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PROFESSOR-TURNED-POPE LEADS A SEMINAR ON EVOLUTION

Ian Fisher, 2 settembre 2006

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They meet every year, the eminent German professor and his old doctoral students, for a weekend of high-minded talk on a chosen topic. For years it was nothing more than that.

But now the professor, once called Joseph Ratzinger, has become Pope Benedict XVI. And this year, for three days beginning Friday, the topic on the table is evolution, an issue perched on the ever more contentious front between science and belief.

And so the questions rise as the meeting unfolds at a papal palace just outside Rome. Is this merely another yearly seminar? Or is the leader of the world's billion Roman Catholics signaling that he may join in earnest the emotional debate over evolution, intelligent design and all that might mean for politics and faith, especially in the United States?

There is no way to know immediately, though many church experts believe that the pope has fewer problems with the science of evolution than with its use to wipe God more cleanly from a secular world. No document will be published afterward, no news conference given.

But the seminar comes after a year particularly fraught over the issue of evolution, in America -- with the fight over intelligent design -- and in the church. Last year a leading cardinal, who will speak at the meeting, expressed doubts that Darwinism and Catholicism were compatible, and the pope declared the creation of the universe an "intelligent project."

And so scientists and believers from around the world, on all sides of an extraordinarily charged debate, are watching the meeting carefully.

Proponents of intelligent design, defeated in a high-profile court case last year in Pennsylvania, say they are pleased that their ideas, which posit that life is so complex that it requires an active creator, may get a fair hearing in the lofty circles of Professor Ratzinger's seminars.

"I think this is indicative of an opening and expansion of the discussion, the discussion over Darwinism and evolution generally," said Bruce Chapman, president of the Discovery Institute, one of the main proponents of intelligent design. "It's very helpful to our desire to see an expanded dialogue in many quarters."

On the other side, scientists and theologians who support evolution say they worry that, even inadvertently, the church may be driving a wedge between itself and science.

"If for some reason the Catholic Church gets on the wrong side of the science, then it's going to in the long term do huge damage, just as it did when they went against Galileo," said Lawrence M. Krauss, chairman of the physics department at Case Western Reserve University and a highly visible opponent of intelligent design. "It threatened their credibility."

"Because like it or not," he added, "evolution happened."

The meeting opened Friday morning at Castel Gandolfo, a papal palace that stands as a sort of symbol for the church's coexistence with science. Castel Gandolfo houses a world-class observatory - - with a telescope that Pope John Paul II enjoyed looking through -- built a century after the church acknowledged its mistake in condemning Galileo for his postulation that planets revolve around the sun.

Similarly, the church has moved from neutrality to something like acceptance of evolutionary theory, though drawing a thick bottom line that God is the ultimate creator.

In 1996, Pope John Paul declared evolution "more than a hypothesis," and in 2004 as Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict endorsed the scientific view that the earth is roughly four billion years old and that species changed through evolution. Indeed, there has been no credible scientific challenge to the idea that evolution, the foundation of modern biology, explains the diversity of life on earth.

Given that history, scientists and church experts say they cannot imagine the study session ending with any alignment of the pope or the church with intelligent design or American-style creationism, which often posits that Earth is only about 6,000 years old.

"I suspect they will try to avoid it," said the Rev. Joseph Fessio, an American priest and former student of the pope's, who is taking part in the meeting, "because intelligent design has been represented either as a religion, which it is not, or as a science, which I think is indefensible."

But Father Fessio and others say the pope, based on his statements and writings, remains deeply concerned specifically about the contention among some supporters of modern evolution that the theory refutes any role of God in creation.

"Given this ideology, the temptation or danger is real to say that you don't have any need of God, that the spirit doesn't exist," said Msgr. Fiorenzo Facchini, an Italian priest and paleoanthropologist. "And the church should keep guard against this and denounce it."

Monsignor Facchini wrote an influential article this year in the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, praising as "correct" the decision in January by a judge in Pennsylvania that intelligent design should not be taught as a scientific alternative to evolution.

Nonetheless he cautioned that the mechanisms of evolution are not all known -- and that just as religion has no business in science, science should not overstep its bounds in declaring that God could have no role in creation.

That is a similar line of thinking presented over many years by Benedict, whose main preoccupation is growing secularism, and it is likely to be a central part of the discussions this weekend.

In his book "Truth and Tolerance" (Ignatius Press, 2004), written when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, he wrote of what he called an effort to turn evolution into a "universal philosophy" that explained all of life.

"This evolutionary ethic that inevitably takes as its key concept the model of selectivity, that is, the struggle for survival, the victory of the fittest, successful adaptation, has little comfort to offer," he wrote. "Even when people try to make it more attractive in various ways, it ultimately remains a bloodthirsty ethic."

After John Paul died in April 2005, Benedict signaled a similar concern in his homily at the Mass in which he was formally installed as pope.

"We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution," he said. "Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."

But some students of the pope say his doubts go deeper into the science of evolutionary theory. In his writings he has echoed the questions of anti-Darwinians about how evolution can transform one species into another.

The pope "does not accept at face value the scientific theory," said Dominique Tassot, director of the French group, the Center for Studies and Prospectives on Science. "He wants to make people reconsider the question."

As might be expected from a German professor, all sides of the evolution question will get a hearing, though with an emphasis on skepticism. The seminar on Friday reportedly began with a presentation by Peter Schuster, an eminent molecular biologist, president of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a defender of evolution.

There will be three other speakers to the study group, most notably Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, who sparked a contentious debate last year after he wrote an Op-Ed article for The New York Times questioning evolution. The article was submitted by the same public relations firm used by the Discovery Institute.

The two other speakers are Professor Robert Spaemann, a German philosopher who has criticized evolution as a full philosophical theory; and the Rev. Paul Elbrich, a Jesuit priest and scientist whose work on proteins questions whether chance alone could play the decisive role in evolution.

The pope's annual seminars do not shy away from difficult topics. Last year the issue under discussion was Islam.