

The European Geosciences Union (EGU)'s misinformation about Louis Agassiz (1807-1873)

The "*European Geosciences Union (EGU)*" was established in 2002. It has over 12,500 members and is "*dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in the Earth, planetary, and space sciences for the benefit of humanity, worldwide.*"¹

The EGU runs an "*Awards & Medals programme*" which "*identifies the awardees as role models for the next generation of early career scientists*". In 2005, the EGU named one of his numerous medals of honour after Louis Agassiz (1807-1873).

This choice harms the reputation of the EGU and its Awards & Medals programme: Louis Agassiz is infamously well known for his constant misuse of science and research in the pursuit of his racist objectives such as ethnic cleansing, apartheid, genocidal measures to prevent procreation of "half-breeds", racial discrimination and hierarchization, etc.

In 2007 the Swiss Government condemned Louis Agassiz' extreme racism² and reaffirmed this condemnation in 2015³. In 2016 the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs declared that Louis Agassiz had definitively been removed from the federal list of representatives of Swiss culture.⁴ In 2010, I informed the EGU at length about Louis Agassiz' racist writings and activities.

Instead of taking the Swiss government's attitude and decision as an example, the European Geosciences Union continues to honour Louis Agassiz. But Louis Agassiz was not – as the EGU wants us to believe – a full-time scientist, and a racist on a part-time basis. Louis Agassiz was a **scientific racist**; his science was ideological and flawed.

By honouring Louis Agassiz the "European Geosciences Union (EGU)" does not only give up fundamental ethical standards, but also basic academic standards. In these circumstances, it is not surprising to find on the EGU's Homepage a portrait of Louis Agassiz containing gross errors. You even find on the EGU's Homepage a Link to an internet website where Louis Agassiz is acquitted of racism.

The EDU's portrait⁵ of Louis Agassiz:

- The portrait says that, in 1832, Louis Agassiz was "*appointed professor of natural history at the University of Neuchâtel*". In Neuchâtel, at that time, there was no university. It was founded only in 1909, long after Agassiz's death. The "Académie" of Neuchâtel was created in 1838. Louis Agassiz taught from 1832 to 1838 at the local high school, from 1838 to 1846 at the Académie.
- The portrait says that Alexander von Humboldt "*launched*" Louis Agassiz on his career of geology. The opposite is true. Says biographer Christoph Irmscher: "*Humboldt found Agassiz's primordial fields of ice, the glaciers on which great*

¹ <https://www.egu.eu/about/>

² <https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaeft?AffairId=20073486>

³ <https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaeft?AffairId=20153852>

⁴ <https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaeft?AffairId=20165538>

⁵ <https://www.egu.eu/awards-medals/portrait-louis-agassiz/> (21.11.2017)

boulders rolled around, deeply unappealing [...]". And he goes on to say that Humboldt "had informed Agassiz that he just couldn't understand how the world could have iced over so fast that the animals didn't even have a chance to decompose first."⁶

- The portrait says that: "*In 1837 Agassiz proposed the idea that the Earth had been subject to a past ice age.*" (Emphasis in original.) This is false information. What Agassiz proposed in 1837 was, and he himself insisted on it: "*le résultat de la combinaison de mes idées et de celle de M. Schimper sur ce sujet.*"⁷
- The portrait says that: "*Agassiz's lasting legacy is on his pioneering work on Ice Ages.*" (Emphasis in original.) As regards the general contribution Louis Agassiz made to geo-sciences, the EGU's portrait lacks completely the critical distance that is needed. Jean-Paul Schaer, professor of Geology at the University of Neuchâtel and a long-time, untiring admirer of Louis Agassiz, evaluated the results of Agassiz' glacier research and was forced to pronounce a devastating verdict: "*Ayant examiné attentivement l'ensemble des travaux d'Agassiz consacrés au domaine glaciaire, nous avons été surpris d'y trouver peu de réelles découvertes dans un message qui doit beaucoup à des emprunts pas toujours reconnus.*"⁸ In plain text: Louis Agassiz made surprisingly few real discoveries in glacier research; his research owes a lot to plagiarism.
- The portrait says that: "*By 1857 he was so well-loved that Longfellow wrote "The fiftieth birthday of Agassiz" in his honour.*" (Emphasis in original.) Well-loved ... by whom? By a few slave-holders or by millions of slaves? The EGU's statement is quite meaningless and its truth-value is that of a sentence like: By 1931 Adolf Hitler was so **well-loved** that world-renowned philosopher Martin Heidegger offered "Mein Kampf" as a Christmas gift to his brother Fritz. By 1857, "well-loved" Louis Agassiz had visited different slave-concentration-camps where his slave-holder friends exploited hundreds of Africans who had no rights and who had to suffer inhumane living and working conditions. "Well-loved" Louis Agassiz asked to dehumanize even more some of the slaves and to completely undress a certain number of female and male slaves and to daguerreotype them. Agassiz used these photographs to "prove" that Africans were inferior to Whites.
- The EGU's portrait remains totally silent about all of Louis Agassiz's racist activities and writings.

The EGU's Link to Wikipedia.

The EGU's homepage links⁹ to the English Wikipedia Page¹⁰ dedicated to Louis Agassiz. This page is different from the German and French version.

- Wikipedia says: "*Agassiz never supported slavery [...]*". A skilfully misleading information. Between 1846 (Agassiz' arrival in the USA) and 1863 (near the end of

⁶ IRMSCHER, Christoph (2013) : Louis Agassiz. Creator of American Science. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Boston, New York, 2013. p. 77.

⁷ AGASSIZ, Louis (1837) : Discours d'ouverture de la réunion de la SHSN à Neuchâtel le 24 juillet 1837, Actes de la Société helvétique des Sciences naturelles, 22ème session, Neuchâtel 1837, p. XXII.

⁸ SCHAER, Jean-Paul (2000) : Agassiz et les glaciers. Sa conduite de la recherche et ses mérites. In: Eclogae Geologicae Helvetiae. Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Geologischen Gesellschaft. Vol. 93, No. 2. Basel, 2000. pp. 231-256. Here p. 232.

⁹ The "Louis Agassiz Medal" page : <https://www.egu.eu/awards-medals/louis-agassiz/>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Agassiz

the American Civil War), Agassiz never condemned slavery in word or deed. On the contrary, he supported slavery in an unmistakably clear and unequivocal manner: not by a statement in favour of slavery, but with a variety of actions and writings. We need only remember (see above) that Agassiz visited slave-concentration-camps where he carried out anthropological investigations on victims of black chattel slavery.

- Wikipedia says:

"However, Blowers notes that despite favouring polygenism, Agassiz rejected racism and believed in a spiritualized human unity.¹¹ According to Blowers, Agassiz believed God made all men equal: "Those intellectual and moral qualities which are so eminently developed in civilized society, but which equally exist in the natural dispositions of all human races, constituting the higher unity among men, making them all equal before God."¹²

If you read Paul M. BLOWERS's article on patristics, you will not find any mention of Louis Agassiz or topics related to him, you will not find any quote of Agassiz.

But if you make the effort to open **another** book edited by the same van der Meer and Mandelbrote: *"Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: 1700 – Present"*, you will find Louis Agassiz mentioned in historian Gary BLAIR NELSON's article on *"Ethnology and the "Two Books": Some Nineteenth-Century Americans on Preadamist Polygenism."*¹³

But does Gary Blair Nelson say *"that despite favouring polygenism, Agassiz rejected racism"*? Of course not. Blair Nelson wants to examine *"the ethnological thinking of a sampling of American men of science and religious writers"* (p. 147), like Josiah C. Nott and Louis Agassiz. Blair Nelson continues: *"The sample is not demographically diverse: all were white males who shared the racism endemic to nineteenth-century European Americans [...]"* (p. 147). Yes, far from rejecting, Louis Agassiz shared the white man's racism.

And what about **Wikipedia's quote of Agassiz**? It is a falsified quotation.

Here is the whole paragraph of Louis Agassiz's text.¹⁴

"Having once vindicated for all races of men such a community of physical constitution, such a unity of type, such an essential difference from the character of even the highest animals, we hardly need allude further to those most prominent, more elevating, more dignifying distinctions which belong to man, as an intellectual and moral being; and we would gladly be silent upon this side of the question, did we not feel that we would be giving up the better part of our nature not to claim that peculiar characteristic of mankind, those intellectual and moral qualities

¹¹ Here a footnote says: "Paul M. Blowers, 2008, "Entering 'This Sublime and Blessed Amphitheatre': Contemplation of Nature and Interpretation of the Bible in the Patristic Period, *In* "Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700", 2 vols (Scott Mandelbrote & Jitse van der Meer, Eds.), book DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004171916.i-782, book ISBN 9789047425236, pp. 147–176, esp. 159-164 and 151-154, chapter DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004171916.i-782.34, chapter ISBN 9789047425236, see [1], accessed 8 June 2014."

¹² Same footnote.

¹³ BLAIR NELSON, Gary (2008) : Ethnology and the "Two Books": Some Nineteenth-Century Americans on Preadamist Polygenism. In: VAN DER MEER, Jitse M. & MANDELBROTE, Scott (Editors) (2008) : Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: 1700-Present. Vol 1. Brill. Leiden/Boston, 2008. pp. 145-179.

¹⁴ AGASSIZ, Louis (1850) : The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races. In: The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany. Volume XLIX. Fourth Series, Volume XIV. July, September, November, 1850. W M. Crossby and H.P. Nichols. Boston, 1850. p. 110-145. Here p. 120.

which are so eminently developed in civilized society, but which equally exist in the natural dispositions of all human races, constituting the higher unity among men, making them all equal before God, because all of them have been created in his image, inasmuch as they have a spark of the divine light which elevates man above the present, and enables him to look forward in the future towards eternity, to remember the past, to record his destinies, and to be taught how to improve himself, and to be led in these improvements by motives of a higher, of a purely moral character."

Blair Nelson quotes this paragraph in part (big letters) and marks his omissions.¹⁵ His quotation is correct and does not falsify Agassiz's statement.

Things are totally different with Wikipedia: only the words I underline are quoted and ... falsified in the following way:

"Those intellectual and moral qualities which are so eminently developed in civilized society, but which equally exist in the natural dispositions of all human races, constituting the higher unity among men, making them all equal before God." (Wikipedia)

A small section of a long sentence is presented as a whole sentence, starting with a capital "T" and ending with a dot marking the end of a sentence. A clearly fraudulent quotation.

Furthermore, Wikipedia tells the reader how to (mis-)understand the quotation: "Agassiz rejected racism and believed in a spiritualized human unity. [...] Agassiz believed God made all men equal [...]" (Wikipedia). Agassiz's text, read in its entirety, cannot be understood as a rejection of racism: all men are "equal before God, **because** [my emphasis] all of them have been created in his image, inasmuch as they have a spark of the divine light which elevates man above the present, and enables him to look forward in the future towards eternity, to remember the past, to record his destinies, and to be taught how to improve himself, and to be led in these improvements by motives of a higher, of a purely moral character."

Yes, for Agassiz, even inferior races, like Blacks, have "a spark of the divine light", are able "to look forward in the future towards eternity, to remember the past, to record his destinies, and to be taught how to improve himself" etc.

To make it clear, Agassiz writes a few pages later:

"The monuments of Egypt teach us that five thousand years ago the negroes were as different from the white race as they are now, and that, therefore, neither time nor climate nor change of habitation has produced the differences we observe between the races, and that to assume them to be of the same order, and to assert their common origin, it to assume and to assert what has no historical or physiological or physical foundation." (p. 124)

And to make it even more clear, Agassiz says: "And it seems to us to be mock-philanthropy and mock-philosophy to assume that all races have the same abilities, enjoy the same powers, and show the same natural dispositions, and that in consequence of this equality they are entitled to the same position in society." (p. 142).

And Agassiz reciting his racist Credo: "The indomitable, courageous, proud Indian, - in how very different a light he stands by the side of the submissive, obsequious, imitative negro, or

¹⁵ BLAIR NELSON, Gary (2008) : op.cit., p. 162.

by the side of the tricky, cunning, and cowardly Mongolian! Are not these facts indications that the different races do not rank upon one level in nature [...]" (p. 144).

It is appalling to see the European Geosciences Union spreading false information about Louis Agassiz on its homepage and directing readers to a Wikipedia website containing fake information about the racist whose name is used for a EGU medal of honour. It is the EGU scientific members' duty to stop this infringement of scientific deontology.