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REVELATION AND BIOLOGY

The main generalisation of modern biology is, of course, the theory of evolution. No living biologist of any standing would deny this theory. There are differences about the detail of the process, but there is no difference, I take it, about Darwin's main contention that man's appearance on earth has been a long, slow emergence from animal forms of life, and that these forms have themselves emerged from others still more remote. Is a Roman Catholic free to accept this theory?

It is instructive to consult Catholic manuals on this point. These assure us that the Catholic scientist is at liberty to accept anything that is true. What exactly do such assurances mean? Do they mean that he is free to accept any theory which the evidence before him requires? Or do they mean that in some areas of his inquiry the church is already in possession of the truth, so that regardless of the evidence he may unearth, his conclusions are determined for him in advance? That the position of the church is the latter, not the former, will be evident from an example or two.

The theory of evolution is a theory not only of physical but also of mental evolution. The affinities of animal with human intelligence and the levels of intelligence within the animal world have been studied illuminatingly by Romanes, Lubbock, Huxley, Yerkes, Lashley, Köhler, and many more. The Catholic scientist, in approaching these studies, is met by such absolute prohibitions as the following, transcribed from *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*:

‘For a Catholic there can be no question and no debate about the hypothesis or even the possibility of the development of Adam's spiritual soul from the non-spiritual animating principle or soul of any brute, however highly advanced in the scale of animal perfection. The theory of evolution taken universally, as embracing the development of the first man's soul from some non-human faculty of one of the higher animals, is out of court for the Catholic....’

It may be said that while a Catholic cannot believe in the evolution of the soul he can still believe in the evolution of the mind. This is not, I think, logically possible. In the manual just quoted, it is said of the ‘soul or mind’ (the two terms being used as synonyms) that ‘its existence and other powers, such as reasoning and volition,’ are ‘inseparable from its essence.’ To be a soul is to have certain powers and functions; its character lies in its activities of thinking, feeling, and willing. To deny that the soul evolves is to deny that its powers and functions evolve, and to deny this is to deny that mind evolves. Thus the Catholic is cut off from the belief in evolution in the full sense in which biologists generally accept it.

What alternative to the biologist's view is open to the Catholic scientist? His theory must be

- (1) that all men have descended from a single pair of progenitors, Adam and Eve,
- (2) that man's spiritual faculties, instead of evolving with his body, were attached by God to his body at some point in the past, and
- (3) that God similarly attaches the soul to each man's body at some point in his pre-natal growth. The first point was made clear by Pius XII in his *Humani Generis* of 1950.

‘For Christ's faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains either that 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; since 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.’

On the second point, the special creation of the soul, one gains useful light from the account of evolution given in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1967.

‘Man's capacity for culture... must be, at root, spiritual. This spiritual capacity cannot have its origins in primate potentialities or in a purely material substrate. The human spirit must have its origin in the immediate creative act of God’ (V, 682). ‘When the hominid body was so disposed by the natural processes governing the rest of primate development, God created and infused the spirit of man, elevating what was formerly a hominid to the stature of a new, distinct, and unique species’ (ibid., 683).

As for the third point, the acquisition of a soul by each individual body, we are informed that God waits until the foetus

achieves 'human organs for the organic faculties, the operation of which are indispensable for the exercise of reason'. This is believed to be about the end of the third month after conception. 'It is likely that human animation takes place at this time' (ibid., 684).

In early editions of the Encyclopedia, even bodily evolution was rejected; 'there is no evidence in favour of an ascending evolution of organic forms (V, 670). It is clear that the Catholic views on evolution have been slowly adjusting themselves to modern biology. But even in the pronouncement which many Catholics regard as a charter of freedom, Pius XII's *Humani Generis*, two requirements of belief are laid down for the biologist on theological grounds: evolution does not apply to man's higher faculties, and since we have all inherited original sin from Adam, we must all have descended from Adam. I do not propose to discuss this theological biology, nor is it easy to see how any scientific inquiry could either prove or disprove it. It belongs to a theology that rests not on science but on the church's interpretation of Scripture, and its credibility turns on whether the church's authority is decisive. On that we shall have more to say.

The Catholic biologist has certainly attained more freedom than he had at the beginning of the century. But how free is he? The position that Genesis is inerrant is still required of him; it was laid down at Trent and Vatican I by the church's highest authority; and the Pope's Biblical Commission has insisted that Genesis must be taken as history, not as legend or allegory. It is uneasily added, however, that one is not bound to seek in it for scientific exactitude of expression; and in spite of its insistence on historicity and inerrancy, the church has decided that 'days' mean 'moments or impulses of God's creative activity rather than any definite periods of time'. We are informed that 'With this interpretation, all the objections brought against the Mosaic account of creation from the physical sciences collapse'. This seems over-sanguine. What about the order in which the various creatures were created? In Genesis light is created on the first day, but the sources of light, namely the sun, moon, and stars, do not appear till the fourth; on the fifth day fish and birds make their entrance, and on the sixth day reptiles, though biologists know, from the record of the rocks, that reptiles came before birds and fish, not after them. It is evident that a large licence must be granted if inerrancy is to be preserved. The following passage suggests what this is:

'When it happened that the inspired writer had, incidentally, to touch upon such matters to enforce or illustrate his teaching, to set it in a framework that should make a deeper impression upon his readers, or for some similar reason, he adapted himself to the level of their intelligence, he conformed his phraseology to their common opinions, he took over their current modes of expression.'

This seems to mean that although the writer, as inspired and inerrant, knew the truth about these matters, he deliberately used language that would convey a false impression to his readers. At times, moreover, he used this deceptive language when there was no point in the deception; there was surely no reason why, if he knew that reptiles preceded fishes, he should have reversed the order of their appearance. This is one of the many places where the Roman church has been caught between the claims of science and of a mythology pronounced inerrant. It can hardly afford to denounce science. It cannot without self-stultification abandon an authoritative pronouncement about an errorless book. So it resorts to the expedient of saying that writers who were presumably in command of the truth set down for no evident reasons statements that they knew would induce false beliefs.

It may be said that this elastic exegesis itself gives freedom of movement to the Catholic evolutionist. If he establishes his theories by the evidence, the church will find some way of showing that Genesis never intended to say anything inconsistent with them. As evidence piled up, for example, against the theory of special creation, Catholic scholars began to find the term 'special creation' ambiguous, and held that it may not after all exclude the theory 'that God took one of the higher animals and, by infusing into it a human soul, made it a man'. To be sure, the biologist who adopts this view is yielding unduly to evolutionist pressure, but he can accept it without formal condemnation. Still, if he does, he is at the danger line. He will clearly be passing that line if he questions that Adam and Eve were historical personages, that Adam was made first, or that Eve was made out of Adam. Nor can he hold, whatever the evidence, that the race had more than one set of parents.

Is this scientific freedom? Not if freedom means the privilege of following the evidence in whatever direction it may lead. The demand made on modern science that it should adjust its findings to chronicles twenty-five centuries old, innocent of scientific methods or historical standards, is not notably reasonable to begin with, and those Catholics who have attained distinction in biology—they are not many—have keenly felt the strain. The able biologist St George Mivart, who was a president of the British Association, did remain in the church for many years, but he rebelled increasingly against its restrictions and was excommunicated a few weeks before his death. There are other kinds of pressure, however, than the threat of formal excommunication. There is the refusal of the right to publish, which kept the work on evolution of Teilhard de Chardin out of print as long as he lived. The intellectual atmosphere in which Catholic scientists have been supposed to live is suggested by such statements as the following from the officially approved work I have several times quoted, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*. It says about evolution: 'if we take it as covering all forms of animal life and so embracing the origin of the human body, the positive evidence in favour of it is, at present, so slight and feeble as to be negligible' (I, 208). Of course many fundamentalist Protestant theologians have taken the same line. But they have not had the support of a hierarchy that could claim ultimacy and unchangeableness for its teaching. It is not surprising that Catholic

biologists should have conspicuously dragged their feet.

MY COMMENT: The theory of evolution can be called the theory of development.