

Roman Catholic confusion on creation

Benno Zuiddam

The Roman Catholic Church reflects a tension between its traditional teachings and the current views of its leadership. While many bishops and nearly all Catholic universities promote evolution, historical creation remains the official doctrine of the church.

The Roman Catholic Church and its governance are sometimes difficult for Protestant Christians to understand. Even among Roman Catholics, confusion and misconceptions prevail on the subject of creation.

Encouraged by Roman Catholic academia and most bishops, many prominent Catholics happily assert that their church embraces evolution, while traditional Catholics remind them that not even the pope can change a defined ‘doctrine of faith’, including the church’s traditional doctrines regarding the historical truth of Genesis 1–11. This includes the original holiness of Adam and Eve and the doctrine of Original Sin.

Traditional Catholics who study the history of the Catholic Church know that there have been prior occasions on which popes, like Pope Honorius in the seventh century, failed to uphold ‘teachings’ already defined and thus allowed error to spread. They point out that the doctrine of ‘papal infallibility’ as defined by the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) specifies that God protects the pope from error only when he defines a doctrine of faith or morals as being contained in the ‘Deposit of Faith’; and not when he teaches ‘new doctrine’.

Non-Catholics whose information about Roman Catholic Church affairs reaches them through the mass media, or even through ‘official’ Vatican press releases, have every reason to think that the pope and most of the bishops have the power and the intention to change the traditional doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church, especially in relation to the doctrine of creation. However, the fact that the pope and many of his advisors may indeed *intend* to accomplish such a revolution does not mean that they actually have the *power* to do so.

As confusion reigns, the *Reformed Daily*, a conservative Protestant newspaper in the Netherlands, asked me to correct some of these views.¹ In this contribution to *Journal of Creation* I will try to shed some light on these issues in a more substantial way for evangelical Christians. I will do this by first examining some of the recent events touted by the mass media in support of a revolutionary view of the contemporary papacy, before putting them into proper perspective in the light of doctrines previously defined by the Catholic Church at the highest levels of authority.

Creation suppressed

When the Pontifical Academy of Sciences organised an international conference on creation and evolution in 2009, it decided specifically not to invite any scientists who supported creation or Intelligent Design (ID).² Free enquiry was not part of the agenda. The only creationist present was a multi-faith invitee. Once the organisation discovered that this Turkish Muslim professor was a creationist who dared to speak out against evolution, his microphone was turned off.³ This was under the relatively conservative Pope Benedict, who was said to be sympathetic to ID but did not have the power to invite any like-minded scholars to his own conference on creation and evolution; it is feared that the situation has not improved since. Indeed, with the recent suppression of the seminary of the Friars of the Immaculata in Rome,⁴ the last bastion of traditional creation theology was shut down and theistic evolution has become the virtually undisputed academic orthodoxy in the Roman Catholic seminaries and universities.

Genesis at parish level

Whilst the present discrimination of the Vatican against traditional theologians and scholars is very real,⁵ there are other factors that contribute to the confusion as well. Catholic schools and universities are a substantial problem in this respect, as most have at best a token identity and are Catholic in name only. While the senior clergy and teachers actively promote Darwinism, Catholic education in general has embraced evolution.⁶ With notable exceptions among the Catholic episcopate, it is generally only at the family and parish level that priests and individual believers object to this and embrace a traditional and biblical view of creation.

However their number is substantial. According to last year’s Gallup Poll, nearly 40% of all American Catholics believe in a biblical creation less than 10,000 years ago and accept the historicity of Adam and the worldwide Flood as described in Genesis.⁷ This also explains why, although teaching evolution in Catholic institutions is the rule, it is still controversial among traditional religious communities and in Catholic circles at the parish level. Responsible positions in



Image: Benno Zuiddam

Figure 1. St Peter's Church in Rome, the centre of Roman Catholicism

Catholic education and senior clergy appointments, certainly in the Western world, are filled with those who have either embraced evolution personally or are unwilling to speak out against it publicly. So, while two out of every five Catholics in the USA holds fast to traditional biblical creation, most of the bishops, as well as those who run its education, either ignore and exclude creationist views or actively work and teach against these.

Presumably the 37% of Catholics who believe in what the Catechism of the Council of Trent called 'the sacred history of Genesis' are likely to be a far larger percentage of believers who attend church on a regular basis and give financial support at a local level. As most professing Catholics are non-practising, those who do find biblical convictions important are likely to be largely found among church-going Catholics. They find themselves in a situation in which Catholic institutions no longer actively uphold traditional Catholic faith and practice. Thus, it is helpful for evangelical Christians to realize that despite the statements of recent popes and bishops, there are many Catholics who hold the traditional biblical belief in the literal historical truth of the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis. While they are traditionally loyal to the hierarchy, they nonetheless find themselves in a situation where many important positions in their church, as well as in Catholic media and education, have been hijacked by those with a different agenda.

Media agenda

As mentioned above, another important factor that contributes to the confusion about the actual teachings of the Roman Catholic Church is the mass media. The promotion of evolution as the accepted Catholic view is often

media-induced. This is not only due to a secular press which seeks sensationalism. It is also actively promoted by Catholic-run media, traditionally initiatives of the Jesuit order.

The moment Pope Francis says something along progressive lines, his words are blown out of proportion to create momentum and political pressure. When Francis proclaimed in 2014 that the 'big bang' and evolution harmonize with biblical creation, this produced sensational headlines about the pope ending up in the camp of the evolutionists.⁸

In reality, Francis did not say anything different than what his two predecessors had already stated publicly. More to the point, he actually made out a case for ID without mentioning the name, because the goal-orientated evolution that the pope spoke about does not exist in a scientific sense.⁹ But on this the mass media kept silent. They like to use this pope for their own agenda.

Official doctrine

In understanding the Roman Catholic Church it is helpful to realize that there is a significant distinction between one's private or personal convictions and one's official views as a representative of the organisation. Its doctrine of 'papal infallibility' does not mean that whatever a pope proclaims is right. A pope cannot invent new doctrine. Even for doctrines that he promulgates *ex cathedra* ('full authority') to be considered valid two conditions must be met. First, such teachings need to be in agreement with the Scriptures, and second, they must have confirmation in apostolic tradition. The latter is, as a rule, indicated by unanimity among the early Church Fathers. Only then does a papal proclamation form part of the magisterial,¹⁰ or official, teaching of the Catholic Church.

Just as Protestant ministers may at times doubt the official teachings of their denomination, popes and bishops do not always have sufficient faith in the doctrines or moral teachings of the church they represent. Out of regard for their responsible office, good bishops and popes will be careful not to express their doubts or disagreements with the teachings of the church in an official capacity. This is why the Catholics distinguish between personal opinions of a pope and official pronouncements that he makes.

For this reason Benedict XVI was usually quite diplomatic in his choice of words and emphasized regularly that evolution was a hypothesis and a pragmatic theory for testable phenomena. Pope Francis also has a similarly reticent approach in his official letters. For example, in *Laudato Si* (24 May 2015, par. 81) he says: “Human beings, even if we postulate a process of evolution, also possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems.” In other words, the pope in his official teaching is careful not to deny the official doctrine of the church. Which pope would like to be seen committing something he knows to be qualified as ‘mortal sin’ by the prior magisterium of the church? Neither Benedict nor Francis has thought it wise to give passing metaphysical scientific theories the status of fact or dogma.

For Catholics, the pope is only authoritative when he speaks as the official representative of Christ, when he defines a doctrine as part of the Deposit of Faith. Acknowledging the historical character of the first chapters of the Bible is part of this official doctrine of the Catholic Church. In other words, doctrinally and principally the Catholic Church is committed to biblical creation. Other views are permissible, but these must meet minimal doctrinal criteria.

The most comprehensive recent authoritative document on creation was prepared by the Pontifical Bible Commission (PBC) and proclaimed by Pius X in 1909: *De Charactere Historico* (On the historical character of the first chapters of Genesis).¹¹ Together with relevant parts of *Humani Generis* (12 August 1950) this document represents the definitive teachings of the church on the doctrine of creation. It also contains a firm rejection of Darwinism. Any Catholic who openly doubts these teachings is, by an authoritative papal declaration, guilty of *culpa gravi*, or mortal sin (*Praestantia Scripturae*, 18 November 1907). Whatever the prevailing views at Catholic schools and seminaries might be presently, this remains the official doctrine of the church.

Historical account

Following the Church Fathers and Councils, the Catholic Church teaches that the first three chapters of Genesis have a literal and historical meaning. Mythologizing of the history of Genesis is expressly rejected. More specifically, any Catholic is obliged to believe as history: the immediate creation of man, the formation of Eve from Adam and a literal interpretation of mankind’s fall into sin, the role of the serpent included. Bible interpreters, however, are free as to their interpretation of the word ‘day’ in Genesis. Both the proper sense of the text (*sensu proprio*) and a non-literal interpretation (*sensu improprio*) are allowed, provided that the historical requirements mentioned earlier are met.¹² The PBC established that the Church Fathers

are more or less unanimous in their literal interpretation of Genesis 1–3 as historical events. If they deviate from this at all, as St Augustine did in regard to the meaning of ‘day’ in Genesis 1, it is not in Darwin’s direction. On the contrary, Augustine proposed an immediate creation of everything in principle, shorter than six day-night cycles. All Fathers were ‘creationists’ and believed in a young earth of less than 6,000 years at the time; including Augustine. These views were confirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council (AD 1215). The greatest scholar of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, specifically taught that the creation days in Genesis 1 were normal days.

As the doctrine of creation concerns revealed truth—even Moses did not have human eyewitnesses available when he described the Genesis account—teachings on creation are largely dependent on the authority of Scripture. The acceptance of evolution in Catholic circles coincided with a departure from papal doctrine on the Bible as the historically reliable Word of God. While Pius XII seemed more flexible on the doctrine of creation than his predecessors, the public shift of the Vatican towards evolution only started under Pope John Paul II.

In a lecture for the Papal Academy of Science (22 October 1996) he spoke positive words about evolution as ‘more than a hypothesis’. Also at the time, newspaper headlines followed, including ‘Pope believes in evolution’.¹³ Catholic media like EWTN were quick to explain that the wording of the speech did not endorse biological evolution. What is profoundly mystifying though, is that John Paul’s famous lecture most likely never took place, despite the countless international news reports to the contrary.¹⁴ The text of the speech was, most likely, forwarded to the media without the pope ever seeing or signing it. The press release also bypassed the pope’s right-hand man who was responsible for approving its contents. It is reported that members of the Pontifical Academy for Science received a copy without the pope’s usual signature. The media coup outmanoeuvred the small circle of John Paul II loyalists in the Vatican who took an interest in publicly preserving the teachings of the magisterium on Genesis. They were placed before a *fait accompli*. A combination of embarrassment and the liberal personal views of John Paul II kept him from public disclosure and correction of this affair, particularly as the speech had received the highest praise by almost all media outlets in the world.

Pressures

There is a background to the praise for evolution by the last three popes. The shady events surrounding the controversial John Paul II speech, as well as the 2009 Vatican congress that specifically excluded scientists who believed in

the traditional doctrine of the Catholic Church, is indicative of a politicized climate that does not shrink back from shady measures to promote its causes. Both Benedict and John Paul functioned under tremendous pressure, especially from the Jesuit order, which is not only the largest religious order, but also the one most involved in and responsible for Catholic education. In the 20th century they took a leading role, both in media and education, in actively promoting historical criticism in biblical studies and Darwinism in science.

Georges Lemaître, the brilliant Belgian physicist who proposed the idea that was popularized as the ‘big bang’, was educated in a Jesuit school; and an influential Jesuit evolutionist was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. His thinking shows that the adoption of neo-Darwinism isn’t merely about the historicity of one or two chapters in the Bible, but inevitably leads to the denial of core biblical truths. As a result of his commitment to evolution, Teilhard de Chardin abandoned the dogma of original sin. If there was sin and death before Adam’s fall and God used these to make all men, there really is no other option theologically.

Affirmation of creation

Still, the Catholic Church did not waver and the standards of the PBC remained the official doctrine. This became clear in 1948 when French Cardinal Suhard tried to make the PBC withdraw its promulgated teachings on Genesis and evolution. The Vatican denied his request and confirmed that these teachings were clear and valid so that nothing beyond these was required. For this reason, *Humani Generis*—which appeared shortly afterwards and which allows Catholic scholars not to believe or to teach evolution but to examine

it as a hypothesis—should be read in the light of the PBC decrees of 1909.

There is also good theological reason for the magisterium not to endorse theistic evolution, as the theory does not sit well with several core doctrines of the church. It does not meet the requirements of the PBC and is far too problematic in most respects to be classified as an exception in terms of *De Charactere Historico*. The context of this document rules this out, because it was the perceived heresy of Darwinism that gave rise to the pronouncements of the PBC on Genesis in the first place.

This, however, pales into insignificance if the larger doctrinal implications of neo-Darwinism are considered: the doctrine of God (death and sin as creation tools); the doctrine of man (death and sin were part of original creation and ultimately mankind cannot be held responsible); the doctrine of sin (no inherited sin and responsibility of first Adam); the doctrine of salvation (Christ coming to save the world from a condition for which God and not mankind was responsible). Billions of years of suffering resulting in the rise of man is a far cry from God’s reflections in Genesis 1, or even from the conditional mortality that some Church Fathers proposed.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Pope John Paul II advanced the view that any conceived life would ultimately be saved. If evolution were true, it should not be otherwise or God would be profoundly unjust. At best God infuses souls into wretched humanoids who have to make a start in a world that has been subjected to a cosmic curse from the very beginning with a fallible body and mind to match. Man had no chance whatsoever to begin with. Theologically this cruel experiment is hard to reconcile with a loving Father who creates the world through the author of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Gnostics and Marcion already realized that one’s view of creation has implications. Christ as agent of creation (John, Colossians) cannot present different values than the Incarnate Word and the Master of the Gospels. For the early heretical groups just mentioned this resulted in a separation between the material and spiritual world. In today’s terms, they ceded the material world to Darwinism and claimed the soul for the Lord. Not only is this view of



Figure 2. Dark clouds may be looming over Rome, but creation remains its official doctrine

God essentially pagan, it also requires a redefinition of the doctrine of Scripture.¹⁵

Conclusion

In sum, the fathers and councils, from Lateran IV to Vatican I, propagated a good creation and the historicity of the events described in Genesis 1–3, including a historical fall of the first two parents of all humanity with cosmic implications. It is unlikely that the traditional doctrine of creation described above will be revisited by present or future popes. The teachings of the Catholic Church have been constant and unequivocal for the duration of its existence and are based on the best philological interpretation of Scripture. Added to this is the unanimous view of the fathers as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture laid down by two authoritative councils, Trent (1545–1563) and Vatican I (1869–1870).

This implies that any innovation in regard to the doctrine of creation will necessarily sabotage the Catholic faith and cause the Catholic Church to depart from its traditional identity. Then there are additional clear statements of the magisterium in the decrees of several ecumenical councils and authoritative papal declarations. For instance, a solemn warning and declaration by Vatican I against the proposition that ‘the progress of science’ could justify changing the doctrine of creation as defined by the Catholic Church, excluded, and for a long time prevented, any future acceptance of evolution.

In other words, the traditional doctrine of creation cannot be abandoned, unless the church leadership officially renounces the immutability of dogma as an essential characteristic of the magisterium—and ceases to be Catholic.

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- Pope Francis could be argued to use evolution in a similar way as Cardinal John Newman did in the days of Darwin: “If Mr Darwin in this or that point of his theory comes into collision with revealed truth, that is another matter—but I do not see that the *principle* of development, or what I have called construction, does.” See Dessain, C.S. and Gornall, T. (Eds.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. XXIV, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 77–78, 1973. It should be noted, however, that in other writings Newman upheld the literal historical truth of Genesis 1–11. In *The Idea of a University*, for example, he writes: “Holy Scripture ... does declare a few momentous facts, so few that they may be counted, of a physical character. It speaks of a process of formation out of chaos which occupied six days; it speaks of the firmament, of the sun and moon being created for the sake of the earth; of the earth being immovable; of a great deluge and of several other similar facts and events.” (*The Idea of a University*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, p. 399, 1959.)
- From the Latin *magisterium*.
- De caractere historico trium priorum capitum Geneseos* (Concerning the historical nature of the first three chapters of Genesis), p. 567–569, 30 June 1909 [AAS 1]. The original Latin may be consulted at: vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_doc_index.html.
- However, a literal interpretation is preferred. The context of the 1909 decrees places the burden of proof squarely on the shoulders of exegetes who deny the literal and obvious sense of any part of the text of Genesis 1–3, including the meaning of “yom” (יָוֶם) or “dies” in Genesis 1.
- The full text of John Paul II’s speech may be retrieved at: ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp961022.html.
- See Zuiddam, B.A., Did modernist Lobby pressure Pope JP2 into pro-evolution speech that he never gave or signed?: zuiddam.wordpress.com/2017/10/12/did-modernist-lobby-pressure-pope-jp2-into-pro-evolution-speech-that-he-never-gave-or-signed/.
- If there is a god in Darwinism, he is not unlike the old Gnostic Demiurge, irreconcilable with Christian values. Marcion and other Gnostics therefore removed large portions from the Bible as non-authoritative, or denied their historical character.

Benno Alexander Zuiddam D.Th. (church history) Ph.D. (Greek) studied at four universities in Europe and South Africa. He is research professor (extraordinary associate) with the Faculty of Theology of North West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. He also serves with Greenwich School of Theology (UK) and the Centre for Patristic Research (Free University Amsterdam/University Tilburg). Prof. Zuiddam has published in a great variety of peer-reviewed journals, including international publications in the fields of Greek and Old Testament Studies. He also authored an in-depth study on the authority of the Scriptures in the early church, as well as an introduction to the history of the Western Church. His research focuses on divine revelation in early Christian and biblical literature and the Greco-Roman world, but he also takes a professional interest in theological liberalism, particularly in the 19th century. In 2014 Prof. Zuiddam was elected member of the South African Academy for Science and Art.