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# The Ghost in the Classroom. Evolution, Ernst Haeckel and German biology didactics (1859-1933)

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## Abstract

When Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) entered Germany, it rapidly spawned controversies over evolution's place in the class room. It was especially Germany's leading proponent of evolution Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) who questioned the monopoly of religion on the teaching of the meaning of life. Evolution, for him, was a worthwhile substitute for dualistic accounts of creation. This belief was articulated in his monist philosophy which postulates that matter and spirit are united in the organic substance. Churches and conservatives were appalled by Haeckel's heretic idea to replace religion by evolution in school curricula and to possibly convert Christian students into materialist atheists. In 1882, the Prussian ministry of education reacted and banned biology as a whole from secondary education. In 1925, over 40 years later, the Weimar ministry of education eventually declared biology and evolution integral parts of the curriculum. School book authors were now confronted with the choice of how to rhetorically present this socially and politically sensitive topic. Should evolution be presented as a hypothesis or an established scientific world view? I argue that the enduring juxtaposition of evolution and religion in Germany had culminated in their incommensurability. If a school book author wanted to portray evolution as *the* valid theory of organic development, his presentation concurrently had to surrogate the biblical version of creation. This paper presents a rhetorical analysis of Weimar school books to illustrate how authors appropriated Haeckel's rhetoric of a *scientific* Genesis in their attempts to persuade adolescent students into embracing evolution.

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