

## **WHAT DO CATHOLICS BELIEVE ABOUT CREATION?**

Could God have created the world in only six days? Yes, God could have, but the question that gets debated is not COULD God, but DID God create the universe in six days? How a person answers that question reveals a great deal about his or her religious background and his or her understanding of God and human beings. . Trying to get at the answer involves the work of scripture scholars and scientists.

The main question becomes: Is the theory of evolution incompatible with what is revealed to us in the Scriptures? Catholic theologians tell us that the theory of evolution is not necessarily incompatible with Scripture. In fact, it is compatible if evolution is seen as a theory, and the creation of the world by God is not limited literally to six days. If evolution is understood as being progress, i.e. moving from less to more, and it is acknowledged that God's creative power is the cause of that movement, then evolution and Scripture can be seen as being compatible.

### **What does the Bible teach about creation?**

The Catholic Church believes that the Biblical account of creation teaches us some basic truths about God's plan for our salvation. These basic truths include:

1. There is only one God, the Supreme Being, who created and oversees all visible and invisible beings.
2. The universe is not the result of a struggle between opposing cosmic forces or between good and evil gods.
3. The universe was created by God; it is a matter of fact and it does not tell anything about how or when. The universe is distinct from God. It is not an object of worship in itself.
4. Men and women equally share the dignity of being made in the true image of God.
5. Disorder in the universe arises from the choices of human beings as they try to be totally self-sufficient and ignore God. This is called sin.
6. According to Genesis, the Earth is entrusted to human beings who should consider themselves its stewards rather than its autonomous owners.

These teachings flow from the meanings within the Biblical texts, and they are reaffirmed by Catholics every time the Creed is said.

### **The Debate**

Confusion arises when people try to compare religious truths and scientific theories. The Book of Genesis in the Bible is, in part, a poetic statement of wisdom given to humanity by God and passed from generation to generation through an oral tradition before it was ever written down. yet, there are some people who would say that the Biblical story of creation must be held as being literally true because there can be no error in the Bible. Others would say that although the Bible is without error, this doesn't mean the text is always literally true.

In the latter half of the last century, the scientific world was becoming more and more knowledgeable about human development and the theory of evolution was gaining wider acceptance. Scientific developments in palaeontology, anatomy, anthropology, comparative physiology, embryology, and geography all began to make sense when they were seen through the framework of the theory of evolution.

In the early part of this century, in the Southern and Midwestern United States, a movement began that came to be known as Fundamentalism. One of the basic beliefs of Fundamentalists is that because the Bible is God's word, it is completely without error and must be interpreted literally.

These two positions, Fundamentalism and scientific theories of Evolution, were on a collision course. The stage was set for a stormy battle that has lasted for over sixty years and still flares up from time to time. The battle ground is often the school system and the fight is over which theory will be taught.

Perhaps the most famous of these battles was the Scopes trial in Tennessee in 1925. It became known as the "Monkey trial" in the popular press and pitted Clarence Darrow, a famous human rights lawyer, against William Jennings Bryan, a professed Fundamentalist.

Discoveries by scientists lead them to speak of the creation of the earth as a process requiring millions of years. Fundamentalist Christians hold firmly to the biblical account and insist that creation took six days, literally. In an attempt to bridge the gap, some Christian theologians adopted arguments that came to be called "concordism". When scientific discoveries and the Bible seemed to be incompatible, they looked for a possible explanation which involved re-interpreting the biblical account. For example, they proposed that perhaps a "day" in the Bible really referred to a geological period. However, they soon found that this type of reasoning only led to other problems.

In 1950, Pope Pius the XII<sup>th</sup> issued an encyclical letter to Catholics entitled *Humani Generis (The Origin of Human Being)*. In it, he dealt with many of the fears and misconceptions that had arisen in science versus Bible debates. The Pope did not forbid ongoing research by people versed in both science and Scripture, but he insisted this be done with seriousness, moderation, and careful weighing and judging of opinions from both fields. He also said that the first eleven chapters of Genesis contain historical truths which must be studied further and examined. He pointed out, however, that these writings should not be compared to history in the modern sense of that word, i.e. presenting known times, dates, places, etc. The Book of Genesis was written to explain truths about God and humanity in simple metaphorical language adapted to the people of the time.

## **Communication of Divine Revelation**

The Catholic Church treasures the Scriptures as being the inspired Word of God. Catholics are encouraged to read the Bible and readings from the Old and New Testaments hold an honoured place in Catholic worship.

For Catholics, God's revelation to us comes through the channel of sacred Scripture, interpreted in light of all the resources made available to the community of the Church across time and space. The Church uses the word "Tradition" to mean the process by which God's truth, presented by Jesus Christ and handed down to us through the apostles, is communicated; God's truth becomes deeper and clearer in meaning as the community of the Church lives the Gospel.

At the Second Vatican Council, in the text on Divine Revelation, (*Dei verbum* [D. V.J]), the bishops of the world and the Pope told us:

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes in various ways. It comes through contemplation and the study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth until eventually, the words of God are fulfilled in her. [D. V..#8]

Catholics believe sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are closely interrelated, and it is the two together that give the Church its guidance and assurance that the Word of God is true and without error. The sacred Scripture speaks of realities revealed to us by God for our salvation and the Church accepts both the Old and New Testaments as being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

To compose the sacred books, God chose, certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though He acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever He wanted written, and no more.

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus, all Scripture is inspired by God. [D. V. #11]

So, we are assured that in Scripture God has given us the truth needed in order to achieve salvation. When it comes to the question of trying to discern and understand the meaning of Scripture for our times, the Church gives its members the benefit of the guidance of experts and “exegetes” who are trained to study and interpret the Bible.

Seeing that in sacred Scripture God speaks through men in human fashion it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning of the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words.

In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid, among other things, to literary forms, for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various forms of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression. Hence, the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express through the medium of a contemporary literary form.  
[O.V.#12]

## **Conclusion**

There need not be any conflict between science and Scripture if people understand the purpose of each. They are linked because both tell us about our world and our humanity. We have been given the power to think, to reason, and to make moral choices. The Scriptures guide us in making the moral choices we must make about science and how its discoveries are used. As we make those choices, we are expected to remember what the Book of Genesis teaches us: that the universe was created by God, and it is good; that we are all equal members of the same human family; that we are stewards of the earth and that troubles in our world and environment are partial result of our own self-centredness, arrogance, and misuse of creation.

Episcopal Theology Commission  
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops  
June, 1991