RACISM AS NONSENSICAL AS CREATIONISM

Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere clearly show that race relations in the United States remains a serious problem. It is, as well, a legacy of slavery in our nation. But there is a larger story not widely known or appreciated.

Slavery is a very old practice. But when the American colonies were established, it had not been practiced in Britain for centuries. But as labor was needed, bond servitude, of Europeans at first, joined later by Africans under various contractual arrangements, was used. But “true slavery did not exist in the early decades of the English North American colonies … [although] some men who purchased headrights to laborers treated them as if they were slaves for life,” according to renowned anthropologist Audrey Smedley, who is herself of African ancestry. In those early days, blacks and whites lived together, worked together and intermarried. There was no pervasive identification of dark skin with either servitude or inferiority. That began to change after a series of rebellions by the lower classes, especially Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676. The best historical evidence, Smedley notes, is that the British:

“began to pass laws, very gradually … that gave Europeans privileges while they increasingly enslaved Africans. … There was a decline in the number of European servants … [and] an increase in the ships bringing Africans … the Europeans become identified as ‘white.’ And Africans … are not only heathens, but … perceived as vulnerable to being enslaved. … it became part of the consciousness that they had no rights as Englishmen. … between 1690 and 1735, even those Africans who had been free and who had been there for many generations, had their rights taken away from them. … [and it was] possible to create a society in which the slaves were little better than animals. … After a while, slavery became identified with Africans. … [it] gave people the idea that Africans were a different kind of people. … [whereas] the early 17th century planter … wrote to the trustees of his company and he said: ‘Please don’t send us any more Irishmen. Send us some Africans, because the Africans are civilized and the Irish are not.’ But 100 years later, … all the attributes of savagery which the English had once given to the Irish, now they are giving to the Africans.”[1]

In the late 18th Century, Thomas Jefferson, considering the idea that African slaves had an inferior moral sense, pointed out:

“That a change in the relations in which a man is placed should change his ideas of moral right and wrong, is neither new, nor peculiar to the colour of the blacks. … The opinion, that they are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence.”[2]

Jefferson, a slaveowner himself, nevertheless went along with popular beliefs, saying:

“I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior …”

But Jefferson also suggested that these questions were “subjects of natural history” – the term by which science was then known – to be settled by recourse to facts and reason. The trouble was that the scientific methods of the time could not – and did not – settle such questions properly. Instead, learned men gave credence to the idea that there really were separate “races” of humanity. Biblical grounds were also advanced for this belief. The great Harvard professor of zoology and geology Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), famous for his opposition to Darwin’s ideas, held that blacks and whites were actually different species. [3]

The late 19th and early 20th Century has been called “the golden age of racial classification.” [3] In 1934 one influential German anthropologist divided humanity into three subspecies, 38 varieties and 37 subvarieties. Even the embrace of Hitler and Nazism did not much weaken the standing of this idea. But in 1950, UNESCO issued a statement on “The Race Question,” saying:

“the problem of race … has its roots ‘in the minds of men.’ … It involves belief in the innate and absolute superiority of an arbitrarily defined human group over other equally arbitrarily defined groups … maintained in defiance of the scientific method … all men belong to the same species … each group arbitrarily tends to misinterpret the variability which occurs as a fundamental difference … National, religious, geographic, linguistic and cultural groups do not necessarily coincide with racial groups: and the
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Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club: To Be Announced!
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Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“FAMILY VALUES” (and/or other stuff)

>> Sunday, May 3rd, 2015 <<
>still at our NEW LOCATION<
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(about 1/2 mile west of the Sheraton on 114 - take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western)

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