
Race Relations: A dialogue between Science and Theology on the Basis of Race

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When the topic of race is breached the emotions expressed can range from extreme feelings of guilt to extreme feelings of anger. Why is a word that is, today, commonly associated with a person's skin color and other physical characteristics responsible for such strong emotional reactions? Much of the violence, poverty, injustice, and hurt in the world has been and is caused by racial division. With the continued use of such an arbitrary system as race these issues will continue to persist and deteriorate. This paper will explore the origin, as well as scientific and theological perspectives of race and race relations as it impacts prejudice against groups not one's own. I will conclude the race relations is profoundly impacted by the evolution of the theological and scientific ideas of race.

Despite the fact that it has been over 150 years since the abolition of slavery in both Europe and the Americas much of the mentality of slavery still persists. Race is a concept born during a time of severe oppression in order to justify the incredibly cruel acts brought about by human beings upon other human beings. The fact that the oppressors looked significantly different than those being oppressed gave birth to what is today known as race. Such a miniscule difference in appearance became the foundation for much of today's social and political upheavals.

Today the shade of a person's skin is often used to predict their life expectancy, socioeconomic status and overall quality of life. Yet, very few people have a working understanding of what exactly race is. When asked to define race, a variety of answers are given from the shade of a person's skin to the shape of their nose or eyes to the way that they talk. The definition of race does not seem to be a concrete one. Despite the lack of a concrete definition, race is viewed as a more powerful defining factor of a

person's character, in today's society, than the actual person themselves.

What is race?

The question "what is race" is a loaded question because often times a person's view of race depends on geography, time period and the individual being asked. However, if one were to look up "race" according to Merriam Webster they would discover two things: 1) that the primary definition of race has nothing to do with grouping a set of people based on certain physical characteristics and 2) instead, it has to do with competitive running. The definition of race that is useful to this conversation derives from the old Italian word *razza* and is used to indicate a group of people that are identifiable by shared physical characteristics and interests.¹ It is the third definition of race found in Merriam Webster even though in the current American political climate it would be the number one definition given by most Americans to answer the question "what is race."

¹ Fairbanks, D.J. (2015), 14.

History has established that race has to do with how a person looks, their intellectual ability and their health. It was not until fairly recently that scientists have found that race, as it is commonly defined today, has no genetic basis and therefore is not a predictor of a person's physical appearance, intellectual ability or their health. Instead, a variety of factors inside and outside the genome influence the development of physical appearance, intellect and health. The mere color of a person's skin has very little to do with how smart they will be or how long they can expect to live. Yet, these ideas still persist and people are still told that their race is an important social, health, and political factor everyday through both private and public relations. The answers to why such an unscientific idea still has such a stronghold on a generation that is becoming known for its scientific and technological intellect lies within history. Race has a long and unsurpassed history that if not studied and understood by society can go wholly unnoticed and unfortunately underestimated in its impact on everyday life.

History of Race

Race, in the context it is used today is about 500 years old, relatively young if viewed in the context of the existence of humans. However, the recentness of race does not negate its impact. Many people would subconsciously hypothesize that race came before slavery or that race was the foundation for slavery, when in fact it is the exact opposite. Humans had been enslaving one another for hundreds of years before race even entered the picture. When one group of people conquered another during war it was commonplace for those who were defeated to become the slaves of their conquerors. Before race came to be, societies were divided based on language

and religion, amongst other things like conqueror and conquered.

Often when race is brought up people commonly think of the two predominant "races," Black and White. However, there are more races than just these. Racial division looks different depending on the continent and time period being referenced. On the continent of Australia it was between the British, the aboriginal people, and Chinese.² In Germany it was between the non-Jewish Germans and the Jewish and non-white occupants of Germany. On the island of Hispaniola it is between the Afro-French Haitians and the mostly white Spanish Dominicans. Each country has different views on race and the history behind why the divide exists is almost always one of wars and conquests.

Wars and conquests are at the root of American history and mark the beginning of the racial divide. Long before African Slaves would arrive on the eastern coast of America there was a racial war already taking place between America's new colonists and the Native Americans. Much of the dispute between these two groups of people was cultural and based upon a lack of understanding, which tends to be the foundation of most racial divisions. English colonists came to America for many reasons including religious freedom, fortune, and land prospects to name just a few. When they arrived they were met by people looked slightly different and had a culture that was vastly different than their own. Some settlers like the Quakers saw the Native Americans as an evangelism opportunity while other settlers like the Puritans saw them as a hindrance to the promise that God had for them.³

Depending on the lens that one looked through the Native Americans were either looked upon as culturally inept

² Fairbanks, D.J. (2015), 142.

³ Bayor, R. H. (2004), 4.

savages or a people equally worthy of God's redeeming love. Unfortunately as more English settlers arrived with their foreign diseases and equally foreign ideas they pushed the Native Americans out of a land that many had known most of their lives. Fear of the unknown became prominent in both the Native American and English settlers mind. This fear slowly gave way to anger and anger led to war and the near eradication of a group of people from their homeland. This time period gave birth to a racial tension that still exists today between many White Americans and Native Americans.

While the Native Americans were being pushed out of their homeland, the Africans were being taken away from theirs. The Black and White racial divide is historically most prominent in North America. Despite what some people may believe, race has not always been what it is today. Race did not become a common term until the transatlantic slave trade of the eighteenth century. During this time period a unique set of circumstances led to the establishment of race, as it is used today. The people being enslaved had similar physical characteristics and a culture completely foreign to that of their enslavers which isolated them from each other. In order to explain this difference and justify the reasoning behind the continued enslavement of a group of people whose home was thousands of miles across the ocean, the idea of race was born.

The first slaves set foot on American soil at the end of the seventeenth century. But it was not until the eighteenth century when the transatlantic slave trade really became prominent that the dynamics of the Black and White racial divide became cemented in American history. Prior to this it could be said that African slaves and their

White counterparts led a somewhat amicable life. Many of the slaves imported to America during the mid-seventeenth century knew how to speak English and were well versed on many English customs, so the move to America was not a big culture shock for these seventeenth century slaves.⁴ During this time many of the other servants were White indentured servants, who endured much of the same treatment from their masters as their African counterparts. In fact, in the 1650s and 1660s marriages between free Black men and free White women were not uncommon nor was it uncommon for those same free Black men to be landowners.⁵ The ability to speak English and the understanding of English customs was crucial to the success of the free Black man in the mid-1600s. For this short period during early slavery in America the color of a person's skin was just a color and nothing else.

However, when the demand for more laborers to cultivate the land increased and the supply of White indentured servants decreased, much of the labor shifted to the use of slavery. With this shift the divide between Blacks and Whites became more pronounced. Instead of both Whites and blacks sharing some of the same life experiences such as servitude to a common master, the racial lines became distinctly drawn between those who were slaves and those who were masters. Laws began to become more racially divided as the close of the seventeenth century approached. By 1691 laws were passed that prohibited any White colonist from marrying a person who was Indian, African, or mulatto.⁶ In the span of 30 years permanent racial lines were drawn and the categories of races that people know today were cemented into American history.

⁴ Bayor, R.H. (2004), 11.

⁵ Bayor, R.H. (2004), 12.

⁶ Bayor, R.H. (2004), 12.

As time progressed and important historical events like the American Revolution of 1700s, the Civil War of 1860s, and the Civil Rights movement of 1960s took place these divisions became broader. In each of those pivotal times the conflict between different perceived racial groups, especially Blacks and Whites became even more pronounced. During the American Revolution many Blacks joined forces with the British in hopes of gaining their freedom from their American masters. The American Civil War was primarily a fight for the freedom of Blacks from the oppressive forces of their White masters. The ending of the Civil War should have, theoretically, been the ending of racial division. Instead, the ending of slavery further divided the races. Whites and Blacks became enemies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Blacks were discriminated against publically and Whites became the oppressive monsters in the minds of every Black child.

The 1960s showcased the fears and prejudices of Americans like no other time in American history. A mere 56 years ago, Blacks and Whites could not drink from the same water fountain, use the same restrooms or simply walk through the same door. Race had become such a defining factor of society that it was the norm for people of opposite colors to never interact with each other in their lifetime. When the demand for equality came it was met with much resistance not just from Whites but from Blacks also. People had become so comfortable in their separate societies that the implications of a world where Black and White constantly mixed every single day was daunting to say the least. When the Civil Rights movement ended and equality was gained, for the most part, many people in America thought that was the end of race and racism.

Instead, the twenty-first century gave birth to this new idea of color-blindness. Color-blindness is the idea that no longer do people see race, in fact they do not even recognize color, instead people look past the exterior and judge a person by their character. Although this idea seems like the best possible solution to the race problem it is actually the antithesis of what racial equality actually means. Color-blindness is impossible because the history of race is too deep and too painful to be erased from the human psyche. Just because one does not acknowledge color does not mean that Blacks, Native Americans, and Latinos are not at a disparity when it comes to things like healthcare, education and job status. Being color blind does not erase the racial homogeneity of suburban areas or the ghetto. These problems, which are the very foundations of racism, will continue to exist despite an attempt to be color-blind. Race is a fiction; it is a myth but it is a myth that will always exist because racism, which is a fact, continues to exist today.

Scientific View of Race

In science, race has always existed but it has existed in a different context than it is applied when used in reference to the human population. Scientific races, also called subspecies, are populations of species that have barriers to mating which causes morphological or genetic variations in that population.⁷ For example, let's say there is a group of Blue Jays living off the coast of Florida and some natural phenomenon happens that separates the Blue Jays into two populations- one that stays on the coast of Florida and the other that ends up on an island in the Bahamas. Hundreds of thousands of years pass by without contact between these two populations of Blue Jays. Both groups are still Blue Jays however the group that lives on an island has slight

⁷ Sussman, R.W. (2014), 5.

variations that differentiate them from their mainland counterparts but the variations are not so drastic as to make them an entirely new species. This is the scientific meaning of race, more commonly known as a subspecies. From this explanation it should have been clear that there are no biological races among humans since history has cataloged a continuous intermixing of populations despite large geographic distances.

However, scientists still continued to search for a justification of human variation in the context of biological races. In Spain, during the Spanish inquisition, race and ethnicity became the primary mode of discriminating against a certain group of people. When Christopher Columbus came to the Americas, race and ethnicity was again used to discriminate against Native Americans. The Spanish justified their mistreatment of Native Americans by claiming that they were subhumans, who had no soul.⁸ This idea of there being a race that was subhuman and deserving of mistreatment was an important factor in the development and institutionalization of slavery.

Science became an integral part in the institutionalization of slavery and other discriminatory actions when scientists began to seek answers to human variation in skin color, eye color and other physical characteristics. Carl Linnaeus, an important figure in the development of modern biology and the founder of taxonomy, classified humans based on their education and the climate they lived in. This idea that changes in climate as the cause of human variation continued to influence many scientists during this time period. One of which was eighteenth century general physician and anatomist Johann Blumenbach. It is because of Blumenbach that the term “caucasian” exists today. Though Blumenbach believed

that there was only one human species and that the differences in human variation were not major enough to classify into racial categories, he still developed and published a human racial classification system in 1775. This classification system divides humans into five hierarchical races: Caucasian, American Indian, Malay, Oriental, and African. These five races still exist today and are the foundation for what today in America is commonly known as Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Survey. If one applies for any job in America they are asked to use Blumenbach’s racial classification system to identify their race.

Although Blumenbach and many other scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century believed that there was only one human species and that human diversity was not a justification for racial classification, they still ascribed to the idea of racial classification. The existence of hierarchical races was the only way that Whites could justify the mistreatments of non-whites. Many scientists, who were wealthy landowners, stood to lose a lot when slavery and colonialism were called into question. The establishment of biological races silenced any questions as to whether or not non-whites were really inferior and permanently established Whites as the superior race.

This idea of Whites as superior to all other variation of people became the foundation of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century. The Eugenics Movement changed the way that race was viewed and is the foundation of modern racism. The means by which eugenics further established biological races came in the form of genetics. For a considerable amount of time eugenics and genetics were inseparable fields of science founded on the belief that within the human genome lies the answers

⁸ Sussman, R.W. (2014), 13.

to human diversity. Eugenics was focused on finding the original perfect race created by God, a race believed by many to be light in both hair, eye, and skin color. Many eugenicists, like Charles Davenport, correlated negative social behaviors like insanity and lawlessness with certain races and cited that such behaviors were inherited through certain genes that was found only in certain races.⁹ This became the justification used for the mass sterilization of criminals and mentally unstable individuals during the first three decades of the twentieth century in America.

Along with the horrific mass sterilization in North America and the extermination of thousands of Jews in Nazi Germany, the Eugenics Movement also contributed greatly to the establishment of many of America's segregation laws of the early twentieth century. The growing study of genetics established the idea of racial heredity. Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, had a profound effect on this idea of racial heredity. Before Galton human variation was seen as coincidental, people who live in the same region for large periods of times just happened to have the same physical characteristics. However, Galton used genetics and mathematical methods to study the heredity of human variation. By combining heredity and race, Galton redefined race as a biological entity. He proposed the idea that those physical characteristics that made a person White or Black are hereditary and thus justifies the existence of biological races. Galton and his counterparts shifted race from the observable skin color to the unobservable genes. This transition made race something that could never be extinguished from the human psyche since it was now believed to lie in the very intricate crevices of our genetic code.

⁹ Yudell, M. (2014), 14.

However, only a few decades later in 1950, all of the Eugenic Movement's assertions about the biological foundation of race was debunked when the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released a statement stating that despite years of scientific theories and research that says otherwise race is a mere myth based more on social principles rather than biological ones.¹⁰ This idea that race is a myth, a social construction developed by the leaders of society for political and economical purposes was supported by the work of Ashley Montagu, an anthropologist, that suggested that there was no such thing as race but instead that racial traits were actually clines. Clines have to do with the gradation of a particular trait. This gradation accounts for much of the geographical distribution seen when one looks at certain racial characteristics like skin and eye color. The distribution of these traits are less discrete as many were made to believe and instead are gradual in their distribution over time and geography. This is why it is not totally inconceivable that a dark skin person could have blue eyes. These two physical characteristics are independently distributed and many factors affect the expression of such traits. Therefore, having the gene for blonde hair does not necessarily mean that you will also have the gene for blue eyes. Even more complex is the idea that traits like skin color and eye color are rarely determined by a single genetic factor, instead, they are determined by multiple factors-which is known as polygenic inheritance.

Despite all the recent genetic and anthropological evidence that now says race is a myth the ideas of Davenport and Blumenbach are still prominent today. Recent genetic studies have dismantled Blumenbach's human racial classification

¹⁰ Sussman, R.W. (2014), 1.

system of 1775 with the discovery that humankind originated in Africa. Thus making every single person on the face of the earth, despite skin color, African. Even with this discovery conventional racial classification still exists. Despite the shocking statistic that 85% of variation is found among racial groups rather than between perceived racial groups, race categories still exist.¹¹ This begs the question if science has erased the existence of race from the genome why does it still exist in the human psyche?

Theology's View of Race

1 Corinthians 12:13 says that “we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free— and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”¹² This should be the foundation for theology's view of race, which should be that there are no races because everyone is a part of one body and spirit. However, the relationship between the Christian faith and race has been a long and complicated one.

During times of racial discrimination, when the Church should have been the protector of those who were being persecuted for the color of their skin, the Church chose instead to uphold the racist status quo of the times. Many of those leading the Church benefiting from the status quo financially and politically. During the times of slavery, many pastors preached that it was God's will for Black men to be slaves to their White counterparts. They cited scriptures like Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22 as justification for the continued existence of slavery and encouraged slaves to obey their masters as a means to gaining entrance into eternity.

Early theologians took it a step further by suggesting that because slaves

were different physically and intellectually, the system of slavery was a way to help them in their physical and intellectual deficits.¹³ Two theories developed in order to explain these deficits: the Pre-Adamite and Degenerate theory. The Pre-Adamite and the Degenerate theories explore the origin of human species and how human variation came to be. The Pre-Adamite theory proposed that races like Native American and Black were not descendants of Adam and Eve, instead their origin lies in the time period before the existence of Adam and Eve. This existence before Adam and Eve meant that Native Americans, Blacks, and other minorities could not be human since humanity is biblically said to have begun with Adam and Eve. So it was justifiable that they be treated as inferior in relation to those who were the rightful descendants of Adam and Eve, those who are white. The Degenerate theory, on the other hand, proposed that all humans were descendants of God however, minorities were inferior because of variation in climate and conditions of life that led to their non-white status.¹⁴ This variation was not the fault of non-whites so it was the responsibility of those who were White to aid the rehabilitation of those who were non-white from their degenerative condition.

Another explanation that many early theologians ascribed to in order to justify the existence of slavery and racial discrimination was the curse of Ham.¹⁵ This curse was issued by Abraham to his son Ham's descendants after Ham saw Abraham's nakedness when Abraham had drunkenly fallen asleep and exposed. Because of this, Abraham cursed Ham's descendants to a life of bondage to his brothers. It was commonly believed that the descendants of Ham were cursed with both

¹¹ Fairbanks, D.J. (2015), 22.

¹² NLT

¹³ Shelton, J.E. (2012), 35.

¹⁴ Sussman, R.W. (2014), 14.

¹⁵ Shelton, J.E. (2012), 35.

dark skin and a life of bondage.¹⁶ Many believed that Africans were the descendants of Ham and that this was justification enough for the subjugation of the African people. The Church was a big supporter of the curse of Ham and used it as a way to continue to divide followers by race.

Despite the teachings of Church leaders, Blacks still found hope in the Christian faith. They ascribed to the same beliefs as their White slave masters but practiced in a vastly different way. For Blacks, the Christian faith came to represent a story of liberation not just from sin but from the oppressive forces of their fellow man. For this reason, there seems to be an almost emotionally charged reawakening in the services of a Black congregation. This reawakening and emotionally driven atmosphere can be intimidating and uncomfortable for those who do not understand the oppression and bondage that fuels their emotions. With the ending of slavery and the institutionalization of segregation the Church became place that many Blacks would congregate and discuss the racial climate. The Church was the birthplace of many of the Civil Rights Movement's most influential leaders, Martin Luther King Jr being one of its most influential.

It was Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who famously said that Sunday morning was the most segregated hour of the week and he was absolutely right. The Church has always been segregated, in the beginning that segregation existed under the same roof with the Blacks sitting in one section and the Whites sitting in another. Today, that segregation is even more drastic and the two rarely even share the same roof. Dr. King saw something wrong with the fact that Whites and Blacks could not even worship together. He thought it was against the Bible's second greatest commandment to

love one's neighbor if the neighbors refused to even worship in the presence of one another. This segregation of the churches still exists today despite the recent efforts many evangelicals have put forth to end it. The segregation of the Church is just a smaller manifestation of the segregation of the world, though it seems harmless and unintentional it is in fact, detrimental and socially constructed to uphold an age old status quo, one that breathes separation and miscommunication between races.

Conclusion

Both science and theology have had major effects on society's view of race and racism. Both now claim that races do not exist, that all people are the same in the eyes of both God and science. But both still subconsciously ascribe to the principles of race. Science through its ideas of racially defined health disparities and theology through its continued segregated Sunday services. Karen Fields and Barbara Fields explained these prevailing ideas of race as Racecraft, "a way of seeing, understanding and reflecting on [the] world, even when there is no rational basis for a certain worldview".¹⁷

The human brain likes to categorize and create patterns; race is the easiest way for the brain to conceptualize physical and cultural differences. Unfortunately, when these generalizations are made barriers are erected and judgements are passed without looking at the evidence. Race, is a complex social construction, and if people are not consciously aware of it they fall prey into thinking that the monster it has created in the form of racism no longer exists. Authors Emerson and Smith said it best when they said that people are born into a racialized society that "does not require racism or prejudice as they are typically defined" instead this racialized society is one that

¹⁶ Fairbanks, D.J. (2015), 46.

¹⁷ Yudell, M. (2014), 4.

occurs by choice.¹⁸ People choose daily to separate themselves racially by who they marry, where they live, the music they listen to and where they worship. The statistics on these matters show that no other factor so divides these categories than racialization. These are unconscious choices that people make everyday but they are choices that continue to greatly affect the racial divide.

Depending on who is asked the answer to whether racism still exist varies but the answer to this question should not depend on who is asked. It should not depend on where one lives or what color their skin is, but it does. Racism is not an issue for those who do not suffer from many

of today's social, political and economical problems. This difference of worldview is the very reason why racism will continue to exist and why society will continue to be racialized. To end racism means a reawakening to the problems of the past, it means seriously discussing the problems of the future and it means re-evaluating the means by which people are judged across the world, especially in America. If we wish to overcome racism we must learn the history of race and talk about the place it has in society today. Only by educating people on the history of the development and establishment of race can we ever hope to combat the destructiveness of racism.

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¹⁸ Emerson, M. (2002), 11.