

[John Paul II](#) [1]

1985, April 26

Ladies and Gentlemen,

during this Easter season, as we celebrate with great joy the mystery of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, I am pleased to have the opportunity to greet those who have gathered here in Rome during these days to attend the International Science Symposium and to discuss such an important subject as “Christian Faith and the Theory of Evolution”. A special greeting to you, Most Eminent Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to your assistants and the consultants of your dicastery, who are participating in the proceedings on these days.

An equally warm greeting to Professors Robert Spaemann and Reinhard Löw and their assistants of the First Chair of Philosophy of the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. It was them who took the initiative of organising the present conference and you yourselves are responsible for its successful result. You have in any case already proved your ability in this respect at the two previous symposia on “Evolution and Freedom” and “The Theory of Evolution and Human Conscience before the Scientific World”. Thus a good deal of well-known experts in the various philosophical and theological subjects have accepted your invitation and I welcome them all as well.

The multifaceted notion of “evolution”, also seen from the philosophical point of view, has long been developing more and more in the sense of a wide epistemological paradigm of contemporary world. It intends to integrate physics, biology, anthropology, ethics and sociology within the logic of a general scientific explanation. The paradigm of evolution is developing no less importantly within an ever-growing scientific literature to become a sort of exhaustive conception of the world, an “evolutionary image of the world”.

Such a notion of the world differs from the materialistic image of the world, which was disseminated at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on the grounds of its extensive development and its remarkable ability to integrate seemingly disparate dimensions. While traditional materialism purported to unmask the moral and spiritual conscience of man viewed as an illusion, and sometimes even actively opposed it, biological evolutionism feels strong enough to give reason of this conscience in a functional way, by means of the advantages of natural selection connected with evolutionism itself and to integrate it into its own more general conception. Its practical consequence being that the supporters of this evolutionary worldview have imposed a new definition of the relations with religion, that markedly differs from that of the most recent or most distant past times.

As far as the purely naturalistic point of view of the question is concerned, my unforgotten predecessor Pius XII in his 1950 Encyclical *Humani generis*, had already drawn attention to the fact that the explicatory “evolution” model is not hindered by faith, provided this discussion stays within the context of the method of the natural sciences and of its possible scope. He stressed the limited range of that method when he said that the magisterium of the Church does not forbid “that, in line with the current advancement of sciences and theology, the doctrine of evolutionism should be the subject of research and debate by competent scholars in both fields, in so far as it explores the origin of the human body, which would derive from pre-existing organic matter (Catholic faith binds us maintain that souls have been immediately created by God). This, though, has to be done in such a way as to allow for the reasons on either side, that is the one favouring and the one opposing evolutionism, to be pondered and judged with

due care, moderation and measure” (cf. DH 3896). On the basis of such remarks made by my predecessor, no obstacles are created by a properly conceived faith in creation or by a properly understood teaching on evolution: evolution does indeed presuppose creation; creation is placed in the light of evolution as an event that extends along time — as a “*creatio continua*” [a continuing creation] — in which God is made visible to the believer’s eyes as the Creator of heaven and earth.

The question of the proper limit and of the proper co-ordination of the different contexts of human knowledge, which lies at the centre of the quoted statement in the Encyclical *Humani generi*, has also acquired new dimensions through the new “evolutionary image.” Most extensively it no longer claims to deal with the “origin of man,” but, in the broadest sense, to derive all spiritual phenomena, including ethics and religion, from the “basic model of “evolution,” out of which their functions and limits are simultaneously defined. Such a “functionalisation” of Christian faith would duly affect man’s nature and modify it in its core. This is why a thinking grounded on faith cannot deal with this evolutionary worldview, which extends far beyond its foundations in the natural sciences. The central issue of faith is always the search for truth. Hence there too one has to wonder what truth content and what place, if any, should be attributed to scientific theories that should in turn support and justify a philosophy that is often popularised in its account, embedded as it is in the framework of naturalistic knowledge or developed from it thereafter.

It is self-evident that this serious and urgent problem cannot be solved without resorting to philosophy. It is precisely philosophy’s task to critically examine the way in which results and hypotheses are attained, to distinguish from ideological abstractions the relationship between theories and individual statements, the place of scientific statements and their significance, in particular the very content of naturalistic assertions.

For such reasons I greet the present symposium, where competent scientists and scholars — especially philosophers and theologians of different orientations and fields of study — have wanted to devote their time and efforts to this work, i.e. precisely aiming at identifying the issues involved, and working out the right answers on the basis of a knowledge of those issues. This ultimately means understanding man, which certainly cannot be separated from the issue of God. In Romano Guardini’s profound words: “only those who know God can understand man.” Actually it is only in this broader perspective that the true greatness of man comes to light, his deeper identity becomes clear: a being wanted and loved by their Creator, whose inalienable greatness is to be on intimate terms with God.

In this spirit I am truly happy to impart my Apostolic Blessing on you all for your work.

Source of the Italian text: [The Official web site of the Holy See](#) [2]. English translation by Paolo Zanna.

[Teachings from John Paul II](#) [3]

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