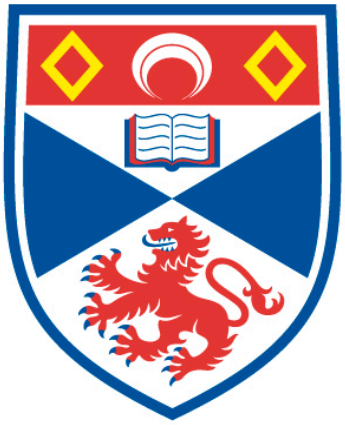
# RACE IN A GODLESS WORLD: ATHEISTS AND RACIAL THOUGHT IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES, C. 1850-1914

Nathan Alexander

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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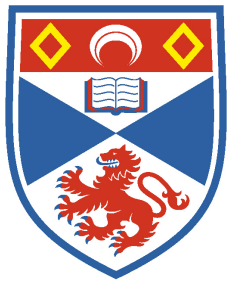

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# ABSTRACT

"Race in a Godless World" examines the racial thought of atheists in Britain and the United States from about 1850 to 1914. While there have been no comprehensive studies of atheists' views on race, there is a trend in the historiography on racial thought, which I have described as the "Race-Secularization Thesis," that suggests a link between the secularization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and an increase in nineteenth-century racialism – that is, racial essentialism and determinism – as well as resulting racial prejudice and discrimination. Through a study of both leading and lesser-known atheists and freethinkers, I argue that the "Race-Secularization Thesis" needs to be reconsidered. A simple link between secularization and racialism is misleading. This is not to suggest that the "Race-Secularization Thesis" contains no truth, only that secularization did not inevitably lead to racialism. This dissertation helps to tell a more complex and nuanced story about the relationship between atheism and racial thought. While in some cases, nineteenth-century atheists and freethinkers were among the leading exponents of racialist views, there is an alternative story in which the atheist worldview – through its emphasis on rationality and skepticism – provided the tools with which to critique ideas of racial prejudice, racial superiority, and even the concept of race itself.

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I am grateful to Elliot Hanowski, Ben Hiemstra, and Rosario López, who read chapters and offered helpful feedback. I would like to thank Richard Whatmore, who helped bring me to St Andrews and gave me considerable support during my time here, and my two examiners, John Clark and David Livingstone, who offered important criticism and advice on the dissertation. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Colin Kidd, for giving me free rein to pursue my research and offering his guidance and expertise along the way. Finally I would like to thank my family for their continual love and support.

# RACE IN A GODLESS WORLD: ATHEISTS AND RACIAL THOUGHT IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES, C. 1850-1914

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# INTRODUCTION

This dissertation differs from the numerous works that trace the development of racial thought in the West. Instead of examining this subject with reference to the best known or most influential figures in a given era, this dissertation looks at the racial views of atheists and other nonbelievers – figures who, because of their irreligious beliefs, were marginalized within their own societies. Drawing on the methodology of intellectual history, the dissertation considers atheists within their own context and traces the influence of racial thought in their worldview. In particular, the dissertation focuses on the United States and Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century.

There are two reasons for focusing on this era. For one, many historians have identified this as a critical period in which racialist attitudes in Britain and the United States attained prominence.[1] By "racialism," I mean an acceptance of hierarchical racial divisions and a deterministic view of race that permanently fixed individuals' place within this hierarchy. Racial science, with its emphasis on racial classifications based on physical or mental features, came to the fore in tandem with the emergence of the new disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, and more generally the triumph of science as the leading authority on the natural world. Even more important than scientific doctrines were the social, cultural, and political contexts in which these new racial attitudes were formulated. The construction of civilizational hierarchies that ranged from savage to civilized had a clear racial component as some races were judged to be naturally suited to higher levels of civilization than others. These scientific hierarchies of race and

[1] For some examples, see Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1965); Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1971); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); John S. Haller, *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978); Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, New Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Douglas Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations and Resistance: Britain, 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

civilizational judgments both justified and were justified by colonial conquests of supposedly inferior non-white people and the enslavement and subsequent oppression of black people.

This period also saw a burgeoning popular movement of atheists and other nonbelievers on both sides of the Atlantic that challenged the authority and veracity of Christianity and the Bible, and instead championed a rational and scientific view of the world. The difference with the eighteenth century was the public and organized nature of unbelief. While eighteenth-century freethinkers confined their irreligious views to upper-class circles and did not seek to organize themselves, nineteenth-century freethinkers bonded together in various organizations and sought to make converts to their cause among all segments of society, particularly the lower classes. These groups inserted themselves into the public sphere by way of numerous books, pamphlets, and weekly periodicals that conveyed their message.

The question this dissertation considers is how these atheists responded to the growth of racialist attitudes. This is an important question in light of a trend in the historiography of racial thought, which suggests that Christianity militated against racial thinking, and that therefore the secularization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries opened the door to the hardening of racial attitudes that came about in the nineteenth century. I call this trend the "Race-Secularization Thesis." There is no one work that advocates the thesis explicitly, but its features are found in many works on the history of racial thought. Despite the suggestion of the link between secularization and racialism, there have been only two case studies of individual atheists and their racial thought. The lack of historical interest in this issue is especially surprising given that, as Colin Kidd contends, "scripture has been for much of the early modern and modern eras the primary cultural influence on the forging of races."[2] The influence of Christianity was pervasive throughout the nineteenth century and played an important role in the construction of racial attitudes. This invites the question of how people who rejected Christianity responded to racial ideas.

This dissertation aims to provide an answer to this question by looking at the views of actual atheists and, in so doing, calls for the "Race-Secularization Thesis" to be reconsidered. A simple link between secularization and racialism is not tenable. This is not to suggest that the "Race-Secularization Thesis" contains no truth, only that secularization did not inevitably lead to

[2] Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.

racialism. There are other stories we might tell about this relationship: atheists and other nonbelievers responded in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways to racial ideas in the second half of the nineteenth century. If the "Race-Secularization Thesis" were true, one would expect to find atheists in the nineteenth century to be some of the strongest exponents of racialist views. In some cases, one does find this, but there is an alternative story in which the atheist worldview provided tools to critique ideas of racial prejudice, racial superiority, and even the concept of race itself.[3]

I identify three main factors that contributed to atheists' racial views. The first is atheists' commitment to skepticism and rationalism. If atheists were skeptical of the central religious orthodoxies of a society, it follows that they would also be skeptical of other orthodoxies as well, in this case the superiority of white, Western civilization. Similarly, for atheists, science and reason were the only sure ways to attain truth and therefore they attempted to apply these tools to all discussions of racial issues. This did not mean their efforts were always perfectly rational, but they tried to follow these principles and, at the very least, always framed their arguments in these terms.

Secondly, atheists' perspectives on racial issues were never far removed from the rhetorical value these positions might hold against Christianity. This meant that at times atheists' views on race shifted to suit their wider irreligious arguments. It does not follow that their racial views were completely groundless or unprincipled, only that their potential value as weapons against Christianity cannot be ignored. If, for example, Christians held one position on race, atheists found a way to hold the opposite and aimed to show how the Christian view was false or unscientific. In some ways then, atheists' racial views were derivative of whatever Christians thought or did with regard to race.

The third factor contributing to atheists' racial views was their marginalization within their own societies. Atheists suffered various social – not to mention legal – penalties for their nonbelief. Furthermore, many atheists came from the working classes which meant that, in addition to their social marginalization, they were also economically disadvantaged. This

[3] The concept of race itself is biologically incoherent to us now (although still rife with social significance). In the past the term referred to many things, from all of humanity ("our race") to sub-groups of humans based on physical features, to national or ethnic groups. When I talk about race, I intend to capture some of the ambiguity that the concept held for nineteenth-century people. For this reason I have not provided an all-encompassing definition of the term. I hope my usage of the term "race" is not taken as an endorsement of the reality of racial differences. The same sentiment applies to my usage of terms like "savages," "lower races," and so on.

marginalization further exacerbated their skepticism by forcing them to examine dominant discourses from the perspective of an outsider. Since their societies were so bound up with Christianity, atheists were forced to cautiously examine every societal truth as one potentially tainted by that religion.

In these ways, atheists' racial views were directly informed by their overall irreligious worldview. We will see each of these three threads running throughout the dissertation. While these factors meant atheists responded in a variety of ways – sometimes even contradictorily – to racial issues, I will suggest that, contrary to the "Race-Secularization Thesis," in many respects atheists were actually at the forefront of confronting racialist ideas.

The remainder of this introduction will set out the main arguments contained in the "Race-Secularization Thesis" before moving on to give a brief overview of the history of atheism in Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century.

**The "Race-Secularization Thesis"**

The term "Race-Secularization Thesis" is a play on the "Secularization Thesis," which is a constellation of different ideas that holds a causal link between modernity and secularization. Although there is much disagreement over the validity of the "Secularization Thesis," it is not my intention here to wade into this debate or to offer a definition of secularization. Instead, this section will show that for all the many perspectives on secularization, there are equally many ways in which historians have imagined secularization – whatever that may mean – to contribute to the development of racial thought, from changing Enlightenment discourses toward the nature of humanity, to the rise of the heretical doctrine of polygenesis, to the emergence of Darwinism, or to the triumph of scientific over religious explanations for natural phenomena.

For many historians, the Enlightenment represents a crucial point in which scholars began to classify humanity into distinct races. An early and influential classification scheme was the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturæ* (1735), in which humans were divided into four distinct races. Other Enlightenment thinkers like the French scientist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, insisted upon further descriptions of racial difference without committing to a set number of races. Johannes Blumenbach enlarged the number of races to five, while Georges

Cuvier's scheme consisted of only three races.[4] "Whatever their intentions," George Fredrickson notes,

> Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and other eighteenth-century ethnologists opened the way to a secular or scientific racism by considering human beings part of the animal kingdom rather than viewing them in biblical terms as children of God endowed with spiritual capacities denied to other creatures.[5]

Richard Popkin concurs. He diagnoses the shift over the course of eighteenth century this way: "People had given up Biblical humanism, and with it the conviction that everyone, no matter what he looked like, was an image of God."[6]

More generally, the Enlightenment's emphasis upon reason seemed to open the way for a changing conception of humanity that made thinking in terms of races possible. The German-born philosopher Eric Voegelin identifies the rise of racial thought as a shift from earlier Christian conceptions of community. The unifying forces in Western civilization had gradually evolved from the Greek polis to "the mystical body of Christ," in which the spirit of Christ acts as the unifying force for all members of the Christian community or indeed all humans.[7] "The process of secularisation on the Western world," however, led to "a slow fading out of the consciousness of the mystical body of Christ," which was replaced by "reason as the substance which constitutes the unity of mankind."[8] While reason, like Christianity, was meant to be universal, the loss of the unifying force of Christianity compelled communities to find new unifying symbols, some of which were applicable only to individual nations or races.[9] Another result of the secularization process was the move from an internalization of evil (in the Christian perspective, Original Sin) to viewing evil as a result of external factors. As communities became closed off from one another, they looked to external groups as sources of evil, as in the Nazis' scapegoating of the Jews, for example.[10]

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[4] See chapter 15 of Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).
[5] George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 57.
[6] Richard H. Popkin, "The Philosophical Basis of Eighteenth-Century Racism," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 3 (1973): 253–4.
[7] Eric Voegelin, "The Growth of the Race Idea," *The Review of Politics* 2, no. 3 (July 1940): 286–91.
[8] Ibid., 292–3.
[9] Ibid., 293.
[10] Ibid., 307–10.

Later scholars have, like Voegelin, identified a shift in the conception of humanity as an important precursor to the rise of racial thinking. Michael Banton describes the Enlightenment view in which "Men did not really need myths. Reason could provide the ground for a conception of Man independent both of God and of Nature."[11] Ivan Hannaford similarly identifies several premises that were necessary for the development of racial thought in the modern world. The first premise was "that human beings are independent of ethical, moral, religious, and mythological laws or rules, and are subject to the laws of Nature; man is a primate, like a bat, a lemur, or an ape", and the second was "that origins are only to be found in physical-mechanical motions or in simple ideas implanted on the mind by Nature, and that these provide a more rational explanation of beginnings than myth or legend".[12] While other factors were necessary for the full development of modern racial thought, these secular Enlightenment ideas served as essential preconditions.

Many scholars have seen Christianity's universalist message as a bulwark against the division of humans into distinct races. Christianity seemed to suggest that all humans were inherently equal since they all descended from the biblical Adam. Even if one proposed that the seeds of racialism were sown by Christian anti-Semitism, Fredrickson argues, "to achieve its full potential as an ideology, racism had to be emancipated from Christian universalism."[13] The way Christianity inhibited racial thought is most clearly seen in the debate between monogenesis and polygenesis. The theory of monogenesis posited a single origin for all humans, in this case Adam and Eve. The theory of polygenesis, however, suggested that each human race had arisen independently, meaning they were permanently separate and distinct. This had heretical implications for Christianity, since if all humans did not descend from Adam, they did not all share in his Original Sin, and nor did they share in the salvation wrought by Christ. Since Christianity seemed to act as a check against racialism, we must notice that, as Hannah Franziska Augstein writes, "the very first full-blown racial theories were put forward by men who did not much care for religion. The notion of inherently different races was somewhat alien to the

[11] Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 15.
[12] Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 57–8.
[13] Fredrickson, *Racism*, 47; it should be noted, however, that Frederickson acknowledged that the Enlightenment rhetoric about the equality of all people could be used as ammunition to confront racial thinking, as in arguments against slavery. See ibid., 61–3.

anthropological doctrines of Christian orthodoxy."[14] Owing to new geological and archaeological findings and the emerging biblical criticism, "the Christian foundations of theories on man were crumbling. Once natural historians no longer felt obliged to align their tenets to the story of Genesis, the playground for all sorts of racialist speculations was opened."[15] With the Christian framework destabilized, anything was now permitted.

This narrative continues into the nineteenth century, as the proudly heretical proponents of scientific polygenesis won credibility for their ideas. The innovators in the US were Samuel Morton, Louis Agassiz, Josiah Nott, and George Gliddon, the so-called American School of Anthropology. While Morton and Agassiz attempted to square polygenesis with Christianity, Nott and Gliddon delighted in their anticlericalism. Nott and Gliddon wrote the quintessential work of the American School, *Types of Mankind*, in 1854. To Michael Banton, "the doctrine of permanent human types […] attained its most systematic statement" in this work.[16] In Britain meanwhile, the Scottish anatomist Robert Knox led the way in polygenist thinking, in turn influencing James Hunt, the leader of the boldly heretical Anthropological Society of London, and his followers. Historians have typically assigned these mid-nineteenth century racial theorists a prominent role in the development of racial thought.[17]

The opposite side of this coin is that the opponents of polygenesis were inevitably committed Christians. In the United States, Samuel Stanhope Smith and John Bachman, the two most prominent defenders of monogenesis, were both ordained ministers.[18] In Britain, the chief proponent of monogenesis in the first half of the nineteenth century was James Cowles Prichard, an Anglican with Quaker roots.[19] Quakers and evangelicals dominated anti-slavery and humanitarian groups in the United States and Britain. Hannah Augstein acknowledges it would be too much to say it was "a general rule" that a belief in monogenesis always accompanied humanitarianism, but in Britain at least, "religious monogenism and anti-slavery agitation went hand-in-hand."[20] Christine Bolt likewise notes that anthropologists disdained the sentimentalism

[14] Hannah Franziska Augstein, ed., *Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), xxv.
[15] Ibid., xxxii.
[16] Banton, *Idea of Race*, 5.
[17] For some examples, see chapter one of Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*; Banton, *Idea of Race*, 46–53; C. Loring Brace, *"Race" Is a Four-Letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110–9, 125–43; Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 275–9, 283–8; and chapter fifteen of Curtin, *Image of Africa*.
[18] William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 3–10, 123–36.
[19] George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 49.
[20] Augstein, *Race*, xxii.

of Christian philanthropists and therefore struck a blow at the equality inherent in monogenesis. But, she writes,

> it was infinitely preferable, in my view, to argue such doctrines [of equality] from Christian conviction, notwithstanding frequent ignorance of African conditions and private prejudices, than to argue against equality in a scholarly fashion, on the grounds that African religious beliefs or cultural achievements were inferior or non-existent.[21]

This, however, presents a false choice in which racial equality could only be defended on Christian grounds. This is the impression one gets from reading the historiography since historians tell us that on the one hand, committed Christians, armed with their monogenist doctrines and ideas about the brotherhood of man, checked the rise of racialist thought, while on the other hand irreligious provocateurs developed racialist science.

Other historians have noted how the ostensibly godless insights of Charles Darwin furthered racial thinking. While his work logically should have dealt a deathblow to the monogenesis-polygenesis debate, according to Bolt, in some cases it actually gave polygenesis "a new importance in scientific circles" and further "undermined the Christian and philanthropic defence of monogenesis […]."[22] As Michael Banton elaborates, the application of Darwinism to human society was at odds with Christianity since it "denied the split between body and spirit crucial to Christian theology. Evolution offered, or appeared to offer, a physical cause explanation of everything in the human realm, including morals."[23] Philip Curtin makes the same point. He writes that the consequences of Darwinism "were to be far more disastrous to the supporters of Christian and anti-racist monogenesis than to their opponents" since its insights could be harnessed to show the vast differences between races. "For monogenists," Curtin continues, "not only was the scientific basis for their position swept away; its other support in the authority of Christian revelation was no more valid for Darwinians than other aspects of the Christian tradition – when that tradition was confronted by scientific truth."[24] Dinesh D'Souza makes the point most baldly: "If God does not exist, Dostoyevsky warns, everything is permitted.

[21] Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, 211.
[22] Ibid., 207.
[23] Banton, *Idea of Race*, 89.
[24] Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 363–4.

The secularism and racism embodied in Darwin prevailed, and increasingly race began to replace religion as the gnostic key to history."[25]

Similarly, Richard Weikart, in his controversial book, *From Darwin to Hitler*, notes how the decline in Christianity led to a rejection of its monogenist premise. "Before the nineteenth century," Weikart writes, "the intellectual dominance of Christianity militated against some of the worst excesses of racism." This was because in the Christian view, "all humans, regardless of race, were created in the image of God and possessed eternal souls."[26] Weikart's book argues that Darwinism "smoothed the path for Nazi ideology" since it provided a materialistic account of the origins of humanity and ethics, opening the door to moral relativism and the devaluation of human life.[27] For Weikart then, the loss of faith in Christianity and its replacement with a new theory that saw humans as mere animals is bound up with the worst of Nazi crimes.

A strange bedfellow of Weikart in this regard is the philosopher John Gray, an atheist himself. In a piece in *The Guardian*, Gray hammers twenty-first-century atheists for their uncritical acceptance of liberalism and capitalism. He compares this to how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century members of "the secular intelligentsia", like Ernst Haeckel, H.G. Wells, and Julian Huxley – those are his only examples – accepted the division of humans into racial groupings on a scientific basis and thus helped to pave the way for the Nazis.[28] Other authors have, like Gray, tried to link the history of racial science with twenty-first-century atheists' attitudes toward Islam. Murtaza Hussain dubiously suggests that the critiques of Islam made by New Atheists, a group of outspoken twenty-first-century atheist intellectuals, hark back to centuries past, when thinkers sought to give their racial prejudices a scientific cover.[29] Stephen LeDrew makes a similar argument as he suggests parallels between the supposed anti-Muslim bigotry of New Atheists and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anthropological views of race.[30] While none of these works are written by historians, they demonstrate the extent to which the "Race-Secularization Thesis" has influenced popular understandings of atheism. These authors

[25] Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 132.
[26] Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 103.
[27] Ibid., 6.
[28] John Gray, "What Scares the New Atheists," *The Guardian*, March 3, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/03/what-scares-the-new-atheists.
[29] Murtaza Hussain, "Scientific Racism, Militarism, and the New Atheists," *Al Jazeera*, April 2, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/20134210413618256.html.
[30] Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 75–6.

seem to suggest that there is an inherent (and sinister) racial viewpoint contained within atheism that began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and has continued up to the present.

More scholarly accounts have noted how the application of Darwin's ideas to society contributed to racial thinking. The notion of a struggle for existence, central to Darwin's ideas, could be turned to promote the idea that races struggled against one another in a zero-sum game for survival.[31] As Greta Jones points out, "Social Darwinism secularised" ideas about the natural and social order of the world that had previously been present in works of natural theology: "It removed God but it reinstated the idea of order, equilibrium and hierarchy, this time in a social context. […] Social Darwinism substituted natural, scientific processes for God as the guarantor of social equilibrium."[32] It is not surprising to find then that the major contributors to Social Darwinism like Herbert Spencer in Britain, William Graham Sumner in the United States, and Ernst Haeckel in Germany were all irreligious if not outright atheists. Certainly not all Social Darwinists were atheists however. Leading Christian figures in nineteenth-century America, like Henry Ward Beecher or Josiah Strong, combined their Christian beliefs with Social Darwinism.[33]

Closely related to Social Darwinism is eugenics, which was developed by Darwin's cousin Francis Galton. It intended to harness evolution's power by encouraging the "fit" members of society to have more children while discouraging the "unfit" from procreating, sometimes through forcible sterilization. Eugenics programs often targeted criminality, alcoholism, "feeble-mindedness," and other traits that seemed, often erroneously, to be heritable. British eugenics, Nancy Stepan notes, "was never extreme in its racialism, nor did it have broad political support."[34] In the United States, however, the link between eugenics and race was clearer since racial minorities were disproportionately targeted for forced sterilization and eugenicists were some of the most vocal proponents of enacting immigration restrictions on undesirable racial groups.[35] Daniel J. Kevles plays upon the theme of the "Race-Secularization Thesis" in his book on eugenics. Both Galton and his follower Karl Pearson were hostile to

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[31] See in particular chapter eight of Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); chapter seven of Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction between Biological and Social Theory* (Sussex; New Jersey: The Harvester Press; Humanities Press, 1980); and chapter nine of Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Revised Edition (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1955).
[32] Jones, *Social Darwinism*, xiii.
[33] Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 29–30, 178–9.
[34] Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 111–2.
[35] Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 74–5, 96–7, 168.

Christianity and sought to replace it with eugenics.[36] Galton, writes Kevles, "found in eugenics a scientific substitute for church orthodoxies, a secular faith, a defensible religious obligation."[37] His chapter titles continue this theme: Galton is dubbed the "Founder of the Faith," Pearson is "Saint Biometrika," and the concluding chapter is ominously titled "Songs of Deicide." Nonetheless, elsewhere in the book he says the supporters of eugenics in the early twentieth century were "predominantly Protestant".[38] Kevles's wider point, however, seems to be that eugenics was a futile and disastrous attempt at replacing Christianity.

Another facet of the "Race-Secularization Thesis" is that the triumph of science over religion opened the way toward racialist thinking. For Douglas Lorimer, scientific racial thought cannot be explained merely by reference to the emergence of disciplines like anthropology and evolutionary biology, but "needs to be considered as part of the broader cultural and social process of 'secularization'."[39] Lorimer's argument is that older tropes about racial groups dating from the abolitionist era of the early nineteenth century become secularized in a scientific discourse by the end of the century. As he explains, "the racial discourse of the scientists retained the negative attributes of peoples designated as sinners, or savages, and redefined the more positive affirmations of abolitionists and missionaries as pious sentimentality."[40] The new scientific studies of humanity, Lorimer continues, "treated human beings as natural objects subject to forces analogous to those operating in the natural world."[41] In conclusion, Lorimer notes:

> This process of secularization may well represent a liberation of reason from the religious and cultural authority of the past. The disturbing question is why the liberation weakened existing forces of resistance to racism and, at the same time, strengthened the forces of colonial oppression.[42]

[36] Ibid., 11, 22.
[37] Ibid., 12.
[38] Ibid., 64.
[39] Douglas Lorimer, "Science and the Secularization of Victorian Images of Race," in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. Bernard Lightman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 212–3.
[40] Ibid., 214.
[41] Ibid., 229–30.
[42] Ibid., 215.

Lorimer does not mean that all of the racial thinkers he examined were atheists (although one of his examples, Edward Clodd, was an agnostic), but rather that their discourse was secular and framed in scientific, rather than religious, terms.

In the rare cases – two that I am aware of – where historians have looked at atheists and racial thought explicitly, their work fits into the "Race-Secularization Thesis" by showing how atheists' irreligious worldviews led them to adopt stances that supported the oppression of non-white people. One case study comes from John Stenhouse, who examines the racial views of the British atheist, Charles Southwell.[43] Southwell (1814-1860) edited the journal, *The Oracle of Reason*, but left Britain in 1855 after a stint in jail for blasphemy and a failure to find success through his publications. He moved to Australia and finally settled in New Zealand. There, Southwell opposed the white Anglican clergy and Maori converts to Christianity not only on religious grounds, but also because they defended the rights of the Maori against the encroaching white settlers, whom Southwell supported. In this way, Southwell's religious and political views turned to "racism" as he dismissed the Maori as irredeemable savages. As Stenhouse writes, "[t]hroughout his almost five-year colonial career, England's most militant atheist expressed probably the most extreme, systematic, and inflammatory racism in colonial New Zealand. It cannot be understood apart from the militant secularism he brought with him from Britain."[44] An article by Bill Cooke, written partly in response to Stenhouse's article, has cast doubt on Stenhouse's conclusions.[45] Cooke argues that Stenhouse overstates Southwell's racialist thought and instead points to Southwell's denunciation of American slavery and his approving citation of one Maori leader's speech, both things that Cooke argues would contradict a racialist mindset.[46] Further, Cooke argues that many settlers, the vast majority of them Christian, supported Southwell's views toward the Maori, which undermines a clear link between atheism and racialist thought.[47] Cooke offers some useful corrections to Stenhouse's argument, but on the whole they are not fatal to Stenhouse's interpretation that Southwell's atheism informed his racial views in the colonial context of New Zealand.

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[43] John Stenhouse, "Imperialism, Atheism, and Race: Charles Southwell, Old Corruption, and the Maori," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 4 (October 2005): 754–74.
[44] Ibid., 771.
[45] Bill Cooke, "Charles Southwell: One of the Romances of Rationalism," *Journal of Freethought* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 2012): 1–41.
[46] Ibid., 31, 33.
[47] Ibid., 34.

The second case study is Jeremy Rich's article on a lesser-known American freethinker, Richard Lynn Garner (1848-1920).[48] Garner was a self-trained scientist, who researched primate language and studied African religion during his many years of living in Gabon, in West Africa. Influenced by Charles Darwin and the American freethinker Robert Ingersoll, Garner's private writings were filled with skepticism about Christianity. Garner believed his freethinking attitude shielded him from sentimental religious views that called for political equality between races. This was unacceptable and unscientific, since, to Garner, blacks and whites represented separate species.[49] Garner opposed missionary evangelizing in Africa and in general hated the French colonial system he witnessed in Gabon, espousing instead a kind of cultural and moral relativism.[50] At the same time, Garner expressed a personal dislike for Africans, emphasizing their inferiority to whites.[51] As in Southwell's case, Garner's racial and religious views were clearly linked.

Both studies provide insights into the links between atheism and racial thought, but the fact that they are case studies of individuals means that their conclusions cannot necessarily be extrapolated to other freethinkers. Nonetheless, these works do hint at the possibilities of a larger study of freethinkers' views on race, since, as Stenhouse notes, "[…] Victorian Britain was not monolithically or essentially Christian. Atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and secular liberals shaped the cultures of British imperialism, not just Christians."[52] Similarly, Rich writes, "[i]f one is to move beyond a hagiographic approach to the history of American religious scepticism, it will be necessary for scholars to find how freethinkers engaged with major issues in American cultural life."[53] While in both cases, the authors' arguments about their individual subjects are convincing, we should not assume that all examinations of atheists and their racial views will – or should – cast these individuals in a negative light, as the authors seem to be hinting.

Some historians have, however, questioned the "Race-Secularization Thesis." While Colin Kidd admitted that it seemed initially compelling when he began his study of racial views and scripture in the modern world, he ultimately dismissed the "Race-Secularization Thesis." He explains that he "had a suspicion – perhaps verging on a crude hypothesis – that the dethroning of

[48] Jeremy Rich, "Heresy Is the Only True Religion: Richard Lynch Garner (1848-1920), A Southern Freethinker in Africa and America," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12, no. 1 (January 2013): 65–94.
[49] Ibid., 79–80.
[50] Ibid., 85–7.
[51] Ibid., 90–1.
[52] Stenhouse, "Imperialism, Atheism, and Race," 755.
[53] Rich, "Heresy," 92.

biblical authority was a necessary prelude to the emergence of modern racism." This did not mean that a straight line could be drawn, but "that the liberation of the scriptures opens the *possibility* – no more than that – of a less constrained doctrine of racial difference grounded on a theory of polygenesis." However, Kidd "came to realise that […] the historical record […] is replete with unpredictable and illogical developments. The human imagination is equally capable of interpreting the Christian scriptures in a racialist as in an anti-racialist manner."[54] David N. Livingstone strikes a similar note as he writes that "[p]olygenism was eagerly harnessed in the cause of racial apologetic by those of a more or less secular outlook," but at the same time, the idea of men existing before or alongside the biblical Adam "was embraced by some religious partisans intent on cultivating a racialized theology."[55] In other words, both religious and irreligious thinkers used racial ideas for their own ends and there was often no way to neatly map racial views onto religious beliefs.

Other historians have gone further and discerned the ways in which Christianity actively contributed to racial thinking. Some historians have discussed how medieval Christian Spain's persecution of converts from Judaism and Islam presaged modern forms of racial violence.[56] Others have shown how eighteenth-century Christian pietism, through its emphasis on emotions, instincts, and the pursuit of symbolic community, led the way to a race-based nationalism.[57] Furthermore, Christian views of Africans as heathens or as the cursed descendants of Noah's son Ham also played their part in the march to racialism.[58] The most scathing work in this regard, however, is Forrest G. Wood's *The Arrogance of Faith*, which argues that Christianity "has been fundamentally racist in its ideology, organization, and practice."[59] In every manifestation of racial violence, Wood finds Christianity involved in some way, from the evangelist urge to justify American expansion, to Christian support for slavery as biblically justified or a means to spread the faith.

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[54] Kidd, *Forging of Races*, 271.
[55] David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 169.
[56] Fredrickson, *Racism*, 31–42; Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 137–51.
[57] George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (London: Dent, 1978), 1–8.
[58] Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 17–24.
[59] Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), xviii.

The "Race-Secularization Thesis" is ultimately an amalgam of individual arguments and I do not want to suggest that the authors cited would accept every aspect of the thesis as I have outlined. There is no one work that sums up all of the arguments in the "Race-Secularization Thesis," but a reader examining the historiography on racial thought would come away with the impression of its truth. This is why it has entered into some popular writing by non-historians on the topic of atheism. Nonetheless, I do not want to suggest that the "Race-Secularization Thesis" is completely untrue or that the works cited above are not valuable. I instead want to highlight that there are other stories we can tell about the link between racial thought and atheism. While the "Race-Secularization Thesis" appears plausible on the surface, there have been no works, save the two case studies, to examine the racial thought of atheists and other freethinkers in order to test its validity. My dissertation aims at beginning to fill this gap in the academic literature.

This study therefore has the merit of uncovering previously overlooked voices in the creation and reception of racial discourse. While many historians have constructed their histories with reference to the major thinkers in an era or those who produced a large amount of writing on racial issues, by focusing on a specific subset of the population in Britain and the United States, we can see how race was understood not just by the most important thinkers, but also by marginal figures for whom race was not a central intellectual concern. It is also important to note that this dissertation is not an attempt to describe or account for the racial composition of the freethought movement. The vast majority of freethinkers were white, although there were exceptions that I will highlight in later chapters.

**Transatlantic Atheism**

As I explained above, the second half of the nineteenth century, aside from seeing a hardening of racial attitudes, also witnessed the emergence of popular atheist movements in Britain and the United States. While the context of both countries was different, it makes sense to consider atheists and freethinkers in Britain and the United States as forming a transatlantic intellectual community since there was considerable movement of both ideas and people across the Atlantic, giving the development of freethought in both countries a great deal of unity. The nineteenth century saw a large number of British visitors to the United States and vice versa and

both nations were tied up economically and culturally, not to mention linguistically.[60] The following section briefly describes the development of atheism and freethought while emphasizing the transatlantic connections. Though I use the terms "atheism," "freethought," "nonbelief," or "irreligion" interchangeably, it should be noted that not all of the figures discussed here would accept the label of "atheist" to describe themselves. This section will also therefore attempt to show the range of irreligious labels available to nineteenth-century figures.

The development of atheism in both the United States and Britain owed much to late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists. In Britain, figures like John Toland, Matthew Tindal, and Anthony Collins denounced the miracles of the Bible as contrary to reason.[61] Deism likewise found adherents in the United States, most notably with Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.[62] The most influential deist, on both sides of the Atlantic, was Thomas Paine. Paine, born in England, first gained fame in the United States, where his republican writings provided fuel for the American revolutionaries. Paine returned to England in 1787, but his defense of the French Revolution led to a hostile reaction that forced him to flee to Paris in 1792. There he began writing *The Age of Reason* (1794), a three-part attack on Christianity and the authority of the Bible. Paine soon ran afoul of the revolutionaries and was imprisoned from late 1793 to 1794, during which time he completed *The Age of Reason*. By directing his work toward the masses and not just the educated few, Paine reached a wide audience and his work became incredibly influential, even though little was particularly original. Political and religious radicals in Britain, like Richard Carlile, and in the United States, like Elihu Palmer, took up Paine's writings in the first half of the nineteenth century while attracting the ire of the law for their controversial views. Paine remained in Paris until 1802, when he returned to the United States. Paine's reputation since the revolution had however declined and he lived out his days as a social pariah, dying in 1809.[63] Nonetheless, by the 1820s, American freethinkers began to celebrate Paine's birthday annually.[64]

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[60] Frank Thistlethwaite, *The Anglo-American Connection in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959); Walter Allen, ed., *Transatlantic Crossing: American Visitors to Britain and British Visitors to America in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1971).
[61] Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement: 1791-1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 12–3.
[62] Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 17–8.
[63] On Paine and his reception, see Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, 26–43; Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 22–6; Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 36–65.
[64] Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 155–9; Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 64–5.

Another crucial figure in the early history of popular freethought was the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen, who, like Paine, was influential on both sides of the Atlantic. Owen gained national prominence in the first half of the nineteenth century for his utopian experiments in Britain and America based on his radical view of human nature as being determined almost entirely by one's circumstances. Owen, disgusted with the condition of the working classes in Britain, first began his experiments in Scotland at New Lanark, a cotton mill owned by his father-in-law. Owen instituted reforms that focused on improving the workers' living conditions and educating their children. At the same time, Owen's movement was anti-Christian: Owen believed all religions were equally false and hampered the adoption of his principles about the formation of character. In 1824, Owen left for America to begin a utopian community at New Harmony, Indiana. The experiment was however a failure and Owen returned to Britain in 1829, this time to lead several abortive working-class movements aimed at the promotion of his ideas. Nonetheless, his Association of All Classes of All Nations, formed in 1835, soon developed a nationwide organizational presence.[65]

Before leaving the United States, Owen gained further publicity when he participated in a public debate with the Reverend Alexander Campbell of Virginia in 1829.[66] Owen's son, Robert Dale, accompanied his father to New Harmony and spent most of the remainder of his life in the US, while Scottish-born Frances Wright was inspired by Owen to begin her own utopian community for freed slaves in Tennessee. The two became prominent freethinkers and published their own freethought periodical.[67] Aside from Owen and Wright, other British immigrants were also important to the development of freethought in the United States. George Houston, Gilbert Vale, and Benjamin Offen all came from England to New York City where they took a leading role in the freethought scene.[68] The most important early freethought paper in the United States, the *Boston Investigator*, was started by Abner Kneeland, a former Universalist minister, in 1831, and was for a time co-edited with Wright. Horace Seaver took over from Kneeland and remained as editor for much of the nineteenth century.[69] It was one of the leading national freethought papers until its incorporation into the *Truth Seeker* in 1904.

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[65] Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, 43–53.
[66] For the full debate, see Alexander Campbell, ed., *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity* (London: R. Groombridge, 1839); for a description of the debate, see Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 131–7.
[67] Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 35–42, 81–6.
[68] Ibid., 32–3, 45–51, 76–80.
[69] Ibid., 52–7.

In Britain meanwhile, a number of Owen's followers broke with him in order to focus primarily on religious criticism. Charles Southwell, mentioned above, created the periodical the *Oracle of Reason* along with William Chilton. George Jacob Holyoake, another follower of Owen, took over the editorship of Southwell's paper during his imprisonment. Like Southwell and so many other atheists, Holyoake spent time behind bars for his views. He would later establish his own periodicals, first *The Movement*, then the more successful *Reasoner* from 1846 to 1861. Through this paper, Holyoake became one of the most prominent irreligious leaders in the country. He coined the term "secularism" in the 1850s as a replacement for "atheism." In Holyoake's view, a secularist outlook differed from an atheist one in the sense that it was not wholly destructive but sought to establish a framework for ethics that was independent of religion.[70]

Holyoake began a number of secular societies around Britain, but the leadership of the movement was usurped by Charles Bradlaugh, a fiery atheist who consolidated the local secular societies into the National Secular Society (NSS) in 1866. Bradlaugh was the president of that organization until his death in 1891 and he also edited the NSS's flagship newspaper, the *National Reformer* (1860-1893), for much of his life. Bradlaugh became one of the most prominent atheists of the nineteenth century owing to two major public incidents. In 1877-78, Bradlaugh and his most important secularist ally Annie Besant were tried and convicted for publishing a birth control pamphlet, but the conviction was ultimately overturned on a technicality. The other incident that led to national attention was Bradlaugh's election as an MP for Northampton in 1880. Because Bradlaugh was an atheist he was unable to swear an oath necessary to take his seat in Parliament. After a long and tortuous legal battle, Bradlaugh was finally permitted to take the oath (and his seat) in 1886.[71]

With Bradlaugh at the helm, secular societies boomed. The high point was the 1880s, when there were nearly 120 local secular societies across Britain that reached an estimated 60,000 people. In terms of actual members, however, the maximum would have been only

[70] The best sources for Holyoake's life and career are Royle, *Victorian Infidels*; Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).
[71] The main Bradlaugh biographies are Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J.M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895); David Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh M.P.* (London: Elek, 1971); Bryan Niblett, *Dare to Stand Alone: The Story of Charles Bradlaugh* (Oxford: Kramedart Press, 2010); also see Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*.

several thousand.[72] Bradlaugh visited the United States three times, in 1873, 1874, and 1875. Bradlaugh was almost as popular in the United States as American freethought leader Robert Ingersoll, and many Americans closely followed Bradlaugh's battle to enter Parliament in the 1880s.[73] Other British freethinkers who visited the US were Holyoake, who visited twice, in 1879 and 1882, and Charles Watts and G.W. Foote, who visited jointly in 1896, though Watts had already been to North America numerous times, including a lengthy stint in Canada.[74] J.M. Robertson, a leading secularist in the late nineteenth century, also went on a lengthy lecture tour in the United States between 1897 and 1898.[75]

But secularists were not the only irreligious figures in Britain. Agnosticism, a term coined by the British scientist T.H. Huxley, was an epistemological position meant to differ from atheism by emphasizing humans' absence of knowledge about God's existence. The term became influential and was adopted by others like Charles Darwin, John Tyndall, and Leslie Stephen.[76] Huxley's scientific background and defense of Darwinism made him a celebrity and he went on a six-week speaking tour of the United States.[77] Huxley and his fellow scientists were also advocates of what has been called "scientific naturalism," which aimed to replace Christian understandings of the natural world with scientific ones, and to ensure scientists assumed a central role as social and cultural leaders.[78]

Agnosticism also found a champion in the American Robert Ingersoll, who was popularly known as the "Great Agnostic." Nonetheless, Ingersoll believed the terms atheist and agnostic were interchangeable and used both synonymously.[79] Ingersoll was the leading freethinker in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century. At a time when outdoor lectures were incredibly popular, Ingersoll became one of the greatest orators of the time and people flocked to see his lectures – not just atheists and freethinkers, but many Christians as well. Ingersoll supported the Republican Party for much of his life, and contemporaries acknowledged

[72] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 132–6.
[73] Sidney Warren, *American Freethought, 1860-1914* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966), 38.
[74] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 80–1.
[75] Odin Dekkers, *J.M. Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic* (Aldershot, Vt.: Ashgate, 1998), 30.
[76] The definitive account of the agnostics is Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
[77] Adrian Desmond, *Huxley: From Devil's Disciple to Evolution's High Priest* (Reading, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1997), 469–82; Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 134–7.
[78] Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 9.
[79] Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 17.

that Ingersoll might have gone on to hold political office if not for his atheism. Ingersoll never visited Britain on a formal speaking tour, though he and his wife took a trip to the country in 1878.[80] He also followed affairs in Britain closely, maintaining correspondence with Holyoake and even clashing in print with William Gladstone.[81] In addition, a district just outside London was dubbed the Ingersoll district given the high number of freethinkers who lived there.[82]

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the growth of the American freethought movement, including a number of freethought periodicals, the most important being the *Boston Investigator* (1831-1904) and the *Truth Seeker* (1873-present).[83] The latter, edited first by D.M. Bennett, followed by Eugene Macdonald and later his brother George, was the largest American freethought periodical and had a national circulation. The leaders of this group took up the former Unitarian pastor Francis Ellingwood Abbot's "Nine Demands of Liberalism," which called for further measures insuring the separation of church and state, and helped to form the National Liberal League in 1876. Those freethinkers who were more hostile to Christianity, like D.M. Bennett, took over the organization from moderates like Abbot in 1878. The organization was renamed the American Secular Union in 1884 and would later merge in 1894 with the Freethought Federation of America, formed by Samuel Porter Putnam.[84] Of the leading freethinkers in the US, both Bennett and Putnam made visits to Britain.[85]

The influence of Auguste Comte's philosophy of positivism was also strong in both the United States and Britain. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Comte wrote his six-volume *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42) which outlined his philosophy that would provide order to a chaotic society. Comte believed Western civilization was passing from the theological and metaphysical stages to the final, positive stage, in which a total understanding of the universe through scientific laws was in reach. Among the many earlier supporters of his philosophy were major Victorian thinkers like John Stuart Mill, George Henry Lewes, and Harriet Martineau, as well as Holyoake. Following the death of Comte's lover Clotilde de Vaux in 1846, his

[80] Orvin Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 138–9.
[81] The main sources for Ingersoll's life are C.H. Cramer, *Royal Bob: The Life of Robert G. Ingersoll* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952); Larson, *American Infidel*; David D. Anderson, *Robert Ingersoll* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1972); Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic*.
[82] Larson, *American Infidel*, 205.
[83] Warren, *American Freethought*, 22–3.
[84] Ibid., 35–6, 156–75.
[85] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 80; Roderick Bradford, *D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2006), 250–2, 260–1, 285–91.

philosophy took an increasingly religious turn. Named the "Religion of Humanity," Comte's new creed worshipped humanity in the collective and was based around love and altruism. Comte's new religion featured a priesthood (with himself as the high priest) and a calendar with a different "saint" every day of the week. Richard Congreve, the first of Comte's British converts, established the London Positivist Society in 1867. He broke with other adherents like E.S. Beesly, Frederick Harrison, and J.H. Bridges over his emphasis on ritualistic aspects of positivism. The latter were more interested in disseminating a positivist philosophy to the masses than in performing rituals. In any case, as Susan Budd notes, the number of committed positivists was small, likely only several hundred at any given time.[86] In America, positivism likewise attracted a number of adherents, particularly among immigrants from England.[87]

No discussion of freethought in the nineteenth century can be complete without the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, although labelling his religious views is a challenge. In his autobiography, Mill wrote:

> I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it. I grew up in a negative state with relation to it. I looked upon the modern exactly as I did upon the Greek religion, as something which in no way concerned me.[88]

Indeed, according to Mill's friend Alexander Bain, Mill never attended a church service in his life.[89] Mill was initially attracted by Comte's positive philosophy and the Religion of Humanity, although later in life he distanced himself from Comte because of differences both personal and substantial. Nonetheless, Mill continued his belief that the Religion of Humanity, in some form, was necessary to take the place of Christianity.[90] Many freethought figures revered Mill for his defence of utilitarianism and liberalism and he was friendly with a number of the leading figures.

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[86] Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 190–9; T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[87] Gillis J. Harp, *Positivist Republic: Auguste Comte and the Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1920* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
[88] John Stuart Mill, "Autobiography," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 1 (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 44.
[89] Robert Carr, "The Religious Thought of John Stuart Mill: A Study in Reluctant Scepticism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 4 (December 1962): 475–6.
[90] Wright, *Religion of Humanity*, 40–50.

For example, he contributed funds to Charles Bradlaugh's 1868 election campaign.[91] Mill however never explicitly joined the popular freethought movement and, in his *Three Essays on Religion*, published posthumously, Mill seemed to express sympathy for the idea of theistic design in the universe.[92]

Another variety of nonbelief came in the form of ethical societies. The London South Place Chapel had roots as a Unitarian church in late eighteenth-century America, but moved to London in 1822. Led by Moncure Conway, a Virginian who had since relocated to London, the congregation moved entirely away from Christianity, becoming something of an atheist church. After Conway's departure in 1884, leadership of the congregation fell to Stanton Coit, another transplanted American. Coit was influenced by Felix Adler, a New York rabbi who purged all supernatural elements from Reform Judaism as he began the Society for Ethical Culture in 1876 in New York City. Independent ethical societies sprouted in various cities across the US soon after. Coit took Adler's ideas with him to London and transformed South Place into an ethical society. He departed after a rupture with the congregation in 1892, but founded the West London Ethical Society and helped to establish similar societies across Britain.[93]

The message of freethinkers was transmitted in books, lectures, and pamphlets, but especially periodicals. The chief periodicals used in this dissertation are, from Britain, the *Reasoner*, the *National Reformer*, and the *Freethinker*, and, from the United States, the *Boston Investigator* and the *Truth Seeker*. While there were countless smaller periodicals, these were the longest running and most important in their respective countries. Furthermore, it should be noted that these periodicals were based in urban centres (London for the British periodicals, and Boston and New York respectively for the two American ones), but they also reprinted articles from smaller periodicals and reported on meetings and events from across each country. These periodicals routinely featured columns taken from other freethought papers in their own country as well as their counterpart across the Atlantic. Additionally, freethought bookshops in Britain would contain the latest works from both British and American freethinkers.[94] In terms of the circulation of these British periodicals, each might have about several thousand readers, with the

[91] Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, 110–1.
[92] John Stuart Mill, "Three Essays on Religion," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 10, 33 vols. (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 369–489.
[93] On ethical societies in Britain and the US, see Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1969); Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1971), 71–85; Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 188–214.
[94] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 156.

*Freethinker* reaching over 10,000 at its peak in the 1880s.[95] The circulation of American periodicals is unclear, but it seems reasonable that, as with the British, they reached several thousand readers at most. Albert Post reports that the *Boston Investigator* had a subscription of over 2,000 in 1835, though the number had fallen to 500 in 1850 (when his study concludes).[96] Sidney Warren meanwhile estimates that freethought works by Ingersoll and others "were read by scores of thousands […]."[97]

Reading the work of freethinkers in both countries reveals that, aside from contextual differences, the concerns and language of freethinkers were broadly the same. Their arguments mirrored each other and authors drew inspiration from their transatlantic counterparts. Indeed, as will be seen throughout the dissertation, freethinkers considered themselves part of a common intellectual heritage that transcended national boundaries. In this way, their national context is less important than the international context in which they saw themselves. My approach, therefore, fits in with the global turn in intellectual history.[98] Rather than focusing on bounded nation states, or even on a straightforward, one-way flow of influence from metropole to colony, historians have stressed the need to consider the importance of networks in which the flows of ideas and people have had profound impacts on multiple societies.[99] While some historians have identified links between nineteenth-century evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic,[100] so far historians of freethought movements have not followed suit. My aim is not to give a full treatment of these connections, only, for the sake of this particular study, to demonstrate that such connections were crucial to both countries.

Also essential to my argument is that atheists represented a marginalized group in Britain and the United States. In both these countries, freethinkers suffered a variety of penalties, legal or otherwise, for their irreligion. In Britain, the post office could seize freethought materials sent

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[95] Ibid., 157–64.
[96] Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 54–6.
[97] Warren, *American Freethought*, 230.
[98] David Armitage, "The International Turn in Intellectual History," in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 232–52.
[99] Examples include Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2003).
[100] See for example Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Wesport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1978); Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

through the mail and some news vendors refused to stock freethought literature, while the popular press routinely portrayed atheists in a negative light.[101] It was because of the association between atheism and immorality that one risked losing their job and livelihood if discovered as a freethinker.[102] Various by-laws interfered with Sunday lectures or outdoor meetings, while atheists and other nonbelievers had no standing in court due to their inability to swear an oath or affirm.[103] Numerous British freethinkers throughout the century were jailed for blasphemy, including Richard Carlile, Charles Southwell, George Holyoake, and G.W. Foote. Annie Besant meanwhile lost custody of her daughter to her ex-husband Frank Besant because of her irreligious beliefs and her advocacy of birth control.

Atheists in the United States also faced persecution, though unlike their British cousins did not have to contend with a legal linkage of religion and state. Still, there were cases of atheists being denied the right to testify in court on account of their inability to affirm,[104] or losing their jobs if their irreligious views were discovered.[105] Abner Kneeland was the last person jailed for blasphemy in the United States in 1838, but the *Truth Seeker*'s D.M. Bennett was convicted in 1879 of sending obscene material – a birth control pamphlet – through the mail and, despite being sixty years old, was sentenced to a year of hard labour in a federal penitentiary. Even for those not directly affected by blasphemy persecutions, the sight of revered figures, and in some cases friends, being hauled off to prison must have created a sense of being under siege by Christians.

Aside from the religious marginalization faced by freethinkers, they also contended with economic marginalization. Edward Royle and Susan Budd have both found that members of the British secularist movement came mainly from the urban working or lower middle classes.[106] In the United States, members of the freethought movement likewise had roots in the working classes before the Civil War, but by the end of the century many members came from the emerging middle classes.[107] The editors of the *Boston Investigator* and the *Truth Seeker* all came

[101] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 263.
[102] Ibid., 264.
[103] Ibid., 265.
[104] Warren, *American Freethought*, 180–1.
[105] Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 212–3.
[106] Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, 304–5; Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 95–8; Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 126–8.
[107] Evelyn A. Kirkley, *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen: Gender and American Atheism, 1865-1915* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 22.

from the working classes and were sympathetic to the plight of the poor.[108] Freethinkers found many aspects of their societies unpalatable and in particular felt a concern for the poor, undoubtedly stemming from the legacy of Owen and Paine. Given the influence of Robert Owen on the creation of the freethought movement, it is not surprising that many freethinkers became socialists. Even those who opposed socialism, like Charles Bradlaugh or Robert Ingersoll, were deeply concerned about enacting reforms to help the poor.[109] As David Tribe points out, since many of the secularist leaders were autodidacts who found success despite their lack of formal education, they believed, perhaps naively, that everyone could match their accomplishments given a fair playing field.[110]

**Outline of the Dissertation**

The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled "Atheism and Polygenesis," discusses how freethinkers engaged with polygenist thought. As has already been suggested, polygenesis was a heretical theory that had both racial and theological implications. Freethinkers embraced polygenesis since it seemed to be the most accurate scientific explanation for the diversity of races in contrast to the quaint theory of monogenesis, which Christians clung to despite seemingly insurmountable scientific evidence. More importantly, the theory seemed to deal a fatal blow to the creation account in Genesis, and with it, the entire foundation of Christianity. For this reason, many atheists aligned themselves with irreligious anthropologists who posited vast differences between the various races.

The monogenist and polygenist division was ostensibly made obsolete by the insights of Darwin, yet as the second chapter, "Race in Biological and Sociocultural Evolution," shows, racialist ideas persisted within an evolutionary framework. Evolution presented an alternative explanation for the diversity of species over special creation, but had ambiguous consequences for racial thought. On the one hand, the message of evolution seemed to be that all species, including humans, were ultimately ephemeral, and therefore racial differences in the vastness of time were meaningless. On the other hand, however, polygenist divisions could persist within an evolutionary framework and races could be ranked according to their progress in evolution. Furthermore, some atheists used the so-called lower races as a way to bridge the gap between

[108] Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 69; Warren, *American Freethought*, 119.
[109] See for example Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, 105–7; Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic*, 97–8.
[110] David Tribe, *100 Years of Freethought* (London: Elek, 1967).

humans and apes or to throw light on the early history of civilized humans. In these cases, it was useful to emphasize the degradation and primitiveness of the lower races.

The first two chapters seem to offer support for the "Race-Secularization Thesis," in that the godless doctrines of polygenesis and Darwinism opened the way for racialist thinking. The next chapters, however, discuss how freethinkers considered non-white people in practice. The third chapter, "Images of Savagery," examines atheists' views of non-white "savages" in Africa, the Americas, and Australasia. While such people were generally thought to be at a lower level on the civilizational and racial hierarchy, atheists believed there were many virtues to be found in these societies, particularly their egalitarianism and their simple rationality that seemed to immunize them against the claims of Christian missionaries. It was because freethinkers' societies were so bound up with Christianity that they were skeptical of missionary and imperial activity in these societies. Indeed, in some ways, atheists and freethinkers identified with these people, who were subject, like atheists, to a dominant Christian power.

The fourth chapter, "The Civilizations of the East," carries on in a similar theme as it examines civilizations in India, China, and Japan. As with "savage" societies, these civilizations contained many virtues in contrast to freethinkers' own societies. For one thing, they possessed a long history with ancient religious traditions that seemed to freethinkers to be preferable to Christianity. Furthermore, these religions, in particular those in China and Japan, in many ways seemed to be secular already. This was one reason that freethought found fertile ground in these countries, something freethinkers continually trumpeted as a sign of their creed's universal appeal. As with "savage" societies, freethinkers were skeptical about Western incursion into these countries. This respect for Chinese society also led many, though not all, freethinkers to oppose the movement to ban Chinese immigration into the United States.

Continuing on the topic of racial issues in the United States, the fifth chapter, "The Fate of Black Americans After the Civil War," examines white atheists' views of black Americans. White freethinkers offered various caricatures of blacks, depicting them as suffering slaves, irrationally religious, or degraded criminals, usually as a way as to critique Christianity. But despite these frequent caricatures, a more serious discourse among white freethinkers existed, which condemned segregation, lynching, discrimination, and violations of civil rights. Many white freethinkers, while admitting blacks were at present in an inferior position, believed that justice demanded blacks be given equal opportunities to prove themselves. Such an examination

of practical issues of race strikes a blow to the "Race-Secularization Thesis": while freethinkers might accept a theoretical inequality among races, when these issues were considered practically freethinkers often emerged as advocates of the rights of non-white people, in contrast to many of their Christian contemporaries.

The sixth and final chapter, "Against Racialism," makes this point even more explicitly. The chapter discusses how some freethinkers, especially at the turn of the nineteenth century, contested ideas about race by using the language of science and reason. Environmentalist ideas that stressed the importance of circumstances in forming character offered ways to attack racial determinism. Freethinkers also drew upon the Darwinian perspective that showed all of humanity was one and rejected notions of timeless racial essences. Many atheists also challenged "race prejudice" as emotional and irrational and therefore contradictory to the atheist worldview which prided itself on using dispassionate reason as a guide above all else. The reaction against "race prejudice" among atheists was not coincidental, but a natural outgrowth of their worldview. The culmination of the chapter is the 1911 Universal Races Congress, held in London. Freethinkers played a crucial role as organizers of the congress and speakers against ideas of racial prejudice and determinism.

The dissertation therefore reveals the diverse ways freethinkers have engaged with racial issues. The ensuing chapters will demonstrate how atheists' racial views were shaped by their irreligious worldview. I contend that their scientific and rationalist position made them skeptical of racialist thought. Furthermore, their marginal position within their own societies enhanced this skepticism and forced them to examine the dominant racial discourse from the perspective of outsiders. The dissertation will ultimately suggest that the "Race-Secularization Thesis" is not tenable. It is true that atheists' worldview led some to accept or justify racialist ideas, but this same worldview also provided the tools with which to critique and reject racialism.

# CHAPTER 1

## ATHEISM AND POLYGENESIS

As we saw in the introduction, the emergence of the heretical doctrine of polygenesis – the idea that the various races of humanity had multiple origins instead of a single origin as in the Christian doctrine of monogenesis – was a key plank in the "Race-Secularization Thesis." The theory of monogenesis, many historians thought, inhibited the racialism inherent in polygenesis through its defence of the common ancestry of the entire human race. Polygenesis was, almost by definition, supportive of a racialist viewpoint, but it had theological implications as well. If human races had separate origins, this would contradict the Genesis account that all humans descended from Adam and Eve and would call into question the veracity of the Bible. Even worse, if all humans did not descend from Adam, then certain groups would not inherit his Original Sin, meaning Jesus's atonement would not apply to them.

The theory of polygenesis was conceived soon after the European discovery of the American continents and the previously unknown people who lived there. Since the Bible was silent about these mysterious people, various authors – the most important being Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676) – rejected the orthodox view and instead speculated that there must have been men who existed alongside or before Adam.[1] It seemed implausible to polygenists that such widely variant races could have descended from only one pair of humans in such a short time span, less than 6,000 years. While early modern polygenists primarily aimed at reformulating the Christian story, in the nineteenth century, racial scientists in Britain and the United States established the doctrine of polygenesis as central to the nascent discipline of anthropology. These thinkers used the language of science as they described and classified races. While the issue of humanity's origin still had theological implications, clarifying the origin of various racial groups increasingly

[1] On the development of polygenesis in the early modern period, see Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work, and Influence* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1987); chapters three and four of Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); chapters one to three of David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

fell under the domain of science. Advocates of monogenesis, by far the majority, believed that the differences between races came about through gradual change and were, at least in theory, ultimately superficial since everyone was related by their descent from Adam and Eve. The promise of salvation was open to all humans, regardless of their race. Advocates of polygenesis, however, saw racial differences as permanent and unbridgeable. This allowed for the classification of races into superior and inferior groups, although monogenists did this as well. While the monogenists were typically motivated by their strong faith in Christianity, the polygenists were comparatively hostile to orthodox Christianity and many came to use their theory as a means to harass Christians.

While historians have discussed the development of polygenist thought, as we saw in the introduction, the use of polygenesis by freethinkers is virtually unknown in the literature. Given the destabilizing potential of polygenesis to the Christian story, many freethinkers and atheists seized upon the arguments made by polygenists as a way to attack Christianity. One way to do this was to emphasize Christianity's scientific backwardness in the face of what seemed to be cutting edge science. While Christians clung to outdated theories of monogenesis, freethinkers saw themselves as fearlessly pursuing research that demonstrated the fact of polygenesis. Charles Bradlaugh, the leading British atheist in the nineteenth century, particularly drew upon polygenesis as a way to undermine the entire Christian story. It was for these reasons that he and many other atheists closely followed the work of leading polygenist anthropologists, in particular Josiah Nott from the United States and James Hunt and the Anthropological Society in Britain. This chapter will describe first the development of anthropology in the United States, then Britain, and in turn will show how freethinkers responded to each. Finally, I will show how freethinkers harnessed polygenesis against Christianity.

**American School of Anthropology**

Polygenesis first found a scientific basis in the United States. Samuel Morton, a Philadelphia physician and anatomy professor, played a central role in establishing anthropology in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. His work was based chiefly on his collection of crania – the largest in the world – obtained from his many foreign contacts. Morton carefully classified and measured the skulls to demonstrate the diversity and permanence of racial

types.[2] Morton was raised as a Quaker and was less outspokenly anticlerical than his polygenist colleagues. Still, he frequently clashed with the Reverend John Bachman, the chief American monogenist, whom Morton dismissively called his "clerical adversary."[3] Stephen J. Gould describes Morton as "the data analyst," while Louis Agassiz, the famous Swiss scientist, was "the theorist" of American polygenesis.[4] Agassiz, known for his work establishing that the world had passed through an ice age, moved to America in 1846 and later became a professor at Harvard. He declared his support for the polygenist position in an 1850 article – a major coup for the polygenist camp, given Agassiz's reputation as one of the world's leading scientists.[5] Like Morton, Agassiz attempted to square his science with the Bible and argued that a diversity of origin for human races did not contradict the ultimate unity of mankind.[6] He closed his 1850 article by saying, "[w]e hope these remarks will not be considered as attacks upon the Mosaic record. We have felt keenly the injustice and unkindness of the charges that have so represented some of our former remarks."[7]

Following the death of Morton in 1851, the torch of polygenism was passed to Josiah Nott, a physician who was born in South Carolina but spent most of his adult life in Mobile, Alabama. Nott, along with George Gliddon, an English-born American consul in Egypt and one of Morton's foreign contacts, produced the "most systematic statement" of American polygenesis, *Types of Mankind* (1854).[8] Both men were alert to the heretical implications of polygenesis, but unlike their mentors Agassiz and Morton, they relished tangling with the clergy, an activity they described as "parson skinning."[9] Nott's negative attitude toward religion formed while he was a young man. Nott's father was probably nonreligious, though his mother was a Scots Presbyterian.[10] While a student at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), Nott was exposed to the views of Thomas Cooper, an English freethinker and the

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[2] William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 28–33.
[3] Ibid., 132.
[4] Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 42.
[5] Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 100–12.
[6] Louis Agassiz, *The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races: (from the Christian Examiner for July, 1850)* (Boston, 1850), 2.
[7] Ibid., 35.
[8] Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 5.
[9] Quoted in Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, New Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.
[10] Reginald Horsman, *Josiah Nott of Mobile: Southerner, Physician, and Racial Theorist* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 17.

college's president. Cooper frequently clashed with the state's clergy over his unorthodox religious views, but the student body rallied behind him. Attempts to remove him through the 1820s and 1830s failed, perhaps because Cooper's support for slavery and states' rights accorded with the prevailing views in the state, but Cooper resigned of his own volition in 1833 as enrolment at the college was declining.[11] The influence of Cooper's unorthodox religious views coupled with his racial views must have been substantial to the young Nott. As John Bachman, one of Nott's primary opponents, testified, "[t]he 'heresies' of Dr. Cooper, promulgated at the South-Carolina College, have left deep traces on the minds of the succeeding generation […]."[12] Nott's brother, Henry, also got into trouble with the state's clergy. He became a professor at South Carolina College and, much like Cooper, attracted their ire for his freethinking views.[13] It is likely that the freethinking spirit gained from his father and the battles of Cooper and his brother with the clergy influenced Nott's own antipathy toward religion. Later in life, Nott attended the Episcopal Church in Mobile at the urging of his wife, but a fellow physician's wife noted that in fact Nott was "a disbeliever in religion."[14]

Nott began making a name for himself by speaking on racial topics in the 1840s, arguing that the evidence of diverse races dating from the ancient Egyptian monuments, the sterility – or at least reduced fertility – of racial hybrids, and the vast anatomical and mental differences between races all suggested separate origins. It is far from clear, however, whether his primary aim in advancing these views was to justify white superiority or to diminish the authority of the Bible. In his early lectures, Nott took pains to convince the audience that while his scientific views on race seemed to conflict with the Bible, in fact, "[t]he words and works of God, if *properly understood*, can never be opposed to each other – they are two streams which flow the from the same pure fountain, and must at last mingle in the great sea of truth."[15] Nott denied that he wished to generate religious controversy in his lectures about race, but insisted his goal was to

[11] Ibid., 38–9; on Cooper's involvement in the freethought movement, see Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 224–5.
[12] John Bachman, *A Notice of the "Types of Mankind," with an Examination of the Charges Contained in the Biography of Dr. Morton, Published by Nott and Gliddon* (Charleston: James, Williams and Gitsinger, 1854), 35.
[13] Horsman, *Josiah Nott*, 39–41.
[14] Quoted in ibid., 61.
[15] Josiah Nott, *Two Lectures, on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races* (Mobile: Dade and Thompson, 1844), 5.

merely ensure the Bible was not used as an authority on mankind's origins.[16] Nott was influenced by the emerging biblical criticism of Germany, most prominently David Strauss, but also cited leading Unitarian theologians from New England, like William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Andrews Norton, to make his case that a literal reading of Genesis could not be justified.[17] In these lectures Nott began to form the basis of his arguments about the origins of the human races, but he seemed mostly concerned with stripping away the unjustified claims made by the Scriptures, and thereby "restoring the texts to their original purity […]."[18]

As Nott's prominence increased, he became acquainted with Gliddon, and together they produced *Types of Mankind*, a work dedicated to their mentor, Morton, and one that quickly became a bestseller. The book's first half, written by Nott, described and classified the various races, while the second, by Gliddon, analyzed the book of Genesis and argued that it only referred to a small group within Palestine, rather than all of humanity. Over nearly 800 pages drawing together evidence from archaeology, Egyptology, comparative anatomy, biblical exegesis, and other fields, the authors reaffirmed the conclusion that the races did not descend from a single pair, but were separately created to suit their individual environments. The work highlighted the inferiority of non-white people, even while Nott and Gliddon argued "every true philanthropist must admit that no race has a right to enslave or oppress the weaker." Even if this were true, any changes in institutions "should be guided […] by experience, sound judgment, and real charity."[19] Such "experience" and "sound judgment" might of course mean that the abolition of slavery might only take place in the very distant future, if ever. Indeed, Nott himself was a slave-owner: an 1860 census showing he owned ten slaves, a large number for someone who lived in the city.[20]

Like in Nott's other works, Nott and Gliddon were concerned to show their arguments did not contradict the truths of religion; rather it was the monogenist account that contradicted Scripture. They wrote that "the Bible really gives no history of all the races of Men, and but a

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[16] Josiah Nott, *Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man: Delivered by Invitation, from the Chair of Political Economy, Etc., of the Louisiana University* (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1849), 7.
[17] Ibid., 16.
[18] Ibid., 15.
[19] Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: Lippincort, Grambo & Co., 1854), 52.
[20] Horsman, *Josiah Nott*, 258.

meagre account of one."[21] The one, in this case, was the Caucasian race. Monogenists, Nott and Gliddon argued, knew their arguments were on their last legs and were consequently becoming desperate and resorting to absurd and unscientific arguments, like "the old hypothesis of a miraculous change of one race into many at the Tower of Babel!"[22] The monogenist account was therefore contradicted both by science and a close examination of the biblical text. Yet even common sense seemed to deal a deathblow to the theory that all humans came from a single pair. After all, they asked, would it make sense for "the Almighty" to start with "one seed of grass" as a means of creating all the grass on the whole planet?[23]

While their polygenist arguments might be made compatible with Scripture, ultimately Nott and Gliddon were more interested in constructing an argument that championed the supremacy of scientific explanations over religious ones: "the diversity of races must be accepted by Science as a *fact*, independently of theology […]."[24] While they attempted to make their arguments "in the most respectful manner," they complained that their "opinions and motives have been misrepresented and vilified by self-constituted teachers of the Christian religion!"[25] Nott and Gliddon imagined the history of science as a progressive story of science triumphing over religion time and again. In his earlier lectures, Nott had mentioned the persecution that Galileo suffered due to his advocacy of heliocentrism.[26] Nott must have assigned himself, Gliddon, and his fellow polygenists a place in this larger narrative of scientists bravely resisting the bigoted dogma of the religious.

We have seen that Nott and Gliddon rejected the traditional Christian monogenist theory and wished to reform the Bible such that unsupportable portions no longer remained – but did this mean they were atheists? Contemporaries portrayed them as such. John Bachman, for example, argued that a preferable title for *Types of Mankind* might have been "Types of Infidelity."[27] While there is no doubt that the authors were hostile to the traditional Christian worldview, their writings were filled with references to a deity. Indeed, Nott and Gliddon grounded their whole enterprise on the belief that doing science would help humanity to

[21] Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, 55.
[22] Ibid., 57.
[23] Ibid., 73.
[24] Ibid., 56.
[25] Ibid., 61.
[26] Nott, *Natural History*, 3.
[27] Bachman, *A Notice of the "Types of Mankind,"* 5.

understand God's laws and that there need not be a contradiction between religion and science. As Nott wrote:

> Man can *invent* nothing in science or religion but falsehood; and all the truths which he *discovers* are but facts or laws which have emanated from the Creator. All science, therefore, may be regarded as revelation from HIM; and although newly-discovered laws, or facts, in nature, may conflict with religious *errors*, which have been written and preached for centuries, they never can conflict with religious truth. There must be harmony between the works and the words of the Almighty, and wherever they *seem* to conflict, the discord has been produced by the ignorance or wickedness of man.[28]

Such references to a deity seem to refute the idea that these polygenists were atheists. While this language of course does not necessitate a belief in the Christian God, their assertion about the existence of some kind of deity clearly contradicts an atheistic viewpoint. Nonetheless, it is possible that they were using such language metaphorically or even disingenuously as a way to salvage respectability for their otherwise heretical views. Whatever their views on the existence of God, they certainly loathed the clergy, especially those who seemed to defend unsubstantiated biblical claims that properly fell under the domain of science.

This was why freethinkers considered proponents of the American School as fellow combatants in the war against Christianity. Freethought periodicals claimed Louis Agassiz as a freethinker, despite his professed Christianity. His name was trotted out by freethinkers to show that they kept abreast of the latest science, which seemed to contradict orthodox readings of Genesis.[29] When Agassiz repudiated Darwinism in favour of a universe guided by "an intelligent conscious power", however, freethinkers were less charitable: an author in the *Boston Investigator* wrote, "Prof. Agassiz, with all his scientific attainment, is not one of those independent men who have the courage to proclaim new views which differ from those of the majority and from the Bible."[30]

Nott and Gliddon's work also enjoyed a positive reception in the atheist press. The *Reasoner* – edited by the leading secularist of the time, George Holyoake – gave a favourable review to *Types of Mankind*, a "large and valuable volume". The author of the review,

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[28] Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, 61. Emphasis in original.
[29] "Unity of the Homo Race – An Error," *Boston Investigator*, no. 27 (November 3, 1852): 2; F.H.M., "The True Relations of the Human Races," *Boston Investigator*, no. 2 (May 2, 1860): 1; "Not All from One Pair," *Boston Investigator*, no. 13 (July 31, 1867): 101; P.R.J., "Agassiz," *The Truth Seeker* 2, no. 10 (January 15, 1875): 9.
[30] "Professor Agassiz," *Boston Investigator*, no. 12 (July 16, 1873): 6.

presumably Holyoake, declared that the work "contains passages of great interest to the freethought reader" and "is written with a manly, scientific independence of scripture." The book showed that philanthropists and statesmen must not ignore "the truths of ethnology, which lie at the root of all progress."[31] The reviewer was less convinced, however, about Nott and Gliddon's argument about the inferiority of blacks:

> We are not competent to decide what truth there is in the physical inferiority ascribed to the negro, but we are quite sure there are sufficient moral facts known about the race, to demand that they should have the same chance as the whites, and we have no confidence in any theory which would deny them this full freedom.

Despite this hesitation about the work's political implications, the reviewer hoped that it "will find universal readers."[32] The *Boston Investigator* likewise reprinted a review of the work from the *New York Evening Post*. "This work", the review explained, "is destined to create something of a commotion in the religious world. The idea of the unity of the race of man is totally discarded by the authors, one and all."[33] The *Boston Investigator* also featured an excerpt from *Types of Mankind* in another issue that rejected the correlation between skin colour and climate.[34]

John Watts, the first editor of the *National Reformer*, was similarly influenced by Nott and Gliddon. In one case, he listed them alongside the giants of nineteenth-century science, like Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, and T.H. Huxley. The work of these men, to Watts, contained "sufficient facts to justify the assertion that man existed on this earth many centuries prior to the 6,000 years of Genesis."[35] He even stated that "[m]any of those facts recorded by Sir Charles Lyell in his work now under consideration were to be found years ago in that excellent volume already alluded to – 'Nott and Gliddon's Types of Mankind.'"[36] Indeed, Watts relied upon the American polygenists to refute the idea "that all the various races in existence have proceeded from Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve."[37] Watts also cited a letter from Morton to Nott in which Morton explained how a fear of offending the clergy made him hesitate to publish his views.[38] The

[31] "Books of the Day," *The Reasoner* 18, no. 450 (1855): 6.
[32] Ibid.
[33] "A Man Before Adam," *Boston Investigator*, no. 1 (May 3, 1854): 2.
[34] "Climate Not the Cause of Color," *Boston Investigator*, no. 11 (July 8, 1857): 4.
[35] John Watts, "The Origin of Man," *National Reformer*, no. 244 (January 15, 1865): 42.
[36] Ibid., 43.
[37] John Watts, "The Origin of Man (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 245 (January 22, 1865): 57.
[38] Ibid., 58.

*National Reformer* also included excerpts from the *Types of Mankind* in 1866 to show the division between theological and scientific approaches to questions about, for example, the origins of mankind.[39] Even decades after the publication of *Types of Mankind*, the work was still used to support freethought arguments. To show how "the human race has descended from at least five pairs of original progenitors", in contradiction to the biblical story, in 1879 Kersey Graves recommended *Types of Mankind*, which was "compiled from the writings of the ablest naturalists of the age."[40] In 1888, the *Boston Investigator* reprinted an article that disputed the universality of religious belief with reference to *Types of Mankind*.[41] All of this demonstrates the enduring influence of Nott and Gliddon's work even late in the nineteenth century and how freethinkers sought to align themselves with scientific provocateurs who challenged the Genesis story.

**Anthropological Society of London**

The American School was not the only source of polygenist thought for atheists: the Anthropological Society of London was similarly influential. Learned societies established to study anthropology – and other nascent disciplines – sprung up in the nineteenth century, the first being the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris formed by Paul Broca in 1859. This group inspired the formation of a similar society, the Anthropological Society of London (ASL), in 1863. Led by James Hunt, the ASL was a breakaway from the Ethnological Society of London (ESL), the traditional stronghold of monogenesis and humanitarianism. Hunt instead wished to promote his own polygenist ideas that demonstrated the inferiority of non-white people in an arena free from religious dogma.[42]

Hunt's racial ideas were strongly influenced by Robert Knox, a promising Edinburgh anatomist who was disgraced by unknowingly accepting bodies of murder victims for his anatomy classes. Knox initially enjoyed a thriving career, but after the scandal – though officially exonerated of any wrongdoing – he became unemployable.[43] Turning to racial thought, he produced a polemical tract, *The Races of Men* (1850), which argued that race was the key to

[39] "Ethnology," *National Reformer*, no. 316 (June 3, 1866): 346.
[40] Kersey Graves, *The Bible of Bibles; Or, Twenty-Seven "Divine Revelations,"* 4th ed. (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1879), 291.
[41] "The God Idea," *Boston Investigator*, no. 14 (July 11, 1888): 5.
[42] George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 247–54.
[43] Ibid., 64.

understanding all of human history. In his oft-quoted phrase: "Race is everything: literature, science, art – in a word, civilization, depends on it."[44] Perhaps reflecting the trajectory of his own life, Knox's theories were also deeply pessimistic and rejected "all theories of human progress […]."[45] Like many other polygenists, Knox was proudly heretical, declaring the "Jewish chronology" to be "worthless" and the Bible "no more history than it is a work of science."[46] But like the American polygenists, Knox seemed to believe in some kind of deity. For him, a "great creative Power" was clearly at work in nature, though he mocked those who believed in an anthropomorphic conception of God.[47] For example, these people called "fossil remains […] 'Foot-prints of the Creator,' as if the creative Power had feet and hands."[48]

Because of his radical science and his disregard for orthodoxy, Knox's work appealed to freethinkers. Autonomos, a pseudonymous contributor to the *National Reformer*, published a number of lengthy excerpts of Knox's work, with his own additional notes. Three excerpts, "respectfully dedicated [by Autonomos] to theologians in general", discussed the racial character of the Jews.[49] In another series of excerpts, eight in total, Autonomos used Knox's racial views as a way to critique colonialism. Rather than providing support for European intervention against non-white people, Knox's theories actually intended to discourage these kinds of interventions by putting forth a racial relativist argument. As Autonomos explained, if the leaders of British society "could only get a little Anthropology drilled into them […] there might be some faint rational prospect of the arrival of that millennium when men will form a happy family respecting each others [sic] various physical, mental, and moral distinctions […]."[50]

Nonetheless, the basic assumption of Knox's followers in the ASL was that non-white people were inferior, and, while their president James Hunt sought to maintain religious

[44] Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (London: Henry Renshaw, 1850), v.
[45] Ibid., 27.
[46] Ibid., 384.
[47] Ibid., 386.
[48] Ibid., 477.
[49] Autonomos, "Who Are the Jews?," *National Reformer*, no. 265 (May 12, 1867): 293–4; Autonomos, "Who Are the Jews? (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 366 (May 19, 1867): 314–5; Autonomos, "Who Are the Jews? (3)," *National Reformer*, no. 367 (May 26, 1867): 322–4.
[50] Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (8)," *National Reformer*, no. 377 (August 4, 1867): 70; The whole series is Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa," *National Reformer*, no. 369 (June 9, 1867): 362–63; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 370 (June 16, 1867): 373; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (3)," *National Reformer*, no. 371 (June 23, 1867): 394–95; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (4)," *National Reformer*, no. 372 (June 30, 1867): 407; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (5)," *National Reformer*, no. 373 (July 7, 1867): 5–7; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (6)," *National Reformer*, no. 374 (July 14, 1867): 20–22; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (7)," *National Reformer*, no. 375 (July 21, 1867): 37–39; Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (8)," 69–71.

neutrality in public, their work often took on an anti-religious character. Hunt's religion is difficult to determine. In his early speeches to the society, Hunt focused on the need to study man dispassionately, while "be[ing] careful never to attack the religious conviction of any one."[51] Several years later, however, he lashed out at the society's opponents, specifically "persons suffering from […] the religious mania", which Hunt deemed incurable.[52] John Beddoe, another member of the ASL, noted Hunt's "skepticism of religion."[53] The irreligious views of two other leading members of the ASL, Richard Burton and Winwood Reade, serve to further indicate the group's iconoclastic character. Burton, the African explorer, polyglot, and translator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, was unconvinced of any religion's claim to absolute truth. Perhaps his most definitive religious statement came in his 1880 book-length poem, *The Kasîdah*, which was written in the voice of a Sufi poet and presented criticisms of religious dogma. Burton's biographer Dane Kennedy concludes, "*The Kasîdah*, in short, is the testament of a man who knows there is no God."[54] Reade meanwhile strove to gain fame and recognition by embarking on three exploration missions in West Africa as well as authoring a number of fiction and non-fiction books before an untimely death at age 36. Reade wanted to cultivate an image of himself as a bohemian man of science, attaching himself to the ASL and later supplying travel data to Charles Darwin that would be used in Darwin's *The Descent of Man*.[55] Reade was a proud iconoclast and, in his masterwork, *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), pithily summed up his religious views this way: "Supernatural Christianity is false. God-worship is idolatry. Prayer is useless. The soul is not immortal. There are no rewards and there are no punishments in a future state."[56] The examples of Reade and Burton further highlight the irreverent and irreligious character of the ASL.

It was no surprise then that the ASL attracted other irreligious thinkers. While Felix Driver states that Charles Bradlaugh – the future atheist leader – was an early member of the Anthropological Society and Dane Kennedy says he was a member of the Cannibal Club (the

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[51] James Hunt, "Introductory Address on the Study of Anthropology," *Anthropological Review* 1, no. 1 (May 1863): 19.
[52] James Hunt, "The President's Address," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 5 (1867): lix.
[53] Quoted in Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), 138.
[54] Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1999.
[55] On Reade's life, see chapter five of Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).
[56] Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Trubner & Co., 1872), 523.

Society's social club), neither cite where they got their information, and Bradlaugh is not listed in the Royal Anthropological Institute's database of individuals involved in the ASL.[57] Nonetheless, Bradlaugh at least knew James Hunt and referred to him as "my friend."[58] Moncure Conway, minister of the freethought South Place Chapel in London, was a member of the ASL however. He was sought out for his knowledge of American slavery, having been born in Virginia, yet he did not remain a member for long, as he quickly "found that it was led by a few ingenious gentlemen whose chief interest was to foster contempt of the negro."[59] Conway hoped to promote his own anti-slavery viewpoint in the ASL, but without success. "[Thomas Henry] Huxley pointed out to me privately the fallacies of Hunt," Conway explained, "and I made speeches in the Anthropological Society, but it became plain to me that anti-slavery sentiment in England was by no means as deep as I had supposed."[60] The split between the ASL and the ESL would ultimately not last, and the death of James Hunt in 1869 smoothed the path for the merger of two societies under the name of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1871.[61] Conway later rejoined the Anthropological Institute, having grown increasingly interested in the cultural anthropology of religion.[62]

Bradlaugh, given his connection with Hunt, was knowledgeable about the development of the polygenist theory. In *Heresy: Its Utility and Morality* (1882), Bradlaugh included Isaac La Peyrère among his list of famous heretics, explaining that while the Catholic Church forced him to recant his polygenist views, "the opinions he recanted are now amongst common truths."[63] Like Nott, Bradlaugh viewed history as the story of science's inevitable triumph over religion. While heretics were condemned in their own day, "[w]ith few exceptions, the heretics of one generation become the revered saints of a period less than twenty generations later."[64] The ASL was, to Bradlaugh, a prominent example of a modern heresy standing up to Christian bigotry in

[57] Driver, *Geography Militant*, 99; Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 169–70.
[58] Charles Bradlaugh, *The Freethinker's Text-Book, Part I. Man; Whence and How? Or, Revealed and Real Science in Conflict* (London: Charles Watts, 1876), 38.
[59] Moncure Conway, *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences*, vol. 2 (London and Paris: Cassell and Company, 1904), 1.
[60] Ibid., 2:1–2.
[61] Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology*, 254–6.
[62] Conway, *Autobiography*, 2:303.
[63] Charles Bradlaugh, *Heresy: Its Utility and Morality; a Plea and a Justification* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1882), 27.
[64] Ibid., 3.

search of the truth. Bradlaugh's inclusion of the Society in his history tells us about his view of the importance of anthropology, as well as the Society's irreligious character:

> Against the late Anthropological Society charges of Atheism were freely levelled; and although such a charge does not seem justified by any reports of their meetings, or by their printed publications, it is clear that not only out of doors, but even amongst their own circle, it was felt that their researches conflicted seriously with the Hebrew writ. The Society was preached against and prayed against until it collapsed; and yet it was simply a society for discovering everything possible about man, prehistoric as well as modern. It had, however, an unpardonable vice in the eyes of the orthodox – it encouraged the utterance of facts without regard to their effects on faiths.[65]

The influence of the Anthropological and Ethnological Societies extended to other freethinkers. Freethought periodicals regularly reported on news from these societies. An advertisement for the *Ethnological Journal* appeared in the *Reasoner*,[66] and the *Boston Investigator* reported positively on the formation of the ASL, which was formed, in their words "to prove that all foreign missionary operations not only do no good, but inflict a positive injury on mankind."[67] In another case, the *National Reformer* reported on a speech made in 1865 by John Crawfurd, the president of the ESL, that demonstrated the "mental inferiority" of blacks.[68] The article also recorded the reactions by other attendees including Luke Burke and John Lubbock, who endorsed Crawfurd's conclusions.[69] The *National Reformer* also reprinted, on its front page, James Hunt's farewell speech to the ASL in 1867.[70] While Bradlaugh was friendly with Hunt, he took issue with Hunt's criticism of John Stuart Mill and other utilitarians – heroes to most atheists. Such criticisms, Bradlaugh felt, were "utterly unjustifiable" and unwise given that the Society itself faced unfair criticism.[71]

But Hunt's attack on the utilitarians was not enough to sour the relationship with freethinkers. In another edition of the *National Reformer*, J.P. Adams noted that the remarks of Hunt at the 1867 Anthropological Conference in Dundee "comprise so much that recommends itself to the approval of Freethinkers with respect to the mode in which all controversy should be

[65] Ibid., 6.
[66] *The Reasoner* 5, no. 105 (1848): 16.
[67] "Heathen and Civilized," *Boston Investigator*, no. 7 (June 21, 1865): 52.
[68] G.E.H., "The Ethnological Society," *National Reformer*, no. 293 (December 24, 1865): 822.
[69] Ibid., 823.
[70] "Modern Scientific Theories," *National Reformer*, no. 358 (March 24, 1867): 177.
[71] Ibid., 178.

conducted, that we think them entitled to a place in the pages of the *N. R.*" Adams argued that Hunt and the *National Reformer* were equally placed "under a sort of scientific ban" for questioning central dogmas within the society.[72] Another author applauded the ASL as "truly scientific" and praised their willingness to discuss "every shade of thought relating to the physical and (so-called) moral and mental natures of man […]."[73] Many freethinkers saw their goals as overlapping with the ASL, since both groups struggled to transmit their views against the protests of the religious.

As further evidence of the influence of anthropology on freethinkers, C. Carter Blake, a member of the ASL, became a frequent writer for the *National Reformer* in the 1870s and 80s. Here he portrayed himself and his fellow anthropologists as fearless men of science, establishing facts about the world "without any particular assistance from text-clippers."[74] Blake rejected the Christian criticism that it was cruel of "the scientific man" to regard "the negro as a separate species". In response, he recounted a story of a missionary torturing and cutting the eyelids off of a black man in Central America who was accused of theft:

> It is difficult to solve who is the real vilifier of the savage, the scientific man, who asserts mere physiological facts, or the philanthropist, who, on the assumption that the criminal under his jurisdiction is made in the image of the Creator, proceeds deliberately to skin his eyelids.[75]

Blake was clearly influenced by Robert Knox, "a manful exponent of the idea that the races of man were diverse, and that there were probably as many different points of origin as races."[76] Blake, though a polygenist, believed that both monogenesis and polygenesis appeared bad for orthodoxy: "Monogeny goes with long chronology alone. Polygeny is the logical outcome of the short chronologists."[77] In other words, monogenesis worked only if the earth were much older than 6,000 years, yet if one held to a short chronology, the only possible explanation for the diversity of races was polygenesis. Blake's articles also contained his views on other racial issues

[72] J.P. Adams, "The Anthropologists and Their Opponents," *National Reformer*, no. 390 (November 3, 1867): 276.
[73] Delta, "Anthropology in England," *National Reformer*, no. 665 (February 9, 1873): 84.
[74] C. Carter Blake, "Anthropology," *National Reformer*, no. 1021 (October 12, 1879): 659.
[75] Ibid.
[76] C. Carter Blake, "Anthropology," *National Reformer*, no. 1024 (November 2, 1879): 710.
[77] Blake, "Anthropology," October 12, 1879, 660.

that did not directly involve religious criticism, including the futility of racial intermixture,[78] the inferiority of blacks,[79] and the division of races within Europe.[80]

But not every freethinker was favourable to the goals of the ASL. The English radical and journalist, W.E. Adams, a frequent contributor to the *National Reformer*, was one of the chief opponents of slavery in the columns of the paper during the Civil War and routinely attacked members of the ASL for their support of slavery. Writing under the pseudonym "Caractacus," Adams criticized George Rayner Croxford, a member of the ASL, for saying in an earlier article that "Anthropology, as the science of man, denies that the negro can be accepted as a man and a brother." Adams replied, "Well, if the negro isn't a man, what is he, pray? Is he a fish, a reptile, or a wheelbarrow? Since he is neither a man nor a brother, perhaps Mr. Croxford will tell us to what part of animate or inanimate nature the negro belongs." Such a denial of common humanity, to Adams, served to justify slavery and the poor treatment of blacks.[81]

Nonetheless, the leading anthropologists in Britain and the US found their way into a dictionary of freethinkers compiled by the Scottish freethinker, Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, in 1889. The dictionary included anyone who "contributed in their generation to the *advance* of Freethought."[82] The entries were brief and in neutral, matter-of-fact language without any editorial comment. Both Hunt and Nott received entries,[83] and although neither Gliddon nor other leaders of the American school of anthropology received their own entries, the French polygenist and anthropologist, Paul Broca, was included.[84] Wheeler did not explicitly give his approval or disapproval of the subjects of his dictionary, but he clearly saw Hunt and Nott as belonging within the freethought fold. Freethinker J.N. Morean provided a similar though less exhaustive list to the *Boston Investigator* of "the great and good men who buckled on the armor to defend the principles which your paper advocates, of Universal Mental Liberty […]." This list included Samuel Morton and George Gliddon, but excluded Nott.[85]

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[78] Blake, "Anthropology," November 2, 1879, 711; C. Carter Blake, "Biblical Negroes," *National Reformer*, no. 1032 (December 28, 1879): 837.
[79] Blake, "Biblical Negroes," 837.
[80] C. Carter Blake, "Races in Western Europe," *National Reformer*, no. 1037 (February 1, 1880): 69–70.
[81] Caractacus, "Science and Slavery," *National Reformer*, no. 204 (April 9, 1864): 58.
[82] J.M. Wheeler, *A Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of All Ages and Nations* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889), vi.
[83] Ibid., 180, 240.
[84] Ibid., 54–5.
[85] J.N. Morean, "Original Communications," *Boston Investigator*, no. 26 (October 20, 1858): 1.

**The Uses of Polygenesis**

Given the influence of anthropologists on freethinkers, it was no surprise they were familiar with the arguments of polygenesis and its implications for the Genesis story. A number of atheistic authors around the middle of the century used polygenesis as an example of how Christian doctrines seemed to conflict with the obvious facts about reality.[86] John E. Remsburg, an American freethinker, used Christians' defence of monogenesis as a way to demonstrate their unscientific attitude in a 1907 work evaluating the Bible. As Remsburg explained, "[s]cience does not admit that man is the result of a divine creative act, that all the races have descended from a single pair, or that his existence here is confined to the brief period of sixty centuries."[87] Still, the dismissal of monogenesis received only a few lines in Remsburg's larger argument about how Christianity contradicted current scientific knowledge about the world, indicating it was not central to his case. The issue of unscientific Christian support for monogenesis made no appearance in John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Science and Religion* (1874), one of the classic works of the "conflict thesis" that saw science and religion as inevitably in conflict,[88] while Andrew Dickinson White's similar work, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), contains only a brief mention of La Peyrère.[89]

Charles Bradlaugh, however, was the atheist who most clearly grasped how polygenesis could be used against Christianity. As we have already seen, Bradlaugh was linked with James Hunt and the ASL. His library furthermore contained a copy of the eighth edition of *Types of Mankind*, as well as journals from the ASL, the ESL, and the Anthropological Institute.[90] His interest in anthropology was such that in the fall of 1881, he gave four lectures at the London Hall of Science on the subject, which were subsequently published in an 1882 pamphlet. Again,

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[86] Examples include "Human Genera and Species," *Boston Investigator*, no. 18 (September 8, 1841): 2; "What Men Believed in the Sixteenth Century, and What They Believe Now," *The Reasoner* 9, no. 205 (1850): 44; Robert Cooper, *The Infidel's Text-Book, Being the Substance of Thirteen Lectures on the Bible*, American Edition (Boston: J.P. Mendum, 1858), 209–10; J.S.H., "The Unity of the Human Race," *Boston Investigator*, no. 44 (February 24, 1858): 1; "Adam and Eve," *Boston Investigator*, no. 44 (February 22, 1860): 349.

[87] John E. Remsburg, *The Bible: I. Authenticity II. Credibility III. Morality* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1907), 283.

[88] John William Draper, *The History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1874).

[89] Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 255.

[90] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, ed., *Catalogue of the Library of the Late Charles Bradlaugh* (London: Mrs. H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1891), 69, 115, 116.

Bradlaugh gave Nott, Gliddon, Agassiz, and Hunt an important place in the development of anthropology.[91]

Nonetheless, biographers of Bradlaugh and historians of nineteenth-century freethought have paid no attention to Bradlaugh's racial thinking.[92] The only work which mentions Bradlaugh's use of polygenesis is Timothy Larsen's work on Victorians and the Bible, yet the discussion only occupied a paragraph and did not explore his connections to leading polygenist figures.[93] Three of Bradlaugh's works dealt with polygenesis. The first was *Were Adam and Eve Our First Parents?*, published in 1865 and later republished in 1888 as part of Bradlaugh's *Theological Essays*.[94] Bradlaugh returned to polygenist arguments in *The Freethinker's Text-Book, Part I. Man; Whence and How? or, Revealed and Real Science in Conflict*, published in 1876.[95] While both of these works contained detailed discussions of polygenesis, his *Genesis: Its Authorship and Authenticity* of 1882 – revised from his previous work, *The Bible: What It Is!* (1870) – also dealt with the topic.[96]

Bradlaugh saw the story of Adam as central to the biblical story. As he explained, "[t]he account of the Creation and Fall of Man" was "the foundation-stone of the Christian Church" and "if this stone be rotten, the superstructure cannot be stable." It was here that polygenesis played a part in disrupting the biblical story. If all humans did not trace their descent from Adam, but rather were members of separately created races, they would not share in his Original Sin. But then, Bradlaugh asked, "what becomes of the doctrine that Jesus came to redeem mankind from a sin committed by one who was not the common father of all humanity?" In other words, if one could cast doubt on the story of Adam, all of Christianity would come tumbling down as well. As Bradlaugh put it: "Reject Adam, and you cannot accept Jesus."[97] Central to Bradlaugh's argument was the existence of diverse and permanent races. Assuming that the world was 6,000 years old, as the orthodox Christian view did, it seemed inconceivable that the kind of human

[91] Charles Bradlaugh, *Anthropology* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1882), lecture 1, 1–2, 4.
[92] There is no discussion of Bradlaugh's racial thinking in David Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh M.P.* (London: Elek, 1971); Bryan Niblett, *Dare to Stand Alone: The Story of Charles Bradlaugh* (Oxford: Kramedart Press, 2010); or Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).
[93] Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86–7.
[94] Charles Bradlaugh, *Were Adam and Eve Our First Parents?* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1888).
[95] Bradlaugh, *Man; Whence and How?*
[96] Charles Bradlaugh, *Genesis: Its Authorship and Authenticity*, 3rd ed. (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1882).
[97] Bradlaugh, *Adam and Eve*, 8.

diversity seen in the world could have come about in such a short time. Bradlaugh used Louis Agassiz's idea of racial realms to explain how distinct races correlated with distinct plants and animals, all perfectly suited for their environments.[98] With such vast differences among humanity, Bradlaugh argued that these distinct races descended not from Adam and Eve but were "indigenous to their native soils, and climates[.]"[99]

Bradlaugh entertained the Christian hypothesis that members of all races, despite their vast differences, still descended from Adam. He quoted Nott to lay out the potential solutions to how these various races could have come to exist in the 6,000 years allotted by the short biblical chronology: "1st. A miracle or direct act of the Almighty, in changing one type into another. 2nd. The gradual action of physical causes, such as climate, food, mode of life, etc. 3rd. Congenital or accidental varieties."[100] The first option could be dismissed, to Bradlaugh and Nott, since the Bible did not mention a miraculous creation of the various races. To refute the second point, Bradlaugh again looked to Nott and Gliddon to supply evidence about the durability of racial types. The existence of ancient Egyptian statues that predated the biblical flood revealed that racial types within Egypt had been stable for at least 5,000 years. In addition, Bradlaugh, again on Nott's authority, argued that climate could not change one's physical features like skin colour. Sunburns, for example, could not be passed down to one's offspring and skin colour could not therefore change upon moving from one climate to another. Indeed, such a change of natural climates was harmful to individuals, as Bradlaugh argued: "The fact is, that while you don't bleach the color out of the dark-skinned African by placing him in London, you bleach the life out of him; and vice versa with the Englishman."[101] The third point that accidental changes – a white European giving birth to a black African, for example – could explain the presence of distinct races was, to Nott, too far-fetched to be taken seriously.[102]

Even if these objections could not be refuted, Bradlaugh believed that new research indicating the extended chronology of the earth provided a potent weapon against Adam's existence. Bradlaugh cited the research of Baron Bunsen, the Egyptologist, who argued that the Egyptians' own history extended the age of the earth to at least 22,000 years. In addition, geological and archaeological evidence put the earth at tens or even hundreds of thousands of

[98] Bradlaugh, *Man; Whence and How?*, 55.
[99] Bradlaugh, *Adam and Eve*, 3; see also Bradlaugh, *Genesis*, 238–9.
[100] Bradlaugh, *Adam and Eve*, 4; the quotation came from Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, 57.
[101] Bradlaugh, *Adam and Eve*, 4.
[102] Ibid., 5.

years old.[103] But Bradlaugh nonetheless continued to assert that even if the age of the earth were extended much further back in time than 6,000 years, evidence from the Egyptian monuments of the permanency of racial types shows that the races were distinct well into the distant past.[104] While Bradlaugh said that he was reluctant to weigh in on the controversy over whether man has one origin or many, he did give his own preference: "Personally I incline to favor the doctrine of a plurality of sources for the various types of the human race."[105]

Bradlaugh also engaged with some contemporary arguments from theologians that sought to harmonize the accounts in Genesis with the known facts of the world and dismissed their arguments as well. One example that Bradlaugh provided was the theory of Reverend H.S. Warleigh of the Society for Biblical Archaeology. Warleigh argued that a humanoid race of giants, called the Nephilim in the book of Genesis, existed before and alongside Adam. The existence of these Nephilim solved many problems including the question of whom Adam's son Cain married, the existence of ancient artifacts seemingly made by humans, and pagan chronologies that extended longer than those of the Bible.[106] But Bradlaugh ridiculed this interpretation. "If all the genus homo are descended from Adam," Bradlaugh wrote, "and if the Nephilim were not descended from Adam, then they were not human beings. If Cain married one of the females of the Nephilim, then he took his wife from amongst inferior animals."[107] Bradlaugh also mentioned the arguments of Reverend Robinson Thornton, the Vice President of the Christian-friendly Victoria Institute, who argued that the Bible seemed to leave open the possibility that some kind of beings, human or similar, might have existed before Adam.[108] Bradlaugh acknowledged that Thornton's view was more subtly phrased than Warleigh's (if not intentionally ambiguous), but was still an unsatisfactory explanation.

Bradlaugh presented a condensed version of this argument for polygenesis in an 1864 article in the *National Reformer*.[109] The article, however, was met by a stern rebuke from one reader named R. Newstead, who noted that Bradlaugh's arguments were "quite at variance with the great principles taught by Darwin in his work on the 'Origin of Species.'" This was because

[103] Ibid., 6–7.
[104] Ibid., 7.
[105] Ibid., 1.
[106] Bradlaugh, *Man; Whence and How?*, 82–4.
[107] Ibid., 84.
[108] Ibid., 84–5.
[109] Charles Bradlaugh, "Antiquity and Unity of Origin of the Human Race," *National Reformer*, no. 233 (October 29, 1864): 513–4.

"[i]f it is difficult to believe 'that climate, mode of life, and congenital or accidental' divergencies [sic] are capable of producing the different varieties of mankind, then how much more difficult to believe the same effects capable of developing man from the animal next in order to him[?]" In other words, if Bradlaugh could not imagine how humans could diversify, how could he imagine how whole species might become differentiated, as Darwin suggested? Newstead insisted that "the probabilities are, that mankind is descended from a single pair." But Newstead's defense of monogenesis was based purely on atheistic grounds. He rejected appeals to divine creation in favour of explanations in terms of natural laws. Newstead also attacked Nott's suggestion that there was never "a club-footed, cross-eyed, or six-fingered race" by arguing that in those examples the traits were not beneficial and therefore would not be selected for.[110] To Newstead then, Bradlaugh's arguments were contrary to Darwin's work and indeed to science. Rather than confronting Bradlaugh's naive racial views from a religious perspective, Newstead used his interpretation of Darwinism to refute Bradlaugh.

Bradlaugh never appeared to respond to Newstead's arguments directly, but his later discussions of polygenesis, particularly in *The Freethinker's Text-Book* (1876), touched on Darwin's theories. He admitted that his point was not to prove the polygenist account true, but rather to disprove the Genesis account of creation: "it is enough to show in antiquity such variations of human type as render impossible the hypothesis of a common origin in one pair less than 6,000 years ago."[111] But Bradlaugh did wade into a brief discussion of the scientific hypotheses for man's existence. He acknowledged that it was difficult to determine the origin of life and wrote that experiments about "spontaneous generation" had not yet been conclusive. Nonetheless, life

> can clearly be moulded, augmented, and diminished in its presentations. By artificial processes and modes of culture, varieties of vegetable and animal life may most certainly be produced, departing more or less from the parent stock. How far such varieties, so artificially created, can become permanent, or whether their permanency is possible, is an open question.[112]

[110] R. Newstead, "Unity of Origin of the Human Race," *National Reformer*, no. 235 (November 1864): 566.
[111] Bradlaugh, *Man; Whence and How?*, 80.
[112] Ibid., 65.

While Bradlaugh was reluctant to support Darwinism unconditionally, it was enough to simply refute the biblical chronology: "There is no burden on the Freethinker, who finds evidence to reject the Bible story of man, that he should adopt therefore without reservation the views of Mr. Charles Darwin or of Mr. Herbert Spencer."[113] Later in the work, Bradlaugh seemed slightly more inclined to accept evolution:

> The evolution of man from lower forms of life scarcely, as yet, takes rank as a scientific truth; it is rather a grand hypothesis, which, if verified, may throw light on many problems of existence, and is, at least, in analogy with the workings of nature, so far as we know them. When we first catch a glimpse of man, he is, as has been already shown, but a half-human animal dwelling in caves, disputing with his co-brutes for existence; we can trace him thence upwards to the civilised European; it seems reasonable, then, to trace him downwards also to the unintelligent life in its lowest forms, halting only when organic and inorganic blend together in the far-off yesterday.[114]

In 1882's *Genesis: Its Authorship and Authenticity*, Bradlaugh was even more positive about Darwinism, but conflated it with Lamarckianism by arguing that Darwin simply expanded on Lamarck's work.[115] Here he seemed to highlight how Darwinism could be a way to refute a short biblical chronology, but even then his Darwinism coexisted side-by-side with polygenesis in the same work.

Bradlaugh's acceptance of polygenesis appeared elsewhere as well. In an 1881 debate with Reverend James McCann, the two dealt with, among other things, necessitarianism, which Bradlaugh supported. When asked by McCann whether the doctrine of necessitarianism applied equally to humans as it did to vegetable life, Bradlaugh replied that he knew no breaks within life and therefore necessitarianism applied to all. But there was a difference between them,

> as is there a large difference between the Englishman and the Negro; between the Andaman and the Caucasian; and you have no right to talk of man as though man meant the same everywhere. You have no right to put it as though they were all on one level, on one plain. There are marked degrees of differing ability, and that which is possible in volition for the Negro on given conditions, and that which is possible

[113] Ibid., 87.
[114] Ibid., 92.
[115] Bradlaugh, *Genesis*, 292.

> for me on like conditions, are possibilities which are not the same, are possibilities which differ largely from each other.[116]

In this case, whites, with their presumably higher mental capacity, had a greater ability for volition – though Bradlaugh would not say free will – than blacks. McCann countered that "there is the same consciousness in the Negro as in the European."[117] While Bradlaugh again asserted the difference between the mental capacities of the races, the conversation moved on.[118] Nonetheless, the example demonstrates that Bradlaugh's polygenist racial thought informed his philosophical views as well.

Bradlaugh was not the only freethinker to exploit polygenist arguments. Both B.F. Underwood and Robert Ingersoll mentioned the evidence from the Egyptian monuments as ways to suggest the permanency of racial types and therefore to show the flaws of the Bible.[119] Less seriously was W.P. Ball, who poked fun at the racial ambiguity of the Bible. Accompanying his article was a drawing of Noah's supposed family, with each son representing a different race (see figure 1). He explained that since the popular belief was that Noah's three sons spawned the three races of humanity, perhaps the cartoon should have shown Noah "with a parti-colored face in squares or patches like a chess-board […]." The traditional view was, Ball noted, that the white race was the original, and the others were offshoots, but then, since the name Adam "signifies red earth, the Red Indians might fairly claim to be the representatives of the original stock made by God in his own image. In this case the white and black and yellow and brown races would alike be offshoots."[120] A cartoon by the *Truth Seeker* cartoonist, Watson Heston, titled "A Question for Theological Ethnologists," similarly illustrated the problem of polygenesis. It showed a variety of exaggerated racial caricatures and asked, since "God created man in his own image," "[w]hich is the image? After what images were the other fellows fashioned[?]" (See figure 2)[121]

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[116] James McCann and Charles Bradlaugh, *Secularism: Unphilosophical, Immoral, and Anti-Social. Verbatim Report of a Three Nights' Debate between the Rev. Dr. McCann and Charles Bradlaugh* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1881), 20–1.
[117] Ibid., 22.
[118] Ibid., 25.
[119] B.F. Underwood, *The Burgess-Underwood Debate: Commencing June 29, 1875, at Aylmer, Ontario, and Continuing Four Days* (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1876), 91; Robert Ingersoll, "Some Mistakes of Moses," lecture given in 1879, in Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 2 (New York: The Dresden Publishing Co., C.P. Farrell, 1902), 99–100.
[120] W.P. Ball, "Noah's Family; or Bible Evolution," *The Freethinker*, no. 167 (October 19, 1884): 335.
[121] Watson Heston, *The Freethinkers' Pictorial Text-Book* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1890), 123.

While these uses of polygenesis intended to be humorous, Arthur Moss's 1887 *Truth Seeker* article on the origins of man was more serious and drew from the polygenist arguments found in Bradlaugh's *The Freethinker's Text-Book*. Earlier parts of his article discussed archaeological and paleontological evidence of man's antiquity on the earth, but "[a]nthropological science is equally strong in its proof of the vast antiquity of man." Not only that, "it reveals the important fact that man is not of one type nor one race, but that there are at least eight realms with distinct types of man, and accompanying fauna and flora." The eight realms were those devised by Agassiz and listed in Bradlaugh's work.[122] Also like Bradlaugh and others, Moss pointed to evidence from Egypt about the permanence of racial difference, in addition to the fact that "for more than four thousand years the Chinese type has undergone no very important changes." But he also drew up evolutionary arguments, noting "that man is an evolution from lower forms […]."[123]

A rejoinder came from J.W. Grabill, who dismissed the idea that there were more than one species of humans by using scientific arguments, though he wrote from a Christian perspective. He drew upon Huxley, who said, "I cannot see any good ground whatever, or even any tenable sort of evidence, for believing that there are more than one species of man." Furthermore, the different varieties of man were no more different than the various breeds of horses, sheep, cows, or dogs, and cited James Cowles Prichard – the leading monogenist scientist in Britain – to show that these differences "may fairly be attributed to the difference of external circumstances […]." This led Grabill to the conclusions that all humans "sprang from one original pair". While Grabill drew on science, ultimately his views were religious and he admitted his belief that scientists confirmed the Mosaic account of Genesis.[124]

Moss shot back at Grabill by raising questions about the kind of man Adam was: "Was he Jew? Then I am not his descendant. Was he Chinese? Then I am not his descendant. Was he Hindoo? Then I am not his descendant. Of what color and type was Adam?" This was ultimately unknowable, "but it is certain that he could not hav [sic] combined in himself all the diverse characteristics of the numerous races of men now on the earth […]." Moss did not believe there were multiple species of humans, but reiterated his view that the diverse races could not have descended from a single pair in the biblical time frame, and doubted whether any "man of

[122] Arthur B. Moss, "The Age of Man," *The Truth Seeker* 14, no. 5 (January 29, 1887): 70.
[123] Ibid., 71.
[124] J.W. Grabill, "The Age of Man on the Earth," *The Truth Seeker* 14, no. 14 (April 2, 1887): 210.

science" would hold this view. He did however leave open the possibility that the races differentiated at the moment of evolution from a common ape ancestor.[125] Particularly telling about this exchange was that monogenesis and polygenesis were still being debated even in 1887 and that the racial arguments from early and mid nineteenth-century figures continued to be thought of as authoritative.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how atheists harnessed polygenist arguments as a weapon against Christianity. Polygenesis could show how Christians' belief in monogenesis was unscientific and stifled further research out of fear that this research might contradict the Bible. Even worse for Christians, if polygenesis were true, this would mean the entire narrative of Original Sin and the redemption of Jesus would collapse, as Bradlaugh argued. This was why freethinkers were so interested in the evidence presented by polygenist scientists like Josiah Nott, Robert Knox, and James Hunt. By drawing on these figures, freethinkers further demonstrated their own scientific credentials and allowed themselves to construct a story of religion and science in perpetual conflict, with the latter triumphing in the end.

But by using the polygenist argument, freethinkers put themselves in the awkward position of accepting the short chronology of the Bible. Monogenesis became much more plausible if the age of the earth was pushed back thousands or millions of years. By the middle of the nineteenth century, developments in archaeology and geology had begun to demonstrate just how old the earth was.[126] This research was naturally something atheists accepted since it too seemed to contradict the Genesis creation story. But this meant that atheists' polygenist arguments were often disingenuous because they only made sense if the earth were a few thousand years old. The story of descent from Adam could be countered both by recent geologic research and by polygenist arguments. Atheists often used both arguments, but the two contradicted one another. By the 1880s, many Anglicans and other Christian denominations had begun to take on board the insights from geology as well as from German biblical criticism,[127] which meant that after this time, freethinkers' polygenist arguments would have been even more superfluous. This is not to say that atheists' main argument against the story of Adam was

[125] Arthur B. Moss, "The Age of the Earth and Man," *The Truth Seeker* 14, no. 21 (May 21, 1887): 326.
[126] Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology*, 69–74.
[127] Larsen, *People of One Book*, 139.

polygenesis – most often their case was a logical or moral one – yet this strand of argument still cropped up frequently, even late in the century.

The findings here seem to offer support for the "Race-Secularization Thesis." Given the heretical and racialist implications of polygenesis, a link between secularization and racialism would seem clear. There is no question that using polygenesis to critique Christianity meant embracing racialism. However, it is another question whether this acceptance of polygenesis influenced atheists' views on racial issues in practice. In other words, would an acceptance of polygenesis lead to support for discriminatory policies or colonial domination of non-white peoples? Sometimes links can clearly be seen: for example, Secretary of State John C. Calhoun, from South Carolina, explicitly drew upon Samuel Morton's polygenist arguments to defend slavery against criticism from foreign diplomats.[128] Yet it is not clear among the atheists discussed here that their support for polygenesis in the context of the wider anti-Christian argument led them to support policies that oppressed non-white people. I will explore this issue in greater detail in chapters three to six. Before that, it is necessary to consider the ways in which the emergence of Darwinism contributed to the growth of racialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, the subject of the following chapter.

[128] Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 61–5.


Figure 1: "The Noah Family," *The Freethinker*, no. 167 (October 19, 1884). Photographed at Conway Hall Library.

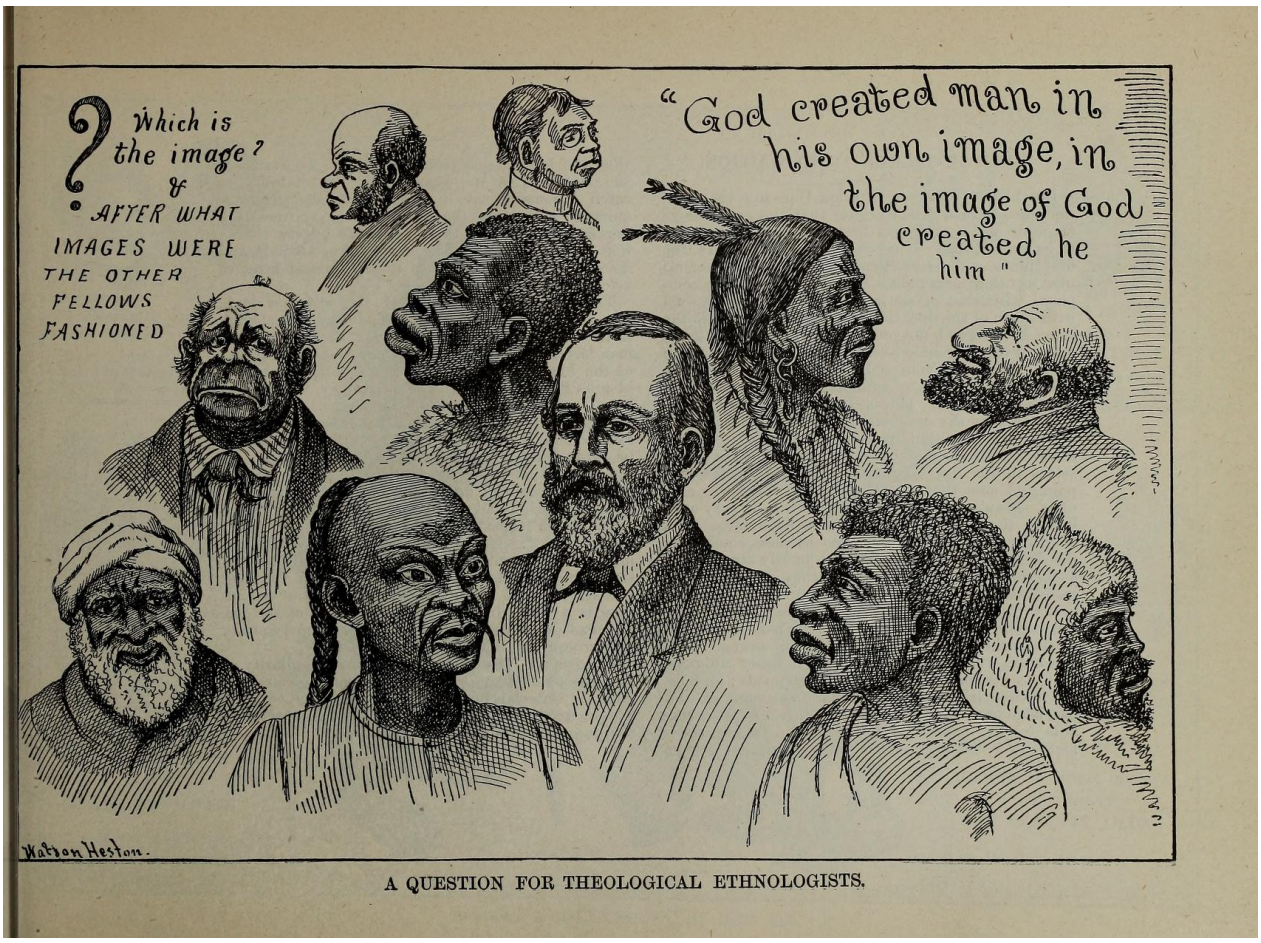


Figure 2: "A Question for Theological Ethnologists," in Watson Heston, *The Freethinkers' Pictorial Text-Book* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1890), 123. Image from https://archive.org/details/freethinkerspict00hest, accessed 8 December 2016.

# CHAPTER 2

# RACE IN BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL EVOLUTION

Evolution is, and was, popularly associated with atheism or deism. Such a view is often valid since many of the leading theorists, like Charles Darwin and T.H. Huxley, were godless, but this is not to indulge the simplistic view of warfare between scientific atheists and unscientific Christians. Many nineteenth-century Christians were quick to endorse Darwinism; the most obvious example is Asa Gray, the Harvard botanist and evangelical Christian, who was one of Darwin's most important defenders in the United States.[1] Still, it is no surprise that atheists and other freethinkers were leaders in developing the idea of evolution since it supplied a plausible alternative to the creation account described in the Bible, in addition to the many political ends evolution could serve.[2] The fact that the ostensibly godless insights of Darwin opened the door to racialist understandings was a key plank in the "Race-Secularization Thesis," as we saw in the introduction. This chapter, like the one before it, offers support for the "Race-Secularization Thesis" by showing how atheists and freethinkers combined racialism and evolution, but will also point to the ways in which readings of evolution could be harnessed against racialism, a theme that will be picked up again in later chapters.

As we saw in the previous chapter, polygenist arguments persisted well into the nineteenth century, even though they were theoretically made obsolete by Darwin's work, which seemed to show that all humans descended from a common ape ancestor. While Darwin has typically been portrayed as a disinterested scientist, James Moore and Adrian Desmond have recently shown that Darwin's evolutionary research was driven by a hatred of slavery and the

[1] See David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Scottish Academic Press/William B. Eerdmans, 1987); Peter Bowler, *Monkey Trials and Gorilla Sermons: Evolution and Christianity from Darwin to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[2] See Adrian Desmond, *The Politics of Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1989]).

polygenist theories that helped to justify it.[3] Darwin's ideas showed that all species, including humanity and its constituent races, were not timeless but ultimately transitory. The lessons for race that Darwin's work set out were not straightforward, however. In vast evolutionary time, the differences between the races of humanity might appear insignificant, yet from some atheists' vantage points in the nineteenth century, the differences were nonetheless stark and meaningful. While races could be modified through changes to their environments, this did not prevent evolutionary thinkers from accepting racial divisions in their present reality.

Though this new evolutionary scheme supported monogenesis (but not the biblical version), a polygenist interpretation, or at least one that preserved a racial hierarchy, could be maintained within the Darwinian framework. Rather than descending from separate Adams, each offshoot of the human race might have been formed in an ancient period of evolution or descended from its own ape. Even if one retained the monogenist view of evolution, there was still something to be gained by accepting racial divisions. Since a common refrain against evolution was the seeming impossibility of a vast jump from apes to humans, the so-called lower races could be slotted in as necessary steps on the evolutionary ladder. In this argument, the lower races appeared animalistic and degraded, lacking in many of the characteristics of civilized people.

While ideas about the progress of civilizations had dated to the eighteenth century, biological evolution also helped to spur thinking about cultural and social evolution. Speculations about social evolution likewise were tinged with racialism since the most primitive stage of civilization, savagery, was invariably occupied by non-white people. These savages were seen as living fossils, frozen in evolutionary time. The study of these savages could therefore offer a glimpse of what the ancestors of civilized Europeans might have been like. Of particular concern to freethinkers was using savage religions as a way to shed light on the origins of religion. By providing a naturalistic account of religion, atheist thinkers attempted to show that Christianity was not unique or divine, but was really no different from a degraded savage religion.

It is nonetheless difficult to discern among the popular freethought movement a coherent racial ideology based on evolution. As this chapter will show, evolution had contradictory lessons for race. Many freethought periodicals collected information from a number of evolutionary

[3] Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2009).

thinkers on race and then summarized it for their audience without holding to a particular editorial line. This meant the information was sometimes inconsistent, but most important from the editors' perspective was to present what was perceived as the most cutting-edge science.

**Evolution Before Darwin**

Speculations about the evolution, or transmutation, of species dated back to the eighteenth century.[4] These evolutionary theories, up to the early nineteenth century, were typically patterned on the idea of a "great chain of being." Devised in ancient Greece, this idea held that "nature produced living things in a great and continuous ladder, each rung of the ladder separated from the next by almost imperceptible differences."[5] An early example can be seen in the series of articles in 1842-3 on "the theory of regular gradation" in the *Oracle of Reason*, which demonstrated the gradation of life from simple to complex. Charles Southwell, who co-founded the periodical with William Chilton, authored the first few articles, but Chilton took over the series following Southwell's imprisonment for blasphemy in 1842. Aside from an illustration accompanying the first article called "Fossil Man," which showed a dark-skinned, primitive-looking figure (see figure 1), there was little about human evolution or race in these articles.[6] The work mentioned race only in a lengthy quotation from the polygenist Charles White's *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man* (1799), which was modelled on the theory of the great chain of being.[7] In the quotation, White gave the standard arguments for polygenesis, including that mulattoes appeared less prolific and that climate could not account for the seemingly vast differences between races.[8] If one accepted the monogenist account, White believed this would logically entail placing the higher apes among the human species as well, "since they differ as little in their organisation from some individuals of the species, as these do from men in general." From here, the argument could be continually extended so that all animals could be said to come from the same ancestor and were therefore part of "one family"; a theory about which White remarked, "a more degrading notion certainly cannot be entertained."[9]

[4] See chapter three of Peter Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).
[5] Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 6.
[6] Charles Southwell, "Theory of Regular Gradation I.," *Oracle of Reason* 1, no. 1 (1842): 5.
[7] Stepan, *Idea of Race in Science*, 8–9.
[8] William Chilton, "The Theory of Regular Gradation XL," *Oracle of Reason* 2, no. 84 (1843): 253–54.
[9] Ibid., 254.

Chilton's evolutionary theory never attracted much interest. But, as James Secord points out, the Edinburgh publisher Robert Chambers's evolutionary arguments in *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) helped to fill this void: "With its populist emphasis on progress, the book could vindicate freethought upon a scientific basis. Here was a work that summed up the latest science without drowning in details."[10] Chambers was, as Secord explains, "a moderate deist" strongly influenced by the booming phrenology scene in Edinburgh.[11] Nonetheless, Chambers made a point in the work to anticipate theological criticism by insisting that he "take[s] it for granted" that God created the universe and all "animated beings".[12] God worked through natural laws, yet this meant God's power was "not diminished or reduced in any way […] but infinitely exalted."[13] Despite Chambers's attempts to pre-emptively rebut charges of atheism, a number of Christian commentators argued that the work might nevertheless lead unsophisticated readers down that path.[14]

Since *Vestiges* charted the development of the entire universe, Chambers devoted only a few pages to the question of the division of races. In his classification scheme, there were five races, each so different "as to give rise to a supposition that they have had distinct or independent origins." But, as Chambers explained, recent research, particularly from the monogenist James Cowles Prichard, showed that humans had a single origin and that the physical differences between the races "are of a more superficial and accidental nature than was at one time supposed."[15] He cited examples of black parents giving birth to white children and vice versa as proof of the mutability of race.[16] At the centre of his evolutionary thinking was constant change in which present configurations were ephemeral, with the environment modifying individuals. Poor environmental and social conditions led to the body becoming ill-formed and ugly, as with, he argued, the Irish. The beauty of the English, by contrast, resulted from the favourable conditions they enjoyed.[17]

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[10] James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 313.
[11] Ibid., 85–6, quotation from 85.
[12] Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 1st ed. (London: John Churchill, 1844), 152.
[13] Ibid., 156.
[14] Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, 274, 280, 330–1, 453, 466.
[15] Chambers, *Vestiges*, 278.
[16] Ibid., 279.
[17] Ibid., 280–1.

Chambers believed that all human races descended from somewhere in India, although he was willing to grant that of all the races, the black race seemed most likely to have had an independent origin. It was more likely, though, that they were "a deteriorated offshoot of the general stock."[18] That Chambers viewed the races hierarchically – again in the manner of the great chain of being– can be seen in his discussion of the idea of recapitulation, in which a human embryo passed through all the earlier stages of its development, from fish and reptiles to mammals, passing through "the Negro, Malay, American, and Mongolian nations," before finally becoming "Caucasian."[19] The Caucasian, then, to Chambers, represented the highest type, while

> [t]he Negro exhibits permanently the imperfect brain, projecting lower jaw, and slender bent limbs, of a Caucasian child, some considerable time before the period of its birth. The aboriginal American represents the same child nearer birth. The Mongolian is an arrested infant newly born. And so forth.[20]

Given their superiority, Chambers predicted that "the best examples of the Caucasian type" might one day "supersede the imperfect nations already existing."[21]

A number of freethinkers reported on the evolutionary theories in *Vestiges*. A series of articles in the *Boston Investigator* summarized the contents, including one on Chambers's racial thought.[22] Another freethinker who mentioned Chambers's racial theories was the American John Shertzer Hittell, who drew on *Vestiges* in his 1857 work, *The Evidences Against Christianity*. Like Chambers, Hittell noted that the boundaries between species were blurry and cited as proof the apparent fact that "[b]lack parents sometimes have white children […]."[23] Despite this, Hittell presented the common division of humans into five races, and like Chambers expressed the idea of recapitulation: "The Caucasian child has to pass through all these [racial] varieties, as he had to pass through all the lower orders, before he sees the light."[24] Hittell returned to the theme of racial divisions in a later work and explained that the "black race" was "in physical organization

[18] Ibid., 296.
[19] Ibid., 306.
[20] Ibid., 307.
[21] Ibid., 310.
[22] Montgarnier, "Nature's Law of Development," *Boston Investigator*, no. 9 (July 8, 1845): 1.
[23] John Shertzer Hittell, *The Evidences Against Christianity*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1857), 147.
[24] Ibid., 1:149.

nearest to the ape, and in mental capacity the lowest […]."[25] Such discussions reveal that while Chambers's evolutionary theory might offer greater support to a monogenist account of the human races, this still left considerable room for a racialist interpretation of evolution.

**The Darwinians**

Chambers's evolutionary ideas were soon superseded following the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 although *Origin* would actually not overtake *Vestiges* in sales until the end of the century.[26] *Origin* was not an anti-Christian work, but by the time of the book's release, Darwin had long since abandoned the religion. In the 1830s, he began to have doubts about Christianity, in large part because of the moral difficulties raised by the doctrine of eternal punishment for non-believers, which included some of his family members. Despite his break with Christianity, Darwin never became affiliated with the popular freethought movement in Britain. He also withdrew an earlier endorsement of the American freethought periodical *The Index* in 1880, possibly because of freethought's growing association with birth control advocacy. Darwin preferred Huxley's term "agnostic" to describe his own religious position, in contrast to "atheist," which connoted, to Darwin, an unreasonable certainty about the non-existence of God and aggressive proselytizing to the masses.[27]

Adrian Desmond and James Moore have convincingly argued that Darwin's evolutionary research was animated by a hatred of slavery and polygenesis. The context in which Darwin developed his evolutionary theories was shot through with debates on slavery, imperialism, and the origin of human races. These questions, to Darwin, were closely bound up. He had come from an abolitionist family, had seen slavery firsthand while on his famous voyage on the *Beagle* in the 1830s, and closely followed the developments surrounding slavery in the United States. In the 1850s and 60s, leading anthropologists in Britain and the United States proclaimed victory for polygenesis, a theory that seemed to offer support, directly or indirectly, for the subordination of

[25] John Shertzer Hittell, *A History of the Mental Growth of Mankind in Ancient Times*, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893), 32.
[26] Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, 526.
[27] James Moore, "Freethought, Secularism, Agnosticism: The Case of Charles Darwin," in *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume 1 Traditions*, ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press in Association with the Open University, 1988), 274–319.

non-white races. It was within this context that Darwin developed his evolutionary theories that sought to demonstrate the unity of the human family, and indeed all life.[28]

While Darwin wished to include more in the *Origin* about human evolution, this was eventually trimmed down to just one portentous line.[29] For Desmond and Moore, the culmination of Darwin's opposition to polygenesis was to be found in *The Descent of Man* (1871).[30] This book made the case for a single origin of humans and accounted for the differences between human races with reference to the theory of sexual selection. Beginning the section on racial differences, Darwin laid out the arguments for polygenesis and admitted, like Chambers, "[i]f a naturalist, who had never before seen such beings, were to compare a Negro, Hottentot, Australian, or Mongolian, […] he would assuredly declare that they were as good species as many to which he had been in the habit of affixing specific names."[31]

Upon closer inspection, however, Darwin believed the case for polygenesis was deeply flawed. The strongest argument against polygenesis, he believed, was that the different races "graduate into each other", which explained why so many naturalists disagreed on the precise number of races. That one naturalist claimed there were as few as two races, while another said there were as many as 63 showed the futility of such efforts.[32] Instead, Darwin believed that anyone who accepted evolution "will feel no doubt that all the races of man are descended from a single primitive stock […]."[33] Indeed, Darwin predicted that as more and more people accepted the evidence for evolution, "the dispute between the monogenists and the polygenists will die a silent and unobserved death."[34] The remainder of the book laid the groundwork for the argument that the majority of the differences between the races could be accounted for not by natural selection, but by sexual selection. Differing skin colour or hirsuteness, for example, did not give any survival advantage to individuals, but appeared arbitrarily among early humans. Since these early humans lived in polygamous societies, Darwin reasoned that the powerful males would

[28] Desmond and Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause*.
[29] "Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history." Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1859), 488.
[30] See especially chapter thirteen of Desmond and Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause*.
[31] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:217.
[32] Ibid., 1:226.
[33] Ibid., 1:229.
[34] Ibid., 1:235.

select a number of the most beautiful females for mating and therefore would perpetuate these arbitrary racial traits throughout the society.[35]

While both Chambers and Darwin believed their work demonstrated the truth of monogenesis – although not the biblical version – it was clear that one could retain a racial hierarchy within an evolutionary framework. One way to do this was through the explanation of human evolution from apes. To many doubters, the gulf between apes and humans appeared far too large to have been bridged without the intervention of a deity. Despite Darwin's desire to refute the implications of polygenesis that cast certain races in inferior positions, he nonetheless employed racial hierarchy as a way to answer this challenge, in particular by bringing in the old idea of the great chain of being.

In *Descent of Man*, Darwin insisted that the intermediary forms between apes and man "have become extinct" and predicted in the future "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races" while the "anthropomorphous apes" would likewise become extinct, meaning "[t]he break will then be rendered wider […]."[36] To make sense of the present gap, Darwin brought in the lower races. There was, he noted, a great difference "in intellect, between a savage who does not use any abstract terms, and a Newton or Shakspeare [sic]." But the savage and the civilized were "connected by the finest gradations" and therefore a large section of *Descent of Man* was devoted to arguing that "there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties."[37] In this section, Darwin gave numerous examples of animals possessing familiar humans emotions and the ability to reason and use basic forms of language, while also noting that the lower races possessed a form of that ability that was inferior to that of a civilized person. In this case, he emphasized the primitiveness of the lower races. To take self-consciousness as one example, Darwin noted the difficulty of knowing with certainty if animals were self-conscious, but added "how little can the hard-worked wife of a degraded Australian savage, who uses hardly any abstract words and cannot count above four, exert her self-consciousness, or reflect on the nature of her own existence."[38] In this way, the boundary

[35] Ibid., 2:316–84; see also Stepan, *Idea of Race in Science*, 59–66.
[36] Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 1:201.
[37] Ibid., 1:35.
[38] Ibid., 1:62.

between humans and animals was blurred, but at the expense of savage races appearing particularly animalistic.

Racial hierarchy and polygenist ideas were also found in the work of T.H. Huxley, one of the greatest champions of Darwinism in Britain. In an 1865 essay, he identified "eleven readily distinguishable stocks, or persistent modifications," based on traits including skin colour, hair type, and head shape.[39] Such races, Huxley contended, had existed with their present features for up to four thousand years.[40] Yet Huxley found value in both the monogenist and polygenist schools. On the one hand, "Rational Monogenists" had rightly pointed out that the earth existed for many eons and that various historical migrations accounted for the spread of the races. On the other hand, Huxley agreed with the polygenists that climatic differences could not account for the formation of races, even if he acknowledged that their evidence for an original diversity of races was wanting.[41] Huxley instead supported Darwinism, which in his view was a third way that combined "all that is good in the Monogenistic and Polygenistic schools."[42] Darwin and the co-discoverer of natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace, both believed that races were formed very early on in human history, after which time racial differences became mostly fixed as natural selection ceased operating on humans.[43] Huxley's own view was that humans arose "probably, though by no means necessarily, in one locality." But the time period in which this took place and "[w]hether [man] arose singly, or a number of examples appeared contemporaneously" were questions that remained as yet unanswered.[44]

Again like Darwin, Huxley drew upon the tactic of using the lower races as a way to bridge the gap between humans and apes, particularly in *Man's Place in Nature* (1863). While a great deal of the work was dedicated to describing the "man-like apes," namely, gorillas, chimpanzees, orang-utans, and gibbons, the reason for this was to show that the real gap was not between humans and the higher apes, but between the higher and lower apes. Here Huxley found it necessary to bring in the lower races as bridges between apes and humans. Measuring cranial capacity, for example, showed that "[…] Men differ more widely from one another than they do from the Apes; while the lowest Apes differ as much, in proportion, from the highest, as the latter

[39] Thomas Henry Huxley, "Methods and Results of Ethnology (1865)," in *Collected Essays: Volume 7: Man's Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays*, vol. 7 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 234.
[40] Ibid., 238.
[41] Ibid., 242–8, quotation on 244.
[42] Ibid., 248.
[43] Stepan, *Idea of Race in Science*, 85–6.
[44] Huxley, "Methods and Results of Ethnology," 249.

does from Man."[45] One could measure other anatomical features – "whatever series of muscles, whatever viscera might be selected for comparison" – and the results would demonstrate that "the lower Apes and the Gorilla would differ more than the Gorilla and the Man."[46] This racialist tactic, as we will see more below, continued to be used to defend evolution by other freethinkers.

Darwin was of course reluctant to turn his theories toward irreligious ends, but one thinker who applied Darwinism in this way was the British explorer Winwood Reade. This is especially apparent in his universal history, *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), which became a classic among freethinkers. As testament to its longevity and influence, in 1910, American freethinker James Morton reflected on the work, saying that "[t]he history of Freethought would be incomplete without the name of Winwood Reade."[47] Reade initially intended to write a history of Africa in a global context, but the project soon expanded to one that charted the history of the world from a Darwinian perspective, emphasizing the role of conquest and struggle in the evolution of societies. Reade constructed an evolutionary view of history beginning with "dots of animated jelly", which continued to evolve "without an interruption to the present day […]."[48] Evolution required conditions necessitating a struggle for life. Without such a catalyst, life would stagnate, as seen in the life of the savage, which "is one long torpor, with spasms of activity. Century follows century, but he does not change."[49] Conquest and even enslavement of inferior races by superior ones were necessary but painful parts of the gradual march to civilization.

Reade however rejected the idea of biological race as an explanatory factor in history, as civilizational progress was dependent on external factors, not internal or innate ones. But this did not mean present racial divisions lacked meaning: "*God made all men equal* is a fine-sounding phrase, and has also done good service in its day; but it is not a scientific fact. On the contrary, there is nothing so certain as the natural inequality of men."[50] Nonetheless, in the rest of his work, Reade argued that these differences were ultimately ephemeral. The idea that there existed permanent, primordial racial essences contradicted Reade's materialist conception of the universe. In the great evolutionary time span,

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[45] Thomas Henry Huxley, "Man's Place in Nature (1863)," in *Collected Essays: Volume 7: Man's Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays*, vol. 7 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 106–8, quotation on 108.
[46] Ibid., 116.
[47] James F. Morton Jr., "W. Winwood Reade," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 42 (October 15, 1910): 658.
[48] Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Trubner & Co., 1872), 399–400.
[49] Ibid., 4–5.
[50] Ibid., 7.

> the distinctions which exist between the races of men [are] unimportant and external. Such as they are, they have been produced by differences of climate and food acting indirectly upon the races throughout geological periods; and it is also possible that these distinctions of hair and skin were chiefly acquired at a time when man's intelligence being imperfectly developed, his physical organisation was more easily moulded by external conditions than was afterwards the case.[51]

This progressive view of life and of humanity can be seen in Reade's optimism that Africans might advance to a higher level of civilization. There could be no guarantees about their progress, but from his first-hand knowledge of blacks, he believed that their strong ability for imitation was an asset, since "imitation is the first principle of progress."[52] This was in contrast to "[t]he Red Indians [who] are not imitative, and they have now nearly been destroyed […]." Blacks on the other hand "imitate like monkeys," a hopeful sign that they might one day advance beyond "the imitative stage."[53] This idea that races could progress struck at the heart of the notion of permanent racial types, yet some of other Reade's statements made clear that even if racial characteristics were transitory, they still mattered a great deal in the present.

**Darwinism and Freethought**

Retrospectively we realize the considerable influence of Darwinism, but as Edward Royle explains, British atheists were actually slow to incorporate Darwin's ideas into their argument against Christianity. It was not until Edward Aveling became a leading figure in the freethought movement that Darwinism became central in their arguments.[54] Aveling, an anatomy lecturer at the London Hospital and King's College London, was one of the leading atheists in the late 1870s and early 1880s, and served several years as the vice president of the National Secular Society. He also taught various adult science classes at the secularists' Hall of Science in London – among the pupils were Charles Bradlaugh's daughters, Alice and Hypatia – and he was linked romantically with Annie Besant. Aveling's support for socialism and his relationship with Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor, beginning in 1884, coupled with his perpetual reliance on Bradlaugh for financial support strained his association with the secularists and he resigned his membership

[51] Ibid., 422.
[52] Ibid., 385.
[53] Ibid., 438–9.
[54] Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 171.

that year.[55] Aveling's influence was nonetheless seen in W. Mann's 1905 list in the *Freethinker* on "The Hundred Best Books" of freethought. There were no works by Darwin in the section on evolution, but Aveling's *Darwin Made Easy* was included, as were other works by Huxley, Reade, and Herbert Spencer.[56] This indicates that nineteenth-century atheists' understanding of Darwin was second-hand and jumbled with the ideas of other evolutionary thinkers, meaning that Darwin's central message about the unity of the human species was lost.

Still, leading freethinkers picked up on many of the threads running through Darwin and other evolutionists' thought. One of these was the incorporation of polygenesis into an evolutionary framework.[57] As we saw in the previous chapter, Charles Bradlaugh tentatively accepted Darwinism, although his Darwinian ideas sat alongside polygenist ones. In Bradlaugh's 1881 lectures on anthropology, he spoke positively about Darwinism but saw it as an extension of the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, a leading French transmutationist in the early nineteenth century known for his argument for the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Bradlaugh saw no conflict between Lamarckism and Darwinism; in fact, the latter was simply a restatement of the former. While "Lamarck's doctrine" was mocked in its time, Bradlaugh explained, it was now "triumphant in Darwinism […]."[58] It was for this reason that Bradlaugh sounded like a Lamarckian when he wrote that poor nutrition would lead to the individual to become "short in stature" and "[i]f this be repeated through many generations it will become habit, and then a regularly transmissible character."[59] The confusion seems to be the result of Bradlaugh interpreting Darwinism and Lamarckism as both concerning the transmutation of species, rather than the mechanism that by which this occurred (natural selection or the inheritance of acquired traits). As Peter Bowler explains, while evolution was accepted fairly rapidly following Darwin,

[55] C.A. Creffield, "Aveling, Edward Bibbens (1849-1898)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40929; Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 105–6, 317–9; Arthur H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), 157–67, 212–22.
[56] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 173; W. Mann, "The Hundred Best Books," *The Freethinker*, no. 1269 (November 19, 1905): 740–42; W. Mann, "The Hundred Best Books (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1270 (November 26, 1905): 762–63.
[57] On the persistence of polygenist ideas after Darwin, see chapter three of George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, New Edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982 [1968]).
[58] Charles Bradlaugh, *Anthropology* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1882), lecture 1, 5.
[59] Ibid., lecture 4, 4.

the idea of natural selection as the mechanism of evolution was not fully accepted until the Darwinian synthesis in the early twentieth century.[60]

Even with his somewhat muddled understanding of Darwin, Bradlaugh still accepted many of the central points of polygenesis, particularly that certain races were suited for corresponding environments. Indeed, the study of anthropology could have practical consequences for colonial policy given the diffusion of whites throughout the world. But anthropological research showed that "[o]ne race has a tendency to die out in a country where another thrives easily"; while in time all humans could become adapted to any climate, this was "only after great struggling."[61] In another lecture, Bradlaugh recommended a "slight crossing with native races, or with settled races with greater power of acclimatisation" as a way to ease the transition process. For example, "a small shade of negro blood lessens the tendency of the European to contract yellow fever."[62]

Bradlaugh's discussion of evolution also used anthropological measurements to construct a gradation from the apes to humans, harking back to earlier notions of the great chain of being. Bradlaugh cited Huxley's research from *Man's Place in Nature* about the differing cranial capacity between the lower and higher apes, and the higher apes and man.[63] He also used the French physician Jules Cloquet's facial angle, measuring "an [sic] European, a Negro, an infant chimpanzee, a full grown chimpanzee, a male gorilla, and a Newfoundland dog" to show that the facial angle was highest for a European and gradually became lower as one moved down to the lower races and non-human animals.[64] By studying anatomical differences, and especially cranial measurements, Bradlaugh believed one could best determine how to categorize the various races. On cranial capacity, Bradlaugh reported that Australians had the smallest capacity, but "[t]he capacity increases in the yellow races, and attains its maximum in the white."[65] The rest of the skeleton also yielded clues to help classify races. The arm of "the Negro" was longer than that of the European and was nearly indistinguishable, proportionally, from a gorilla's.[66] These

[60] See chapter nine of Bowler, *Evolution*.
[61] Bradlaugh, *Anthropology*, lecture 1, 8.
[62] Ibid., lecture 4, 5.
[63] Ibid., lecture 2, 4.
[64] Ibid., lecture 2, 3.
[65] Ibid., lecture 3, 7.
[66] Ibid., lecture 3, 8.

anatomical differences could have consequences for various races' intellects, though Bradlaugh held out the possibility of improvement among lower races.[67]

While Bradlaugh dabbled in the latest anthropological thought, the leading scientific mind among the British secularists was, as noted above, Edward Aveling. He was a student of Darwin and wrote about him frequently.[68] He did however break with his idol over monogenesis, instead favouring a polygenist stance. Before being forced out of the secularist movement for his financial negligence, Aveling wrote a series of articles for the *National Reformer* describing the polygenist evolutionary thought of Carl (also spelled Karl) Vogt, one of the early German supporters of evolution. As Aveling explained, Vogt's measurement of skulls showed "that in brain capacity as in every other anatomical and physiological point, there is more difference between man and man than between man and ape." Aveling noted how a ranking of cranial capacity placed indigenous Australians at the bottom and the English at the top.[69] Vogt's work on pelvis shapes again showed differences between the races. The "wedge-shaped" pelvis of the black races was, to Vogt, most similar to that of apes, showing the evolutionary closeness between the two.[70] These facts meant that the races of man needed to be considered separate species, or the entire system of classification was untenable.[71] Even though Aveling described Darwin as "our master", he chided him for his hasty approval of monogenesis.[72] Elsewhere, Aveling accepted a classification of the human races into ten species, following the scheme of the German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel.[73]

Other evolutionary polygenist ideas found their way into freethought periodicals indicating a continued interest in the most recent anthropological research among freethinkers. A 1903 article in the *Truth Seeker* discussed a recent theory that "the yellow race" originated somewhere in Asia, while "the black race" and "the white race" both originated in separate locations outside the continent.[74] Another article, this from 1910, speculated on the descent of various races from corresponding gorillas, chimpanzees, orang-utans, and gibbons.[75] The

[67] Ibid., lecture 4, 6.
[68] Edward Aveling, *The Religious Views of Charles Darwin* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1883); Edward Aveling, *Darwin Made Easy* (London: Robert Forder, 1893).
[69] Edward Aveling, "Carl Vogt and His Writings, X," *National Reformer*, no. 1251 (September 9, 1883): 173.
[70] Edward Aveling, "Carl Vogt and His Writings, XI," *National Reformer*, no. 1254 (September 30, 1883): 211.
[71] Edward Aveling, "Carl Vogt and His Writings, XII," *National Reformer*, no. 1257 (October 21, 1883): 262.
[72] Edward Aveling, "Carl Vogt and His Writings, XIV," *National Reformer*, no. 1261 (November 18, 1883): 325.
[73] Edward Aveling, "Monkeys, Apes, Men," in Aveling, *Darwin Made Easy*, 5.
[74] Eugene Macdonald, "The White Man's Origin," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 13 (March 28, 1903): 194.
[75] George Macdonald, "Tracing Racial Origins," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 32 (August 6, 1910): 504.

*Freethinker* likewise carried a series of articles in 1915 that, while rejecting a direct link between the varieties of apes and the different humans races, nonetheless argued there were three distinct races, each branching off from a common ancestor during the paleolithic period.[76] These cases demonstrate that the editors of periodicals did not hold to any particular stance on the question of polygenist or monogenist evolution, but instead sought simply to report the latest findings as a way to show their own scientific credentials.

Some freethinkers also opposed racial intermarriage, further demonstrating the persistence of polygenist beliefs. A main tenet of polygenesis was that interbreeding among distant species produced infertile or degraded offspring. In one case, Edward Aveling used the curious example that "the Egyptian women and the white are almost universally infertile."[77] In another, a correspondent from South Carolina asked the editor of the *Truth Seeker*, George Macdonald, if "it is right or wrong for the white people to intermarry with colored?" Macdonald prefaced his remark by noting that "[i]t is a question not of right or wrong, […] but of biology, or ethnology," and that he was not an authority on the subject, but

> [o]rdinary common sense would dictate the answer that intermarriage might be a good thing for the negro, but not for the white – the one race would be made better, but the other would be worsened. All should seek in marriage qualities calculated to better the stock, and it is not our opinion that for white persons those qualities reside in the negro or any other non-Caucasian race.[78]

In other words, Macdonald would not support intermarriage since it tended to degrade the better partner, in this case the white.

Here one can see the influence of eugenic thought, which contended that a large number of traits were heritable and therefore that individuals' reproduction should be carefully managed, either by the state or society. The founder of eugenics was Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton. The historian of eugenics Daniel Kevles has suggested that for Galton and his followers eugenics acted as a kind of a replacement "faith" for Christianity – though "often a cruel and always a

[76] T.F. Palmer, "The Origin and Development of Man," *The Freethinker*, no. 1759 (April 4, 1915): 212–14; T.F. Palmer, "The Origin and Development of Man (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1760 (April 11, 1915): 235–36.
[77] Edward Aveling, "The Darwinian Theory," in Aveling, *Darwin Made Easy*, 20.
[78] George Macdonald, "Notes at Large," *The Truth Seeker* 38, no. 7 (February 18, 1911): 105.

problematic" one.[79] Race did not feature largely in Galton's theorizing, though he did believe that non-white races produced proportionally fewer exceptional individuals than the white race.[80]

For Karl Pearson, another freethinker and Galton's closest follower, race played a greater role. Like Winwood Reade, Pearson believed in the necessity of struggle for evolutionary (and racial) progress. While this could be painful at times – for example, the near elimination of the Indians in North America – on the whole, the good results balanced out the bad. "In place of the red man, contributing practically nothing to the work and thought of the world," Pearson explained, "we have a great nation, mistress of many arts, and able, with its youthful imagination and fresh, untrammelled impulses, to contribute much to the common stock of civilized man."[81] Despite this optimistic note, Pearson was less sanguine about the prospects for racial progress than Reade. For Pearson, inferior "stock" would always persist: "You cannot change the leopard's spots, and you cannot change bad stock to good; you may dilute it, possibly spread it over a wider area, spoiling good stock, but until it ceases to multiply it will not cease to be."[82] This was why superior races could not live in a society with their inferiors, as in the Southern United States. The bad stock would inevitably degrade the good and not vice versa.[83]

Other freethinkers accepted that many traits were heritable and therefore accepted certain eugenicist ideas. Annie Besant used the idea of "reversion" to demonstrate how certain traits persisted even when they were not readily apparent. For example, black parents who gave birth to a white child might have had a distant white ancestor somewhere in their family tree. She also held the Lamarckian idea that acquired characteristics could eventually become heritable.[84] It was because of heredity's importance that Besant called for careful consideration of marriage partners. This should not, however, be brought about by the state but by a common social sense of duty to one's race.[85] The Scottish freethinker J.M. Wheeler likewise accepted eugenicist ideas, but as a positive measure to encourage fitter individuals to procreate. The fact of heredity was clear, seen for example in the inheritance of "the hard head of the Negro […]." Upon accepting the importance of heredity, one "will find no difficulty in Mr. Galton's contention that it would

[79] Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 300.
[80] Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 338–9.
[81] Karl Pearson, *National Life from the Standpoint of Science*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905), 25.
[82] Ibid., 19.
[83] Ibid., 22–3.
[84] Annie Besant, "Heredity as a Factor of Evolution," *National Reformer*, no. 1492 (January 15, 1888): 37–8.
[85] Annie Besant, "Heredity as a Factor of Evolution (4)," *National Reformer*, no. 1496 (February 12, 1888): 100.

be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several generations."[86] The eugenics program was not, however, embraced among all freethinkers. The *Truth Seeker* actually believed it was Christians who led the charge in favour of eugenics: "Only Christian ministers are likely to propose exterminating the offspring of the incapable and vicious" since these Christians refused to allow discussion of birth control methods. Instead, George Macdonald said, "[i]f the means and effort spent on religion were devoted to education in respect for human rights, including the rights of the unborn, a few generations might materially lessen the seriousness of the questions what to do with the criminal and the unfit."[87]

**Evolution and Civilization**

While evolutionary thought applied most readily to biology, it was also relevant to understanding the progress of civilization. The belief in a transition from savagery to civilization dated back to the eighteenth century, but the Darwinian breakthrough transformed these ideas by presenting savage life as the first step in social evolution. This was in contrast to the long-held Christian idea that savages were the degraded offshoots of humans who had originally been created at a high level of civilization. As new chronologies pushed the age of humans back hundreds of thousands of years, an answer was needed for how human culture had evolved from a primitive state. Anthropologists used studies of modern savages, invariably one and the same with the lowest races, as a way to understand the distant ancestors of civilized people. There were two ways freethinkers could use such ideas. First, given the huge hurdle from apes to humans, savages were called upon to act as a midway point, not just in terms of biology, but society and culture as well. Secondly, freethinkers used social evolution to explain religion as nothing more than a survival of crude savage superstition. In this way, the primitiveness and backwardness of savage races were emphasized.

Both Darwin and Huxley had grasped the utility of considering savages as a midpoint in the evolutionary timeline. Edward Aveling followed these thinkers as he contended that "the interval between the highest man and the lowest man in regard to any anatomical or physiological point is greater than it is between the lowest man and the highest ape."[88] Aveling developed this theme in a series of 1884 articles in the *National Reformer* on "brute men": "those races or individuals

[86] J.M. Wheeler, "Heredity and Progress," *The Freethinker*, no. 912 (January 15, 1899): 43.
[87] George Macdonald, "Eugenics With a Vengeance," *The Truth Seeker* 36, no. 26 (June 26, 1909): 405.
[88] Edward Aveling, "The Origin of Man," in Aveling, *Darwin Made Easy*, 3–4.

whose mental powers are of a nature so low that the possessors would be regarded as non-human, were it not that their bodily structure is that of man." While "[t]he idiots, the insane or criminals, met with in any community" were also brute men, Aveling's primary concern was with those "distinct tribes" that lived in the Americas, Australasia, or Africa.[89] The "distinctive marks" of man were cultural, not biological: these included spoken and written language, self-consciousness, the use of clothing, tools, fire, and shelter, and, somewhat curiously from a freethinker, religious belief. As a way to blur the division between man and animals, Aveling argued that these things were either lacking in brute men or were present in animals. On language, for example, he admitted that all savage tribes appeared to have some form of language, albeit sometimes non-written,

> [b]ut it may be fairly contended that the interval between the grunting speech of the Bushman or the clicking dialect of the Kaffir below, and the refined and musical language of a great European orator or singer above, is as great as that between the language of the South African brute-men and the language of the anthropoid apes.[90]

Aveling also contended that animals made progress. Birds, for example, would in time learn to avoid telegraph wires, while travelers' accounts of "the African negro" lamented that this race appeared incapable of progress.[91]

In a later work, Aveling went even further, contending that savage races possessed an inferior memory even to dogs or horses.[92] Love was not a uniquely human trait and could be found in animals, yet appeared to be absent among savage races. "[A]mong the Bosjesmans and Australian blacks," Aveling wrote,

> the father is as likely as not to murder his child as soon as it is born. Even the mother treats her child no better than a cow treats her calf, leaving it to shift for itself at a very early age. On the other hand, the love and respect of children to their parents is almost, or quite, unknown in savage races.[93]

[89] Edward Aveling, "Brute Men," *National Reformer*, no. 1289 (May 11, 1884): 322.
[90] Ibid., 323.
[91] Quoted in Edward Aveling, "Brute Men (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 1290 (May 18, 1884): 339.
[92] Edward Aveling, "The Origin of Man," in Aveling, *Darwin Made Easy*, 39.
[93] Ibid., 39–40.

To Aveling, the lower races were not just inferior to the higher ones, but they were even inferior in mental capacity to apes in some respects.[94]

Another freethinker, W.H. Utley, wrote a similar series of articles for Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* in 1886. The influence of Aveling – who actually introduced Utley to his future wife – is clear in these discussions.[95] In his articles, Utley presented the linear evolution of mankind, "a gradual transition from the gibbon, the lowest of the anthropoids, to the European, the highest type of man."[96] Utley, borrowing from Bradlaugh's anthropology lectures, used the facial angle developed by Cloquet to explain the gradation from backward races to civilized ones.[97] Aside from anatomical features, things like language showed how the lower races acted as a bridge between man and apes. He described how the Bosjesmans (Bushmen) could not talk in the dark since the gestures necessary to supplement their "simple language of clicks and croaks" could not be seen. Indigenous Australians meanwhile did not know how to make fire, while the Fuegians did not wear clothing even in the coldest weather and possessed only "a few branches stuck into the ground" for shelter.[98] These "brute men" arguments continued to appear into the early twentieth century. Numerous articles by a variety of authors in both Britain and the United States made the same arguments, stressing the animalistic nature of savage races while also how various animals possessed characteristics thought to be uniquely human.[99] Even as late as 1913, George Macdonald cited the zoologist and rationalist Sir Ray Lankester, who explained that the vast difference in the brain size between apes and men "is bridged over by the lower races of man and the exceptional individuals of apes."[100]

One of the more bizarre arguments came from Elmina Drake Slenker, a freethinker, birth control advocate, and children's author. In an article in the *Boston Investigator*, she suggested blacks and apes could interbreed successfully, "proving a 'kinship' of ancestry."[101] In a subsequent article she explained the idea came from Frederick Hollick, a nineteenth-century

[94] Edward Aveling, "The Darwinian Theory," in ibid., 22.
[95] Freda Utley, *Odyssey of a Liberal* (Washington: Washington National Press, 1970), 5–7.
[96] W.H. Utley, "Man-Like Apes," *National Reformer*, no. 1416 (August 1, 1886): 74.
[97] W.H. Utley, "Man-Like Apes (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 1417 (August 8, 1886): 91.
[98] W.H. Utley, "Man-Like Apes (3)," *National Reformer*, no. 1419 (August 22, 1886): 123.
[99] B.F. Underwood, "Darwinism," *The Truth Seeker* 2, no. 20 (June 15, 1875): 6; William Denton, "The Origin of Man," *The Truth Seeker* 7, no. 7 (February 14, 1880): 98–9; Henry MacDonald, "Origin of Man," *The Freethinker*, no. 565 (May 22, 1892): 332; James M. McCann, "Man and Brute," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 34 (August 23, 1902): 534–5; James M. McCann, "Man and Brute," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 35 (August 31, 1902): 550.
[100] George Macdonald, "Brain of the Ape and Man," *The Truth Seeker* 40, no. 9 (March 1, 1913): 136.
[101] Elmina Drake Slenker, "Spontaneous Generation," *Boston Investigator*, no. 14 (July 14, 1886): 1.

physician and sex educator. Hollick in turn heard this from a traveler in Africa, who reported that the locals believed in the possibility of crosses between chimpanzees and humans and who had apparently seen the "monkeyfied" children who resulted from such a union. These hybrids, however, could be sterile, as Slenker explained was the case with "[m]ulattoes here in the South […]."[102] In an article intended for children, she again referenced the animal nature of blacks as she explained that "[t]he negro does not seem to be so sensitive to pain as white people are […]."[103] As further evidence of blacks' inferiority, she explained in a children's book that while "[n]egro dolls are sometimes made for colored children," they still prefer white dolls, "just as the black parents prefer pictures of white people to hang up in their houses." This was because "[w]e all like to imitate those we think better and higher than we are, and so the blacks, being an inferior race, look up to and imitate white people."[104]

**Primitive Religion**

Studying savage societies also threw light on the primitive origins of religion and served to demonstrate that true civilization came from the abandonment of religion altogether. While eighteenth-century thinkers drew partly upon travel accounts of savage life to account for the natural origins of religion,[105] after Darwin, the idea that religion itself was a product of evolution became prominent. Studies of savages revealed the origins of religion, but also invited comparisons between savages and Christians, revealing, to freethinkers, that the two differed in degree, not kind. These discussions played upon the notion of the savage as "the Other," in terms of race and civilization, from white Europeans and Americans. It was for this reason that comparisons between Christian and savage customs had so much force. Such comparisons were meant to embarrass and shame Christians into re-evaluating their beliefs through the implied question, are you no better than savages? To freethinkers, true social progress meant giving up religious ideas altogether.

A major goal of cultural anthropology in the second half of the nineteenth century was uncovering the origins of religion. E.B. Tylor – the preeminent figure of late nineteenth-century British anthropology – paid particular attention to the development of religion among primitive

[102] Elmina Drake Slenker, "Hybrids," *Boston Investigator*, no. 18 (August 11, 1886): 2.
[103] Aunt Elmina, "Pain," *Boston Investigator*, no. 2 (April 23, 1884): 8.
[104] Elmina Drake Slenker, *Little Lessons for Little Folks* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1887), 93.
[105] See chapter one of Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

communities. Tylor was born and raised as a Quaker and kept his faith until 1864, when he and his wife resigned their Quaker membership. The precise reasons for the break are unknown, but Timothy Larsen suggests it might have been prompted by the findings of his anthropological research, which he was beginning around the same time.[106]

One of Tylor's innovations was the idea of "survivals": customs and ideas that made sense within earlier forms of society, but that had since lost their original meanings as society progressed and the context changed. The study of survivals had the benefit of highlighting the origins of superstition and therefore making it vulnerable "to the attack of its deadliest enemy, a reasonable explanation."[107] Religion was, in short, a bundle of survivals that had rational explanations in a more primitive context. Religious ideas persisted even as people forgot their original meanings, but anthropological study would help to root out and dispose of these bad ideas. For Tylor, religion's origins were to be found in a mistaken belief in individual souls pervading the natural world, a view he described as animism. From this belief in souls, savages reasoned "to a yet wider doctrine of spiritual beings animated and controlling the universe in all its parts […]." Finally the original idea became increasingly sophisticated as "a general philosophy of man and nature."[108] While Tylor's work had strong implications for the truth of Christianity, these were left for "[e]ducated readers […] to work out […]."[109] Nonetheless, his discussion of religion revealed that there was "an unbroken line of mental connexion" between "the savage fetish-worshipper and the civilized Christian."[110] Tylor was however more forthright in 1883 about the irreligious goals of anthropology, when he contributed the following stanza to a poem by Andrew Lang: "Theologians all to expose, – 'Tis the *mission* of Primitive Man."[111]

While much of Tylor's theorizing was based on the concept of differing levels of civilization, not race, these levels of culture closely aligned with contemporary understandings of racial hierarchies. As he said, "[f]ew would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture: – Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian."[112] Furthermore, despite his

[106] Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20.
[107] E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:15.
[108] Ibid., 2:322.
[109] Ibid., 1:386–7.
[110] Ibid., 1:453.
[111] Quoted in George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 191.
[112] Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1:24.

monogenism, his 1881 work *Anthropology* contained a chapter detailing the various anatomical differences between races.[113] In this sense then, his location of the origins of religion in savage life also meant, although not stated explicitly, that the essence of religion was to be found among Europeans' racial inferiors. While other leading theorists of savage life, like John Lubbock, John Ferguson McLennan, and Herbert Spencer, were more reluctant to challenge the foundations of religious belief directly, they all seemed to accept Tylor's views on the primitive origins of religion.[114]

John Shertzer Hittell was an early freethinker to present a naturalistic explanation of religious belief in *Evidences against Christianity* (1857). He argued that differences between the religion of savages and that of civilized Europeans were in degree, not kind. In Hittell's view, the doctrines of Christianity did not come "from the brain of Jehovah, but grew by slow, gradual, and natural processes, from the low instincts which lead savages to worship stocks and stones."[115] The idea of a divine force came from the savage's "consciousness of his weakness as compared with the great forces of nature" and the inability to distinguish animate from inanimate objects. Low savages worshipped idols, but more advanced groups recognized that these were representatives of the divine force, not the force itself.[116] Individual family gods were likewise transformed into national gods as populations increased. From here, more sophisticated ideas developed, including a creator god and a rival evil deity. It was in this context then that many of the world's ancient religions developed.[117] The precise details of Hittell's scheme are less important than the fact that he linked Christianity with primitive savage religion. In light of this, Hittell concluded that Christianity was not suited for civilized man and therefore "cannot exist much longer in general acceptation among civilized nations […]."[118]

In *The Martyrdom of Man*, Winwood Reade too delved into the origins of religion. A religion corresponded to a society's level of civilization and made sense within that context. Barbarous religion, for example, "established a tyranny, and tyranny was useful in the childhood of mankind."[119] African religion, Reade argued, "is suited to their intellects, and is therefore a

[113] See chapter three of E.B. Tylor, *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881).
[114] Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology*, 195–6.
[115] John Shertzer Hittell, *The Evidences Against Christianity*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1857), 2.
[116] Ibid., 2:3.
[117] Ibid., 2:3–6.
[118] Hittell, *Evidences*, 1857, 1:XVIII.
[119] Reade, *Martyrdom of Man*, 431.

true religion; and the same may be said of Christianity amongst uneducated people." Like Hittell, however, Reade thought that Christianity was now no longer "in accordance with the cultivated mind" and therefore it "ought to be destroyed."[120] At one stage in civilization, Christianity was useful, but that time had now passed: Western society had simply outgrown Christianity and true progress required throwing off the last vestiges of the religion.

Robert Ingersoll, like Reade and Hittell, saw religion as an early and feeble attempt by humans to make sense of their world. Religions began in ignorance, but the culmination of this was science, meaning religion should be discarded. In one of Ingersoll's earliest lectures, entitled, "The Gods," delivered in 1872, he explained the development of religious ideas by a climatic theory. The historian Jeremy Rich argues that this lecture revealed Ingersoll's racial views: "To explain how whites had supposedly reached the summit of intellectual achievement, Ingersoll resorted to the popular nineteenth-century view that climate dictated intelligence."[121] But while a racial component was always lurking in discussions of savages, Ingersoll did not make this work explicitly about race. His intention was to show how religion developed, not to explain racial disparities. He argued that savages, terrified of nature's inexplicable power saw it as "malevolent", which made them "[resort] to prayer, to flattery, to worship and to sacrifice."[122] Here Ingersoll seems to be influenced by Henry Thomas Buckle who similarly argued in the first volume of *The History of Civilization in England* (1857-61) for the explanatory power of environmental factors on the development of societies. For Buckle, violent natural events caused "among the people those feelings of awe, and of helplessness, on which all superstition is based, and without which no superstition can exist."[123] Once humans began to achieve supremacy over nature, progress occurred. With the rise of science and civilization, the belief that gods intervened in human affairs began to disappear. As Ingersoll explained, "[s]ince the invention of steamships and railways, so that the products of all countries can be easily interchanged, the gods have quit the business of producing famine."[124] Ingersoll believed progress was made by brave men and women using their powers of reason to oppose religious dogma. Without them, "we would have

[120] Ibid., 525.
[121] Jeremy Rich, "Heresy Is the Only True Religion: Richard Lynch Garner (1848-1920), A Southern Freethinker in Africa and America," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12, no. 1 (January 2013): 79.
[122] Robert Ingersoll, "The Gods," lecture delivered in 1872, in Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 1 (New York: The Dresden Publishing Co., C.P. Farrell, 1902), 28.
[123] Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861), 112.
[124] Robert Ingersoll, "The Gods," lecture delivered in 1872, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 1:40.

been cannibals, with pictures of wild beasts tattooed upon our flesh, dancing around some dried snake fetich."[125] Christianity was, to Ingersoll, based in a primitive fear that was more suitable to the early stages of human development. Freethought, on the other hand, was the doctrine that led to progress.

While freethinkers were interested in studying savage religion as a way to uncover the natural origins of Christianity, the image of the savage "Other" also served to shame or embarrass Christians by equating them with the lowest African or Native American savages. Such an equation, to be effective, relied upon the view that these groups were at the bottom of the civilizational and evolutionary hierarchy. In one case, Robert Ingersoll drew parallels between the supposed Native American custom of placing "the heads of their children between pieces of bark until the form of the skull is permanently changed" and Christians' putting their children "in the strait-jacket of a creed[.]"[126] This comparison is also seen in a cartoon by Watson Heston, the *Truth Seeker* cartoonist. This showed a side-by-side comparison of a white priest driving away a comet, in reference to the apocryphal story that Pope Calixtus III excommunicated Halley's Comet in 1456, and an African savage banging a drum as a way to drive away an eclipse (see figure 2).[127] The main target of these critiques was Christianity, but depended on portraying savages as especially ignorant and degraded.

Similarly, freethinkers drew comparisons between modern savages and the ancient Hebrews. Ingersoll said the ancient Jews were "as ignorant as the inhabitants of Central Africa" and the god of the Old Testament was "a poor, ignorant, superstitious savage."[128] This point was made in another Watson Heston cartoon, which contained a quote from the book of Psalms ("But God shall wound the head of his enemies, and the hairy scalp of such a one as goeth on still in his trespasses") and showed God's hand reaching down from the clouds to cut off the scalp of a man – in reference to the practice of scalping frequently associated with Native Americans (see figure 3).[129] The message was that the Old Testament was not a guide to morality or metaphysics for enlightened Westerners, but a creation of people no better than contemporary savages. These

[125] Robert Ingersoll, "The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child," lecture delivered in 1877, in ibid., 1:335.
[126] Robert Ingersoll, "Individuality," lecture delivered in 1873, in ibid., 1:186.
[127] "Parallel Cases," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 12 (March 22, 1890): 177.
[128] Robert Ingersoll, "About the Holy Bible," lecture delivered in 1894, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 3:455; Robert Ingersoll, "Superstition," lecture delivered in 1898, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 4:314; for other examples, see Robert Ingersoll, "Some Mistakes of Moses," lecture delivered in 1879, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 2:v; and E.J. Bowtell, "Man, God's Creator," *The Freethinker*, no. 124 (December 23, 1883): 407.
[129] "Does God Scalp His Enemies?," *The Truth Seeker* 19, no. 5 (January 30, 1892): 80.

kinds of arguments, whether consciously or not, reflected Tylor's notion of survivals. Superstitious and savage ideas had survived among civilized people long after they were meaningful. But these arguments also had racial implications. Readers could not miss the fact that modern Christians and ancient Jews were being compared with non-white savages who sat at the lowest rung of the racial and evolutionary hierarchy.

Criticisms of the ancient Hebrews should not however be taken to indicate anti-Jewish prejudice on the part of freethinkers. While Hittell argued that the ancient Hebrews were as savage as various primitive tribes,[130] he rushed to disassociate himself from crude anti-Jewish prejudice. He stated, "I trust that no one will understand my language, in this chapter or elsewhere, as countenancing the vulgar prejudices against the blood or faith of the modern Jews. […] I know many of them to be enlightened, liberal-minded, good men, and feel honored by their friendship."[131] This was hardly unique to Hittell. While freethinkers had few qualms about condemning the ancient Hebrews in the harshest terms, they were alert to the dangers of contemporary persecution of Jews and spoke out against it.[132]

**Conclusion**

The argument of this dissertation has been to cast doubt upon the "Race-Secularization Thesis" and to argue that a simple link between secularization and the rise of racialism is not tenable. But as with the first chapter on polygenesis, this chapter seems to provide support for the "Race-Secularization Thesis," since evolutionary doctrines – devised and supported by atheists and other freethinkers – appeared to allow for racialist interpretations. While pioneers of evolutionary thought like Darwin and Chambers both believed their theories gave support to monogenesis, it is clear that polygenesis – or at least a persisting belief in the importance of racial differences – could continue to flourish within this new framework. This could come in the direct support of a polygenist conception of evolution, as seen in the work of Edward Aveling, or more subtlely by the insertion of a racial hierarchy as a way to explain how humans made the seemingly impossible evolutionary jump up from apes, a tactic that Darwin and Huxley both employed.

[130] Hittell, *Evidences*, 1857, 1:91.
[131] Ibid., 1:103.
[132] See for example, Robert Ingersoll, "The Jews," undated, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 11:457–60; and Edward Aveling, "The Persecution of Jews," *National Reformer*, no. 1157 (February 12, 1882): 101–2.

Evolutionary thought also had implications for understanding the development of societies. In this case, racial hierarchies easily aligned with civilizational and evolutionary ones. Freethinkers' use of sociocultural evolution was particularly directed toward investigating religion's origins. By studying the religion of savages, one could glimpse religion in its primitive form. While Christianity was undoubtedly a more sophisticated version of this basic religion, it remained in essence the same. This tactic then demonstrated Christianity was not, as its proponents contended, a divine revelation, but was instead a dressed-up version of savage superstition. This comparison was designed to shame white Christians by equating them with their supposed civilizational and racial inferiors.

In these discussions, it was useful to portray savage races as especially degraded, either as ignorant and frightened thinkers who first conceived religious ideas, or as midway points on the evolutionary path between apes and civilized Europeans. In other words, these so-called lower races often came out badly in evolutionary theorizing. The next chapter, however, tells another tale and begins to offer arguments against the "Race-Secularization Thesis." When considered in a social, rather than theoretical perspective, the so-called lower races actually appeared quite favourable in the eyes of atheists and other freethinkers.


Figure 1: "Fossil Man," *Oracle of Reason* 1, no. 1 (1842). Image from https://archive.org/details/oracleofreasonor01lond, accessed 8 December 2016.

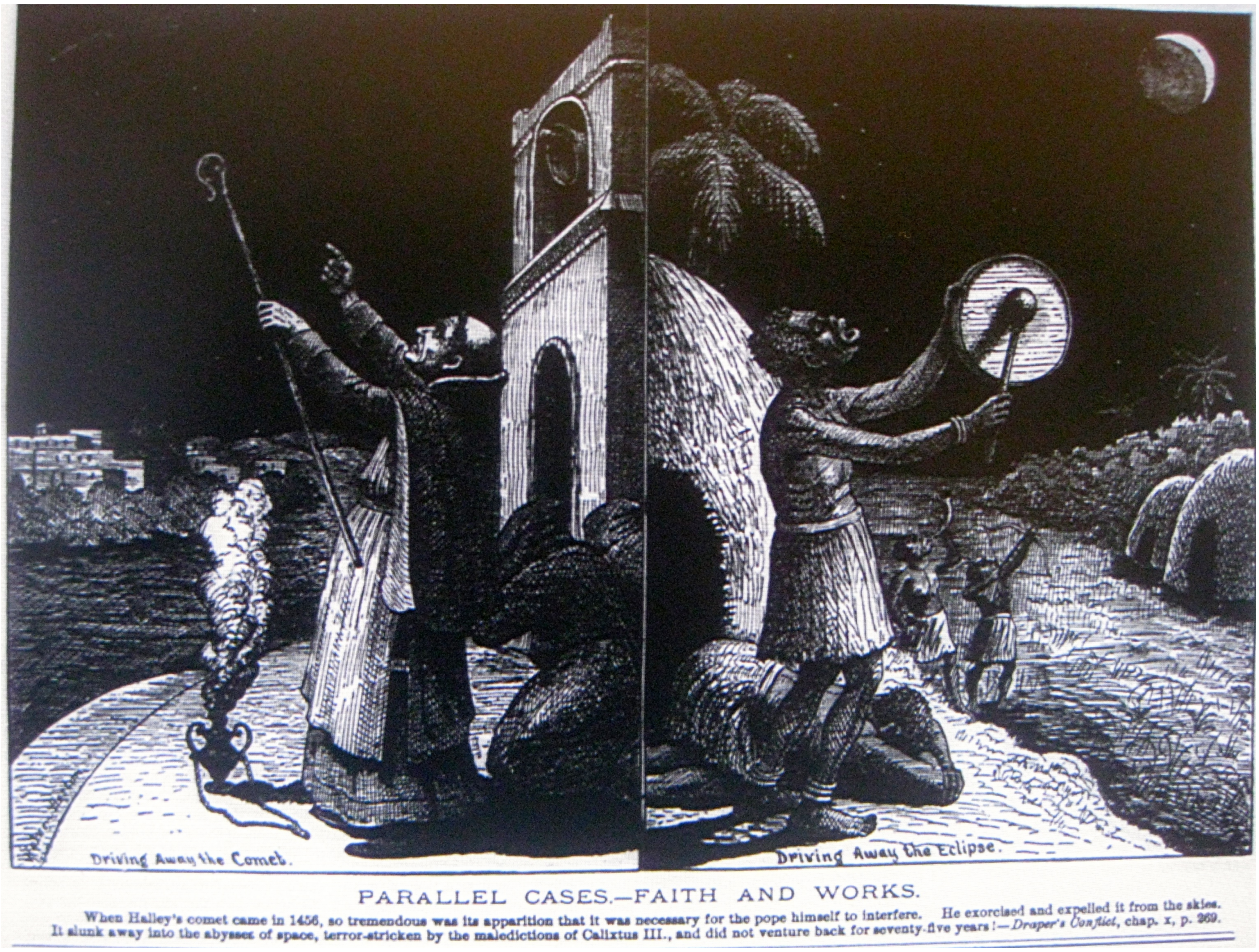


Figure 2: "Parallel Cases," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 12 (March 22, 1890). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

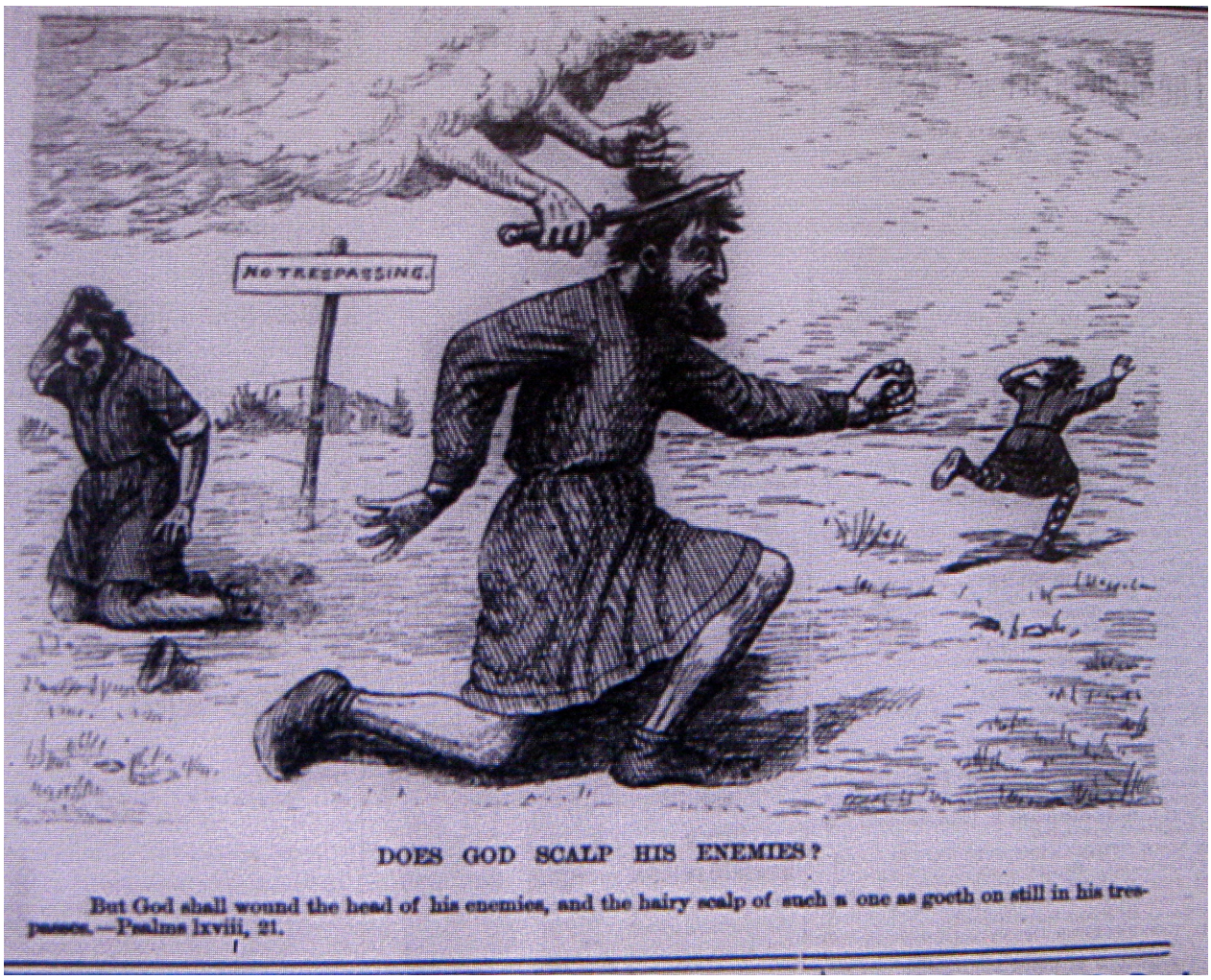


Figure 3: "Does God Scalp His Enemies?," *The Truth Seeker* 19, no. 5 (January 30, 1892). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

# CHAPTER 3

# IMAGES OF SAVAGERY

The previous two chapters showed how white freethinkers deemed non-white people to be racially inferior to and less evolved than Europeans. This offered support for the idea that secularization helped open the way for racialist attitudes to take hold. Here, however, we will begin to consider how these theoretical ideas informed freethinkers' views of race in a social and cultural perspective. In particular, this chapter looks at so-called savage races – those in Africa, Australasia, and the Americas. Polygenist and evolutionary views occurred within a context of a growing imperial presence in these regions by Britain and other European nations (and to a lesser extent the United States). While in some cases, an imperial presence had existed for centuries, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand subdued and dispossessed of their land, the westward expansion of white settlers in the United States and accompanying violence against Native Americans, and the parceling up of nearly all of Africa among European powers. Racialist attitudes helped in part to justify these conquests, and the successful conquests in turn reinforced a belief in white racial superiority.

Paradoxically, however, this chapter will show that many white freethinkers found positives in the societies of so-called savage people and even seemed, in some cases, to identify with them. Both atheists and savages were marginal groups, who faced persecution at the hands of more powerful Christians. Atheists recognized their minority status and this might have been part of the reason freethinkers opposed missionary incursions into savage societies. While white freethinkers were not opposed to imperialism *per se*, they were at least skeptical about Western society running roughshod over these groups. Because Western civilization was so tied up with Christianity, atheists were not convinced of its inherent superiority over other cultures. This helps to explain why an 1861 meeting to build support for the plight of Native Americans was

composed of "about half Spiritualists" and half "Infidels and doubtful Christians" and featured the editor of the *Boston Investigator*, Horace Seaver, as one of the speakers.[1]

But freethinkers' discussions of savage life ultimately said more about their own societies than savage ones. Indeed, whether their portrayal of savages was positive or negative depended on how such a portrayal would assist in their wider argument against Christianity. In the previous chapter we saw that portraying savages as especially degraded provided a useful tool in evolutionary narratives as a way to bridge the gap between civilized Europeans and apes. The contradictory view of savages was highlighted by E.B. Tylor, who noted the tendency of anthropologists "to treat the savage mind according to the needs of our argument, sometimes as extremely ignorant and inconsequent, at other times, as extremely observant and logical."[2] George Stocking has labelled this the "double image of savagery" and it will be seen throughout the chapter in freethinkers' discussions of savage life.[3]

A clear example of this comes in the first part of the chapter, which shows that some freethinkers used the alleged godlessness of savages as a way to refute the notion that belief in God was universal. This absence of religion was, however, sometimes turned against savage people as a way to demonstrate their primitiveness. But freethinkers also believed savages possessed a naive rationality that immunized them against Christian proselytizing and allowed them to see through Christianity's absurdity. Furthermore, savage life seemed in many ways preferable to British and American societies since it offered an apparent alternative to the harsh inequalities of capitalism. On practical questions of the treatment of savage people, freethinkers were critical of unwanted Christian missionary incursions into savage societies. Attempts to force civilization – a concept closely bound up with Christianity – on savages seemed to freethinkers to have had disastrous consequences. Freethinkers were likewise critical of imperial military adventures. Again, since these actions were either directly or indirectly bound up with Christianity, freethinkers opposed them. In their discussions of their own societies' military actions, they adopted a relativist position as they turned the dichotomy of civilized and savage on its head by questioning which side in the conflict was truly civilized. The often brutal behaviour

[1] "A Meeting in Behalf of Indians," *Boston Investigator*, no. 46 (March 6, 1861): 365; see also "Convention for the Indians," *Boston Investigator*, no. 47 (March 13, 1861): 371.
[2] Quoted in George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 187.
[3] Ibid.

of the British and American forces seemed to suggest that these so-called civilized societies might better deserve the label of savage.

As Michael Adas cautions, however, "sympathy for subjugated peoples, and even considerable understanding of their cultures, cannot necessarily be taken as proof that an individual was free of racial prejudice."[4] Indeed, it seems unlikely that freethinkers completely rejected their belief in the superiority of white, Western civilization over that of the savages. Yet any sense of superiority they might have felt was tempered by the unavoidable fact that their own societies and cultures were so intertwined with Christianity, a harmful and hypocritical creed from their perspective. This made freethinkers at least ambivalent about the wisdom of bringing civilization to foreign people.

**Godless Savages**

As we saw in the previous chapter, savage religion appeared primitive and, since savages were seen as living fossils through which the early history of mankind could be glimpsed, the study of their religion allowed one to understand the origins of religion. Others, however, contended that savages lacked religion altogether. This presented a paradox: either their lack of religion demonstrated their minds were so primitive as to be unable even to comprehend the notion of a deity, or it indicated that these people possessed superior minds compared to white Christians.

Many nineteenth-century authors noted that savages appeared to be entirely devoid of religion.[5] John Lubbock was one of the most prominent figures to hold this view. An archaeologist and gentleman in Darwin and Huxley's milieu, Lubbock's 1865 *Pre-Historic Times* discussed ancient humans and used modern savages to throw light on early humanity. He saw savages as intellectually, as well as morally, inferior to civilized Europeans. He cited numerous travelers on the question of savage religion and concluded,

> in the state of their religious conceptions, or rather in the absence of religious conceptions, we get another proof of extreme mental inferiority. It has been asserted over and over again that there is no race of men so degraded as to be entirely without

[4] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 341.

[5] Matthew Day, "Godless Savages and Superstitious Dogs: Charles Darwin, Imperial Ethnography, and the Problem of Human Uniqueness," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (2008): 60.

> a religion – without some idea of a deity. So far from this being true, the very reverse is the case. Many, we might almost say all, of the most savage races are, according to the nearly universal testimony of travellers, in this condition.[6]

Lubbock dismissed travelers' reports that savages did have ideas of God: "How, for instance, can a people who are unable to count their own fingers, possibly raise their mind so far as to admit even the rudiments of a religion."[7] In a later work, he further argued that "[s]ailors, traders, and philosophers, Roman Catholic priests and Protestant missionaries, in ancient and in modern times, in every part of the globe, have concurred in stating that there are races of men altogether devoid of religion."[8]

While Lubbock presented a gradualist and naturalistic account of religion that accorded with the theories of E.B. Tylor, his belief that savages were without religion altogether was disputed. Tylor picked apart Lubbock's examples and noted that many were the result of travelers' misunderstanding, intentionally or not, savage religious practice.[9] Darwin too argued against the idea that savages lacked religion. Matthew Day has convincingly shown that for centuries, authors had speculated that religious belief was a uniquely human trait and therefore to call savages godless was to also say they were somehow less than human. By providing a naturalistic account of religion in *Descent of Man* that saw rudimentary superstitions present in animals, Darwin wished, in Day's words, "to sever the traditional association between the moral status of being human and the anthropological status of having a religion."[10]

Lubbock and others did not posit godless savages explicitly as a way to criticize Christianity. Freethinkers, however, drew upon such accounts to refute the Christian argument that belief in God was universal and to therefore show the legitimacy of atheism. In *The Freethinker's Text-Book* (1876), Bradlaugh cited Lubbock's *Pre-Historic Times* and *Origin of Civilisation* on the existence of races who had no belief in God and mined his work for travelers' testimony on this account.[11] W. Mann similarly wrote two series of articles for the *Freethinker* on

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[6] John Lubbock, *Pre-Historic Times, As Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1865), 467–8.
[7] Ibid., 470.
[8] John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man: Mental and Social Condition of Savages* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1870), 121.
[9] E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871), 1: 379–84.
[10] Day, "Godless Savages," 58.
[11] Charles Bradlaugh, *The Freethinker's Text-Book, Part I. Religion: What and Why? Or, God=X* (London: Charles Watts, 1876), 97–102.

the question of the universality of religion or belief in God. One facet of the argument was the use of travelers' accounts and anthropological works, again drawing from Lubbock, to demonstrate that many tribes were indeed without a belief in God and that these beliefs were therefore not innate, but had to be taught.[12]

Some freethinkers used savages' lack of belief as proof of their low status. E.R. Woodward, admitted that "it is a strange reflection for the Freethinker" to ponder "that there are people existing at the present day who are too degenerate to be even religious."[13] But such a view was not the norm; more often the irreligion of savages was seen favourably. Savages, to atheists and freethinkers, were untainted by Christianity and possessed a simple, even child-like, rationality that allowed them to see through the claims of foreign missionaries. Freethinkers therefore routinely cast savages as foils to missionary attempts at proselytizing. A standard of nineteenth-century thought was to portray savages as having the minds of children,[14] but this child-like naivety seemed to allow them, in freethinkers' narratives, to successfully resist Christian dogma. The sentiment behind Thomas Paine's famous quip that "any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system" seems to be what freethinkers had in mind as they trotted out numerous examples, real and imagined, of savages successfully exposing the absurdities of Christianity.[15]

One example of this came from a confrontation between Samuel Baker, a Christian explorer, and an East African chief named Comorro (also rendered Commora or Comoro). Baker recorded the conversation in a travel memoir in which he tried in vain to convince Comorro of the reality of an afterlife.[16] The story was reported in the freethought press, intending to show the superior wisdom of the African and more importantly the absurdity of the Christian.[17] The most famous case of this kind of confrontation, however, was Bishop John Colenso's "conversion" at

[12] W. Mann, "The Idea of God Not Universal," *The Freethinker*, no. 1709 (April 19, 1914): 245–46; W. Mann, "The Idea of God Not Universal (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1710 (April 26, 1914): 266–67; W. Mann, "The Idea of God Not Universal (3)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1711 (May 3, 1914): 277–78; W. Mann, "Is Religious Belief Universal?," *The Freethinker*, no. 1717 (June 14, 1914): 380–81; W. Mann, "Is Religious Belief Universal? (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1718 (June 21, 1914): 389–90; W. Mann, "Is Religious Belief Universal? (3)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1719 (June 28, 1914): 410–11.
[13] E.R. Woodward, "The Religion of the Savage," *The Freethinker*, no. 1058 (November 3, 1901): 693.
[14] See for example Lubbock, *Pre-Historic Times*, 465; Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1871, 1: 27.
[15] Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1898), 46.
[16] Samuel White Baker, *The Albert N'Yanza, Great Basin Of The Nile, and Exploration of the Nile Sources* (London: Macmillan, 1866), 167–70.
[17] "Negro Infidelity," *Boston Investigator*, no. 47 (March 20, 1872): 3; Sanford M. Clark, "A Savage's Philosophy," *The Truth Seeker* 13, no. 18 (May 1, 1886): 275; see also Mitchell Stephens, *Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13–5.

the hands of the Zulu. Colenso, the first bishop of Natal from 1854 to his death in 1883, was already theologically unorthodox, but was put on the path to further skepticism in 1861 by questions from his Zulu assistant, William Ndigi, about the truth of the Noah's Ark story. In 1862, Colenso began working on his seven-part tome *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (1862-1879), which argued the Pentateuch could not be considered inspired or historical given its many inconsistencies and contradictions. In 1863, the Bishop of Cape Town, Robert Gray, convicted Colenso for "false teaching," though the ruling was overturned two years later on the grounds that Gray had no such authority.[18]

While many contemporaries mocked Colenso as a fool for his "conversion" at the hands of the Zulu,[19] the incident became a staple of freethought lore throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. As George Macdonald described it, "[t]he criticisms of the intelligent African were so shrewd that the bishop himself became convinced that the theory of the inspiration of the Bible was untenable, and he wrote his famous work on the Pentateuch, which has never been answered."[20] While freethinkers praised Colenso for his open-mindedness toward the Zulu criticisms of the Bible, one writer in the *Freethinker* urged that "we should not forget 'the intelligent native'" who sparked Colenso's inquiry.[21] Freethinkers were perhaps too quick to look to Colenso as one of their own, since his own views remained on the liberal wing of Christianity and he never accepted their atheism.

Nonetheless, these confrontations between Christians and savages allowed freethinkers to find common cause with their non-white brothers. The persona of a savage or barbarian offered an ideal guise for religious and social criticism since their outsider status enabled an analysis free from initial biases. European writers in the eighteenth century occasionally adopted a foreign guise for their critiques – a trope Anthony Pagden describes as the "savage critic."[22] Montesquieu adopted an outsider's perspective in *Persian Letters* (1721), which described the fictional voyage of two Persian travelers through France. Prominent French freethinkers in the eighteenth century

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[18] On Colenso's life, see Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883* (Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg: Ravan Press; University of Natal Press, 1983).
[19] Ibid., 133–4.
[20] George Macdonald, "Notes at Large," *The Truth Seeker* 43, no. 47 (November 18, 1916): 745.
[21] Rusticus, "'The Intelligent Zulu,'" *The Freethinker*, no. 950 (October 8, 1899): 651; see also D.M. Bennett, "Around the World," *The Truth Seeker* 5, no. 25 (June 22, 1878): 393; Kersey Graves, *The Bible of Bibles; Or, Twenty-Seven "Divine Revelations,"* 4th ed. (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1879), 306; "The African Zulus," *Boston Investigator*, no. 43 (February 4, 1885): 5.
[22] Anthony Pagden, "The Savage Critic: Some European Images of the Primitive," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 13, Colonial and Imperial Themes Special Number (1983): 32–45.

also used this tactic: Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* (from 1767, set in North America) and Denis Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (from 1772, set in Tahiti) both used savage protagonists as a way to make social and religious criticisms. Nineteenth-century freethinkers also found this literary technique useful. By draping themselves in a foreign garb, they could view various routine cultural practices through unfamiliar eyes and therefore point out their absurdity or hypocrisy. This kind of criticism sometimes found humour in the strangeness of the foreigner or their confusion about aspects of Western culture. More importantly, however, was that the satires directly challenged notions of Western superiority.

An example of this is an 1863 book on the Colenso controversy by George Holyoake. Here he adopted the persona of a "London Zulu" as he defended Colenso against one of the many refutations published against him – this by the Scottish clergyman John Cumming.[23] There was no doubt that Holyoake intended to link the cause of freethinkers and the Zulu, as he noted their former ethnographical name, "Kaffirs," came from the Arabic for "infidel."[24] Aside from defending Colenso's arguments on the Pentateuch, Holyoake, through his Zulu character, also challenged assumptions about the supposed savagery of the Zulu. He noted the irony of labelling the Zulu as savages for "[venerating] the bloody and ferocious memory" of their leader Shaka Zulu while the French venerated Napoleon "who deluged Europe in blood, and his own country too […]." Given this, Holyoake mischievously noted, "the Zulus are not so much behind European civilization."[25] But the Zulu possessed an excellent moral sense, one which clearly did not come from the Bible: "trustiness as noble, devotion as honest, and fidelity as unswerving, and incorruptible as ever the world saw, dwells in the Zulu – ignorant of Moses and all his Hebrew wonders."[26]

Even before that, an 1853 article in Holyoake's *Reasoner* favourably discussed the "Kaffirs" of South Africa.[27] While the "sad, wild, and untameable race […] are sometimes spoken of with contempt" the author believed "that strong speculative faculty lies at the bottom of their character." Some commentators had also suggested they were the ancestors of "a race

[23] John Cumming, *Moses Right, and Bishop Colenso Wrong* (London: Shaw, 1863).
[24] A London Zulu [George Holyoake], *Cumming Wrong; Colenso Right: A Reply to the Rev. Dr. Cumming's "Moses Right Colenso Wrong"* (London: Farrah and Dunbar, undated), 8.
[25] Ibid., 19.
[26] Ibid., 24.
[27] As an ethnological term in the nineteenth century, this was usually used in regard to the Xhosa, but the usage here likely refers to a range of ethnic groups on the East coast of South Africa without distinguishing between them. The term is highly pejorative today.

who refused to accept the Mahomedan tenets in the seventh century […].” Indeed, “[t]he very name of Kaffir signifies the rejection of a faith.”[28] Robert Ryder, also writing in the *Reasoner*, explained in an 1856 article that the Zulu “are a shrewd race of men, very powerful, and very rich, logical and witty, real orators. When the missionary has told his story, they laugh and tell him that their grandmothers told them such tales”, while “they themselves believe nothing, and care for nothing, except oxen and wives.”[29] Others were less charitable. While acknowledging the “incisive logic” of the Zulu which led Colenso to begin questioning the Pentateuch, Douglas Blackburn noted that in his twenty-year experience in South Africa the people were unable to comprehend spiritual topics and the individual “Kaffir” “has no perception of humor apart from physical buffonry [sic], and sarcasm or irony are lost on him.”[30] The lack of religious understanding was, as we have seen, a double-edged sword for savage people. Were they irreligious because they possessed formidable intellects, or were their minds too primitive to even comprehend such ideas?

On the whole, most freethinkers favoured the first explanation, at least in so far as it suited their argument against Christianity. Playing on the theme of the wise Zulu, an article from 1882 in the *National Reformer* purportedly came from “an unconverted Zulu” living in Britain and writing back to a friend in South Africa. The author attempted to render a pidgin dialect in his discussion of the Colenso encounter:

> English nation once sent very big mystery-man to convert poor Zulu to English religion; but poor Zulu and intelligent bishop talked together, and so Zulu converted bishop instead. So Bishop Colenso became a good man and kind friend to Zulus, and not like Christians, who shoot us and steal our women and children and cattle.

The author mocked Christians over their hypocrisy toward the Ten Commandments and wondered why the commandments against killing and stealing were not obeyed. Perhaps, the author speculated, these commandments did not apply to foreigners, “[e]lse why do Christians covet and steal our land and make black people slaves? […] Why they kill thousands of Zulus who never did them harm except in defending fatherland?”[31] When the author was asked by a clergyman in England about sending more missionaries to South Africa, the author declined,

[28] “Free Discussion in Kaffirland,” *The Reasoner* 14, no. 347 (1853): 35.
[29] Robert Ryder, “The Kaffirs and the Missionaries,” *The Reasoner*, no. 518 (April 27, 1856): 133.
[30] Douglas Blackburn, “The Unregenerate Kaffir,” *The Freethinker*, no. 1695 (January 11, 1914): 21.
[31] An Unconverted Zulu, “An Unconverted Zulu,” *National Reformer*, no. 1192 (September 10, 1882): 179.

suggesting "it much better if Zulu chiefs come over to English land to change the hearts of English people, so that they grow just and good, and love their black brothers in distant lands, and no longer do them wrong and unkindness."[32] This article turned the dichotomy of civilization and savagery on its head by viewing Christian society from an outsider's perspective.

Autonomos, an already-pseudonymous author in the *National Reformer*, adopted a further guise, purporting to have translated a letter from "Gelele, King of Dahome" to "Soapy Sam" – Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, the foe of Thomas Huxley in their famed debate on Darwinism. In his letter, Gelele addressed Wilberforce as "the most cunning of the chief fetish-men of England" and repeatedly referred to priests as "mystery-men." He complained that he was "called a savage in England" even though he had forbidden his countrymen from eating missionaries, a difficult task since they were "very nice eating" and "most quarrelsome when alive."[33] Gelele pointed out the hypocrisy of Christians denouncing the superstitious practices of Africans. He asked, for example, "[h]ow can you taunt the African races with their local Gods, when the English believe in three Gods who favour *them* above all other Christians?"[34] He also favourably contrasted his people's relatively peaceful behaviour with that of the English by referring to the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 in Jamaica, and the subsequent crackdown, which was "far more bloody than those of Dahome."[35] In this way, the barbarity of the English was meant to have shocked even the most savage African.

Freethinkers did not just rely on fictional personas, but also highlighted legitimate examples of non-white people who had converted to freethought as a way to demonstrate the universal appeal of the worldview. A.L. Posey, a Native American student from the Indian Territory (in present-day Oklahoma), wrote to the *Boston Investigator* in 1890 to sing the praises of the paper, which was "the grandest and the most scientific paper published within the bounds of America." He spoke in glowing terms of the paper's virtues like its "exhaustless intellectual brilliancy" which would "unveil the fretful heavens of human superstition to brightness." L.K. Washburn, the editor, added a note at the bottom of the letter that read:

> The glowing words of our Indian friend are appreciated by the publisher of this paper. The Investigator has stood for the rights of man, white, black, or red, and has always

[32] Ibid., 180.
[33] Autonomos, "Gelele, King of Dahome, to Soapy Sam," *National Reformer*, no. 344 (December 16, 1866): 387.
[34] Ibid., 388.
[35] Ibid., 389.

> been devoted to the best interests of the whole human race, of whatever land or color. We are pleased to know of one emancipated red brother and extend to him the cordial fellowship of Liberalism.[36]

Freethinkers also claimed the Hawaiian King Kalakua and the Filipino resistance leader Emilio Aguinaldo as their freethought brethren.[37] Rather than seeing these so-called savage people as racial and civilizational Others, white freethinkers actually saw them as allies in the cause of freethought.

**Savages Living the Good Life**

Studies of savage life appeared to show that many savage groups lacked religion, a fact that struck at the Christian argument of the universality of a belief in God. But since Christians held that morality and religion were inextricably linked, freethinkers had to further demonstrate that a lack of religion did not inhibit morality but in fact allowed for a purer form, untainted by the hypocrisies of Christian society. Freethinkers sought to demonstrate this and found that savage societies offered alternative ways of living that were particularly appealing in light of freethinkers' own economic and social marginalization. Of course it is unlikely that freethinkers would have actually preferred living in a savage society. But they did find positives in it that offered alternatives to the problems in their own societies, particularly the excesses of capitalism leaving many impoverished.

Within an evolutionary framework, however, freethinkers might consider savage morality as a rudimentary form of that of civilized Europeans. Darwin believed that while savages possessed morality, it was chiefly practiced between members of the tribe.[38] Winwood Reade took a similar view to his idol Darwin, saying that "savages within their own communion do live according to the golden rule", but "they are not in reality good men."[39] This was because their moral code only extended to those within their own society. This was not true morality, but "only a kind of honour among thieves." Nonetheless, savage morality gradually extended beyond their

[36] A.L. Posey, "Letter from an Indian Student," *Boston Investigator*, no. 24 (September 17, 1890): 6; for a fictional example, see Big Eagle, "From a Chippewa Indian," *The Truth Seeker* 5, no. 16 (April 20, 1878): 251.
[37] "King Kalakua's Religion," *Boston Investigator*, no. 45 (February 11, 1891): 6; "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 919 (March 5, 1899): 150.
[38] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1871), 94–5.
[39] Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Trubner & Co., 1872), 446–7.

own families and tribes to eventually encompass all people.[40] E.B. Tylor was more positive than these thinkers and argued that any kind of social life necessitated morality: "Without a code of morals, the very existence of the rudest tribe would be impossible; and indeed the moral standards of even savage races are to no small extent well-defined and praiseworthy."[41] Morals, then, had a natural origin: they were not divinely inspired, but had evolved.

This is a clear example of the "double image of savagery." When thinking about savage life in terms of social evolution, savage morality seemed inferior compared to that of civilized people. Yet when approaching savage life as a way to critique the problems of Western society, many freethinkers found that savage life actually had much to teach Westerners. As I noted in the introduction, nineteenth-century freethought was descended in large part from the socialism of Robert Owen and working-class radicalism more generally. It was no surprise therefore that many freethinkers believed savage societies offered an alternative to Western capitalism. As one author in the *Boston Investigator* explained with regard to Native Americans, "[i]n the forest, virtue is native, and hospitality impulsive; the hand is open to receive the wretched, not as in Christendom, like a beggar, but as a brother." A hypocritical disregard for the poor pervaded Christian society, but equality and fair treatment formed the basis of Native American society. The article further quoted George Catlin, known for his artistic depictions of Native Americans during his travels in the American West: "They possess everything that they want or regard as a luxury. They have no inequality, no confinement to business hours; no debts, notes in bank, credit system, no competition!"[42]

Other authors made similar observations. Emily G. Taylor in the *Truth Seeker* explained that the so-called Hottentots of South Africa, "in the excellence of their morals, surpassed all nations of the earth" despite lacking ideas of God or future rewards or punishments. She also noted that this society had not succumbed to the problems of capitalism: "Peace and prosperity reigned; no wealthy class was supported in idleness by the toiling poor; no dens of infamy, no saloons, and – no churches."[43] Robert Ryder, who lived in Pietermaritzburg (in Natal), similarly noted the many virtues of the irreligious Zulu, including their honesty, faithfulness, and hospitality. The Zulu were "Epicureans to the back bone" who lived only for "freedom and

[40] Ibid., 447.
[41] E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1871), 326.
[42] Horace Seaver, "The Indians, Heathen, &c.," *Boston Investigator*, no. 45 (March 4, 1857): 2.
[43] "The Christian and the Hottentot," *The Truth Seeker* 22, no. 50 (December 14, 1895): 790.

pleasure". Ryder questioned the use, therefore, that Christianity – and the capitalist system that went along with it – would have for such a people who lived a simple but plentiful life.[44] The Zulu had "[p]lenty of wives, plenty of cattle, plenty of land, plenty of corn" and Ryder encouraged the predominantly working-class readers of the *Reasoner* to "contrast that with your condition."[45] In other words, a simple savage life provided all one could want for happiness, while Christianity and capitalism seemed to leave people destitute.

The highly moral savage became a common figure in freethought journals. Reports abounded about the superior morality of various groups in Africa,[46] the "Arafuras" of the Aru Islands,[47] the Dyaks of Borneo,[48] the Samoyedic people of Siberia,[49] Australian aborigines,[50] and the indigenous people of the Philippines.[51] Freethinkers also sought to refute negative stereotypes about savage people. In the *National Reformer*, Charles Bradlaugh's daughter, Hypatia, favourably reviewed Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor*, an 1881 work that offered a sympathetic account of the history of indigenous people in America. The book, Hypatia believed, would help to dispel "the false impressions that we have so long harbored concerning the North American Indians."[52] George C. Bartlett wrote an article that refuted the idea that aboriginal people in Fiji engaged in cannibalism. In fact, he claimed, "[a] more gentle, loving, peaceable race of people I never met."[53] In another case, a correspondent from New Zealand, Charles Rae, wrote to the *National Reformer* in 1879 to chide Annie Besant for her quip that some Maori, "desiring to thoroughly digest Christianity," killed and ate five missionaries. Rae insisted that such a stereotype was no longer valid: "to the credit of the Maori be it said, that cannibalism no longer exists."[54]

This is not to say all freethinkers avoided the temptation of making jokes about the alleged cannibalism practiced by savages. The butt of the jokes, however, was usually naive

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[44] Robert Ryder, "Secular Life in Africa," *The Reasoner*, no. 631 (June 23, 1858): 194.
[45] Ryder, "The Kaffirs and the Missionaries," 133.
[46] Graves, *The Bible of Bibles*, 216; "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 467 (July 13, 1890): 328.
[47] Robert Cooper, *The Infidel's Text-Book, Being the Substance of Thirteen Lectures on the Bible*, American Edition (Boston: J.P. Mendum, 1858), 262–3.
[48] "The Dyaks of Borneo," *The Truth Seeker* 12, no. 41 (October 10, 1885): 646.
[49] "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 759 (February 9, 1896): 88.
[50] Joseph Symes, "Religion of the 'Black Fellows,'" *The Freethinker*, no. 1345 (May 5, 1907): 282–83.
[51] Eugene Macdonald, "Filipinos Who Are Moral Without Religion," *The Truth Seeker* 25, no. 37 (September 10, 1898): 584–5; Hyland C. Kirk, "Religions of the Filipinos," *The Truth Seeker* 33, no. 47 (November 24, 1906): 738.
[52] Hypatia Bradlaugh, "A Century of Dishonor," *National Reformer*, no. 1248 (August 19, 1883): 123.
[53] George C. Bartlett, "Is Cannibalism a Myth?," *The Truth Seeker* 35, no. 36 (September 5, 1908): 566.
[54] Charles Rae, "Eating Missionaries," *National Reformer*, no. 995 (April 20, 1879): 294.

missionaries, but the humour depended on savages appearing especially degraded. For example, one news item in 1867 in the *National Reformer* noted the death of a West African king, who – in a play on the popular abolitionist phrase – "was a man and a brother, and lunched off cold missionary, when in season, with great regularity."[55] These kinds of jokes were frequently inserted as short paragraphs in the news sections of periodicals or at the bottom of columns to fill space. While they demonstrated the persistence of crude stereotypes, they also existed side-by-side in the freethought press with more favourable and thoughtful views of savages.

These discussions of the superior morality of savages might seem to follow the trope of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "noble savage," with its connotations of a naive and rose-coloured image of savage races. One commentator in the *National Reformer*, however, rejected talk of sentimentalism toward African savages even as he criticized British interventions in Africa: "We have no admiration for all the cant that is talked of the noble savage, but we can see that if Rousseau were again in our midst, he might still say that nothing but selfishness and greed actuate too many of the rulers of mankind."[56] As Ter Ellingson explains, however, Rousseau never actually used the term "noble savage." In fact, Ellingson shows that this phrase, while first used in the seventeenth century, disappeared until it was resurrected in the mid nineteenth century by John Crawfurd, a chief ally of James Hunt in the Ethnological and Anthropological Societies, as part of a program pushing their racialist views. From Crawfurd, the phrase was transmitted to other influential anthropologists like Lubbock and Tylor.[57] As we saw in the first chapter, freethinkers were heavily influenced by anthropologists, so the author felt the need to preface his critique of imperialism with a denial of sentimentalism. Most freethinkers however felt no need to make this kind of proviso when discussing savage life.

**Criticism of Missionaries**

It might be too much to say that freethinkers genuinely admired savage cultures, but they nonetheless viewed them with enough respect that they did not want to see their societies trampled underfoot by Christian missionaries. Concepts of civilization were closely bound up with Christianity, and civilizing heathens often included converting them to Christianity.

[55] "Summary of News," *National Reformer*, no. 367 (May 26, 1867): 328; for another example see "Vegetarian Preferred," *The Truth Seeker* 39, no. 42 (October 19, 1912): 664.
[56] Jacques Bonhomme, "Our Little War with the Zulus," *National Reformer*, no. 986 (February 16, 1879): 100.
[57] See especially chapter seventeen of Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

Freethinkers' true targets, as always, were Christian missionaries, yet freethinkers certainly sympathized with the people whose societies were destabilized by the introduction of Christianity.

While humanitarian opinion in the mid nineteenth century worried about the dangers of white contact with indigenous people, many Christian humanitarians thought that white missionaries would actually serve as protective buffers between indigenous people and white settlers.[58] Freethinkers naturally disagreed with this since they did not distinguish between settlers and missionaries: all were agents of imperialism, in their eyes. While some historians have argued that missionaries assisted with the spread of imperialism, Andrew Porter has convincingly argued that in fact there was frequent tension between missionaries and colonial officials. Missionaries were as likely to push against colonial rule as they were to harmonize with it. Their relationship with empire ebbed and flowed over the course of the century and they always evaluated this relationship based on how it helped to achieve their own goals.[59]

One common narrative held throughout this period was that indigenous people were dying out in the face of white settlement.[60] This was, to freethinkers, connected with the introduction of Christianity into these societies. Freethinkers saw themselves as powerless to slow the incursion of Christian missionaries into foreign lands, where the missionaries would unintentionally bring on the demise of the local races. As George Macdonald put it about a group in Tierra del Fuego, "[t]he remnant is being Christianized off the face of the earth."[61] The idea of Europeans as bringers of destruction can be seen in an 1893 cartoon by Watson Heston. On one side stood a Native American figure who received only death, slavery and violence, while on the other a European figure reaped wealth and dominion over the New World (see figure 1).[62]

Part of the reason for the devastation wrought by foreign invaders was that Christianity demanded a drastic change of lifestyle among native people: not only did the people need to change their religion, they also needed to adopt an alien lifestyle. J.M. Wheeler cited the work of

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[58] See chapter six of Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004).
[59] Ibid.
[60] Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology*, 275–83.
[61] George Macdonald, "'A Disappearing Race,'" *The Truth Seeker* 36, no. 24 (June 12, 1909): 372; see also "Influence of the 'Pale-Faces,'" *Boston Investigator*, no. 7 (June 6, 1860): 52; "Civilization – Negroes, Indians," *Boston Investigator*, no. 29 (November 11, 1874): 4; G.W. Foote, "A Maori Messiah," *National Reformer*, no. 1023 (October 26, 1879): 693; Henry Henshaw, "Missions and Mission Indians of Upper and Lower California," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 32 (August 9, 1890): 503.
[62] "Some Providential Gifts," *The Truth Seeker* 20, no. 22 (June 3, 1893): 337.

H.R. Fox Bourne, the leader of the Aborigines Protection Society, about the negative impact of Christian civilization on indigenous people. These people were forced to wear Western dress, making them "susceptible to cold and disease."[63] The reason wearing clothes was harmful was explained by W. Mann, in reference to the South Sea Islanders: "In the native state the body, being saturated with cocoanut [sic] oil, sheds the water like a duck's back, and in a few minutes after the shower, in a tropical sun, he is perfectly warm and comfortable. On the other hand, when clothed, he sits cowering in his drenched garments" leading to various illnesses.[64] While there were pleas for compassion toward native people, in the case of Mann, the discussions relied partly upon the peculiar racial characteristics of indigenous people: the ability to shed water "like a duck's back" for example.

Freethinkers believed that missionaries disrupted local economies by attempting to import a Western capitalist lifestyle to savage societies. This can be seen in Robert Ryder's discussion of Zulu society. There, everyone's basic needs were met, yet "[i]f he [the Zulu] turns Christian, he becomes melancholy and desponding, begins to wear clothes, and soon goes ragged and tattered; he loses caste with his tribe; he is alone in the world – and ultimately becomes the poor day labourer!"[65] A cartoon by Watson Heston played upon the idea of the "White Man's Burden" being brought to the Philippines, a territory recently acquired by the Americans. The burden in this case was actually taxes, debts, litigation, along with religion, that the white Americans would unload upon the simple Filipinos (see figure 2).[66] Chapman Cohen also discussed how missionaries' encouragement of local industries damaged societies – in his example, Eskimo society – by redirecting resources away from traditional methods of gathering food. The introduction of firearms further disrupted traditional hunting techniques and led to the depopulation of the reindeer. While the Eskimos' lifestyle required frequent migration, this was hindered by missionary attempts to force them to remain in one location.[67] "[*I*]*f* it is necessary to bring the natives […] under Western influences," Cohen said in another article, "then the trader is a much better civiliser than the missionary […]."[68] But given the emphasis on "if" in the sentence, Cohen seemed unconvinced of the necessity of making these people civilized. This

[63] J.M. Wheeler, "Christians and Heathens," *The Freethinker*, no. 851 (November 14, 1897): 722.
[64] W. Mann, "The Missionary in the South Seas," *The Freethinker*, no. 1533 (December 11, 1910): 794.
[65] Ryder, "The Kaffirs and the Missionaries," 133.
[66] "The White Man's Burden," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 14 (April 8, 1899): 209.
[67] Chapman Cohen, "Civilising the Eskimo," *The Freethinker*, no. 1544 (February 26, 1911): 130.
[68] Chapman Cohen, "Papuans, Limited," *The Freethinker*, no. 1179 (February 28, 1904): 131.

emphasis on free trade as a natural civilizer, in contrast to direct interventions by missionaries or colonial administrators, mirrored the arguments of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics of empire.[69]

Many of these themes are captured in a satirical dialogue reprinted in the *Freethinker*, which contrasted "civilized" life with that of the savage. The dialogue occurred between "a large, strong man dressed in a uniform, and armed to the teeth", representing Christian civilization, and a native African. The man explained to the African that he wanted to "make a reasonable human being out of [him] if it is possible." This involved wearing clothes "like a white man", but the African protested that it was too hot to wear those clothes and, since he was unaccustomed to them, he "shall perish from the heat." But the man replied, "Well if you do die, you will have the satisfaction of being a martyr to civilisation." The African, despite his pleas that food was plentiful and he therefore had no need to work, was told that "[y]ou must settle down to some occupation, my friend. If you don't, I shall have to lock you up a vagrant." The African suggested he could start a coffeehouse since he had so much coffee and sugar, but the Christian demanded payment for setting up the shop. When the African asked why, the man replied, "[a]s an occupation tax, you ignorant heathen. Do you expect to get all the blessings of civilisation for nothing?" When the African explained he had no money, the man said he would take payment in sugar and coffee, and if not, he would put the African in jail. The African muttered, "[w]hat a great thing Christian civilisation is", and the story ended with his disappearance into the woods, never to be heard from again.[70] Although the sketch was meant to be comedic, it also highlighted again how Christianity and a capitalist lifestyle seemed to go hand-in-hand, causing a disruption of savage societies.

Missionaries also encouraged vices like alcoholism in the eyes of freethinkers. This was almost a law of history since, according to Robert Ingersoll, "when a superior race meets an inferior, the inferior imitates only the vices of the superior, and the superior those of the inferior."[71] A cartoon in the *Freethinker* depicted a degraded African convert, smoking while

[69] See especially chapter eight of Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in Africa 1895-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1968).
[70] "Christian Civilisation in Africa," *The Freethinker*, no. 208 (August 2, 1885): 247.
[71] Robert Ingersoll, "Is Avarice Triumphant?," article from 1891, in Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 7 (New York: The Dresden Publishing Co., C.P. Farrell, 1902), 436.

holding an empty bottle of rum (see figure 3).[72] A series of cartoons by Watson Heston likewise demonstrated that while civilization might bring technological benefits to savage societies, more insidious things also came with Christianity, like "Christian Rum" (see figures 4 and 5).[73] Given that so many freethinkers were teetotallers, the introduction of alcohol into previously uncorrupted societies would have been particularly appalling.[74]

Even if Christianity were not innately harmful, to freethinkers it was, at best, a useless doctrine. Great amounts of resources and time were expended teaching nonsensical doctrines when these same resources might be better used helping people at home or at least teaching useful skills to foreign savages.[75] From the 1860s to the 1890s, criticism of missionaries in general, not just from freethinkers, concerned the high costs of supporting missions and the lavish expenditures of the missionaries.[76] In some cases, freethinkers' discussions about the wastefulness of missionaries were vindictive toward savages. This was the case for Eugene Macdonald, who had no doubt about the need to civilize Native Americans, but questioned the missionaries' method. To achieve this required a "tough love" approach. As he argued, "the way to civilize them is to place them among civilized surroundings. As long as Indians are allowed to hav [sic] guns, ponies, and practically unlimited range, they will remain nomads. Surroundings, climate, and habits of life are all-powerful influences to mold [sic] the character of races." In the same conditions, even "[i]ndustrious, intelligent white men […] would degenerate into vagabonds in a few decades […]." Since Native Americans were simply too lazy to work on their own, they should be given vacant land and then left to their own devices, "for, until hunger drives him, an Indian will not work." On the other hand, "they never will become civilized by learning the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ."[77] On the whole, however, Macdonald's hostility to Native

[72] "An African Convert," *The Freethinker*, no. 330 (November 27, 1887): 377; see also "News of the Week," *The Truth Seeker* 9, no. 6 (February 11, 1882): 81; John P. Guild, "The Zulu's Belief Proves Neither His Spooks Nor His Gods," *The Truth Seeker* 19, no. 25 (June 18, 1892): 394.
[73] "A Yankee Way to Make Converts," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 20 (May 17, 1890): 305; "A Few Other Christian Tools for the Consideration of the Heathen," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 21 (May 24, 1890): 321.
[74] On freethinkers' teetotalism, see for example Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 144–5, 223.
[75] See for example John Watts, "Bishop Colenso on Missionaryism," *National Reformer*, no. 264 (June 4, 1865): 361; "Rough Notes," *National Reformer*, no. 461 (March 14, 1869): 169; Index, "Wanted, a Missionary," *National Reformer*, no. 522 (May 15, 1870): 308.
[76] Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?*, 191–2.
[77] Eugene Macdonald, "The Indian Problem," *The Truth Seeker* 14, no. 8 (February 19, 1887): 120; see also V. Arier, "The Indian Problem Again," *The Truth Seeker* 15, no. 15 (April 14, 1888): 227.

Americans was out of step with most other freethinkers who looked favourably upon savage society and did not want to see it become Westernized.

**Racial and Cultural Relativism**

Some historians, like Douglas Lorimer, have noted that the premise of white and Western superiority in Britain "[was] not subject to dispute but rather had become […] [a matter] of common sense."[78] While such a characterization no doubt applied to most of British society, it misses out on the dissenting voices. In freethinkers' discussions of savage societies, we have already seen that they believed savage societies had many virtues in contrast to their own flawed societies. Even if freethinkers did not completely disown their belief in progress and the racial superiority we have seen in the first two chapters, the skepticism inherent in an atheist worldview made them constantly question their own society's orthodoxies, including the notion that Western civilization was superior. There appeared to be no common standard by which to measure the worth of a society, indicating a kind of cultural relativism on the part of atheists. In fact, in discussions of imperialism, freethinkers asserted that the conduct of Western nations actually revealed the backward state of Western civilization.

One exception to this is, as we saw in the introduction, Charles Southwell, an early associate of George Holyoake who left Britain in 1855 to settle in Australia and then New Zealand. There, Southwell championed white settler claims against the white missionaries and clergy who sided with the Maori and tried to protect them from settler encroachment. Southwell heaped special scorn on Maori converts to Christianity, who were in league with the Anglican elite to thwart settler aspirations. In his characterizations of the Maori, John Stenhouse explains, Southwell "expressed probably the most extreme, systematic, and inflammatory racism in colonial New Zealand."[79]

While Stenhouse has used Charles Southwell as a case study of atheist attitudes toward race, we have already seen above many examples that demonstrate his views were not the norm for most freethinkers. Furthermore, other freethinkers' views on the conflict between settlers and

[78] Douglas Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations and Resistance: Britain, 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 24.
[79] John Stenhouse, "Imperialism, Atheism, and Race: Charles Southwell, Old Corruption, and the Maori," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 4 (October 2005): 771; see also Charles Southwell, "New Zealand, Its Missionaries, and Its People," *The Reasoner*, no. 562 (March 1, 1857): 34–35; Charles Southwell, "New Zealand, Its Missionaries, and Its People (2)," *The Reasoner*, no. 563 (March 9, 1857): 38.

the Maori show again that Southwell is an outlier. Instead, the activities of the New Zealand government only called into question their claims to be called civilized. During a particular brutal period in the 1860s of the protracted war between the New Zealand government and Maori resistance, one commentator in the *National Reformer* denounced the government's actions and linked them to Christianity: "The war against the Maori is a Christian war – instigated by a Christian governor, who is the servant of a Christian Government, which boasts of its Anglican Church and its Christian humility."[80] As white immigration increased and the Maori were forced off their land, non-violent Maori protesters in the village of Parihaka called for the retention of their land. An 1879 news report in the *National Reformer* described the arrest and imprisonment, without trial, of several of these Maori protesters. One of the prisoners died after being held for eleven months and the author of the report ironically remarked, "[t]hese Maories are savages – we English who hold them are civilised."[81] Charles Bradlaugh took up the prisoners' cause once he was elected to Parliament in 1880. He described their continued imprisonment as "exceedingly cruel" and noted, "[t]hey are the savage Pagan subjects of a civilised Christian Government."[82] In another case, W.P. Ball, a writer for the *Freethinker*, drew explicit parallels between the Maori and British atheists in their struggle against Christians. As he said, "[t]he 'Infidel' can do little in the matter except stir up the Christian by his reproaches, *for he himself*, *like the Maori*, is fighting the Christian for the common rights of humanity stolen from him by self-complacent bigotry."[83] In this case, Ball saw the Maori and freethinkers facing off together against the more powerful Christians.

This inversion of the language of superiority and civilization can be seen in other critiques of Western interventions of Africa and Asia.[84] When Britain went to war against the Zulu in 1879, one author echoed the positive views of the Zulu and mentioned their role in Colenso's "conversion" as proof of their intelligence, but he grimly (and correctly) predicted the British

[80] B.W.W., "A Christian War," *National Reformer*, no. 217 (July 9, 1864): 258; see also B.W.W., "The Christian War," *National Reformer*, no. 220 (July 30, 1864): 309; B.W.W., "The Christian War in New Zealand," *National Reformer*, no. 248 (February 12, 1865): 97–8; an opposing Christian perspective came from A.C., "The New Zealand War," *National Reformer*, no. 246 (January 29, 1865): 75–6.
[81] "Summary of News," *National Reformer*, no. 1076 (October 3, 1880): 264.
[82] Charles Bradlaugh, "Parliamentary Jottings," *National Reformer*, no. 1077 (October 10, 1880): 270.
[83] W.P. Ball, "Christian and Maori," *The Freethinker*, no. 149 (June 15, 1884): 191. My emphasis.
[84] On atheist views of empire, and particularly those of the positivists, see Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); for British secularists' reaction to the South African War, see David Nash, "Taming the God of Battles: Secular and Moral Critiques of the South African War," in *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking the South African War, 1899-1902*, ed. Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh, and Mary-Lynn Suttie (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 266–86.

would defeat them and annex their lands: "And so one more wrong will have been done, and once more we shall teach the 'inferior' races our superior cunning and honesty."[85] A notice in the *Freethinker* condemned the British campaign in Matabeleland (1893-4) and noted sarcastically that in the conflict "the African 'savages' had a beautiful experience of the virtues of 'civilisation.'"[86] Elizabeth E. Evans, in her discussion of the US war in the Philippines likewise noted: "Now more than ever before the phrase 'Christian civilization' implies a scathing satire upon Christian conduct."[87] In these cases, the authors made a specific point of enclosing the terms "inferior," "savages," and "civilization" in quotation, indicating that they were using them ironically and did not accept the validity of such labels. This relativist strategy meant casting doubt upon the entire notion of inherent Western racial or civilizational superiority that served to justify imperial conquest.

One of the most outspoken arguments for upsetting notions of Western superiority came from Chapman Cohen, a prominent secularist who became the president of the National Secular Society after G.W. Foote's death in 1915. A series in the *Freethinker* in 1912 considered the question of what it meant to be civilized. Cohen acknowledged that savages lacked modern technology like railways, submarines, or airplanes, as well as the ability to understand nature through science, but the possession of these things would not make savages instantly civilized. Perhaps the difference then was in manners; civilized people were typically thought to be "courteous, obliging, considerate, refined in manners", but to Cohen these characteristics "belong to the more fundamental human qualities […]. Savages get born, grow up, get married, become parents, and die just as do civilised people. And the feelings that accompany these states and conditions are with both more or less alike." For Cohen, one needed to compare individual "mental outlook" to determine if a person were civilized or savage. Upon examination, this demonstrated that "[t]here are people belonging to what would be called […] a comparatively primitive social state who would be really less primitive than some belonging to a comparatively advanced social state."[88] The primitive mindset could be seen not just in so-called savage tribes, but in modern Britain: "It may be discerned as clearly in our own House of Commons or in a

[85] Bonhomme, "Our Little War with the Zulus," 100.
[86] "Acid Drops," June 10, 1894, 367.
[87] Elizabeth E. Evans, "'Christian Civilization,'" *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 12 (March 24, 1900): 183.
[88] Chapman Cohen, "The Primitive Mind," *The Freethinker*, no. 1632 (October 27, 1912): 674.

modern church as in a primitive pow-wow or savage witch-dance. The method of reasoning is often substantially the same; the outlook on life often identical."[89]

Cohen was even more scathing in his second article, saying, "[f]rom the throne – that stronghold of primitive ideas and barbaric ceremonial – downward, we meet with frequent reminders that our veneer of civilisation is of the thinnest possible kind." He mocked "the sheep-like, sanctimonious manner" with which the British public received the national anthem and adored the monarch. For Cohen, patriotism was a primitive devotion to one's tribe that was useful in humanity's evolutionary past, but no longer.[90] One might value one's national institutions, but they needed to be valued based on whether they were beneficial, not simply that they were one's own. Patriotism was something that would in time be evolved away: "For what is the one dominant lesson of social evolution? It is, in a word, the growing interdependence of the whole human race." War was therefore a true example of uncivilized behaviour, no matter the technology used: "In what ways is a fight between modern gunboats more civilised than a fight between canoes?"[91] The skepticism inherent in an atheist worldview led Cohen to question established orthodoxies about the superiority of Western civilization. While not completely giving up a belief in progress, Cohen's relativistic view contended that there were multiple ways to be civilized and the West could not therefore assume it had a monopoly on the concept of civilization.

This relativist approach to questions of civilizational difference and imperialism was to some extent compatible with a polygenist viewpoint. As we saw in the previous chapter, Charles Bradlaugh suggested in his anthropology lectures that whites simply could not colonize some regions given the inhospitable climate that was unsuited for their race.[92] G.W. Foote struck a similar note to Bradlaugh as he cited the Australian politician Charles Henry Pearson's *National Life and Character* (1893), which "laughed at the exaggerated pretensions of the white race" and "proved that they can only flourish in certain latitudes, and that outside these they cannot compete in population with the indigenous inhabitants." Foote predicted that "the brown, black, and yellow races will at least hold their own in the future" and maintain their dominant position

[89] Ibid., 675.
[90] Chapman Cohen, "The Primitive Mind (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 1633 (November 3, 1912): 690.
[91] Ibid., 691.
[92] Charles Bradlaugh, *Anthropology* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1882), lecture 1, 8.

in their own continents, though whether they would threaten the white race in Europe, as Pearson suggested, was an open question.[93]

The clearest example of using polygenesis to oppose imperialism came in a lengthy series of articles excerpting the polygenist Robert Knox's *Races of Mankind* (1850). Autonomos, who authored the satire on the African diplomat seen above, provided eight excerpts of the work, with his own commentary, in the *National Reformer*. The series, from 1867, took a grim and fatalistic view of Christian imperialism and offered a defense of polygenist anthropological thought with regard to colonial policy. In Knox and Autonomos's view, the white races had an irrepressible desire for conquest and plunder that inevitably led them into conflict with non-white races. While temporary conquest was possible, the forces of climate meant that whites could not survive permanently in Africa or other foreign continents. Christianity often justified these conquests and Autonomos argued it was "the nature of English Christians to exterminate the dark races under the lying pretence of civilising and Christianising them […]."[94] Much of the colonial violence, Autonomos pointed out, was ironically committed by those "who are indignant with Anthropologists for hinting that all races cannot come from Adam."[95] The monogenist view was unreasonably sentimental and Autonomos was shocked that "[s]ecularists, lovers of appeals to reason alone on theology, should follow the example of Exeter Hall [the centre of humanitarian thought] in being led entirely by the feelings, and virtually refusing the trial of Freethought on this important anthropological and social question."[96] An anti-imperial polygenist attitude therefore could be seen in Knox's writing, as quoted by Autonomos:

> Would it not be better to accept of the races of men as Nature made them; study their history, trace their social history when congregated into nations, and the modifications it undergoes by civilisation; show them, by good example, the advantages of modern European civilisation, and leave them to govern themselves?[97]

While Knox and Autonomos argued for a racialist conception of the world, such a view could actually be turned to a kind of culture relativism. If such a view took for granted whites' racial superiority, it did not follow that whites possessed superior morality or that they would use their

[93] G.W. Foote, "Mr. Gladstone and Li Hung Chang," *The Freethinker*, no. 787 (August 23, 1896): 529.
[94] Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (8)," *National Reformer*, no. 377 (August 4, 1867): 70.
[95] Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (3)," *National Reformer*, no. 371 (June 23, 1867): 394.
[96] Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (7)," *National Reformer*, no. 375 (July 21, 1867): 39.
[97] Autonomos, "Christian Filibusters in Africa (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 370 (June 16, 1867): 373.

superiority wisely. In fact, the fatalistic lessons of racial science seemed to show that whites were biologically determined for bloody conquests.

The use of polygenesis as a way to critique imperialism was also seen at the turn of the nineteenth century, primarily in the work of Mary Kingsley and E.D. Morel. These authors encouraged a relativist conception of racial difference that decried attempts to impose Western standards upon African people.[98] The secularist and ethicist F.J. Gould drew upon the work of one of their allies, the colonial administrator and African explorer Harry Johnston, as he lamented the fate of native African populations. In particular, he discussed "the Mandingo woman" of Liberia, with whom "[a]t first glance [he] fell in love […]." In his description of the women's bodies, he emphasized their distinctive racial features: "the lips of African amplitude, yet feminine; the eyes mild and sociable; the skin a mellow brown; the bust shapely, the left breast – the only one exposed, – full without obtrusiveness; the hands long and slender." Gould came across "these charming dusky brethren" in Johnston's work on Liberia, which included photos of the people as well as sketches. In contrast to the natives he saw in their natural habitat, he recoiled at a photo of black Liberian students at college dressed in Western clothes: "All these negro striplings wear mortar-boards! Africa apes Oxford, or, for that matter, the fifth-rate boarding-schools of our unæsthetic kingdom."[99] Gould followed Johnston in his view that Africans should retain their distinctive culture, rather than try to mimic the West.

This aligns with a polygenist viewpoint that regards individual races not as inherently superior or inferior, but as simply different. This difference should be accentuated, argued Gould, not covered over: "the Mandingo form [should] be draped in those vestures that the negro taste has gradually selected as the most congruous with the complexion and habits of the Liberian tribes." He lamented the failed attempts of "Liberian negresses" to look feminine in Western garb and even worse were the men, who were "a far more dismal failure." Despite Gould's patronizing tone, he pleaded for Europeans to respect Africans' culture: "The White People would lose nothing by manly recognition of what is valuable in the negro world; and the negro would all the more gratefully and intelligently absorb the wisdom of the West."[100]

[98] Porter, *Critics of Empire*, 149–55, 254–66, 287–90.
[99] F.J. Gould, "The Fate of the Red Bush Pig," *The Freethinker*, no. 1400 (May 24, 1908): 321.
[100] Ibid., 322.

**Conclusion**

While a polygenist framework could be harnessed to question racial hierarchy, this is not to say that freethinkers' views of savage people were based entirely or even mostly on a belief in polygenesis. Despite the influence of polygenist thought that we saw in the first chapter, when discussing savages in a social context, freethinkers rarely used explicitly racial language. Rather than emphasizing their racial and civilizational difference with savages, white freethinkers highlighted their commonalities. The clearest way was to note that many savages had no religion. While some took this to mean savages were intellectually deficient, a more common route was to show savages – real or imagined – as the heroic and logical resisters of Christian proselytising. In this way, freethinkers drew parallels between themselves and the savages: both were outcasts fighting the absurd religion of Christians.

In order to understand why freethinkers found savage life desirable, it is necessary to consider their context of social and economic marginalization. Savage life seemed to offer a favourable alternative to the harsh realities of Christian capitalism, which left many destitute. Given that so many freethinkers in both Britain and the United States came from the working classes, the image of a bountiful savage life with every want provided was no doubt appealing. It was because of this idealization of savage societies that so many freethinkers looked with dismay upon foreign incursion into these societies. In their discussions of imperial conflict, freethinkers routinely inverted the idea of civilizational superiority by suggesting that it was the Christians who were the true savages. While not completely abandoning ideas of progress, this relativistic approach instead questioned what it meant to be civilized and found that common societal definitions of civilization were deficient.

One can, however, question how much these positive depictions of savagery were simply rhetorical devices in freethinkers' larger arguments. It seems unlikely that these white freethinkers were really ready to abandon their Western lifestyle or their belief in the superiority of their civilization. Certainly white freethinkers imagined themselves to be at the pinnacle of civilization, yet this did not include their Christian compatriots. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to dismiss their views of savages as simply posturing. Their sympathies with subjugated savage peoples were real enough, even if their idealistic depictions of their societies were at times exaggerated.

The first two chapters seemed to suggest that as Christian authority was stripped away and polygenesis and Darwinian evolution filled the void, the way was opened for racialist understandings. Such a narrative is in line with the "Race-Secularization Thesis." But while these ideas undoubtedly influenced freethinkers, this chapter has moved to consider how freethinkers understood race in a social perspective and found that their atheism actually helped to counter notions of racial and civilizational superiority. This same theme will be continued in the next chapter that investigates how atheists imagined India, China, and Japan.

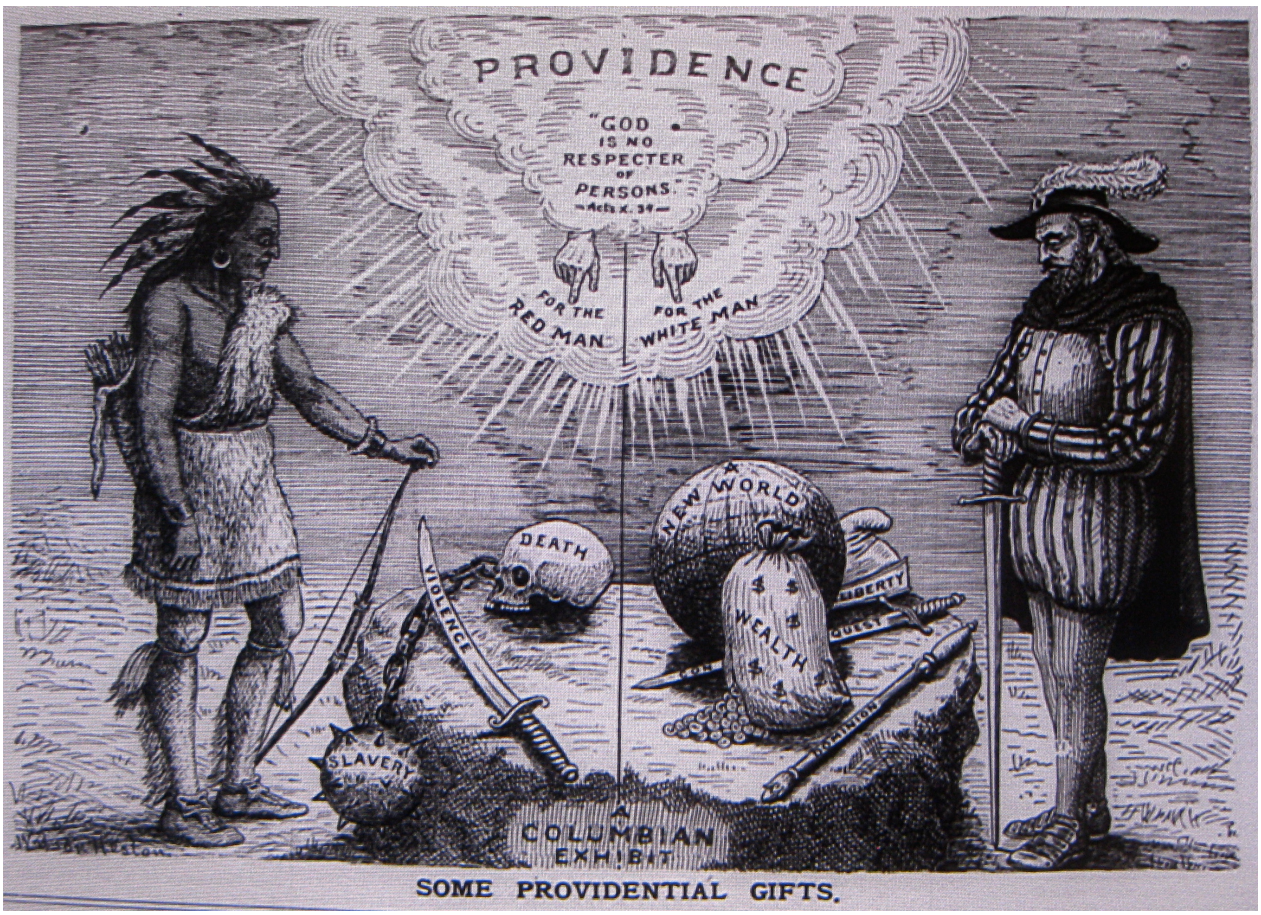


Figure 1: "Some Providential Gifts," *The Truth Seeker* 20, no. 22 (June 3, 1893). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

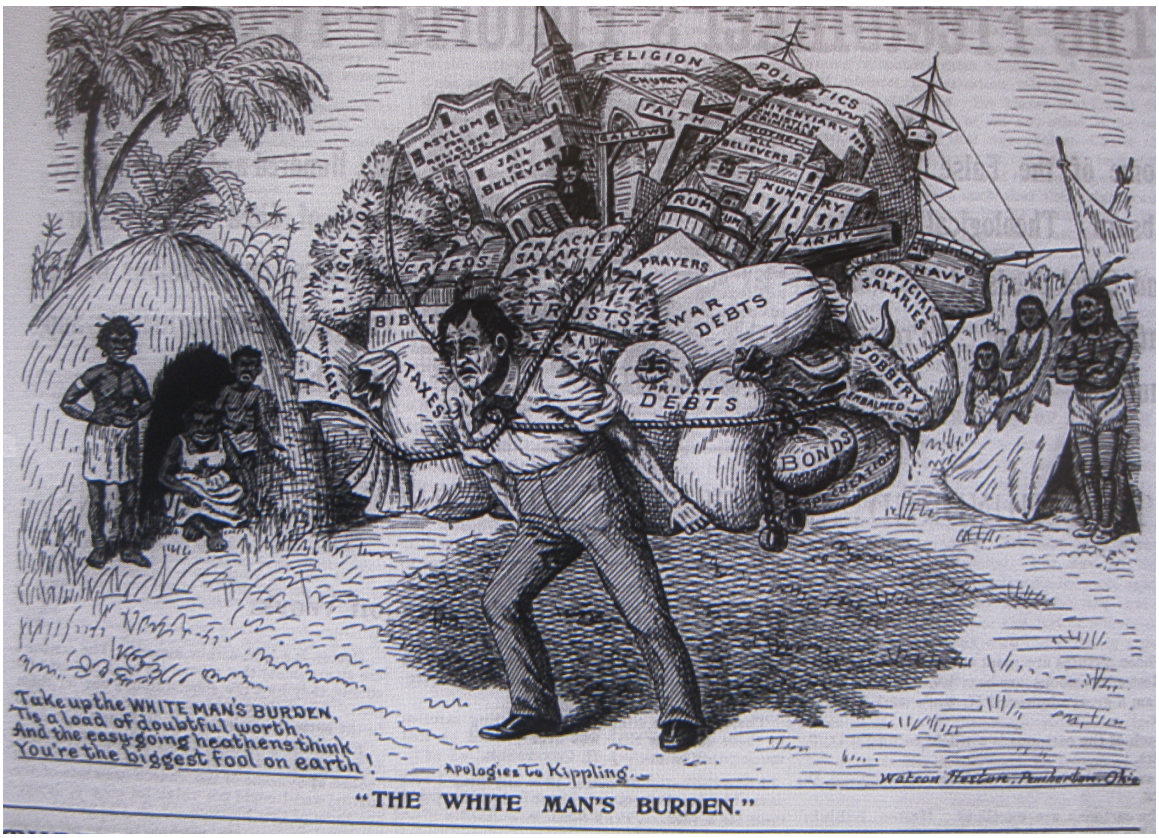


Figure 2: "The White Man's Burden," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 14 (April 8, 1899). Photographed at the Library of Congress.


Figure 3: "An African Convert," *The Freethinker*, no. 330 (November 27, 1887). Photographed at Conway Hall Library.

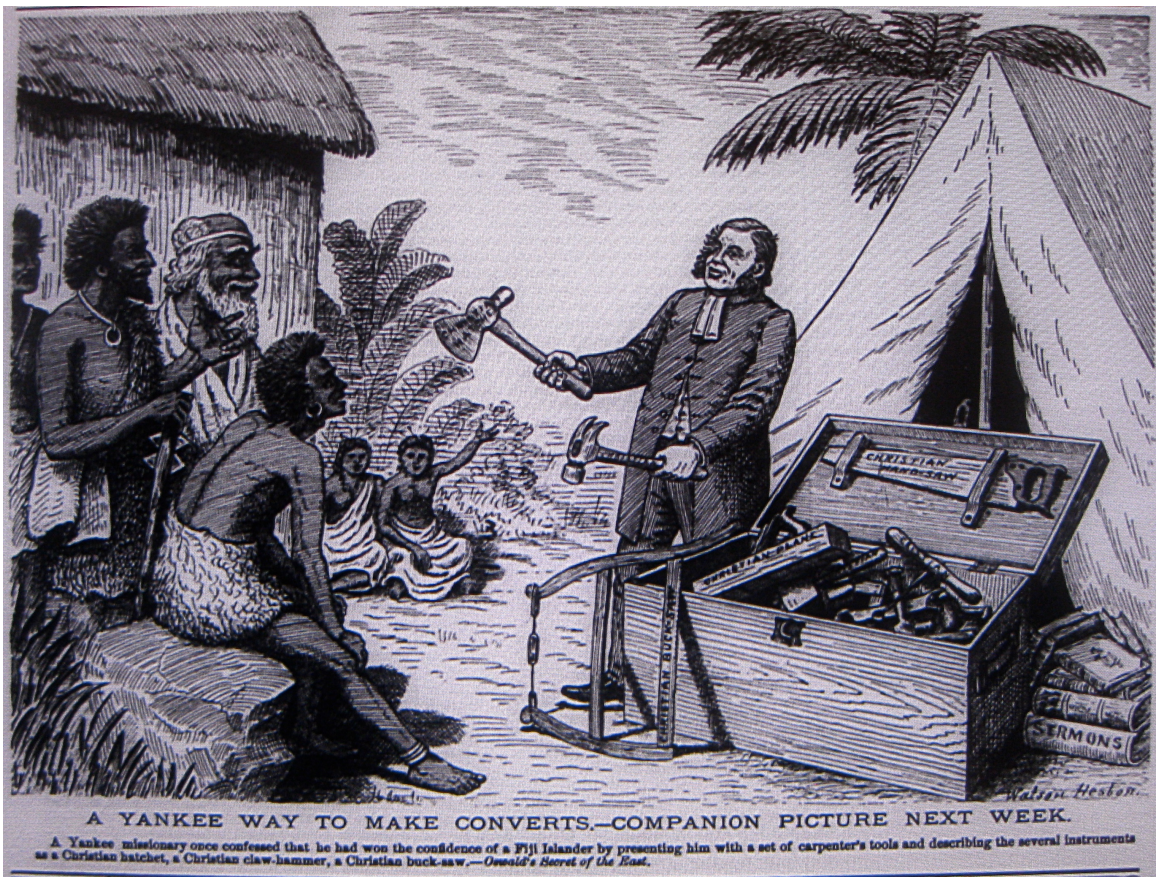


Figure 4: "A Yankee Way to Make Converts," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 20 (May 17, 1890). Photographed at the Library of Congress.


Figure 5: "A Few Other Christian Tools for the Consideration of the Heathen," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 21 (May 24, 1890). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

# CHAPTER 4

# THE CIVILIZATIONS OF THE EAST

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) created a storm of controversy in its analysis and critique of the West's construction of the East. In this work, Said identified a link between the production of knowledge about these societies and imperial conquest.[1] Despite its enduring influence, a number of scholars have strongly criticized the book. One of the most pertinent criticisms of Said and his followers was that, through their criticism of Westerners essentializing the East, Said and others actually essentialized the West. Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm explains that as Said attributed essentialist views of the Middle East to figures throughout Western history, he "seems to be saying that the 'European mind' […] is inherently bent on distorting all human realities other than its own and for the sake of its own aggrandisement." But, he continues, "this manner of construing the origins of Orientalism simply lends strength to the essentialistic categories of 'Orient' and 'Occident', representing the ineradicable distinction between East and West […]."[2] This broad criticism applies more generally to histories of racial thought and Western perceptions of foreign societies, which run the risk of treating their subject societies as monolithic.

While Said critiqued all orientalists, the name given to those who studied the "Orient," his work limited itself to studies of the Middle East and the Islamic World. Other scholars have extended the scope of Said's work to other societies in the Orient. Indeed, China and India might be a better fit for the kind of "Othering" undertaken by Europeans of foreign societies, since, as Ronald Inden notes,

> [t]he Ottoman was a potentially dangerous Alter Ego of the European. His religion, Islam, was a false, fanatical cousin of Christianity and he continued to rule over parts

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).
[2] Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 219.

> of eastern Europe. But the Chinaman and Hindoo were the true Others. Both China and India were, thus, the opposites of the West.[3]

Western views of the East were about constructing these people as Others and in turn constructing oneself. The Orientalist discourse, as Inden explains, "speaks of Asian Others in ways that contrast rather sharply with the way in which it speaks of itself."[4]

While not disputing the main thrust of these thinkers' analyses – that knowledge production often went hand-in-hand with imperialism and that on the whole Europeans saw those in the Orient as inferior to themselves – I want to point out that such works often overlook opposing voices to the dominant discourses. Robert Irwin, one of Said's strongest critics, has highlighted how Said uses the notion of "discourse" inconsistently.[5] At times Said expresses his belief in individuals' ability to transcend the constraints of discourse, while at others he accepts these constraints, at one point making the surprising claim that, because of the unavoidable power of discourse, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric."[6]

The aim of this chapter is to show instead that freethinkers' views of the East did not correspond to the negative, imperial discourse discerned by Said and others. In the previous chapter, we saw that freethinkers found many positive aspects of savage life, and the same conclusion applies to freethinkers looking upon India, China, and Japan. Far from constructing these people as Others, freethinkers attempted to portray these people as similar to themselves and to break down the supposed racial and civilizational boundaries between them.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, negative stereotypes about Indians and the Chinese dominated Western understandings. The fact that India had been under British rule for over a century and that China was gradually being picked apart by Western colonial powers only enhanced the idea that these societies were backward, inferior, and in need of the West's tutelage. But freethinkers for the most part rejected these negative views. India and China, in their eyes, both possessed ancient civilizations with equally ancient religious traditions that had much

[3] Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 54.
[4] Ibid., 37.
[5] Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Penguin, 2007), 289–91.
[6] Said, *Orientalism*, 204.

wisdom to impart to Western audiences.[7] For example, the *Truth Seeker*, in its early issues, published a column called "Words of the Wise," which featured quotations from contemporary and historical freethinkers as well as from canonical religious texts, like the Analects of Confucius or the Vedas.[8] Furthermore, the moral teachings of these religions, particularly the Golden Rule, seemed to have been reached independently from the teachings of Christianity and indeed often predated them.[9] Both D.M. Bennett and Moncure Conway undertook voyages through India (and in Bennett's case, China and Japan as well), where they visited temples and discussed religion with the local populations.[10] Other authors spent much time attempting to discern the common links held between Christianity and Eastern religions, albeit sometimes with the goal of discrediting Christianity as a mere re-telling of Eastern myths.[11]

Of course, freethinkers for the most part would not have accepted the truth claims of any of these religions, but the religions were important because they presented an alternative path to morality. Often, freethinkers favourably contrasted the morality of the Chinese or Indians with that of their fellow citizens. What was more, some aspects of the religions of the East, like Buddhism or Confucianism, seemed to reject the supernatural and be quasi-secularist already, at least in what freethinkers took to be their uncorrupted forms. Freethinkers also routinely reported on the apparently positive reception of freethought literature in these countries.

This chapter will first discuss India, then China and Japan. While each country had its own context, the broad themes that emerge are similar for all of them. As in the previous chapter, the discontent freethinkers felt toward their own societies meant they were willing to look outside their borders for other ways of living and to therefore express skepticism about imperial and missionary interventions in these countries. Furthermore, they rejected negative stereotypes of the native people, and this is particularly clear in debates surrounding Chinese immigration. Freethinkers' outlooks were based on anti-Christian views and ostensibly framed through rationalist or scientific perspectives.

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[7] I talk about the "religions" of India, China, and Japan, but it should be noted that the category of "religion" is a Western one that imperfectly maps onto these various worldviews.
[8] "Words of the Wise," *The Truth Seeker* 1, no. 6 (February 1874): 16.
[9] "Christian Morality Not Unique," *The Freethinker*, no. 456 (April 27, 1890): 201.
[10] D.M. Bennett, *A Truth Seeker Around the World*, 4 vols. (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1882); Moncure Conway, *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906).
[11] Kersey Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors; Or, Christianity Before Christ*, 4th ed. (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1876); Kersey Graves, *The Bible of Bibles; Or, Twenty-Seven "Divine Revelations,"* 4th ed. (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1879); J.M. Robertson, *Pagan Christs: Studies in Comparative Hierology* (London: Watts & Co., 1903); J.M. Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology*, 2nd ed. (London: Watts & Co., 1910).

**India**

The antiquity of the religious traditions in India impressed freethinkers. The region contained two ancient religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism began to be described in the second half of the eighteenth century and was impressive primarily to Europeans for its literary output, particularly the Vedas.[12] As Tony Ballantyne explains, a common view in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dating back to the Sanskrit scholar William Jones, was a "Sanskritocentric" vision of India "that celebrated Sanskrit and the Vedic texts, but decried contemporary culture as debased and backward."[13] This meant there was "a stronger interest in India's past than its present."[14] Freethinkers also shared this disproportionate interest in India's history, although their interests were not identical with their Christian counterparts. For one thing, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates were waged over which of Noah's sons originally peopled India – some claimed Ham while others claimed Japhet. Furthermore, Jones and others' philological research linking Sanskrit with Greek and Latin was meant to demonstrate the truth of monogenesis and therefore to make history accord with the Genesis accounts.[15] Of course, freethinkers did not engage in such debates, since they rejected the historicity of Genesis.

Another thing working in Indians' favour from the European perspective was Indians' "Aryan" heritage. Originally a linguistic category devised by Friedrich Max Müller in the mid nineteenth century to describe the common language of Indians and Europeans, the concept easily allowed for an interpretation of a common racial ancestry.[16] The "deep and lasting consensus" in nineteenth-century Britain with regard to the Aryans was "that India's civilization was produced by the clash and subsequent mixture of light-skinned civilizing invaders (the Aryans) and dark-skinned barbarian aborigines (often identified as Dravidians)."[17] While the racial theory of Aryanism was rarely referenced by freethinkers, one author who did discuss the

[12] P.J. Marshall, ed., *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
[13] Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 31.
[14] Ibid., 43.
[15] Ibid., 28–9, 42.
[16] George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 58–60.
[17] Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

Aryans was John Shertzer Hittell in his multi-volume *A History of the Mental Growth of Mankind in Ancient Times* (1893). He explained that the descendants of the Aryans became

> the nations that in the past have played the greatest parts in the history of the world; that in the present century occupy or dominate over most of the temperate regions of the globe; and that, for many centuries to come, will continue to lead all other branches of the human family in industry, social refinement, wise government, enlightened religion, and polished literature.[18]

Hittell accepted the common view that of the Aryans entering India and imposing their "laws, customs, language, and religion" on the original inhabitants, "the Dravidians, a dark-skinned people, apparently of the black race […]."[19] Hittell ranked the Aryan's Sanskrit literature above the Greeks and all other contemporary nations, save those, perhaps, in Mesopotamia.[20] While freethinkers and others looked fondly upon the religion of the ancient Aryans, contemporary Hinduism was seen as a corruption. D.M. Bennett noted that numerous deities were imposed upon the simple Aryan religion by the priestly classes, as well as practices of the caste system and widow burning (sati).[21]

Buddhism was likewise of great interest in the Victorian period. While there were hardly widespread conversions, as Philip Almond notes, Buddhism appealed to those who could not accept Christianity but who nonetheless wished to retain a sense of spirituality.[22] Christian critics found disagreeable aspects of Buddhism that were deemed the result of the "Oriental mind," with its inferior mental capacity and superstitious, child-like mindset. Furthermore, doctrines of contemplation and Nirvana were supposedly rooted in the indolence of these people, which contributed to the stagnant quality of their societies.[23] In contrast, most atheists praised Buddhism as a highly rational religion. Hittell noted that the Buddha did not incorporate "deity, immortality, or ceremonial worship" into his system, although – in what was a standard view of the time – he conceded that Buddhism became corrupted with superstitious beliefs as it spread.[24] Other

[18] John Shertzer Hittell, *A History of the Mental Growth of Mankind in Ancient Times*, vol. 2 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893), 196.
[19] Ibid., 2:199.
[20] Ibid., 2:208.
[21] Bennett, *Truth Seeker Around the World*, 1882, 2:784.
[22] Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 35.
[23] Ibid., 41–53.
[24] Hittell, *A History of the Mental Growth of Mankind in Ancient Times*, 2:236–8. Quotation from 236. see also "Book Chat," *The Freethinker*, no. 754 (January 5, 1896): 13; Almond, *British Discovery of Buddhism*, 96–102.

freethinkers offered similar praise. D.M. Bennett described the Buddha as "one of the best and most wonderful men that ever lived" who founded a religion "the influence of which has been kindly, peaceful, and beneficent", while Robert Ingersoll asked, "[i]s there anything in our Bible as lofty and loving as the prayer of the Buddhist?"[25]

Observers of Buddhism had long held that it was atheistical. This was corroborated in several reports in the *Boston Investigator* which described Buddhism as an atheistic or agnostic system and also one with exemplary moral teachings.[26] During his travels through Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), D.M. Bennett gave a speech at a Buddhist temple and said that despite their small disagreements, "we recognize you as comparative Freethinkers, while we are comparative Buddhists."[27] Authors generally suggested that Buddhism contained either the same or superior moral teachings to Christianity, indicating that the creeds derived from a common aspect of human nature, not from something divine.[28]

Perhaps because of the legacy of these quasi-atheistic religions, India seemed receptive to the influence of freethought and secular literature. In contrast to other nineteenth-century accounts that took Hinduism as the essence of Indian civilization,[29] freethinkers de-emphasized this religion, instead opting to note the rapid advance of science and freethought in the country. British and American periodicals reported on the distribution of freethought works in India and how major figures in freethought, like Charles Bradlaugh, Charles Darwin, and John Stuart Mill, were all well known among educated Indians. This influx of foreign freethought literature led to the development of indigenous movements and periodicals dedicated to freethought.[30] When D.M. Bennett toured India, he was able to observe this firsthand, noting that "I have had interviews with several of the Brahman classes, and I find them cultured, deeply read men" who

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[25] D.M. Bennett, "The Indian Saint, or Buddha and Buddhism," *The Truth Seeker* 4, no. 36 (September 8, 1877): 285; Robert Ingersoll, "Heretics and Heresies," lecture delivered in 1874, in Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 1 (New York: The Dresden Publishing Co., C.P. Farrell, 1902), 244–5.
[26] "Buddhism Atheistical," *Boston Investigator*, no. 11 (July 17, 1867): 82; "Buddhism in America," *Boston Investigator*, no. 6 (May 18, 1887): 3.
[27] D.M. Bennett, *A Truth Seeker Around the World*, vol. 3 (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1882), 397.
[28] Paul Carus, "Buddhism and God," *The Freethinker*, no. 774 (May 24, 1896): 331; J.M. Wheeler, "Max Müller on Christianity and Buddhism," *The Freethinker*, no. 784 (August 2, 1896): 491–92.
[29] See chapter three of Inden, *Imagining India*.
[30] See for example "Special Progress," *The Reasoner* 1, no. 1 (June 3, 1846): 12–3; "Current Facts," *The Reasoner* 5, no. 113 (1848): 141; "Reports of Secularism in Calcutta," *Boston Investigator*, no. 7 (June 14, 1854): 2; Bombay Correspondents, "Abdoola Shaw, the Freethinking Lecturer of Bombay," *The Reasoner*, no. 734 (June 10, 1860): 189; B.V., "Freethought in India," *National Reformer*, no. 767 (January 24, 1875): 53; "Sugar Plums," *The Freethinker*, no. 76 (January 28, 1883): 29; Remly S. Sidelinger, "India Ahead," *The Truth Seeker* 11, no. 22 (November 22, 1884): 745.

were familiar with the leading British thinkers like Mill, Spencer, Huxley, and Darwin.[31] The National Secular Society also had a presence in India: two branches opened, one in Fyzabad in 1883, and one in Madras in 1884, although it is not clear whether the members were predominantly white British or Indians.[32] The converse of this picture was that Indian converts to Christianity were described in the harshest terms. They were "the scum of native society, unworthy of trust and with no idea of honesty or integrity" and came only from "the savage hill tribes and devil worshippers".[33]

Freethought periodicals likewise featured Indian authors who complained about Christian missionaries in their homeland and explained how the introduction of Western freethought works helped to combat Christianity.[34] One author, C.V. Varadacharia, wrote in the *Truth Seeker* of the positive influence of Western thought in the country, yet also explained that India had its own tradition of freethinkers:

> there were many Mills, Bains, Spencers, Darwins, and Paines and Ingersolls in ancient India. Buddha, the prince of reformers, was the founder of that scientific system called Buddhism, which means the religion of enlightenment, *i.e.*, Freethought.

Varadacharia closed the letter by explaining to the editor, Eugene Macdonald, that all freethinkers were united in this common tradition: "I belong to such band of men, and you, too, belong to them."[35] Because of the tradition of freethought in India, the image of the clever Indian – though appearing less frequently than that of the savage in the previous chapter – was deployed in fictional dialogues with missionaries, in which the "Hindu" inevitably bested the Christian.[36] This view that Indians represented potential or actual atheists strikes at the notion of Indians as

[31] Bennett, *Truth Seeker Around the World*, 1882, 2:765.
[32] Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 80.
[33] C.J., "Indian Notes," *The Freethinker*, no. 101 (July 15, 1883): 222; "Sugar Plums," *The Freethinker*, no. 136 (March 16, 1884): 86; see also J.M. Wheeler, "Christianity in India," *The Freethinker*, no. 163 (September 21, 1884): 303; Staff-Sergeant, "Converts in India," *The Freethinker*, no. 1137 (May 10, 1903): 301.
[34] Kedarnath Basu, "A Letter from India," *The Truth Seeker* 9, no. 37 (September 16, 1882): 588; "Sugar Plums," March 16, 1884, 86; Amrita Lal Roy, "The Missionary and the Heathen," *The Truth Seeker* 12, no. 38 (September 19, 1885): 595.
[35] C.V. Varadacharia, "A Letter from India," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 45 (November 8, 1902): 713.
[36] Lucianus, "A Dialogue Between a Missionary and a Hindu," *The Freethinker*, no. 81 (February 25, 1883): 57–58; "A Dialogue Between a Missionary and a Hindu," *The Freethinker*, no. 1179 (February 28, 1904): 140.

the Other to white freethinkers. Instead, these discussions show how freethinkers identified with their Indian counterparts through their common belief in rationality and freethought.

It was because of the many positives of Indian culture that led freethinkers to support reforming imperial governance there. The British secularist leader George Holyoake was one exception to this: he contemplated a withdrawal from India – not out of reverence for Indian culture, but because the poor character of Indians made the country ungovernable. In an article from 1856, Holyoake denounced the excessive religiosity of Indians. "The Hindoo", explained Holyoake, "is the most religious being in existence. Not an action he performs, not a step he takes, not a word he utters, not a breath he draws, but he does all agreeably to the institution of his religion."[37] Holyoake's views hardened following the Indian Mutiny of 1857-8, after which time, as Christine Bolt explains, "the romance of India" ended among the British as they reacted to what they saw as "a gross ingratitude on the part of the Indian people."[38] In a speech from 1858, written in the midst of the mutiny, Holyoake railed against the untrustworthy and disloyal character of Indians. In the speech – although not reported verbatim – he argued that

> [t]he Oriental character was totally different from the English. The Hindoo or the Mahomedan, in the very moment that he was prostrate before you, professing the highest esteem for you, kissing the soles of your feet as the "Light of the World," at that very moment he probably had sharpened his knife to cut your throat in your first ungarded [sic] moment. Treat these people with kindness, they despise you; treat them justly, make a bargain, observe it yourself and compel them to fulfil it, and they will respect you, but relax your strictness and treat them with what we should call generosity, and they will despise you and poison you the first opportunity. This was the general characteristic of the Indian people.[39]

He said it would have been best had Britain never become involved in India, although he accepted that, on the whole, the rule of the East India Company had been better for Indians than their own rule. Before considering withdrawal from India, Holyoake stated that Britain must first suppress the mutinies, otherwise "not the throat of an Englishman would be safe in any part of the world."[40]

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[37] "Religious Character of the Hindoo," *The Reasoner*, no. 506 (February 3, 1856): 36.
[38] Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1971), 201, 157.
[39] "The Bolton (Prohibited) Lecture on India," *The Reasoner*, no. 608 (January 13, 1858): 12.
[40] Ibid.

Nonetheless, Holyoake, as he did in his work on the Zulu in the previous chapter, drew parallels between the lot of atheists and secularists in Britain and that of non-Christians in India. There existed in Britain "a modified sepoyism of opinion" – a reference to the sepoys, the Indian soldiers who mutinied – because atheists were unable to take oaths in court.[41] Furthermore, in India, British missionaries told inhabitants "to abandon the religion of their forefathers" yet they condemned freethinkers in Britain who themselves had abandoned their Christian religion: "Here, they denounce Atheism, not merely because it is wrong, but on the ground that it is wicked – there they preach and advise the Atheism of the people of India towards the gods of their forefathers."[42] Holyoake's negative portrayal of Indians was an exception among freethinkers. Nonetheless, his criticism of British imperialism, particularly missionaries, was in step with the views of his fellow freethinkers.

Richard Congreve, the leading positivist in Britain at the time, produced one of the strongest statements against British rule in India in his 1857 book, *India*. In the aftermath of the mutiny, Congreve called for "justice" for both whites and Indians. This was the clear course for those "not blinded by an overweening sentiment of outraged pride – outraged in its feeling of national superiority, or the still intenser feeling of superiority of race."[43] Congreve called for withdrawal as quickly as possible, yet with an agreement between the other European Powers that they would not attempt to intervene in India upon the British departure.[44] He pointed to India's ancient civilization – much older than Britain's – as proof that it would not revert to barbarism in the wake of a British withdrawal, but he clearly saw India as an inferior partner since he described it as "older, and yet younger" in terms of civilization.[45] That said, Congreve admitted it took many centuries after the Norman Conquest for the invaders to become integrated with the original inhabitants, "and in that case there was no difference of race, of colour, of religion."[46]

Most freethinkers saw British rule as harmful for India and therefore wanted to see a transition, albeit a very gradual one, to Indian self-government. One correspondent in the *National Reformer* supported plans for greater Indian independence, yet admitted that the process would be gradual, something "even the most ardent advocates of the change [to Home Rule]

[41] Ibid., 13.
[42] George Jacob Holyoake, "Importance of Secularism to India," *The Reasoner*, no. 696 (September 11, 1859): 289.
[43] Richard Congreve, *India* (London: John Chapman, 1857), 5.
[44] Ibid., 6–7.
[45] Ibid., 16–7, quotation on 17.
[46] Ibid., 31–2; for another positivist view on India, see E.H. Pember, "England and India," in *International Policy: Essays on the Foreign Relations of England*, ed. Frederic Harrison (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 223–326.

admit […]. No one supposes that the natives of India are ready, or nearly ready, for self-government."[47] Steps to be taken toward this end included putting Indians on local councils or creating a national assembly.[48] G.W. Foote, the editor of the *Freethinker*, likewise believed that Britain should prepare the country for eventual independence by "[training] the natives in self-government, so that when we do withdraw they may be capable of progress and self-protection." He also dismissed suggestions that the British should feel proud of their supposed virtuous motives in India, since "the 'pride' involved in this attitude is chiefly a pride of race, the other side of which is disdain of races with a far older civilization."[49]

Annie Besant was the most forceful, and indeed likely the most knowledgeable, commentator on Indian affairs among secularists. She provided a detailed history of British relations with India in the pages of the *National Reformer* and refuted notions of the inferiority of Indians. In 1878, she chastised those "who think of all nations as barbarous which are not European" or that the Indians "were rude and savage peoples, rightly subjugated by the English […]." While Indian civilization differed from the West, it "is not less polished, not less dignified, not less luxurious, and far more ancient than our own."[50] Britain, Besant believed, was at fault for making India worse off than it was before British intervention. But because of Britain's role in devastating India, she felt it would be wrong for Britain simply to "fling it aside." The answer for Besant was, like those above, to gradually introduce measures for self-government to prepare India for full independence.[51]

Besant's interest in Indian culture dated to the late 1870s, but it became even more apparent in her conversion in 1889 to theosophy, a new religion composed of elements taken from Eastern creeds and Western science and mysticism. Besant was particularly attracted to the Hindu elements within theosophy. The conversion finally severed her links with the rest of the secularist movement, already tenuous because of her unpopular commitment to socialism. After the 1891 death of its founder, Helena Blavatsky, Besant became one of the leaders of the international theosophy movement.[52] In this position, she visited India numerous times and while she initially eschewed involvement with politics, on future visits she grew closer to the

[47] S.S., "Home Rule in India," *National Reformer*, no. 1187 (August 6, 1882): 102–3.
[48] Ibid., 103.
[49] G.W. Foote, "Providence and the British Empire," *The Freethinker*, no. 837 (August 8, 1897): 497.
[50] Annie Besant, "England, India, and Afghanistan (1)," *National Reformer*, no. 972 (November 10, 1878): 293.
[51] Annie Besant, "England, India, and Afghanistan (6)," *National Reformer*, no. 977 (December 15, 1878): 371.
[52] See part five of Arthur H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961).

movement for Indian home rule. She helped to found the Home Rule League in 1916 and in 1917 was elected for a one-year term as president of the Indian National Congress.[53]

Besant's closest ally and friend, before her conversion to theosophy, was Charles Bradlaugh. As an MP, Bradlaugh took up the unofficial mantle of the "Member for India," the member who expressed the greatest interest in Indian affairs.[54] In Parliament and in other public speeches, Bradlaugh repeatedly addressed Indian issues. He defended the controversial 1883 Ilbert Bill, which proposed that British whites could be tried by Indian judges. In a speech, he countered arguments that insisted on the right of whites to be judged by those of their own race. The proposed bill was not unfair in Bradlaugh's eyes: "[i]f you go to a foreign country for your own benefit, why should you have a superior position to the people who belong to that country and to whom that country belongs? You are an intruder there."[55] He also refuted opposition to the bill coming from the High Court judge, James Fitzjames Stephen, who said that it was a "the privilege of the European not to be tried by a Hindu." But Bradlaugh rejected that "privilege": "If any Englishman puts himself in contact with the Hindu, knowingly beforehand, he is bound to submit himself to the law and he has no right to privilege which prevents his crime from punishment."[56]

Bradlaugh also advocated for gradual Indian home rule. Indians had to be patient, but they would in time be granted "the fullest right of self-government […]."[57] In another article, Bradlaugh suggested that if the British governed well and "if we win the heart and brain of India gradually to the higher standard of Western civilisation," then the Indians might wish to remain within the empire.[58] J.M. Robertson, Bradlaugh's successor as editor of the *National Reformer*, summarized Bradlaugh's views of imperialism in India in his 1895 biography of him (co-written with Bradlaugh's daughter, Hypatia):

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[53] Arthur H. Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963); see also Mark Bevir, "In Opposition to the Raj: Annie Besant and the Dialectic of Empire," *History of Political Thought* 19, no. 1 (1998): 61–77.
[54] On Bradlaugh's work on India, see David Nash, "Charles Bradlaugh, India, and the Many Chameleon Destinations of Republicanism," in *Republicanism in Victorian Society*, ed. David Nash and Anthony Taylor (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2000), 106–24.
[55] Charles Bradlaugh, *Speeches* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1890), 42.
[56] Ibid., 43.
[57] Speech on India at Town Hall, Northampton, 19 November 1883 in ibid., 45.
[58] Charles Bradlaugh, "England in Asia," *National Reformer*, no. 1620 (June 29, 1890): 402.

> Bradlaugh, it may suffice to say, was under no delusions as to the present political capacity of the Indian races. He perfectly recognised their bias to rhetoric and their immaturity of character, as well as the enormous difficulties in the way of their political amalgamation. Hence his programme for them was an extremely gradual introduction of the principle of self-rule.[59]

Bradlaugh's advocacy for Indian home rule, even if gradual, put him outside the mainstream of British imperial thought and made him a hero in India, where he traveled in the winter of 1889-90. An 1889 report from the *Hindu* newspaper, reprinted in the *National Reformer* and written in advance of his visit, predicted "a scene of genuine and excited enthusiasm" when he visited the country to attend the Indian National Congress meeting in Bombay since he "has won for himself a home in the hearts of thousands of Indians who have never seen him, but who recognise his fearless advocacy of justice and truth."[60] Bradlaugh gave a rousing speech to the Congress on 29 December 1889 and said, "I feel proud to be fellow-subject with you, in the hope that the phrase fellow-citizen may grow into reality even before my life is ended."[61] The speech drew to a crescendo as he declared, "[b]orn of the people, trusted by the people, I hope to die of the people. (Renewed cheering.) And I know no geographic or race limitations to this word 'people'."[62] Bradlaugh's visit to India was a great success and reports from Indian newspapers described the large crowds that gathered to see him off.[63] His impact was also felt among Indians then living in Britain: his funeral was attended by a large contingent of Indians living in London, among them a young Mohandas Gandhi, then training as a lawyer in the city.[64]

This phrasing in Bradlaugh's speech, that he knew no "race limitations" to the word people, is of interest because, as we saw in the first chapter, Bradlaugh championed anthropological research that showed the division and hierarchy of racial groups. Also telling is that Bradlaugh never framed his admiration of India in terms of a perceived common Aryan ancestry. It seems unlikely that Bradlaugh's racial views had changed by the end of his life, but more likely is that Bradlaugh's thinking on racial science was somewhat compartmentalized from his thinking on more concrete questions of imperial governance. Considerations of abstract races

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[59] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J.M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work*, vol. 2 (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895), 200. Robertson wrote the second volume.
[60] "Mr. Bradlaugh and India," *National Reformer*, no. 1595 (January 5, 1890): 12.
[61] Indian National Congress Speech, Bombay, 29 December 1889 in Bradlaugh, *Speeches*, 152.
[62] Ibid., 153.
[63] "Departure from Bombay," *National Reformer*, no. 1599 (February 2, 1890): 76.
[64] David Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh M.P.* (London: Elek, 1971), 289.

led to different conclusions when considering these people as individuals in a social and political context. This was also true as he championed the cause of the Maori prisoners, seen in chapter three. That said, as we saw in chapter two, Bradlaugh believed that certain climates were inhospitable to certain races, meaning that imperialism was bound to fail. This was a view inherited from mid-nineteenth-century polygenist thought. Indeed, the American polygenist Josiah Nott made the argument that whites died off in India.[65] In any case, this leads one to question a direct correlation between holding racialist views and supporting policies that oppressed non-white colonial subjects.

**China and Japan**

Anti-Chinese (and to a lesser extent anti-Japanese) sentiment reached a high point in the latter half of the nineteenth century. An array of negative stereotypes concerning the Chinese was widespread: they smoked opium, ate a strange diet, lived in filthy conditions, and practiced a strange religion. They had no desire to assimilate into their host culture and stole jobs from white workers because they could live on a smaller income than whites. They also represented an inferior race from a stagnant civilization.[66] Despite these widely held views about the Chinese, freethinkers' own opinions of China and Japan, as with India, went against the grain of popular opinion.

One positive about China was Confucianism, which was to many freethinkers an entirely rational religion that seemed to reject the supernatural, deities, and the idea of an afterlife. A typical view came from John Shertzer Hittell, who wrote of Confucius: "Alone among the founders of religions, he neither claimed a divine character or commission, nor taught men to do anything to influence the fate of their souls after the death of their bodies."[67] China was seen in an even more favourable light when its people seemed to be not just adherents of Confucius, but full-blown agnostics or secularists. A report in the *Truth Seeker* claimed that "[e]very true Confucian […] is an Agnostic. He believes only in the seen; the unseen he regards as unknown

[65] George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, New Edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53–4.
[66] On stereotypes of the Chinese, see Robert McClellan, *The Heathen Chinee: A Study of American Attitudes toward China, 1890-1905* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971).
[67] John Shertzer Hittell, *A History of the Mental Growth of Mankind in Ancient Times*, vol. 2 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893), 123; see also "China – Its Religion, &c.," *Boston Investigator*, no. 42 (February 18, 1863): 333.

and unknowable. As an Agnostic the Confucianist is tolerant of other creeds."[68] An article by J.M. Wheeler meanwhile described Confucius as a "Chinese Secularist" who taught morality without recourse to supernatural invocations or divine judgment.[69] As with India, Chinese converts to Christianity appeared to come from the lowest ranks of society according to freethinkers. They were, to Eugene Macdonald, "weak-minded" or sought an easy life by "being allies of the missionaries".[70]

Despite these positive views of Chinese culture, some freethinkers – though rarely – found humour in mocking the Chinese accent or their alleged diet of dogs and cats.[71] On the whole, however, most freethinkers challenged these negative stereotypes about the Chinese rather than reinforced them. D.M. Bennett acknowledged that on his travels through China he found that people did eat these animals, but he explained that "cats and dogs, when nicely dressed, look as well as pigs and rabbits" and he dismissed taboos against eating certain animals as purely arbitrary.[72]

Freethinkers were similarly interested in Japan. An early source was a mid nineteenth-century work, *Japan and the Japanese* (1852), about the Russian Captain Golownin's captivity in Japan. In that work, as quoted in the *Boston Investigator*, Golownin noted the presence of "atheists and sceptics" in Japan, although he believed the majority of people there were "not only extremely bigoted but very superstitious."[73] Other reports were more positive. One explained that the Japanese, "according to all accounts, are much better behaved and more moral than Christians."[74] As with China and India, freethinkers believed Japan was rapidly adopting rationalism and secularism. Eugene Macdonald reported that "the doctrines of Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley have secured a firm hold upon the minds of the educated Japanese," meaning that Christianity had dim prospects for taking root in the country.[75] In another article, Macdonald

[68] "Notes and Clippings," *The Truth Seeker* 10, no. 24 (June 16, 1883): 368.
[69] J.M. Wheeler, "A Chinese Secularist," *The Freethinker*, no. 313 (July 31, 1887): 242.
[70] Eugene Macdonald, "Effort Worse Than Wasted," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 36 (September 8, 1900): 562; see also "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 159 (August 24, 1884): 207.
[71] See for example "Replies and Notices to Reader," *The Reasoner* 16, no. 412 (1854): 270; "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 129 (January 27, 1884): 28; Alec. Zander, "Ah Ling's Religion," *The Freethinker*, no. 1049 (September 1, 1901): 549.
[72] Bennett, *Truth Seeker Around the World*, 1882, 3:790.
[73] "Freethinkers in Japan," *Boston Investigator*, no. 13 (July 26, 1854): 2; see also "Civilization Vs. Heathenism," *Boston Investigator*, no. 37 (January 14, 1852): 2.
[74] "The Heathen Japanese," *Boston Investigator*, no. 47 (March 14, 1860): 372; see also "Japan," *Boston Investigator*, no. 37 (January 5, 1859): 3.
[75] Eugene Macdonald, "A Composite Religion for Japan," *The Truth Seeker* 24, no. 30 (July 24, 1897): 448.

cited a survey of university students in 1898 which apparently found that the vast majority identified as either atheists or agnostics.[76] Chapman Cohen likewise stated that, in Japan, "the educated classes became imbued with Agnosticism, or Atheism; and this enabled them to *understand* Christianity, which is really the surest guarantee of one's not believing in it."[77]

Discussions of the Japanese religion of Shintoism – though occurring less frequently than those of Chinese religions – were favourable since Shintoism was, as J.M. Wheeler explained, not a supernatural religion, but "a creed of jollity, a system of health and happiness for life here and now."[78] With its emphasis on joy, Wheeler saw it as an improvement on Christianity, "a religion which has for its basis human depravity, bloody atonement, and infernal damnation," and hoped that once Christianity was discarded, Western society too would accept the importance of joy.[79] Elsewhere, Wheeler drew parallels between the Japanese and British freethinkers. The Japanese maintained their religious customs without believing in their literal truth, "just as even Freethinkers still keep up some of the old Pagan observances at Christmas."[80]

Because of their perceived rationality, Chinese figures were ideal vehicles from which to make social criticism. As we saw in the previous chapter, using fictional characters from savage societies allowed for cutting satire of one's own society. Autonomos, who in the previous chapter authored a piece from a fictional African chief, wrote another series of articles from the perspective of Whang Chang Bang, a Chinese envoy visiting Britain. In his letters, Whang mimicked the discourse of Westerners toward supposedly less advanced societies as he stated he would call "the English simply, *the barbarians*," whom he concluded "had neither morals, manners, nor religion."[81] Since Chinese civilization was much older than Europe's, the Chinese "can afford to regard these Western nations with a tolerant sympathy akin to that which a venerable sage bestows on the first attempts of a child to walk alone."[82] Whang noted that the irony of the English having "stolen India, invaded China, and extirpated whole races of men," while at the same time "there is actually a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, and another for the protection of the Aborigines." This was proof, to his delight, that "there is even

[76] Eugene Macdonald, "Many Japanese Agnostics," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 31 (August 2, 1902): 488.
[77] Chapman Cohen, "Converting the Japs," *The Freethinker*, no. 1182 (March 20, 1904): 178.
[78] J.M. Wheeler, "A Jolly Japanese Religion," *The Freethinker*, no. 721 (May 19, 1895): 305.
[79] Ibid., 306.
[80] J.M. Wheeler, "Religion in Japan," *The Freethinker*, no. 801 (November 29, 1896): 755.
[81] Autonomos, "Whang Chang Bang on the Religion of the English (Part 1)," *National Reformer*, no. 334 (October 7, 1866): 229.
[82] Ibid., 230.

humanity among the English!"[83] Yet Whang concluded with a damning view of English hypocrisy: while there were pretences of religion and morality, "the characteristics of the average English Christian barbarian" in reality included "a slavish adoration of rank and wealth, a selfish courtesy towards equals in social degree, and contempt for poverty […]."[84] Ostensibly the satire found humour in Whang's strangeness and his inability to understand aspects of British society, yet the true target of the article was the society's hypocrisy, revealed through the lens of an outsider. The shared critique of Christian society emphasized the similarity between white freethinkers and their, if fictitious, Chinese counterparts.

Another fictional perspective came from Hsiang-Foo. Like Whang's article, this article derived humour from the inability of the author to understand Western culture precisely, but also his funny accent – he called Christians "Clistians" for example. But the author also pointed out the hypocrisy behind Western condemnation of Chinese customs as backward or degraded: "They forget that we were civilized ages ago, when they were still savages." Hsiang-Foo also highlighted the contradiction between Christians venerating Jesus as "the Prince of Peace" yet "spend[ing] so much of their wealth on ironclads, cannons, and other munitions of war."[85] A similar example came from a book containing letters from Ah Sin that first appeared in the *Freethinker*. The name Ah Sin was a frequent moniker for Chinese characters and came from the popular 1870 poem, "The Heathen Chinee," by the American Bret Harte.[86] Like the other cases, Ah Sin critiqued the irrationality of Christianity through an outsider perspective. Furthermore, he also repeated common beliefs that the Chinese eagerly read the works of scientists like Darwin and Huxley, and that Christian converts came only from the lowest strata of Chinese society.[87] The image of the wise Chinese critiquing Western society was also evident in a Watson Heston cartoon that showed a white American berating a Chinese man over violence against missionaries then occurring in China. The Chinese man shot back that white Americans attacked blacks in "[c]ruelties which would make barbarians blush" (see figure 1).[88]

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[83] Autonomos, "Whang Chang Bang on the Religion of the English (Part 3)," *National Reformer*, no. 339 (November 11, 1866): 311.
[84] Autonomos, "Whang Chang Bang on the Religion of the English (Part 4)," *National Reformer*, no. 341 (November 25, 1866): 342.
[85] Hsiang-Ti-Foo, "O Clismas!," *The Freethinker*, no. 805 (December 27, 1896): 820.
[86] McClellan, *Heathen Chinee*, 48.
[87] Ah Sin, *Letters of a Chinaman to English Readers on English and Chinese Superstition and the Mischief of Missionaries* (London: Pioneer Press, 1903), 7–8.
[88] "The Heathen and the Hypocrite," *The Truth Seeker* 22, no. 37 (September 14, 1895): 577.

But freethinkers also featured writings from Chinese and Japanese people – not just fictional characters – especially when they critiqued Christianity or Western societies more broadly.[89] Wu Tingfang, the Chinese Minister to the US from 1896 to 1902 and from 1907 to 1909, was cited by a variety of freethinkers for his criticisms of Biblical absurdities while promoting the doctrines of Confucius, who, in Wu's words, "would be called an Agnostic now."[90] Wu was also used as an example to refute negative portrayals of Chinese immigrants and to contest the notion that only people from Christian civilizations could be moral. To John F. Clark, Wu was "a brilliant, versatile, and profound scholar and statesman as well as a well-bred gentleman" while George Macdonald said he was "a man who intellectually as well as morally stands on a plane unapproachable" by many leading Americans.[91]

Baron Kaneko, a Harvard-educated Japanese envoy to the US tasked with improving relations between the two countries, was likewise quoted in several articles in the *Truth Seeker*. In the articles, Kaneko rejected the idea of Japan as a "yellow peril" and argued that there was a mutual benefit for the Americans and Japanese to interact.[92] Freethought periodicals also showcased explicitly atheistic Japanese authors. Yoshiro Oyama founded the Japanese Rationalist Association after visiting the US in 1908, when he "received the true light and became a Freethinker" after reading the *Truth Seeker* and other freethought literature.[93] Oyama insisted "that Japanese educated classes are all Freethinkers and strong opposers of Christian mythology and false doctrines."[94] J.M. Wheeler quoted a letter purporting to be from a Japanese student, named Okakuri, written to a friend in Tokyo. To Okakuri, Christianity was merely a product of savage conditions. The few positive tenets contained in the faith were disregarded by hypocritical Christians.[95]

Probably the most prominent Chinese freethinker was Wong Chin Foo, a Chinese immigrant to the United States. Wong was a forceful advocate for the rights of Chinese

[89] J.M. Wheeler, "Missions in China," *The Freethinker*, no. 734 (August 18, 1895): 514; Tse-Shenk Linn, "Qualities of the Chinese," *The Truth Seeker* 38, no. 11 (March 18, 1911): 166.
[90] "The Heathen Has His Say," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 51 (December 22, 1900): 455; see also "A Chinese Opinion of Christianity," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 29 (July 21, 1900): 455.
[91] John F. Clark, "A Word for the Chinese," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 25 (June 21, 1902): 393; George Macdonald, "A Heathen Bystander," *The Truth Seeker* 41, no. 26 (June 27, 1914): 401.
[92] Eugene Macdonald, "The 'White Peril' in the Far East," *The Truth Seeker* 31, no. 48 (November 26, 1904): 755; Baron Kaneko, "Baron Kaneko on Japan," *The Truth Seeker* 32, no. 37 (September 16, 1905): 583.
[93] Yoshiro Oyama, "Freethought Lively in Japan," *The Truth Seeker* 38, no. 41 (October 14, 1911): 642.
[94] Y. Oyama, "Our Japanese Recruit," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 42 (October 15, 1910): 666.
[95] J.M. Wheeler, "A Funny Faith: Christianity as Viewed by a Japanese," *The Freethinker*, no. 636 (October 1, 1893): 634–5.

immigrants in the US and clashed in public debate with Denis Kearney, an Irish-American leader of the anti-Chinese movement. Born in China, Wong lived with an American missionary family from a young age and became a Christian. When he moved to the United States, his Christian faith was gradually eroded. He attended the National Liberal League convention, organized by the leading American freethinker Robert Ingersoll, in 1879. It is possible that Wong met Ingersoll there since Wong raved about the convention in a subsequent interview and said Ingersoll was "doing nearly as much good for America as Confucius had done for China, though the identical truths of his philosophy were preached by Confucius over 2,400 years ago."[96] Wong's New York City office, where he ran his newspaper, the *Chinese American*, contained works by Ingersoll and Thomas Paine, and Wong was once advertised on a lecture tour as "The Bob Ingersoll of China."[97]

Wong happily adopted the label of "heathen" and dubbed himself the first Chinese missionary to the United States. In 1886 and 1887, the *North American Review* ran a series of articles on religion with titles like, "Why Am I a Jew?" or "Why Am I a Free Religionist?" Wong penned his own, entitled "Why Am I a Heathen?" In this article, Wong described how he gradually lost his faith in Christianity and favourably contrasted Chinese civilization with that of the United States. He criticized American Christians for what he saw as their obsession with money and their self-aggrandizement. Furthermore, Wong wrote that China had advanced beyond the primitive racial prejudice of the United States: "we are so far heathenish as to no longer persecute men simply on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, but treat them all according to their individual worth."[98] Whether Wong embraced the agnosticism of Ingersoll is not entirely clear since he also wrote, "[w]e heathen are a God-fearing race. Aye, we believe the whole Universe-creation – whatever exists and has existed – is of God and in God […]."[99] Nonetheless, he certainly embraced Ingersoll's rationalism. He echoed many other freethinkers' depictions of Confucius as a forerunner of secularism, calling him "our great Reasoner".[100] In Wong's view, Confucianism represented a rational religion that espoused all the good parts of Christianity, with none of the bad. Indeed, unlike Christians, Confucians actually followed

[96] Quoted in Scott D. Seligman, *The First Chinese American: The Remarkable Life of Wong Chin Foo* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 75.
[97] Ibid., 91.
[98] Wong Chin Foo, "Why Am I a Heathen?," *North American Review* 145, no. 369 (August 1887): 175.
[99] Ibid., 179.
[100] Ibid., 174.

through on their ethical commitments and for this reason he "earnestly invite[d] the Christians of America to come to Confucius."[101] As Wong's biographer, Scott D. Seligman, points out, however, this kind of writing was more "a device to get Americans to do some self-examination than as a serious gambit to attract converts."[102]

Wong's article was reprinted in both the *Truth Seeker* and the *Freethinker*.[103] The *Truth Seeker* also reprinted a report about an 1877 speech Wong gave in New York. In this speech, Wong expressed his disapproval of missionaries in general and dispelled some of the misconceptions about his country, particularly that China was a backward nation that dined on rats and dogs.[104] Wong also addressed the Freethought Congress of the American Secular Union and the Freethought Federation, held in Chicago in 1896 (two years before his death in 1898). In a report from the *Truth Seeker*, he was described as a "Freethinking Chinaman" (although was not identified by name). Wong called himself a "Freethought missionary" and explained the common moral values among the different religious traditions and that each nation had been given their own prophet: "To the Chinaman he gave a Confucius, to the Jews a Jesus, and to the Americans he had given an Ingersoll." The report concluded by noting, "The Chinaman got a rousing lot of applause, and promised to tell the Freethinkers of Chicago more about his views at some other time."[105]

As with India, these positive views led to criticism of Western intervention in China by freethinkers.[106] In one case, a report in the *National Reformer* described how Harriet Law, a popular secularist lecturer, spoke out against British imperialism in China at a public lecture in 1869. She condemned the entrance of missionaries and opium into China, and the protection of both through military means. After an uproar at the public meeting, the report noted that Law criticized some members of the audience for their disorderly behaviour: "The followers of

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[101] Ibid., 179.
[102] Seligman, *The First Chinese American*, 294.
[103] Wong Chin Foo, "Why Am I a Heathen?," *The Truth Seeker* 14, no. 30 (August 13, 1887): 518–19; Wong Chin Foo, "Why Am I a Heathen?," *The Freethinker*, no. 317 (August 28, 1887): 279; Wong Chin Foo, "Why Am I a Heathen? (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 318 (September 4, 1887): 287; Wong Chin Foo, "Why Am I a Heathen? (3)," *The Freethinker*, no. 319 (September 11, 1887): 295; Wong Chin Foo, "Why Am I a Heathen? (4)," *The Freethinker*, no. 321 (September 25, 1887): 311.
[104] "Ye Unspeakable Heathen," *The Truth Seeker* 4, no. 20 (May 19, 1877): 58.
[105] "A Countryman of Confucius," *The Truth Seeker* 23, no. 48 (November 28, 1896): 761.
[106] For some early examples, see T.W. Thornton, "Cannoniers of the Cross," *The Reasoner* 3, no. 61 (1847): 411–2; John Watts, "The Session and Secularism," *National Reformer*, no. 221 (August 6, 1864): 329; J.H. Bridges, "England and China," in *International Policy: Essays on the Foreign Relations of England*, ed. Frederic Harrison (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 327–448; J.H. Bridges, "England and China," *National Reformer*, no. 546 (October 30, 1870): 283.

Confucius would blush to behave in the way the meeting did." Indeed, she noted it would be beneficial to "have some missionaries who believed in the doctrine of Confucius to come here and civilise them. Talk of going to civilise the heathen! Why, we wanted civilising ourselves."[107] J.M. Wheeler also noticed the tendency of missionaries to wear out their welcome in China. The Chinese "are a peaceful, not easily stirred people, and […] they accord perfect toleration to all religions" but the missionaries' patronizing attitude toward the Chinese eventually made them hostile to the missionaries.[108]

At the turn of the century, the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) in China and the victory of Japan against Russia in 1905 stoked fears of a "yellow peril" that would throw off Western influence in Asia and eventually conquer the entire world.[109] White freethinkers however did not buy into these fears. Instead, they pinned much of the blame for the violence of the Boxer Rebellion on Western interference in China.[110] As in the last chapter, freethinkers used the language of savagery to describe the actions of Western governments. To Frederick Ryan, the violence by Western governments was an "outburst of savagery" and he lamented that "we are really so little removed from maniacal brutes […]."[111] Freethinkers also unanimously supported Japan in the Russo-Japanese War. One reason for this was that, to Eugene Macdonald, Russia was a religious and reclusive society, but "Japan, on the contrary, is a wide open country, and the Japanese have advanced wonderfully in modern civilization because of such open communications with the world."[112] Macdonald also favourably contrasted the humane conduct of the Japanese toward Russian prisoners and wounded soldiers with the American record in the Philippines.[113] G.W. Foote likewise supported the Japanese and denounced prejudiced talk toward them and the Chinese. "If the Japs and the Chinese together are able to dominate this planet," he wrote, "Nature will not exclude them from the front position because they are yellow. And the white man should really try to rid himself of the silly egotism connected with the color

[107] "Mrs. Law on Chinese Missions," *National Reformer*, no. 464 (April 4, 1869): 219.
[108] J.M. Wheeler, "Christianity in China," *The Freethinker*, no. 551 (February 14, 1892): 98.
[109] McClellan, *Heathen Chinee*, 228–38.
[110] G.W. Foote, "Breaking China," *The Freethinker*, no. 986 (June 17, 1900): 367; Eugene Macdonald, "The Crisis in China," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 30 (July 28, 1900): 468; G.W. Foote, "Chinese Horrors," *The Freethinker*, no. 992 (July 29, 1900): 465; L.D. Crine, "Conspiracy Against China," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 34 (August 25, 1900): 534; G.W. Foote, "Christian Beasts in China," *The Freethinker*, no. 1017 (January 20, 1901): 33–34.
[111] Frederick Ryan, "The Chinese Horror and Its Lessons," *The Freethinker*, no. 1043 (July 21, 1901): 460.
[112] Eugene Macdonald, "Jap and Muscovite," *The Truth Seeker* 31, no. 8 (February 20, 1904): 116.
[113] Eugene Macdonald, "The Source of Japanese Humanity," *The Truth Seeker* 32, no. 5 (February 4, 1905): 69; see also M. Wachter, "As To Christianity in Japan," *The Truth Seeker* 32, no. 23 (June 10, 1905): 361; Eugene Macdonald, "The Peace," *The Truth Seeker* 32, no. 36 (September 9, 1905): 565.

of his epidermis." He continued, "[f]or our part, we have no belief whatever in this Yellow Peril." He predicted that Asian countries would rise up against Western governments to become independent – a good thing in his view – "[b]ut it is a fantastic idea that the Yellow races will wage a war of extermination against the White races."[114] Elsewhere, Foote wrote, "the Yellow Peril is merely a symptom of the uneasy conscience of the Western Powers" resulting from their imperial record.[115]

Freethinkers were also interested in the treatment of Chinese immigrants. Agitation against Chinese immigration began in the 1850s on the west coast, yet did not become a national movement until after 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was completed. This drove the Chinese immigrants who had come to work on the railroad into other industries and also facilitated greater trade across the continent, worrying white workers around the country that the Chinese would drive down wages. The anti-Chinese movement scored a victory with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which restricted Chinese immigration for a period of ten years. The Geary Act of 1892 closed loopholes within the previous legislation and extended the ban on Chinese immigration for another ten years. Meanwhile, the Chinese who were already in the United States faced violence from disgruntled whites.[116]

Robert Ingersoll was one of the most vocal supporters of Chinese immigrants among freethinkers (and indeed all Americans) and it is possible that Wong Chin Foo awakened him to the issue; as mentioned above, the two might have met at the National Liberal League convention in 1879. In an interview in 1880, Ingersoll explained that he opposed "contracts that amount to slavery" in which Chinese were forcibly sent to the United States by Chinese owners, but did not oppose "voluntary immigration".[117] Nonetheless, Ingersoll noted sardonically that given the history of US-Chinese relations, "there is very little danger of any Chinaman voluntarily coming here. By this time China must have an exceedingly exalted opinion of our religion, and of the

[114] G.W. Foote, "That Horrid Japan," *The Freethinker*, no. 1206 (September 4, 1904): 561.
[115] G.W. Foote, "The Yellow Peril," *The Freethinker*, no. 1269 (November 19, 1905): 737; see also G.W. Foote, "The Japanese Spirit," *The Freethinker*, no. 1243 (May 21, 1905): 321–22; Annie Lillian Swett, "After the Russian and Japanese War," *The Truth Seeker* 33, no. 25 (June 23, 1906): 387.
[116] Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, New Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 289–91; Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 75–81.
[117] Robert Ingersoll, interview with *The Commercial*, Cincinnati, Ohio, December 6, 1880, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 8:59–60, quotation on 59.

justice and hospitality born of our most holy faith."[118] This criticism of Christian hypocrisy was a theme for Ingersoll when discussing the treatment of immigrants. Rather than having missionaries travel to China to convert the Chinese, "[w]ould it not be a good thing for the Methodists to civilize our own Christians to such a degree that they would not murder a man simply because he belongs to another race and worships other gods?"[119]

In 1893, a year after the passage of the Geary Act, which extended the prohibition on Chinese immigration, Ingersoll wrote an article in the *North American Review* (alongside a counter article by Congressman Thomas Geary, the architect of the act) on the question of Chinese exclusion. In his article, Ingersoll appealed to his fellow Americans to reject xenophobia. Fear of outsiders seemed to be human nature, but the negative influence of nationalism and religion exacerbated this natural tendency by shrinking people's minds and decreasing tolerance for difference. "The average American," Ingersoll contended,

> like the average man of any country, has but little imagination. People who speak a different language, worship some other god, or wear clothing unlike his own, are beyond the horizon of his sympathy. He cares but little or nothing for the sufferings or misfortunes of those who are of a different complexion or of another race. His imagination is not powerful enough to recognize the human being, in spite of peculiarities. Instead of this he looks upon every difference as an evidence of inferiority, and for the inferior he has but little if any feeling. If these inferior people claim equal rights he feels insulted, and for the purpose of establishing his own superiority tramples on the rights of the so-called inferior.[120]

He added that American history was marked with incidents of hostility to various immigrant groups, including the Irish, the Germans, and the Italians. In time, however, these groups were gradually accepted by their host nation and eventually thrived. The Chinese, Ingersoll predicted, were no different in their potential to succeed and integrate. There was no reason for Americans to dislike the Chinese, since they "are inoffensive, peaceable and law-abiding."[121]

Ingersoll also discussed how the prejudice toward Chinese immigrants translated to violence in America. Again, Ingersoll seized upon the disjunction between the United States' supposed Christian charity and its practices: "All this [violence] was done in a country that sends

[118] Ibid., 8:60.
[119] Robert Ingersoll, interview with *The Press*, Cleveland, Ohio, November 12, 1891, in ibid., 8:485.
[120] Robert Ingersoll, "Should the Chinese Be Excluded?" in Ingersoll, *Works*, 11:357.
[121] Ibid., 11:359.

missionaries to China to tell the benighted savages of the blessed religion of the United States."[122] Ingersoll appealed to Americans to look objectively at their situation to see how they would respond if the same sort of racial violence were occurring in a foreign country, in particular the violence against Jews occurring in Russia.[123] Ingersoll's freethought allowed him to transcend the widespread anti-Chinese sentiment and instead advocate for a more inclusive approach.

Ingersoll was not the only freethinker to defend the Chinese against xenophobic sentiments. A common argument from other supporters of Chinese immigration was to emphasize the positive qualities of the Chinese. Commentators regularly pointed to Chinese immigrants' frugality, their diligence, their respect for laws, their peacefulness, and their abstention from alcohol.[124] The Chinese even seemed superior to other white immigrants. Eugene Macdonald, although perhaps not enthusiastic about Chinese immigration, explained that the Chinese immigrants were in many respects superior to the Catholic Irish, Italians, and Germans, who lived in the same areas as the Chinese, yet were "more in need of civilization" than them.[125]

As we will see in more detail in the sixth chapter regarding racial prejudice, freethinking defenders of Chinese immigration cast their opponents as motivated by irrational prejudice and racial hatred. For George C. Bartlett, the entire issue was the old problem of "hatred of race", dating to the times of clan warfare.[126] John F. Clark also believed the opposition to Chinese immigration "surely must be founded upon race prejudice, fostered by religious intolerance."[127] James Morton likewise criticized those Americans who "reason by their prejudices rather than from the standpoint of any degree of exact information […]."[128] Writers also expressed optimism that this racial prejudice would disappear in the future. Bartlett hoped that "each race soon give up its peculiar egotism and conceit and with mutal [sic] humility and respect be willing to learn

[122] Ibid., 11:361.
[123] Ibid., 11:365.
[124] E.D. Strong, "The Chinese Question," *The Truth Seeker* 5, no. 29 (July 20, 1878): 457; Susan H. Wixon, "Several Subjects," *Boston Investigator*, no. 1 (April 19, 1882): 1; Crine, "Conspiracy Against China," 534; Clark, "A Word for the Chinese," 393; George C. Bartlett, "A Letter from China," *The Truth Seeker* 32, no. 29 (July 22, 1905): 458.
[125] Eugene Macdonald, "The Chinaman and the Christians," *The Truth Seeker* 10, no. 31 (August 4, 1883): 488; for a similar comparison, see James F. Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 38 (September 17, 1910): 600.
[126] Bartlett, "A Letter from China," 458.
[127] Clark, "A Word for the Chinese," 393.
[128] Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," 600.

one of another."[129] J.E. Roberts imagined a day when barriers of race would disappear, "when the map of the world is changed, when the lines of demarcation that separate peoples are less and less observed, [and] when caste and race prejudice have been overcome […]."[130] In this way, racial prejudice was contested from a uniquely freethought perspective, a theme that will be developed further in chapter six.

Nonetheless, some freethinkers did oppose Chinese immigration, primarily on the grounds that the Chinese could live more cheaply than their white counterparts, and therefore would drive down living conditions for everyone. One correspondent in the *National Reformer*, identified only as D., was particularly opposed to Chinese immigration because of a concern for the lower classes of Britain. Greedy capitalists, forever looking for cheaper labour, encouraged immigration from among "the lower races of mankind" who could live on less. "Our sole desire", he explained, "is to save our working-classes from extinction or degradation to a lower standard of living." Despite D.'s talk of higher and lower races, he attempted to show that he was not motivated by racial antipathy. He claimed opponents of immigration cared for both races, but he drew parallels between the Chinese and "men afflicted with small-pox." There was no "dislike" for either, but the immigration of "a race with a low standard of living" could not be accepted in the same way that one would not allow "persons suffering from infectious disease 'freedom' to carry that disease among healthy people […]."[131] In another article, D. further insisted, "[h]e is no true Liberal to whom the happiness of the Chinese is not as dear as that of any other portion of the human race."[132] Whether or not his protests were convincing, D. recognized that there seemed to be a contradiction between being a freethinker (or a "Liberal") and possessing racial prejudice. This was why he went to such lengths to make the case that he was not motivated by irrational prejudice, but by a rational concern for workers in Britain.

Most of the opposition came from American freethinkers, particularly those on the West coast, who protested that those in the East could not understand the problem posed by the Chinese. One argument was that the Chinese earned money in the US but promptly sent it back to China. As one correspondent from Los Angeles explained, "this is not his home; he says he 'no

[129] Bartlett, "A Letter from China," 458.
[130] J.E. Roberts, "The Land of Confucius," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 45 (November 10, 1900): 708.
[131] D., "Immigration," *National Reformer*, no. 933 (February 24, 1878): 1045.
[132] D., "The 'Chinese' Question (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 1513 (June 10, 1888): 373.

like Melican man,' 'me go home when me makee some money.'"[133] One correspondent in the *Truth Seeker*, Clarke Irvine, based in Portland, echoed D. as he painted an unsettling picture of millions of Chinese coming to the US where they would "fill every occupation" and be stuffed "from garret to cellar" in tenement buildings.[134]

Part of the debate simply concerned geographical location: those in the Western United States, and therefore those who ostensibly had the most experience with Chinese immigration, tended to oppose it, whereas those in the Eastern part of the country, and therefore those for whom the debate was more abstract, tended to support it. But there was something more going on than this. Numerous freethinkers defending immigration made their arguments specifically on the ground that racial prejudice was completely alien to freethought, since freethinkers prided themselves on their adherence to evidence and rationality. Even the opponents of Chinese immigration, like D. above, recognized this contradiction and attempted to refute the charge.

**Conclusion**

This chapter began with a discussion of Edward Said's critique of Western views of the Orient. To Said and his followers, those in the East represented the Other to the West – in terms of race and civilization. This chapter has shown, however, that for white freethinkers, those in India, China, and Japan were not in fact the Other, but were in many ways comparable to themselves. While negative stereotypes about these people abounded in Britain and the United States, white freethinkers for the most part rejected these characterizations.

Although each country had its own particular context, familiar patterns emerge in each. These countries seemed to possess ancient religions and civilizations that provided favourable alternatives to Christianity. Furthermore, the religions seemed quasi-secular already and the people, at least the educated ones, appeared eager to embrace freethought. It seems likely that freethinkers exaggerated the extent of these societies' irreligiosity, but whether or not their characterizations were accurate, the more important point for my overall argument is that in seeing Indians, Chinese, and Japanese as being like themselves, white freethinkers broke down the idea that these people represented a racial or civilizational Other.

[133] R.B.G., "The Chinese Question," *Boston Investigator*, no. 14 (July 26, 1876): 2; see also F.W. Conn, "From California," *Boston Investigator*, no. 52 (April 7, 1886): 2.
[134] Clarke Irvine, "Anti-Mongols," *The Truth Seeker* 13, no. 24 (June 12, 1886): 375.

As with the previous chapter, this attempt by white freethinkers to link themselves with foreign peoples – in this case of the East – further undermines the "Race-Secularization Thesis." Here, the freethought worldview provided a link between freethinkers in Britain and the United States and those in India, China, or Japan. Atheism, freethought, and rationality therefore directly worked against attitudes of racial and civilizational hierarchy in this case. In the final section on attitudes to Chinese immigration, we saw how freethinkers rejected racial prejudice on the grounds that it was inimical to their own principles. This theme will emerge again in the following two chapters, the first of which considers white freethinkers' views of black Americans.


Figure 1: "The Heathen and the Hypocrite," *The Truth Seeker* 22, no. 37 (September 14, 1895). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

# CHAPTER 5

# THE FATE OF BLACK AMERICANS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

The previous two chapters have examined white freethinkers' views of racial issues in practice, with regard to those non-white races outside their own borders, but this chapter looks at how white freethinkers responded to debates about the fate of blacks in the post-Civil War United States. After the devastation of the war, the period of Reconstruction saw attempts to enfranchise the newly freed slaves and rebuild the South. The optimism of the Reconstruction period began to fade in 1877 as Northern soldiers withdrew from the South in a compromise to allow Republicans to take control of the presidency after a disputed election. In the following years, the Supreme Court rolled back civil rights legislation, Jim Crow laws enforced segregation and discrimination in the South, and lynchings and large-scale white attacks against blacks – race riots – became common. Furthermore, there was a sense among many whites in both the North and South that Reconstruction had failed and was proof of the futility of trying to create a biracial society. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was, as the historian Rayford Logan famously put it, the "nadir" of race relations in the United States.[1]

The historian George Fredrickson has argued that the nineteenth-century debate among whites over the fate of black Americans was typically constrained by a belief in black inferiority – in physical, intellectual, and societal terms – that was either innate or subject to very slow change. The main debate in the nineteenth century was therefore between those whites who believed society would remain permanently segregated or those who thought that blacks would inevitably decline in competition with whites. Only "a tiny (and often uncertain) minority of white spokesmen" rejected these premises.[2] Contrary to what we would expect to find in the "Race-Secularization Thesis," which held that secularization opened the door to hardened racialist attitudes, many white atheists and freethinkers were part of this skeptical minority.

[1] Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).
[2] George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 321–2, quotation on 321.

This is not to say all white atheists resisted stereotypical conceptions of black people. The first part of the chapter considers how blacks appeared as caricatures within freethinkers' writing. One-dimensional tropes of black people included the suffering slave, the black criminal, and the superstitious black Christian. While these images had an instrumental purpose in attacking Christianity, they showed blacks in a negative light as well. Furthermore, white freethinkers seemed to use these images of blacks as a mirror through which to define their own identity. The alleged traits of blacks – pious, superstitious, foolish, immoral – were precisely the opposite of the traits that white freethinkers prized in themselves.

Despite these negative images, there were some blacks who became freethinkers. Aside from W.E.B. Du Bois, whom I discuss more in the next chapter, Frederick Douglass seems to be the most prominent, although his precise religious orientation is not known with certainty. Nonetheless, freethinkers sought to link themselves with Douglass as a way to demonstrate their own rejection of racial prejudice. The clearest case of this is when Douglass found refuge at the house of the American freethinker Robert Ingersoll. This story entered into freethought lore and was repeatedly called upon to demonstrate Ingersoll's morality and, by extension, that of all freethinkers.

Douglass was also a useful figure to show that blacks could rise to high levels of achievement and were not constrained by any innate inferiority. This is part of what I call the discourse of racial optimism. Atheists and freethinkers spoke up in favour of suffrage and civil rights for blacks by appealing to a sense of justice and equal treatment without regard to race. Since there existed no innate limitations to black achievement, racial optimists believed that providing equal opportunities would ensure the best individuals, regardless of race, would be successful. Robert Ingersoll was one of the most vocal racial optimists, as we saw in the previous chapter that discussed his opposition to anti-Chinese prejudice. He was regarded in his own time as a humanitarian whose racial views served as models for other freethinkers. Yet not all freethinkers were racial optimists. An alternative discourse within freethought circles held that a rational approach – one that explicitly rejected decision-making based on mere "sentiment" – showed the innate inferiority of blacks. While these freethinkers contended that they harboured no ill will toward blacks, they argued that granting voting rights to uneducated blacks had been folly.

**Racial Caricatures of Blacks**

Aside from these debates about racial issues, a host of caricatures about black people pervaded freethought periodicals. One of the most prominent was to portray blacks as helpless and pitiable slaves. In this argument, freethinkers highlighted how Christians had justified slavery through the Bible and showed how other freethinkers often played a leading role in the abolitionist movement.[3] To create maximum effect for this argument, freethinkers often painted a simplistic portrait of passive black slaves. As Douglas Lorimer contends, the images of blacks as helpless and degraded dated from Christian abolitionist propaganda and over the course of the nineteenth century these images became secularized as they lost their religious connotations.[4]

One example of this is *Christianity and the Slave Trade*, written in the early 1880s by the Scottish agnostic William Stewart Ross, under the pen name Saladin. Ross drew a contrast between Christian rhetoric and the realities of slavery by quoting the Anglican cleric Frederic Farrar's *Life of Christ* (1874), which said of Christianity: "It elevated the woman; it shrouded as with a halo of sacred innocence the tender years of the child."[5] Ross returned to this quote through the book, and specifically criticized the violation of femininity resulting from slavery by emphasizing the suffering of the mother and her child. The figure of an African woman seems to have been chosen specifically to arouse more sympathy from Ross's readers. Such a figure was portrayed as passive and therefore much less threatening than the figure of an African man. Ross said for example, in allusion to Farrar's quote: "The Christian slave-owner elevated woman by tearing her away from her husband and children and father and mother and native land to toil for his profit, with the lash of the whip ever liable to descend upon her naked back and limbs."[6] In further depictions of the way Christianity led to the degradation of women and children, he described how "some huge negro" would at times be "let in among the negresses, that he might impregnate them, and thus provide a new relay of slaves […]."[7] Such discussions relied on a notion of black feminine innocence and purity, corrupted by white Christians. Images of the

[3] George Holyoake and Brewin Grant, *Christianity and Secularism: Report of a Public Discussion Between the Rev. Brewin Grant, B.A., and George Jacob Holyoake, Esq.* (London: Ward and Co., 1853), 122, 258; J.M. Wheeler, "Was Slavery Abolished by Christianity?," *The Freethinker*, no. 296 (April 3, 1887): 111.
[4] Douglas Lorimer, "Science and the Secularization of Victorian Images of Race," in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. Bernard Lightman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 212–35.
[5] Saladin, *Christianity and the Slave Trade* (London: W. Stewart & Co., c. 1880s), 1.
[6] Ibid., 3.
[7] Ibid., 7.

suffering (often female) slave appeared numerous times in other freethought works as a way to show the link between Christianity and support for slavery (see figures 1 – 4).[8]

Portrayals of blacks as sympathetic yet foolish figures were also common. The *National Reformer*, for example, republished a story which recounted a black preacher talking about the story of Adam and Eve's fall. It supposedly came directly "from the thick lips of the reverend orator himself." The excerpt undoubtedly intended to amuse readers through its reproduction of a black dialect:

> My tex', breden and sister, will be found in de fus chapter Genesis and twenty-sebenth werse; "And de Lord make Adam." I tole you how he make him. He make him out of clay, and when he git dry he breathed into him de bref ob life. He put him in de garden of Eden, and he set him in de korner ob de lot, and he told him to eat all de apples ceptin' dem in de middle ob de orchard; dem he want for he winter apples.[9]

Such reports occurred frequently in freethought periodicals, often appearing in sections that contained serious news or at the bottom of columns to fill space.[10]

This use of blacks as figures of amusement might also be used to build cohesion among white freethought groups. One report in 1846 in the *Reasoner* described the opening of the Finsbury Mechanics' Institute, a place for adult education supported by secularists and freethinkers. At the meeting, someone apparently performed a minstrel song in blackface: "An Indian gentleman gave a 'Nigger song.'" Later at the meeting, George Holyoake, who was attending, congratulated them on the opening of their institute and said:

> The 'Nigger song' had been heard by some with surprise, by some with pleasure […]. Let Mechanics' Institutions flourish, and their influence would reach the negro, and he would contribute one day to our instruction as now his eccentricities do to our amusement. Let Mechanics' Institutions flourish, and their influence would travel across the Atlantic, strike the fetters from the American slave, and rescue, by the force of public opinion, that glorious republic from the odium now attached to it by the existence of slavery within its territory.[11]

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[8] Eugene Macdonald, *A Short History of the Inquisition: What It Was and What It Did* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1913), images are between 532–3 and 568–9; "A Biblical Custom," *The Truth Seeker* 19, no. 52 (December 24, 1892): 817; "Inspired Slavery," *The Freethinker*, no. 194 (May 3, 1885): 137.
[9] "A Coloured Discourse," *National Reformer*, no. 294 (December 31, 1865): 834.
[10] For example, see "A Negro Story," *Boston Investigator*, no. 30 (November 26, 1851): 4; Scoffer, "A Negro Sermon," *The Freethinker*, no. 184 (February 15, 1885): 52; "Colored Piety," *The Freethinker*, no. 849 (October 31, 1897): 700; "Justification," *The Freethinker*, no. 1494 (March 13, 1910).
[11] "Opening of the Finsbury Mechanics' Institute," *The Reasoner*, no. 9 (July 29, 1846): 137.

Yet the intention of the "nigger song" was not obviously to demean or mock blacks. Holyoake remarked in his speech and in a later article that Thomas D. Rice, the famous minstrel performer, had intended to get audiences accustomed to seeing black performers on stage, in the same way, in Holyoake's view, as Shakespeare hoped to win acceptance for Jews on stage in his depiction of Shylock.[12] In this way then, Holyoake and presumably his fellow secularists did not feel their enjoyment of the minstrel show was based on mockery, but on an admiration for black culture – especially since they opposed slavery. As Eric Lott argues, black minstrelsy was about more than white domination; it harmonized contradictory and ambivalent white male feelings of both attraction and repulsion toward black men.[13]

Blacks also appeared in freethought papers as criminals, which seemed to show the degrading influence of Christianity. In the view of freethinkers, the Christian doctrine of forgiveness encouraged blacks to commit crimes, safe in the belief that they would ultimately be forgiven. A cartoon from the *Truth Seeker* by Watson Heston demonstrated this point. Based on events in 1894 in Alabama, the cartoon showed three black men ("The Believing Saints") at the gallows as a white priest points to heaven where the three men are shown dancing with angels and chatting with Jesus. Below the cartoon was a report that reprinted the speeches of the three men. One, for example, said, "Brethren, in fifteen minutes I'll be in Paradise with a long white robe on and golden slippers a walking de golden streets" (see figure 5).[14] This can also be seen in some portrayals of lynching, which held that Christianity was both the cause of the initial crime of the black person, as well as the violent reprisal by the white mob (see figures 6 and 7).[15]

Another trope about blacks was that they were deeply superstitious, making them especially prone to the negative influence of Christianity. In some cases, authors highlighted non-Christian folk beliefs as a way to emphasize the irrationality of blacks. An article written in the *Truth Seeker* in 1907 by "A Country Doctor" in Maryland discussed various superstitions he had come

[12] George Holyoake, "Two Sides of the Jewish Character," *The Reasoner* 6, no. 161 (1849): 403.
[13] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[14] "Sickening Talk on the Gallows," *The Truth Seeker* 21, no. 35 (September 1, 1894): 545; for similar examples, see "Notes and Clippings," *The Truth Seeker* 5, no. 35 (August 31, 1878): 545; "Notes and Clippings," *The Truth Seeker* 12, no. 23 (June 6, 1885): 353.
[15] "A Christian Endeavor," *The Truth Seeker* 22, no. 46 (November 16, 1895): 721; "About Evenly Balanced," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 19 (May 13, 1899): 289.

across, particularly "hoodoo," in which "[t]he Negro, as a race, is a firm believer […]."[16] Such reports seemed to emphasize the backwardness and innate difference of blacks.[17] Eugene Macdonald agreed that blacks were, as a race, naturally religious. As he explained, "[t]here is no class of people in the world more religious than the negroes. Their fervent African temperament makes them peculiarly susceptible to religious sentiment and at the same time leads them into licentious lives."[18] While such statements suggested that blacks had a natural tendency toward superstition, the influence of Christianity only exacerbated this tendency and drove them further away from more productive pursuits. Various discussions of black churches showed that the mix of Christianity with innate black religiosity produced a harmful combination.[19] But an article in the *Boston Investigator*, while not denying the irrationality of black churches, also made the point that white churches were equally irrational.[20]

This discussion of black superstition and religiosity could be used as a contrast to the cool rationality of white freethinkers. A cartoon in the *Truth Seeker* demonstrated this as it showed a white man and boy – representing the brave freethought minority – facing off against a large mob of irrational people, among them white priests, Puritans, and children, but also a stereotypical black man and Native American (see figure 8).[21] Such an image showed how freethinkers understood themselves. In contrast to blacks, who embodied many of the characteristics freethinkers despised, white freethinkers were composed and rational in the face of the superstitious hordes that threatened their freedom. It was for this reason that an 1857 meeting of the Infidel Association of the United States debated a resolution that religious beliefs were held only by "negroes and a few white fanatics" – though the reference to "negroes" was eventually deleted.[22] Portrayals of blacks then served to offer a lesson for the values of freethinkers by reference to the undesirable behaviour of blacks.

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[16] A Country Doctor, "Popular Superstitions," *The Truth Seeker* 34, no. 37 (September 14, 1907): 578.
[17] For other examples, see "Negro Superstition," *Boston Investigator*, no. 44 (February 28, 1872): 3; "Items of News," *Boston Investigator*, no. 15 (July 30, 1879): 6; "News of the Week," *The Truth Seeker* 14, no. 51 (December 17, 1887): 816; "News of the Week," *The Truth Seeker* 15, no. 14 (April 7, 1888): 224; "The Nigger Preacher and the Black Cat," *The Freethinker*, no. 765 (March 22, 1896): 188.
[18] Eugene Macdonald, "Colored Preachers," *The Truth Seeker* 10, no. 26 (June 30, 1883): 409.
[19] George Macdonald, "Observations," *The Truth Seeker* 24, no. 37 (September 11, 1897): 585; M.M. Mangasarian, "'Colored' Christians in the South," *The Truth Seeker* 42, no. 8 (February 20, 1915): 115.
[20] "Negro Religious Worship," *Boston Investigator*, no. 19 (September 9, 1868): 149.
[21] "The Infallible Judgment of the Majority," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 28 (June 12, 1890): 433.
[22] Sidney Warren, *American Freethought, 1860-1914* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966), 194.

The negative stereotypes about blacks led some white freethinkers to mockingly suggest that God or Jesus was actually black. While there is a tradition in black theology of this kind of speculation,[23] such comparisons were hardly meant to be flattering in this context. Kersey Graves wrote in 1876 that there was a much evidence that Jesus was black as there was that he was born of a virgin. Early Christian portraits of Jesus apparently depicted him as a black man and

> the only text in the Christian bible quoted by orthodox Christians, as describing his complexion, represents it as being black. Solomon's declaration, "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem" (Sol. i. 5), is often cited as referring to Christ. According to the bible itself, then, Jesus Christ was a black man.[24]

Graves also mused about whether white Christians would accept a black Jesus if he returned to earth and went to their churches: "What a ludicrous series of ideas is thus suggested by the thought that Jesus Christ was a 'darky.'"[25] Elmina Slenker also penned an article on this topic and cited Graves, who in her words had discovered "the dark, ugly, hateful, repulsive, forbidding features of the negro" in Jesus's family tree.[26] In another article, W.P. Ball again followed Graves in suggesting that Jesus was black. He also proposed "that the God of the Bible is a negro" because in the book of Jeremiah (8:21), God said, "I am black" – although in context "black" was meant as a synonym for "hurt."[27] While there were hints in these articles of criticism of white Christians' racial hypocrisy, the main goal was a shared laugh among white freethinkers both at the expense of white Christians and black people more generally.

**Black Freethinkers**

These negative caricatures of blacks could be a result of white freethinkers' lack of actual interaction with real black people. In 1903, George Macdonald reported positively on the behaviour of a black neighbour who secretly fed a hungry dog belonging to another white neighbour. Macdonald had lived for decades in New York, a city in which blacks lived largely

[23] Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47–8.
[24] Kersey Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors; Or, Christianity Before Christ*, 4th ed. (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1876), 51. The reference is to a character in the poem, not to Jesus.
[25] Ibid., 52.
[26] Elmina Drake Slenker, "Was Christ a Negro?," *The Truth Seeker* 3, no. 2 (January 8, 1876): 11.
[27] W.P. Ball, "God's Complexion," *The Freethinker*, no. 201 (June 14, 1885): 190.

apart from whites,[28] and therefore this was "the first colored man whose conduct [he had] been able to observe […]."[29] When an inquirer wrote to the editors of the *Boston Investigator* in 1889 to ask "whether there are many Freethinkers or Infidels among the colored people?" The editors replied: "We are not acquainted with many of the colored people who are Infidels. They are generally either Protestants or Catholics, for they are apt to be credulous, and easily imposed upon […]."[30] This physical separation of blacks and whites meant that white freethinkers' mental image of blacks would come primarily from second-hand accounts like the caricatured descriptions provided in the pages of freethought papers.

There were black freethinkers as the above questioner suspected, but the historian Evelyn Kirkley is right to point out though that the involvement of non-white people in the popular freethought movement was rare enough as to be considered "newsworthy."[31] Susan Jacoby, in her history of American freethought, suggests some reasons for the dearth of black freethinkers. One reason was that black slaves had long looked to Christianity as a source of inspiration and hope for a future liberation in this world or the next. After emancipation, the black church offered a stable institution that bound the community together. On the other hand, freethought, with its emphasis on individuality, would have threatened the community that membership in the black church supplied. Furthermore, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as blacks saw their civil rights eroded and their physical safety under threat, debates about the authenticity of the Bible or the merits of evolution, for example, would have seemed unimportant in the face of these more pressing issues. Finally, she argues that many blacks simply would not have had the educational and social opportunities to be exposed to freethought.[32] Additionally, Kirkley notes that white freethinkers "made no effort to enlist African Americans."[33]

Nonetheless, some white freethinkers reacted angrily to segregated organizations and expressed their commitment to open membership for all regardless of race. In one case in 1847, the *Boston Investigator* cited an incident where the Newburyport Branch of the Sons of

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[28] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).
[29] George Macdonald, "Observations," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 36 (September 5, 1903): 568.
[30] "Colored Freethinkers," *Boston Investigator*, no. 15 (July 17, 1889): 5.
[31] Evelyn A. Kirkley, *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen: Gender and American Atheism, 1865-1915* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 21.
[32] Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 189–91.
[33] Kirkley, *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen*, 22.

Temperance rejected a member "on account of his color." The editor, Horace Seaver, disagreed with the move, arguing that "[a] man's color, being nothing that he had the slightest concern in producing, should never create a prejudice against him; but to deprive him of rights and privileges on that account, is peculiarly unjust […]." In the Boston Infidel Relief Society, a group formed in 1845 to assist freethinkers suffering hardship, Seaver gladly noted, "the whole human race stand on an equality, and a black man is as eligible to membership as a white man. So it should be in all Societies."[34] Will S. Andrews, from Portsmouth, Oregon, made a similar point in an 1890 letter to the *Boston Investigator* in which he criticized the Assembly of Progress, a whites-only progressive organization. Andrews asked, "Why white persons solely? […] Do they hold that in order to be progressive and liberal your skin must be white?" He recommended they remove that clause, since "[i]f a human is progressive, liberal, of good moral character, and socially acceptable, no matter what color the skin, he is my brother and should be yours." The idea of segregation accorded with Christianity, he argued, but it "is too foreign to Free Thought and Secular ideas to deserve serious attention and consideration."[35]

Despite white freethinkers' ostensible commitment to openness – but given the stereotypical rendering of blacks seen above, it is fair to question how widespread that commitment was – there were few black freethinkers involved in the popular movement. One of the most prominent examples however was Hubert Harrison, who was born in the West Indies in 1883 but later settled in New York in 1900. Like so many other freethinkers, Harrison was an autodidact. He became one of the leading black intellectuals in New York – advocating for greater class and race consciousness – and was dubbed by contemporaries the "father of Harlem radicalism." Harrison's work helped to spark the Harlem Renaissance, a black cultural and artistic movement in Harlem during the 1920s.[36]

Harrison, influenced by Paine, Huxley, and Darwin, lost his faith in 1901 and became an agnostic.[37] He was involved in the New York freethought scene since at least 1903 and contributed a number of articles to the *Truth Seeker* on a range of topics from Thomas Paine's legacy to arguments for taxing church property.[38] In a 1914 article, Harrison took his fellow

[34] "Sons of Temperance," *Boston Investigator*, no. 51 (April 28, 1847): 3.
[35] Will S. Andrews, "Impromptu Thoughts," *Boston Investigator*, no. 24 (September 17, 1890): 2.
[36] On Harrison's life, see Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
[37] Ibid., 60–3.
[38] Ibid., 114–8, 135–7.

blacks to task for what he saw as their political and religious conservatism. Harrison blamed the legacy of Christianity for this and noted, "it should seem that negroes, of all Americans, would be found in the Freethought fold, since they have suffered more than any other class of Americans from the dubious blessings of Christianity." Yet Harrison sympathized with those who remained Christians; after all, he understood the burden of leaving behind the religion of one's community. It was for this reason he believed it would take years before there were large numbers of black freethinkers, although he noted there were some in New York and Boston, especially those immigrants from the Caribbean.[39]

A similar perspective came in 1910 by W.S.T. Harris, a black man, who pleaded with his fellow blacks to recognize the harmful effects of religion. "Negroes," he wrote, "you are asleep. Wake up. We are too religious for our own good." He recommended putting church buildings to better use by turning them into workshops, schools, banks, and theatres. The money spent on churches and especially the money spent on foreign missions could be better used "to civilize our own race out of superstition, fears, and ignorance."[40] This negative view about black religion was not unanimous. The *Truth Seeker* reprinted an article (possibly written by W.E.B. Du Bois) from *The Crisis*, the official journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The article argued that black Christianity was no more superstitious than its white counterpart. Specifically, the author of the article pointed to Billy Sunday, the former baseball star and popular evangelical preacher. Sunday's exaggerated and charismatic preaching style led the author to note parallels with "the whirling dervish, the snake dancer and devotee of 'Mumbo Jumbo.'" With the example of Billy Sunday in view, "let no white man sneer at the medicine men of West Africa or the howling of the Negro revival. The Negro church is at least democratic. It welcomes everybody. It draws no color line."[41] Whether Du Bois wrote the article is unclear, but there is no doubt of his irreligious views, which I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter.

Another black freethinker, David S. Cincose, spoke at the International Congress of Freethinkers, held in 1893 in Chicago, where he was billed as "the Colored Bob Ingersoll." The freethinker Samuel Porter Putnam reported on the convention and remarked, "As Scipio carried

[39] Hubert Harrison, "The Negro A Conservative," *The Truth Seeker* 41, no. 37 (September 12, 1914): 583.
[40] W.S.T. Harris, "A Colored Man's Plea," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 43 (October 22, 1910): 683.
[41] "The Christianity of White Christians," *The Truth Seeker* 42, no. 10 (March 6, 1915): 147; the original article is "The White Christ," *The Crisis* 9, no. 5 (March 1915): 238.

the war into Africa, so Africa now carries the war into the church, and that is a good sign. Our friend was once a Baptist preacher, but his baptism did not go deep enough, and he has come out a Freethinker."[42] Unfortunately Putnam did not say any more about Cincose or explain the contents of his speech. Two more cases of black men speaking to New York discussion groups about racial issues were reported in the *Truth Seeker*, although more will be said about these below.[43]

**Frederick Douglass and Robert Ingersoll**

An ambiguous case of a black freethinker is that of Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave and leading abolitionist. Historians have seen Douglass as a Christian, if a conflicted one.[44] A recent article by Zachary McLeod Hutchinson, however, suggests that a close reading of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) shows a wholesale rejection of Christianity, though one shrouded in metaphor that present-day readers of Douglass have overlooked.[45] The possibility that Douglass might have been an atheist is a tantalizing one but is as yet inconclusive. Freethought periodicals – without claiming him as one of their own – often quoted Douglass on relevant issues. The *Boston Investigator* reprinted a report about one of Douglass's lectures, in which he "said that he was glad to observe that the old superstitions respecting 'chance,' 'luck,' and 'Providence' were giving way to a more rational and scientific explanation of human success and failure."[46] In another case, the *Freethinker* reprinted part of a Douglass lecture in which he noted that the abolitionists received little help from Christians and that in fact many Christians used the Bible to justify slavery.[47]

Whatever his actual religion, Douglass's national prominence meant white freethinkers praised his achievements and sought to highlight their associations with him. Such a strategy had two goals. For one, Douglass's accomplishments lent support for the argument that blacks were capable of full citizenship. Secondly, by linking themselves with Douglass, white freethinkers

[42] Samuel Porter Putnam, *400 Years of Freethought* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1894), 661.
[43] Carr, "The Negro's Viewpoint of the Negro Question," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 21 (May 23, 1903): 326–7; George E. Wibecan, Jr., "The Race Problem at the B.P.A.," *The Truth Seeker* 36, no. 19 (May 8, 1909): 296.
[44] See for example Scott C. Williamson, *The Narrative Life: The Moral and Religious Thought of Frederick Douglass* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2002).
[45] Zachary McLeod Hutchins, "Rejecting the Root: The Liberating, Anti-Christ Theology of Douglass's Narrative," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68, no. 3 (2013): 292–322.
[46] "Fred. Douglass on the Supernatural," *Boston Investigator*, no. 33 (December 14, 1870): 261.
[47] Frederick Douglass, "The American Church and Slavery," *The Freethinker*, no. 500 (February 22, 1891): 88.

also demonstrated their own tolerance and humanity in contrast to the supposed bigotry of white Christians. A typical description of Douglass comes from an 1890 news item in the *Truth Seeker*, which stated, "Frederick Douglass states the true wisdom for both parties on the negro question in the terse saying: 'Let us alone and giv [sic] us fair play.'"[48] John E. Remsburg described Douglass as "the greatest of his race" while Sara A. Underwood said he was as "a born orator, and a noble pleader for his despised race."[49] Another freethinker defended Douglass against criticism for marrying a white woman. Such criticism, he believed, came from those "who are presumably Christians" yet he pointed to the example of Moses marrying an Ethiopian woman in the Bible.[50]

The clearest way freethinkers linked their cause to Douglass was the famous story of his meeting with the leading American freethinker, Robert Ingersoll. The incident entered freethought lore and would be retold multiple times. Douglass narrated the story in his final autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). While on a visit to give a lecture in Elmwood, Illinois, in the late 1860s or early 1870s, Douglass needed to spend the night in nearby Peoria after the lecture in order to make it to his next speaking engagement the following day. Douglass worried that he would be unable to find accommodation there, when a companion suggested that Douglass look up Ingersoll, who would gladly welcome any visitor. As it happened, Douglass found accommodation at a hotel in Peoria that night, but was curious about Ingersoll and "resolved to know more of this now famous and noted 'infidel'."[51] On calling at his door, Douglass found Ingersoll just as advertised: "I received a welcome from Mr. Ingersoll and his family which would have been a cordial to the bruised heart of any proscribed and storm-beaten stranger, and one which I can never forget or fail to appreciate." Douglass concluded that his view of "infidels" had changed following the meeting:

> Incidents of this character have greatly tended to liberalize my views as to the value of creeds in estimating the character of men. They have brought me to the conclusion that genuine goodness is the same, whether found inside or outside the church, and

[48] "Notes and Clippings," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 38 (September 20, 1890): 593.
[49] John E. Remsburg, *The Bible: I. Authenticity II. Credibility III. Morality* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1907), 381; Sara A. Underwood, "New York Anniversaries," *Boston Investigator*, no. 4 (May 27, 1868): 26.
[50] Adolphe Beckett, "Mixed Marriages," *Boston Investigator*, no. 46 (February 27, 1884): 5.
[51] Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn.: Park Publishing Co., 1881), 561.

> that to be an 'infidel' no more proves a man to be selfish, mean, and wicked, than to be evangelical proves him to be honest, just, and humane.[52]

While Ingersoll appears never to have spoken about the encounter during his life, the British secularist George Holyoake recounted the story in his autobiography, written in 1903, and claimed that on his trip to the US in 1879, he visited Ingersoll's house and also met Douglass there.[53] In another article in the *Freethinker*, an author named H.J. criticized the black preacher Celestine Edwards for his criticism of atheists. With segregation and discrimination in view, H.J. cautioned that Edwards should think twice about his views of atheists. While Frederick Douglass faced discrimination from white Christians, he was, as H.J. explained, "a personal friend of Col. Ingersoll, at whose house I believe he is a welcome guest. Let Mr. Celestine Edwards, who is never tired of holding Atheists up to public execration, make a note of this."[54] Again, the story was brought up as proof of Ingersoll's – and by extension all atheists' – superior morality. The story would appear several more times in *The Freethinker* before the end of the century.[55]

Douglass's encounter with Ingersoll was again brought up when a group of "colored Freethinkers" met in 1901 in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the life of Ingersoll, who had passed away in 1899. The hall was decorated with portraits of Douglass and Ingersoll on either side of the stage. Many speakers discussed Ingersoll's achievements and emphasized his great humanity. One speaker brought up the story about Douglass and spoke highly of Ingersoll, "particularly for his championship of human rights regardless of race or color."[56] He continued:

> Ingersoll was one of the first fruits of the evolution of humanity away from tribe and clan and race into a manhood bounded only by humanity. He saw no black peril in America, or yellow peril on the other side of the world. He saw only man, and believed that all should walk by the light of reason under the sway of the sceptre of liberty and justice.[57]

At the meeting a resolution was passed, proposed by William Calvin Chase, editor of the black newspaper the *Washington Bee*, which said in part, "[Ingersoll's] sympathies were boundless,

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[52] Ibid., 562.
[53] George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903), 99.
[54] H.J., "How Christians Love the Negro (1)," *The Freethinker*, no. 568 (June 12, 1892): 371.
[55] "Ingersoll and F. Douglas," *The Freethinker*, no. 698 (December 9, 1894): 788; "Frederick Douglass and Ingersoll," *The Freethinker*, no. 752 (December 22, 1895): 805.
[56] J.J.S., "Colored Liberals," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 12 (March 23, 1901): 184.
[57] "Negroes Praised Him," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 16 (April 20, 1901): 247.

they were confined by no narrow limitations of race, class, or sex. All men who suffered wrong found in Ingersoll an advocate and champion."[58] Eva Ingersoll, Robert's wife, could not attend the meeting but wrote a letter that was read aloud in which she expressed her regrets and support for the meeting. "Since his death", she said, "I have received innumerable expressions of affection for him and sympathy for me and mine from the colored people throughout the entire country, for which I am deeply grateful."[59] Such words, while given at a celebratory event, suggest that Ingersoll was regarded in his own time as a champion of civil rights for blacks.

**Racial Optimists**

Given his prominence as the leading freethinker in the United States, Ingersoll has attracted attention from historians. Some have argued that he did little to protest against racial injustice in the US. David Anderson says that "he was almost silent as second-class citizenship became a reality" and, while Ingersoll was "[a] strong supporter of civil rights, particularly for Negroes, he did not make the emergence of Jim Crow and segregation, for which his party [the Republicans] bore much responsibility, a political issue as he might have done."[60] Jeremy Rich, citing Anderson, states that Ingersoll "rarely touched on racial themes, even as he expounded on practically every other intellectual topic. […] Although Ingersoll attacked slavery and supported Republican civil rights legislation after the late 1860s, he did nothing to decry the rise of Jim Crow in the 1880s and 1890s."[61] More generally, Evelyn Kirkley says white American freethinkers as a group "held paternalistic, racist attitudes prevalent among postbellum Euro-Americans. Although many of them and their parents had supported abolition, they were reluctant to endorse African American civil rights."[62]

These accounts give Ingersoll and his colleagues far too little credit. Far from being silent on racial issues, as we saw in the previous chapter, Ingersoll was an outspoken defender of the Chinese and he also stood up for black civil rights until the end of his life. Of course one must also be careful to avoid the assumption that Ingersoll held racial views that would fit comfortably in our contemporary society. Susan Jacoby, in her recent biography of Ingersoll, comes close to

[58] J.J.S., "Colored Liberals," 184.
[59] "Negroes Praised Him," 248.
[60] David D. Anderson, *Robert Ingersoll* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1972), 7, 129.
[61] Jeremy Rich, "Heresy Is the Only True Religion: Richard Lynch Garner (1848-1920), A Southern Freethinker in Africa and America," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12, no. 1 (January 2013): 78–9.
[62] Kirkley, *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen*, 21.

this as she notes that "Ingersoll was far ahead of his time" on social issues including "racial equality". "From a secular humanist perspective," Jacoby continues, "Ingersoll was on the right side of nearly all of these issues."[63] Such a view, while nearer to the mark, overlooks some of the limitations to the progressiveness of Ingersoll's racial views.

Ingersoll was not exceptional among freethinkers in this regard, but he was not the norm either. Sidney Warren rightly points out that "freethinkers were sometimes radical and other times reactionary" about racial issues.[64] There was a range of views among white freethinkers, from optimistic support of racial justice, egalitarianism, and a belief in blacks' capacity for progress, to pessimistic, racial determinist views, which held that innate black inferiority made true equality impossible. Even those on the egalitarian side, like Ingersoll, held a lingering belief in black inferiority.

Robert Ingersoll is certainly the leading optimist among white freethinkers. This would not have been clear, however, in judging from his early political career, when he ran for Congress as a Democrat in 1860 and opposed Lincoln's leadership for the first half of the Civil War. One point of contention was the Emancipation Proclamation, which Ingersoll worried would make the South more intractable and bring a massive influx of emancipated slaves into northern states.[65] This would be a recurring worry for Ingersoll who said in an 1863 speech that these ex-slaves were "a dangerous element" and were "too ignorant and degraded." Therefore, he wanted "the negro to be put in a territory by himself."[66] By the middle of 1863, however, he was thoroughly behind Lincoln and supported his brother Ebon's successful run for Congress as a Republican in 1864. After the war was over, Ingersoll encouraged Ebon to oppose leniency and pursue a radical policy toward the South.[67]

At the start of the Civil War, however, Ingersoll was, in the words of biographer Orvin Larson, "not as yet a godless man."[68] It was not until the 1860s when Ingersoll's anti-religious views really took shape: in 1862 he married Eva Parker, who came from a freethinking family, and in the mid 1860s, he began to read canonical anti-religious works.[69] It is not unreasonable,

[63] Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 109.
[64] Warren, *American Freethought*, 117.
[65] Orvin Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 63–4.
[66] Quoted in ibid., 70.
[67] Ibid., 82.
[68] Ibid., 42.
[69] Ibid., 51–2, 76–8.

therefore, to suggest that Ingersoll's growing hostility to religion might have influenced his evolving racial politics. Soon after the war, in 1867, Ingersoll gave a speech in Galesburg, Illinois to a group of blacks, who requested that Ingersoll, then Attorney General of Illinois with a growing reputation for stirring oratory, address them. In the talk, Ingersoll explained to his audience how the Bible helped justify slavery. He also stated that blacks should have the same rights as white people and encouraged them to use their voting rights with sophistication by making the two political parties fight for their votes.[70]

Ingersoll was an active Republican for much of his life. He campaigned for the Republicans in the 1876 and 1880 presidential elections and made racial issues a prominent theme. In campaign speeches, he painted the Democrats as untrustworthy and conniving given their historical support for slavery.[71] While his campaign speeches in 1876 and 1880 mainly slung mud at the Democrats, he also used these speeches to make a broader point about racial injustice. Ingersoll gave the example of a horse race, "free to every horse in the world, and to all the mules, and all the scrubs, and all the donkeys." Why, Ingersoll asked, would the superior "blooded horse" care about the mules and donkeys on the track? On the other hand,

> the Democratic scrub, with his chuckle-head and lop-ears, with his tail full of cockle-burrs, jumping high and short, and digging in the ground when he feels the breath of the coming mule on his cockle-burr tail, he is the chap that jumps the track and says, "I am down on mule equality."[72]

Here, however, Ingersoll seems to accept the notion of inherent white superiority: whites represented "the blooded horse" and therefore had no reason to restrict the rights of their inferiors since, in a fair competition, whites would come out ahead anyway. In another speech, he noted, in a similar vein, "[i]f I belong to the superior race, I will be so superior that I can make my living without stealing from the inferior."[73] Ingersoll seemed to take whites' superiority as a given,

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[70] Robert Ingersoll, "An Address to the Colored People," speech delivered in Galesburg, Illinois in 1867, in Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 9 (New York: The Dresden Publishing Co., C.P. Farrell, 1902), 5–17.
[71] See for example Robert Ingersoll, "Bangor Speech," speech delivered in Bangor, Maine on August 24, 1876, in ibid., 9:97–122.
[72] Robert Ingersoll, "Cooper Union Speech, New York," speech delivered in New York on September 10, 1876, in ibid., 9:181–2.
[73] Robert Ingersoll, "Chicago Speech," speech delivered in Chicago on October 20, 1876, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 9:218.

which meant laws infringing upon blacks' freedoms were simply gratuitous and used to help those whites who could not succeed on their own.

Ingersoll also protested against the curtailment of civil rights for blacks. In 1883, the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Acts of 1875, which ensured equal access for blacks and whites to various services, like hotels, trains, and theatres, a decision that was, to Ingersoll, "a disgrace to the age in which we live."[74] Far from being silent on the scaling back of civil rights, Ingersoll criticized his own party, the Republicans, for failing to make this a major issue in their unsuccessful 1884 presidential campaign – a decision he believed led blacks to lose faith in the party.[75] In a speech delivered on 22 October 1883, only a few days after the Supreme Court's decision, Ingersoll gave an impassioned critique of the ruling:

> I am the inferior of any man whose rights I trample under foot. Men are not superior by reason of the accidents of race or color. They are superior who have the best heart – the best brain. Superiority is born of honesty, of virtue, of charity, and above all, of the love of liberty. The superior man is the providence of the inferior. He is eyes for the blind, strength for the weak, and a shield for the defenceless. He stands erect by bending above the fallen. He rises by lifting others.[76]

In arguing against the decision, Ingersoll used the example of Frederick Douglass to show the injustice. It was "simply absurd" that "a man like Frederick Douglass" could be denied entrance to a hotel, theatre, or train on account of his race.[77] While such an argument was no doubt powerful, the implication was that unequal treatment was wrong because it would provide unequal treatment not to just any average black man, but to someone of Douglass's status. Equal rights therefore seemed contingent upon sufficient black achievement. Such an argument also further emphasized the fact that black achievement was an aberration.

This use of black success stories was a common tactic for racial optimists. Another example was Booker T. Washington. Washington, born into slavery in 1856, went on to become the inaugural leader of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, an agricultural and industrial training centre for blacks. Washington advocated that blacks focus on self-improvement as a way to earn

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[74] Robert Ingersoll, interview with *The National*, Washington, D.C., October 17, 1883, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 8:136.
[75] Robert Ingersoll, interview with The Commercial, Louisville, Kentucky, October [November?] 24, 1884, in ibid., 8:219.
[76] Robert Ingersoll, "Address on the Civil Rights Act," speech delivered in Washington, D.C., on October 22, 1883, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 11:48.
[77] Robert Ingersoll, interview with The National Republican, Washington, D.C., October 17, 1883, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 8:136–7; see also "Col. Ingersoll on the Colored Race," *Boston Investigator*, no. 3 (April 20, 1892): 6.

the respect of white people, rather than challenging segregation and disfranchisement directly.[78] Many whites, including freethinkers – North and South – found in Washington a relatively uncontroversial figure on whom they could count to express moderate and agreeable views on the race question. One news report in the *Truth Seeker* from 1890, described Washington as "one of the most competent and cultivated colored men in the country", while Eugene Macdonald said he was "probably the brainiest colored man in the country today."[79] When arguing against racial prejudice, Washington could be called upon as an exemplar of black progress. Hugh O. Pentecost, in a speech from 1907, criticized the notion of the innate inferiority of blacks and said, "[l]ook at Booker T. Washington himself; he contradicts that statement."[80] Another exemplar was Clement G. Morgan, who was voted the speaker of his 1890 graduating class at Harvard – the first black man to receive the honour. Ingersoll invoked Morgan as an example of the extent of black progress following emancipation.[81] A report in the *Boston Investigator* likewise sung the praises of Morgan, while denouncing the negative reactions against him, which "spring from prejudice, or are dictated by foolish sentiments unworthy the age in which we live."[82] This was part of a wider strand of the optimist argument that held blacks needed to be given a fair opportunity before one could decide on the merits of their race.[83]

In Britain too, there was hope among white freethinkers about the fate of blacks, but also condemnation of white attempts to hinder their progress. The *National Reformer* reported on positive developments among former slaves in the years following the Civil War, but also noted with worry the white backlash in the South.[84] During Charles Bradlaugh's visit to America in 1875, he penned a series of articles on American politics and touched on the condition of former slaves in one section. He noted that while blacks received "a paper political equality" through the fifteenth amendment, it would take "several generations" of education and training "to even give

[78] On Washington's life, see Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).
[79] "Notes and Clippings," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 35 (August 30, 1890): 545; Eugene MacDonald, "The Negro," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 17 (April 25, 1903): 264; see also "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 786 (August 16, 1896): 519.
[80] Hugh O. Pentecost, "How We Treat the Negroes," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 23 (June 6, 1903): 354.
[81] Robert Ingersoll, "Fragments," undated, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 12:340.
[82] "Harvard's Colored Class-Day Orator," *Boston Investigator*, no. 13 (July 2, 1890): 4.
[83] "The Negro Question," *Boston Investigator*, no. 25 (October 25, 1865): 197; "Inquiries," *Boston Investigator*, no. 26 (October 28, 1868): 204.
[84] "Summary of News," *National Reformer*, no. 385 (September 29, 1867): 280; "Summary of News," *National Reformer*, no. 437 (September 27, 1868): 200; "Summary of News," *National Reformer*, no. 507 (January 30, 1870): 72.

the coloured race the possible chance of making the best of the organisation they inherit." But Bradlaugh also acknowledged the role of white supremacist groups in the South, which "represent an element which will never cease to oppose the recognition of the equality before the law of the negro race."[85]

Black freethinkers most obviously spoke out against racial injustice. One speech by a Mr. Carr, a former district attorney, was given to the Manhattan Liberal Club in 1903. As a preface to the speech, he expressed his belief that the "liberal" in the name of the club meant those who have "minds that are open to reason, and that from the discussions the element of prejudice is eliminated." The thread that ran through Carr's speech was the idea of justice. Whites, in his view, needed to be prepared to accept blacks if they became educated and acquired property. Voting laws also needed to be just. He accepted "educational and property qualifications" so long as they were applied equally to whites and blacks.[86] George E. Wibecan, Jr. struck a similar note to Carr in his lecture to the Brooklyn Philosophical Association in 1909. He stressed that when blacks had similar opportunities to whites, they flourished. He pointed to the example of Alain Locke, who in 1907 became the first black man to be awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. Like Carr and others, Wibecan argued for the importance of judging someone "according to his worth as a man and not by the shade of his skin."[87]

The issue of lynching was another flashpoint in the debate around blacks at the turn of the nineteenth century. Ingersoll addressed the subject in the final speech before his death in 1899. In the speech, he questioned the idea that Christianity improved morality, by pointing to lynching as one example: "Has the Bible made the people of Georgia kind and merciful? Would the lynchers be more ferocious if they worshipped gods of wood and stone?"[88] In an 1899 interview, Ingersoll responded angrily to a lynching in Georgia, in which Sam Hose, a black man, killed his white employer – probably in self-defence – and was subsequently captured by a mob, mutilated, and burned alive. Of the incident, Ingersoll said, "I know of no words strong enough, bitter enough, to express my indignation and horror."[89] He called the perpetrators "savages" and said, "[t]hey are a disgrace to our country, our century and the human race."[90] Finally, Ingersoll wondered,

[85] Charles Bradlaugh, "American Politics (2)," *National Reformer*, no. 779 (April 18, 1875): 443.
[86] Carr, "The Negro's Viewpoint of the Negro Question," 326–8, quotation on 326.
[87] Wibecan, Jr., "The Race Problem at the B.P.A.," 296.
[88] Robert Ingersoll, "What is Religion?" speech delivered in Boston on June 2, 1899, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 4:494.
[89] Robert Ingersoll, "Fragments," undated, in Ingersoll, *Works*, 12:322.
[90] Ibid., 12:323.

"Are white people insane? Has mercy fled to beasts?"[91] Both the *Truth Seeker* and the *Freethinker* reprinted excerpts of Ingersoll's condemnation of the lynching.[92]

Ingersoll's response generated a number of letters to the *Truth Seeker* to defend lynching, or at least to defend the character of the South. No writers defended the barbarity of the practice and most said that they would never personally engage in a lynching. As the historian George Fredrickson observes, "the more educated and sophisticated Southern Negrophobes of the period generally condemned the practice in the abstract […]. But […] these spokesmen often ended up apologizing for the practice as virtually unavoidable under existing circumstances."[93] This was the case for white Southern freethinkers: various authors stated that while they disapproved of lynching, it was unfair of Ingersoll and the *Truth Seeker* readership to judge the South because they could not adequately understand the conditions there.[94] Numerous other authors wrote in to the *Truth Seeker* to condemn those lynching apologists. Lynch mobs, they argued, often targeted innocent men and had no place in a civilized society.[95]

Ingersoll was not the only white freethinker to speak out against lynching, but the fact that he was the most prominent in the country undoubtedly encouraged others to do so. Eugene Macdonald's younger brother, George, who wrote regularly for the *Truth Seeker* and took over as editor after Eugene's death, also denounced lynching. Macdonald denounced the brutality of the mob violence and dismissed arguments that lynchers were nobly trying to prevent crime through their actions.[96] Similarly, Charles Chilton Moore, a freethinker who edited the *Blue Grass Blade* in Lexington, Kentucky, condemned lynching and argued that there seemed to be a contradiction between participating in a lynching and being a freethinker. He cited one report that claimed a

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[91] Ibid., 12:324.
[92] "Has Mercy Fled to Beasts?," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 18 (May 6, 1899): 277; "Sugar Plums," *The Freethinker*, no. 930 (May 21, 1899): 329–30.
[93] Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, 272.
[94] For the defenders of lynching, see S. Rittenburg, "Lynching Excused," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 24 (June 17, 1899): 378; S.R. Shepherd, "The Leavenworth Lynching," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 7 (February 16, 1901): 106–7; Anonymous, "Punishment for Negro Fiends," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 38 (September 21, 1901): 601; Jno. W. James, "Was Born in Tennessee," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 32 (August 8, 1903): 506; W.L. Dolphyn, "Must Lynch Them," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 40 (October 3, 1903): 634; J.M. Benjamin, "Negro Question Not a Burning One," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 50 (December 12, 1903): 790; R.M. Powell, "Facts About Southern Lynching," *The Truth Seeker* 34, no. 2 (January 12, 1907): 25.
[95] Charles D. McBride, "The Hose Murder," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 30 (July 29, 1899): 474; H. Sandberg, "The Crime of Lynching," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 44 (November 2, 1901): 697; Elizabeth E. Evans, "Black and White," *The Truth Seeker* 31, no. 29 (June 16, 1904): 454; James F. Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," *The Truth Seeker* 38, no. 14 (April 8, 1911): 211.
[96] George Macdonald, "Observations," *The Truth Seeker* 27, no. 50 (December 15, 1900): 792; George Macdonald, "Observations," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 32 (August 8, 1903): 503.

recent lynching was perpetrated by numerous church members, yet the report "didn't say that there was any Infidel in the crowd, and I do not believe that there was one, because Infidels do not do things like that, and Christians do." Furthermore, "[a]ny Infidel who was known to have been in that gang would receive the condemnation of all leading Infidels in the world […]."[97] In this case, Moore explicitly categorized lynching as contrary to the values of freethought.

On a similar note, white freethinkers attacked the hypocrisy of Christians with regard to race. One example is criticism directed to Celestine Edwards, a prominent black lecturer for the Christian Evidence Society and a founding member of the Society for the Furtherance of the Brotherhood of Man. Edwards frequently criticized British atheists in his speeches, and styled himself "BC", the "Black Champion" while labeling opponents like Bradlaugh or J.M. Robertson "WC" or the "White Champion."[98] In response, an article in *The Freethinker* by H.J., sought to remind Edwards "about the way in which his white fellow-Christians in the United States treat the black man." H.J. believed part of Edwards's appeal was the novelty of a black man preaching to white people. While the British were happy to "shake hands with their 'black brother,'" white Americans refused to worship in the same church as blacks "and hold the 'nigger' in undisguised contempt."[99] White freethinkers had no such prejudices and H.J. said they would always be willing to meet a black man in public debate "as if he were a 'white man' in a figurative as well as in a literal sense." Furthermore, the author brought up the abolitionist history of atheists and infidels as he encouraged Edwards to

> remember that some of the best friends the negro ever had were infidels and Atheists. Let him remember it, to his shame, when he is trying to paint the characters of great and good men to his ignorant Christian audiences in colors as black as his own skin. […].[100]

In this instance, H.J. used the historical and contemporary examples to demonstrate the hypocrisy of Christians' proclaimed treatment of all people equally. At the same time, H.J. used

[97] Charles Chilton Moore, "Christian Crime in Kentucky and Ohio," *The Freethinker*, no. 966 (January 28, 1900): 53.
[98] Douglas Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations and Resistance: Britain, 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 280–1.
[99] H.J., "How Christians Love the Negro (1)," 371.
[100] H.J., "How Christians Love the Negro (2)," *The Freethinker*, no. 569 (June 19, 1892): 388.

counterexamples from atheists that showed they in fact possessed a consistent morality that opposed racialism.

**Racial Pessimists**

This is not to suggest all white freethinkers possessed optimistic views with regard to the potential for black progress. As we have already seen, negative stereotypes of blacks were littered throughout white freethinkers' writings. T.H. Huxley, as we saw in the second chapter, regarded the lower races as intermediaries between apes and men on the evolutionary ladder. Not surprisingly then, he was skeptical about the progress of black Americans following the Civil War. He conceded in an 1865 essay that some blacks might be better than some whites, "but no rational man, cognisant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the average white man."[101] Furthermore, it was "simply incredible" to think that on an equal playing field "our prognathous relative […] will be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival, in a contest which is to be carried on by thought and not by bites."[102]

White freethinking suffragettes like Elizabeth Cady Stanton also drew upon these racial pessimist arguments in debates surrounding the prospect of black male enfranchisement in the years following the Civil War. It was unjust, she argued, for uneducated black men to receive the vote while white women did not. This strain of argument easily turned to one that emphasized the racial inferiority of blacks. As Stanton put it,

> […] I would not trust him [the black man] with my rights; degraded, oppressed himself, he would be more despotic with the governing power than ever our Saxon rulers are. If women are still to be represented by men, then I say let only the highest type of manhood stand at the helm of State.[103]

D.M. Bennett, the founder of the *Truth Seeker*, likewise expressed negative views toward blacks. In his tour of Europe, he noted that black people were treated well in Vienna. "If a colored woman removes to Vienna," Bennett explained, "if not too ugly of feature, she is preferred by the

[101] Thomas Henry Huxley, "Emancipation – Black and White (1865)," in *Collected Essays: Volume 3: Science and Education Essays* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), 66–7.
[102] Ibid., 67.
[103] Quoted in Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), 84–5.

young bloods to the pretty women of their own race." This led Bennett to suggest therefore that "a thousand or so of the wenches of America" should emigrate there.[104]

Other white freethinkers possessed an outright disdain for blacks. Such was the case with William Cowper Brann, a freethinker from Texas who wrote a periodical called the *Iconoclast* and who was murdered in 1898 by a Christian gunman. In an article reprinted in the *Freethinker*, Brann railed against black preachers with vitriol unmatched by other major white freethinkers. The black preacher, Brann contended, had "even less morals than the usual darkey." It was these men who had been responsible for uprisings in the South and "[t]he belief in many negro skulls that the black is several degrees better than the white is largely due to the assurances of their preachers." Similarly, assaults against white women were laid at the feet "of these greasy, indolent, vociferous mal-odorous nuisances" and Brann recommended that in addition to lynching the perpetrator, the black preacher who compelled the initial violence should also be lynched.[105] As Susan Jacoby points out, however, the fact that Brann was "a militant racist […] made him a pariah within the national freethought movement […]."[106] Yet the fact that the *Freethinker* reprinted his essay without comment suggests that his language was not completely beyond the pale.

Probably the most prominent freethinker to express a racial pessimist position was Eugene Macdonald, the editor of the *Truth Seeker* from 1883 to his death in 1909. His racial views signalled a broader shift in white American opinion around the turn of the nineteenth century. As George Fredrickson explains, "[s]pokesmen who claimed to represent an unsentimental and tough-minded perception of racial reality denied the prospect of gradual black 'progress' in an atmosphere of increased mutual accommodation, projecting instead a future of increasing racial antagonism."[107] One particular editorial by Macdonald in April 1903 exemplified this change as he launched into a lengthy rant on black character:

> The negro is unquestionably of an inferior race. He is imitative, not initiative, and like most imitators imitates the worst, not the best. He is not and can never be the equal of the white race, for he is several hundred years behind, can never catch up. His customs and manners, otherwise known as morals, are widely different from the white man's. He picks up small portable articles with the same irresponsibility as a

[104] D.M. Bennett, *A Truth Seeker Around the World*, vol. 1 (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1882), 497.
[105] "Negro Preachers and Their Work," *The Freethinker*, no. 983 (May 27, 1900): 332.
[106] Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 155.
[107] Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, 228.

> monkey. He chatters away from the truth as easily as a minister slanders Infidels. He has the passions of an animal with scant intellectual command of them.

Furthermore, he maintained that most blacks were "lazy, lying, shiftless, immoral, superstitious, and dishonest."[108]

Given blacks' inferiority and ignorance from slavery, according to Macdonald, black suffrage was a mistake. Northern politicians used the issue of voting as a ploy to gain black support in the South. Such a tactic was "no way to elevate" blacks from their inferior condition, and in fact only harmed them since it encouraged them to think "Nigger good as white man". Furthermore, Macdonald argued that blacks simply voted for the Republicans out of "gratitude" without any understanding of what they were voting for. Earlier portrayals of blacks lingering from earlier "Abolition doctrines" were unrealistic: "every negro was a persecuted saint; that he was just as good if not a little better than a white man […]." But this was only "a splendid dream". Macdonald also believed that forcing blacks and whites together in "the same cars and restaurants and other places where physical contact is impossible to avoid, is to violate sociological laws as well as healthful natural instincts." Macdonald called for future policy toward blacks to come "from the sociologists and not from the politicians." As he argued further, "[i]t would be as reasonable to enact a statute against the thunder and lightning as one proclaiming the equality of the white and colored races. […] Nature knows neither charity nor justice; inexorable law governs the universe."[109] Macdonald's freethought certainly influenced his view of blacks: he claimed to base his views of proper race relations on scientific and rational grounds, without recourse to mere sentimentality.

The editorial attracted both positive and negative feedback. One writer, S.M. Lewis, disagreed with the "very one-sided and prejudiced" editorial. He contested Macdonald on the grounds of freethought. While Lewis accepted blacks were presently inferior, this was "because [they had] been crushed by the brutal power of might for centuries […]." Lewis gave a poignant rejoinder to Macdonald's idea that the black man "would be improved by crushing him" when he asked – in a question sure to wound a freethinker priding himself on rationality – "[a]re you a homeopath?" Lewis further took issue with Macdonald's invocation of sociology. There was no "sociological law" that stated whites and blacks could not ride in the same cars or eat at the same

[108] Eugene Macdonald, "The Negro Problem," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 10 (March 7, 1903): 148.
[109] Ibid.

tables. Lewis noted that considerable advancement had been made among the black population since 1865 and called for judgment based on "individual merit". He closed his letter by quoting Thomas Paine's famous phrase, "The world is my country, to do good my religion", which had connotations of opposing racial prejudice.[110]

But Macdonald's editorial also attracted some support. A letter from Francis Smith, from Arkansas, stated that Macdonald's opinion was "eminently correct" and in complete harmony with Southern views. He called for giving blacks civil rights and "practical education as far as they are capable of receiving it." While Smith acknowledged that while there were "some good negroes, […] many others are but little better than savages." Additionally, most blacks did not have "sufficient intelligence" to be able to vote. He believed that those blacks who focused on "honest labor […] will always be respected by the white people." That said, Southern whites, in Smith's view, did not want to have social interaction or "amalgamation" with blacks.[111]

In other articles, Macdonald continued his attacks on sentimental portrayals of blacks. As he said in one article, "the days of Uncle Tom's Cabin are over. Sentiment, except that of justice, benevolence, and forbearance, should be excluded." Instead, Macdonald looked to "the sociologists who can advance a rational mode of settlement[.]"[112] On the subject of lynching, Macdonald wrote in a brief response to one letter defending lynching that getting vengeance on a criminal or rapist "is to be expected." But the torture, brutality, and festive nature only took away sympathy from the original victim and turned "brutal negroes into heroes and martyrs in the eyes of some Northern sentimentalists."[113] Still, Macdonald denounced Charles Carroll's book, *The Negro a Beast, or In the Image of God?*, which argued that blacks were beasts, one of whom married Cain. Such a book, Macdonald contended, was designed "to injure the negro" by misrepresenting the Bible.[114]

**Conclusion**

This chapter has traced freethinkers' views of black Americans in the decades following the Civil War. Freethinkers often used unflattering and simplistic portrayals of blacks as an

[110] S.M. Lewis, "The Negro Problem," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 14 (April 4, 1903): 218.
[111] Francis Smith, "The Negro Problem," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 14 (April 4, 1903): 218.
[112] Macdonald, "The Negro," 264; see also Eugene Macdonald, "Barbarism in the United States," *The Truth Seeker* 31, no. 3 (January 16, 1904): 36.
[113] Dolphyn, "Must Lynch Them," 634.
[114] Eugene Macdonald, "Christian Hatred of the Negro," *The Truth Seeker* 30, no. 18 (May 2, 1903): 276.

instrumental way to critique Christianity. Additionally, the characteristics attributed to blacks, such as their foolishness, their piety, and their criminality, were all opposite to the ones that white freethinkers prided in themselves. In this way, blacks represented a mirror by which white freethinkers could define their own identities. I suggested that part of the reason that so many of these images of blacks were simple caricatures was that white freethinkers had little contact with black people.

Despite the negative portrayals of blacks, a number of freethinkers did assert that the freethought movement was open to anyone regardless of race. Depictions of superstitious blacks were therefore partially refuted by the presence of a number of black freethinkers, some of whom were directly involved in the freethought movement. One possible black freethinker was Frederick Douglass and, while his religious convictions are not completely clear, his connection with Robert Ingersoll was drawn upon time and again by other white freethinkers to demonstrate Ingersoll's superior humanity and by extension their own. Indeed, Ingersoll was the most vocal racial optimist among white freethinkers. He argued for equal civil rights for blacks and protested against lynching and the onset of renewed segregation. Ingersoll and others argued against racial prejudice toward blacks, particularly on the grounds that it was clashed with the rationalist principles of freethought. The optimist position however seemed to take black inferiority for granted, even while they argued for equal opportunities for all. Likewise, the emphasis on black progress, seen especially through the use of black exemplars like Douglass, seemed to make equal rights dependent on sufficient progress and, though unintentionally, underscored that figures like Douglass were actually very rare. There was also a more pessimistic position with regard to blacks. This was exemplified by Eugene Macdonald, who argued late in the nineteenth century against the wisdom of granting blacks the right to vote. True equality could not be legislated into existence, he argued, and pretending away the sociological fact of black inferiority was mere sentiment, unsuited to the rationalist freethinker.

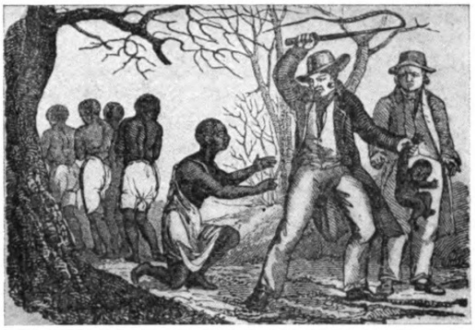
With all of this in view, one can ask whether there was a distinctive atheistic perspective with regard to black Americans. We have already seen that there was a range of different views, but in each there was a focus on science and rationality as the basis for decision-making. Even if they ultimately reasoned themselves to different conclusions, freethinkers on opposite ends of the divide shared these common principles. Such a debate has implications for the "Race-Secularization Thesis," which might suggest that this emphasis on science and rationality would

lead to racialist views. This was somewhat the case as we have seen with Eugene Macdonald, but by using these principles atheists could put forth an alternative perspective with regard to racial prejudice. This will become even clearer in the next chapter, which examines how an atheistic perspective offered the tools to critique racialism.

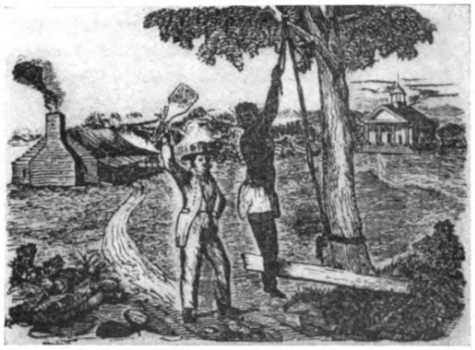
Branding a Negress.



Figure 1: In Eugene Macdonald, *A Short History of the Inquisition: What It Was and What It Did* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1913), between 532–3. Image from https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008976300, accessed 8 December 2016.



Christians Taking a Child From Its Mother.



A Christian Overseer's Job.



Figure 2: In Eugene Macdonald, *A Short History of the Inquisition: What It Was and What It Did* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1913), between 568–9. Image from https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008976300, accessed 8 December 2016.


Figure 3: "A Biblical Custom," *The Truth Seeker* 19, no. 52 (December 24, 1892). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

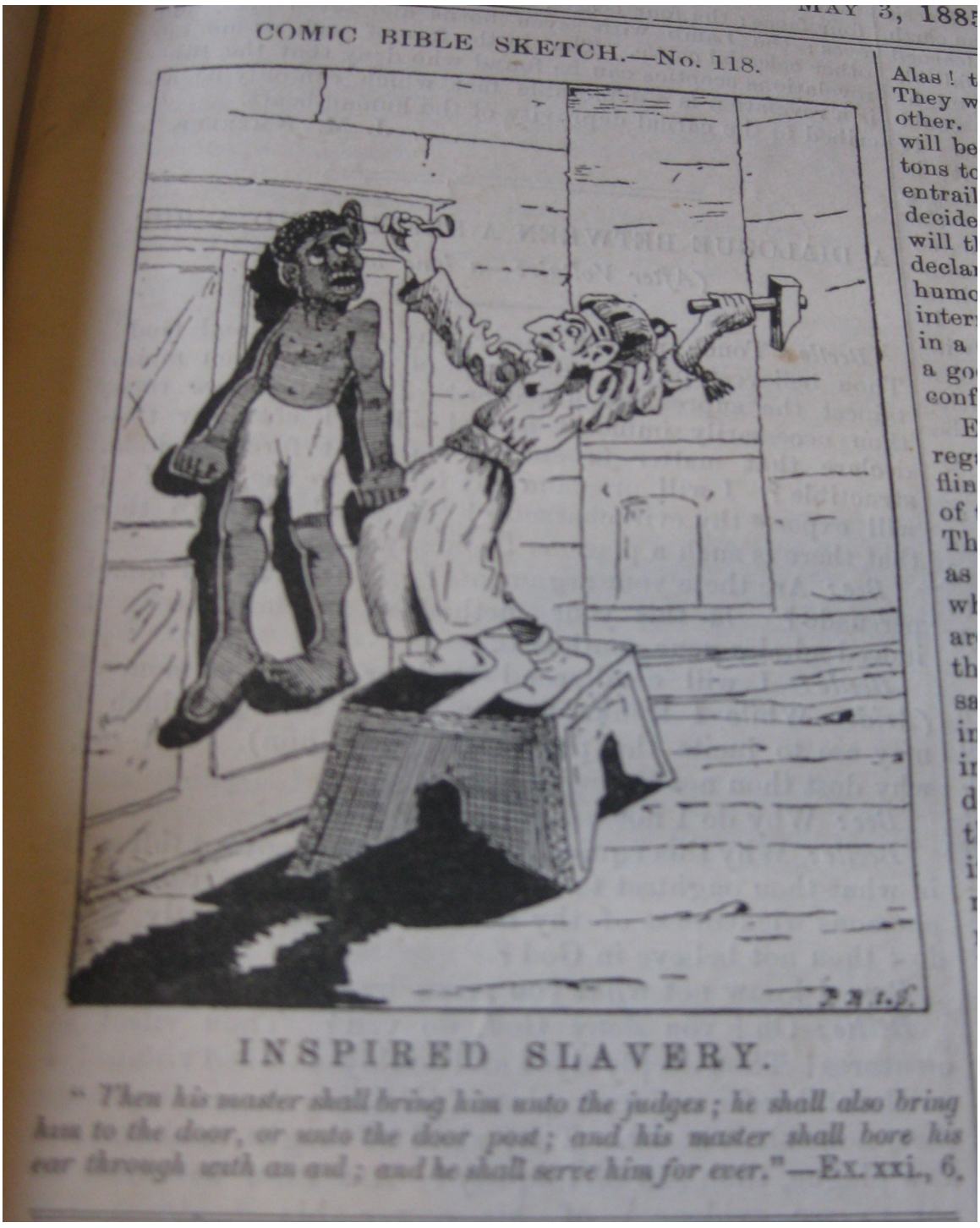



Figure 4: "Inspired Slavery," *The Freethinker*, no. 194 (May 3, 1885). Photographed at Conway Hall Library.

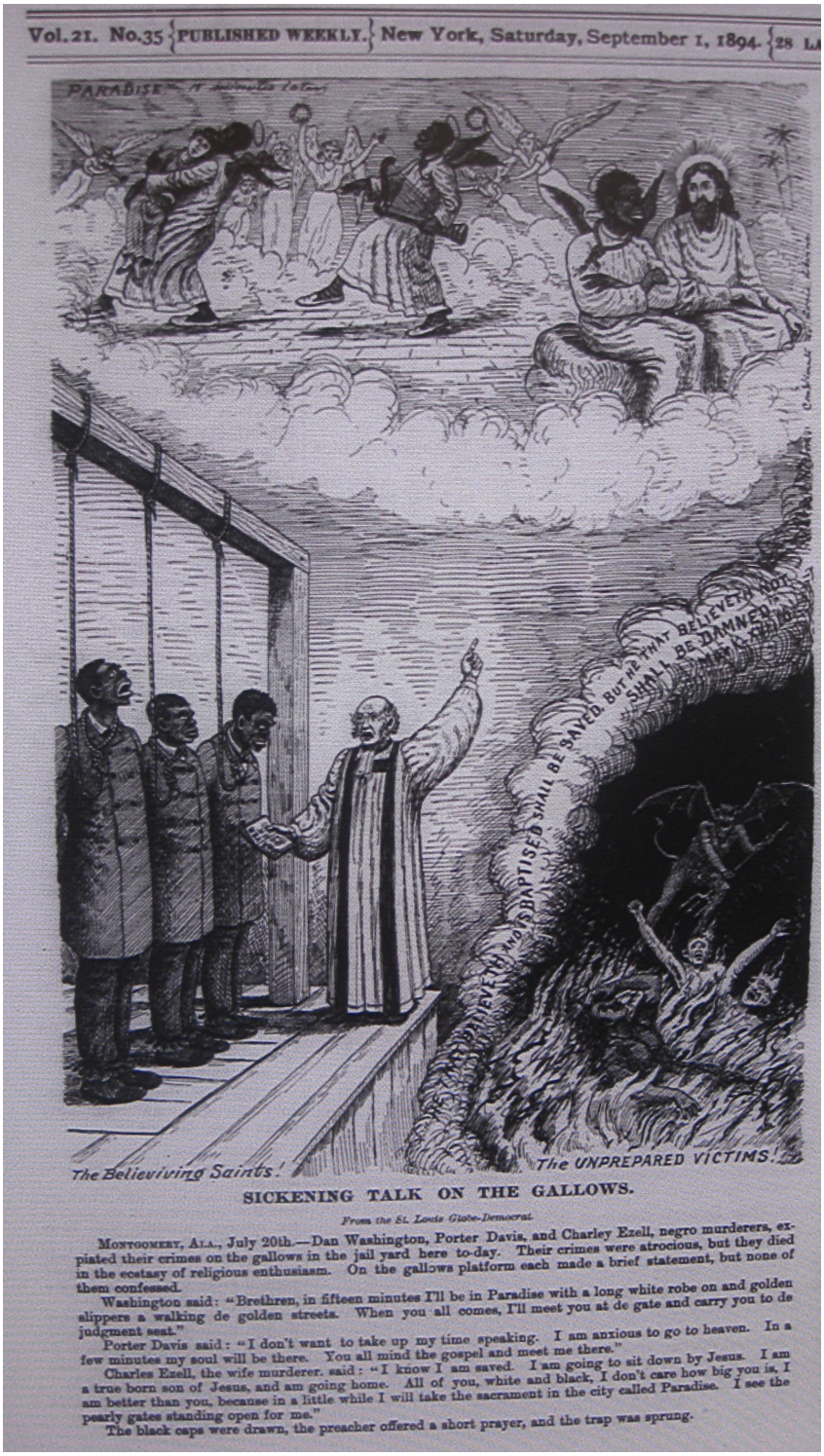



Figure 5: "Sickening Talk on the Gallows," *The Truth Seeker* 21, no. 35 (September 1, 1894). Photographed at the Library of Congress.


Figure 6: A Christian Endeavor," *The Truth Seeker* 22, no. 46 (November 16, 1895). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

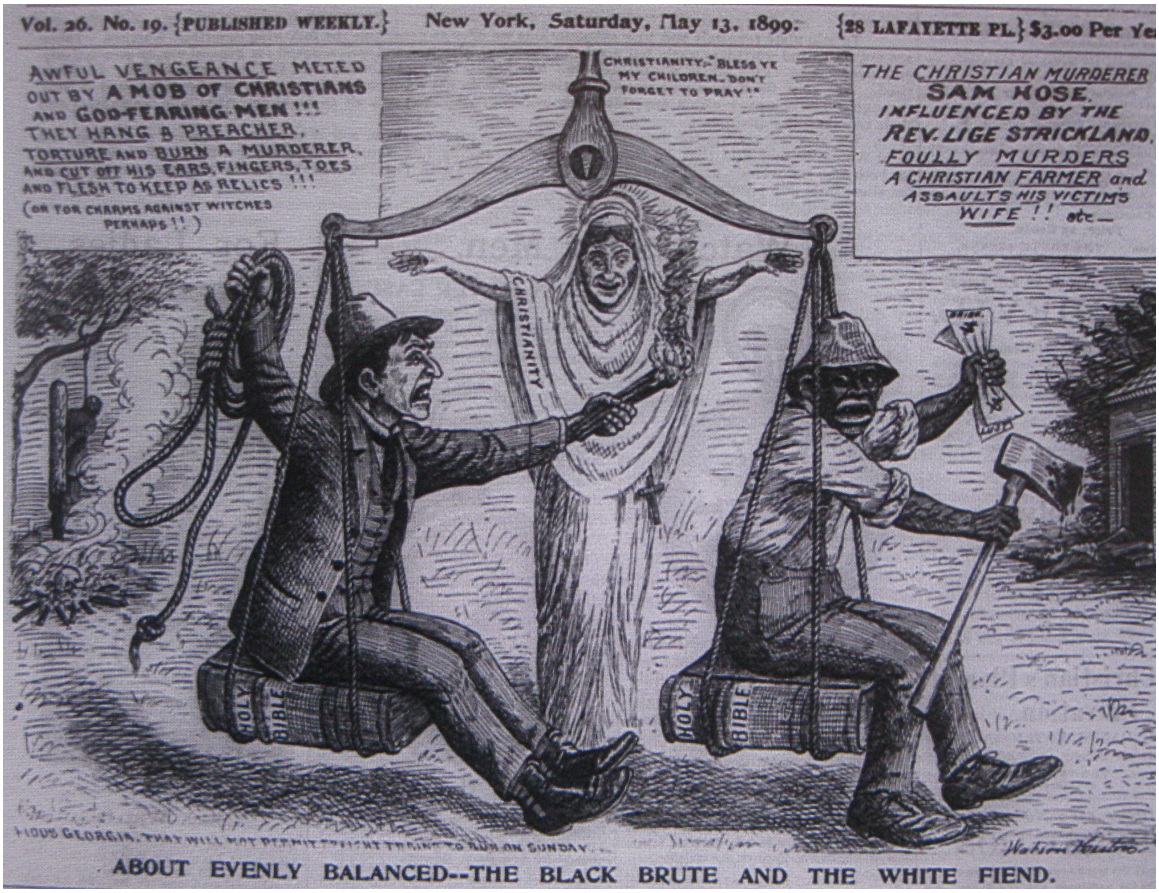



Figure 7: "About Evenly Balanced," *The Truth Seeker* 26, no. 19 (May 13, 1899). Photographed at the Library of Congress.


Figure 8: "The Infallible Judgment of the Majority," *The Truth Seeker* 17, no. 28 (June 12, 1890). Photographed at the Library of Congress.

# CHAPTER 6

# AGAINST RACIALISM

In the previous chapters, we have seen the diverse positions freethinkers might take with respect to racial issues, ranging from polygenist racialism to relativist arguments that questioned racial and civilizational superiority. This chapter, however, presents the clearest argument against the "Race-Secularization Thesis." While it was true that in some ways Christianity could inhibit the growth of racialist thinking, it was also possible to challenge these ideas within an atheist worldview. This chapter shows how atheists at the turn of the nineteenth century attacked ideas of racial prejudice, determinism, and essentialism. Earlier in the century, the environmentalist doctrines of Robert Owen and John Stuart Mill offered strong arguments against racial determinism. While not linked intellectually, their ideas contended that one's circumstances determined (or greatly influenced) one's character, which meant the rejection of the importance of innate biological factors.

The end of the nineteenth century, however, is where we find the clearest cases of prominent freethinkers opposing racial determinism and racial prejudice. First I will examine J.M. Robertson, a Scottish freethinker whose work, in particular in *The Saxon and the Celt* (1897), challenged the idea of race as a guide to history and politics and instead put forth an environmentalist explanation for racial differences. On the other side of the Atlantic, James Morton, a freethinker active in the New York freethought scene, routinely confronted "race prejudice" in the pages of the *Truth Seeker* and in his work, *The Curse of Race Prejudice* (1906). Racial prejudice, to Morton, was a primitive superstition that should die out as civilization progressed.

This chapter culminates with the Universal Races Congress, held in London in 1911. Organized by Felix Adler and Gustav Spiller, two members of the Ethical Culture Societies in the US and Britain, respectively, the congress espoused racial harmony and criticized notions of racial difference purportedly based on science. The event had a large freethought presence –

hitherto unrecognized – which included Robertson and other leading freethinkers who confronted racialist ideas. These included W.E.B. Du Bois, the black American sociologist, and Franz Boas, a German-American anthropologist. The central point of the chapter is to tell an alternative story to the "Race-Secularization Thesis." In this new narrative, the atheist worldview offered the tools of science and reason as a way to critique ideas of racial prejudice and racial determinism.

**Robert Owen**

Owen, as we saw in the introduction, greatly influenced the development of the freethought movement in both Britain and the United States through his religious criticism and proto-socialist organizations. As a young man, Owen discarded his religious views and instead adopted "the spirit of universal charity, – not for a sect or a party, or for a country or a colour, – but for the human race, and with a real and ardent desire to do them good."[1] Central to Owen's worldview and political program was that human nature was formed by one's social or environmental circumstances, not their innate faculties.[2] Such an idea theoretically challenged racial determinism, even though Owen rarely applied this environmentalist view to racial issues. When he did discuss perceived racial differences, however, he emphasized how they were constructed by circumstances. In a speech in Glasgow in 1812, Owen discussed the apparent differences between the races of mankind: "Man becomes a wild ferocious savage, a cannibal, or a highly civilised and benevolent being, according to the circumstances which he may be placed from his birth."[3] This was why, as he said at a later date, "we ought not to be *displeased* or to *blame* any individuals, tribes, or people; or to be less *friendly* to them, because they have been made to differ from us in *colour*, *form*, or *features*."[4]

Since non-white people were not inherently inferior in this environmentalist theory, they might expect to fare better in Owen's worldview. This was not, however, the case in practice. While in New Lanark, Owen did not need to confront racial issues, but when he visited Jamaica in 1828, he reported that the black slaves there were in a better condition than the working-classes in Britain and Ireland.[5] Furthermore, when Owen and his followers began a utopian

[1] Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen, Written by Himself* (London: Charles Knight & Co. Ltd, 1971 [1857]), 16.
[2] This idea runs throughout Owen's work, but see for example Robert Owen, *A New View of Society, or Essays on the Formation of Human Character* (London: Macmillan, 1972 [1813]), 90–1.
[3] Quoted in Frank Podmore, *Robert Owen: A Biography*, vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1906), 24.
[4] Alexander Campbell, ed., *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity* (London: R. Groombridge, 1839), 24.
[5] Podmore, *Robert Owen*, 1:339–40.

commune at New Harmony in the United States, its constitution, adopted in 1825, explicitly considered non-white people as a wrung below whites:

> Persons of all ages and descriptions, exclusive of persons of color, may become members of the Preliminary Society. Persons of color may be received as helpers to the society, if necessary; or it may be found useful to prepare and enable them to become associates in communities in Africa, or in some other country, or in some other part of this country.[6]

It is not clear if Owen himself drafted this particular passage in the constitution, but it seems difficult to believe he would have been completely ignorant of it.

Race, however, rarely entered into Owen's worldview and later freethinkers almost never discussed his ideas about race. The only exception appears to be an 1849 article in the *Reasoner*. The article told a story, possibly apocryphal, about the display of a group of "Bosjesmans" or Bushmen at a London museum. The narrator recounted how, at the museum, an Anglican bishop mused about "the probability of a child of the Bosjesmans ever attaining the language, manners, and customs, and the intellectuality of Europeans."[7] The narrator, evidently influenced by Owen's ideas, interjected that "any future knowledge that the child might imbibe would be entirely attributable to the circumstances it was placed in in early youth." The narrator then left for a short time, but noticed another person had been listening to their conversation intently. After the narrator returned to the conversation, he heard this person say: "That is what I have been endeavouring for the last forty years to prove, both in this and in other countries, that a man is guided in the future by the present circumstances, over which we have no control." The narrator noted the surprise on the bishop's face on realizing the man's identity: "it was Robert Owen, the Socialist."[8] At the middle of the century, as racial determinism was beginning to gain greater scientific acceptance, the story of Owen – real or not – arguing for the innate capacities of even the degraded Bosjesman demonstrates the ends to which Owen's environmentalist views might have been put.

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[6] Quoted in George Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 85. The constitution is reprinted in full on 84-90.
[7] "The Bosjesmans and Mr. Owen," *The Reasoner* 7, no. 184 (1849): 362–3.
[8] Ibid., 363.

**John Stuart Mill**

The mid nineteenth-century liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill also held that one's character was largely determined by circumstances, but did not appear to be directly influenced by Owen in this view. Mill, much more than Owen, applied his philosophy to racial thought. He rejected what he saw as his age's growing fascination with all explanations of difference as based upon heredity, racial or otherwise. To Mill, to regard the differences between "individuals, races, or sexes" as "innate and in the main indelible" ignored the fact that these differences "would be produced by differences in circumstances […]." Indeed, this biological determinist view "is one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement."[9]

Mill's environmentalist ideas had practical implications for racial issues, and the condition of recently emancipated slaves in the West Indies provided one such flashpoint for debate. As Douglas Lorimer argues, the perceived slow pace of improvement among the freedmen increased anti-black sentiment among white Britons, following the enthusiastic abolitionist sentiment of earlier decades.[10] Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish writer, exemplified this pessimistic attitude in his anonymous work, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question" (1849). In the article, Carlyle lamented the abolition of slavery in the West Indies which allowed "Quashee" – his generic term for a black person – to live in virtual idleness, since his subsistence was provided by a surplus of pumpkins and therefore he did not learn the virtues of hard work.[11] Carlyle argued instead that blacks should simply resign themselves to labouring for those "born wiser" – the whites.[12]

Mill responded to Carlyle, his former friend, with an anonymous article of his own. While refuting some of the practical and ethical issues in Carlyle's defense of slavery, Mill also took issue with the racial determinism of Carlyle's assertion that whites had a natural right to rule over blacks. If Carlyle had understood how human character is formed through external forces, Mill argued, "he would have escaped the vulgar error of imputing every difference which he finds among human beings to an original difference of nature." Mill used the example of two trees growing side-by-side, with one taller than the other:

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[9] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in J.M. Robson, ed., *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1 (Toronto, London: University of Toronto Press, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 270.
[10] See chapter six of Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978).
[11] Thomas Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* XL (December 1849): 670–79.
[12] Ibid., 677.

> Is nothing to be attributed to soil, nothing to climate, nothing to difference of exposure – has no storm swept over the one and not the other, no lightning scathed it, no beast browsed on it, no passing stranger stript off its leaves or its bark? If the trees grew near together, may not the one which, by whatever accident, grew up first, have retarded the other's development by its shade?[13]

In fact, Mill explained, human beings were subject to far greater external forces than trees and could, unlike trees, actively conspire to prevent the flourishing of another, "since those who begin by being strongest, have almost always hitherto used their strength to keep the others weak."[14] Mill and Carlyle clashed again later in the century, as they found themselves on opposite ends of the debate over Governor Edward John Eyre's harsh response to the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, in 1865. Mill led the Jamaica Committee that attempted (unsuccessfully) to have Eyre tried for his conduct, while Carlyle led the Eyre Defence Committee.[15]

Mill's racial ideas were attacked by James Hunt, the founder of the polygenist Anthropological Society of London. Hunt believed his organization was opposed by two main groups, those "suffering from […] the religious mania, and the rights-of-man mania." The latter and more serious case was produced by accepting "the one gigantic assumption of absolute human equality, which is generally known under the title of rights of man."[16] To Hunt, Mill was the exemplar of this unfortunate condition and "is perhaps the most painful ever recorded."[17] Elsewhere, Hunt chastised Mill because he refused to admit that the inferiority of "the Australian, the Andaman islander, and the Hottentot" was not innate, but "due to a combination of unfavourable circumstances."[18] Mill, however, never referred to Hunt in any correspondence and admitted his unfamiliarity with the Anthropological Society.[19] The historian Georgios Varouxakis, in summing up Mill's racial views, notes that while Mill accepted some of the racial

[13] John Stuart Mill, "The Negro Question," in Robson, *CW*, 21:93.
[14] Ibid.
[15] J. Joseph Miller, "Chairing the Jamaica Committee: JS Mill and the Limits of Colonial Authority," in *Utilitarianism and Empire*, ed. Bart Schultz and Georgios Varouxakis (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2005), 155–78.
[16] James Hunt, "The President's Address," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 5 (1867): lix.
[17] Ibid., lx.
[18] [James Hunt], "Race in Legislation and Political Economy," *Anthropological Review* 4, no. 13 (1866): 122.
[19] Georgios Varouxakis, "John Stuart Mill on Race," *Utilitas* 10, no. 1 (1998): 27–8.

stereotypes of his time, he was "in the forefront of attempts to discredit the deterministic implications of racial theories […]."[20]

**J.M. Robertson**

While the racial views of Owen and Mill were not explicitly atheistical, the turn of the nineteenth century saw a number of other freethinkers begin to oppose racial prejudice and racial determinism from a freethought perspective. One such example is J.M. (John Mackinnon) Robertson.[21] Born in 1856 in Scotland, Robertson gave up religion in his youth and became involved in the small but active Edinburgh Secular Society in the early 1880s. He eventually moved to London where he became assistant editor of Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. Like other secularists, though not Bradlaugh, Robertson was sympathetic to socialism and the aims of the Fabian Society. Robertson was passed over for the leadership of the National Secular Society following Bradlaugh's resignation in 1890 in favour of G.W. Foote. Disputes with Foote eventually drove Robertson out of the society, yet he was a lecturer with the South Place Ethical Society from 1900 until his death. He also acted as president of the Rationalist Peace Society from its foundation in 1910 until its disbandment in 1921. Robertson was elected as a Liberal MP for the riding of Tyneside in 1906, serving until 1918.

Robertson' intellectual interests varied from literary criticism to ancient mythology to radical politics, but he was also a fierce critic of racial determinism and essentialism. This is best seen in his 1897 work, *The Saxon and the Celt*, which aimed to counter talk of the "peculiarities of character in the Irish race" as either explanations by "opponents of the Irish nationalist movement" for "Irish difficulties" or justifications by Irish nationalists for having their own legislature.[22] Both pro- and anti-Irish thinkers based their political programs on the supposed racial tendencies of the Irish, yet Robertson wanted "to upset such generalisations, and to discredit all claims of innate and unchanging racial peculiarity," and therefore "take up an independent and non-partisan position […]."[23] Robertson's sympathies nonetheless seemed to be

[20] Ibid., 18.
[21] The following summary of Robertson's life is based upon Odin Dekkers, *J.M. Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic* (Aldershot, Vt.: Ashgate, 1998), 1–50.
[22] J.M. Robertson, *The Saxon and the Celt: A Study in Sociology* (London: University Press, Limited, 1897), v.
[23] Ibid., vi.

more with the Irish nationalists, as he characterized their opponents as having "a certain psychological compulsion […] to revert in some way to the attitude of race prejudice."[24]

More generally, talk of races within other European countries seemed absurd to Robertson. He cited the work of Grant Allen, which listed the "Teutonic" characteristics of the British, but Robertson could "see no scientific coherence in these generalisations."[25] He likewise took on Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* – "an ill-made but then-esteemed work of the last generation of ethnology" – in a lengthy footnote and deemed their discussion of the racial basis for recent French history incoherent.[26] Robertson also criticized the work of Frederick Hoffman, a German statistician working in the US.[27] While Hoffman argued black Americans' racial "tendencies" accounted for their inferior condition, Robertson countered that work "not only gives no proof of such primordial 'race tendencies' as it alleges, but on the contrary shews that a race's tendencies are constantly determined by its environment."[28] Robertson contended that differences between nations must be found in institutional, environmental, or political factors – "in anything, in short, rather than in primordial and perpetual qualities of 'race.'"[29]

Robertson returned to this theme in his 1916 work, *The Germans*. There he charted much the same ground, this time attacking the "Teutomania" that explained European history and contemporary politics with reference to the "Teutonic" races. But, Robertson said, "Teutomania is to be superseded not by Keltomania or any other race-gospel, but by a sociology which sees in all races the varying products of antecedents and environments, conditions and institutions."[30] In a similar vein, Joseph Kaines, a member of the Anthropological Institute, dismissed notions about the coherence of an Aryan race in an 1876 article in the *National Reformer*. When one asked about the precise identity or origins of the supposed Aryan race, "one gets replies remarkable mainly for their variety rather than their intelligibility."[31] World history demonstrated the fallacy of assuming there were discrete races: conquests, migrations, and intermarriage occurred so

[24] Ibid., ix; see also L.P. Curtis Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, Connecticut: Conference on British Studies, 1968), 104–5.
[25] Robertson, *Saxon and Celt*, xii.
[26] Ibid., 27–8, quotation on 27.
[27] On Hoffman, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 249–51.
[28] Robertson, *Saxon and Celt*, xii.
[29] Ibid., xiii.
[30] J.M. Robertson, *The Germans* (London: William and Norgate, 1916), 78.
[31] Joseph Kaines, "Race," *National Reformer*, no. 816 (January 2, 1876): 6.

frequently that no race could be considered pure. Kaines accepted that there were differences between the three main races – white, black, and yellow – but asked, like Robertson: "Are not these diversities the result rather of sociological than cosmological influences? The enormous power of the former over the latter as modifiers can hardly be overrated. If it be so, what becomes of race?"[32]

Robertson drew upon Darwinian arguments for evolution to explain the origins of racial differences. These occurred in a long and gradual process of evolution from apes and proto-humans. In this early period of human evolution, there were a number of varieties, some of which quickly went extinct. The surviving groups slowly became dispersed across the globe, leading to, in the vast expanse of time, the differences commonly associated with race, like skin colour or language. These differences then were not ancient, but actually occurred relatively recently in human history.[33] Within this evolutionary framework, it was absurd to talk of "primordial, purely blond and dark, long-headed and broad-headed races" since "[i]n no part of the world to-day do we find such definitely marked-off races […]."[34] The notion of permanent racial essences was in fact contrary to an evolutionary worldview.

Much like other freethinkers, Robertson accepted the idea of civilizational progress. Within this progress narrative, non-white people might be seen as backward and inferior. Robertson, however, used the idea of progress to suggest that a belief in racialism was actually a sign of a backward society. For him, racial thinking was "an irrational play of instinct" and "an energy of mere animal passion, surviving unpurified from the stage of sheer barbarism […]."[35] In this way, Robertson harnessed the widespread view of civilizational progress to make an argument against racial prejudice. Such an argument had much in common with the view that religion constituted a primitive and irrational superstition, highlighting how atheist thinking informed his argument. Indeed, Robertson cited "rationalist" thinkers like John Stuart Mill and T.H. Huxley as some of the few who spoke with "sanity and righteousness" on racial issues.[36]

Robertson was not the only freethinker to express scepticism about supposed Anglo-Saxon superiority. While Anglo-Saxon supremacy was celebrated in the mid nineteenth century,

[32] Ibid., 6–7.
[33] Robertson, *Saxon and Celt*, 30.
[34] Ibid., 32–3.
[35] Ibid., 124.
[36] Robertson, *The Germans*, 109–10, quotation on 109.

Irish and other "Celts" often took issue with this ethnocentrism.[37] In one case, an 1850 anonymous article – perhaps written by someone of Irish heritage – in the *Boston Investigator* said, "Anglo-Saxon-dom is a rum-drinking, beer-guzzling, monopoly-loving, man-stealing, land-stealing, fighting, trading, cheating, lying race."[38] Another example was a lengthy article in the *National Reformer* by William Maccall, a former Unitarian minister and a Scot like Robertson. Maccall criticized the hysteria around identifying "Anglo-Saxon" lineages and attributing events like the American Revolution or the British conquest of India to the race's supposed virtues. Maccall's investigations into the Anglo-Saxons led him to the conclusion that "the Anglo-Saxon is a wholly fabulous personage"; instead, the repeated migrations into Britain by Celts, Romans, Vikings, and Normans made the British population highly mixed.[39] Maccall also pointed out the absurdity of hyphenated racial groupings. If the British were called Anglo-Saxons, there would need to be similar names for the Greeks and Romans and other races. Since the Italians were "a mixed race, ought we not to have a compound name for the Romans of a hundred syllables at least?"[40] In conclusion, he recommended jettisoning the "Anglo-Saxon" term and instead "call[ing] ourselves simply and frankly Britons or Englishmen."[41]

Applying his theoretical racial views in practice, Robertson criticized empire, in particular the British cause in the South African War (1899-1902) in two books.[42] Robertson was also skeptical of any talk of patriotism. In his view, patriotism was just a tool of the wealthy to whip up enthusiasm for war among the working classes.[43] He saw empire and militarism as dangerous outgrowths of patriotism and nationalism. As a freethinker and rationalist, he described the impulses of patriotism, militarism, and imperialism – like racial prejudice – as all having grown out of "the same animal roots" while imperialism itself was "an insensate superstition" with an economic basis that "belongs to the life of the redskins and its sociology to the civilization of Tamerlane."[44] While Robertson was a critic of imperial conduct and did not want the empire to

[37] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, First Paperback Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 208.
[38] "Anglo-Saxon Glorification," *Boston Investigator*, no. 42 (February 20, 1850): 2; for a more positive view, see "The Anglo-Saxon Race," *Boston Investigator*, no. 32 (December 10, 1851): 1.
[39] William Maccall, "The Fabulous Anglo-Saxon," *National Reformer*, no. 306 (February 25, 1866): 122.
[40] Ibid., 123.
[41] Ibid., 124.
[42] J.M. Robertson, *Wrecking the Empire* (London: Grant Richards, 1901); J.M. Robertson, *The Boer War: Open Letter to Dr. Conan Doyle* (Philadelphia: G.H. Buchanan & Co., 1902).
[43] J.M. Robertson, *Patriotism and Empire*, 2nd ed. (London: Grant Richards, 1900), 9–10.
[44] Ibid., 71, 191–2.

expand, he felt that in some cases, like India, the subject countries needed to be governed by the British, who would gradually guide them to self-rule.[45] Furthermore, in contrast to his rejection of racial science above, Robertson noted that "the simple biological fact that Englishmen cannot breed in India for two generations" might convince supporters of imperialism there that it could never be permanent.[46]

Throughout Robertson's time in parliament, he also expressed an interest in Egyptian affairs. He believed Britain's only justification for being in the country was to help them transition to self-rule. During the First World War, however, Egypt was made a British protectorate and its reigning monarch, Abbas Hilmi II, was deposed. After the protectorate was ended, Egypt continued to be heavily under the influence of Britain. Robertson kept up a lengthy correspondence with Hilmi, whom Robertson believed was the rightful ruler of Egypt.[47] Particularly interesting for my argument is that the first chapter of Edward Said's *Orientalism* opens with a discussion of the 1910 exchange in the House of Commons between J.M. Robertson and Arthur James Balfour. Robertson asked, referring to the Egyptians, "What right have you to take up these airs of superiority with regard to people whom you choose to call Oriental?"[48] Balfour proceeded to explain to Robertson and the rest of the House that the British simply "know" about Egypt and therefore have a right to govern it – the essence of Said's argument throughout the book.[49] Said unfortunately never returns to consider how it was that Robertson asked the question in the first place. To do so would undermine Said's argument about the pervasiveness of orientalist views among British society, but, as I mentioned in chapter four, this completely ignores dissenting voices. Robertson was one such dissenting voice, and his skepticism about racial and civilizational superiority was informed – not coincidentally – by his freethought.

**James Morton**

Like Robertson, James Morton, an American freethinker, was one of the most outspoken critics of racial prejudice at the turn of the nineteenth century. Unlike many of the other figures

[45] Ibid., 144.
[46] Ibid., 200.
[47] Dekkers, *J.M. Robertson*, 44–5.
[48] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 31; for the entire debate, see Hansard 13 June 1910, col. 1103-1163, available online at http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1910/jun/13/consolidated-fund-no-2-bill (accessed 4 October 2015).
[49] Ibid., 32.

considered, James Morton has attracted virtually no scholarly attention.[50] Morton was born into a well-connected religious family in 1870 in Littleton, Massachusetts.[51] He attended Harvard while still a Christian, learning Hebrew and Greek to be able to read the Bible in its original language. But reading Plato and Darwin and studying Christianity at university led to his gradual break with the faith. At the end of the century, Morton made his way west where he became the editor of a community newspaper in an anarchist colony in Washington.[52] From there, he went to New York where he became active in the freethought movement during the first decade of the twentieth century. In the 1910s, however, Morton became an adherent to the Baha'i faith, which he believed was amenable to all the world's religious and irreligious traditions. Aside from anarchism and freethought, Morton was also involved in a variety of other causes, including the promotion of Esperanto, which, as Morton's friend Edward Cole recollected, "he looked upon […] as a step toward the universal brotherhood of man."[53] Morton experienced prejudice and teasing on account of his red hair. In a short biographical series from 1907, Morton explained the "unending taunts concerning my red hair, first bred in my boyish mind the germs which were later to fructify into a realization of the extreme fallibility of public opinion."[54] Later in life, Morton spoke out against superstitions about redheads at a meeting of the Thirteen Club, a New York group formed to flaunt superstitions.[55]

It might have been a result of this teasing at a young age that Morton became one of the most vocal opponents of racial prejudice in the freethought movement. He was involved in a number of debates over racial issues in the *Truth Seeker*. The first concerned Booker T. Washington's controversial dinner at the White House with Theodore Roosevelt in 1901, which some felt was disrespectful to the office of the presidency. The letter that began the controversy in the *Truth Seeker* came from R. Randolph, writing from Alabama. In the letter Randolph argued

[50] The Wikipedia page for Morton is surprisingly comprehensive and brought to my attention many important sources used in the following paragraphs. "James Ferdinand Morton, Jr.," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, November 2, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=James_Ferdinand_Morton,_Jr.&oldid=688715834.
[51] On Morton's life, see "Introduction" in David E. Schultz and S.T. Joshi, eds., *H.P. Lovecraft: Letters to James F. Morton* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 7–16; James F. Morton Jr., "Fragments of a Mental Autobigraphy," published in 1907, in ibid., 418–25; James F. Morton, Jr., "My Intellectual Evolution," published in 1923, in ibid., 425–6.
[52] On Morton's activities there, see Charles P. Lewarne, "The Anarchist Colony at Home, Washington, 1901-1902," *Arizona and the West* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 155–68.
[53] Edward H. Cole, "James F. Morton, Jr." in Schultz and Joshi, *Letters to James F. Morton*, 433, 436, quotation from 436.
[54] James F. Morton, Jr., "Fragments of a Mental Autobiography," in ibid., 422.
[55] "All Superstitions Defied at Thirteen Club Dinner," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 14, 1907, 22.

in the most hyperbolic terms about the horror of Roosevelt dining with a black man. In Randolph's telling, Roosevelt "has thus early shown the cloven-foot by having a coal black 'nigger' dine with himself and family in the White House, a national mansion hitherto held as negro-proof." Randolph also noted Roosevelt's famous characterization of freethought hero Thomas Paine as "a filthy little atheist," but Randolph continued that even if Roosevelt's characterization of Paine were true, "he could not have been near so filthy" as Roosevelt, who allowed "the splay feet of a negro, for the first time in this country's history, under the dinner table that has been so long honoured by the best company of this and foreign lands." The sight of a black man in the White House, Randolph believed, would make blacks "become so insolent and intolerable as to greatly increase the hatred already existing, and possibly lead them to perpetrate more of those fiendish acts which are almost invariably followed by lynchings."[56]

Randolph attracted a few supporters,[57] but on the whole, most freethinkers denounced Randolph and his views in the strongest terms. One particular theme among the anti-Randolph letters was that his "race prejudice" was incompatible with his claims to be a freethinker. In their responses to Randolph, the inconsistency between holding prejudiced views and being a freethinker was highlighted. P.F. Shumaker, writing from Mississippi, wrote, "Mr. Randolph has taken his seat in the wrong pew. The readers of The Truth Seeker are mostly *Liberals*, and he is very *illiberal*."[58] Moncure Conway, by this point one of the most respected freethinkers on either side of the Atlantic, likewise noted that "a Freethinker animated by race hatred" was "phenomenal." Conway portrayed Randolph's prejudice as something irrational, even pathological. It was motivated not by clear, reasoned thinking, but an animalistic, emotional reaction. He likened Randolph's prejudice to a disease, namely, "*negrophobia hysterica*".[59] Another writer, D. Mackay, from Texas, diagnosed Randolph as having "the worst case of ethnical race virus" he had seen in his forty years in the South.[60] James Morton, for his part, stated that Randolph's letter "is enough to make any true Liberal shiver that such a man should have the insolence to class himself among Freethinkers."[61]

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[56] R. Randolph, "As It Strikes a Southerner," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 45 (November 9, 1901): 714.
[57] H.S. Trott, "An Unnecessary Discussion," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 1 (January 4, 1902): 9; Francis B. Livesey, "Booker Should Turn Press-Writer," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 2 (January 11, 1902): 25.
[58] P.F. Shumaker, "A Tempest in a Teapot," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 11 (March 15, 1902): 170.
[59] Moncure Conway, "Negrophobic Hysteria," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 51 (December 21, 1901): 803.
[60] D. Mackay, "Concerning Booker T. Washington and Vegetarianism," *The Truth Seeker* 29, no. 10 (March 8, 1902): 153.
[61] James F. Morton Jr., "The Negro and the Anarchist," *The Truth Seeker* 28, no. 48 (November 30, 1901): 762.

Morton also wrote a regular column in the *Truth Seeker*, in which a frequent subject was race prejudice, occasionally connected to Christianity. In one case he noted wryly that "Christian brotherly love" was apparent in Honolulu where the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) refused membership to the Japanese vice-consul because of his race.[62] In another case he noted that the Christian Endeavor Convention held in Washington, D.C., segregated its black delegates, which "demonstrated how little modern Christianity really cares for its pretended recognition of human brotherhood."[63] He also criticized the introduction of voting restrictions against blacks and spoke out against the unjust treatment of blacks in the legal system.[64]

Another debate featuring Morton was touched off in the *Truth Seeker* when A.C. Bowers (self-described as "an Agnostic, with a belief in Theism"[65]) commended Eugene Macdonald's recent book on the Inquisition, except the brief section on Christianity's relationship with slavery. For Bowers, the book "would have done more good had [Macdonald] left out the negro question."[66] Morton shot back, "[t]hat is to say, you can do more good for humanity by ignoring human rights than by recognizing them! This may be the doctrine of race prejudice, but it is not that of reason, science, or Freethought."[67] The two traded letters, as Bowers admitted his prejudice and said while he would "give the negro justice", the question of whether blacks could be improved was an open one.[68] Morton for his part called for treatment on the basis of individual merits, and, as other racial optimists did, pointed to the fact that "the colored race has produced not one but at least several examples of refinement, culture and intelligence […]."[69]

Bowers attracted further support from H.C. Bradford from Nashville who mostly appealed to dispassionate science to make his case about the inferiority of blacks. "To form any just conception of a race," Bradford believed, one had to study blacks "on their own ground" where there were sufficient numbers. The only place this could be done was in the South, but Bradford doubted whether Morton had ever been there or had met blacks in the South, who, unlike some of the more educated blacks in the North, were "[i]gnorant, poverty-stricken, utterly devoid of all

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[62] James F. Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 49 (December 3, 1910): 771.
[63] James F. Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," *The Truth Seeker* 39, no. 18 (May 4, 1912): 279.
[64] James F. Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," *The Truth Seeker* 40, no. 33 (August 16, 1913): 520; James F. Morton Jr., "Certain Comments," *The Truth Seeker* 38, no. 9 (March 4, 1911): 137.
[65] A.C. Bowers, "Race Prejudice," *The Truth Seeker* 36, no. 4 (January 23, 1909): 58.
[66] A.C. Bowers, "In Narrow Quarters," *The Truth Seeker* 35, no. 41 (October 10, 1908): 651.
[67] James F. Morton Jr., "The Race Question," *The Truth Seeker* 35, no. 43 (October 24, 1908): 683.
[68] A.C. Bowers, "The Negro," *The Truth Seeker* 35, no. 50 (December 12, 1908): 795.
[69] James F. Morton Jr., "Race Prejudice," *The Truth Seeker* 35, no. 52 (December 26, 1908): 826.

sense of honor, and as full of superstition as the most bigoted Roman Catholic foreigner that ever drew breath." Given blacks' superstition, Bradford remarked, "a Negro Freethinker is a thing totally unknown" although he allowed that there might be some in the North. Bradford also worried that disregarding the importance of racial differences would lead to "the mingling of the two races" and the South would in turn become "mongrelized". Science, in his view, showed that "admixture of the races would inevitably tend to degrade the higher, and that too without in any corresponding degree elevating the lower."[70]

Morton called Bradford's letter "a candid and courteous argument" although it made "no novel point" and contained no new facts.[71] In his response to Bradford, Morton drew upon the arguments from his 1906 book, *The Curse of Race Prejudice*. Morton's work on race prejudice was informed by his freethought as seen in his numerous appeals to science and rationality in contrast to the irrationality and emotion of race prejudice. As he stated at the start of the book, he wanted to make his arguments "entirely on the basis of reason, avoiding mere appeals to passion […]."[72] Elsewhere, Morton described race prejudice as "an attitude of mind which precludes the exercise of reason" and was "wholly emotional […]."[73]

Like Robertson, Morton believed that race prejudice dated to the era of "primitive man", but would be eradicated in the civilizing process.[74] It was for this reason that Morton likened race prejudice to other outmoded superstitions that would in time be rooted out. These included witchcraft, "the old tendency to fetich worship", "medieval science", and fears about the number 13.[75] Again like Robertson, Morton drew upon Darwinian evolution to explain "that the human race is one in all essential characteristics" and therefore it was impossible to talk about a race being superior or inferior to any other.[76] Morton predicted that those in the future would have difficulty believing people in the past accepted irrational superstitions about races, particularly in light of Darwinian science: "'What!' we may suppose them to say, 'Did these crude notions prevail in an age when Darwin's epoch-making scientific achievements had made the common

[70] H.C. Bradford, "The Race Question," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 47 (November 19, 1910): 746.
[71] James F. Morton Jr., "The Biological Imperative," *The Truth Seeker* 37, no. 49 (December 3, 1910): 779.
[72] James F. Morton Jr., *The Curse of Race Prejudice* (New York: Published by the author, 1906), 4.
[73] Ibid., 8.
[74] Ibid., 11–2.
[75] Ibid., 36, 65, 46, 66.
[76] Ibid., 7–8.

origin of the human race a matter of schoolboy knowledge?'"[77] Morton dismissed "pseudo-scientific expositions of the theory of inferior races" by appealing to current knowledge about biology:

> We are told in elaborate detail, adorned by much semi-scientific verbiage, that there are many vast anatomic and physiological differences between the Caucasian and the Negro. […] Modern science has shown clearly enough the meaning of all these variations, and the manner in which they have arisen through natural selection and other environing influences. Magnified to the utmost, they in no way contravene a probability of one origin for the entire human race. The differences between races of men are all of degree, not of kind; and not one fact can be adduced in support of the contention that any infrangible barrier exists between any two races. Each, like all the others, possesses practically unlimited capacity for change and growth, wholly depending on environment. The immense flexibility of the Negro race is proved by the total transformation that has taken place in it during the comparatively brief period since the abolition of slavery. Even its worst enemies admit this. Their own talk of deterioration confutes them out of their own mouths. If new environments develop evil qualities, better environments will develop good qualities.[78]

Here Morton was drawing not only on the Darwinian argument for a secular monogenesis, but also, if not explicitly, the environmentalist doctrines elaborated by Mill and others that emphasized the importance of one's environment in forming their character.

While confronting scientific arguments about racial determinism, Morton was equally critical of race prejudice justified by religion. To Morton, it made sense "that the advocates of race prejudice, hopelessly defeated in the forum of reason, and routed by the evidences of science, should rush to religion, and seek to borrow her white robes to cover their besmirched garments." In particular, Morton dismissed theories of blacks as "semi-human pre-Adamite[s]" or as the cursed offspring of Ham to justify racial prejudice.[79] If anything, the Bible appeared to be against race prejudice as seen in "the unequivocal utterance that God 'hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.'" The theme of the unity of mankind was repeated throughout the Bible, making hypocrites of any Christians who professed race

[77] Ibid., 31; for another example of using Darwin against racial chauvinism, see A Citizen of the World, "The Pride of Race and the Love of Country," *National Reformer*, no. 543 (October 9, 1870): 234–5.
[78] Morton Jr., *Curse of Race Prejudice*, 46.
[79] Ibid., 47.

prejudice.[80] "On this point," Morton continued, "religion and science, though for very different reasons, are unreservedly agreed."[81]

Morton nonetheless felt it necessary to distance himself from charges of sentimentality towards blacks. Morton explained that he "has no extraordinary predilection for this particular race, and is in no way fanatical on the subject. A protest against Negrophobia is by no means a eulogy of Negromania."[82] Morton advocated extending voting rights to blacks, but he resisted calls for total "social equality": it "exists nowhere; and nobody ever dreamed of applying it to the colored race, or to any other race, *taken as a whole*."[83] Individuals needed to be judged on their merits, and not their skin colour, but this did not mean that Morton would "associate with every Negro as my equal" since "[m]any of them are my inferiors in education, mental culture, refinement and character […]."Morton's friends included individuals of all races who were selected "on their personal merits, and not on a mere accident of birth or color."[84] Morton likewise dismissed the "the only war cry left to out Negrophobiac friends. *'Do you want your sister to marry a nigger?'*" This was a logical absurdity, Morton argued: just because one would sit with someone on a streetcar did not mean one would necessarily want to have that person as a family member. Fears about racial amalgamation were therefore unwarranted.[85]

Morton's friend circle included a number of prominent black freethinkers. Morton knew the black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, from their student days at Harvard.[86] Du Bois was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and that organization regularly advertised *The Curse of Race Prejudice* in their official periodical, *The Crisis*. Additionally, Morton also served on various committees of the NAACP during the 1910s.[87] Morton was also acquainted with the black freethinker and radical Hubert Harrison, mentioned in chapter five.[88] Harrison too critiqued racial prejudice from a freethought perspective. Like Morton, Harrison believed it was a "superstition" that would, like other

[80] Ibid., 48.
[81] Ibid., 51.
[82] Ibid., 3.
[83] Ibid., 60.
[84] Ibid., 62.
[85] Ibid., 64.
[86] Ibid., 34.
[87] See for example *The Crisis* 1, no. 5 (March 1911): 2, 32; *The Crisis* 19, no. 6 (April 1915): 308; *The Crisis* 21, no. 3 (January 1921): 2.
[88] Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 147.

superstitions, disappear with the advance of civilization. The failure to root out racial prejudice was, to Harrison, proof that the US was not yet completely civilized and the country could therefore "fittingly lead in such savage and primitive superstitions as race prejudice and lynching bees."[89] In an earlier article, he wrote a letter to the *New York Times* in protest at the notion, put forth by another article in that paper, that all blacks had been thieves "since the days of Ham and Noah's ark." Harrison rejected such an argument, noting that T.H. Huxley had already shown that "the Noah's ark story, far from being a fact, is an impossible myth […]."[90]

**Universal Races Congress (1911)**

Freethinkers also played a critical role in the Universal Races Congress (URC), held in London on 26-29 July 1911. The event attracted upwards of 2,000 statesmen, intellectuals, and activists from around the world, but the idea for such a congress came from leaders in the Ethical Culture movement. Founded in New York in 1876 by Felix Adler, the Ethical Culture Society promoted moral values independent of supernatural religion. Racial issues had been discussed in American Ethical Societies around the turn of the century and many of its leading figures signed a petition supporting the creation of the NAACP.[91] Adler first suggested the idea for the Congress in 1906 while the Hungarian-born Gustav Spiller, active in the Ethical movement in Britain and secretary of the International Ethical Union, carried the idea forward.[92] The goal of the congress was, according to the invitation,

> to discuss, in the light of science and the modern conscience, the general relations subsisting between the peoples of the West and those of the East, between so-called white and so-called coloured peoples, with a view to encouraging between them a fuller understanding, the most friendly feelings, and a heartier co-operation.[93]

[89] Hubert Harrison, "Race Prejudice - II," in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 57.
[90] Hubert Harrison, "A Negro on Chicken Stealing: Assails the Statement That His Race Is Addicted to Vice," *New York Times*, December 11, 1904.
[91] Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1969), 94, 170–1.
[92] Michael Biddiss, "The Universal Races Congress of 1911," *Race and Class* 13, no. 1 (July 1971): 37.
[93] "Invitation" in Gustav Spiller, ed., *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems Communicated to the First Universal Races Congress, Held at the University of London July 26-29, 1911* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1911), xiii.

As the historian Michael Biddiss notes, the URC contained a number of religious impulses, not least "Christian universalism",[94] though the importance of freethought has not been explicitly acknowledged by historians. Aside from Adler and Spiller, the chief organizers, the URC also welcomed papers from J.M. Robertson, who argued against race-based justifications for imperialism,[95] as well as two of the leading thinkers opposing racialist ideas, Franz Boas and W.E.B. Du Bois, both of whom were freethinkers. Additionally, the British freethinker F.J. Gould prepared an "Inter-Racial Lesson" that was taught in a number of countries, including hundreds of schools in Britain,[96] while the rationalist Joseph McCabe was also involved in translating some of the papers written in foreign languages.[97] Watts & Co., the publishing house of the Rationalist Press Association, printed the preliminary pamphlet in advance of the Congress.[98]

The paper that summed up the URC's mission was Gustav Spiller's "The Problem of Race Equality." Spiller, born in Hungary, moved to London in 1885 where he became active in the Ethical movement, eventually becoming the secretary of the International Ethical Union in 1904.[99] Spiller was also a member of the National Secular Society and was, in his own words, "a great admirer of [Robert] Ingersoll".[100] In his speech to the congress, he encouraged harmony among races and called for equal treatment without regard to racial difference. All races had the capacity to excel under the right conditions, demonstrated by the fact that members of all races had graduated from European universities. Spiller cited with approval the German anthropologist Friedrich Ratzel, "who says, 'There is only one species of man; the variations are numerous, but do not go deep.'"[101] Like the other authors considered in this chapter, Spiller accepted an environmentalist perspective on culture that rejected biological arguments for racial inequality. While race and culture seemed to be linked, "a Zulu, for instance, taken from his tribe where he appears to possess innumerable rooted and peculiar customs, very soon loses them nearly all."[102] The only reason to admit racial inequality was, to Spiller, because of prejudice, which was "based

[94] Biddiss, "Universal Races Congress," 40.
[95] J.M. Robertson, "The Rationale of Autonomy," in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, 40–49.
[96] Biddiss, "Universal Races Congress," 40.
[97] Gustav Spiller, "Preface," in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, vi.
[98] *First Universal Races Congress, University of London, July 26-29, 1911* (London: Watts & Co., 1910).
[99] Ian MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 138.
[100] Gustav Spiller, "Ethicists and Secularists," *The Freethinker*, no. 1409 (July 26, 1908): 477.
[101] Gustav Spiller, "The Problem of Race Equality," in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, 31.
[102] Ibid., 36.

on callousness, ignorance, misunderstanding, economic rivalry, and, above all, on the fact that our customs are dear to us, but appear ridiculous and perverse to all who do not sympathetically study them."[103] That said, Spiller did grant that certain "insignificant" races, like "the Veddahs or the Andamese, the Hottentots or the Dyaks" might be shown to be inferior, although this did not hinder the equality to be found among the main races of mankind nor did it "preclude our loving [these lower races] tenderly and doing everything which conduced to their welfare."[104]

Despite Spiller's qualifications to complete racial equality, he continued to make the same general argument that all races had the capacity to excel. In a 1912 article for the *Sociological Review*, Spiller argued that one could not fairly judge a race from one moment in time. The fact that the white race was currently the dominant power was not evidence of any kind of racial superiority since this could change; China, for example, might one day take this position.[105] If one wanted to determine whether races had the capacity for equality, one needed to approach the issue scientifically, thought Spiller. He proposed a simple scientific test to examine the abilities of individuals of different races who studied at British universities. After examining their results and meeting many students of different races personally, Spiller concluded "that men and women of all races are essentially alike and equal in inherent intellectual capacity and moral insight."[106] In another article, Spiller wrote that "the different races of mankind are for all intents and purposes indefinitely modifiable in their mentality […]."[107] Beyond questioning ideas of racial inequality, Spiller likewise questioned the idea of race itself. While at times seeming to acquiesce to this idea – again mentioning "such insignificant peoples as the Andamanese, the Australians, the Veddas, or the Bushmen"[108] – elsewhere in the article he seemed much more skeptical of the concept. He noted for example that leading scientists like Alfred Haddon and Felix von Luschan held "that the term race is unscientific unless used in relation to the human race or species *per se* […]."[109] Likewise, at the beginning of the article he cautioned that "the words Caucasian and Aryan are products of the fancy rather than of science […]."[110] Spiller's work was therefore

[103] Ibid., 35.
[104] Ibid., 30.
[105] Gustav Spiller, "Science and Race Prejudice," *Sociological Review* 5, no. 4 (1912): 334–5.
[106] Ibid., 342.
[107] Gustav Spiller, "Darwinism and Sociology," *Sociological Review* 7, no. 3 (1914): 239.
[108] Spiller, "Science and Race Prejudice," 346.
[109] Ibid., 346–7.
[110] Ibid., 331.

clearly informed by a scientific perspective that sought evidence from leading scientists and empirical tests of racial capacity.

The congress turned to more practical themes with the speech by Felix Adler. Here he attempted to diminish ideas of racial superiority, something he saw as a potential cause of war. He encouraged a racial and civilizational pluralism in which no one type became dominant.[111] An exchange of ideas among civilizations benefitted all participants. European life was richer, he argued, because each nation had exchanged its ideas with every other. Nonetheless, he cautioned against cultural arrogance in this process. While the West had brought much to the East, it had also "inflicted incalculable spiritual harm" by disregarding its sacred religions. "If humanity is ever to become a *corpus organicum spirituale* – and that is the aim", then there needed to be recognition and encouragement of human cultural and spiritual diversity.[112] Adler did not reject the idea that there were "uncivilized races" but argued that civilized races should work to bring civilization to these backward people by "what may be called the 'methods of race pedagogy.'" These took account of successes and failures "in the schooling of primitive communities" to find which methods should be used. Agricultural and industrial training seemed to work best, yet relations in the past had mainly been exploitative. Instead, these uncivilized people should be governed for their own benefit, which was "in the long run for the benefit of humanity in general." These races furthermore should be studied with the aim "to engender in the students a generous appreciation of all that is fine and worthy in the character and culture of the alien people."[113]

The URC also welcomed contributions from some of the leading scientific thinkers on racial questions, including Franz Boas. Boas was born to a secular Jewish family in Germany and, after completing his doctoral work there in physics in 1882, he took up an interest in geography and anthropology. He completed fieldwork with the indigenous people of Northern and Western Canada and settled in New York City in 1887, escaping the anti-Semitic climate in Germany and eventually becoming a professor of anthropology at Columbia University in 1896.[114] Boas also became a member of Felix Adler's Ethical Culture Society in New York.

[111] Felix Adler, "The Fundamental Principle of Inter Racial Ethics, and Some Practical Applications of It," in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, 265.
[112] Ibid., 266.
[113] Ibid., 267.
[114] On Boas's early life, see Douglas Cole, *Franz Boas: The Early Years, 1858-1906* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999).

Adler, a friend of Boas's relatives, also placed Boas on the board of the Ethical Culture Society's Workingman's School, which provided education for the children of poor families.[115] As Leonard Glick explains, while Boas came from a Jewish family, his "personal philosophy compounded of rationalism, cultural relativism, and ethical humanism, and [he] identified himself as an enlightened universalist who had transcended both ethnic provincialism and supernatural religion."[116]

Boas was a leading figure in upsetting ideas about civilizational and racial hierarchy. Many of his ideas were summed up in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911). In this work he challenged notions of "race and civilization" which he dubbed "the two unproved assumptions".[117] He acknowledged that a superficial examination of Western civilization would lead one to assume that whites represented a superior race, yet when examined more closely, this fell apart. Given the hundred thousand years of human existence, the gulf between the Old World and the New would only be a few thousand years – an insignificant gap in the vast sweep of time.[118] Furthermore, the evolution of civilization did not follow a linear process. Instead, Boas pointed to various examples of how technology or language, for example, did not evolve in a straightforward way from simple to complex. Technological advances did not occur in a step-by-step process that was true of all societies, but occurred in different places at different times.[119] Ultimately, the moral of Boas's work was to "teach us a greater tolerance of forms of civilization different from our own," and to "learn to look upon foreign races with greater sympathy, and with the conviction, that, as all races have contributed in the past to cultural progress in one way or another, so they will be capable of advancing the interests of mankind, if we are only willing to give them a fair opportunity."[120] For Boas, this cultural relativist position did not just allow one to respect foreign cultures, but also to realize that one was conditioned by their own culture and civilization to accept certain truths.

Aside from critiquing ideas of civilization, Boas also challenged notions of race as a static category. This was the theme of Boas's discussion at the URC, which was based on his recent

[115] Leonard B. Glick, "Types Distinct from Our Own: Franz Boas on Jewish Identity and Assimilation," *American Anthropologist* 84, no. 3 (September 1982): 555–6; Cole, *Franz Boas*, 109.
[116] Glick, "Types Distinct from Our Own," 546.
[117] Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1922 [1911]), 4.
[118] Ibid., 8–10.
[119] Ibid., 182–96.
[120] Ibid., 278.

research on European immigrants to New York and their children.[121] The paper, entitled the "Instability of Human Types," argued that although there were some differences between races, "the assumption of an absolute stability of human types is not plausible."[122] Like others seen in this chapter, Boas stressed an environmental explanation for racial differences. In his study, Boas found that anatomical measurements of European immigrants and their American-born children produced different values, indicating that a supposed racial type was not in fact static but was strongly influenced by its environment. In particular, Boas found that children born in America were taller than their parents and their head shape became longer and narrower.[123] Such a conclusion showed that racial types were not immutable but were in fact plastic – although he cautioned that the extent of this plasticity was not known. Nonetheless, "[t]he old idea of absolute stability of human types" had to be jettisoned, along with the corresponding "belief of the heredity superiority of certain types over others."[124]

Boas's work in both cultural and physical anthropology had far reaching implications and historians have given Boas an important place in the turn against racial thinking. Reflecting on the achievements of Boas's anthropological career, Thomas Gossett states, "[i]t is possible that Boas did more to combat race prejudice than any other person in history."[125] As Vernon J. Williams Jr. points out, however, Boas must be seen in his own context. While it is true he fought against the dominant racial paradigm of his time, he still accepted that blacks, on average, had smaller brains than whites and were slightly less intelligent. Still, to Boas, "the variability of black intelligence" meant that any discrimination toward blacks on the basis of race was unjustified.[126]

Another critical figure in the turn against racialism was the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, who also presented at the URC. Born in Massachusetts, Du Bois was raised as a Congregationalist, yet his faith was gradually eroded, particularly while completing his PhD at

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[121] Franz Boas, "Changes in the Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants," *American Anthropologist* 14, no. 3 (July-September 1912): 530–62; a summarized version appears in Franz Boas, "Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants," in *Race, Language, and Culture*, Reprint (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 60–75.
[122] Franz Boas, "Instability of Human Types," in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, 99.
[123] Ibid., 101.
[124] Ibid., 103.
[125] Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, New Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 418.
[126] Vernon J. Williams Jr., *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 1.

Harvard and his visit to Germany in the 1890s. As he wrote in his autobiography, it was in Germany where "[…] I turned still further from religious dogma and began to grasp the idea of a world of human beings whose actions, like those of the physical world, were subject to law."[127] It was here that Du Bois "became a freethinker […]."[128] Nonetheless, unlike many of the other figures discussed in the dissertation, Du Bois's irreligious views were rarely stated explicitly.[129]

Du Bois's freethought seemed to inform his scientific approach to studying the condition of blacks. His mindset at the start of his career was that "[t]he world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation."[130] The result of his investigations, undertaken while at the University of Pennsylvania, was *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), which "revealed the Negro group as a symptom, not a cause; as a striving, palpitating group, and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long historic development and not a transient occurrence."[131] The striking thing about Du Bois's work, when compared with white racialist writers in the mid nineteenth century, is how much both approaches appealed to objective, dispassionate science. One of Du Bois's biographers, Brian L. Johnson, highlights how Du Bois used the metaphor of himself as a black crow, flying high above and looking down at the world, interpreting it through his sociological training and dispensing it to the people.[132] Du Bois carried this approach into his 1915 work, *The Negro*. Here he challenged racial prejudice through a historical and contemporary study of blacks in Africa and throughout the world. A global history, Du Bois contended, would be incomplete without reference to Africa, and he gave the continent a central role in the development of human civilization. Such a project was not too different from the one the freethinker Winwood Reade originally conceived in the 1870s,[133] and Du Bois quoted him approvingly later in the work.[134] In

[127] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1968), 205.
[128] Ibid., 285.
[129] On Du Bois's religious views, see Brian L. Johnson, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Toward Agnosticism, 1868-1934* (Lanham; Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
[130] Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 197.
[131] Ibid., 198–9.
[132] Johnson, *Du Bois*, 72–3.
[133] Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Trubner & Co., 1872).
[134] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (New York: Holt, 1915), 7.

a subsequent work, *The World and Africa* (1946), Du Bois even wrote, "[o]ne always turns back to Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* for renewal of faith."[135]

In *The Negro*, Du Bois critiqued scientific theories about blacks. Scientific attempts to find the perfect example of "an extreme type of black, ugly, and woolly-haired Negro," had proved futile. This attempt to delineate a perfect specimen of the black race was impossible and to Du Bois had no parallels to the "white" or "yellow" races that allowed considerable variability in whom could be considered members. The lesson in this was that "no scientific definition of race is possible." There were differences between humans, he acknowledged, "but they fade into each other so insensibly that we can only indicate the main divisions of men in broad outlines." On the futility of a quest to define the races, he quoted the Austrian anthropologist Felix von Luschan, who drew parallels with medieval Christian philosophizing: "It is of no more importance now to know how many humans races there are than to know how many angels can dance on the point of a needle."[136] Such a comparison was, as we have seen, common among other freethinkers who noted that race prejudice was no different from other forms of religious superstition. Later in the book, Du Bois refuted arguments about black inferiority from a scientific perspective. He deemed the argument that blacks had smaller brains to be "an unproved assumption," that was based on faulty measurements, and even if blacks' brains were on average smaller or lighter, there was no proof that this influenced mental faculties. Finally, he concluded by quoting from Gustav Spiller's paper at the congress, itself quoting Friedrich Ratzel: "We may, therefore, say with Ratzel, 'There is only one species of man. The variations are numerous, but do not go deep.'"[137]

At the URC, Du Bois's gave a matter-of-fact, statistical account of the condition of blacks in America. "[A]lthough hard pressed by economic and mental strain," Du Bois argued that the black race "is more than holding its own."[138] Despite worrying signs of race prejudice toward blacks, he was nonetheless optimistic that "[t]here are some signs that the prejudice in the South is not immovable, and now and then voices of protest and signs of liberal thought appear there."[139] In his autobiography, Du Bois reflected that the congress "was a great and inspiring

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[135] Quoted in Robin Law, "Du Bois as a Pioneer of African History: A Reassessment of *The Negro* (1915)," in *Re-Cognizing W.E.B. Du Bois in the Twenty-First Century: Essays on W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Mary Keller and Chester J. Fontenot, Jr. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2007), 28.
[136] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 7.
[137] Ibid., 63.
[138] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro Race in the United States of America," in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, 351.
[139] Ibid., 364.

occasion bringing together representatives of numerous ethnic and cultural groups and bringing new and frank conceptions of scientific bases of racial and social relations of people."[140]

As I noted above, the historiography around the URC has largely ignored the role played by freethinkers. This was noticed at the time as well. The *Freethinker* reported on the congress, noting that it was "a laudable endeavor to bring about a better understanding between people of different races and nations" that they wished success. However,

> the religious press has been anxious to exploit the gathering in the interests of Christianity. Much has been written about its being an expression of the Christian conscience, etc., etc., and the fact that the Congress was suggested by Freethinkers, has been largely engineered by Freethinkers, and a good proportion of Freethinkers take part in its proceedings, being conveniently ignored. We are too much accustomed to this game to be greatly surprised at its being played on the present occasion.[141]

Such a perspective undoubtedly remains the case as historical works do not discuss the influence of freethinkers explicitly. Nonetheless, as the article in the *Freethinker* argued, and as I showed here, the Congress could not have taken place without the influence of freethinkers.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has offered the strongest argument against the "Race-Secularization Thesis" by showing how atheists and freethinkers deployed science and reason against racialist ideas. The tools of science and reason were essential to the freethought worldview, meaning their opposition to racialism on these grounds was not coincidentally related to their atheism, but rather was central to it. For these thinkers, racial prejudice was an irrational superstition that needed to be outgrown. Earlier chapters showed how notions of progress reinforced ideas about the inferiority of certain races. The narrative of progress was retained here, but deployed to different ends. In this alternative narrative, the eventual demise of racial prejudice, like witchcraft or primitive religious ideas, would occur as civilization progressed.

Darwinian evolution was another tool that freethinkers used against racialism. Again, in chapter two we saw that evolution offered mixed lessons with regard to race. While Darwin himself supported a monogenist version of evolution, one could also interpret evolution in

[140] Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 263.
[141] "Acid Drops," *The Freethinker*, no. 1568 (August 6, 1911): 503.

racialist ways. In this chapter, however, we have seen how Darwinism could support the belief that all humans were one and that there was no basis for accepting racial hierarchy. Furthermore, an environmentalist conception of evolution showed that one's circumstances mattered most in accounting for social and physical differences between populations, not innate and immutable biology. Indeed, such talk of unchanging and primordial racial essences became ludicrous in an evolutionary perspective. Empirical science more generally also served to refute racialist ideas. While in the mid nineteenth century, anthropologists measured skulls to determine racial inferiority, Franz Boas used these same kinds of measurements to demonstrate that in fact human biology was more malleable than had been assumed. Likewise, scientific study of the achievements of non-white people at universities, as done by Gustav Spiller, again showed that there was no incapacity among certain races to match their white counterparts.

The individuals in this chapter were, to some extent, outsiders. While they were already religiously unorthodox, all of them were marked as different in some way from the Anglo-Saxon majority. Most obvious was W.E.B. Du Bois, a black man, yet others were also aware of their difference. James Morton endured taunts about his red hair while J.M. Robertson was a working-class Scot. Both Felix Adler and Franz Boas were of German-Jewish descent and knew the realities of anti-Semitism, while Gustav Spiller emigrated from Hungary to Britain. It seems likely then that all of these individuals experienced some form of marginalization on account of their outsider status, and that this in turn may have influenced their opposition to racial prejudice. Nonetheless, the language with which they attacked racial prejudice was ultimately informed by their freethought.

# CONCLUSION

One of the aims of this dissertation has been to fill a gap within the historiography of racial thought by examining the subject through the eyes of atheists and freethinkers. This approach offers a different perspective from many other works on the history of racial thought. These works typically examine racial ideas with reference to the most important thinkers or leading newspapers and periodicals of the era. This methodology is obviously valuable for sketching out the dominant views in given societies, but it runs the risk of treating them as monolithic and therefore potentially missing out on dissenting voices. By looking at marginalized figures in a society, in this case atheists, we can see how dominant discourses around race might have been accepted or contested.[1] While it was true that the majority of white people in Britain and the United States accepted ideas about their own racial and civilizational superiority, the dissertation shows that this was not true of everyone.

This gap in the historiography becomes even more important in light of the "Race-Secularization Thesis," a trend in the academic literature that contends there was a causal link between the process of secularization and the rise of racialism. In this view, Christianity's universalist message militated against the emergence of racialist ideas. As the authority of the Christian message declined, the door was opened for racialist thought to take hold. Historians have noted the various ways this secularization contributed to this process, which included secular Enlightenment ideas that viewed humans as just another part of the animal kingdom, the rise of the heretical doctrine of polygenesis in contrast to the orthodox monogenist view, the onset of godless Darwinism that allowed for racialist interpretations, and the replacement of Christianity by science as the primary means to understand the natural world. Despite this trend in the historiography, only a few works had attempted to analyze the racial thought of atheists as

[1] For another example of this approach, see Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

a way to see how actual "secular" people responded to racial ideas and to thereby test the conclusions of the "Race-Secularization Thesis." My findings offer a revisionist approach: while there is more than a kernel of truth in the contentions of the "Race-Secularization Thesis," I argue that there are other stories to be told about the relationship between atheism and racial thought. Here I have suggested that an atheist worldview actually offered the tools with which to question ideas of racial prejudice, racial determinism, and civilizational hierarchies.

I have identified three ways that atheism directly informed my subjects' racial views. The first was that rationalism and skepticism were often essential parts of any atheist or freethinker's worldview. This meant that they attempted to analyze all issues rationally and scientifically, without the need to make their ideas correspond to preconceived interpretations of scripture. Furthermore, their skeptical attitude – most obviously directed against Christianity – also made them question other central orthodoxies of their age, like the superiority of their race or civilization. But because atheist writings often aimed at discrediting Christianity, this meant that racial issues could be deployed against the religion. Secondly then, this instrumentalist view meant that atheists' use of racial issues shifted based on their potential use in attacking Christianity, which sometimes led to contradictory views. Thirdly, a final and less obvious way that atheism influenced racial views was the marginalization that many atheists suffered as a result of their nonbelief and the further fact that many atheists came from the working classes. This marginalization made them far less sanguine about the virtues of Christian civilization. The fact that so many of their fellow citizens were Christians was proof, to freethinkers, that Western civilization had not really advanced as far as was commonly imagined. This marginalization was also a reason for them to look favourably upon foreign societies and to be wary of Western incursions there.

The dissertation began with two chapters that seemed to offer partial support for the "Race-Secularization Thesis." Within the historiography of racial thought, there is a suggestion that Christian monogenesis inhibited racialism since monogenesis meant that all humans descended from a single source and were therefore all related and at least theoretically equal. The heretical idea of polygenesis, on the other hand, encouraged viewing human races as distinct and hierarchical, and many of the leading proponents of this idea were indeed freethinkers. Furthermore other freethinkers, Charles Bradlaugh in particular, were, if not scientists themselves, highly interested in polygenesis and used it to attack Christianity by showing that

polygenesis contradicted the orthodox Genesis creation story and that Christianity therefore stifled scientific investigations. Darwinism too played a role in the development of racialist thinking. While Darwinian evolution seemed to show that all humans (indeed all species) were related and that species were constantly in flux, striking at the notion of primordial racial essences, it could also be used to further racial divisions. This was accomplished through designating lower races as less evolved than their white cousins or by allowing for a polygenist understanding of evolution in which different races were, actually or in effect, permanently separate. Again, many freethinkers accepted evolutionary ideas and often adopted a racialist interpretation of them. In this way, it would seem that as the authority of the Christian message declined, the door was opened for racialism.

While the foregoing chapters seemed to lend support for the "Race-Secularization Thesis," the next two chapters began to consider how these abstract ideas informed freethinkers' understanding of foreign, non-white races, typically seen to be backward and inferior in terms of race and level of civilization. Contrary to these wider views, freethinkers found many positives in savage societies in Africa, the Americas, or Australasia, and in the ancient civilizations of the East. In both cases, the indigenous populations seemed to possess either a simple rationality, in the case of savages, or quasi-secular religions, in the case of India, China, and Japan, that made them impervious to Christian proselytizing and open to the influence of science and freethought. These societies also seemed to inculcate purer morals than Christians despite the seeming absence of a belief in God or the supernatural. It was for these reasons that freethinkers were hostile to missionary or imperial incursions into these societies and even drew parallels between the plight of these colonized people and their own struggle against Christians. In this way, the common view that non-white people acted as the racial and civilizational Others to white Europeans or Americans is subverted, since white freethinkers actually seemed to identify with these people in many ways.

The fifth chapter, on white freethinkers' views of black Americans, showed how an atheist worldview could lead to opposite conclusions on racial issues. On the one hand, a scientific and rationalist approach led some atheists to reject what they saw as sentimentality toward blacks and instead adopt a pessimistic viewpoint toward their future prospects. On the other hand, however, some atheists argued that freethought was inimical to racial prejudice and a rational observation of the situation instead showed that blacks were progressing when given

equal opportunities. This point became even clearer in the sixth and final chapter, which deals the largest blow to the "Race-Secularization Thesis." At the turn of the century, reactions against racialism as irrational and unscientific came to the fore among many leading freethinkers. Key figures included James F. Morton and J.M. Robertson, both of whom argued that racial prejudice was an outdated superstition that would in time be discredited as civilization progressed. An alternative viewpoint could instead be found in an evolutionary conception of life, in which all races were related and racial differences were the result of environmental factors, not innate ones. This was likewise seen at the Universal Races Congress of 1911 – held to promote racial harmony and to strike at these deterministic understandings of race. Freethinkers Gustav Spiller and Felix Adler were the key organizers of the Congress, while other freethinkers, like W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Boas, presented the latest scientific and sociological knowledge refuting racialism.

Throughout this dissertation, I have contended that the "Race-Secularization Thesis" becomes untenable in the wake of a close examination of the racial views of atheists. Furthermore, freethinkers' cherished values of rationalism and skepticism actually put them at the forefront of challenging racialism, particularly at the turn of the nineteenth century. To construct a new story of atheists' relationship with racial thought, one could point to the ways leading freethinkers struck at the heart of racialism. Horace Seaver responded to a Native American freethinker that the freethought movement welcomed all regardless of race. Moncure Conway argued that racial prejudice was pathological and not in accordance with reason. Charles Bradlaugh's speech in India denied race distinctions between people. Robert Ingersoll attacked the xenophobia inherent in the anti-Chinese immigration movement and the prejudice of those who would deny equal rights to black Americans. George Holyoake's "London Zulu" character showed how atheism could unite people of all races through a shared commitment to freethought. W.P. Ball contended that both atheists and the Maori suffered at the hands of more powerful Christians. Hubert Harrison cited Huxley to refute the idea of the Curse of Ham myth. James Morton believed that the teaching of Darwinism made clear that all humanity was one and that there was no need for racial prejudice. Charles Chilton Moore contended that participating in lynching was impossible for a freethinker. The list could go on, but it seems clear that there is an alternative tradition, aside from the one put forth by historians following the "Race-Secularization Thesis." This alternative tradition deserves to become more widely known among

historians and the general public. It is, I believe, more representative of the general atheist position in the nineteenth century than the racialist view described in the "Race-Secularization Thesis."

I have contended in the dissertation that atheists' commitment to reason and science led them to a position on race that anticipated the twenty-first-century view that rejects racial prejudice. Mitchell Stephens, in his recent work on the history of atheism, extends this argument as he charts a progressive narrative that sees atheism developing in tandem with science, democracy, and human rights.[2] He overstates his case and overlooks potential objections to his narrative, but it appears to be true that atheists of centuries past have disproportionately anticipated developments in fields like science and politics that have become truisms today. This seems to be the case with racial views as well, as I have shown throughout.

This teleological narrative about atheism and modernity is not without complications however. As I have already pointed out, atheists' support for "unscientific" polygenesis, seen in the first chapter, strikes at the simple notion of atheism and science marching hand-in-hand. Other cases could be cited, for example the fact that many nineteenth-century atheists opposed compulsory vaccination on the grounds that it violated personal liberty.[3] Such a position would undoubtedly come as a surprise to twenty-first-century atheists, who denounce those parents who reject vaccinations for their children on religious grounds. The twentieth century likewise held surprising and unpredictable developments with regard to the links between atheism and racial thought. The *Truth Seeker*, the flagship paper for American freethought in the second half of the nineteenth century which I have drawn upon frequently throughout, was taken over by genuine white supremacists and anti-Semites after the editor George Macdonald's death in 1937. First Charles Lee Smith and then his successor James Hervey Johnson continued the publication, combining atheism with racism and other eccentric interests like naturopathy. By this point, however, the *Truth Seeker* was far outside the mainstream of the atheist movement and only reached a few hundred subscribers.[4]

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[2] Mitchell Stephens, *Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[3] Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 224–5.
[4] Tom Flynn, "Smith, Charles Lee," in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2007), 718–19; Fred Edwords, "Johnson, James Hervey," in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, 451–52.

Furthermore, I have also suggested that atheists' marginal position within their societies led them to reject orthodox views of racial superiority, and one might argue therefore that it was not primarily rationality, but a contrarian reaction that accounts for atheists' racial views. In other words, one might suggest that racialist ideas served the interests of the powerful in society, and since atheists were mostly excluded from positions of power, they would not have been beholden to maintaining these dominant ideas. With this in mind, it remains an open question whether this skepticism toward racial ideas would be as potent if atheists were the dominant group in society. Local context likewise seemed to matter in the formation of racial views. While this study has been concerned primarily with freethinkers in urban centres in Britain and the United States (in particular London, New York, and Boston), more localized studies offer different conclusions. On the frontlines of settler societies in New Zealand or Canada, white atheists might be more inclined to hold negative views of non-white people if these people provided obstacles to the larger goals of white settlers or seemed to be in cahoots with local white Christians.[5] This was evident as well in the dissertation with regard to the views of blacks or Chinese immigrants. Those white freethinkers in the Southern or Western United States more often seemed to hold more negative views of these groups than their Northeastern counterparts.

While all of this throws a wrench into a straightforward link between atheism and modern perspectives on questions like race, it does seem that a rational perspective allowed some atheists to glimpse "truths" that would be accepted only at a later date. Or, at least, they were able to falsify unjustified assumptions about the innate superiority of white people and Western societies. If one grants that there is a "reality" out there that we can approach through the use of reason and science, then it would follow that atheists, who highly prized science and reason, would be the ones to lead the way. While the science behind racialism was flawed, science itself is ostensibly self-correcting. In the fight against racialist ideas, Christianity – though offering a belief in a common humanity – was ultimately an unsatisfactory solution since as the central premise of the religion fell away, so too would its ethnological arguments. Science and reason – if at times deployed toward unsavoury ends – still seem to provide the most reliable grounds on which to confront racialism.

[5] John Stenhouse, "Imperialism, Atheism, and Race: Charles Southwell, Old Corruption, and the Maori," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 4 (October 2005): 754–74; Lynne Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

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