

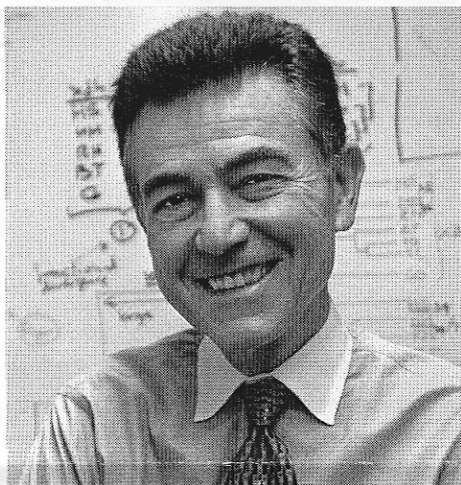
Charles Darwin and Theodicy

Robert T. Dillon, Jr., Ph.D.

PASTCF Member

This past spring my eye happened to fall on an essay contributed to the *Washington Post* by Dr. Francisco Ayala, who had just recently been awarded the 2010 Templeton Prize. Ayala was a role model for me in the formative years of my career and some of his early papers on the population genetics of *Drosophila* influencing my own research directions. His 1981 testimony as a prominent evolutionary biologist and former Dominican Priest in the landmark McLean v. Arkansas case made a big impression on me, helping turn the tide (as it did) against "Creation Science." For years I adopted Ayala's *Popula-*

tion and Evolutionary Genetics as a required text in my junior-level Evolution class.



Francisco Ayala

But the words in Ayala's op-ed essay were so alien to my understanding of both science and the Christian religion that they seemed to be written in a foreign language. Ayala characterized scientific knowledge and religious belief as "consistent" for the nearly incomprehensible reason that science can account for "human crimes and sins (including the biblical Fall) and for all the catastrophes that pervade the natural world," whereas religious belief cannot. Taking as his example the observation that about 20% of all human pregnancies end in spontaneous abortion during their first two months, Ayala wrote, "I shudder in

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"If God Is All Good ..."

The Reverend James B. Miller, Ph.D.

PASTCF General Missioner

Many of us played with this question in late night college dorm arguments or perhaps in Philosophy or Religion 101 courses. "If God is all good and God is all powerful, why is there evil in the world?" Of course this is not a new question for humankind. One whole book in the Hebrew canon, the Book of Job, is devoted to this question, the "problem of evil" or theodicy. Perhaps even Neanderthals, who sustained the lives of disabled members of their group and buried their dead, mused on this question around their Neolithic cave fires.

This issue of *SciTech* addresses this perennial question. It was prompted by a PASTCF member, Rob Dillon, Associate Professor of Biology at the College of Charleston, when he read and reacted to an essay in the *Washington Post* by 2010 Templeton Prize winner, Francisco Ayala, evolutionary biologist at the University of California-Irvine. To put it mildly, Rob found Francisco's discussion of "the problem of evil" profoundly inadequate, if not heretical from Rob's perspective. Rob's article in this issue provides an engaging expression of his objection to

Ayala's position.

Reflecting on Rob's article I imagined that PASTCF members might find an issue of *SciTech* on the question of theodicy interesting. Anna Case-Winters, Professor of Theology at McCormick Seminary and a member of PASTCF, agreed to provide a concise overview of the way Christian theologians, generally, and Reformed theologians, in particular, have addressed the theodicy question. She also offers some considerations of how the contemporary science and religion explorations bear on the question.

Finally, Ellie Stock, another longtime member of PASTCF and the co-pastor of the Northwood Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, agreed to provide a reflection on theodicy from a pastoral point of view. She also graces this issue with a serendipitously (or is that providentially?) composed poem that is resonant with the theodicy theme.

Following Rob's, Anna's, and Ellie's reflections, I add a few of my own concluding remarks.

I hope you, the reader, will find these reflections provocative, in the most benign and positive sense of that term.

terror at the thought that some people of faith would implicitly attribute this and so many other calamities to the Creator's faulty design. I'd rather see them as a consequence of natural processes."

Before going any further I should confess that my personal familiarity with Roman Catholicism has always been very limited. There was a Roman Catholic family in my neighborhood when I was growing up, and they didn't seem too much different from everybody else, except they had lots of kids, and ate fish on Fridays. My mother told me that they believed in "free will," which lumped them together with common Baptists and Methodists in her book. Free will was a dangerous-sounding concept to my young ears, and entirely theoretical in our household, to be certain.

So I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I have continued to toss Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholics haphazardly into the single untidy corner of my brain marked "other Christian doctrines" until the very hour my eye fell on that column written by my old hero, Francisco Ayala. But the stark dichotomy in Ayala's thought between processes of nature and the Hand of God was so foreign to any Christian belief in my personal experience that I resolved to purchase a copy of his (2007) *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* and research the matter more fully.

Ayala begins his argument describing the Dominican monastery of San Esteban in Salamanca, Spain, where he studied theology in the late 1950s. He focuses at some length on the "sumptuously ornate and gilded high altar," which he characterized as "a 1692 Baroque masterpiece." It was in Salamanca that the young Francisco first understood that "evolution solved the theodicy problem."

According to Ayala, traditional theology distinguishes three kinds of evil: (1) moral evil or sin, (2) pain and suffering, and (3) physical evil, including illness and natural disasters. The theologians of Ayala's acquaintance have apparently never encountered any difficulty explaining moral evil as a consequence of free will, and human suffering (or at least a subset

of it) as a consequence of human wrongdoing. "A virtuous life *earns* the eternal reward of heaven" (his italics).

But Ayala argues there was no explanation for physical evil until the advent of modern science. With the Enlightenment it became clear that natural catastrophes "are built into the structure of the world itself," and hence are not "specifically designed by God." And with Darwin in the 19th century came the understanding that "predators and parasites, dysfunctions and disease are a consequence of the evolution of life," over which God has no more control than God does over Germans. Thus Darwin's "gift" to religion was apparently a resolution of the third and final prong of the theodicy problem.

Ayala does not offer any scriptural support for this line of reasoning. It is asserted as a teaching of Roman Catholicism, clearly laid out by Pope Pius XII in his 1950 encyclical *Humani generis*, patiently transmitted to the young Francisco by "Father Pedro" in his sixth grade science class, becoming fully manifest during his theological studies at San Esteban. Throughout his education, from grade school to seminary, "Darwin was a much-welcomed friend."

So after many years of lumping Roman Catholics together with Baptists and Methodists, here in the writings of an evolutionary biologist my eyes were finally opened. Such common-lot Protestants as jostle one another for wavelengths on the Sunday-morning radio allege support for such erroneous doctrines as "free will" from scripture. Roman Catholics apparently make no pretense of reference to scripture whatsoever, deriving their error entirely from traditions within their medieval denomination.

However, all the gold on the high altar of Salamanca notwithstanding, God is omnipotent. The authors of the Westminster standards selected Gen. 17.1, Dan. 4.25, Eph. 1.11, Rev. 4.8 and 19.16 to support this fundamental tenet of Christianity. In fact, the omnipotence of God is a feature of every verse of every chapter of every book, "so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." (1 Cor. 2.5 – NRSV).

Our Lord most certainly can cause to be earthquakes (Matt. 28.2), fire (Exo. 13.21), famine, (Ezek. 5.17), storm (Isa. 29.6), disease (2 Chron. 21.18), and plagues of gnats (Exo. 8.16), just as God can stay such trials (Deut. 7.15), or take them away, as by the hand of Christ (Matt. 4.23). Yes, "shudder in terror" is our correct response, precisely.

Scientific knowledge may certainly be "consistent" with Dr. Ayala's personal religious beliefs, perhaps even consistent with those of the Roman Catholic tradition from which he springs. But stepping down from the choir loft to don my lab coat for the space of a single independent clause, no evolutionary hypothesis can be adduced to yield a pathogen effective only against the first-born children of households unmarked by the blood of an unblemished lamb.

Science cannot be bent into consistency with the faith of my family in the pews at First Presbyterian Church, nor with that of my sister's family across the street at First Baptist, nor with that of my wife's family around the corner at Main Street Methodist. Any attempt to do so would require a much greater compromise of scientific rigor than Dr. Ayala was himself willing to accept in Arkansas in 1981.

And surely Dr. Ayala is not suggesting that the entire sweep of scripture, from Genesis through Moses and the prophets, the incarnation, resurrection, and the witness of the apostles be bent to the scientific method, is he? The concept of resurrection cannot even be expressed in the language of science, for by definition death is permanent.

The "theodicy problem," it seems to me, is a restatement of the "original sin problem." The only element of God's creation asking why evil exists are those of us his fallen creatures who think we know what evil is. Evil is a construct of human vanity, in all three "prongs." And I do pray that all of us in every room of our Father's house can agree that the One who came to cure the original sin problem was not named "Charles Darwin."

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