

Cultural history colors thought about bioethics, evolution

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Cultural views of evolution can have important ethical implications, says a Duke University expert on theological and biomedical ethics. Because the popular imagination filters science through cultural assumptions about race, cultural history should be an essential part of biomedical conversations.

Amy Laura Hall, associate professor of Christian ethics at Duke University, argues that many popularized ideas about evolution assume that some human groups are more evolved than other human groups.

"I believe that [evolutionary biology](#), as depicted in the popular press, too often uncritically reinforces ideas about race that privilege white, Western bodies and cultures. I see this at work today in new arguments for paternalism in Haiti, for example" says Hall, who appears on a Sunday morning panel at the AAAS annual meeting called "Genetics and Ethics: Different Views on the Human Condition."

The panel of scholars from the fields of genetics and theology will focus on how genetics and its medical applications are communicated to the general public.

Hall's current research looks at ways evolutionary biology is conveyed in the popular media. She cites examples of television documentaries about evolution that portray [human evolution](#) commencing in Africa, using images of dark-skinned people "almost as living icons" to represent humanity at our genesis. "When evolution is depicted as an upward

slope, those representing the origin are also often perceived as the nadir," she says.

Hall is looking at how these popular portrayals are reinforced in recent media coverage of the earthquake disaster in Haiti, coverage that she says depicts Haitians as more primal and less developed, and how this may influence relief efforts that are more paternalistic in nature.

"In order to seek more collaborative, less hierarchical models of international engagement or relief work, we need to discuss head-on the racist ways evolutionary biology has become dispersed," she says.

"In order to collaborate, you have to consider your potential collaborators as adults, rather than as people further down a slope of human development, thus assuming a kind of tacit paternalism," says Hall, whose training is as a moral theologian.

Hall's research in this area will be part of her forthcoming book on "muscular Christianity," a movement that crystallized during the Victorian era to reinforce virile Christianity and social Darwinism.

Hall is also involved in a project on neurobiology, poverty, virtue and vice with a group of researchers from Vanderbilt and Marquette Universities. Her most recent book is "Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction" (Eerdmans, 2008).

Provided by Duke University

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