

"Infidel Science: Polygenism in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Religious Press."

“And [God]hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth . . .” – Acts 17:26a

Abstract

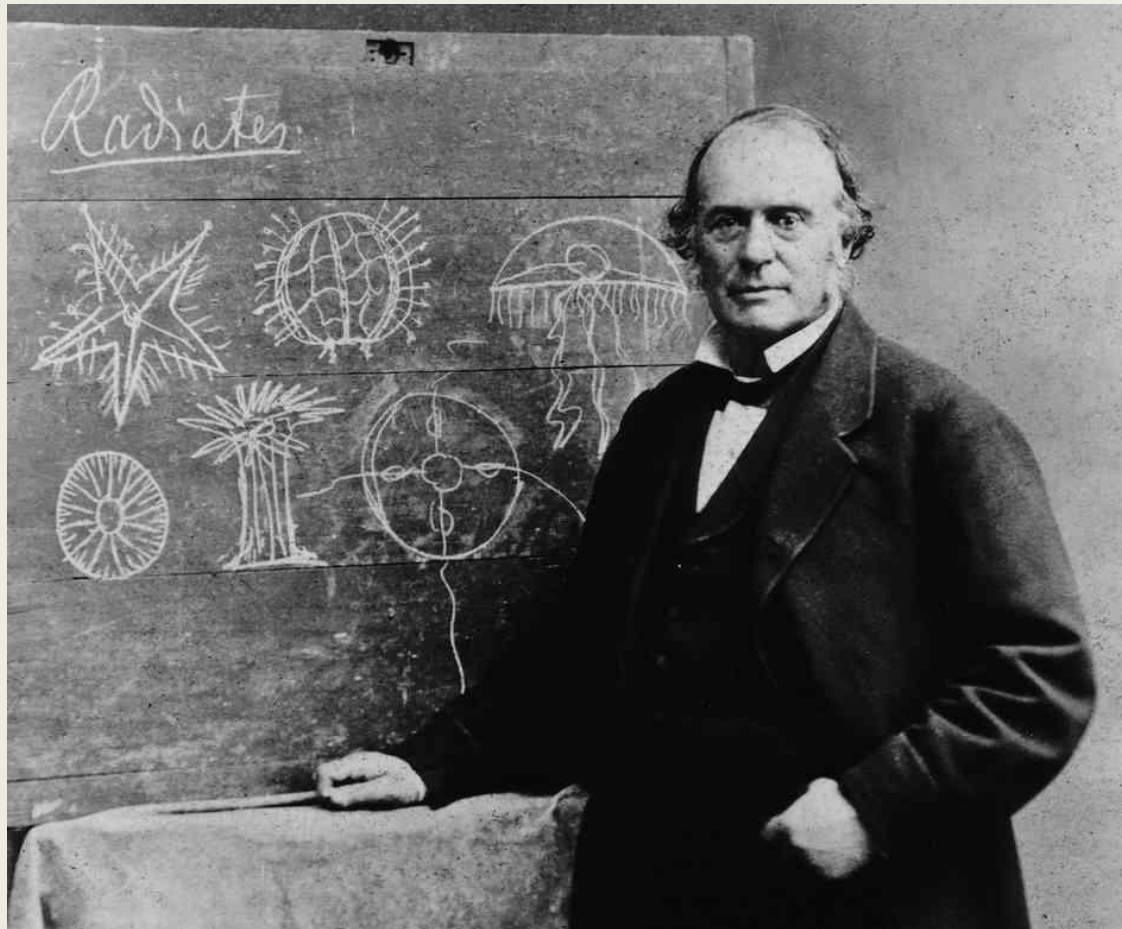
The question of the unity of the human race—do we all share a common ancestor or not—exploded on to the pages of the American popular press at the dawn of 1850. Incited by the claims of several men of science that human races are distinct biological entities, each the result of a separate act of creation, and that, if read correctly, the book of Genesis endorses such a polygenesis, writers in America's burgeoning weekly religious press almost uniformly denounced this as infidel science, science distorted for the purpose of undermining faith. The rise and fall of the controversy gives us insight into how popular religious writers dealt with seemingly hostile scientific ideas and the endurance and evolution of their understanding of how science and religion interact.

Jean *Louis* Rodophe Agassiz

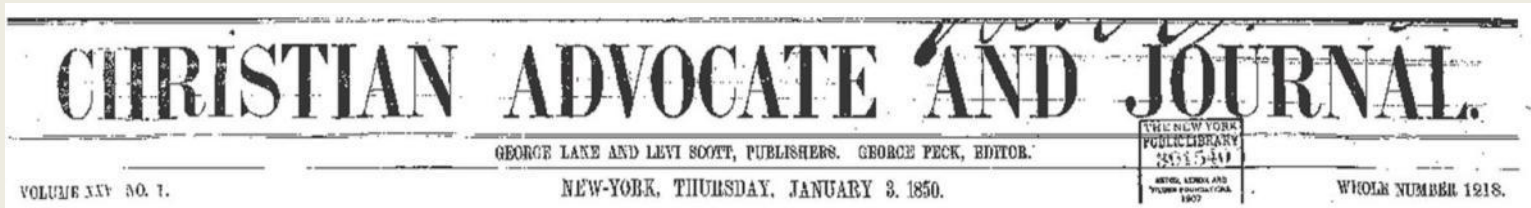


Swiss naturalist from a family of Protestant clergy, Agassiz emigrated to America in 1846, and became the founding professor of the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard. He spend the rest of his life there, marrying into a prominent Boston family, who were Unitarians. He contributed enormously to American science, both in content, organization, professionalization, and patronage.

Possibly the most famous scientist of his day, Agassiz enjoyed an immense public reputation for both his research and his—often public—teaching.



Science in America's Weekly Religious Press



The weekly religious press grew enormously in the 1840s. By the end of the decade hundreds of these small newspapers existed, some the official organs of their churches, others the independent productions of religious entrepreneurs. Many of the editors had a healthy interest in science, although science reporting varied widely in both quality and quantity between papers.

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THE PURITAN RECORDER.

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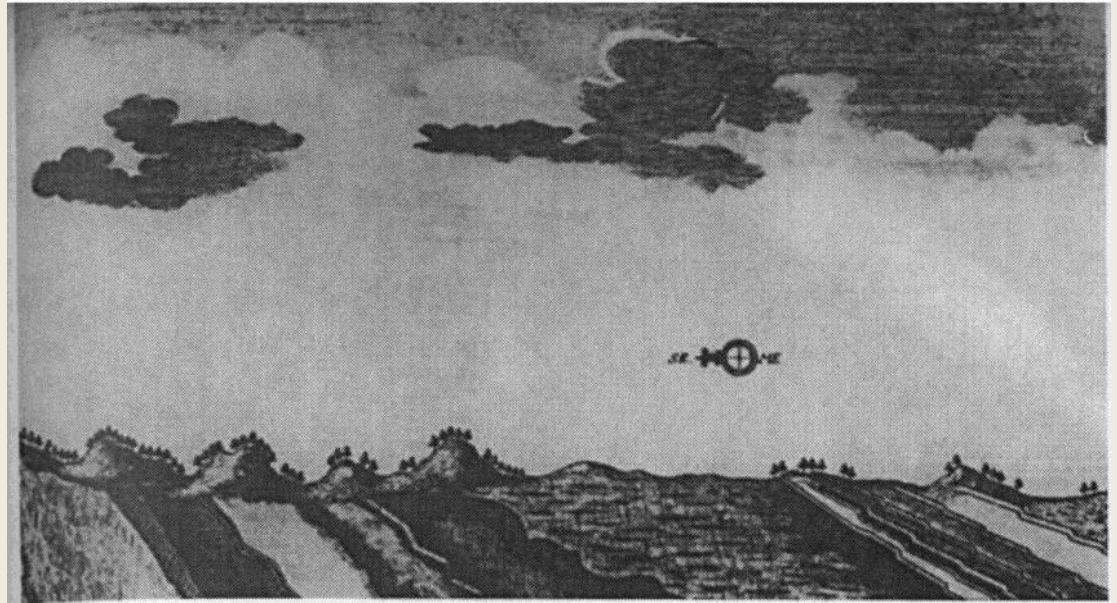
BOSTON, THURSDAY, AUGUST 8, 1850.

VOLUME XXXV - NUMBER 33.

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God's Two Books

Nineteenth-century Protestants were deeply invested in the metaphor of the two books: God's revelation comes in scripture and nature. Since both have the same author, they cannot contradict no matter how different their idioms might be. Thus, religious writers expected science to serve their cause



For example, by 1840, old earth geology had won the day, outside *and* inside the church. Some still resisted it, but most religious newspapers taught the great age of the earth. God had used these great periods of time to prepare the earth for humans, producing coal beds and others necessary resources for our comfort

Science reporting served various purposes

Apologetics

Spiritual inspiration—“The atmosphere rises above us with its cathedral dome, reaching towards the heaven of which it is the most familiar synomyme [*sic*] and symbol.” –taken from Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos*.

Pious leisure: “The friends of science, sound morals and religion, have reason to rejoice that this subject [geology] is gaining so large a share of public attention.” It especially saves youths from “vicious and expensive amusements and of course from dissipation and ruin.”

Boys with geological cabinets do not waste their time playing marbles

Agassiz believed that his discoveries revealed the very acts of God in creation. Religious writers loved him.



*"The glacier was
God's great plough
set at work ages ago
to grind, furrow,
and knead over, as
it were, the surface
of the earth."*

Louis Agassiz

Imagine the surprise of religious folks when Agassiz announced at the 1850 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that he believed that the various human races *do not share a common ancestor*, but that *each race was the product of a separate and distinct act of creation*.

He put it in print in in the popular journal *The Christian Examiner*:

“Geographical Distribution of Animals” (1850)

“The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races” (1850)

“Contemplations of God in the Kosmos” (1851)

Agassiz was not the first in America to argue for multiply human creations, a theory known as polygenism.

A British admirer names this group the American School of Ethnology.

Who were they and how did they argue their case?

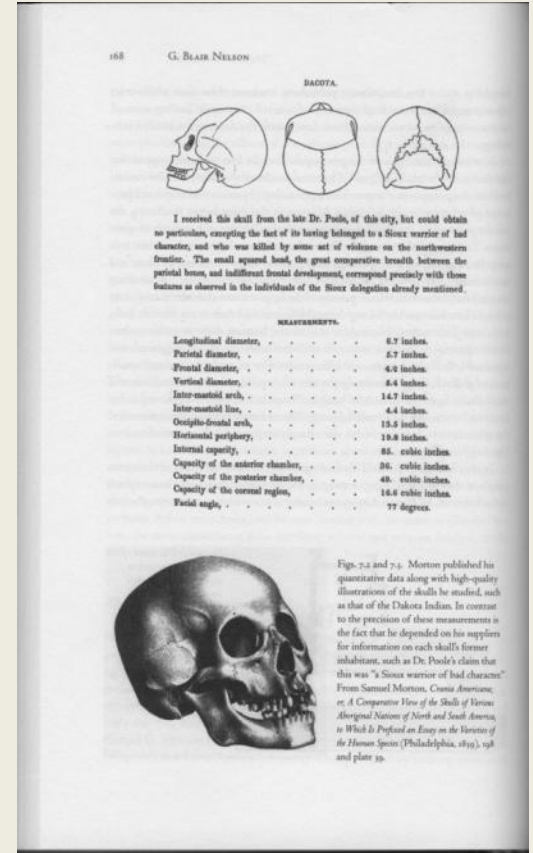
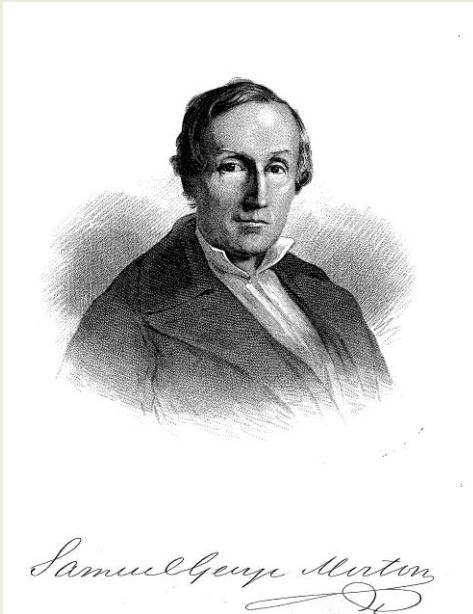
American Polygenism: *Morton's Craniometry*

Dr. Samuel G. Morton

- America's Golgotha
- *Crania Americana* (1839)
 - Native American's are unrelated to other races
 - Racial hierarchy based on skull size

Mean Skull Capacity (in³)

Caucasian	87
Mongolian	83
Malay	81
American	82
Ethiopian	78

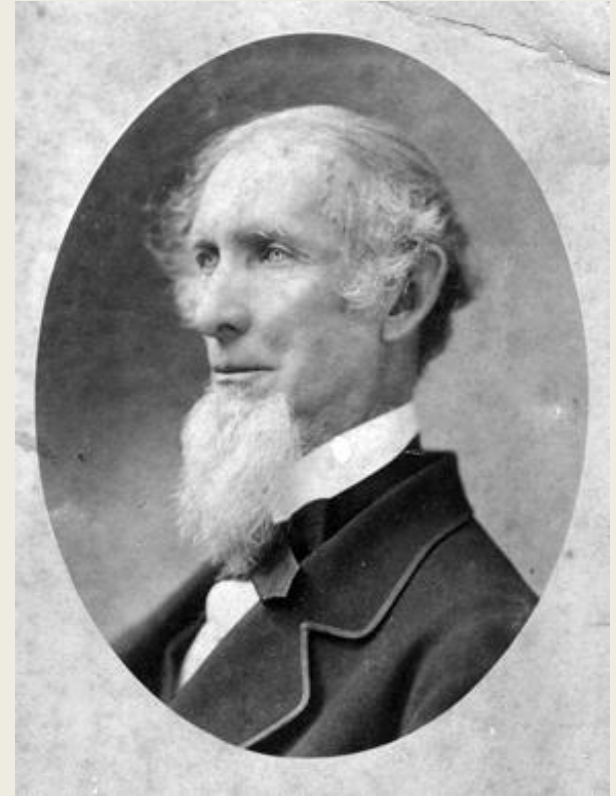


- *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844)
 - Ancient Egyptians were Caucasian
 - Races had not changed in recorded history

Josiah C. Nott, MD

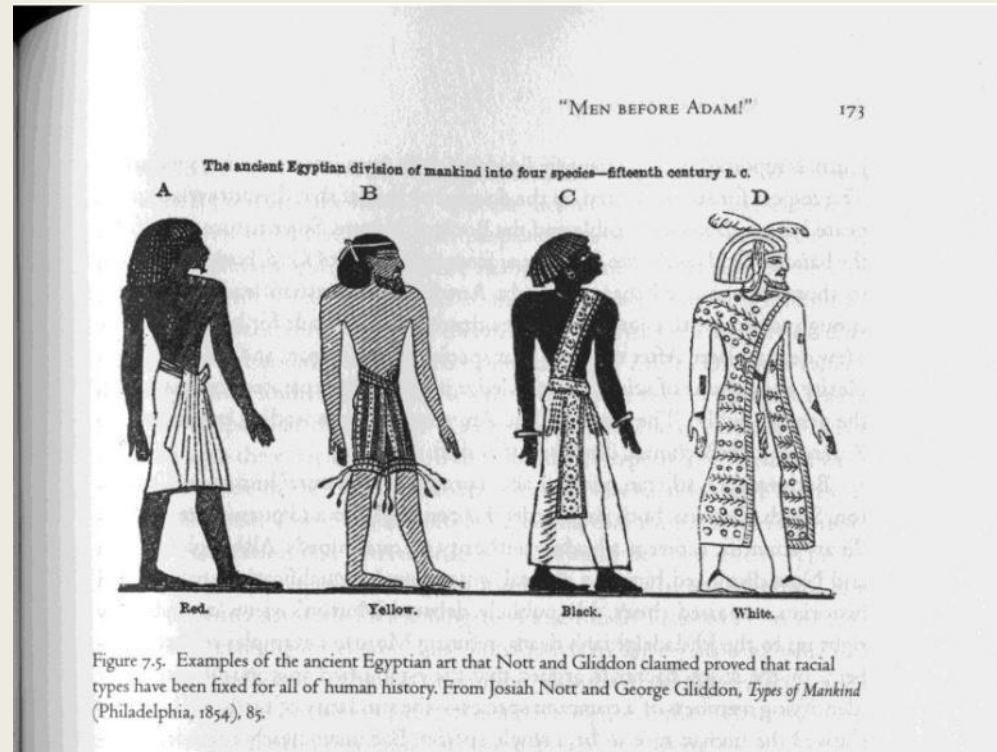
- Elite physician practicing in Mobile, AL
- *Two Lectures on the Connection between the Biblical and Physical History of Man.* (N.Y.: 1849)
- *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: 1854, with George R. Gliddon)

“Almighty in his wisdom has peopled our vast planet from many distant centres, instead of one, and with races or species originally and radically distinct.”



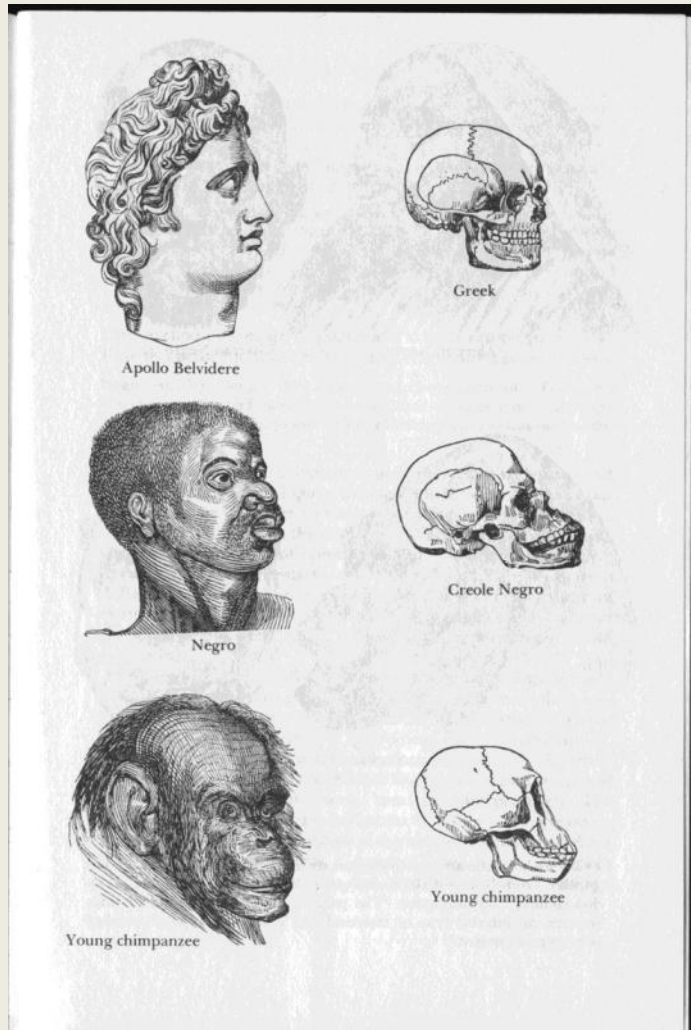
American Polygenism: *Archaeological Argument*

Images depicting what appear human racial differences identical to those seen today from Egyptian monuments dating to thousands of years before Christ.



These arguments assume, by modern standards, a short human chronology, only a few thousand years at best. Nott and Gliddon argued that these monuments put the date of full human racial differentiation so close to the creation or flood, that no natural means are conceivable that could accomplish that differentiation. Thus, human races were originally distinct: ie. separate creations.

American Polygenism: *Anatomical Argument*



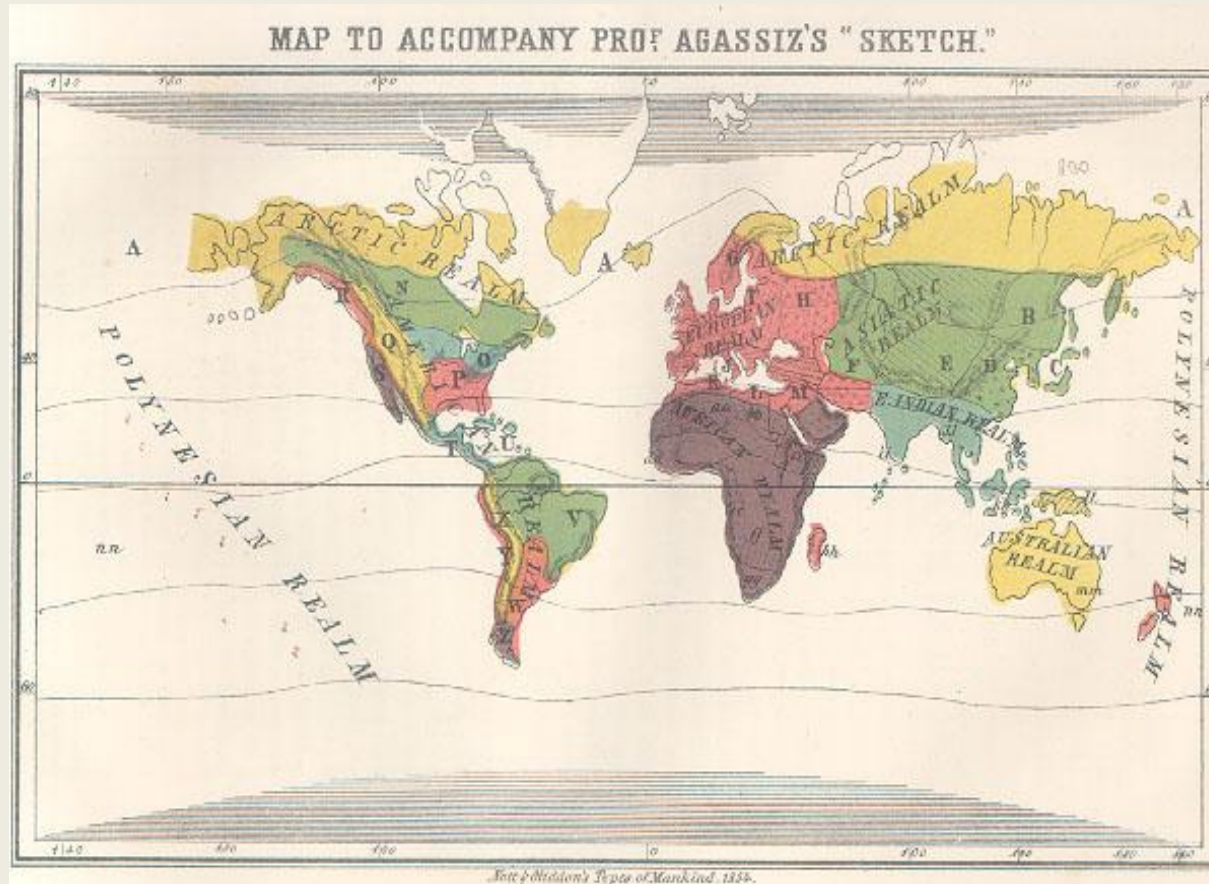
Polygenists, also many racist monogenists, presented abundant evidence of inherent anatomical and physiological differences between the races.

Favorites included facial angle, skull shape, form of the ankle, diseases peculiar to certain races, etc. How, they asked, can you account for these variations?

By today's standards, this data is crude and biased, but much had the authority of "science" in its day.

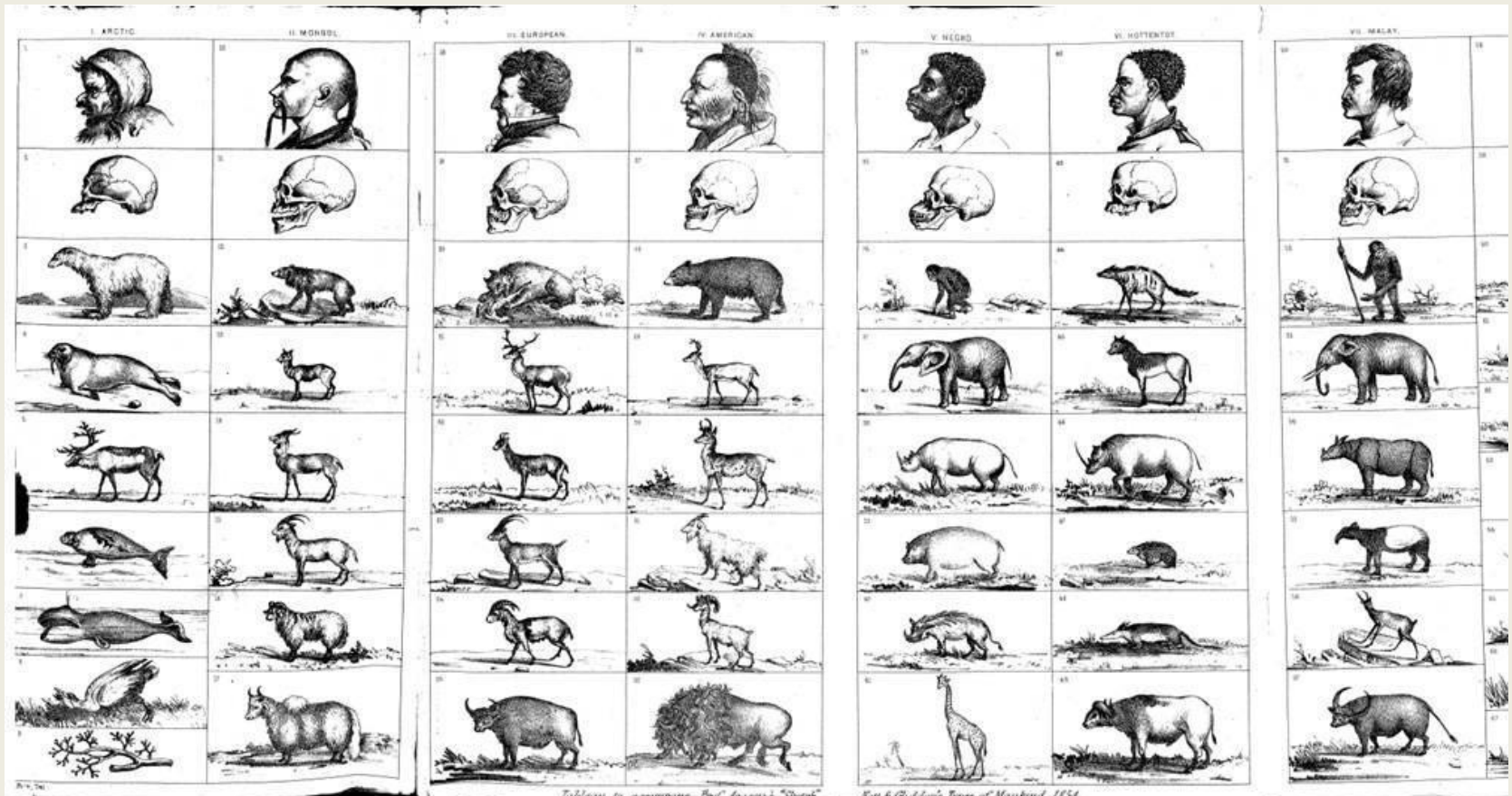
American Polygenism: *Geographical Argument*

If all humans and animals came from one point, Mt. Ararat, then how did they get to the farthest reaches of the earth? How did they end up grouped in the racially homogeneous units?



American Polygenism: Agassiz's Zoological Provinces

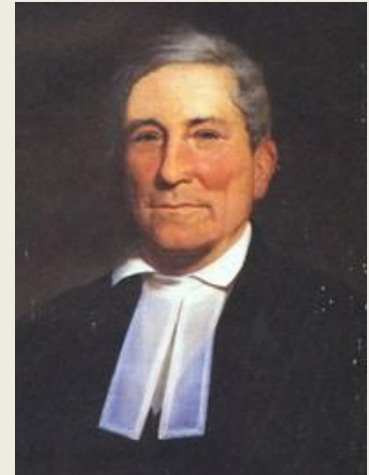
Agassiz was struck by how the ranges of so many species map so closely onto each other. He believed the earth could be divided into a number of zoological provinces, each with its own distinct flora and fauna. He excepted humans from this theory, until he moved to America.



Monogenist Response: The Charleston Divines

Rev. John Bachman,

- pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church, Charleston, SC.
- premier naturalist, international reputation
- published with the Audubons *Viviparous Quadrupeds of the United States*
- a parson naturalist



- Had been debating Morton on hybridity in a medical journal (1849-1850) when Nott and Agassiz published
- *The Doctrine of the Unity of the Human Race Examined on the Principles of Science* (1850)
- Was chairing the section of the AAAS where Agassiz announced his conversion to polygenism, Charleston, Mar. 1850

Rev. Thomas Smyth



- Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC
- Along with Bachman, had been debating human unity in Charleston's Literary Club, and had a manuscript on the topic almost complete when Nott and Agassiz published.
- *The Unity of the Human Races, Proved to be the Doctrine of Scripture, Reason and Science; with A Review of the Present Position and Theory of Professor Agassiz (1850)*

Monogenist Arguments

- Gradation of human types—there are no discrete groups.
- Hybrid infertility: since the eighteenth century, one common criterion of species was that, if two organisms can produce fertile offspring, then they were of the same species. Hybrids are infertile (mules). Southern plantations produced abundant evidence of European/African interfertility.
- Evidence of rapid human population increase.
- Evidence of adaptation to environment.
- Growing evidence of kinship ties between languages—discovery of the Indo-European family of languages.

Religious Issues

Theological: Since we are redeemed by Christ, the second Adam, from the consequences of the fall brought by the first, we all must be descendants of the first couple to benefit from the work of Christ?

Missiological: Can the people groups who missionaries are evangelizing truly be candidates for redemption if they are not Adam's offspring.

Veracity of the Bible: Does not the Bible teach human unity?

Clearly, here are the ingredients for a controversy. At the dawn of 1850, first in the south in response to Nott's two lectures, then in the north a few months later, when Agassiz published his *Christian Examiner* articles, the American weekly religious press geared up for war. It was a war on infidelity.

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UNITY OF THE HUMAN RACE.—The common origin of the human race is one of the plainest teachings of the Scriptures, and the denial of it, whatever apologies and evasions are made, is equivalent to the denial of the inspiration and veracity of the Scriptures. Certain lecturers at the South having promulgated their disbelief of the unity of the human family, and among others Prof. Agassiz is implicated.

A number of learned and well written articles have appeared in the Southern religious papers and literary journals in confutation of the infidel doctrine. An extract from a recent work of Rev. John Backman, D. D., Professor of Natural History in Charleston College, entitled "The Doctrine of the Unity of the Human Race, examined on the Principles of Science," presents certain views as new to most readers as they are satisfactory.

What are the causes in nature to produce first a peculiarity in climate, and then an adaption of the constitution suited to that climate, are subjects which, owing to our imperfect knowledge of the laws of the Creator, the wisest philosophers are unable fully to explain. The productions of these varieties may be the effects either of altitudes or depressions in countries—of geological formations—of electrical phenomena—of peculiar atmospheres—of soils—of an approximation to, or a removal from the ocean—or particular kinds of food and manner of life, or of all these causes combined.

The effects, however, are before our eyes in every country—in every tribe of men, and in every race of domesticated animals, and could we be permitted to see more clearly into the hidden mysteries of nature, we would find no difficulty in accounting for the causes why, from time to time, offspring differing widely from the parents is produced in different regions of

to the same enjoyed or yet I entirely already with no reason why we are we at present have, for that a privilege. It is believe that have more ready possession means any ty of the our sin if the work of influence of excuse for dullness of Spirit to that it not, it is it, or ask a I quite said, on that necessary there is or that prom which I th mean the ministers. brethren, your cand am not, go nor conde postulate derest affe tempting eye, I do my own, to the hun Receive I meekness If there

s a clear, cold, sp, untrodden cape, sparkled lions of gems. nmer was al- the wayside, ver, silent and out as we ap- little fall was t was leaping n the midst of was on every e stream was too active and ry. It is sun- is descending rim arises, and filling the air, his path. He ost, and night bewildered, dis- s down to die. given to home his soul com- the numbness ses and limbs, borne on the n appeal to his even from the h an effort he it is repeated, er like himself d lying down g-sheet spread r his brother's effort to rouse d his exertions his activity has t saved a fellow- I turn to the s every motive

of a talent; that fraction or that unit must be employed, or you must bear the character and meet the doom of the slothful servant.—
Rev. J. A. James.

THE HUMAN RACE.

Agassiz and Adam.

When the apostle Paul asserted in the hearing of the Epicureans and Stoics at Athens, that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth," he certainly maintained the unity of the human race, both as to nature and origin. By the phrase *one blood*, he evidently intends the whole race of man, constituting a single family, descended from a single progenitor. This is further evident from his declaration, that these nations of one blood were made to "dwell on all the face of the earth." Thus the entire human population of the habitable world forms but a single family, in whose veins flows the "blood" which they all inherit from a common centre and source.

The most important principles of the Bible, whether as respects Christian doctrine or Christian morals, are based upon this revealed fact of a community of origin to all mankind. Hence the opposers of the scriptural system of doctrine and morality, —whether they oppose it openly, secretly, or through unintending ignorance, all unite to assail this fundamental truth. They have assailed it on many different grounds; —sometimes on the ground of existing differences in language, complexion, hair, skulls, and other physical and intellectual developments; and sometimes on the ground of alleged astronomical, geological, and antiquarian discoveries. Each and all of these

question seems with Yet, in truth, there i If every trout were pair of legs, and oft all the means of tra which men employ, do as man has done, a to every stream that the earth." The dif doing this all the timo to be peopled over o of a single pair could passing strange that i cultivated as that of such a weed as this wreathed as a verita let of science. We apostle, "Where is th Scribe? Where is th Hath not God made this world?" He wi sun-light of Inspirati ward progress by the flashes of modern sc bins and piece-mea It is but just to Pr that he disclaims all the respect which i religion, and even r as perfectly consiste only proves that he Bible with the same bestows upon his tr fishes. Aside from dogma upon the Tu the evidences of rev most hostile aspect to revelation itself. Fi ed that all men entit descended from one that by the sin of the are constituted sinn it is further revealed tion of the Son of Gi

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late dinner cannot be well avoided. This need not be the tremendous meal it is customary to make it, if the breakfast be substantial and nutritious, and not a thing of slops and biscuits, as it too often is.

UNITY OF THE HUMAN RACE.

The following is the conclusion of Mr. Baneroff's recent work on "The Native Races of the Pacific States":

He who carefully examines the myths and languages of the aboriginal nations inhabiting the Pacific States, cannot fail to be impressed with the similarity between them and the beliefs and tongues of mankind elsewhere. Here is the same insatiate thirst to know the unknowable, here are the same audacious attempts to tear asunder the veil; the same fashioning and peopling of worlds; laying out and circumscribing of celestial regions, and manufacturing, and setting up, spiritually and materially, of creators, man and animal makers and rulers, everywhere manifest. Here is apparent what would seem to be the same inherent necessity for worship, for propitiation, for purification, or a cleansing from sin, for atonement and sacrifice, with all the symbols and paraphernalia of natural and artificial religion. In their speech the same grammatical constructions are seen with the usual variations in form and scope, in poverty and richness, which are found in nations rude or cultivated everywhere.

Little as we know of the beginning and end of things, we can but feel, as

at \$30,000,000 and a fortune of his own father left his estate son, and as he kept father, investing all estate in New York been accumulating u estimated as high as lived a large part of brick mansion in E. a few years since he to an equally plain west corner of Fifth fifth street. He has taking care of his pr has been assisted by not been regarded as factions, his principles made to supplement endowment of the which his father left gift of William B. A was made in 1850. building was filled. the trustees with a p wide by 150 feet d second building, simi erected in 1859. I further gift to the \$20,000 of which we ing books, and the the general funds of Astor leaves three have assisted their agement of his esta never engaged in an

SWINDLING II

In a certain Troy says the *Times* of man who occupied s

"WHAT THOU SEEST, WRITE, AND SEND UNTO THE CHURCHES."

TERMS—\$2 PER ANNUM

Ch Secretary

HARTFORD, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1851.

NEW SERIES, V

of at least one cause be just, his prayer is, that the public notice of it may work some change. Eleven years' membership in four several Baptist churches in the cities of his residence, in two merely temporary, with almost unintermitted attendance on the ministrations of the pastors, have not afforded one appeal to young men on this subject, and not one in the four churches has been devoted in that time to the service. It may have been that there were none fitted, none exercised on the subject, and therefore none who could be devoted to the work; but a far more reasonable conclusion would be, that the young men, like those of old on another subject, "have not so much as heard" whether their duty or privilege was to stand up in the name of the Lord, and, abandoning the doubtful question, have decided to pursue some other calling.— A fearful responsibility to assume! Yet is it not for ministers a serious question whether they have done all their duty as workers to-

viating his distresses. To the Commissioners for relieving the American sufferers, application was made, but fruitlessly; at length he attended at Windsor, and delivered a memorial to the Queen, briefly stating his sufferings, and the cause of them.

"Struck with his appearance, and pleased with his address, she graciously assured him of patronage, provided his pretensions should, on inquiry, be found justified.

"The result was, that in a few days she gave him a commission in the army; and by his public services twice has his name appeared in the Gazette among the promotions."

For the Chr. Secretary.

THE PAGANS' CALL FOR HELP.

BY H. S. STEVENS.

Hear you not the distant wailings,
Coming from across the deep;

Unity of Races.

We are happy to find that the celebrated philosopher and traveller, Humboldt, maintains the Christian and humane doctrine of the unity of the human species. The following extract is from his last work, *Cosmos*, and is distinguished by a noble spirit of humanity:—

"Whilst we maintain the unity of the human species, we at the same time repel the depressing assumption of superior and inferior races of men. There are nations more susceptible of cultivation, more highly civilized, more ennobled by mental cultivation, than others, but none, in themselves, nobler than others. All are in like degree designed for freedom; a freedom which in the ruder conditions of society belongs only to the individual, but which in social States, enjoying political institutions, appertains as a right to the whole body of the community.

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So, we have all the makings of a classic conflict between religion and science:

- A new science challenging the biblical narrative
- Advocated by highly qualified scientists
- Resisted first by two clergymen
- Become a cause célèbre in the religious press

BUT . . .

The story is more complex:

- Rev. John Bachman was at least as qualified a naturalist as Nott, and more competent than Agassiz on American vertebrates. Bachman's writing on human unity is almost entirely scientific argumentation, with very little religious rhetoric and less religious argumentation.
- While many of the newspaper articles attacked the presumed irreligion of polygenism, most stressed the importance of fighting science with science.

In the end, the religious writers who fought for human unity were far closer to modern notions of human evolution, which are, essentially, monogenetic.

They argued the human races are varieties of the human species that diverged from a common ancestor in response to new environments of the areas they came to occupy

There is a historical mystery, here: Why 1850?

Polygenism had been in the air since the late 1700s, and Nott and a few others had been promoting it in America since the early 1840s.

The weekly religious press all but ignored the topic until Nott published his *Two Lectures on the Connection between the Biblical and Physical History of Man* in late 1849 and Agassiz published his *Christian Examiner* articles beginning in early 1850.

Those publications caused American religious writers to view them as an infidel threat.

Most unexpected, though, the scientists also presented religious arguments. Agassiz and Nott attempted to interpret the Bible to make it compatible with polygenism, for their readers.

Preadamism:

- Isaac de la Peyrere, *Praeadamitae. Sive exercitatio super versibus duodecimo, decimotertio, & decimoquarto, capitis quinti Epistolae D. Pauli ad Romanos. Quibus inducuntur primi homines ante Adamum conditi.* (1655: Eng. Trans, 1656).
Condemned even before it was published, along with Hobbes and Spinoza, Peyere was one of the great heretics of the seventeenth century.
- Preadamism provides an answer the annoying problem of people mentioned who are not connected to Adam and Eve or their offspring.

In their 1849-1850 writings, Nott and Agassiz suggested that preadamism as means of reconciling polygenism with the Bible.

The two men of science instructed exegetes in how to read the Bible. This was taken as an attack.

Also, Nott, and his colleague George Gliddon were stridently anti-clerical. Their writings dripped with sarcasm and ridicule aimed at traditional Christianity and its leaders.

Religious writer could leave polygenism to public debate, until these men of science aimed it directly at traditional Christianity. Then it became an infidel science.

War on Infidelity

Protestant writers were strident in their declarations that science and revelation cannot conflict.

But, they also believed that infidel writers distorted science to make it seem to conflict with revelation in order to discredit Christianity. Infidels, who were aggressively anti-religious, used science “falsely-so-called” as well as provocative anti-religious language to embarrass the faith into questioning their faith.

Nott’s rhetoric, and that of his collaborator, George R. Gliddon, used precisely the kind of infidel rhetoric that religious writers had been warning their readers about for decades. Their science would receive a hard hearing, because it came in the same verbal package as infidel science.

Nott (and Gliddon), were notorious for deprecating, demeaning, and talking down to American clergy. Nott gloried in provoking clergy into public disputes, “skunk-baiting” he called it. He also used the conflicted rhetoric to challenge his religious readers:

“Astronomy and geology, so long kept down by bigotry and ignorance, have triumphed, and the day is at hand when the natural history of man will burst the trammels which have so long held it captive. The unity of the races can only be deduced from forced constructions of the Old and New Testaments, and persistence in this error is calculated to subvert and not to uphold our religion.”

In a discussion on Bible revision, in *Types of Mankind*, Gliddon announced that, by the time a new version is complete:

“the development of science will have rendered any *new translation* altogether supererogatory among the educated who are creating *new religions* for themselves.”

Agassiz fared better at the hand of religious opponents of polygenism.

He had, before his declaration for plural human origins, been a great favorite of the religious, because his was a philosophical theist and regularly salted his scientific works with words of praise for the grand, intellectual creator of it all.

However, even Agassiz's immense scientific authority, and his pious demeanor, could not open much room for polygenism among the religious.

Why? Plural origins attacked more than just the biblical narrative, it cut at the heart of the universality of God's offer of salvation in the sacrifice of Christ.

How did writers in the weekly religious press fight infidel science?

There was neither room on the page nor did most readers have the education for these writers to fully explain the scientific arguments and evidence, or even the religious ones.

They used rhetorical strategies to comfort their readers that this threat would not succeed:

- they pointed to past controversies that had resolved themselves in favor of the faith
- they attacked the scientific credentials of the polygenists, except for Agassiz's
- they complained that these scientists were out of their depth when they promoted pre-adamism.

What happened next?

The intensity of the debate within the religious press died down, but did not disappear. The American polygenists had succeeded in making the unity issue an entrenched part of the religious press's reporting on science. Articles and book reviews continued into the late 1870s and beyond.

While the issue tarried in religious thinking, the debate lost most of its fire by 1875.

Why?

An easy answer would be that Darwinism, which is essentially monogenetic, disproved it.

But, Darwinism did not establish itself that quickly, and some polygenists actually welcomed it.

Rather than being refuted, Polygenism seemed to have died from lack of ongoing support.

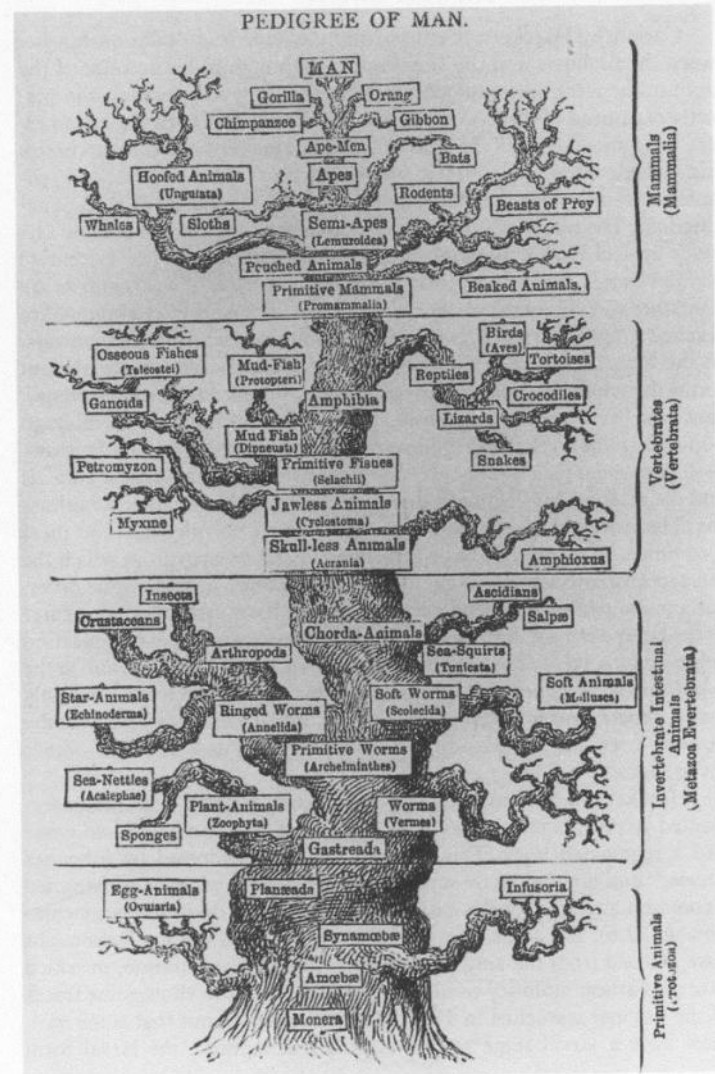


FIGURE 2.5 The Pedigree of Man. From Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation* (New York, 1883), II, facing p. 188.

Although there were more polygenists among American men of science than just Morton, Agassiz, Nott and Gliddon, no one else advocated for their cause publically.

But, assuming that many of America's scientists rejected polygenism, very few of them spoke out, especially in the 1850s, the polygenists' heyday, with the exception of Rev. John Bachman.

Morton, died in 1850, and Gliddon in 1856. Agassiz and Nott lived until the mid-1870s, but Agassiz said little about polygenism in print after 1854, and Nott was so demoralized by the outcome of the Civil War, that he said little about any thing.

Thus, the American school polygenism seem to die of attrition. With no one to fuel the debate, the religious press became occupied with other challenges.

What killed the unity debate within the American religious press?

The short answer: a lack of space.

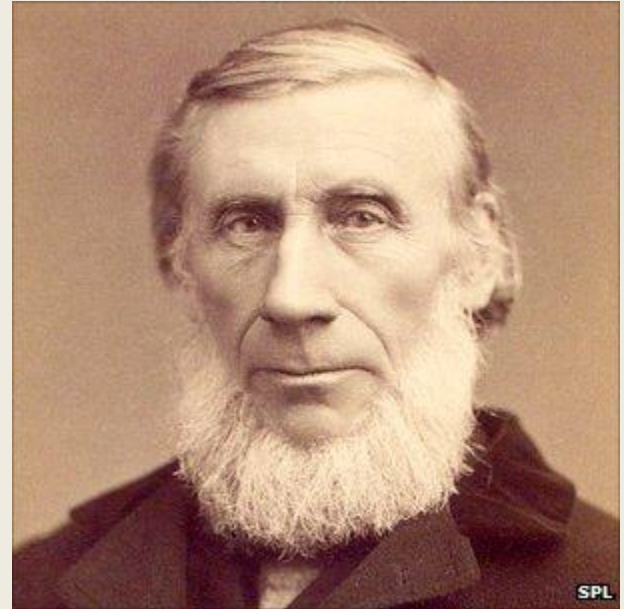
Beginning in the 1870s, new infidels appeared, using science to challenge religious authority. Like Agassiz, these men had unimpeachable reputations as men of science. Their attack on traditional religion demanded that attention of religious writers that has formerly been occupied by the polygenists. Also, the polygenists were dead or silent, these new infidels were alive and kicking.

Who were these new infidels?



Thomas Henry Huxley

John Tyndall



Forging a new place for science

Tyndall and Huxley worked to fashion a greater presence for science in Britain's emerging national and bureaucratic state. To do so, they believed, then needed to force the traditional religious justification and patronage of science off the stage. They did this by deploying a rhetoric of an inherent conflict between religion and science.

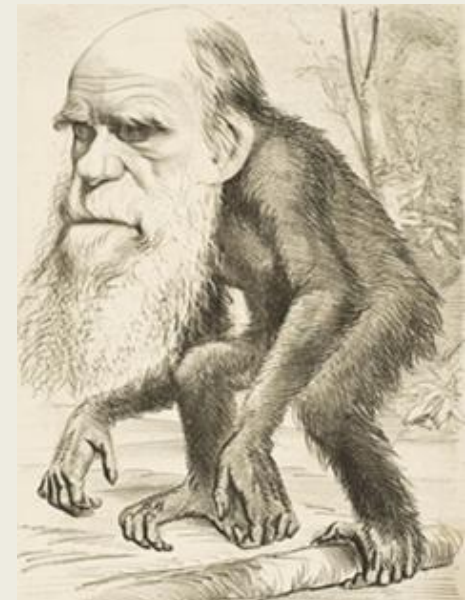
One example from Huxley will illustrate: **“The cradle of every science is surrounded by dead theologians as that of Hercules was with strangled serpents”**



A Speculation

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* received some notice in the American religious newspaper when it appeared in 1859, some but not much. Although not a large movement, a few religious writers greeted Darwinism with enthusiasm as a scientific refutation of polygenism. The negative reputation that Darwin later received in the religious press came when Huxley and Tyndall associated his ideas with their cause. Their harsh rhetoric gave them reputations as infidel scientists, then their use of Darwin's name and ideas drew him into that camp in the eyes of writers in the religious newspapers.

Had that not happen, perhaps Darwin would have become the man who saved the faith from polygenism rather than the man who made monkeys of our grandparents!



Appendix:

Some Unexpected Observations

The polygenists arguments depended on a short human chronology and fixity of species

The science of polygenism required as many miracles as there are species, while many who held to human unity primarily on religious grounds, also argued for a naturalistic explanation of human racial variation.

The discovery of a high human antiquity aided environmentalist monogenism by giving it more time in which to operate

Bachman's theory of human variation was only half a step away from evolution. The only constraint was that he restricted variations to within species.

In the long run, the environmentalist monogenism, advocated by the Rev's Bachman and Smyth, among others, in which organic forms develop variations over time due to the influence of environment, is far closer to our understanding of the origins of the varieties of forms than the theories of their "scientific" opponents.

An Unexpected Outcome

Preadamism: the exegetical theory used by Agassiz and Nott in their weak effort to make polygenism orthodox, would be adopted by several leading Protestant intellectuals to accommodate human evolution to a literal Adam and Eve! But that is another story.

The polygenists were the aggressors: Nott's and Gliddon's rhetoric would have drawn fire from their clerical opponents no matter what they advocated.