Early Catholic Responses to Darwin’s Theory of Evolution

*Samuel Klumpenhouwer*

There are no simple conclusions to be drawn when exploring the historical relationships between religion and science. Those that present either a straightforward conflict or a perfectly harmonious collaboration run contrary to the evidence of history. This is especially true for analyses of the initial reactions of the Catholic Church to Darwin’s theory of evolution, as first thoroughly expounded in the *Origin of Species*. This paper will show that throughout the 19th century, ecclesiastical authorities offered no normative response to evolutionary theory, neither an explicit condemnation nor an overt approval, and this in turn created a great diversity of reactions among Catholics. This diversity of reactions will be expounded through an overview of the responses to evolution, accompanied by an analysis of the nature of the controversy itself. Finally, this study will then culminate in an examination of how the controversy was specifically enacted in the careers of two prominent Catholic scientists.

The evidence that will be incorporated is primarily from the formal reactions of the Catholic Church to evolution. That is, the reactions of ecclesiastical leaders and Congregations (such as the Congregation of the Index), as well as influential journals and other Catholic media, will be the points of focus. One could rightly suppose that there was a wide-spread opposition by uneducated Catholics to the theory of evolution, but that deserves its own separate investigation. Some lay Catholic academics will also figure into the present inquiry, but only those who elicited a response from within the Catholic hierarchy. Since 1998, when Pope John Paul II first opened the Vatican archives to public examination, many new studies have been able to reconstruct the Catholic Church’s formal responses to evolution with much greater accuracy. Among these new
studies, the scholarship by Artigas, Glick and Martinez provide an especially thorough and
critical analysis of these documents.\(^1\)

Apart from a few exceptions, this study is restricted to the second half of the 19th century.
It is indeed true that studying later responses by the Catholic Church to evolution can shed light
on earlier reactions, especially during Vatican II and in the papal encyclicals *Humani Generis*
and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Yet, it is also important not to be anachronistic and let these later
statements influence the study of what preceded them. Typically, Catholic ecclesiastical leaders
today accept some form of theistic evolution, but it would be mistaken to transpose this general
modern acceptance onto the 19th century, even if its roots do indeed lie there.

There is a unique discrepancy in the responses to evolution from the Catholic Church as
compared to those of the Protestant denominations, and a brief examination of this will
illuminate the nature of the controversy as it developed among Catholics. With the Catholic
Church, a more centralized authority, the belief in the ability of the Church to authoritatively
interpret Scripture (rather than *Sola Scriptura*, as in main-line Protestantism), and the deference
given to the Church Fathers all contributed to the formation of unique reactions to evolution.
Studies that focus on Protestantism are often left arbitrarily claiming a certain denomination to
be the normative. It is true, as the thesis of this paper claims, that the Catholic Church also
lacked a normative response. Yet because of the centralized structure of authority in the Catholic
Church, it remains possible to speak of an official response, or, in this case, the significance of
the lack of one.

\(^1\) The opening of the Archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith specifically allowed the public to
study in detail the discussions that went on within the Congregation of the Holy Office (also known as the
Inquisition) and the Congregation of the Index. Especially with the latter Congregation (which is actually an
extension of the Holy Office), the public could now gain a greater understanding not just of which books were
prohibited, but the reasons behind the prohibition. For further details on the nature of the archives, see Mariano
Artigas, Thomas F. Glick and Rafael A. Martinez, *Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican Confronts Evolution 1877-1902*
Concerning evolutionary theory itself, one of the many reasons for its success is its diversity of forms. On a practical level, it is flexible enough to be moulded over time according to new discoveries in science and the fossil record. On a conceptual level, it can be used to construct a strictly materialistic worldview, and it can also be reformulated such that it is compatible with Catholic orthodoxy. That said, in the nineteenth century there were many who considered evolution in its pure form to be an atheistic, or at least a materialistic, theory. For them, it either precluded the existence of God or had no use for it other than as a first cause. If a Catholic was to reconcile evolution to orthodox doctrine, he would have to discern at some level the workings of God through the processes of evolution. This would typically include a denial that chance was a driving mechanism in the evolution of species. In effect, such a Catholic would be accepting evolution, but denying “Darwinism”, as the latter concept’s inclusion of this element of random happenstance leaves little place for teleology. Darwin and many of the secular proponents of evolution, however, saw no evidence of purpose in nature. As emphasized by John Hedley Brooke, many of the disputes taken as evidence of ‘the conflict between religion and science’ turn out upon closer examination to be disputes as to the correct meaning of scientific theories. Even when 19th century Catholics believed evolution to be true, there was no consensus on what that actually meant in terms of a new understanding of science and theology.

This range of reactions to evolution among Catholic intellectuals is visible in the following examples. Cardinal Newman, one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 19th century, remarked to a friend in 1868 that he did not see in “Mr. Darwin’s theory” that “the accidental evolution of organic beings’ in inconsistent with divine design—it is accidental to use,

---

3 Ibid., 283.
5 Brooke, Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives, 275
not to God”. In contrast to this early and charitable response to evolution (although Newman remained a skeptic of Darwin) is Joseph Scheeben (1835-88), another very influential Catholic theologian, who declared that evolution itself, not just Darwinism, was heretical if it were ever applied to man’s body. From the scientific community, and from a distant point on the spectrum of opinion, George Jackson Mivart, perhaps the most severe critic of Darwin, but also an influential Catholic scientist who strove for much of his life to reconcile evolution and Christianity, eventually concluded that the Bible and Catholic doctrine could not be reconciled to the new science.

From the world of media, the reactions of Catholic journals to evolution were also characterized by wide-spread disagreement or condemnation. The first Catholic journal to respond to the publication of the *Origin of Species* was in England by *The Rambler* in March of 1860. After making the critique that Darwin was simply recycling ancient Greek philosophy that had been refuted by Aristotle, the reviewer especially rejected the materialistic philosophy he saw as inherent in the *Origin of Species*. However, the Catholic journal that continuously and famously opposed evolution was not *The Rambler*, but rather *La Civilta Cattolica*, a journal directed by a group of Jesuits in Rome. A major factor in the general responses to evolution, especially in Rome, was the complete opposition presented by this journal. It is difficult to overstate the influence of the journal in the Catholic world, even though it was not an official representative of the Vatican. This journal also provided the foundation for many of the

---

textbooks used in Catholic schools, which adopted its opposition.\textsuperscript{12} As was previously proposed, there was a general opposition to evolution from Catholics. Any attempts to reconcile the two had to work against the spirit of the age.

Yet it was not only Catholics who struggled to see how evolution could be reconciled to Catholicism. The idea that evolution and Catholicism were incompatible was often adopted by secularists as well.\textsuperscript{13} For this community, many of the proponents of evolution used the opportunity to deny the possibility of the reconciliation of science with Catholicism. Thomas Henry Huxley, for example, considered one of the greatest merits of the theory of evolution to be its incompatibility with Roman Catholicism.\textsuperscript{14} In France, when Royer provided the French translation of Darwin’s \textit{Origins}, she included an aggressive preface calculated to alienate Catholic opinion.\textsuperscript{15} Later on in 1874, the scientist John William Draper, whose book on the \textit{History of the Conflict between Religion and Science} was eventually placed on the Index, articulated well what many of his peers were wishing: “Many good and well-meaning men have attempted to reconcile the statements of Genesis with the discoveries of science, but it is in vain. The divergence has increased so much that it has become an absolute opposition. One of the antagonists must give way.”\textsuperscript{16} It is obvious that the debate in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was not simply about evolution, as this was not just a new scientific theory, it was an opportunity. Advocates for evolution found it extremely difficult not to take this chance to draw unwarranted conclusions about society, politics and religion.\textsuperscript{17} Concerning the responses of the Catholic Church to evolution, what must therefore always be taken into consideration is that its responses were

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{13} Brooke, \textit{Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives}, 303.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 289.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 297.
\textsuperscript{17} Brooke, \textit{Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives}, 295.
Early Catholic Responses to Darwin’s Theory of Evolution

Samuel Klumpenhouwer

rarely directed just to a scientific theory. Catholic reactions were also to all the ideology that people attached to it. It was often very difficult for Catholics to sift through this ideological baggage and respond to evolutionary theory *per se.*

Although there was a significant modernist faction of the Catholic Church who eagerly sought to incorporate the various changes of the 19th century into the Church, the papacy and most of the ecclesiastical leaders opposed modernism. The title of modernism came to incorporate the theory of evolution, as it was all too easy to lump it together with other modernist ideologies that were seen as being in opposition to the Catholic Church. This anti-modernism extended through the 19th century and into the 20th. With this attitude, Pope Pius X famously wrote the 1907 syllabus of errors *Lamentabili Sane* that condemned, among many other things, the proposition that “Scientific progress demands that the concepts of Christian doctrine concerning God, creation, revelation, the Person of the Incarnate Word, and Redemption be re-adjusted.” Papal encyclicals, while not dogmatic in their teaching (i.e. not irreformable) provide much of the normative framework for theology and catechism. It remained to be seen, however, whether or not an acceptance of evolution would necessitate a deviance from the dogmatic teachings of the Church.

Up to this point, little has been said concerning the specific points of conflict between evolution and Catholicism. Most people have a basic understanding of the conflict due to the fact that there are still many Christians who deny evolution, especially among American Evangelicals. However, to better understand the controversy in the 19th century, and the nuances

---

of its emergence within the Catholic Church, it is necessary now to delve deeper into the specifics of the controversy.

The main points of conflict centered upon issues of biblical interpretation and the nature of truth. If one were to take the creation narrative in Genesis literally, as most Catholics did in the 19th century, there would be an apparent conflict with the idea of evolution. In Catholic theology, it is believed that people may come to know truth through both revelation and reason, but that ultimately all truth comes from God—“all truth is God’s truth”—so, therefore, for the Catholic, there can be no real contradiction between faith and the findings of science. Hence, Pope Leo XIII in the 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* declared that “there can never, indeed, be any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist, as long as each confines himself within his own lines.” Faced with an apparent contradiction between Catholic dogma and evolution, this inconsistency must therefore either be illusory, or one of the two must be wrong. As previously stated, both Catholics and non-Catholics generally considered the latter to be the case, although the first option remained a viable course of investigation. In any case, a Catholic could not have recourse to a subjectivism supporting the existence of two opposing truths. New discoveries in science during this period were thus often disconcerting to Catholics.

The Catholic Church, however, was not bound to a literal interpretation of Genesis, even if this was the default position. Pope Leo XIII restated this in 1893, when he declared that people are “not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it

---

22 Or both, for that matter.
untenable or necessity requires.”

Furthermore, Catholic theologians were accustomed to performing biblical exegesis with a complicated set of hermeneutical tools. This allowed for an understanding of Scripture on various levels of meaning, and sensitivity to the genres in which books of the Bible were written. Even in the fifth century, for example, Augustine interpreted the Genesis account of creation in six days to be metaphorical, believing instead that creation was an instantaneous act. That said, even if Catholics were not always bound to a literal interpretation of Genesis, a greater controversy arose when evolution came into apparent conflict with what Catholics were bound to: dogma.

Unlike Protestants, who normally accept the Reformation adherence to Sola Scriptura, Catholics believe both Scripture and the Church to be authoritative, such that the Magisterium of the Church can, under certain circumstances, declare certain doctrines infallible and irreformable. Hence, conflict with Catholicism usually arose when evolution was perceived to challenge dogmatic theology. Some of the examples of this have been stated by Pius X, specifically the dogmas concerning “God, creation, revelation, the Person of the Incarnate Word, and Redemption.” Unlike today’s Evangelicals, the age of the Earth was not a major point of contention, nor was the evolution of animals; however, the evolution of human bodies was. This appeared to challenge not only the dogmatic theology concerning redemption, but also the nature of the soul.

\[23\] Ibid.

\[24\] In traditional Catholic exegesis, it is understood that there are four levels of meaning in Scripture: the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical.

\[25\] The nineteenth century was also a formative time as regards biblical interpretation. Apart from the controversy surrounding evolution, Catholic exegetes were also being challenged by changes in the fields of historical and textual criticism.


When Vatican I opened in 1869, it sought to address these issues, reaffirming and clarifying its stance on three major areas of conflict: the first being doctrines of Creation, the Fall and Redemption, the second being the interpretation of Scripture, and the last being the relationship between reason and revelation. These were the bases for much of the controversy, and many examples of the opposition to evolution by Catholics have thus far been given, yet the general opposition to evolution was not as absolute as it may seem. This becomes evident with the acknowledgement of the fact that the Catholic Church understands itself to speak at different times with varying degrees of authority. Even though people in the highest ecclesiastical offices personally spoke out against evolution, the Catholic Church never authoritatively adopted a stance on the issue. In the 19th century, despite the intensity of personal opinions, it was recognized that the official Magisterium of the Church took no position on evolution. The Holy Office likewise did not offer an opinion—and their opinion was also never sought. The most explicit statement the Pope ever endorsed was made during a provincial council held in Cologne in 1860, wherein a debate ensued over evolution. While this council did not have the authority of an ecumenical council, it was authorized by Pope Pius IX. The council declared, among other things, that man’s body was created directly by God, thereby addressing the contentious issue of whether or not human bodies had evolved. Yet its decrees were only promulgated under the authority of the German bishops. They were not a dogmatic declaration and Catholic

---

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 21.
32 As well, while the intention of the council was clear, the language was not. This provided the opportunity for theologians that supported evolution to continue their endeavors to reconcile it with Christianity.
theologians and scientists could still remain within the bounds of orthodoxy when they sought to reconcile evolution and Catholicism.\(^{34}\)

Although Vatican I (1868-1870) had little to say about evolution directly, many of its pronouncements influenced the approach to issues of evolution, and of science in general. Among other things, the council explicitly rejected any deistic or materialistic understandings of the universe. It also declared again that God could be known both through revelation and reason—reaffirming that “there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason.”\(^{35}\) After the council, the option remained open for Catholics to explore methods of reconciling evolution to Catholicism, provided that they never abandoned truth gained through revelation.

Granted that the attitudes of Catholics were generally opposed to evolution, it remains to be seen why there was never even a public condemnation, as was the case in the trial of Galileo. At this point, it is important to take a brief look at this trial of Galileo, and its effect on the nature of Catholic responses to evolution. This trial had already become a touchstone for discussions concerning religion and science, and some of the reasons for reservation on the part of ecclesiastical leaders in the nineteenth century are directly related to it.\(^{36}\) During the 19\(^{th}\) century, the trial of Galileo was often brought up in anti-Catholic polemics, such as in Draper’s aforementioned work, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*.\(^{37}\) As much as it tried, the nineteenth century Catholic Church could not forget about Galileo.

The controversy surrounding this man, like the controversy surrounding evolution, was not simply about science. At the time, Galileo’s theory of the universe, much like Darwin’s in

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 23.
the 19th century, was far from proven fact, and in the same way it incited unwarranted conclusions from an unproven hypothesis.38 At the core of this issue was a debate over the correct interpretation of the Bible.39 This was often the case with evolution as well. That said, the nature of the two controversies was also different in significant ways. Much of the Catholic Church’s reactions to Galileo were not just to his ideas, but to Galileo as a Catholic. Darwin, however, was not a Catholic, and the Church was responding primarily to ideas coming from outside herself. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church saw a need for prudence in the 19th century because she was suffering the effects of a lack of prudence in the trial of Galileo. The Church had lost credibility within the scientific community, and regardless of how merited or unmerited that loss may have been, the possibility that evolution was true, however small, remained real. In the 19th century, furthermore, the Church did not have the secular authority and respect that it had during the time of Galileo. In France especially, as has been pointed out by Harry Paul, the desire to recover the intellectual community, and scientists in particular, was felt as an acute need.40 The Church certainly did not wish for Darwin to give rise to the so called “greatest scandal in Christendom” as Galileo had done.41 In part as a result of this experience, therefore, the Catholic Church restrained its opposition in the controversy surrounding evolution to a greater degree that it had with Galileo.

Thus far much has been said about the general nature of the controversy as well as the reluctance of ecclesiastical leaders to address the theory publicly. What will now be briefly examined is how this controversy was enacted in the careers of two Catholic scientists who sought to reconcile evolutionary theory with Catholicism.

41 Ibid., 158.
First is the case of George Jackson Mivart (1827-1900), an English biologist and devout Catholic. As a brilliant scientist, he became a friend of Darwin, Huxley and many other important figures in the English scientific community. After the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Mivart was initially skeptical, but soon came to accept evolution and sought to incorporate it into a Catholic framework. Yet, even though he accepted evolution, he rejected natural selection and criticized Darwin’s account of evolution on many other points—something Darwin took seriously enough to refute in the sixth edition of his *Origin of Species*. As a Catholic who believed in evolution, and also as someone who severely criticized how it was being understood and applied, Mivart was ostracised by both sides of the debate at the end of his life. His friendships with Darwin and Huxley fell apart, and the Catholic Church denied him a Church burial (it is not technically correct to say he was excommunicated). Some of his publications were also placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* by the Congregation of the Index.

Mivart is the example most often cited in discussions of Catholicism and evolution. The conflict that left him in a state of disfavour with the Catholic Church, however, was not over his belief that evolution was compatible with Catholicism. In fact, after the publication of his *Genesis of Species*, in which he mounted a critique of Darwin but also sought to show there was nothing in evolution generally that was antagonistic to Catholicism, he was awarded a doctorate in philosophy by Pope Pius IX. He fell out of favour with the Catholic Church not because of his attempts to reconcile evolution and Catholicism, but rather because of his publication of a number of articles on the nature of hell that were deemed heretical (Mivart believed that some

---

44 Ibid., 236.
happiness remained for those in hell). These articles were the ones placed on the Index, and not his books on evolution. It was also his refusal to retract his statements about hell that caused the ecclesiastical authorities to deny him a Church burial. 46

Before looking at the second example of a Catholic who sought to reconcile evolution with Catholicism, it is important to briefly state the nature of the Congregation of the Index at this period in history. While it did condemn some books relating to evolution, it is important to note that no books either by Huxley, Spencer or Charles Darwin were ever listed. However, Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles Darwin, and Draper (who was earlier mentioned) did have some of their publications placed the Index. Although this congregation could proactively look for publications that should be censored, normally it only investigated publications that had been reported. 47 There was no systematic investigation of publications or a campaign against books about evolution. Furthermore, while the Congregation of the Index was indeed generally opposed to evolution when investigating a publication, there was no authoritative standard that could be directly used on which to base its decisions—and neither were its decisions irrevocable (Copernican works, for example, had been taken off the Index in 1822). 48 As stated, it was recognized that the Magisterium of the Church took no official position on evolution. This resulted in lengthy and complex deliberations on the part of the Congregation of the Index as to what should be censured. 49

The second scholar to be examined is Dalmace Leroy (1828-1905), a Dominican priest who in 1877 published The Evolution of Organic Species. A second edition, expanded and with corrections, appeared under the title Evolution Limited to Organic Species in 1891. Like Mivart,

46 Artigas, et al., Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican Confronts Evolution 1877-1902, 236.
48 Langford, Galileo, Science and the Church, 162.
Leroy sought to prove that evolution was compatible with Catholicism, that it was not necessarily materialistic or atheistic.\(^{50}\) Unlike Mivart, though, Leroy’s publications on evolution were investigated by the Congregation of the Index and subsequently condemned. The condemnation, however, should not be understood without qualification. There were four written reports produced by the Congregation of the Index on Leroy’s book over a number of years. The first recommended that no action be taken, and the second that Leroy only be warned. It was in the third that it was proposed to prohibit the books unless Leroy retracted—which he did. Finally, it was only with the fourth that his book was actually condemned.\(^{51}\) However, the decree against his book was never made public and it never actually appeared on the Index. In fact, although numerous Catholic books about evolution were condemned, there was only one that was ever actually listed on the Index: a work by Raffaello Caverni.\(^{52}\) Furthermore, as Artigas, Glick, and Martinez conclude from their study of the documents from the Congregation of the Index, it is Leroy’s case that stands as the typical example.\(^{53}\) His case and many others show that the restraint shown by ecclesiastical authorities in their reactions to evolution extended into their judgement on scholarly works. When there were condemnations, they were performed neither quickly nor publicly.

It can be concluded that although there was a general opposition to evolution by ecclesiastical authorities in the highest ranks, there was never an authoritative condemnation. The reactions by Catholics to evolution were typically negative in the 19\(^{th}\) century, but discussion and debate remained open. The groundwork had thus been laid for a minority of Catholic academics to continue their work to reconcile evolution and Catholicism. Their point, as

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 52.
\(^{52}\) Artigas, et al., *Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican Confronts Evolution 1877-1902*, 32.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 122.
Brooke says, was that “Darwin’s critique did not touch the central thrust of their doctrine, which was that everything ultimately owed its existence and preservation to a power transcending the natural order.”54 It is upon this groundwork that over the next century the minority would become the majority.

Early Catholic Responses to Darwin’s Theory of Evolution

Samuel Klumpenhouwer

Works Cited


Vidler, Alec R. *The Church in an Age of Revolution*. The Penguin History of the Church. London:
Early Catholic Responses to Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Samuel Klumpenhouwer