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An Evolving Position on Evolution? Interesting Developments in the Roman Catholic Church

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A leading Roman Catholic cardinal has issued a statement that has caused quite a stir in both scientific and theological circles. Christoph Schonborn, the cardinal archbishop of Vienna, published his controversial remarks in the pages of The New York Times, and in the form of an op-ed column entitled "Finding Design in Nature."

Schonborn, the most aristocratic of the European cardinals, was considered a possible candidate to succeed Pope John Paul II. Now, he is out to set the record straight about the Catholic Church's position on evolution — and about the real intention of John Paul II. Here's how he begins his column:

Ever since 1996, when Pope John Paul II said that evolution (a term he did not define) was "more than just a hypothesis," defenders of neo-Darwinian dogma have often invoked the supposed acceptance - or at least acquiescence - of the Roman Catholic Church when they defend their theory as somehow compatible with Christian faith.

But this is not true. The Catholic Church, while leaving to science many details about the history of life on earth, proclaims that by the light of reason the human intellect can readily and clearly discern purpose and design in the natural world, including the world of living things.

Evolution in the sense of common ancestry might be true, but evolution in the neo-Darwinian sense - an unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection - is not. Any system of thought that denies or seeks to explain away the overwhelming evidence for design in biology is ideology, not science.

These three paragraphs represent a genuine bombshell in the Catholic world. Cardinal Schonborn is recognized as a close friend and supporter of Pope Benedict XVI and is thought to have been among the new pope's strongest advocates in the last papal election. His statement also addressed what Schonborn characterizes as a misrepresentation of a statement by Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) about evolution:

In an unfortunate new twist on this old controversy, neo-Darwinists recently have sought to portray our new pope, Benedict XVI, as a satisfied evolutionist. They have quoted a sentence about common ancestry from a 2004 document of the International Theological Commission, pointed out that Benedict was at the time head of the commission, and concluded that the Catholic Church has no problem with the notion of "evolution" as used by mainstream biologists - that is, synonymous with neo-Darwinism.

The commission's document, however, reaffirms the perennial teaching of the Catholic Church about the reality of design in nature. Commenting on the widespread abuse of John Paul's 1996 letter on evolution, the commission cautions that "the letter cannot be read as a blanket approbation of all theories of evolution, including those of a neo-Darwinian provenance which explicitly deny to divine providence any truly causal role in the development of life in the universe."

Furthermore, according to the commission, "An unguided evolutionary process - one that falls outside the bounds of

divine providence - simply cannot exist.”

Indeed, in the homily at his installation just a few weeks ago, Benedict proclaimed: “We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”

Vatican observers suggest that Schonborn’s ‘clarification’ was likely made with full support from the Pope, though the cardinal denied that his statement was officially approved by the Vatican. In any event, this cardinal’s rejection of the dominant evolutionary model — signaling a shift in the Vatican’s emphasis, if not in the Vatican’s position — started quite a controversy.

The New York Times ran a news story shortly after the cardinal’s column appeared in the opinion pages of the paper — an unusual development in itself. In its article, the paper quickly got to the point: *An influential cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, which has long been regarded as an ally of the theory of evolution, is now suggesting that belief in evolution as accepted by science today may be incompatible with Catholic faith. Further: American Catholics and conservative evangelical Christians have been a potent united front in opposing abortion, stem cell research and euthanasia, but had parted company on the death penalty and the teaching of evolution. Cardinal Schönborn’s essay and comments are an indication that the church may now enter the debate over evolution more forcefully on the side of those who oppose the teaching of evolution alone.*

Since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic church has held positions on evolution that have attempted to straddle the fence between evolutionary naturalism and theistic creation. A 1996 public letter by John Paul II (interestingly characterized by Schonborn as “rather vague and unimportant”) is often cited as evidence that the Catholic Church had largely accepted the dominant evolutionary model — a model that excludes the possibility of divine design. The reaction to Cardinal Schonborn’s statement will be interesting to watch. The end result is likely to be a further clarification of the Vatican’s position.

For the rest of us, this controversy is yet another reminder that irreconcilable worldviews cannot be bridged by accommodationist theories. The dominant evolutionary model denies the possibility of divine design within the process of evolution. This model *cannot* be reconciled with the Bible and the Christian truth claim.

