

The real danger in Darwin is not evolution, but racism

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Many who support the separation of church and state say that the intelligent design theory of creation ought not to be taught in public schools because it contains a religious bias. They dislike its suggestion that the evolutionary development of life was not the result of natural selection, as Charles Darwin suggested, but was somehow given purposeful direction and, by implication, was guided by God.

Arguing for what they believe is a nonprejudicial science, they contend that children in public schools should be taught Darwin's explanation of how the human race evolved, which they claim is value-free and depends solely on scientific evidence.

In terms of science, Darwin's account may be solid indeed. But value free? Nothing could be further from the truth — and that's where the problem lies.

Some creationists fear Darwin because his theories contradict their literal biblical belief that creation occurred in six 24-hour days. But they do not get at the real dangers of Darwinism. They do not realize that an explanation of the development of biological organisms over eons of time really does not pose the great threat to the dignity of our humanity that they suppose. Instead, they, along with the rest of us, should really fear the ethical implications of Darwin's original writings.

In reality, those writings express the prevalent racism of the 19th century and endorse an extreme laissez-faire political ideology that legitimizes the neglect of the suffering poor by the ruling elite.

Those who argue at school board meetings that Darwin should be taught in public schools seldom have taken the time to read him. If they knew the full title of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*, they might have gained some inkling of the racism propagated by this controversial theorist. Had they actually read *Origin*, they likely would be shocked to learn that among Darwin's scientifically based proposals was the elimination of "the negro and Australian peoples," which he considered savage races whose continued survival was hindering the progress of civilization.

In his next book, *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin ranked races in terms of what he believed was their nearness and likeness to gorillas. Then he went on to propose the extermination of races he "scientifically" defined as inferior. If this were not done, he claimed, those races, with much higher birthrates than "superior" races, would exhaust the resources needed for the survival of better people, eventually dragging down all civilization.

Darwin even argued that advanced societ-



PAUL LACHINE

ies should not waste time and money on caring for the mentally ill, or those with birth defects. To him, these unfit members of our species ought not to survive.

In case you think Darwin sounds like a Nazi, there is a connection. Darwin's ideas were complicit in the rise of Nazi ideas. Pulitzer Prize winner Marilynne Robinson, in her insightful essay on Darwin, points out that the German nationalist and anti-Semitic writer Heinrich von Treitschke and the biologist Ernst Haeckel also drew on Darwin's writings to justify racism, nationalism and harsh policies toward the poor and less privileged. Although these men's lives much predated Hitler's rise to power, their ideas were very influential as he developed the racist ideas that led to the Holocaust. Konrad Lorenz, a biologist who belonged to the Nazi Office for Race Policy and whose work supported Nazi theories of "racial hygiene," made Darwin's theories the basis for his reasoning.

I hope our schoolchildren will be taught that it is up to science to study the processes that gave birth to the human race. But, as postmodern as it may be, I also want them to learn that whatever science discovers about our biological origins, there is, nevertheless, a mystical quality in human beings that makes each of us sacred and of infinite worth.

Regardless of how we got here, we should recognize that there is an infinite qualitative difference between the most highly developed ape and each and every human being. Darwin never recognized this disjuncture. And that is why his theories are dangerous.

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