

Evolution debate has regressed

By Tracey O'Shaughnessy

© 2005 [Republican-American](#), reprinted with permission.

The Catholic Church is wading into the muck of the evolution debate.

Oh, goody.

The Catholic Church has doggedly sidestepped this fracas, which has largely pitted fundamentalist Christians against scientists, the latter of whom have largely accepted Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as the foundation of modern biology. But because the theory is taught in schools, fundamentalists have cried foul, initially clamoring for equal time for Creationism, and now, for its spiritual cousin, "intelligent design."

Intelligent design holds that while we may not be able to carbon date the Earth's creation to 10,000 years ago, as Genesis suggests, the world and everything in it is simply too complex not to have been instigated by an intelligent creator. Put another way: There's no way to explain the origin of the earth's organisms without acknowledging that somebody -- or something -- wicked smart set it all in motion.

Currently, school boards from Kansas to New York have been upended by intelligent design proponents who want that theory taught in schools, alongside a more skeptical teaching of the theory of evolution, which is, after all, just a theory.

Catholics have largely stayed away from this messy and ultimately futile brouhaha. Many Catholic schools teach Darwinian evolution. And many Catholics don't find evolution and their faith incompatible. They've been buoyed by statements Pope John Paul II made that entertained the possibility of evolution.

In a formal statement to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, John Paul II said, "fresh knowledge leads to recognition of the theory of evolution as more than just a hypothesis." He added that creation and evolution can co-exist as long as it is understood that only God can create the human soul.

That seemed acceptable to me and many other Roman Catholics. But two weeks ago, an influential cardinal suggested that belief in evolution may be incompatible with the Catholic faith.

Writing on the Op-Ed pages of The New York Times, Cardinal Christoph Schonborn said, "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."

And, then, bam! Faster than you could say, "Lancelot Link, Secret Chimp," The New York Times printed a front-page article suggesting the Catholic church had backed away from its previous acceptance of evolution.

Confused theologians clamored for answers. Three scientists, two of them Catholic, have asked Pope Benedict XVI to clarify the church's position. They hopefully quoted John Paul II's statement "that scientific rationality and the church's commitment to divine purpose and meaning in the universe were not compatible."

Conservative columnist Andrew Sullivan, a Catholic, alleged that the church was going back to the Middle Ages. And a flurry of blogs accused the Church and Pope Benedict XVI of turning away from the 21st century.

The problem with all of this bloviating is that faith -- and particularly the Catholic church, which eschews literalism -- is all about nuance. What Cardinal Schonborn wrote is not that Darwin was wrong, but that the idea that God absented himself from natural selection -- or whatever brought us to our current condition -- is wrong.

"Evolution has not been a problem for the Catholic religion," Margaret Farley, professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, told me. "And it hasn't been a problem for Catholics because if you believe that God is behind everything, it doesn't much matter how God does it."

The Catholic Church has long promoted harmony between faith and reason, one of the justifications for its long-standing support of higher education. But as science advanced, a hostility developed between science's empirical fastidiousness and religion's allegiance to faith -- the so-called battle between faith and reason. It was never a battle religionists could win. How do you fight 21st century science with a book written in a primitive society?

As Anthony Tambasco, a Georgetown University theologian says, "the fact that there may be random selection does not mean there's no God behind it. Some people think if you say there is some kind of chaos it negates the presence of God. What I say is why can't God's plan include random selection and chaos? Why does that eliminate the existence of a divine being? It doesn't. ..Your theory of evolution can be perfectly legitimate but there is a God behind it."

This is essentially what Schonborn wrote. What he took issue with was the "unguided evolutionary process outside the bounds of divine providence." As he wrote, "the immanent design evident in nature is real."

And yet The Times read it as a major shift, writing that Schonborn essay was "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."

But Farley disagreed. "I'm not sure there's anything new," she said. "It's unfortunate that it got said this way or that it got interpreted this way."

But Schonborn's statement is just the kind of plastique fundamentalists can twist into their own purpose, and anti-Catholics, like the Times, can brandish to demonstrate how antediluvian the church is. In all of this din, it's easy to lose sight of the central argument. Science can teach us much about the beginning and end of life. Religion exists to help us understand how to live it.