

Pope John Paul II on the Evolution and Mary

by Jim Seghers

“Pope Says We May Descend From Monkeys,” “Pope Backs Acceptance of Evolution,” these and similar headlines greeted newspaper readers in response to Pope John Paul II’s address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 23, 1996. Was the Holy Father endorsing evolution, as the press would have us believe? The truth is that the only one making a monkey out of anyone was the media duping its audience.

In the Pope’s carefully worded remarks Darwin’s theory was rejected as unacceptable because it is destructive both to man’s dignity and freedom, both of which are affirmed by revelation.

Parenthetically, Darwin’s theories are also rejected by a growing list of world-class scholars like: professor emeritus Dr. William Marra of Fordham, Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard biologist, Dr. Maciej Giertych, head of the Genetics Department, Polish Academy of Sciences, John Bonner, biology professor at Princeton, Richard Lewontin, professor of zoology and genetics at Harvard, Richard Goldschmidt, the geneticist who taught at Berkeley, Otto Schindewolf, the great German paleontologist, the late Pierre P. Grasse, president of the French Academy of Sciences, along with biologists and geneticists with international reputations like: Hans Driesch in Germany, Lucien Cuenot in France, and Vernon Kellog and T.H. Morgan in America.

Pope John Paul II’s address reaffirmed Pope Pius XII’s statements in the encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) — that the human soul was directly created by God and not through an evolutionary process. The present Pope in his general audiences January 24 and April 16, 1986, also reinforced this teaching. He pointed out that the Book of Genesis “has above all a **religious** and **theological** importance. There are not to be sought in it significant elements from the point of view of the natural sciences ... Indeed, the *theory* of natural evolution, understood in a sense that does not exclude divine causality, is not in principle opposed to the truth about the creation of the visible world as presented in the Book of Genesis... The doctrine of faith, however, invariably affirms that man’s spiritual soul is created directly by God. According to the **hypothesis** mentioned, it is **possible** that the human body, **following** the order *impressed by the Creator* on the energies of life, **could** have been gradually prepared in the forms of **antecedent** living beings.”

In addition the Holy Father reiterated the Church’s teaching that the truth of faith has nothing to fear from scientific research so long as it is not perverted by false philosophies and hostile ideologies which distort its methodologies and counterfeit its findings. Contrary to the misinformation found in the popular press, the Holy Father’s remarks give no support to those who want to enshrine Darwin’s theory with the cloak of fact. John Paul II has reasserted that true science always conforms to God’s revelation.

This balanced view which sees no conflict between the truth of faith and the truth of science is characteristic of Catholic Church teaching. What may surprise many, even Roman Catholics, is to realize that this harmony resonates in part from the Church’s teaching on Mary. The

Lutheran pastor, professor and author, Dr. Charles Dickson in his fine book, *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary* persuasively develops this theme.

“Interestingly, this controversy of science versus religion has involved primarily Protestant fundamentalist groups who, holding on to a rigid biblicism, feel threatened by suggestions of the scientific community that there may be ways of explaining the biological processes whereby human beings have arrived at the point we now are... It is at this point that the position of the Blessed Virgin Mary becomes a prime importance. For Catholics and all others who will consider it, a mature view of Mary in god’s plan of creation provides us with a key to understanding science, while at the same time relieving us of the problem of involvement in the age-old controversies between science and religion.”¹

“Such an honest recognition of the important role of Mary as the Mother of God helps us to understand how a loving God used the processes of the natural world to become one with His creation. This is the glorious mystery of the Incarnation, which occurs through the vehicle of the flesh of the Blessed Virgin”²

“For Christians, God is not an idea but a Person who comes to us in the flesh through His Divine Son. The Blessed Virgin is the agent of the Incarnation. Therefore God can be above the processes of nature as well as the One who acts within them. The Incarnation through Mary both enriches religion and ennobles science. The 17th cleric Philip Henry asserted, ‘The person who thinks there can be any real conflict between science and religion must be either very young in science or very ignorant in religion’”³

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¹ Charles Dickson, *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, c. 1996), pp. 55-562.

² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.