

Introduction: the tangled histories of Christianity, secularization, and race

The number of atheists and nonreligious people across the globe has never been higher.¹ Secularization – the falling away of Christianity – has occurred over centuries in the West, with far-reaching and sometimes unexpected effects on all aspects of life. These effects extend to race as well, but it remains disputed whether secularization helped open the way for racism or whether it provided new ways to challenge racism. The answer to this question will throw light on a larger one: has secularization been on the whole beneficial or harmful to western societies?

The argument that secularization contributed to the development of racism, sketched in more detail below, goes something like this: Christianity held that all humans were created in the image of God and descended from Adam and Eve, meaning that all humans were literally related. Moreover, the Bible proclaimed that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men” (Acts 17:26, King James Version), which struck at the idea that humans could be divided into distinct biological groups. As the influence of the Christian story began to decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, humans were no longer seen as part of one big family, created by God, but rather as nothing more than another species of animal. From here, the argument goes, it was easy to begin speculating that perhaps different human groups had evolved or emerged separately. If this were the case, it might be possible to arrange these races into a hierarchy or even to consider some as less than fully human. Indeed, many white Europeans and Americans did precisely this in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inevitably placing themselves at the top of the racial hierarchy and justifying

Race in a Godless World

racist violence against non-whites. The thrust of this argument is that secularization lamentably allowed for racism to take hold in our modern society.

But there is another story to be told, one in which secularization offered new tools to oppose racism. The argument for this position is as follows: despite Christianity's seemingly anti-racist message, in reality the religion played a crucial role in the emergence of racism through its long history of anti-Semitism and its disregard for non-Christian religions. Africans, for example, were often judged to be irredeemable heathens, and in time as fundamentally separate from Christian whites. These religious divisions, in other words, helped to create and eventually cement racial divisions. Furthermore, Christianity gave divine sanction to slavery and justified the conquest of other groups on the grounds of bringing them civilization and the gospel. Jettisoning the authority of Christianity not only removed this unwarranted sense of divinely granted superiority, the argument continues, it freed people to see humans as they were: not as God's creations, but as highly evolved apes, all descending from a common ancestor. In this view, racism made no sense because races were all part of the same story of evolutionary descent in which superficial physical differences developed over time but had no deeper theological meaning. In contrast to the previous argument, then, secularization could be seen as a boon to the fight against racism since it stripped away irrational Christian ideas about humanity and replaced them with ones based in science and reason.

These two conflicting perspectives about the relationship between secularization and racism – each with a degree of truth – both focus primarily on the influence of Christian ideas about race. They point to the need for an examination of the racial views of atheists, a topic that no historians have yet addressed in any detail.² This book tackles precisely that question.

The focus of the book is the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in Britain and the United States. There are two reasons for looking at this period. For one, this was the time when racist attitudes in Britain and the United States attained prominence.³ Racial science, with its emphasis on racial classifications based on physical and mental features – such as measurements of the skull – came to the fore in this period, in tandem with the emergence of the new disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, and more generally the triumph of science

Introduction

as the leading authority on the natural world. New racist doctrines defined whites as the superior race and western society as representing the pinnacle of civilization. These ideas emerged as western countries were beginning to industrialize and gain untold wealth, in part through imperial domination. Pseudo-scientific hierarchies of race and civilizational judgments helped to justify colonial conquests of supposedly inferior non-white people and the enslavement and subsequent oppression of black people, and this domination only served to reinforce the notion that white racial superiority must be true.

This period also saw a burgeoning popular movement of atheists and other nonbelievers on both sides of the Atlantic which challenged the authority of Christianity and the Bible, and instead championed a rational and scientific view of the world. For several centuries there had been those, called freethinkers, who rejected the ideas of Christianity, and even some atheists who rejected the idea of a God altogether.⁴ Yet these individuals mostly moved in upper-class circles and did not seek to organize themselves or win converts among the masses. Nineteenth-century freethinkers, on the other hand, banded together in various organizations and sought to convey their irreligious message to all segments of society, particularly the lower classes. These new organizations inserted themselves into the public sphere by way of numerous lectures, books, pamphlets, debates, and weekly newspapers that aimed to reach a wide audience.

My aim in this book is to investigate how ideas about race, atheism, and civilization – all of which reached their peak in many ways in the nineteenth century – were interconnected. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the question of the relationship between secularization and racism.

During this era, white atheists and freethinkers in Europe and the United States imagined themselves as part of the most advanced civilization on the planet. It was widely believed that their nations dominated the globe through a combination of technological innovation, military strength, superior institutions, and, not least, racial superiority. And yet there was a tension: how advanced could these civilizations be, atheists and freethinkers asked themselves, given that the majority of the population believed in Christianity, a doctrine that was not only untrue but also harmful? What right therefore did these white Christian nations have to rule over other

Race in a Godless World

societies and races, wiping out whole cultures and civilizations in the process? Might these cultures actually offer their own virtues that were superior in some ways to Christianity? Might it be wrong – indeed, unscientific and irrational – to consider some races as innately inferior to others?

The central argument of the book is that there was, therefore, a profound ambivalence among white atheists and freethinkers about the question of the West's racial and civilizational superiority. On the one hand, they imagined themselves at the pinnacle of the racial and civilization hierarchy. But on the other, the vast majority of their countrymen were Christians who seemed to reject the West's greatest gifts, namely reason and science, which led them to question these same notions of racial and cultural superiority. While white atheists never quite succeeded in resolving this tension, as we will see, their efforts reveal nuanced and often novel attempts to grapple with the problems of race and civilization.

Race, religion, and secularization

Given the ubiquity of Christianity over the course of western history, it is no surprise 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.”⁵ Yet, Kidd notes, the Bible is mostly silent on explicit matters of race, except for the verse mentioned above in the book of Acts proclaiming that God created humans of one blood and the verse in the book of Jeremiah (13:23, King James Version) which asked, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?”⁶ This silence has meant that the lessons Christians drew from the Bible about race often needed to be inferred from the text, and, as might be expected, this was not always done in a straightforward way.

Christian anti-Semitism has a long history, and some historians have seen in medieval anti-Semitism the genesis of modern racism. In the Middle Ages, Christians held Jews responsible for the death of Christ and treated them, at best, as second-class citizens. Theories abounded that groups of Jews conspired to kidnap and murder Christian children for blood sacrifices, or to steal and desecrate the Eucharist host – the sacred bread which was, to Christians, literally Christ's body. At numerous times throughout

Introduction

the Middle Ages, such conspiracy theories whipped up whole communities of Christians into frenzies, resulting in mass violence against Jews. Nonetheless, Jews could still, at least theoretically, convert to Christianity and become equals to Christians. This began to change in the early modern period, particularly in Spain during the Christian Reconquista, completed in 1492, when Muslims and Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Some Jews, the *conversos*, remained in the country and converted to Christianity to escape the anti-Semitic persecution. But suspicions remained of this group: it was no longer the outward religion of a person that marked them as permanently different, but their potentially tainted blood and lineage. This shift from religion to blood lines, some historians have suggested, was a critical step on the way to modern racism.⁷

Christianity also played an important role in creating racial divisions in colonial America, where Christian European settlers distinguished themselves from supposedly “heathen” Africans. In this period, whiteness became synonymous with Christianity and blackness with heathenism. The perceived lack of religion among Africans allowed Christians to justify their enslavement, but things became more complicated when black slaves converted to Christianity: could fellow Christians still be enslaved? Eventually, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, baptism and enslaved status were decoupled, meaning that even if slaves converted to Christianity, they would still remain enslaved. In colonial America there developed the idea of “hereditary heathenism,” in Rebecca Goetz’s terminology, which saw Africans as essentially and permanently godless heathens who could never truly become Christian – an idea that helped to create modern conceptions of racial divisions.⁸

At the same time, however, many scholars have seen Christianity’s universalist message as a bulwark against the division of humanity into distinct races. As noted above, Christianity seemed to suggest that all humans were inherently equal since they all descended from the biblical Adam and were therefore created in the image of God. This is why George Fredrickson argues that “to achieve its full potential as an ideology, racism had to be emancipated from Christian universalism.”⁹ Such a turning point, some historians have suggested, came in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. It was in this period that white European thinkers began to classify

Race in a Godless World

humanity into distinct races based on supposedly objective analyses of physical and mental features. An early and influential classification scheme was the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus's *Systema naturæ*, first published in 1735 but much expanded in later editions. In this work, humans were grouped into four different races: Europeans, Asians, Americans, and Africans. While his system was not explicitly hierarchical, Linnaeus's views became clear in the descriptions for each race. Europeans, for example, were "acute, inventive," and "[g]overned by laws," whereas Africans were "crafty, indolent, negligent," and "[g]overned by caprice."¹⁰ Other Enlightenment thinkers followed Linnaeus's lead. Johannes Blumenbach, for example, enlarged the number of races to five and coined the term "Caucasian" for white people, considering them the original type of man from which the other types – Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay – had degenerated.¹¹ "Whatever their intentions," 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.¹²

This is not to say that the Enlightenment offered straightforward lessons about race. This was a time when, paradoxically, philosophers proclaimed the equality of all men and their common universal nature, even as they developed new and more complex racial classification schemes. This paradox is perhaps best captured in the thought of Thomas Jefferson, the chief author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States. Jefferson was a man of the secular Enlightenment, although he was fiercely private about his own religious views. He rejected the miraculous claims of the Bible and the doctrine of the Trinity, which he deemed contrary to reason, but he did believe in a creator God and hoped for an afterlife. Despite his rejection of most Christian ideas, Jefferson had a profound admiration for the moral teachings of Jesus, and went about creating his own version of the New Testament – with the aid of scissors and glue – by systematically removing all references to Jesus's miracles, resurrection, and divinity.¹³

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that "[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," but such high-

Introduction

sounding rhetoric clashed with the reality that millions of Africans and African Americans were then enslaved in the United States, including several hundred at Jefferson's Monticello plantation. In line with other Enlightenment thinkers, Jefferson thought blacks were inferior to whites. He granted that they might be equal in memory, but that "in reason [they are] much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid: and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."¹⁴ That said, and despite the fact that he owned slaves, he personally abhorred slavery, believing that it harmed both whites and blacks.¹⁵ He recognized the injustice of slavery and feared a future divine reprisal, writing, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just [...]."¹⁶ Still, he believed that unconditional freedom for slaves was not a viable solution because of the intractable prejudices and hatreds that had been built up during the time of slavery.¹⁷ He therefore mused on various remedies, including colonizing freed blacks outside the United States, but critics today question the seriousness of Jefferson's commitment to ending slavery given his inaction on that question.¹⁸ Indeed, Jefferson carried on a lengthy relationship and fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings after the death of his wife Martha. These children and a select few others were the only slaves Jefferson freed; the vast majority were sold to other owners on Jefferson's death.¹⁹

Other Enlightenment luminaries, like David Hume, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant, expressed similar views to Jefferson that blacks were, in some way or another, inferior to whites.²⁰ Yet for others, like Thomas Paine, Jefferson's comrade in the revolutionary struggle against Britain and a fellow deist, the lessons of the Enlightenment pointed against racism. In Paine's deist tract *The Age of Reason* (1794–95), he proclaimed his belief in "the equality of man."²¹ Before the American Revolution, Paine was an opponent of slavery,²² and he spoke out against the institution in a 1776 article which urged American independence and, in a footnote, implored the reader to "[f]orget not the hapless African."²³ After independence, Paine was elected a member of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1787.²⁴ Later in life, he continued on the theme of anti-slavery, counseling his friend then-President Jefferson to offer American mediation to support the fledgling state of Haiti, created as a result of a successful slave revolt

Race in a Godless World

against France. Paine also encouraged Jefferson to forbid the introduction of slaves into the newly acquired Louisiana territory and to instead support free black labor there.²⁵

Secular Enlightenment thought opened new avenues for thinking about race. It offered powerful arguments against inequality and slavery through the rhetoric of the equality of man, but it also served to emphasize the divisions between human races through the guise of rational science. Nineteenth-century atheists and freethinkers were profoundly rooted in the thought of the Enlightenment and therefore also inherited many of these contradictions.

As new speculations about the distinctions between human races came to the fore, Christianity seemed to act, at least theoretically, as a check against such racism. This was through the belief in monogenesis, a theory that posited a single origin for all humans in Adam and Eve. An alternative theory, called polygenesis, began to develop in the sixteenth century. This theory suggested that each human race had arisen independently, such that the races were permanently separate and distinct. As Hannah Franziska Augstein points out, “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 anthropological doctrines of Christian orthodoxy.”²⁶ Owing to new geological and archeological findings that undercut the traditional Genesis creation story, and the techniques of biblical criticism that called into question a single divine authorship for the Bible, “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.”²⁷ With the Christian framework destabilized, anything was now permitted.

Many polygenists in the nineteenth century were indeed proudly heretical. The innovators in the United States were Samuel Morton, Louis Agassiz, Josiah Nott, and George Gliddon, the so-called American School of Anthropology. While Morton and Agassiz both 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, a massive volume arguing for the distinc-

Introduction

tiveness of the races. Nott was furthermore a slaveholder and used his polygenist ideas to bolster the case for black inferiority. In Britain, meanwhile, the Scottish anatomist Robert Knox led the way in polygenist thinking, in turn influencing James Hunt, the leader of the irreligious Anthropological Society of London, and his followers. Historians have typically assigned these mid-nineteenth century irreligious racial theorists a prominent role in the development of racial thought.²⁸

The other side of this coin is that the strongest opponents of polygenesis were typically Christians. In the United States, Samuel Stanhope Smith and John Bachman, the two most prominent defenders of monogenesis, were both ordained ministers.²⁹ In Britain, the chief proponent of monogenesis in the first half of the nineteenth century was James Cowles Prichard, an Anglican with Quaker roots.³⁰ Quakers and evangelicals dominated anti-slavery and humanitarian groups in the United States and Britain. Hannah Augstein acknowledges that 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.”³¹ This should not be taken too far, however: John Bachman, who argued strenuously against polygenesis and in favor of monogenesis, was completely in agreement with his opponent Josiah Nott about the legitimacy of slavery.

One clearly did not need to be a secular polygenist to support slavery. There were many other ways to defend the institution, and indeed the most common ones were based in Christianity, not secular polygenesis. One could, for example, point to all of the passages in the Old Testament that detailed the conditions under which slavery was allowed for the ancient Hebrews – for example in Leviticus 25:39–55 – or Paul’s injunction in the New Testament for slaves to “be obedient to them that are your masters” (Ephesians 6:5, King James Version). The “Curse of Ham” myth likewise was used by some to justify blacks’ enslaved status. In the book of Genesis, Noah’s son Ham transgressed against his father, who in turn cursed the descendants of Ham’s son Canaan to slavery. It was widely held that Ham was therefore the progenitor of the black race, and it became common to suggest that blacks were “the sons of Ham.”³² These Bible-based defenses of slavery were countered by abolitionist Christians who contended that the

Race in a Godless World

central message of Jesus was the Golden Rule: to treat others the way one would want to be treated. But these abolitionists were hampered in debates in the nineteenth century by the fact that Jesus never explicitly spoke against slavery, as the defenders of the institution could always point out.³³

The most outspoken historian on Christianity's links with racism is Forrest G. Wood, whose polemical work *The Arrogance of Faith* makes the case that Christianity "has been fundamentally racist in its ideology, organization, and practice."³⁴ In every manifestation of racial violence throughout American history Wood finds Christianity involved in some way. This link came from an ethnocentrism that he argues is inherent to the faith, which considered all non-Christian cultures to be inferior or lacking precisely because they were not Christian. This ethnocentrism could easily justify the conquest of other cultures, or the enslavement of Africans, on the grounds of spreading Christianity to godless heathens. Indeed, perceived godlessness was associated with Satan and could open the way for dehumanization of those deemed to be outside the boundaries of Christianity. Those Christian voices of protest against slavery or foreign domination, Wood argues, were too few and often had self-serving motives. Abolitionist Quakers in the United States, for example, appeared more concerned with avoiding the sinful institution of slavery for the sake of their own salvation rather than with the suffering of the enslaved.³⁵

Wood, however, does not deny the influence of secular thought – for example the works of Charles Darwin – on the development of racism.³⁶ Darwin's theory of evolution, put forward in his 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, contended that all species evolved through a gradual process of natural selection that took eons, in contrast to the mainstream Christian view that each species had been created individually by God. Several scholars have seen Darwin's theory as a critical step toward the emergence of scientific racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By undermining the Genesis account even further, it opened the way to conceiving of races as separately evolved and able to be ranked in a hierarchy.³⁷ More polemical works, from a clear Christian perspective, have exploited these observations to make a case against Darwinism. Richard Weikart, in his controversial book *From Darwin to Hitler*, notes how the decline of Christianity led to a rejection of its monogenist premise. "Before the nineteenth century,"

Introduction

Weikart writes, “the intellectual dominance of Christianity militated against some of the worst excesses of racism.”³⁸ In his view, Darwinism introduced a materialistic account of the origins of humanity and ethics, opening the door to moral relativism and the devaluation of human life, which ultimately “smoothed the path for Nazi ideology.”³⁹ 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 the Nazis’ crimes.

Weikart’s account has been strongly criticized by historians,⁴⁰ and one can actually identify anti-racist threads running through Darwin’s work. This has been done most prominently by Adrian Desmond and James Moore, two of the most important Darwin scholars, who argue convincingly in a recent book that Darwin’s evolutionary research was animated by a hatred of polygenesis and the ways in which it could be used to justify slavery or imperial conquest. Darwin’s work claimed that all humans, and indeed all life, descended from a common ancestor through evolution by natural selection and that suggestions about the permanent inferiority of certain races were unfounded.⁴¹ In this respect, Darwin’s ideas had an anti-racist core, even if others reworked them to support racial hierarchies.

The ideas of Darwinian evolution provided the basis for the new field of eugenics, developed by Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton. Eugenics 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 targeted criminality, alcoholism, “feeble-mindedness,” and other traits that seemed, often erroneously, to be inheritable. A race-based eugenics never took off in Britain, but in the United States 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.⁴² Daniel J. Kevles emphasizes that both Galton and his most prominent follower Karl Pearson were hostile to Christianity and sought to replace it with eugenics. Galton, writes Kevles, “found in eugenics a scientific substitute for church orthodoxies, a secular faith, a defensible religious obligation.”⁴³ But again, the link between secularization and eugenics was not straightforward, as

Race in a Godless World

Kevles admits that the supporters of eugenics in the early twentieth century were “predominantly Protestant.”⁴⁴

Another way in which secularization and racism are linked is in the triumph of scientific over religious explanations of natural phenomena that occurred in the nineteenth century. For Douglas Lorimer, scientific racism 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.’”⁴⁵ Lorimer’s argument is that older tropes about racial groups dating from the abolitionist era of the early nineteenth century became secularized in scientific discourses 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.”⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

A related perspective that stresses the continuities between Christian and secular conceptions of race comes from Terence Keel in his book *Divine Variations*. In his view, there was not a sharp break between Christian views of race and secular, modern ones. Rather, he says, “modern scientific theories of race are an extension of Christian intellectual history.”⁴⁸ This can be seen, for example, in the persistent divisions of races into three on the pattern of ancestry from Noah’s three sons. Likewise, Blumenbach’s story of an originally perfect white race which subsequently degenerated into non-white races had a biblical parallel in the story of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. More broadly, the power of a creator God, Keel argues, has been transferred onto nature, biology, and genetics. In short, the process of secularization did not, as others have suggested, open the way for racism, but merely translated previous ideas about race into modern terms.

The relationship between secularization, Christianity, and racism is thus complex. This complexity is perhaps best seen in Colin Kidd’s work examining the relationship between Protestantism and racial thought in the previous four centuries. At the outset of the project, he admitted that

Introduction

he “had a suspicion – perhaps verging on a crude hypothesis – that the dethroning of 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 racist as in an anti-racist manner. It often depends less, it seems, on the logic of the scriptures than on the objectives of the interpreter [...].⁴⁹

Thus far, much of the literature on the relationship between race and religion has focused on Christian thought, without addressing atheism specifically. This fact points to the need for an examination of what actual atheists and secular people thought about race during this period. Before beginning this exploration, however, it is necessary to survey the emergence of popular atheist movements in Britain and the United States, since they form the basis of this book.

Transatlantic atheism

The second half of the nineteenth century, aside from seeing a hardening of racial attitudes, also witnessed an efflorescence of outspoken atheists and freethinkers in Britain and the United States. While the context was different in each country, atheists and freethinkers in Britain and the United States formed a transatlantic intellectual community with considerable movement of both ideas and people across the Atlantic, giving the development of freethought in both countries a great deal of unity.⁵⁰ Though I use the terms “atheism,” “freethought,” “nonbelief,” and “irreligion” interchangeably, it should be noted that not all of the figures discussed would have accepted the label of “atheist” to describe themselves. As we will see, there was a 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. Deism held that the universe was created by a god, but one who then stepped back and no

Race in a Godless World

longer intervened in the workings of the universe or in human affairs. This meant that revelations supposedly coming from God – such as the Bible – were actually the works of men and that accounts of miracles were contrary to reason. Deists continued to believe, however, that God’s existence could be deduced from the design seemingly found in nature and they hoped his existence provided a basis for morality. The deist critique of Christianity nonetheless provided a powerful impetus for atheism since it gave a much reduced role to God. Atheism reduced that role to nothing, arguing that instances where God was seemingly necessary – such as overseeing the forces of gravity in the universe, as Isaac Newton thought – could actually be explained just as well without him. Avowed atheists first appeared in the late eighteenth century and would become increasingly numerous in the nineteenth century.⁵¹

Probably the most influential figure in the development of freethought on both sides of the Atlantic was the deist Thomas Paine, discussed above.⁵² Paine, born in England, first gained fame in the United States, where his republican writings attacking monarchy provided fuel for the American revolutionaries. Paine returned to England in 1787, but his support of the French Revolution led to a hostile reaction that forced him to flee to Paris in 1792. There he wrote *The Age of Reason* (1794–95), a two-part attack on Christianity and the authority of the Bible. Paine argued that all revelations claiming to be from the deity were invalid and that one could discern God’s works through a study of nature.

By directing his work toward the masses and not just the educated few, Paine reached a wide audience, even though little in the work was particularly original. In the first half of the nineteenth century, political and religious radicals in Britain and the United States took up Paine’s writings and began to form clubs centered on his ideas, while attracting the ire of the law for their controversial views. Many elites – particularly in Britain – feared the links they saw between irreligion and the political radicalism of the French Revolution and wished to prevent similar events from happening in their own countries. For Paine and his followers, irreligion and radical politics were closely interlinked: a hostility to the authority of “priestcraft” and the influence of Christian elites easily fit with a hostility to monarchy and aristocratic elites with inherited wealth and status. A program of increased

Introduction

democracy, which would give greater power to the masses, combined with greater allowance for freedom of conscience and expression was therefore a main feature of nineteenth-century freethought. Paine remained in Paris until 1802, when he returned to the United States, dying in 1809. By the 1820s, American freethinkers had begun to celebrate Paine's birthday, signaling their commitment to both his religious and political radicalism.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ 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 circumstances. Owen, disgusted with the condition of the working classes in Britain, wanted to redirect capitalism's productive power to benefit all. He began his experiments in Scotland at New Lanark, a cotton mill purchased from his father-in-law, where he instituted reforms that focused on improving the workers' living conditions and educating their children. Owen wanted to extend his cooperative schemes across the country, but, as Edward Royle explains, "he began to think of communities not only as a solution to the problem of the poor but also as a scheme for promoting the practical happiness and regeneration of all mankind."⁵⁵ At the same time, Owen's movement was opposed to Christianity and indeed all religions, since they hampered the adoption of his principles about the malleability of human character. As with Paine, then, Owen's skepticism of religion went hand-in-hand with his reformist politics. 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 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. Before leaving the United States, Owen gained further publicity when he participated in a public debate on the merits of Christianity with Rev. Alexander Campbell of Virginia in 1829.⁵⁶

In Britain, meanwhile, a number of Owen's followers broke with him in order to focus primarily on religious criticism. Charles Southwell created the newspaper the *Oracle of Reason* along with William Chilton. George

Race in a Godless World

Jacob Holyoake, the son of a tinsmith, became a follower of Owen and later took over the editorship of Southwell's paper after Southwell was imprisoned for blasphemy. Like Southwell and so many other atheists, Holyoake also spent time behind bars for his views. He would later establish his own newspapers, the longest-running of which was the *Reasoner*, published from 1846 to 1861. Through this paper, Holyoake became one of the most prominent irreligious leaders in the country as he built bridges with middle-class intellectuals and liberal theists. 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. In other words, Holyoake saw atheism as a purely negative creed, whereas secularism was a positive one.⁵⁷

Holyoake's secularism drew much of its ethics from utilitarianism, a non-Christian system of morals. This philosophy, devised in the late eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham, held that humans desired the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Pleasure was the only good; pain the only evil. Government policies, Bentham reasoned, should therefore aim to maximize pleasure, minimize pain, and produce the greatest happiness – also called the greatest utility – for the greatest number.⁵⁸ Utilitarianism would be further developed by the British liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century. For much of his life, Mill was a colonial administrator with the East India Company, and he was elected as a Liberal MP from 1865 to 1868. Mill's philosophy emphasized individual rights and democratic freedoms, including advocacy of women's suffrage. Mill himself was an unbeliever, although assigning a label to his religious views remains challenging. 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.⁵⁹

Indeed, according to Mill's friend Alexander Bain, Mill never attended a church service in his life.⁶⁰ Many working-class freethinkers revered Mill for his cogent defense of utilitarianism and liberalism – the basis of much of their radical program – and he was friendly with a number of the most

Introduction

prominent figures. For example, he contributed funds to the 1868 election campaign of the leading atheist thinker Charles Bradlaugh.⁶¹ Mill, however, never explicitly joined the popular freethought movement, and in his *Three Essays on Religion*, published posthumously, he seemed to express sympathy for the idea of theistic design in the universe.⁶²

Meanwhile, Holyoake began a number of secular societies around Britain, but the leadership of the movement was usurped by Charles Bradlaugh, who adopted a more hardline atheist position than Holyoake. Bradlaugh, the son of a solicitor's clerk, had been a Sunday school teacher as a teenager, but gradually came to doubt the claims of Christianity. Because of his irreligion, he was forced to leave his home and live in poverty before enlisting in the army. After being stationed in Dublin for several years, he returned to London to work as a legal clerk. Bradlaugh gained an increasing reputation in secular circles and consolidated the local secular societies into the National Secular Society in 1866. He was the president of that organization until his death in 1891 and also edited the society's flagship newspaper, the *National Reformer* (1860–93), 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, he 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 MP for Northampton in 1880. Because Bradlaugh was an atheist he was unable to swear the oath necessary to take his seat in Parliament. After a long and tortuous legal battle that attracted considerable press coverage, Bradlaugh was finally permitted to take the oath (and his seat) in 1886.⁶³ With Bradlaugh at the helm, secular societies boomed. The high point was the 1880s, when there were nearly 120 local secular societies, whose message reached an estimated 60,000 people through newspapers or meetings. The number of actual members, however, would have been only several thousand.⁶⁴

The predominantly working-class secularists were not the only irreligious figures in Britain. Agnosticism, a term coined by the British evolutionary scientist T.H. Huxley, was an epistemological position meant to differ from atheism by emphasizing humans' absence of knowledge about

Race in a Godless World

God's existence. The term became influential and was adopted by others, like the scientists Charles Darwin and John Tyndall and the writer and historian Leslie Stephen.⁶⁵ Huxley and his fellow scientists were 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, in keeping with their emergent middle-class position.⁶⁶ Some working-class atheists, however, rejected what they saw as disingenuous window-dressing on the part of Huxley and the agnostics. In the view of these atheists, the new term "agnostic" did not differ in content from "atheist," but attempted to distance its adherents from the negative associations with the term "atheism" and maintain a respectable status.

Such divisions between atheists and agnostics were not as clear-cut in the United States, and the leading American freethinker, Robert Ingersoll, was popularly known as the "Great Agnostic," even though he admitted that he saw no real difference between the terms "atheist" and "agnostic."⁶⁷ Born in Dresden, New York, Ingersoll was raised in a household where both parents were abolitionists. As was the case with many other freethinkers, Ingersoll's father was a preacher, yet as a young man, Ingersoll came to doubt Christianity. At a time when outdoor lectures were a key medium for disseminating political or religious views, Ingersoll became known as one of the greatest orators of the time, and people flocked to hear 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 that he might have gone on to hold high political office if not for his atheism.⁶⁸

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the growth of the American freethought movement, including a number of freethought newspapers, the most important being the *Boston Investigator* (1831–1904) and the *Truth Seeker* (1873–present).⁶⁹ The latter, edited first by D.M. Bennett, who was followed by Eugene Macdonald and later his brother George, was the largest American freethought newspaper and had a national circulation. American freethinkers took up the former Unitarian pastor Francis Ellingwood Abbot's "Nine Demands of Liberalism," which called for further measures ensuring the separation of church and state, and helped to form the

Introduction

National Liberal League in 1876. Those freethinkers who were more hostile to Christianity, like 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.⁷⁰

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 theory that 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 would be in reach. Among the many early supporters of his philosophy were major Victorian thinkers like John Stuart Mill, as well as George Holyoake. Following the death of Comte's lover Clotilde de Vaux in 1846, his philosophy took an increasingly religious turn. Named the "Religion of Humanity," Comte's new creed worshipped humanity in the collective and was based on love and altruism. Mill was initially attracted by this approach, but later in life he distanced himself from Comte because of differences both personal and intellectual. Nonetheless, Mill continued his belief that the Religion of Humanity, in some form, was a necessary replacement for Christianity.⁷¹ 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, Frederic Harrison, and J.H. Bridges over his emphasis on the 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.⁷² In America, positivism likewise attracted a small number of adherents, particularly among immigrants from England.⁷³

Another variety of unbelief came in the form of ethical societies. The London South Place Chapel had roots as a Unitarian church in late eighteenth-century America. It crossed the Atlantic to London in 1822. Under Moncure Conway, a Virginian who had relocated to London in 1863, the congregation moved away from Christianity entirely, becoming something of an atheist church. After Conway's departure in 1884, leadership

Race in a Godless World

of the congregation fell to Stanton Coit, another transplanted American. Coit's theological views were 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 United States 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.⁷⁴

The message of freethinkers was transmitted in books, lectures, and pamphlets, but especially in newspapers. The chief newspapers drawn upon in this book 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 newspapers, these were the longest-running and most important in their respective countries. They represented forums for debate and encompassed a range of perspectives. While they were based in urban centers (London for the British papers, and Boston and New York respectively for the two American ones), they also reprinted articles from smaller newspapers and reported on meetings and events from across each country. In terms of the circulation of the British papers, each might have had about several thousand readers, with the *Reasoner* reaching a peak of 5,000 copies sold per week in the mid-1850s and the *Freethinker* selling over 10,000 copies per week at its height in the 1880s.⁷⁵ Albert Post reports that the *Boston Investigator* had a subscription of over 2,000 in 1835, though the number had fallen to 500 in 1850.⁷⁶ Sidney Warren meanwhile estimates that freethought works by Ingersoll and others "were read by scores of thousands [...]."⁷⁷ Larger newspapers like the *Truth Seeker* had a circulation well into the thousands.⁷⁸

Essential to this book's argument is the fact that atheists' racial views were shaped in large part by their status as a marginalized group in Britain and the United States. In both these countries, atheists and other nonbelievers suffered a variety of penalties, legal or otherwise, for their irreligion. Atheism had long been associated with immorality. If there were no rewards or punishments in the afterlife, the argument went, what reason would people

Introduction

have to act morally in this life? In this sense, then, atheism was a theological sin, but it was also a social one, since it threatened the entire basis of social cohesion.⁷⁹

In Britain, numerous freethinkers spent time in prison for blasphemy, including Richard Carlile, Charles Southwell, George Holyoake, and G.W. Foote.⁸⁰ Other penalties could also await those who publicly professed their unbelief. For example, Annie Besant, one of the leading secularists in the second half of the century, lost custody of her daughter to her husband Frank Besant, from whom she was separated, because of her irreligious beliefs and her advocacy of birth control. Laws also hampered the spread of freethought. The post office could seize freethought materials sent through the mail, and some news vendors refused to stock freethought literature, while the popular press routinely painted atheists in a negative light. It was because of the association between atheism and immorality that atheists risked losing their jobs and livelihoods if their irreligious views were discovered.⁸¹ Various by-laws interfered with Sunday freethought lectures or outdoor meetings, while atheists and other nonbelievers had no standing in court because of their inability to swear an oath or affirm.⁸²

Atheists in the United States also faced persecution, though unlike their British cousins, they did not have to contend with a legal linkage of religion and state, and were supported by a constitution that, at least in theory, mandated freedom of religion. Still, there were cases of atheists being denied the right to testify in court because of their inability to affirm,⁸³ or losing their jobs if their irreligious views were discovered.⁸⁴ The founder of the *Boston Investigator*, Abner Kneeland, was convicted and jailed for blasphemy in 1838, while the *Truth Seeker's* D.M. Bennett was targeted by the Comstock Laws, which were devised by the puritanical Anthony Comstock to prevent the sending of "obscene" material through the mail. Comstock despised Bennett's irreligious views and made it his mission to catch him in violation of the law. His chance came in 1879, when Bennett was convicted for mailing a free love pamphlet. Despite being sixty years old, Bennett was sentenced to thirteen months of hard labor in a federal penitentiary.⁸⁵ Even for those not directly affected by blasphemy persecutions, the sight of revered figures, and in some cases friends, being hauled off to prison created a sense of being besieged by Christians. Aside from the threat of legal persecution, there

Race in a Godless World

was an even greater potential for social ostracism, which further deepened freethinkers' discontent toward their societies.

On top of this religious marginalization, many freethinkers were also economically marginalized. The class background of atheists and other nonreligious people was not uniform, but both Edward Royle and Susan Budd have found that members of the British secularist movement came mainly from the urban working and lower middle classes.⁸⁶ In the United States, members of the freethought movement likewise had roots in the working classes before the Civil War, though by the end of the century many members came from the emerging middle classes.⁸⁷ The editors of the *Boston Investigator* and the *Truth Seeker* came from humble origins and were sympathetic to the plight of the poor.⁸⁸ This is not to say that all nonreligious people were working class. T.H. Huxley, discussed above, came from a poor background, but eventually became one of the most prominent scientists in the country. He was, like his fellow agnostic Charles Darwin, reluctant to associate himself too closely with the working-class freethought and secular movement, even if he continued to prove popular among the working classes through his lectures.⁸⁹ Huxley staked out his place in the new scientific establishment, and eventually dominated it with his fellows in the X-Club, a dining club consisting of the leading scientific thinkers in the country.⁹⁰ Some of these X-Club scientists, such as John Lubbock, were born into wealthy, aristocratic families; others, such as Huxley or Herbert Spencer, came from more modest backgrounds or from families of Dissenters – those non-Anglican Protestants who were shut out of posts in government or top universities because of their dissent from the Anglican state church. By the second half of the nineteenth century, these men had forced their way into the establishment and many of the barriers to Dissenters had been removed, but they still carried this tradition of being outsiders, and were still aware of the precariousness of their respectable status within a Christian society.

For many atheists and freethinkers, and even the agnostics who moved closest to respectability, there was a sense of being on the outside looking in. Certainly it was true that they considered themselves proud Britons or Americans, and perhaps even the best embodiments of the western, Enlightened tradition, but it was also clear that they were not fully embraced

Introduction

– to put it mildly – by their Christian countrymen. It was because of their status as outsiders that atheists and nonreligious people found many aspects of their societies unpalatable. This discontent manifested itself in a range of political positions that advocated for reform of their societies. The shape this reform would take was a matter of fierce debate – debates between freethinking socialists and liberals in late nineteenth-century Britain caused a serious split in the freethought movement, for example – but there was no doubt in their minds that reform was required.

The degree to which atheists and freethinkers were outsiders of course varied according to other factors like class or gender, not to mention race. As an independently wealthy gentleman naturalist, Darwin was obviously much more of an insider than someone like the working-class atheist leader Charles Bradlaugh, or indeed an average working-class atheist who might have written only an occasional letter to a freethought newspaper or attended meetings. Women in Britain and the United States were already deprived of equal rights and shut out of many educational and employment opportunities, and this marginalization was compounded in the case of those women who became freethinkers, since they were thought to have violated taboos surrounding women's proper place within the domestic sphere.⁹¹ As a general rule, those who were most marginalized were often the ones who expressed the most subversive views with regard to race.

It should be noted that the focus of the book is mostly on white people. In western countries today, atheists and other nonreligious people are slightly disproportionately white.⁹² This has been true historically as well. For example, a 1930 survey of members in the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (4A) found that all but two of the 350 respondents were white. (The authors of the study did not say which race these two were.)⁹³ This book is ultimately not, however, an attempt to explain why atheists are or were disproportionately white. There are likely myriad factors for this dynamic – differing economic or educational opportunities might play an important role, for example – but this is not my main focus. I do, though, want to take the “whiteness” of the atheists in the book as an important fact. Some historians have begun to make the creation and maintenance of white racial identities an object of historical study.⁹⁴ Their investigations show that we cannot assume that “whiteness” is somehow

Race in a Godless World

a neutral or stable category, but rather that what constituted the “white race” has changed over time, and that possessing a white racial identity had implications for one’s worldview. While the focus here is mostly on white atheists, I do nonetheless highlight cases of non-white atheists from time to time, although these people were clearly in the minority.

Outline of the book

In the opening chapter, entitled “Were Adam and Eve our first parents? Atheism and polygenesis,” I show how a shared hostility to Christianity united white atheists and scientific racists in the nineteenth century. Crucial to this link was the heretical doctrine of polygenesis, the idea that the various races of humanity had multiple origins instead of a single one, as in the Christian doctrine of monogenesis. As has already been suggested, polygenesis was a heretical theory that had both racial and theological implications. If human races had separate origins, atheists pointed out, this would contradict the Genesis account that all humans descended from Adam and Eve and would call into question the veracity of the Bible. The theory of polygenesis had been around for several centuries, but it gained scientific support by the middle of the nineteenth century among racial scientists, who argued that the races were innately different and could be ranked hierarchically. Atheists and 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 often aligned themselves with irreligious scientific racists who posited vast differences between the various races.

The monogenist and polygenist division was ostensibly made obsolete by the evolutionary insights of Darwin, who argued that all life evolved from a common ancestor; yet as I show in the second chapter, “Brute men: race and society in evolution,” racist ideas persisted within an evolutionary framework. Since evolution challenged the traditional account of creation as found in Genesis, it is unsurprising that many in the atheist movement

Introduction

were interested in these new ideas. The implications for race from evolutionary theory were not, however, straightforward. On the one hand, there were those who argued that evolution showed that all humans were related and any racial differences between them were ultimately superficial in the vast expanse of evolutionary time. On the other hand, there were those who argued that races could be ranked in a hierarchy on the basis of their evolutionary progress or that each race descended from its own unique ape ancestor. Evolution also shed light on the development of civilizations. The eighteenth-century idea that societies followed a linear course on the way to civilization fit well within an evolutionary worldview. Along with accepting the idea that white European civilization represented the apex of progress, other white atheists gave a subversive reading of societal evolution in which religion itself was seen as a product of evolution, formed when humanity was in its “savage” state. In this view, Christians were really no better than their savage counterparts.

An evolutionary perspective seemed to place Europe and the United States at the top of the racial and civilizational pyramid, but, as I demonstrate in the third chapter, “A London Zulu: savagery and civilization,” there was considerable ambivalence about this hierarchical approach. An examination of how the so-called savage races – those in Africa, Australasia, and the Americas – appeared in atheists’ writing reveals that many white atheists found positives in these societies and seemed, in some cases, to identify with them. The key link was a shared experience, among both atheists and savage groups, of persecution at the hands of more powerful Christians. Atheists recognized their own minority status and saw parallels between their experience of persecution and the missionary and imperial incursions into savage societies. While white atheists and freethinkers were not opposed to imperialism *per se*, they were at least skeptical about the legitimacy of 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. Indeed, there were many positives to be found in these savage societies, including a more egalitarian social structure and a seeming lack of religion and belief in God.

The fourth chapter, “The wise men of the East: India, China, and Japan,” carries on in a similar vein by examining these eastern civilizations. Far

Race in a Godless World

from constructing the people there as Others, atheists attempted to portray these groups 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 of Indians and the Chinese dominated western understandings. But atheists for the most part rejected these negative views. India and China, in their eyes, both possessed ancient civilizations and had equally ancient religious traditions that had much wisdom to impart to western audiences. While atheists would not have accepted the supernatural claims of any of these traditions, they nonetheless seemed to present an alternative path to morality. 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 atheists took to be their uncorrupted forms. It was because of this admiration for the civilizations of the East that so many white atheists and freethinkers opposed western incursions into these societies. The discontent freethinkers felt toward their own societies meant that they were willing to look outside their borders for other ways of living and therefore to express skepticism about imperial and missionary interventions in these countries. This perspective also led many, though not all, atheists and freethinkers to oppose the movement to ban Chinese immigration into the United States. They rejected negative stereotypes of these people and instead found much to admire about these societies.

The fifth chapter, “The best friends the negro ever had: African Americans and white atheists,” takes as its starting point that virtually all white Americans in the nineteenth century held a belief in black inferiority – even those who otherwise argued against racist policies. Certainly this was true for white atheists and freethinkers as well. Freethought newspapers often contained one-dimensional caricatures of black people as pious, superstitious, foolish, and immoral – precisely the opposite of the traits that white freethinkers prized in themselves. The image of black Americans therefore often acted as a means by which white freethinkers could clarify their own identities. Despite these negative depictions, however, on the whole white atheists attempted to portray themselves as free from racial prejudice. They claimed that they treated people equally without regard to race and argued that since there existed no innate limitations to black

Introduction

achievement, providing equal opportunities would ensure that the best individuals, regardless of race, would be successful. Yet not all white atheists held such optimistic views. An alternative discourse within freethought circles held that a rational and scientific approach – one that explicitly rejected decision-making based on mere “sentiment” – showed the innate inferiority of blacks. This chapter wrestles once more with the competing demands of scientific rationalism, hostility to Christianity, and a commitment to equality that helped to inform white atheists’ racial views.

While earlier chapters note the ambivalence in white atheists’ racial views, the sixth chapter, “The curse of race prejudice: rethinking race at the turn of the century,” presents the strongest arguments against racism that were rooted in an atheist perspective. Environmentalist ideas that stressed the importance of social circumstances – not biology – for forming character offered ways to attack racial determinism. Atheists and freethinkers also drew upon the Darwinian perspective that showed that all of humanity was one and rejected notions of timeless racial essences. Many atheists challenged “race prejudice” as emotional and irrational and therefore contradictory to the atheist worldview, which prided itself on the use of dispassionate reason. The reaction against “race prejudice” among atheists was not coincidental, but a natural outgrowth of their worldview. The culmination of this chapter’s discussion focuses on the 1911 Universal Races Congress, held in London. Atheists and other freethinkers played a crucial role as organizers of the congress and speakers against ideas of scientific racism. The central point of the chapter is to tell an alternative story to the one in which secularization opened the way for racism. In this chapter, I show how an atheist worldview could offer the tools of science and reason as a way to critique ideas of racial prejudice and racial determinism.

The Conclusion summarizes the book’s arguments and offers some thoughts on the links between atheism and race in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I also put forth some final reflections on the links between atheists’ social, economic, and political positions and their views on race in our contemporary society. If nonreligious people become the majority in western societies, as seems to be taking place, will their views on race (and indeed other political questions) become less subversive and instead merely parrot ones that maintain their own power?