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Darwin, race and religion in Australia

Joanna Cruickshank ABC Religion and Ethics 11 Apr 2011

The concept of race has received unusual public attention recently, as Andrew Bolt defended himself against charges of racial vilification.

Ron Merkel, for the prosecution, accused Bolt of harking back to the racial attitudes of the 1930s, which fuelled the eugenics movement and ultimately the Holocaust. What was learned from those horrors, Merkel argued, was that "race is a loose concept and it overlaps with nationality and ethnic identity."

Merkel is right that the early twentieth-century saw an evil flowering of "scientific" racism in the form of eugenics movements. But this form of racism has a much longer history. In Australia, as elsewhere, the story of race has much to do with both religion and the theory of evolution.

In debates between atheists and religious believers, the historical connection between the theory of evolution and "scientific" racism is often mentioned.

Believers are often quick to accuse Darwin of setting in train an intellectual and cultural shift that ultimately led to the horrors of the Holocaust. Atheists, on the other hand, are often keen to quarantine "scientific" racism as an aberrant development only tangentially related to Darwin and his ideas.

Yet the details of history, as is often the case, do not lend themselves to such simple narratives.

Human beings have always found ways to denigrate those different from themselves. Prior to the eighteenth century, Europeans explained human difference in multiple ways, including environment, religion or social status. Such categories tended to explain human difference as mutable - people could shift categories by changing location, religion or position in the social hierarchy.

The notion that human beings can be divided into a small number of biologically-based categories called "races" is relatively new. It gained traction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as European explorers had their first contact with many different human communities and cultures as well as astounding varieties of flora and fauna.

During this period, European scientists were increasingly using the new Linnaean system of classification. Linnaeus categorised plants and animals into descending categories of kingdom, genus and species, based on his observation of their physical characteristics.

From this system, it was a small step to pondering whether the physical differences between human groups could also be understood in this way, perhaps as evidence of different species. European colonisation and slave trading provided potent motivations for arguing that some of these "species" might be naturally superior to others.

Scientific or pseudo-scientific disciplines like craniometry (the measurement of skulls to determine intelligence) and physiognomy (the use of physical features to judge character) thrived during the early nineteenth century.

The American scientist Samuel Morton, working with a massive collection of purloined skulls, published a highly influential craniometric study that claimed to provide evidence for a racialised hierarchy of character and intelligence.

As Steven Jay Gould has shown, in his fascinating study, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Morton's experiments show equal measures of serious scientific method and apparently unconscious errors that confirmed his racial prejudices. Morton received generous funding from American slave-owners.

In this context, it would take a great deal of historical ignorance to blame Darwin and his theories for the rise of "scientific" racism. Darwin himself was almost rejected for his position as gentleman naturalist on The Beagle because the captain, an ardent believer in physiognomy, judged Darwin's nose to be evidence of a lack of perseverance.

Darwin was less racist than many of his contemporaries and supported the abolition of slavery. He generally avoided the more derogatory racist language of some of his supporters, like Thomas Huxley.

In his discussion of race in *The Descent of Man* (1871) he opposed the notion that different racial groups were separate species and instead suggested they could be understood as "sub-species."

Nonetheless, Darwin's brilliant insight into the mechanism of natural selection, producing what Herbert Spencer called "the survival of the fittest" seemed tailor-made for those determined to argue for racial hierarchy. As did the tempting notion that human beings could be ranked in terms of their similarity to apes.

Darwin himself ranked human races on a scale from "savage" to "civilized" and argued that the "savage" races would almost inevitably give way and die out as the "civilized" races progressed. He paralleled this process to the struggle that occurred among stronger and weaker species in nature.

Supporters of Darwin have understandably often been reluctant to acknowledge how closely entangled Darwinism and social Darwinism were, preferring to distance Darwin from his theory's evil twin.

Yet those who debated the theory of evolution in the late nineteenth century were keenly aware of this connection, which muddled the already complicated relationship between scientific and religious responses to evolution.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in Australia. The Australian colonies had provided much raw data for naturalists and anthropologists and much of Darwin's own argument about the "extinction of races" was based on the myth of the complete depopulation of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

When he visited Van Diemen's Land himself in 1836, he noted that the few remaining Aboriginal people had been removed to Flinder's Island. This "cruel step" was, he suggested, only way to prevent their complete destruction in the face of their more civilized aggressors and was of "great advantage to the colony."

Darwin's theories traveled quickly to Australia after the publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859. The early reception among both scientists and clergy was largely hostile, but within twenty years the scientific tide had largely turned in favour of evolutionary theory.

A young Englishman, visiting Australia in 1876, noted that the typical squatter's library was made up of a handful of works by William Shakespeare, John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin.

Through the twenty or thirty years in which evolution was the subject of most public debate in Australia, those who debated evolution made constant reference to its implications for understanding questions of race, not noting differences between what modern scholars would describe as Darwinism and social Darwinism.

Nor did these debates represent any simple opposition of science and religion.

In 1869, for example, the headmaster of Melbourne Grammar, a Reverend Bromby, gave a public lecture defending *On the Origin of Species*. As Robert Kenny has explained in his award-winning book, [The Lamb Enters the Dreaming](#), Bromby followed Darwin's logic in using the apparent dying out of Aboriginal people as evidence for evolution. These were a primitive people, he argued, who could not compete with races at a later stage of development.

In response, the Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, Charles Perry, attacked both Bromby's evidence and his conclusions. Perry critiqued what he saw as the scientific inadequacies of Darwin's book.

In particular, however, Perry attacked the view that human beings could be divided by race - or any other category - into "savage" and "civilised":

"What is the significance of these terms, savage and civilised? The terms [are] inapplicable and are, we think, calculated to mislead. A highly-civilised man may be a cruel, profligate libertine. A comparatively moral, nay, a truly spiritual man, a Christian, may be, if not a savage, yet certainly an uncivilised man."

Bromby represented the "progressive" wing of the Church of England, open to scientific evidence and dismissive of biblical literalism. Perry, by contrast, was a staunch evangelical, uncomfortable with the theological implications of Darwin's theory and horrified at what he saw as a threat to the biblical claim that all humanity was formed of "one blood."

In the years to come, Bromby's views would prove more representative, not only among many of his fellow clergy and Christians but also among the leading anthropologists, scientists and politicians of the new Australian nation.

When the Australian federation passed its first legislation, enshrining the "White Australia" policy and effectively denying Aboriginal people the vote, few voices were raised in protest. Progressives and conservatives alike saw the preservation of the more evolved white race as central to national identity.

Those few protests against the policy came from unlikely quarters. The fledgling New South Wales Aborigines Mission, a small evangelical organization, pointed out that while most politicians claimed

"to be ultra-democratic, they are sadly conservative in democratic practice, and unChristian both in theory and in practice when they say that a native born Australian is not a man and a brother because his skin happens to be a few shades darker than their own."

By and large, however, few objections were raised to the legislation on either scientific or religious grounds.

The history of scientific racism in Australia offers small grounds for triumphalism on the part of either atheists or believers. Both science and religion proved amenable to seduction by the powerful concept of race.

Nonetheless, attempts to portray the historical conflict over evolution as a simple matter of religious bigotry versus honest science are as flawed as attempts to make evolutionary theory responsible for the Holocaust.

Though scientific arguments against social Darwinism were multiple before the twentieth century, it was not until the twentieth century that genetics provided convincing evidence that the variations within so-called races were greater than the variations between them.

In earlier periods, one of the few persistent barriers to social Darwinist theory in Australia was the Christian doctrine that all human beings were of "one blood."

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