
The Introduction
to
Christian Materialism

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In 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. The work was his explanation of “evolution”—the idea that the species were produced by the gradual development of more primitive forms of life. According to Darwin, evolution was propelled by what he called “natural selection”—the idea that the struggle for survival will always be won by the “fittest” of every litter. Steadily, Darwin argued, this saw to the structural improvement of primitive species. With time, it saw to the development of whole new structures. Where the demands of survival favored different improvements, different species eventually emerged. With more time, these evolved into the species that now exist.

To be sure, the idea of evolution had not originated with Darwin. Anaximander had spoken of evolution as early as the seventh century B.C. Though the idea did not survive the classical period, it had recently reappeared in the writings of a number of nineteenth century scientists trying to answer the newly perplexing question of the origin of the species. Darwin is remembered because it was he who amassed a body of evidence to support the idea which was too great to be ignored. It was he who advanced the then most plausible way to account for this evidence, the idea of natural selection. And finally, it was he whose book brought the entire matter to public attention.

Although *The Origin of Species* did not state that the origin of the human species was to be attributed to the same processes to which it attributed the origin of all other species, the implication was no less clear. Moreover, this implication was immediately recognized by nearly everyone who came into contact with Darwin’s work. It was only partly for this reason that both the theory and its author were condemned by Christians of all kinds.

To most Christians, the theory of evolution was the first attack their faith had ever faced. The theory held that the various species were the product of evolution, a natural process requiring millions upon millions of years. This was not the teaching of the Bible. Genesis said that the heavens, the earth, and everything in them had been created by God in six days. It told of the creation of man out of clay. To the minds of most Christians, if Darwin was right, the Bible was wrong. If so, it could not be the inspired Word of God upon which Christian doctrine depends. Furthermore, inasmuch as evolution explained the origin of species by a *natural* process, it appeared to deny the necessity of a Creator—God Himself. If this were not enough, in its implicit explanation of the origin of man,

the theory considered him the descendant of primitive primates. In any case, to say that people are descended from lower forms of life seemed to deny them their immortal soul.

To most churchmen, and here reference is being made to Catholic churchmen, Darwin's theory was hardly a first attack upon their faith. As they saw it, the Church had never been without its enemies; Darwin was simply the latest. Always the Church had prevailed; always it would. Yet, as they were also aware, the Church was already in the third century of a decline in influence that had begun with the defection of Martin Luther. As yet, little had successfully been done to stop this decline and now the theory of evolution would only make things worse. Despite this, they were still sure that the Church would prevail. They did not doubt its teachings were true.

Institutionally speaking, the Church could not have thought otherwise. Considering itself the one true Church instituted by Jesus Christ to preach, and therefore to teach, the saving revelation of God to humanity, it was sure to have expected God's protection and guidance. Obviously, this included the divine guarantee that the Church would not teach error.

To be clear, this guarantee (or "infallibility") was taught to be no substitute for believing in the Sacred Scriptures. The Church taught that the Scriptures were the inspired, inerrant Word of God. But since any scriptural passage can be interpreted in a host of different if not contradictory ways, the good use of Scripture clearly depended upon the divine guidance to interpret it correctly. Furthermore, even though the Scriptures were believed to preserve all we needed to know, they were not believed to preserve all God wanted us to know. Certain truths were preserved in the form of an unwritten but still Sacred Tradition that the Church had faithfully passed down from the apostles. Though these truths were implicitly taught in Scripture, they might not have been noticed had they not been taught by Tradition. Thus, the actual guarantee of their truth was the fact that the Church transmitted them, especially if they were accepted by a formal act of Church teaching—an act of the "magisterium"—the ultimate earthly source of what is true.

It was the issue of Sacred Tradition, and specifically its citation in favor of the doctrine of indulgences, that became the occasion of Luther's break with the Church of his baptism. Though his dispute with the Church also concerned his ideas about salvation, it was at heart a dispute over the authority of the Church *per se*. The result was the Protestant Reformation and its rejection of that authority in favor of an insistence upon the supreme authority of the Bible.

Soon after the Reformation, however, Catholics and Protestants began to encounter a rejection of even those beliefs they held in common. With the "Renaissance"

of Western Europe had come increasing hostility to almost any mention of the supernatural, the invisible, or anything else that could not be proved scientifically. In increasing numbers, the educated in society began to speak of the Scriptures as fable or fabrication with little or no historical basis. Though this did not always involve a denial of some sort of God, for a growing number it did. Of late, the still increasing hostility to the idea of anything that could not be seen had come to include a denial that man is composed of body and soul. To most Church leaders, Catholic and not, the theory of evolution appeared to support these developments across the board.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that evolution was condemned by almost every Church. To most, the issue could not have been more clear: It was *The Origin of Species* or the Bible, evolution or creation, Darwin or God. Though some sought to challenge Darwin's theory on the basis of criticisms offered by his colleagues in the scientific community, most made clear that they did not understand the theory and, unwittingly or not, they misrepresented it, subjecting it to the most ridiculous of critique and caricature.

It was all to no avail. Although the ensuing decades of scientific debate did identify serious problems with the theory of natural selection—especially its inability to account for many of the more complex structures that creatures possess—a number of complementary processes came to be suggested. Theories of evolution were also offered to explain the way primitive life-forms might have emerged out of nonliving matter. Meanwhile, the evidence to support the idea of evolution *per se* continued to mount. Though scientists were by no means convinced that they had discovered all of the dynamisms by which to explain it, they were all but universally agreed that evolution had taken place. It was fast becoming impossible for an educated, intellectually honest person to disagree.

For a time, church leaders found themselves upon the horns of a serious dilemma. It was fast becoming impossible to deny the evidence. Yet it seemed that to accept the evidence would be to admit that the Scriptures and the magisterium had been wrong. This neither could they do.

In the face of this dilemma, certain theologians (those who do “theology,” the study of God) began to consider the possibility the evolution did not require them to abandon their religious beliefs. They began to consider the idea that evolution and creation were not so mutually exclusive as first they had feared. Perhaps it was not evolution *or* creation but creation *by means* of evolution. After all, evolution might explain the origin of the species but it could never explain itself. It could never explain the existence of a universe in which evolution was not only possible but led to humanity. Surely Christians could safely claim that this had been the work of God. The discoveries that had discredited

the six-day model of creation in no way required or even implied a denial that God is the source of all there is. Was this not the “essence” of the Genesis account of creation? Had not the Genesis account expressed this essential truth long before we had discovered the means by which God had chosen to create? Did not Genesis express this doctrine in the only way its first recipients, the ancient Hebrews, could have understood it?

Actually, as must be acknowledged, when the new ideas of creation and truth were first articulated, they were condemned by most Christian leaders, including various organs of the magisterium. This should not have been surprising. After all, creation had always been pictured as a six-day miracle; the Bible had always been taken literally. The new view was too new. Nonetheless, under the increasing weight of the evidence for evolution, resistance began to soften. Church leaders became accustomed to the idea of creation by means of evolution. Likewise, as they became accustomed to the idea that doctrine needs to be suited to the people for whom it is meant, they were led to a new appreciation for the role of the human writer of the sacred texts. It was his role to put the truth into words his people could understand. This he did by being himself.

Armed with this idea, theologians were freed to study the Scriptures with the aid of methods one would use to discover the meaning and historical basis of any ancient text. Though this “modern biblical criticism” did concede much of what certain biblical critics had been saying for centuries, it provided new religious insights and scientifically respectable evidence that the historical basis of Christianity is indeed sound. How ironic. It was the theory of evolution that forced the faith into these developments.

Evolution likewise contributed to the new conception of Church teaching that became necessary when the Church finally formally accepted the new view of Scripture. Over the course of history, Church teaching had come to include a number of references to the literal, historical truth of all of the Scriptures and all of their parts. As well, when the theory of evolution first became public, both the theory and attempts to reconcile it with creation were condemned. Again a dilemma. The Church could not declare it had taught error, and yet... Faced with this dilemma, the Church saw fit to apply the distinction between the truth and its understanding to its own doctrinal declarations. In this light, troublesome statements about scriptural inerrancy were now said to teach the essential truth that the Scriptures unerringly teach the truth “necessary for our salvation.” Statements condemning evolution were said to have asserted that God is the “ultimate” author of all that is.

This was only the beginning. Theologians now insisted that the time had come for new versions of many Church teachings. In some cases, especially with regard to the salvation of non-Christians, the new versions differed quite dramatically

from the historical teachings. What is more, the new teaching on salvation actually succeeded in reducing the doctrinal disagreement that still separates the Church from most Protestant denominations. Eventually, evolution began to be mentioned by name in certain theological theses. Not surprisingly, it became the basis of theologies of progress and this led to a new awareness that humanity is one.

Of course, none of this took place quite so easily as retrospect can sometimes suggest. Indeed, as history will attest, new ideas are always resisted. Nonetheless, by 1965, much of what post-evolution theology had done was either explicitly or by implication incorporated into the documents of the Second Vatican Council, that great assembly of Catholic leaders that sought to renew—and to modernize—the life of the Church. Among its many accomplishments, the once evil idea of evolution had been defused. The Council had rendered a Christian interpretation of the idea. At the same time, it was also to be acknowledged that evolution had contributed to a new and deeper view of Christianity. In other words, the two ideas had interpreted each other. It could be said that a “Christian Evolutionism” or even an “Evolutionistic Christianity” had been struck.

A Christian Evolutionism may have been struck, but as was revealed by the historical studies inspired by the new view of truth, this was not the first result of Christianity’s successful encounter with “foreign” ideas. Scriptural studies showed that Christianity was first a sect, an interpretation, Jesus’ interpretation, of the Judaism of His day. Judaism was itself an interpretation of the philosophically simple view of the world common to the semitic peoples of the ancient Near East. To them a rock was a rock, a tree was a tree, a person was a person and there was little more that needed to or could be said. These were ideas that the first Christians presumed. Therefore, Christianity was at first “Christian Semitism.”

After a time, as the new faith spread beyond the borders of Palestine, it began to encounter people who did not see things as the semites did. It began to encounter people who saw the world through the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato. These featured a distinction between the material world of the body and the spiritual world of the soul. At first Christianity was not at home in such a world; nor did it possess the sophisticated explanations demanded by the rigor of Greek, or “hellenic,” thought. Here was the making of a crisis. Fortunately for the faith, in the writings of people like Paul, Christianity began to distinguish itself from its Judaic, semitic origins. Thus began centuries of struggle which saw the Fathers of the Church—in unknowing collaboration with others less orthodox—seek to make the faith make sense. As they did, attempting to clarify their faith and to explain it, and to respond to questions that had never been answered—or even asked—they made use of hellenic concepts such as “person” and “nature” which

semitism could not have supplied. Culminating in the work of Augustine, the result was the christianization of a once foreign world-view. A “Christian Hellenism” had been created and if it had not Christianity would not have survived to spread as it did.

Several centuries later, as the medieval period of Western history was just beginning, the thought of Plato’s pupil Aristotle swept through the intellectual circles of what was now Christian Europe. Aristotle’s philosophy was more sophisticated than that of Plato. It featured the mutual dependence of matter and spirit. This idea was a response to problems Aristotle had perceived in Plato’s complete distinction between the two. Indeed, this distinction had become the source of problems concerning the proper Christian attitude toward anything “worldly” which were created and never resolved when Christianity and hellenism had interpreted each other. Aristotelian philosophy appeared to offer a solution to these problems. Furthermore, it appeared to describe reality so insightfully that its precepts could not be ignored. Once again Christianity had to interpret a new world-view. Culminating in the work of Thomas Aquinas, a Christian interpretation of Aristotle’s philosophy, then called “scholasticism,” was effected. In the process, scholasticism—especially in its rigor—affected Christianity. Christian doctrine was never more completely explained; ancient problems were resolved and deeper views of everything were reached. A “Christian Scholasticism” had been created. The Church had again succeeded in an explanation of Christian beliefs which would see to their survival in the light of a new world-view.

To the minds of most of the members of the Second Vatican Council, the Church had again made sense of a new world-view. Though they never referred to their work as the creation of a Christian Evolutionism, they did believe that they had rendered a renewal of faith that would satisfy the demands of modern thinking. It had not come cheaply; after all, nearly nineteen hundred years of biblical literalism had been abandoned. Nonetheless, they did insist that the apostolic faith had been preserved. Indeed, the Church had grown in its understanding of that faith. This was expected to reverse the distinctly un-Christian direction in which the Western world had been moving steadily for now over four hundred years.

Despite such optimism, disregard for Christian beliefs has shown no signs of abatement. Instead, the years following Vatican II have seen both the deepening of this disregard and its spread throughout society. To this fact, churchmen will normally respond by saying something to the effect that the current crisis cannot so simply be attributed to intellectual dissatisfaction with scholastic or even modern understandings of basic beliefs. Instead, as is always insisted, the actual causes of the present crisis include the profound economic, political and social changes that characterized Western

civilization's passage from its medieval to modern periods. Theological reforms do not easily address circumstances such as these. Nonetheless, the Church has faced crises before; it will face them again. Carried out with dedication and patience, Vatican II's reforms will have their effect. In God's good time, things will turn around.

It is going to take more than dedication and patience.

First, however, let it be acknowledged that the causes of the decline of Christianity in the West are more than intellectual, and include many of profound changes in society that came with modernity. It should also be said that the reforms collectively dubbed Christian Evolutionism have contributed much to the credibility of Christianity in this century. Indeed, it is not to be imagined that Christian beliefs would have retained the esteem they still enjoy if these innovations had not been adopted. Nonetheless, important though they have been, they will not see to Christianity's resurgence as the soul of what is sure to become an ever more modern society. Instead, the decline will continue.

The decline dates to the demise of Christian Scholasticism. During the period of Christian Scholasticism, Christianity enjoyed a unified and nearly universal acceptance even among the educated wherever it was indigenous. Major among the reasons: During the period of Christian Scholasticism the truths of faith and reason supported each other. Scholasticism not only had room for the supernatural, it needed it. It systematized everything from angels to anatomy and everything fit. The demise of this philosophy has left faith a stranger in a strange land. Things will not change until Christianity interprets and is interpreted by the world-view that replaced scholasticism. This has not been evolutionism. Evolutionism is an element of a far more comprehensive system of ideas.

Evolution has precious little to tell us about reality as such. It does not describe what it is for something to "be"; nor does it explain what it is that makes things what they are. These are the tasks of a "metaphysic." Evolution offers no "epistemology"—an idea of the origins and nature of human knowing. Evolution, describing as it does the origin and development of life, only makes sense within the framework of a metaphysic in which the higher can emerge from the lower, and the living can come from the nonliving. This is provided by "materialism," which is also the implicit basis of the "seeing is believing" approach to truth which led to the demise of its predecessor and has caused the decline of Christianity, belief in God and, lately, belief that humanity is special.

By materialism, reference is not made to the attitude of people who appear to live for material goods alone; this we would call "consumerism." Neither is intended the judgment that nothing but matter exists, an idea that denies the existence of God by definition, as in the "dialectical materialism" of Karl Marx. By materialism is

meant that all the world and everything in it, including us, can be attributed to the interaction of the most elementary units of matter—those unintelligent realities not composed of smaller units which move in space and time and are described by physical laws. Christianity will never regain the credibility which it has lost until it has confronted, interpreted, and been interpreted by this understanding of the world at large. In other words, a “Christian Materialism” must be created.

It might seem madness to contend that Christian belief could ever find a home in a materialistic world-view. Materialism asserts that everything can be explained in terms of matter. It specifically denies that the so-called “spiritual” aspect of human existence demonstrates a purely spiritual part, element, or principle—a soul. But the soul is the seat of immortality. The soul is the source of free will.

For many reasons, the suggestion that there could be a synthesis of Christianity and materialism must appear at least as implausible as the idea that there could be a synthesis of Christianity and evolution. Let us not forget: Even though the results of this synthesis are taken for granted—today—it was not so long ago that the possibility of a reconciliation of science and the Scriptures could hardly have been imagined except by a very few. Nonetheless, a synthesis was achieved. Though biblical literalism had to be abandoned, a new and more profound understanding of Scripture took its place. In the process, solutions to age-old problems were advanced while important new insights were acquired. Theology took a great step forward.

Theology must continue to move forward. It must complete the christianization of modernity begun by its successful encounter with evolution. It must successfully confront the world-view which evolution insinuated from the very beginning. It must interpret and be interpreted by the world-view whose inarticulate embrace has coincided with a decline in Christianity that will not stop until this happens. Although this will require new understandings of basic Christian beliefs far more dramatic than have hitherto been necessary, the result will be an understanding of these beliefs which is not only credible but appealing. Actually, as the completion of the christianization of modernity, Christian Materialism will concretize much of what modern theology has already begun to suspect and lead it past its present problems to remarkably new and systematic solutions to the crucial questions with which any belief system must deal if it would hope to enjoy the confidence of the modern world. This will begin a Renaissance of faith that did not take place when modernity was born.

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