

How Darwin Redefined Race

By R.G. Price

Darwin Day, February 12th, is coming up soon, and will be a time when many people around the world gather to celebrate the life and contributions of Charles Darwin. It's a relatively new celebration, and in part a reaction against much of the opposition to the teaching of his ideas among religious conservatives. While while of people understand Darwin's scientific contributions to our understanding of life on earth, however, few understand the real social contributions that he made or the views on things like race and poverty that he held. This is all the more important today because some opponents of evolution are not only trying to claim that evolutionary was responsible for the supposed "rise" of racism, but also that Charles Darwin himself was a racist.

In fact nothing could be farther from the truth. Charles Darwin was a fervent abolitionist who defended the rights and abilities blacks, and it was evolutionary theory that brought about a dramatically positive shift in our view of race. Few people understand this because few people today really understand just how bad and how confused racial views of the past were. This is in part because of our culture's embarrassment over those views which has led us not to shy away from teaching about them.

Prior to Darwin's theory of evolution the idea of inferior and superior races was not just widespread in Western civilization, it was accepted as a fact, and this "fact" was, by and large, supported with the use of Christian scripture. Many people believed that "whites", "blacks", Asians, and "Indians" were all different species. Most Americans in the South claimed that "negroes" were subhuman and not descended from Adam and Eve. This was a popular topic, and one about which many books were written.

Around the same time that Darwin published his first book on evolution, *"The Origin of Species"*, the American Civil War was about to start and European imperialism was at its peak. Because of this many books about race were published during the mid 19th century. One of the most important of these was a book published in 1853 by the Frenchman Arthur de Gobineau called *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*. It was in this book that the now infamous term "Aryan Race" was coined and many of the racial ideas that became important to the Nazis were put forward. Likewise, American "creationists" in the South published many so-called scientific books on race prior to the Civil War arguing that the "negro races" were distinctly inferior and created intentionally by God to serve whites.

As an example of the state of racial relations in America on the eve of the Civil War we can see that even Abraham Lincoln believed that whites were a superior race, and that while he opposed slavery, he was not in favor of racial equality either.

"I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, [applause]-that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."

- Abraham Lincoln; Fourth Presidential Debate with Stephen Douglas, September 18, 1858

When Darwin published "*The Origin of Species*", also in 1858, commonly held beliefs about race included beliefs that whites, blacks, American Indians, and Asians were all different species, that races are static and created by God, that races should never be mixed, that there are superior and inferior races and the superior whites had the right to dominate the inferior blacks and Indians, that there were distinct delineations between the races, that different races are not related to each other, that interbreeding of races leads to degeneration, that God originally created civilization and whites have stayed true to God, thus maintaining civilization, but the darker races have degenerated and lost civilization as they have become more savage and further from the word of God, that darker races are descendants of Canaan (Ham's Curse) and the darker their skin the more inherently sinful they are.

In contrast to these ideas Darwin argued that people cannot be classified as different species, all races are related and have a common ancestry, that *all people* come from "savage" origins, that the different races have much more in common than was believed at the time, that the mental capabilities of all races are virtually the same and there is greater variation within races than between races, that different races of people can interbreed and there is no concern for ill effects, that culture (not biology) accounted for the greatest differences between the races, and that races are not distinct, but rather they blend together.

Despite the popular misconception that evolutionary theory supports a "survival of the fittest" view of human culture, Darwin argued strongly that sympathy was the greatest and most important of human emotions, that sympathy was a socially evolved trait, that the most sympathetic groups had evolutionary advantages over other groups, and that human sympathy was greatest hope for improving society. Darwin's own words demonstrate just how far ahead of his times he really was.

"As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. If, indeed, such men are separated from him by great differences in appearance or habits, experience unfortunately shews us how long it is, before we look at them as our fellow-creatures."

– Charles Darwin; *The Descent of Man*, 1871

R.G. Price will be speaking on the subject of Darwin and race at the First Universalist Church of Denver on 4101 East Hampden Avenue at 7:00 pm on Sunday February 10th.