

Ambivalence and Conflict: Catholic Church and Evolution¹

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I. Preliminary Conceptual Remarks

I would like to state one important point right at the outset. The Catholic Church has always maintained an almost enlightened position with respect to evolutionary theory, when one compares it with Christian American fundamentalism or its Turkish Islamic counterpart.²

There are, nonetheless conflicts. I would like to distinguish two types of conflict. The *first* is a doctrinal conflict in which science and religion hold conflicting, mutually exclusive, views about a particular situation. The most important example of this type of doctrinal conflict was seen in the case of Galileo and, to honour him, I term these kinds of conflict, *Galilean conflicts*. The most recent example of such a *Galilean conflict* is the debate surrounding evolutionary theory.

The *second* type of conflict is not so much about doctrine itself. It is more about scientists' attempts to refute that religion is a phenomenon in its own right. Such explanations are also called "naturalistic" or "scientific". In this vein, Karl Marx described religion as the "opium of the people", Freud viewed religion as a collective neurosis and some modern brain researchers even regard it as an illusion produced by the limbic system. Others, in turn, see religion as an

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² During the meeting we got a vivid impression of the latter during a visit at Piri Reis school (Muğla) that is part of the Hizmet movement of the Turkish Imam and religious scholar Fethullah Gülen. According to Wikipedia the Gülen movement runs over 1000 Charter schools around the world, including 130 in the US. The schools are excellently equipped. Furthermore, education and science play an important role in Gülen's somewhat opaque teaching and even more opaque political practice. Nonetheless, biology was not mentioned when in a propaganda film mathematics and physics were praised. In private conversation one of the teachers referred to evolutionary theory as "monkey theory"... – The visit at Piri Reis was, by the way, requested as part of the funding by the Turkish Prime Minister's Promotion Fund.

important component of the evolution of social behaviour; while others like Richard Dawkins explain religion as a by-product of evolution. As in all these approaches religion appears as illusory, I would like to term these types of conflicts *Freudian conflicts*, because the word “illusion” appears in the title *The Future of an Illusion* of Freud’s book on the topic.

II. Galilean Conflicts on Evolution

The Galileo affair has been a deep embarrassment to the Church ever since the second half of the 17th century when it became clear to almost everybody in Rome that Copernicanism was far from being “philosophically absurd and false” or “heretical”.

Having become sort of prudent the **ecclesiastical authorities** kept a low profile throughout the first hundred years of Darwinian evolutionary theory. They seemed to have learnt their lesson from the Galileo Affair and kept their noses out of scientific debates, at least as far as making any official announcements about evolutionary theory is concerned. This is the more surprising as the topic of human evolution as – among other things – also dealing with the nature of man is much closer to central tenets of Faith than Copernicanism.

The first official and explicitly public and path breaking statement on evolution by a Church authority is the Encyclical *Humani Generis*, promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1950. On the whole, this Encyclical expresses a rather relaxed position with respect to evolution. But although it does not instigate a Galilean conflict it nonetheless does intimate *possible* Galileo-like problems.

The text is somewhat obfuscated, however, by the low epistemological expertise, which has characterized documents of the Church up to the present day.

Talking about empirical science the Pope distinguishes between “clearly proved facts” and “hypotheses”. However, as, by definition, all universal statements in empirical science are hypotheses, it seems more likely that the Pope is actually distinguishing between

hypotheses that are strongly supported by empirical evidence and hypotheses that lack sufficient empirical evidence.

In this light, we can say that Pope Pius XII:

1) accepts evolutionary theory as a scientific theory as long as it does not contest

a) God's creation of the human soul and b) the monogenic origin of mankind (which contradicts all scientific evidence)

2) The Pope requires that evolutionary "hypotheses" have to be "submitted to the judgement of the Church." Whether this also holds for "proved facts", remains unclear.

3) does not speak out on whether he thinks that evolution is a historical fact of the history of the earth.

The next pronouncement of the Church concerning evolution can be found in the *Monitum*, a warning against the writings of Jesuit palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin, issued by the Holy Office on June 30, 1962 and reiterated on July 20, 1981.

The *Monitum* clearly illustrates two important points. 1) The Church is not interested in engaging in a Galilean conflict about evolution and explicitly refrains from interfering with matters of science. 2) The Church maintains a cautious and expectant position with respect to evolutionary theory.

This caution seems to be thrown to the wind in a famous letter by John Paul II to the Pontifical Academy on October 22, 1996. In this letter, Pope John Paul II confirms the position taken by Pius XII in *Humani Generis*, but with one decisive qualification:

"Today, almost half a century after the publication of the Encyclical [*Humani Generis*] new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favour of this theory."

But the Pope adds: “theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man.”

1) Pope John Paul II acknowledges the theory of evolution to be an adequately confirmed theory or, as formulated in Vatican epistemological terminology, it has risen above mere “hypothesis” and is beginning to be something like a “proven fact”.

2) He, nonetheless, points to conflict areas. a) the monogenic origin of mankind (by implication only, because he confirms in a summary way what was said in *Humani Generis*) and b) God’s direct creation of the soul. The thesis of the monogenic origin contradicts scientific evidence about the formation of species, while the question of the soul is a special conceptual issue that, to the best of my knowledge, the pertinent sciences probably are not that concerned about. But that the Pope contests the evolution of mind and brain contradicts flatly his praise of evolutionary theory in general as well as well confirmed results of evolutionary theory, anthropology and palaeontology.

Given that general policy to get out of the Galilean fire line, it is most surprising that recently the Church, in the person of one of its most senior Cardinals, seems to have taken up arms again and marching head-long back on to this Galilean battlefield. In an article (“Finding Design in Nature”) that was published in the *New York Times* on July 7, 2005 Christoph Cardinal Schönborn was widely perceived as siding with the most recent incarnation of American Creationism, the so-called Intelligent Design Theory, ID for short. As this paper focuses on epistemological issues, I will not address all of the many other interesting aspects of this article but I will concentrate here on two pertinent quotations:

1) “The Catholic Church, while leaving to science many details about the history of life on earth, proclaims that the human intellect can readily and clearly discern purpose and design in the natural world, including the world of living things.”

2) “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 is ideology not science.”

As to the first quotation, I should remark that evolutionary biology in the course of its 150 years of existence has been able to explain thousands of design-like structures in living beings in terms of evolution, of which natural selection, as proposed by Darwin, is the most important but not the only factor. Before the advent of Evolutionary Theory, such structures were believed to have been drafted by an omnipotent designer. To answer Cardinal Schönborn’s first point in just one sentence: the human intellect, indeed, is able to discern purpose and design in the natural world, but explains this *scientifically* in terms of functional adaptations brought about mostly by natural selection.

As to the second point, tens of thousands of biologists all over the world will be astounded to hear that by relying on the two principles of evolutionary theory: random variation and natural selection, they are ideologists rather than scientists. Taking Cardinal Schönborn’s assessment seriously and dismissing random variation and natural selection would put an end to both evolutionary biology, and most other areas of biology, as we know them today.

Schönborn’s objections against evolutionary theory are, by the way, well known from creationist literature. Their mantra like repetition does not get them closer to the truth:

Both evolutionary biology as well as the philosophy of biology have dealt with these objections and have disproved them on countless occasions – to no avail.

Schönborn’s anti-evolutionism does not seem to be an isolated position, however. In September 2006 in Castel Gandolfo at a meeting on evolution of Pope Benedict with his former students, he praised Schönborn’s article in the *New York Times* this way.

„It occurs to me that it was divine providence that lead you, Eminency, to write a gloss in the *New York Times*, to render public again this topic and to show, where the questions are.”

Normally, one finds even behind bizarre positions of the Church a rational core. This seems to hold also in this case:

It is not clear whether Cardinal Schönborn *really* intended to do what he actually did: launching a new Galilean conflict; and whether he really wanted to side with ID. There is some evidence that he did not want this and that he merely meant to engage in a *Freudian* conflict but that he applied the arguments the proponents of ID implement in their *Galilean* fight against evolutionary theory.

III. Freudian Conflicts on Evolution

Freudian conflicts arise, when a particular science tries to explain away religion as a phenomenon in its own right. They do not specifically affect the Catholic Church, but religion in general. Therefore, the first task of those who wish to wage a Freudian conflict should be to develop an adequate definition, or at least a satisfactory characterization, of the concept of religion. So far nobody seems to have achieved this and, unfortunately, most of those waging Freudian conflicts hardly even acknowledge this as a major problem. The second task would be to adduce sufficient scientific evidence in order to substantiate their Freudian claims in explaining religion.

These two defects one finds also in Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion*. In Chapter 5 (“The Roots of Religion”), it is clear that Dawkins has difficulties in pinpointing the direct adaptational value of religion. After rejecting explanations based on group selection, Dawkins starts with the confession: “I am one of an increasing number of biologists who see religion as a by-product of something else” (174). The idea of by-product, i.e. the idea that a structure that at some period in time had evolved according to certain selective pressures is later used for other purposes than the one it was originally selected for, is quite common in evolutionary biology. This phenomenon is called “exaptation” of a

structure, which is distinct from adaptation. Dawkins goes on to present the bold idea that: “natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them. Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival.” (176). Religion is just a by-product of this brain structure.

Firstly, to assume that religion is above all or even exclusively about “trusting obedience” seems a rather narrow view of a monotheistic religion let alone a non-monotheistic religion. Secondly, as far as evidence is concerned, Dawkins just presents us nothing else than a just-so-story that abounds with “might” “could” and similar linguistic indicators of uncertainty and speculation. If natural science were conducted in this way, there could be no natural science in the sense we know and trust. In fact, Dawkins is much aware of the weakness of his position. “I must stress”, he admits “that it is only an example of the *kind* of thing I mean, and I shall come on to parallel suggestions made by others. I am much more wedded to the general principle that the question should be properly put [i.e. religion as a by-product of the evolutionary process], and if necessary rewritten, than I am to any particular answer.” (174). In response to this, it must be said that the very principle of scientific research is that ideas have to be supported by evidence. What is virtually missing from Dawkins’ claim is the evidence that religion is a “by-product of something else”.

My criticism of Freudian attacks on evolutionary explanations of religion given here has two targets: 1) I would like to contest their claims that they have scientifically explained away religion by means of natural science. At best they could show some behavioural dispositions for religion in humans that are far away from the phenomenal richness of religions. Generally we see here the problem of methodological naturalism: are the natural sciences the right way of dealing with cultural phenomena? My preliminary answer is: NO. Cultural phenomena are much too complex as to allow one-dimensional explanations.

2) But I would also like contest the claim that the self proclaimed “new atheists” have proven atheism to be true. Even if we concede, for arguments sake, that their evolutionary explanation of religion was correct, this would only show that humans have the corresponding behavioural dispositions (for social cohesion through religious symbols, obedience etc.). – A believer could easily answer that this only shows God’s wisdom in creation, insofar He/She has created us such that it is easy for us to believe in Him/Her.