

THE CATHOLIC AND EVOLUTION

“What may a Catholic hold concerning evolution?” The recent fanfare of publicity afforded the theory in our daily press, prompted by the dogmatic pronouncements of scientists and pseudo-scientists clamoring for the recognition of a very wide degree of evolution, and by the equally dogmatic and unqualified denial of any sort of evolution by the supporters of the fixity of species, has made this a frequent question on the lips of the present generation. The participants in the present day quarrel are perhaps a little too close to the scene of battle to direct us without prejudice to a solution of the difficulty. Let us go back more than six hundred years, and put our question humbly to the Angel of the Schools, St. Thomas Aquinas.

In going to St. Thomas, however, for aid to help us determine the attitude a Catholic should take toward the problem of organic evolution, two things especially must be borne in mind. In the first place, we must remember that the Holy Doctor was not faced with the theory as it is presented to us today. In no place does he deal directly with the possibility or the probability of the mutation of species as our scientists today regard the term, or of a genetic relationship existing between them. Remembering this, we will also readily see that we cannot ask from the Angelic Doctor a precise and direct valuation of the evidence presented in support of the theory; for he never found himself confronted with this evidence, which has been brought to light almost entirely by the researches of modern science alone. A consideration of the problem in the light of the principles of St. Thomas must, accordingly, be of its nature a question of possibility and not a question of fact. So we submit our perplexity to St. Thomas merely in an attempt to discover whether the theory of organic evolution may be considered a legitimate scientific hypothesis.

May we, then, as Catholics, and in how far may we accept the theory of evolution, if science furnishes us with indications of such an operation in nature? Does the theory contain anything contrary to our Faith? Does it contradict our Holy Scriptures? Is it, or is it not at variance with the tenets of Catholic philosophy? These are the questions we ask St. Thomas to answer for us.



St. Thomas Offering His Works to the Church

Before we may seek for the answers of these questions in the pages of St. Thomas, however, it is necessary that we first determine accurately what we mean by the theory of evolution, and that we distinguish carefully between the various forms of the theory. For distinctions beget clearness, and clearness is the mother of truth.

By the theory of evolution we understand the scientific hypothesis that the various forms of life now existing on the earth, and the forms that have existed in the past, have developed through the action of secondary natural causes from one or several primitive types. If we consider the theory as a purely scientific hypothesis, we will have a twofold division: Monophyletic evolution, which would derive all living beings from one primitive type or phylum; and Polyphyletic evolution on the other hand, which postulates several, though as yet an undetermined number of primitive forms. We may, however, consider evolution with regard to the ultimate principle or principles at work behind its operation. Viewed from this philosophical aspect, with regard to its first cause, our division of the theory of evolution will again be twofold. It will be Materialistic or Atheistic if we attribute all these results to the blind workings of chance, to the unfolding of vague potentialities inherent somehow in the essence of uncreated matter; it will be Theistic if we recognize in the working of the laws of nature God as the prime mover, and His Divine Providence as the directing force.

Bearing these distinctions well in mind, let us now turn to St. Thomas for his answers to the questions we proposed to him.

First, then, Materialistic evolution. It would require colossal hardihood, indeed, to ask the Angelic Doctor if we may accept such a view of the origin of things. For this theory considers the entire universe as the result of the blind workings of chance. According to it, matter has existed from all eternity entirely independent of any action of God. Man differs from the brute not at all in kind but only in degree of intelligence. Man's soul is but a more perfect form of the animating principle of the brute, and has arisen from it. This materialistic view of the theory of evolution, which so flagrantly contradicts Holy Scripture and the teachings of our Faith, and is so openly at variance with the essential tenets of Christian philosophy, can find no place in the Catholic view of life.

But do the same difficulties forbid our acceptance of Theistic evolution—of that form of evolution which derives from God all power of developing further forms that may be found in the creature?

To determine St. Thomas' answer to this question, we must make our examination according to the distinction already pointed out between monophyletic and polyphyletic evolution. To a strict monophyletic theory of evolution, which would derive all organic beings from one original form, we find the principles of St. Thomas clearly opposed. For such an hypothesis implies the origin of the higher animals and of the body of man by secondary causes, without the direct intervention of God. Now, though St. Thomas is quite willing to admit spontaneous generation of the lower forms of life through the agency of the heavenly bodies, such as the action of the sun on corrupting meat, yet he does not deem these bodies capable of producing the higher forms. For this he gives no *a priori* reason, however;¹ rather, it seems he is led to deny this power to the heavenly bodies solely from the lack of scientific evidence to justify it. For St. Thomas, considering the question of spontaneous generation,—a phenomenon apparently obvious before the day of the microscope,—accepted the Aristotelian doctrine on the power of the heavenly bodies in this instance in order to account by proximate causes, without recourse to the preternatural, for a seemingly patent fact of science. All he denies² is the extension of this doctrine by the Arabian philosopher Avicenna to the immediate production of higher forms. It seems certain, therefore, that given a different and well-founded scientific theory with regard to the origin and diversification of these higher forms of brute life, our Saint would have been willing to admit the possibility of a natural development even among them.

When, however, we come to consider the question of the proposed evolution of man, which a strict monophyletic theory of evolution would require, we find the teachings of the Angelic Doctor still more strongly opposed, and on firmer grounds. If this theory is extended to require the evolution of the human soul, monophyletic evolution, even though it calls itself theistic, becomes in fact mere materialism; and as such meets with the

¹ I, 71, 1; I, 91, 2, ad 2.

² I, 91, 2, ad 2.

same inflexible opposition that has already been pointed out when considering the confessedly atheistic and materialistic form of the doctrine.³

Neither is St. Thomas willing to admit the formation of the body of the first man by secondary causes, which monophyletic evolution necessarily implies. In answering the question "Whether the body of man was immediately formed by God?"⁴ St. Thomas states expressly that the first formation of the human body was not by any created power but directly by the uncreated power of God. Again, in answering the objection that according to St. Augustine's famous doctrine of "seminal reasons" man's body was only potentially made in the six days of creation and later was to reach its perfect form, St. Thomas replies that by this is to be understood only that the matter of which man's body consists was made in the very beginning of creation, but that the later molding of this matter into a human body was to be the act not of any created power, but of the power of God alone.⁵ In much the same way we say that a statue exists potentially in the rough block of marble, though we well know that the statue itself will never actually exist until the stone is worked upon by the sculptor. There can be no doubt, then, regarding the mind of St. Thomas. According to him the body of the first man was immediately formed by God, and not evolved by a series of natural causes.

This doctrine of St. Thomas, though not an article of Faith, is strongly supported by Catholic tradition and by the express teaching of the vast majority of theologians; and as such it would be rash to abandon it except on very solid and positive grounds. If in the future science should furnish evidence sufficiently weighty to require a surrender of this common Catholic position, the surrender could be made, as Father Wasmann is careful to point out,⁶ without injury to our Faith or prejudice to the authority of Holy Scripture. But until science can furnish us with a more complete list of the fossil remains of man's supposed ancestors than the present series which rests so strongly on the interpretation of a thigh bone, two teeth, and a part of a skull of doubtful identity found yards apart in a river bed in

³ I, 90, 2.

⁴ I, 91, 2.

⁵ I, 91, 2, ad 4.

⁶ Wasmann, S. J., "The Problem of Evolution," pp. 54-55.

Java,⁷ there seems no necessity for such a concession; and by far the wisest and most prudent course is to follow the example of St. Thomas in requiring a direct intervention of God for the origin of the body of the first man.

The principles of St. Thomas, then, will lead us to reject on *a priori* grounds both the materialistic evolution which excludes God from the workings of nature, and the monophyletic theistic evolution which would derive all existing organisms from one primitive form, insofar as this latter is extended to include the development of the soul or the body of man from the brute. We come now to consider the theory of polyphyletic theistic evolution; viz., the form of the doctrine which holds that the present systematic species have sprung from an undetermined but relatively small number of primitive types—called by some of its exponents natural species—which God created in the beginning and made capable of developing further varieties through the action of secondary causes, and always under the guiding hand of Divine Providence. Such is the position of a constantly growing number of scientists. It is championed among Catholics especially by the learned German Jesuit, Father Erich Wasmann, and in a somewhat broader application by Canon Henry Dorlodot, Professor of Geology at the Catholic University of Louvain.

In drawing a line between natural and systematic species, the exponents of this theory have done much to free the doctrine of evolution from its more objectionable features, and to establish a middle way between extreme monophyletic evolution on the one hand and rigid fixism on the other. A natural species would comprise a group of living organisms, corresponding somewhat to the Classes (e. g., Birds, Reptiles, Amphibians, etc.) or even Phyla (e. g., Vertebrates) of modern biological division, and resembling each other in general structure, manner of generation, nutrition, and sensation. For a systematic species (e. g., different kinds of Thrushes among the Birds) an accidental difference of structure alone will often suffice. Thus this position approaches quite close in principle to that of the fixists

⁷ These few fossil remains are all we have of the famous Trinil "ape-man," or "Pithecanthropus erectus." Scientists differ widely in their attempt to identify the remains. It is not even certain if the four parts belonged in life to the same animal. Cf. Wasmann, "The Problem of Evolution." Pp. 72-74.

themselves, for these natural species are held to be essentially immutable, and all evolution is confined to the production of new varieties or systematic species within the natural species. This position, it will be seen at once, affords a means of safeguarding the direct production by God of the body of man, inasmuch as it permits the placing of man in a separate natural species by himself.

Viewed in the light of the principles of the Angelic Doctor, how are we to judge this theory? Does it contain anything contrary to our Holy Faith? Does it contradict Holy Scripture? Is it in accordance with the well established principles of Thomistic philosophy concerning the action of secondary causes?

Let St. Thomas answer these questions for us in turn.

First, then, is such a view of creation contrary to our Faith? St. Thomas evidently thinks not. For he says explicitly: "Concerning the beginning of the world, there is this element which pertains to the substance of Faith, namely that the world came into being by creation; and on this all the saints agree. But the manner in which it was made and the order of creation does not pertain to Faith except by accident, insofar as it is contained in Holy Scripture. And the saints themselves, striving by different expositions to save the truth of Holy Scripture, have given us divers accounts of it."⁸ This freedom of exposition he further stresses in the following article, where he reminds us that "in such things as do not pertain to the necessity of Faith, the saints were at liberty to hold various opinions, just as we are."⁹ And so polyphyletic theistic evolution, admitting that which is of Faith, namely that the "world came into being by creation," is perfectly free to differ from the doctrine of the fixists in seeking to explain "the manner in which it was made and the order of creation"; for, according to St. Thomas, we are "at liberty to hold various opinions."

As to our second question: Does a polyphyletic theistic theory of evolution contradict Holy Scripture when it maintains that God created originally only a few forms, giving to them the power of developing other species, and rejects the idea of a successive creation of each systematic species in the order of the days named in Genesis? Let us hear St. Thomas: "St. August-

⁸ 2, d. ii, q. 1, a. 2.

⁹ 2, d. ii, q. 1, a. 3.

tine held that in the very beginning of creation certain things, such as the elements, the heavenly bodies, and the spiritual substances were created distinct according to their species; other things, however, such as animals, plants, and men,¹⁰ were created according to 'seminal reasons' (or, as St. Thomas elsewhere renders this phrase, potentially only), to be later brought out in their proper natures by that operation of God whereof it is said in the Gospel according to St. John: "My Father worketh until now, and I work."¹¹ Neither did St. Augustine hold that an order of time was to be seen in the distinction of things, but an order of nature only and of doctrine. . . . But St. Gregory and other saints hold that an order of time is to be observed in the distinction of things. This latter opinion is the more common, and superficially more in accord with the literal sense of Holy Scripture; but the former is the more reasonable, and better defends our Sacred Scriptures against the ridicule of unbelievers. . . . And this opinion pleases me more."¹² Nor can it be maintained that the famous *rationes seminales* of St. Augustine here mentioned were understood by St. Thomas to imply in creatures a passive potency only; for elsewhere he defines them to be "all the active and passive powers given by God to creatures, by means of which natural effects are brought into being; whence St. Augustine says in his third book on the Trinity that as mothers are pregnant with young, so the world itself is pregnant with the causes of things that are born."¹³

The polyphyletic theistic theory of evolution is, then, according to St. Thomas, altogether orthodox in its interpretation of the account of creation given in Genesis.

We come now to our last question. It this theory in harmony with Catholic philosophy, especially with the Thomistic doctrine on secondary causes? A very slight acquaintance with any of the works of the Angelic Doctor cannot but impress upon us the meticulous care with which he labors to credit the creature with as great a degree of causality as he may, and the infinite pains to which he puts himself in order to assign secondary natural causes whenever possible for any given effect. Only

¹⁰ The sense in which St. Thomas applied this doctrine to man has already been explained.

¹¹ St. John, v, 17.

¹² 2, d. xii, q. 1, a. 2.

¹³ De Veritate, v, 9, ad 8.

when absolutely necessary does he appeal to the direct intervention of a divine or a preternatural cause. Thus while assigning to the angels general presidency over corporal substances, he is careful to limit their direct intervention to preternatural or supernatural events.¹⁴ Such a doctrine, far from implying any imperfection in the primal causality of God, rather shows forth more strikingly the supreme greatness of His power. For, as the saint tells us in his *Summa contra Gentes*: "The greater the power of an agent, the more remote the object to which its operation extends; just as the stronger fire will warm the more distant object. . . . Since therefore the power of divine Providence is the greatest of all powers, it ought to extend its operation, through various media, to the most remote of all objects."¹⁵ In his commentary on Genesis St. Thomas epitomizes his doctrine thus: "God so administers things as to reserve for them, (i. e., for secondary causes) everything He can, in as far as is possible to Him."¹⁶ The corollary of this doctrine, in the form: Miracles are not to be multiplied without necessity, has passed as an axiom into Catholic theology.

It can hardly be maintained that the theistic theory of evolution is in opposition to this doctrine.

We now have our answers to the questions we put to St. Thomas; and I think his reply in each instance has made it apparent that a polyphyletic theistic theory of evolution works no harm to our Faith, that it is not at variance with the Holy Scriptures, and that it is in strict accord with his doctrine on secondary causality: That it remains accordingly for the Christian philosopher and scientist a legitimate field of inquiry and research.

It is true we are told by Haeckel that evolution is the chief weapon employed against Christianity by the heavy artillery of Monism, and materialists have succeeded only too well in popularizing their idea that the theory of evolution is essentially incompatible with the doctrines of our Holy Faith. The materialists knew well what they were doing when they labored so earnestly to get this idea widely diffused, for once it takes root, every scientific fact adduced in support of the probability of evolution is—falsely, indeed, but plausibly—construed to argue

¹⁴ I, 110, 1, ad 2.

¹⁵ *Contra Gentes*, iii, c. 77.

¹⁶ I. c., chap. 1, "Germinet."

with that same degree of probability against the truth and trustworthiness of revealed religion. And if Catholics, being misled by this unwarranted assumption of the materialists, should take alarm at the deductions of science, and attempt to argue against the theory on *a priori* grounds, it would but give to the opponents of religion new occasion for blasphemous ridicule against our Holy Faith.

St. Augustine, in a passage frequently cited by St. Thomas, long ago pointed out the harm that could be done religion by such over-zealous and imprudent defense, and warned against this attitude in no uncertain terms. "For," he says, "it often happens that there is some question as to the earth or sky, . . . of the natures of animals, plants, and the like, respecting which one who is not a Christian has knowledge derived from most certain reasoning or observation; and it is very disgraceful and of all things to be carefully avoided, that a Christian speaking of such matters as being according to the Christian Scriptures, should be heard by an unbeliever so to rave—the word is St. Augustine's, 'ita delirare'—that the unbeliever, perceiving him to be as wide from the mark as east is from west, can hardly restrain himself from laughing. And the pity of it is, not so much that the man is ridiculed for his mistake, as that our holy writers are thought to hold such things by those without the fold."¹⁷ The last sentence of this passage is particularly true, for the multitude is slow to discriminate, and it is not the individual, but the Church he is so readily assumed to represent, and the Scriptures he professes to interpret, that must bear the full burden of opprobrium.

Happily there is not a shadow of truth in Haeckel's assertion that the scientific theory of evolution is opposed to Faith. The false impression his school has spread abroad has arisen entirely, as we have seen, from the failure to distinguish between the scientific hypothesis of evolution and the atheistic philosophy materialists have so deftly spun around it.

Our only quarrel, then, is with these materialistic philosophers. To the scientists who do not attempt by their hypothesis to exclude God from the workings of the laws of nature, we should concede the same freedom St. Thomas so liberally grants them. In their regard we should adopt the attitude he counsels

¹⁷ Gen. ad lit., I, chap. 19.

in his *Summa Theologica*, when, speaking of the order of creation, he lays down the following rule: "In discussing questions of this kind, two things are to be observed. The first is, to maintain inviolably the truth of Scripture. The second is, that since Holy Scripture can be interpreted in a multiplicity of senses, one should adhere to a particular explanation only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it, if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing."¹⁸

Viewed *a priori*, then, and restricted within the legitimate fields of empirical science, the hypothesis of theistic evolution contains nothing that our Faith requires us to condemn. We leave it to rest on its own merits; to stand or to fall according to the strength of the evidence it can muster to its support. With it we have no quarrel. Certainly, at least, we shall not argue against it on *a priori* grounds as contradicting Holy Scripture and the doctrines of our Faith, lest we expose those same revered Scriptures and that same cherished Faith to the derision of unbelievers; lest we disturb many minds, both within the fold and without, with the false position that science is opposed to Faith; and finally, lest by giving a shadow of support to this false position, we multiply obstacles to the faith of scientists, and so bar against the well-disposed among them the door of admission to membership in the saving Church of Christ.

—Bro. Louis Clark, O. P.

¹⁸ I, 78, 1.

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