

`The Origin of Species' and the state of the soul

By The Rev. Paul Viggiano

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"No! I am not an elephant! I am not an animal! I am a human being! I am a man! I am a man!" These were the words cried by John Merrick, in the film adapted in part from Ashley Montagu's "The Elephant Man," as he pled with his contemporaries to give him the dignity of a human being, thus highlighting Montagu's subtitle, "A Study in Human Dignity." Who does not understand, either intellectually or intuitively, the ignominy of being thought of as a beast of the field? The year 2009 brings about the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of his magnum opus, "The Origin of Species," a work that has blurred the distinction between man and beast - a thesis with chilling consequences in the 19th and 20th centuries. There has perhaps been no theory (morphed into ideology) that has so demeaned the human spirit in the last two centuries as Darwin's theory.

I recall my secular professors, with the zeal of evangelists, drumming into our malleable 18-year-old minds that we are merely the highest form of animal - we would be considered silly and open to ridicule to question them. Then, with the God hypothesis conveniently replaced by the facts of natural selection, the weekends would arrive and we'd party - party with no restraints beyond our own survival - and why not?

Sound arguments have been made to connect Darwin and his co-worker, Alfred Russell Wallace, to Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and the disastrous consequences of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler. These connections are, of course, debatable. What ascends beyond debate is the vacuum left in the souls of youths (and adults for that matter) who are given the awful news that instead of being, as the Psalmist records, "fearfully and wonderfully made," they are mere accidents - molecules in motion - the end result of atoms flying through space. During richer spiritual, ethical and economic times this great experiment known as America held almost unanimous consensus that man was a unique creature - formed in the imago dei - the image of God. Knowing and embracing this unique humanness, man had an acute awareness of his own dignity and the attending responsibilities to live in a manner consistent with this high and beautiful calling.

Darwin's theory accommodates and justifies our lowest carnal instincts. When we tell our children they're animals, why should we expect them to behave otherwise?

At times we'll hear references to the nobility of the animal kingdom as a model; animals, after all, don't hunt for entertainment or kill for fun. Of course we only appeal to the behaviors of animals that most closely approximate what we instinctively recognize as noble. What of the animals that eat their young or kill their partners after mating? Why not imitate that?

As a high school and college instructor in secular institutions, I witnessed, firsthand, the pathetic attempts of instilling a sense of value in the hearts and minds of our youth. We would compliment and encourage whatever small thing we could find in an effort to upgrade their sense of self. We might laud their skills in sports, academics, creativity or hair color but it wasn't difficult for the youth to feel the cold current of shallow waters.

Some thirty years ago I heard British theologian, J. Sidlow Baxter, give a lecture in Redondo Beach where he elucidated the issue poetically and profoundly with the explanation, "Those who believe we have evolved from the primordial slime have destined themselves, and those who follow them, to re-evolve back into the slime from whence they believe they came." I remember the crowd laughing. Baxter, who was in his seventies at the time, wasn't looking for a laugh and chided the audience. "You should be weeping."

Darwin's legacy is one of dubious science and cultural licentiousness. A healthy prayer would be for humanity to reacquaint itself with its precious value. Sentence after sentence the Scriptures dedicate themselves to the creation of man - his role, his authority and his unique similarity to the communicable attributes of God. "God made the stars also" is then added as if the entire realm of the heavens were an afterthought when compared with God's finest creation - not bird nor monkey, but man.

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