



THEOLOGY CORNER

Vol. 157 – July 2023

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“The Book of Genesis is a Myth, but is it Fiction?” (Part II - Evolution)

As a quick review, last month I gave an explanation for the first eleven chapters of Genesis as they were written in a mythic genre. I talked about how instead of being written with the intention of giving a precise history of the creation of the world, it was meant to serve as an anti-myth, to combat the Babylonian myths of the time and present an inspired theological explanation of God’s unity and our relation to him as creatures. For this month, I want to turn our attention to the creation narratives of Genesis and what they could mean in relation to the theory of evolution.

Since we have already addressed the way in which one should read Genesis, we know that the Church does not require us to read it literalistically – taking the words at face value. In other words, a Catholic does not have to believe that the woman (Eve) was formed from Adam’s actual rib, or that the world was created in six literal 24-hour days. In fact, believing the latter would be quite problematic since light was said to be created on the first day with the sun, moon, and stars being created on the fourth day. Moreover, many people question why creatures like the dinosaurs were not mentioned. This was not the concern of the Genesis authors since they were primarily concerned with explaining God’s creative activity. But where does reading Genesis according to its mythic genre leave the teaching on evolution? Can we accept it? Or must we reject it in light of Genesis? Is there a theological conflict with Genesis if one was to suppose that human beings have evolved from some lower species? The Church has actually spoken out on evolution in recent years throughout various documents, with John Paul II saying that it is “more than a hypothesis,” Benedict XVI saying that there are “many proofs” for evolution, and with the International Theological Commission claiming that evolution is “virtually certain.” To be fair, the topic of evolution, properly understood, is not a matter on which the Church itself can speak authoritatively. This is because the Church speaks on matters pertaining to faith and morals and leaves other sciences for those who are in a position to speak on them. So, when it comes to the evolution of the body, this is knowledge that the Church will seek out from scientists to provide evidence for a particular standpoint from which to take.

Nevertheless, many Catholics still feel “icky” to say that they accept evolution as a theory. The reason why is that many atheists have used the theory of evolution as an explanation for how the human person “evolved” into a rational being, or even how anything exists at all. They seek to use this to explain away God’s existence altogether. This position is, in fact, contrary to the faith and *cannot* be held by any faithful Catholic. The reasons for this are many. But a couple of reasons are: 1) scripture makes clear that the human person was created by God in his image and that all creatures are dependent on his creative action. Thus, Catholics cannot believe that human beings received their rational nature from some evolutionary process since it is directly given by God – which distinguishes man from any other animal in the world; and 2) Reason makes it clear that the rational soul (image of God) could not have been given by natural processes because the human soul is immaterial and material principles can only produce another material thing. In the middle ages, the Church often communicated this concept through the axiom: “You cannot *give* what you do not *have*.”

The book of Genesis illustrates all of creation’s utter dependency on God for their existence, and this is the core of what must be accepted by faith. So, while there are many “versions” of the theory of evolution, there are theories that *do* conflict with scripture. Evolution, as Charles Darwin conceived of it, may not be accepted because it is *materialistic*, meaning the rational soul did not include any divine intervention in its coming to be. If a Catholic was to accept evolution, it must be accepted in light of the faith. What this would look like is to accept the mounds of scientific evidence for the evolution of man’s body from a lower animal, but with the understanding that God works not only with, but *through* the natural evolutionary process, giving creatures the dignity of driving their own natural development. This idea is what we could call *theistic* evolution – meaning “Godly” evolution, indicating a belief in God as the main driving force, creating the natural process and using it as a way to allow creatures to evolve over time by their action and complex interaction with other things. This means that whenever evolution takes place, it does so because God, in his divine providence, ordered things and continues to govern them in this way. In other words, God is not just some “passive observer” like the deists would say.

The last consideration is to think about what evolution would mean for Adam and Eve. Given what we now know from Part I of this article, we know that there is nothing preventing Catholics from believing that Adam and Eve had biological ancestors who were non-rational animals such as hominids. There is tremendous genetic evidence suggesting that they did. What is clear from scripture is that sin was transmitted to the human race through Adam. There is much debate about how this squares with scientific discovery both within the Church and without, but even if scientific findings show that there was likely a larger pool of ancestors than a single pair, there is nothing in Genesis that would preclude us from supposing that the first pair of human beings mated with hominids. For example, we already have significant scientific evidence suggesting that *homo sapiens* mated with neanderthals. There are lot of things to untangle when it comes to evolutionary biology and genetics, but what we can be certain in knowing is that evolution, properly considered, does not put us at odds with our faith. Therefore, let us not allow this to be an obstacle in bringing others to the faith! Stay tuned for Part III where we will discuss the seven-day structure of creation and man being created from the dust of the earth.