

“Only One Race”: Religious and Scientific Rhetoric of Anti-Racism among  
Young-Earth Creationists

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I would like to begin these remarks with the somewhat unusual technique of providing two separate introductions as a means of illustrating the intersecting concerns I try to sort out here; by the end I hope it becomes clear why I rely on this technique. To begin, it is common to hear within anthropological circles that in order to produce good ethnography, it is important to in some way intersubjectively “empathize” with the people we work with and whose lives form the basis of our work (e.g., Rosaldo 1989; Lassiter 2005:102-3, 108-9). Beyond even the theoretical advantages and disadvantages of such relationships, the demands of extended, often intimate fieldwork engenders a nearly inevitable sociality and closeness between fieldworkers and their research subjects. However, certain groups of people do not so easily fall under anthropology’s sympathetic gaze. In 1991 Susan Harding wrote of fundamentalist Christians as the most recent inhabitants of the category of the “repugnant cultural Other.” Indeed, when I told fellow academics of my plans to study conservative Christians—and not just any conservative Christians, but white, fundamentalist, *creationists*, those with the gall to challenge the evolutionary foundations of the anthropological sciences—they would inevitably ask me what would be the form of my “critique.” While taking a critical lens is undoubtedly a praiseworthy feature of the rigorous study of any topic, I was made uncomfortable by the zeal with which they immediately wanted me to tear down my informants’ cultural façades, revealing an ugly, bigoted, racially motivated core. The dilemma I soon came to face was how I could describe men and women whose lives not only provided the narrative material for my own writing and advancement in my academic program, but who impressed me with their intellectuality and deep compassion. This tension might be reductively parsed as empathy versus distanced critique.

Putting this first introduction aside, I now give a second thematic angle from which to approach the following material. Race in America has been given newfound public attention in

the wake of incidents that illustrate, often through the highly public vehicle of social media, the violence and injustices faced by non-whites, especially black men, women, and children, at the hands of individuals and institutions of power (cf. Bonilla and Rosa 2015). In the seemingly endless list of cities semiotically marked as racial skirmish points—Ferguson, Charleston, and my home of Baltimore—any indications inspired by President Obama’s election that Americans live in a “post-racial” society have been woefully premature. Nevertheless, anthropologists and biologists continue to stress in our classrooms and our popular works that the human species cannot be divided neatly into discrete categories called races. According to anthropological work reaching back to Franz Boas (1949 [1931]), there is no scientific, physical basis on which to ground the concept of race. What is often at stake in these debates is the distinction between race as a biological fiction and race as a social reality. Only understanding one side of this picture—that race does not exist biologically—can lead to relative ignorance of the racialized way in which U.S. society is still largely structured.

Each of the two preceding introductory statements carries its own tension, both of which I hope to incorporate toward my conclusion. Ultimately, in this paper I examine the rhetoric of a group of predominantly white young-earth creationists through a lens of the anti-racist early twentieth-century anthropological science of Franz Boas. While I was in Kentucky conducting research for this project I became attuned to curious parallels between the arguments Boas used to dispel scientific racism—and which still predominate in university anthropology classes today—and the kind of argument made in the halls of an American creationist-sponsored museum. However, the comparisons only go so far; where they begin to diverge is in how creationists suggest we can transcend race and focus exclusively on our common humanity in the image of God. With this move, part of their reasoning aligns with the findings of biocultural

anthropology, yet another part erases the social reality of race, a perspective that is desperately needed in the contemporary United States.

Before I delve further into my argument, some background to my ethnographic data is warranted. From June to August 2014 I lived in the town of Florence, Kentucky, the main hub for the fundamental Christians working at Petersburg's Creation Museum (henceforth referred to as simply "the Museum," as my interlocutors called it). The Museum and its parent organization, Answers in Genesis (AiG), were the institutional focus of my project and what drew me to Kentucky. AiG began as a cross-denominational apologetics ministry in the 1990s devoted to providing educational and evangelistic resources to conservative Christian communities across the U.S. and around the globe. Their focus, as hinted at by their name, is on a strict interpretation of the first few chapters of the book of Genesis, which they understand to prove unquestionably that God created the world and the first humans in six literal, twenty-four-hour days, not over billions of years of evolutionary history as mainstream Western scientists contend. For my project I visited the Museum multiple times and attended and participated in a four-day conference aimed at teaching creationist evangelization. From this conference I draw on one particular session, led by Dr. Georgia Purdom, a molecular geneticist at AiG, as her presentation devoted ninety minutes solely to a consideration of biblical and scientific outlooks on race. Additionally, each week I also attended multiple church services at an independent Baptist congregation in the area that was closely affiliated with AiG, although here I focus mostly on the rhetoric presented at the Museum and in AiG-sponsored media.

The Museum and AiG's widely circulated resources combine narration of biblical accounts with corroborating scientific evidence, much of which comes from their own team of specially dedicated scientists, many of whom have doctoral degrees in various scientific and

historical fields. Broadly speaking, their approach takes the form of debunking “secular humanist” evolution, promoting the plausibility of creation accounts, and relying on the absolute authority of God’s Word as found in the Bible. Over two floors and dozens of exhibits, these rhetorical devices take myriad forms, about which I have written elsewhere (Bafford 2015). Today, however, I focus attention on one specific domain that, while not overwhelming in the Museum, recurs surprisingly frequently. When describing the so-called enemies of Christian life, AiG takes care to list racism among other more traditionally conservative rallying points, viz. abortion, homosexuality, and pornography.

When considering the troubled, always contested relationship between conservative Christianity and race in the United States, AiG’s stance toward racism may seem surprising. Indeed, it is ironic that creationists are so invested in consciously fighting race given their past involvement in efforts to exclude, whether intentionally or not, the participation of non-whites in their religious and social circles. Roger Bastide, as early as 1967 in an incisive article in *Daedalus*, documents a strong history of racial segregation and discrimination within Christian communities across the globe. He suggests that Christian theology, whether Catholic or Protestant, was used as a means through which to rationalize the valorization of “white” and the demonization of “black,” both as general color symbols and the people groups associated with such hues. Consequently, people of African descent were commonly yoked to dark, evil forces in antithesis to the holy white light in which fairer-skinned Europeans were portrayed.

The creationists I worked with are, at least in part, aware of this troublesome history between race and Christianity. In some Museum materials and AiG resources available elsewhere, they explicitly reject theories, some of which are still held within segments of the creationist public, that Noah’s son Ham and grandson Canaan were the progenitors of the darker-

skinned peoples of the world, a sign of having been perpetually and trans-generationally cursed. As Judaic studies scholar David M. Goldenberg writes, this narrative “has been the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years. It is a strange justification indeed, for there is no reference in it to Blacks at all. And yet just about everyone, especially in the antebellum American South, understood that in this story God meant to curse black Africans with eternal slavery, the so-called Curse of Ham” (2003:1). AiG largely agrees with this assessment, taking an aggressive stance against any suggestion of such exegesis. Their displays thus reveal an awareness of the racial ugliness that creationists have evinced in the past and an effort to move their own position away from these compromising stances.

In the place of older creationist tropes of white supremacy within the Noah narrative, the Museum reaches back to the Garden of Eden to articulate a position in which race as a biological concept does not exist at all. Since all people are descended from Adam and Eve, they are seen as brothers and sisters made equally in the image of God. Following the dispersal of peoples after the fall of the Tower of Babel, populations became differentiated by skin tone and other physical features, but these have never prevented the possibility of intermarriage or, more importantly, conversion to Christianity. Being an organization obsessed with the language and discursive power of science, AiG also presents biological evidence, much of it authored by mainstream scientists, to show that there is no genetic or anatomical basis for separating people into essentialized races. With no biological or scriptural basis for separate human races, several AiG presenters, including Dr. Purdom, adopt the refrain “only one race” to indicate that the only true race is the “human race.”

When viewed as a rhetorical device, this denial of racial barriers makes sense for several reasons. First, when trying to bring non-Christians or non-fundamentalists into the fold, opening

salvation to as many people as possible can be beneficial in terms of the number of souls saved, as John and Jean Comaroff (1997) document for southern African missionaries. Just as some Europeans hesitated to bring Christian religion to the African continent, others like the Nonconformists saw the masses of Tswana people as potential converts whose salvation was the responsibility of the missionary enterprise. AiG casts a similarly wide net in hopes of reaching as many lost souls as possible. Second, denying racial difference aligns creationists with popular discourse against seeing race, as in the quip mentioned earlier that we supposedly live in a post-racial society, even if this position is becoming more difficult to maintain. Claiming we are all one race, seemingly without the racial baggage of past generations, has a certain modern, progressive-looking valence to it. That is, it fits within images, shared even by political conservatives, of a utopian modernity in which American ideals of equality can be fully realized. Finally, and perhaps most strategically, evoking the painful history of racism serves as an attack on the evolutionary theory that serves as the primary villain within the Museum's narrative. For instance, a quotation by biologist Stephen Jay Gould appearing in the anti-racism exhibit and repeated by Dr. Purdom reveals a connection between Darwinian ideas and Victorian racism: "Biological arguments for racism may have been common before 1850, but they increased by orders of magnitude following the acceptance of evolutionary theory" (Gould 1977:127-8). Although this quotation alone does not tell the whole story, Gould and the creationists who use his words are correct in pointing out that evolutionary theories have been used for a variety of purposes: some to justify a hierarchical view of human societies. They place on display an example of the negative consequences of early evolutionary thinking and thereby encourage their audiences to be more sympathetic toward the creationist alternative. Although this last explanation may seem opportunistic, it is certainly understandable given the organization's

acknowledged anti-evolutionist goals, and it becomes difficult to blame them for trying to point out the biological fiction of race when anthropologists tell the same story to introductory students each year.

More to this point, their rhetorical strategy here in some ways oddly parallels that exhibited by the anthropologist Franz Boas at the turn of the century. Boas's famous work in anthropometry, particularly that among various generations of immigrants to the U.S., served as scientific evidence that supposedly racial differences were not the cause of these groups' marginalization in society; rather, he claimed, their marginalization was of a *social* origin, with biology a convenient *post hoc* justification for their continued subordination. As he put it in the conclusion of a 1931 presidential address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, "While the biological reasons that are adduced may not be relevant, a stratification of society in social groups that are racial in character will always lead to racial discrimination" (Boas 1949 [1931]:16). Thus, like creationists, Boas set forth an argument based on scientific evidence against racist ideologies.

Also like AiG, Boas's reasons for positioning himself in this way transcended objective scientific fact, a point with which many anthropologists could concur. As American Studies scholar Stephen J. Whitfield (2010) has argued, Boas's identity and experience as a German Jew in the late nineteenth century gave him a personal understanding of racism that drove him to use social science—and the budding field of American anthropology—to challenge injustice as an early "public intellectual." It was this personal moral commitment to ending race discrimination that fueled his efforts toward *scientifically* refuting it using evidence more or less accepted by his peers. Close to a hundred years later, the American Anthropological Association in 1998 approved a statement in which the biological veracity of "race" is deconstructed in favor of the

Boasian view that racial difference emerges not as a result of inherent biological difference but in social distinction propelled by unequal power relations. With writings like these, anthropologists have enshrined in our collective knowledge the biological fiction of race coupled with its social reality. In the case of AiG, the evidence against racial biology is put forth in a similar way. If part of the goal of anthropology is to draw attention to unexpected similarities across what appear to be diverse and unconnected parts of the human experience, it makes sense that even two cultures as distant as Boasian anthropology and evangelical creationism could appear to occupy at least a small square of common ground, drawing on a similar rhetorical technique to further their divergent goals.

Despite the laudability of this anti-racist stance, it is nevertheless important that anthropologists consider what an incessant focus on “one race” erases. As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) sketch in terms of language ideologies, the process of erasure can render invisible the complexity and political stakes inherent in certain social phenomena. By crafting a homogeneous view of society, erasure ideologically prevents certain social realities from coming into popular perceptions. I suggest that one of the unintended consequences of AiG’s rhetorical strategy is that they paper over very real racial asymmetries in the country and within the church. For example, during the conference I attended, which occurred in the wake of the protests in Missouri over Michael Brown’s death, Ken Ham, the charismatic CEO of AiG, mentioned off-handedly that the material on the biological fiction of race to be addressed by Dr. Purdom would really be needed in Ferguson. I take his statement to mean the protesters ought to stop disrupting the status quo by opening old racial wounds. If they only realized we were all one race, there would be no need to protest. This attitude employs scientific justifications to ignore the socially constructed reality of race, even if the biology is accurate. More pervasively, I noticed a lack of

acknowledgment of the racial issues concerning Christian churches themselves. In the United States especially, with its ubiquitous system of racial categorization, race has often been used to exclude non-whites from worship, at least worship alongside whites. Even today religion remains one of the most segregated institutions in American society (e.g., Klaitz and McLean 2015:613-4), yet no mention of the predominantly white audience and speakers is ever made, despite a sizable conservative strain of African-American churches that could be conceivably reached by AiG's discourse if it were to address social marginalization more explicitly.

Having considered these themes briefly, I can return to the tension between empathy and criticism in anthropological work with which I introduced this essay. It is possible to lionize the loving care and professed commitment to fighting racism that I saw in my interlocutors while at the same time heeding the ways their rhetoric contributes to an erasure of racial injustice. This may seem like an unsurprising conclusion; anthropologists have rarely committed to supporting all of what their informants say. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to walk the tightrope between giving voice to a population whose ideas are subject to popular ridicule and the need to deconstruct some of the ideologies under which they operate. In speaking about creationism in academic fora, I have felt the pressure to be sensitive to the politics of representation my interlocutors face. In other words, conservative white Christians may operate within a racially inflected system, but so are all Americans, as part of a shared cultural system, at least partially complicit in similar racial ideologies. Most anthropologists would agree that our discipline has had its own concerns with racial representation, yet there seems to be little justice in continuing to point out the flaws in evangelical culture without considering our own failings. I have tried to avoid further marginalizing a group already considered a "repugnant cultural Other" by choosing to tell a more nuanced story along with the requisite degree of critique. I hope to have struck the

right balance between the themes I addressed in my two introductions: empathy and critique on the one hand, the biological fiction of race and its social reality on the other.

Finally, I hope that through this brisk comparative exercise, I have helped familiarized a group that remains unusually exotic to many progressive anthropologists, while, in good anthropological fashion, forcing us to reconsider our own Boasian heritage in a stranger light, seeing some rhetorical elements deployed by the Other in our own classrooms and journals.<sup>1</sup>

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