

AlbertMohler.com

'Prettifying' Darwin — A Timely Look at a Losing Strategy

Accommodations to evolutionary theory never end. There will always be "unfinished business" that will demand further theological concessions.

Friday, August 27, 2010

The American literary critic Frederick Crews once spoke of defenders of evolutionary theory who attempt to make Darwinism appear more congenial to the Christian faith than it truly is. These defenders, Crews wrote, present a vision of Darwin and Darwinism that "is often prettified to make it safe for doctrines that he himself was sadly compelled to leave behind." The prettifying of evolution continues, even in today's edition of *The Wall Street Journal*.



Writing in the paper's weekly "Houses of Worship" column, John Farrell argues that the 60th anniversary of the Roman Catholic Church's encyclical *Humani Generis* should be cause for celebration, since that historic document, issued by Pope Pius XII, "confirmed, in broad terms, that there is no intrinsic conflict between Christianity and the scientific theory of evolution."

Farrell argues that "Pius XII deserves credit for having the foresight to openly address the science when so many other denominations were either in deep denial or not interested in the challenge evolution poses for Christianity." In other words, those "other denominations" had better get in line and affirm evolution as well.

Papal encyclicals are, by definition, official and authoritative statements of the Catholic magisterium. They often signal significant changes in Catholic theology and teaching. By any measure, *Humani Generis* was a statement of true historical significance. Pope Pius XII did indeed state that there is no intrinsic conflict between Catholic teaching and evolution. He did not lay claim upon a biblical authority for this verdict, but instead presented the document as a statement of papal authority. From 1950 forward, the Roman Catholic Church has been presented as being at peace with the theory of evolution, and this is often thrown in the face of evangelicals in public argument.

Of course, papal encyclicals hold no authority among evangelical Christians, who reject Catholic claims of papal and magisterial authority and see these as directly subversive of biblical authority. Nevertheless, the anniversary of *Humani Generis* does hold lessons evangelicals ought to note, and these surface, at least partially, in John Farrell's column, "Catholics and the Evolving Cosmos."

Farrell argues that *Humani Generis* "laid out the Catholic Church's accommodation with evolution," but then adds, "provided Christians believed the individual soul was not the product of purely material forces, but a direct creation by God." Now, that is a huge qualification of the Catholic "accommodation with evolution." Indeed, current mainstream models of evolution simply do not allow for the notion of a divinely-created soul. As a matter of fact, the reigning physicalist and materialist understandings that underpin evolutionary theory do not really leave any room for the existence of the soul at all.

But there is more to the conditions Pius XII put on his church's acceptance of evolution. In the crucial words of paragraph 37, the Pope wrote this:

When, however, there is question of another conjectural opinion, namely polygenism, the children of the Church by no

means enjoy such liberty. For the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. Now it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own.

Thus, the Pope added the necessity of an historical Adam to his conditions for the acceptance of evolutionary theory. John Farrell does include this qualification in his article, but only after stating earlier that the only qualification was the divinely-created nature of the soul. Farrell presents an accurate account of the Pope's concern: "Pius declared that it was not apparent how such a theory of a founding population of humans, and not a single couple, could be reconciled with original sin. That Catholic doctrine regards the Fall as an historical rebellion against God; a sin actually committed by an individual and which is passed on through the generations from him to all men and women."

The Roman Catholic Church officially affirms that Adam was an historical figure who is indeed the genetic and physical father of all humanity, and it also affirms the doctrine of original sin. Liberal Catholic theologians may deny this teaching, but it stands as the official teaching of the Catholic Church. This is where John Farrell sees a problem, even as he celebrates the anniversary of *Humani Generis*. Genetic research, he asserts, "has settled this question against Pius." Geneticists have proved, he reports, that "the level of genetic variation present in the species today rules out a founding population with less than several thousand individuals."

Farrell explains that the Catholic Church accepted this reality, at least to some extent, with the 2004 statement *Communion and Stewardship*, but he also accepts that there is "unfinished business when it comes to evolution and Christian theology." He then affirms the work of the late Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who "re-interpreted Genesis in light of evolution, arguing that the story of Adam and Eve needed to be read metaphorically." He also applauds John Haught at Georgetown University, who proposes "that the new cosmology of the expanding universe and the evolution of life require a more dynamic sense of God's role in a world that is still not complete, a work in progress."

Actually, John Haught argues that the entire structure of Christian theology should be recast in light of evolution. In his recent book *Making Sense of Evolution*, Haught asserts that "Darwin has altered our understanding of almost everything that concerns theology."

Let no one doubt just how comprehensive Haught's alteration of Christian theology will turn out to be. "Other disciplines such as geology, cosmology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, computer science, and medicine have already undergone a major retooling in the wake of Darwin's findings," he asserts. "Can theology realistically expect to escape a major metamorphosis?"

In *Making Sense of Evolution*, Haught provides ample evidence of what this "major metamorphosis" would mean. Every doctrine is brought to terms with evolutionary theory, including God. The revised deity of Haught's evolutionary model is inseparable from his creation and stripped of sovereignty.

This kind of theological revisionism is not limited to Roman Catholic theologians, of course. John Weaver, a former Baptist minister and geologist who currently teaches at Regent's Park College at the University of Oxford, also argues that we must surrender belief in an historical Adam and an historical Fall. Adam is a symbolic, rather than a genetic head of humanity, he asserts. As for the Fall, he argues: "Within the movement of evolutionary development, there must have been a moment when *Homo sapiens* came to full moral consciousness for the first time." He suggests that a proposed "bottleneck" in the evolutionary past probably reduced human populations to "fairly low numbers for a time," and that this made "the significant moment of moral choice even more critical for humankind as a whole." The historicity of Genesis 3 is just dismissed.

The 60th anniversary of *Humani Generis* should serve as a reminder that evolutionary theory does indeed present Christian theology with an inevitable conflict. In the course of arguing the opposite, John Farrell actually makes this point with profound clarity. *Humani Generis* did not go far enough, he insists, even as he points to "unfinished business" between the Roman Catholic Church and evolution.

The Catholics will sort out their theological questions for themselves. For evangelicals, the direct lesson is that any

accommodation to evolutionary theory comes with huge and inescapable theological costs. There is no way to affirm an historical Adam while holding to any mainstream model of evolution, and there is no way to affirm the Gospel without an historical Adam.

Furthermore, accommodations to evolutionary theory never end. There will always be “unfinished business” that will demand further theological concessions.

This is where the prettifying of Darwinism hits the wall. The real meaning of evolution’s central doctrines runs directly counter to the central doctrines of Christianity. Accommodation with evolution is a disastrous doctrinal strategy.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

John Farrell, “Catholics and the Evolving Cosmos,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, August 27, 2010.

Humani Generis, Encyclical of Pope Pius XII, Given at Rome, at St. Peter’s, August 12, 1950.

Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God, International Theological Commission, publication permitted by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, then President of the Commission, July 23, 2004.

John F. Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010).

Frederick C. Crews, “Saving Us From Darwin,” *The New York Review of Books*, Thursday, October 4, 2001.

John David Weaver, *In the Beginning God: Modern Science and the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (Regent’s Park College, 1994).

Photo: Pope Pius XII

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

