

Genesis isn't a science book: Vatican to study evolution; Benedict's trip to France; and Pius XII

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 19, 2008 All Things Catholic

From time to time, Catholicism can be seized with fits of enthusiasm and veer toward one extreme or another. Over the long run, however, its instinct is usually to seek the sane middle, driven by what Pope Benedict XVI has called the Catholic genius for seeking "both/and" solutions to seemingly "either/or" problems.

In Rome this week, a blow was struck for the sane middle on the most vexed issue in the modern relationship between faith and science: the theory of evolution.

The man responsible was Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture and, in a certain sense, heir to Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan as the church's great interlocutor with secular culture. Like Martini (and also, of course, like Benedict XVI), Ravasi is that rare prelate capable of holding his own with the best and the brightest of secular art, philosophy and science, not as an apologist but as a sympathetic partner in dialogue.

He brought that touch to his discussion of evolution on Tuesday.

"I want to affirm, as an *a priori*, the compatibility of the theory of evolution with the message of the Bible and the church's theology," Ravasi said.

Ravasi pointed out that Charles Darwin had never been condemned by the church, nor was his *Origin of Species* ever placed on the index of prohibited books. Ravasi brushed aside a question about whether the Catholic church should posthumously apologize to Darwin, as a senior British prelate has suggested the Church of England might do, with the quip that "we should abandon the notion of history as a court eternally in session."

The setting was a Vatican briefing to announce a major academic conference in March 2009, organized by the Jesuit-run Gregorian University in Rome and the University of Notre Dame in the United States, and co-sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Culture. The title is "Biological Evolution: Facts and Theories," to be held at the Gregorian in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the *Origin of Species*.

Though organizers didn't quite put it this way, one aim of the conference appears to be to correct impressions that the Catholic church has moved closer to Evangelical-style creationism or the "intelligent design" school. (In brief, creationism is based directly on scripture; intelligent design posits that scientific evidence supports the hypothesis of a designer.) In response to a question from a reporter, Jesuit Fr. Marc Leclerc of the Gregorian University said that exponents of creationism and intelligent design had not been invited to the congress.

Leclerc said of intelligent design that it "substitutes divine will for the mechanism which it is the province of science to study, even though this is obviously a matter of two distinct levels [of causation]."

Professor Gennaro Auletta, a lay scientist and philosopher at the Gregorian who also directs the quixotically named "Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest" project for the Council of Culture, offered a sound-bite for the point of view the conference wants to express: "No to a closed evolutionism, yes to a theory of evolution which is itself evolving."

Not so long ago, the theory of evolution was considered a shining example of how the Catholic church had made its peace with modern science. Pope Pius XII's 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*, while warning against ideological abuses, stated that "the teaching authority of the church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions ? take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution." Famously, Pope John Paul II called evolutionary theory "more than a hypothesis" in a 1996 speech to the Pontifical Academy of Science.

Recently, however, a growing number of Catholics have voiced affinity for intelligent design, worrying that accepting the theory of evolution means acquiescing to a world without God, in which randomness and chance are the ultimate realities. A July 7, 2005, opinion piece in *The New York Times* by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, seemed to express official endorsement of this view, all the more so because the piece had been placed on Schönborn's behalf by the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, an intelligent design think tank.

Professor Philip Sloan of Notre Dame, who took part in the Vatican press conference, told me afterwards that he's seen a clear shift in Catholic attitudes.

"When I started in the 1970s, my Catholic students said the following: 'God works by natural ways, so there's no problem with evolution,'" Sloan said. "When I taught Darwin, the only ones who had a problem were the Protestants. Now I get Catholic students who think it is impossible to be a Catholic and accept the theory of evolution."

"If you look at the condensed versions of the Catechism that end up in high school textbooks, it just gets stronger and stronger toward an almost literal kind of creationism," Sloan said. He attributed that development in part to "an alliance, sometimes an unfortunate one, between right-to-life groups and anti-evolution groups, often developing within Evangelical Protestant circles, which then gets transferred into Catholic discussion."

Ravasi and his colleagues obviously hope to offer a different perception of the church's message. During Tuesday's press conference, I asked Ravasi if one could say that neither creationism nor intelligent design form part of Catholic teaching.

"There is a doctrine of creation which is obviously part of the church's teaching, and which is elaborated in a strictly theological context," Ravasi said. "But if I use this doctrine ideologically in the scientific field, then it breaks down."

Ravasi offered three "virtues" he hopes will characterize the discussion among scientists, philosophers and theologians over evolution:

- "Serious study ? beyond stereotypes and radicalisms."
- Humility, including an awareness of the limits of any one perspective.
- Optimism, based on the conviction that "science can purify religion from superstition" and that "religion can protect science from false absolutes."

In a typical flourish, Ravasi managed to cite six prominent secular thinkers during his roughly 10-minute

presentation, reflecting an astonishing variety of backgrounds and perspectives: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Oscar Wilde, Friedrich Schelling, Max Blanc, Isaac Newton and Alexander Pope. Ravasi noted parenthetically that Newton was a believer and even wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation -- though Ravasi, a renowned Biblical scholar, added that it was of "low quality."

To be sure, Ravasi emphasized that it's just as dangerous for scientists to draw metaphysical conclusions from the fossil record as it is for religious believers to use Genesis as a science textbook. He said that over the years, he's sometimes heard scientists make theological statements that are "frankly laughable."

Ravasi's bottom line was the following: "We don't need an iron curtain of ideologies. We need the nobility of making distinctions, which is not the same thing as separation."

Information about the March 3-7, 2009, conference can be found here: www.evolution-rome2009.net [1].

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The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture made part of Tuesday's media brief available through YouTube. The selections are in Italian with English subtitles.

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This week, I covered a conference in Rome devoted to Pope Pius XII, whose record during the Holocaust has long been a subject of controversy, especially between Catholics and Jews. The 50th anniversary of Pius' death in 1958 falls this year on Oct. 9, which, ironically, also happens to be the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur.

The Sept. 15-17 conference was held at Rome's Palazzo Salviati, on the Tiber River near the Vatican. It was the location where slightly more than 1,000 Roman Jews were incarcerated on Oct. 16, 1943, before being deported to the Nazi death camps. Of that group, only 16 survived.

The conference brought together a number of leading defenders of Pius XII, such as Filippini Sr. Margherita Marchione of Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey; Ronald Rychlak, a Catholic law professor at the University of Mississippi; William Doyno, author of *The Pius War*; Andrea Torielli, a prominent Italian journalist; and Fr. Peter Gumpel, relator for the sainthood cause of Pius XII.

In brief, the case for the defense amounted to:

- Pius was not "silent" on the Nazis or the Holocaust, because he spoke on numerous occasions in ways both public and private. Defenders point out, for example, that Adolph Eichmann's diary, released by Israeli authorities in 2000, claims that protests from Pius XII resulted in suspension of the round-up of Jews in Rome.
- Pius XII avoided more direct and dramatic statements because they could have unleashed even worse persecution.
- Behind the scenes, he mobilized church resources to save lives, including Jewish lives. To take just one example, the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo became a sanctuary for refugees, with the pope's own bedroom converted into a makeshift nursery where 40 babies were born during the war. Afterwards, Jews who had taken shelter at Castel Gandolfo thanked the pope.

What made the gathering remarkable was that it took place under the aegis of the "Pave the Way" foundation, an inter-faith group founded and led by an American Jew named Gary Krupp. A number of Jews, including a handful of rabbis from different parts of the world, were present at the conference, and Krupp plans to turn over

materials the defenders have unearthed to Holocaust museums in order to try to correct impressions of Pius XII.

On Thursday, I took part in an audience at Castel Gandolfo in which Benedict XVI addressed participants in the conference. It amounted to the first time this pope has come to the defense of his controversial predecessor.

Benedict insisted that Pius "spared no effort" to help people, and that many of the pope's humanitarian initiatives were "made secretly and silently," because "in that difficult historical moment, only in this way was it possible to avoid the worst and save the greatest number of Jews."

The cause to declare Pius XII a saint is currently at something of an impasse. In May 2007, the Vatican's Congregation for Saints voted to endorse his "heroic virtue," the first formal step in the process, and a document confirming that verdict is now awaiting a papal signature. Only when that occurs can officials move forward with investigation of a miracle, which is required for beatification. Another miracle would be required for eventual canonization.

My two earlier stories on this conference are here: [American Jew comes to the defense of Pius XII](#) [2] and [Pius XII 'spared no effort' for Jews, Benedict XVI says](#) [3].

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Last weekend, I travelled on the papal plane with Benedict XVI for a four-day visit to France. (The press corps joked that it could be a historic trip in at least one respect; this might have been the last papal flight ever on Alitalia, if the Italian national carrier can't pull itself back from the brink of collapse.)

My coverage can be found here: [Benedict in France and at Lourdes](#) [4]. For now, I'll offer just a couple of quick thoughts about the significance of the trip -- which, by the normal standards of turnout and press coverage, was widely rated a success.

In effect, this trip took the pope to the citadels of the "two Frances." When he visited President Nicolas Sarkozy at the Elysée Palace, he was paying tribute to official, establishment France, the France of the Enlightenment and the Revolution. When he travelled to Lourdes, the famed Marian sanctuary near the Pyrenees, he was in effect honoring the other face of France -- rural, traditional, and believing.

The enthusiasm for Benedict offered a clear sign that this second France, even if reduced in size and visibility, is still around. The church in France, like much of the rest of Europe, is making a sometimes painful transition from a cultural form of Catholicism, relying on institutions and history to transmit the faith, to what one might call a more "evangelical" model -- smaller, but more dynamic and entrepreneurial.

A key theme for Benedict over his four days in France was *laïcité*, usually translated as "secularism." In a sense, the trip offered the second installment of a two-part reflection from the pope on church/state relations, with the first coming during his April visit to the United States. In America, Benedict lauded a model of church/state separation which he regards as offering freedom *for* religion; in France, he urged a new look at *laïcité*, which, in the eyes of many believers, sometimes means freedom *from* religion.

Senior Vatican officials worry that the French model of *laïcité* is marching across Europe these days in a growing body of EU treaties and court decisions, driving member nations into a more rigidly secular stance.

To what extent Benedict actually persuaded the French to be more open to religion in public life remains to be seen, but the tone struck by Sarkozy could not have been more affirmative. It was Sarkozy, not the pope, who asserted in an address at the Elysée that it would be "madness" for France to deny its Christian heritage or the contributions of religious believers.

With allowances for the massive cultural differences, one could say that Sarkozy is sort of the Ronald Reagan of France -- the first political figure to understand the electoral importance of his country's version of the "religious right." The second France, the France of Lourdes, helped propel Sarkozy to victory, and in turn he's emboldening believers to claim a seat at the table of public life.

In the United States, the "Reagan revolution" ushered in an era in which religious believers became an indisputably potent, albeit controversial, force in American politics. It's not at all clear that Sarkozy will have the same impact in France; for one thing, in late 2007 and early 2008 his approval ratings were the lowest of any modern French leader. Yet if Sarkozy is able to right the ship, he could point the way to a new political formula -- one which could dovetail with Benedict's project of opening up a space in which the religious voice can be heard.

Whatever Sarkozy's fortunes, the trick for the pope is to make the case for a religious contribution to politics without seeming partisan; in other words, not to inadvertently unleash a new round of conflict between the "two Frances" and their analogues in other European nations. That's the tightrope Benedict is on, and it will be fascinating to watch him walk it.

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