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More on evolution and religion

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 18, 2006 All Things Catholic

Last week, I looked ahead to a Sept. 1-3 meeting of the pope's Schülerkreis, his circle of former doctoral students. This year the Schülerkreis ponders the explosive theme of "Creation and Evolution," in the wake of a *New York Times* op/ed piece from Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna last year arguing that the theory of evolution is incompatible with Catholicism.

Among the speakers at the meeting will be Dr. Peter Schuster, President of the Austrian Academy of Science and a molecular biologist. Schuster spoke with *NCR* from his office in Vienna on August 11. The full text of the interview can be found in the Special Documents section of *NCR*online.org: Schuster Interview [1].

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Are you a Catholic?
I was a Catholic, but I no longer consider myself one. I suppose I am agnostic. Let's put it his way -- I have difficulties with the idea of a personal God. I don't have trouble with God as creator of the world as a whole.

How were you invited to Castelgandolfo?
A half-year before Cardinal Christoph Schönborn published his article ? we met over breakfast and had a very relaxed and interesting discussion on chance and evolution, what shapes the evolutionary process, and so on.

[After] the *New York Times* piece, there was a partly angry excitement among scientists, though there was also some agreement with the cardinal in broader society. I was invited by a group of physicists to speak on the subject in Traunkirchen. I gave a one-hour talk, then Schönborn spoke, followed by discussion. [Note: A Power Point version of Schuster's talk is available here: http://www.tbi.univie.ac.at/~pks/Presentation/traunkirchen-05.pdf [2]. It is a large file so will take a bit of time to download.]

Generally speaking, we came to the conclusion that there was much less disagreement than we originally thought. Schönborn stayed away from his statement that biologists are promoting an ideology, and I'm glad, because in essence it's not true. Every biologist has the obligation to change his ideas when experiments contradict what he thought. ...

The only area of disagreement concerns whether there are conclusive points in nature which require the hypothesis of an intelligent designer. As molecular biologists, we do not need the intervention of an intelligent designer to explain what we see.

... Six months ago, Cardinal Schönborn called to ask me if I would give more or less the same talk to the pope and his doctoral students. We had lunch together, and I asked the cardinal, 'Why me? Certainly there are evolutionary biologists who are closer to the church.' Schönborn said he had a discussion with the pope, and the

pope wants a scientist who in no way can be suspected of being a creationist.

In your view, science neither proves nor disproves intelligent design?
Biology by no means disproves the idea of a Creator, but the point is that we don't need a Creator to explain what we see. One hundred years ago, it was the common belief of Christians that God directly created every new species. Darwin showed how natural development can lead to new species. Today we understand this much better, and there's no evidence that can't be explained within this general framework.

What do you think will come from the Schülerkreis meeting?
I think they want to have some kind of statement on Darwinian theory, close to that made by the previous pope in 1996. [Note: John Paul II then defined evolution as "more than a hypothesis."]

What are your impressions of the thinking of Benedict XVI on evolution?
I think he's very close to John Paul. One thing I will stress is that referring to "neo-Darwinism" [as Schönborn did in *The New York Times*] is not appropriate in our time. We have different knowledge, and we know many more details. For one thing, we can now do evolutionary experiments in the lab. We can empirically show how the mechanisms of evolution work, optimizing molecules by mutation and selection. We can design molecules by evolutionary techniques using the same process we see in nature. I believe the pope is interested in this.

So you believe Benedict will take a somewhat different position than Schönborn?
I think so, but one never knows. We'll see at the end.

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