DARWIN, DESIGN, AND THE CATHOLIC FAITH

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Words matter, and they matter most of all in the context in which they are to be read and understood. On July 7, 2005, the New York Times published an opinion piece, "Finding Design in Nature," purporting to offer "The official Catholic stance on evolution." The author of that piece, my fellow Catholic Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, got the theology exactly right, but erred dramatically in his take on the science and the politics of the "design" movement as it exists in the United States. Knowing how the Cardinal's words will be misused by the enemies of science in our country, it is important to set the record straight.

As Cardinal Schönborn quite properly points out, the Catholic Church is staunchly opposed to any view of life that would exclude the notion of divine purpose and meaning. In the new century, as he puts it, the church will "defend human reason by proclaiming that the immanent design evident in nature is real." In response I would echo the words of the Catechism that scientific studies of "the age and development of the cosmos, the development of life-forms and the appearance of man . . . invite us to even greater admiration for the greatness of the Creator." Indeed they do.

But the Cardinal is wrong in asserting that the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution is inherently atheistic. Neo-Darwinism, he tells us, is an ideology proposing that an "unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection" gave rise to all life on earth, including our own species. To be sure, many evolutionists have made such assertions in their popular writings on the "meaning" of evolutionary theory. But are such assertions truly part of evolution as it is understood by the "mainstream biologists" of which the Cardinal speaks?

Not at all. Consider these words from George Gaylord Simpson,

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widely recognized as one of the principal architects of the neo-Darwinian synthesis: "The process [of evolution] is wholly natural in its operation. This natural process achieves the aspect of purpose without the intervention of a purposer; and it has produced a vast plan without the concurrent action of a planner. It may be that the initiation of the process and the physical laws under which it functions had a purpose and that this mechanistic way of achieving a plan is the instrument of a Planner—of this still deeper problem the scientist, as scientist, cannot speak."

Exactly. Science is, just as John Paul II said, silent on the issue of ultimate purpose, an issue that lies outside the realm of scientific inquiry. This means that biological evolution, correctly understood, does not make the claim of purposelessness. It does not address what Simpson called the "deeper problem," leaving that problem, quite properly, to the realm of faith.

Cardinal Schönborn also errs in his implicit support of the "intelligent design" movement in the United States. The neo-creationists of intelligent design, unlike Popes Benedict and John Paul, argue against evolution on every level, claiming that a "designer" has repeatedly intervened to directly produce the complex forms of living things. This view stands in sharp contradiction to the words of a 2004 International Theological Commission document cited by the Cardinal. In reality, this document carries a ringing endorsement of the "widely accepted scientific account" of life's emergence and evolution, describes the descent of all forms of life from a common ancestor as "virtually certain," and echoes John Paul II's observation of the "mounting support" for evolution from many fields of study.

More important, the same document makes a critical statement on how we should interpret scientific studies of the complexity of life: "whether the available data support inferences of design or chance . . . cannot be settled by theology. But it is important to note that, according to the Catholic understanding of divine causality, true contingency in the created order is not incompatible with a purposeful divine providence."

Right there, in plain view, is the essence of compatibility between evolution and Catholic theology. "Contingency in the created order," the very essence of evolution, is not at all incompatible with the will of God. The official church document reemphasizes this point by stating that "even the outcome of a truly contingent natural process can nonetheless fall within God's providential plan for creation." And evolution, as Stephen Jay Gould emphasized brilliantly in his writings, is truly a contingent natural process.

The concerns of Pope Benedict, as expressed in his earlier writings

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and in his coronation homily, are not with evolution per se, but with how evolution is to be understood in our modern world. Biological evolution fits neatly into a traditional Catholic understanding of how contingent natural processes can be seen as part of God's plan, while "evolutionist" philosophies that deny the Divine do not. Three popes, beginning with Pius XII, have made this abundantly clear.

John Paul II's 1996 letter to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, which Cardinal Schönborn curiously regards as "unimportant," bore the magnificent title "Truth Cannot Contradict Truth." In that letter the late pope, writing in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas, affirmed the church's twin commitments to scientific rationality and to an overarching spiritual view of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. Like many other scientists who hold the Catholic faith, I see the Creator's plan and purpose fulfilled in our universe. I see a planet bursting with evolutionary possibilities, a continuing creation in which divine providence is manifest in every living thing. I see a science that tells us there is indeed a design to life. And the name of that design is evolution.

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