Evolution and the Pope

Are Science and Religion at War?

We have just passed the one hundredth anniversary of one of the more important books written about the interaction of science and Christianity. The book's title, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, says much about the book.

Andrew White wrote the book in 1896 to justify his belief that a university should be without any religious affiliation. He was the founder and first president of Cornell University in New York and was very outspoken in his views about the hindrance religion has been to scientific progress. It was White who popularized the view that there was a war between science and Christianity, and that in all cases science had ultimately been shown to be right.

A History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom is one long polemic attempting to show that religion has always held back the advance of science. The author maintains that if only theology would quit sticking its nose into the tent of science, everyone would be better off. Well into this century the book was regarded as being an important statement on the tension between science and religion.

One hundred years, however, has changed the tone of the discussion. Today many historians of science would agree that Christianity was a significant foundation for modern science, even though it is now viewed as an outmoded belief. For several reasons, then, it came to be commonly accepted that Christianity had played a key role in preparing the way for the development of modern science. First, Christians assumed they lived in a world that could be understood because it was created by a rational God—the same God who had also created

them. This gave early scientists some reason to assume that nature might obey laws that could be known. Speaking about the view of the universe that the Church gave to the culture around it, the great mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said early in this century, “When we compare this tone of thought [the faith in reason and the regularity of the universe] in Europe with the attitude of other civilizations when left to themselves, there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God.”

Second, not only was the universe understandable because a rational God made it, but the Bible encouraged believers to look at God’s creation for signs of His handiwork. For example, as early as the Psalms David had proclaimed, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). Scriptures such as this one, and many others, encouraged Christians to study nature to understand how it glorified God. Christians were confident that nature’s design would show forth God’s glory.

However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries much happened that eroded Christian confidence that they lived in a world crafted by God. In particular, Darwin’s theory (that all organisms were descended from a common ancestor and that any appearances of design could be explained by natural selection working over long periods of time) came to have great acceptance among almost all scientists. For many the theory of evolution came to be seen as the complete answer as to why the world is as it is. For them, there was no need at all for a Creator or God to explain anything because evolution could, or would, explain everything.

A notable example of this position is the famous statement by astronomer Carl Sagan, “The universe is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” With these words he began his immensely popular series about the universe, *Cosmos*. His words are the creed of the materialist (i.e., if it can be counted,

measured, observed, experimented on, understood by natural laws, then it is real). Anything else is either meaningless or, at least, not scientific. According to this view, mountain goats are real because we can see them, touch them, put them in zoos. Angels, on the other hand, are not real because we can do none of these things to them. Science has to do with facts, and if there is any place for religion it is in the consideration of morals or ethics or those other areas where there are no facts.

But some people, such as Stephen Gould, a palaeontologist at Harvard, have remained open to dialogue on how religion and science can coexist. In his monthly column for *Natural History* magazine, he recently put forth his latest elaboration of how evolution, science, and religion are related. His proposed resolution of this issue is the theme of this essay.

Stephen Gould, the evolutionary writer and scientist, addresses what are the proper bounds of science and religion in a recent *Natural History* magazine. He proposes a complete answer to the problem of how they relate to one another. Simply put, they don't interact at all. "The net of science," says Gould, "covers the empirical universe: what it is made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap."

The Roman Catholic Church uses the term *magisterium* to refer to its authority to teach in areas relating to the Bible and its interpretation. Gould borrows this term and applies it as well to the legitimate area that science teaches. So the Church may speak about moral issues and science about matters of fact and theory. For this somewhat unbalanced division he creates the wonderful phrase "nonoverlapping magisteria."

Has the Pope's View of Evolution Evolved?

Gould is certainly free to pontificate. However, what is

somewhat mystifying is how he draws in Pope John Paul II as a prime supporter not only of his interesting distinction between science and religion, but also as a firm supporter of evolution!

On October 22, 1996, Pope John Paul addressed the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The theme of their conference was to be the origin of life and evolution, so John Paul helpfully laid out what the Church had said over the last fifty years.

The Pope made clear that his predecessor, Pope Pius XI, had "considered the doctrine of 'evolutionism' a serious hypothesis." But, John Paul says, "Today, almost half a century after the publication of the encyclical [of Pius XI], new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory."

That is as far as John Paul's statement goes: evolution has moved from a serious hypothesis to a theory with significant arguments in its favor. Yet from this statement, Gould triumphantly draws an amazing observation:

> *In conclusion, Pius had grudgingly admitted evolution as a legitimate hypothesis that he regarded as only tentatively supported and potentially (as I suspect he hoped) untrue. John Paul, almost fifty years later…adds that additional data and theory have placed the factuality of evolution beyond reasonable doubt. Sincere Christians must now accept evolution not merely as a plausible possibility, but also as an effectively proven fact.*

Is this really what the Pope said? We'll now look more

carefully at Gould's interpretation of the Pope's statement.

Does Evolution Fit the Truth About Man?

Stephen Gould, writing in *Natural History*, makes the Pope say something far more significant, and from Gould's point of view, a concession of defeat. How does Gould paraphrase John Paul's statement? "Sincere Christians must now accept evolution not merely as a plausible possibility, but also as an effectively proven fact."

Nevertheless, either by reading too rapidly or possessing too much enthusiasm for his own position, Gould misses critical distinctions that the Pope's announcement makes. To argue that the Pope's statement ("new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis") means that "sincere Christians must now accept evolution not merely as a plausible possibility, but also as an effectively proven fact" is ludicrous. Gould almost twists the Pope's statement to contradict what he does say.

In fact, in his next paragraph, the Pope states: "A theory is a metascientific elaboration, distinct from the results of observation but consistent with them….Furthermore, while the formulation of a theory like evolution complies with the need for consistency with observed data, it borrows certain notions from natural philosophy."

"Metascientific" means going beyond the realms of science into an abstract, philosophical arena. So, the Pope says, evolution is more than a hypothesis; it is a theory, but as such, it also is "distinct from the result of observation" and borrows from philosophy. His next statement is one Gould may have skipped over:

> *And, to tell the truth, rather than the theory of evolution, we should speak of several theories of evolution. On the one hand, this plurality has to do with the different*

> *explanations advanced for the mechanism of evolution, and on the other, with the various philosophies on which it is based. Hence the existence of materialist, reductionist and spiritualist interpretations.*

So, rather than saying the words Gould puts in his mouth, the Pope actually says that not only is evolution based on a philosophy, but there are several theories, and he goes on to rule out some of them, at least for Roman Catholics. “Theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the spirit as emerging from the forces of living matter or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man.”

Gould wants the Pope to say, “You talk about science, and I’ll talk about religion. You can have the world of facts, and I’ll take what’s left. These areas won’t overlap with each other, and we’ll each stay in our own gardens.” But the Pope is unwilling to follow Gould’s convenient (for science) scheme. Instead, he firmly declares “The Church’s magisterium is directly concerned with the question of evolution, for it involves the conception of man.” This is what all of us who are Christians should be saying. Evolution, as it is usually put forward, is not just a theory about ancient data. It is also a philosophical statement about where man came from and what, if any, importance he has. While Gould claims his scientific views are not related to his moral views, his words give little support to this.

Is Christianity Concerned About Evolutionary Theories?

Early in his essay Gould has dispatched creationists with a few quick paragraphs. “Creationism does not pit science against religion, for no such conflict exists. Creationism does not raise any unsettled intellectual issues about the nature of biology or the history of life. Creationism is a

local and parochial movement, powerful only in the United States among Western nations, and prevalent only among the few sectors of American Protestantism that choose to read the Bible as an inerrant document, literally true in every jot and tittle." Well, so much for a fair, informed assessment of one's opponents.

First he defines out of existence what creationists see as a central argument by merely saying "no such conflict exists." Then he proceeds to caricature creationists as a fringe group only found among a small group of Protestants. Prior to this he has equated "scientific creation," the view that the earth was created in six days and "only a few thousand years old," with all of creationism, which he fails to note includes even those who believe in evolution and an earth billions of years old, but believe God superintended the process.

Gould's claim that "creationism does not raise any unsettled issues" ignores significant questions that have been raised about how life first arose from chemicals, about the source of the genetic code, and of the origination of new biological structures. But does the Pope truly believe in Gould's nonoverlapping magisteria? Gould's summation of the opening of John Paul's speech is that he "begins by summarizing Pius's older encyclical of 1950, and particularly reaffirming the NOMA principle [nonoverlapping magisteria] nothing new here."

Is this really what the Pope said? He begins by saying that "the origins of life and evolution [are] an essential subject which deeply interests the Church, since revelation, for its part, contains teachings concerning the nature and origins of man. . . . I would like to remind you that the magisterium of the Church has already made pronouncements on these matters within the framework of her own competence." This hardly sounds like there is no overlap between what the Church teaches and science. Toward the end of his remarks John Paul flatly contradicts Gould's neat distinction: "The Church's magisterium is directly concerned with the question of

evolution for it involves the conception of man." So it would seem that Gould has used those parts of the Pope's speech which he likes and disregarded the rest.

Two points are important here. First, while Gould sets forth an interesting view about the relationship between science and religion and gives a new name to what used to be called "complementarity," it is not the view espoused by the Pope, and is almost antithetical to it. Second, Gould himself does not abide by this strict separationism in his own views, even when he claims to. When Gould actually makes his own moral position clear, it is hard to escape the conclusion that it comes directly from his views and philosophy as a scientist.

Why Trust Your Mind If No One Made It?

"As a moral position…I prefer the 'cold bath' theory that nature can be truly 'cruel' and 'indifferent.'" This is the summary of Harvard paleontologist Stephen Gould in his *Natural History* essay on how science and religion should relate to each other. "Science," Gould says, "covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work (theory)." Religion is left to cover "questions of moral meaning and value."

Gould calls his position nonoverlapping magisteria and claims the Pope holds the same view. As we stated earlier, this is far from true. But Gould then goes on to describe the moral view he takes.

Gould's position, which he immediately claims is not "a deduction from my knowledge of nature's factuality" is "nature was not constructed as our eventual abode, didn't know we were coming… and doesn't give a _____ about us (speaking metaphorically)." He says he finds such a view "liberating…because we then become free to conduct moral discourse…in our own terms, spared from the delusion that we might read moral truth passively from nature's factuality." It

is indeed hard not to draw the conclusion that Gould has read his view about the process of evolution into his own moral position. How does he know that nature was not constructed for us if not from his studies of the natural world? How would he know it doesn't care about us unless somehow he saw this in his studies? Where else might he get such ideas?

In his speech, Pope John Paul II spoke quite candidly of his view of evolution:

> *And, to tell the truth, rather than the theory of evolution, we should speak of several theories of evolution. On the one hand, this plurality has to do with the different explanations advanced for the mechanism of evolution, and on the other, with the various philosophies on which it is based. Hence the existence of materialist, reductionist and spiritualist interpretations.*

Stephen Gould has a materialist philosophy behind his theory of evolution. He believes that the material universe is all that exists, and that our own consciousness is a chance phenomena and does not come from a Creator. So, for Gould, where else can he draw his views about the meaning of life and what might be moral? His very thinking is a chance product of evolutionary processes that had no design, either to produce man or to give him a mind. Nonetheless, Gould trusts his mind not only to be able to distinguish between science and religion, he is sure that they should not influence one another.

Gould's view is a version of what is the common denominator of much of science today. At all costs religion must be kept out of science, or else science will cease to exist. Only material answers can be given to any question because the intervention of a Creator would negate the laws that govern science. What is missed in all of this is that without a Creator of some kind, not only is there no basis to trust the human mind to

make true observations, but there is no reason to suppose that it would matter. Why worry about science or religion, and certainly why worry about whether they could have a negative effect on each other? If there is no God, there can only be arbitrary judgments. It is God who gives meaning to what we say and believe.

Christians serve a rational God who made both them and the world. On what does Gould base his trust in either science or the mind?

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