

Creation versus evolution in the classroom

Paul Williams

FEW would be aware this year marks 150 years since the theory of evolution or, more precisely, natural selection was published.

Amazingly, it was a principle derived independently by two naturalists, the famous Charles Darwin and the lesser-known Alfred Wallace. The fact that Darwin, in 1859, published his theory in book form *On The Origin of Species* (while Wallace published a mere essay in 1858) is the reason Darwinism, and not Wallaceism, became a synonym for evolution.

Many regard Darwin's tome as one of the most important works in the English language, esteemed for turning church canon on its anti-intellectual head. It also was supposed to solve for all time the eternal question of human origins. But has it? An increasing number of believers who insist on literal biblical interpretation, a sort of big bang faith that decrees God created the universe just a few thousand of years ago in a mere six days, would say otherwise.

Creationism is as old as Christianity (and other major religions). But in recent years there's been a surge in creationism, now under the more benign and publicly acceptable label of intelligent design (ID), a faith that says the universe is so well ordered an all-powerful mind must have created it.

Most critics don't object to creationism or ID when it's a matter of personal faith. Indeed, Darwinism and spiritualism aren't necessarily inconsistent.

But many do object when ID is taught in schools either with, or instead of, evolution as a form of pseudo-science complete with contentious text books such as Davis and Kenyon's *Of Pandas and People*.

ID in recent years has made enormous inroads into school curriculums, with the blessing of arch-conservative political leaders, like a theological Trojan horse. A recent survey found 12.5 per cent of American biology teachers teach creationism or ID as a valid, scientific alternative to Darwinian explanations for the origin of species. Two per cent of all science teachers taught no evolution, despite the US Constitution's First Amendment that separates church from state.

But debate was sparked again recently when Britain's National Academy of Science Education director Michael Reiss, a Church of England clergyman, called on teachers not to disengage from creationism. Without openly advocating ID teaching, Reiss, astonishingly for a scientist, said: "Just because something lacks scientific support doesn't seem sufficient reason to omit it from a science lesson."

Similarly, in June the US state of Louisiana passed a Science Education Act to protect teachers who encourage critical thinking and objective discussion about evolution and other scientific topics. Some see this as licence to substitute natural selection science with ID faith. And while US President George W. Bush has long supported ID teaching, the anti-gun control Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin has upped the ante with her own support for creationism in American schools.

But it's also true creationism has been countered with a commensurate tide of rationalism. Such recent bestselling books as Chris Hitchens' *God is Not Great*; Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris indicate a rash of atheists exiting from closets, a trend verified by census statistics that show that atheism in Australia has grown 19 per cent in 10 years.

Some suggest we are entering a new Age of Enlightenment, but the acceptance of evolution is under a greater threat today than at any time since the Scopes Monkey Trial when, in 1925 and despite defence attorney Clarence Darrow's brilliant counsel, a Tennessee court found schoolteacher John Scopes guilty of teaching natural selection when, under the Butler Act, only creationism was permitted.

The fear is that ID is poised to enter Australian science curriculums under the specious reasoning of academic freedom - a trepidation based on the rising influence of fundamental Christianity on political leaders.

Science teaching and research are critical to any nation's industrial and economic success.

How and what we teach children in the name of science will inevitably determine our future.

We can't afford to let politics, or blind faith, compromise children's education.

- *Dr Paul Williams is a lecturer at the School of Humanities, Griffith University. This article was published in the Brisbane Courier Mail on 23 September 2008*