

The role of eugenics and religion in the construction of race in South Africa¹

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Abstract

It has been postulated that Christian Nationalism, an ideology inspired by Afrikaner Nationalism, was the most powerful influence with regard to racial segregation and the implementation of racially oppressive legislation in apartheid South Africa. This article examines the influences that advanced the legislation galvanising racism in South Africa with particular emphasis on the scientific and ideological reasoning that led to entrenched notions of racial division and racial hierarchy. Socially constructed bias masquerading under the guise of science, religious rhetoric and governmental legislation were fundamental to the production, maintenance and surveillance of the apartheid nation-state. The main aim of this article is to challenge the perception that Christian thinking, propagated by Afrikaner Nationalists, was the sole instigator in the proliferation and perpetuation of a racially entrenched nation. The study of eugenics, which has its origins in Britain, played a critical role in the development of social and political arrangements in South Africa, and fuelled the social and physiological reality of racism which was institutionalised, legalised and internalised under apartheid.

Introduction

The modern South Africa is a kaleidoscope of vibrant cultures and traditions which have emanated from a colonial history involving settlers, indigenous people and slaves. Its most salient feature has always been the racial boundaries that existed among these groups. Colonial authority in the Cape was constructed on the notion that Europeans in the colonies were a biologically and socially superior entity in comparison to indigenous people. This false, yet extremely powerful, premise necessitated the construction of legal and social classifications which designated who could or could not obtain membership to the elite group, and who could become a citizen rather than a subject.² In order to maintain economic, political and social dominance, the Europeans in the colony established a social code dominated by race.³

This article examines the influences that advanced the legislation galvanising racism in South Africa with particular emphasis on the scientific and ideological reasoning that led to entrenched notions of racial division and racial hierarchy. The main aim is to challenge the perception that Christian thought was the sole instigator in the proliferation and perpetuation of a racially entrenched nation. While the role of Afrikaner nationalism in the construction of religious rhetoric and governmental legislation has been widely documented, the role of eugenics in influencing the theological process of race formation in South Africa has not been addressed sufficiently. The eugenics theory was legitimised by the British colonial medical profession in South Africa and had a powerful impact on the construction of the nation's race theory.⁴ The scientific assumptions of eugenics played a critical role in the development of societal and political arrangements in South Africa and fuelled the social and physiological reality of racism which was institutionalised, legalised and internalised under apartheid. I argue that the scientific theory of eugenics laid the foundation for South Africa's race policies and continued to be a key driver of racial segregation throughout the formative years of apartheid and should, therefore, be a concomitant consideration when analysing issues of racial formation in South Africa.

The development of pseudo-scientific racism in Britain

The idea that the people of Europe belonged to one race was coined by Professor Johann Blumenbach (1752-1840), a pioneer in the study of comparative anatomy and skull analysis. According to Blumenbach, Europeans

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² AL Stoler, "Making the Empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in 20th century colonial cultures", *American Ethnologist*, 16/4 (1989), p 635.

³ JC Wells, "The suppression of mixed marriages among LMS missionaries in South Africa before 1820", *South African Historical Journal*, 44 (1997), pp 1-20.

⁴ S Klausen, "For the sake of race: Eugenics discourses of feeble-mindedness and motherhood in the South African medical records", *Journal of South African Studies* 23/1 (1997), pp 27-50.

represented the highest racial type within the human species.⁵ In 1855, Blumenbach's counterpart, Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau, claimed that it is a historical fact that all civilisations are derived from the white race. The white race is noble, great and brilliant only so far as it preserves its "pure" blood and that it is the various admixtures of blood that is responsible for the degeneration of the "pure" race.⁶ British naturalist, Charles Darwin published his *Origin of species* in 1859. His work detailed the idea that an individual's ability to survive and reproduce was dependent on a natural selection of inherited variations. Darwin saw black people as inferior intermediates in the chain of human existence and anticipated a time when these inferior beings would become extinct.⁷

The science of eugenics was developed as an off-shoot of the Darwinian Theory.⁸ It can be traced to Britain in the early 1880s when Sir Francis Galton coined the term to mean "well-born".⁹ Galton claimed that biologically inherited leadership qualities determined the social status of the British ruling class. The notion of "inferior types", European superiority and the need to control human heredity was the preoccupation of eugenicists since then. By the early 19th century the study of eugenics provided a scientific brand of racism which emphasised the supposed biological dangers of "race mixing" and termed it miscegenation. Scientific racism can be defined as the belief that the variables of phenotype, intelligence, and ability to achieve in terms of civilisation and/or culture are not only genetically determined, but also genetically linked.¹⁰ Influential scientists in the field warned that racial mixing was a social crime which would lead to the disappearance of white civilisation and must, therefore, be quelled. Grant Madison, in his influential book, *The passing of the great race*, asserted that the offspring of mixed marriages transmit "impure" blood into the white race and, if allowed to continue, would eventually rob the white race of its hereditary "purity".¹¹

The 19th century was a period when scientific racism held the status of a "normal" science. Within the scientific community, the basic tenets of scientific racism met very little opposition. This newly established racial order was used to justify European dominance, paternalism and imperialism. It also guaranteed European men the status of being the highest rank in terms of race, class and gender¹² and set the stage for racial formation in European colonies.¹³ Montagu remarked that throughout the 19th century, hardly more than a handful of voices were raised against the notion of a hierarchy of races. Sociology, anthropology, biology, psychology and medicine became instruments used to prove the inferiority of various race groups in comparison to the white race.¹⁴

According to Kuhn, the period was characterised by an allegiance to the eugenics theory and these claims went largely unmonitored. This resulted in the development of ideas that had no basis in sound scientific research and grew in prominence right up until the first half of the 20th century.¹⁵ As a result, various population groups around the world became targets for discrimination and marginalisation. The main consideration was undeniably socio-political dominance and this was sustained not by merit, but by the tenacity of those who clung to the notion of racial hierarchy, social and political prominence and, above all, greed.

The racialised approach to human diversity put forward by eugenicists is rooted in social considerations rather than logic or fact. The aim, it seems, was to establish a scientific paradigm that would support white male supremacy. Scientific racism was supported by 18th century Europe because it was a way of sustaining an absolutist system that was poised to enforce patriarchal dominance on newly discovered continents. It appears that scientific ideas of the time were tailored to uphold social control. The emerging slave trade and colonial expansion necessitated the design of inferior races that would be enslaved and exploited with impunity.

The science of eugenics and the construction of race in South Africa

In his influential work, *Illicit union, scientific racism in modern South Africa*, Saul Dubow stated that the eugenics theory was present in South Africa shortly after the First World War and its most consistent and active promoter was Professor Harold Fantham (1876–1937).¹⁶ Fantham presented several academic papers to the

⁵ G Sutton, "The layering of history: a brief look at Eugenics, the Holocaust and scientific racism in South Africa", *Yesterday and Today*, no. 1 (May 2007), pp 22-23.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ L Wilson, *Sir Charles Lyell's scientific journals on the species question*, p 347.

See also, C Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London: Murray Publishing Company, 1859).

⁸ This trend of thought has also been referred to as "Social Darwinism".

⁹ Archive on the Eugenics Movement in America. "The Social Origins of Eugenics" [Accessed 7 June 2012]. (http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_6.html).

¹⁰ S. Montagu, *Man's most dangerous myth*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² T Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, p 10.

¹³ G Sutton, "The layering of history: a brief look at Eugenics, the Holocaust and scientific racism in South Africa." *Yesterday and Today*, no. 1 (May 2007), pp 22-23.

¹⁴ S Montagu, *Man's most dangerous myth*, p 80.

¹⁵ T Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolution*, p 92.

¹⁶ S Dubow, *Illicit Union – scientific racism in modern South Africa*, pp 423–522.

South African Association of Science. His main claim was that the greatest threat facing white South Africans was the deterioration of the white race. He maintained that human beings can be improved by improving individuals and improving race. Fantham believed that heredity was the basis of good progeny and that the development of a eugenics consciousness among South African white communities was vital for the development of the white race and that within the white community people with marked hereditary defects must be segregated.¹⁷

An article in the *Journal of South African Studies* examined eugenic beliefs and practices in South Africa from 1903 to 1926.¹⁸ The article suggested that the English-speaking medical profession in South Africa placed huge emphasis on the study of eugenics in the first three decades of English settlement in the country. South African eugenic scientists shared a common concern for the health of the white race and saw a link between the health of the white population, the role of white women as “mothers of the nation” and the health of the South African state. They believed it was their duty to intervene in social relations, in both the public realm of policy development and the private realm of sexual reproduction.¹⁹ In 1932, Prof Fantham presented a paper entitled, *Notes on some cases of racial admixture in South Africa*. The paper served to summarise the effects of race mixing as evidenced by the offspring that were produced. Prof Fantham concluded his paper by stating that it would be desirable for South Africa to pay attention to the maintenance of “racial purity”.²⁰

According to Prof Sussane Klausen, of the Department of History at the University of Carleton, eugenics thought lay behind the construction of the segregationist ideology in South Africa.²¹ In the early 1900s doctors and scientists were convinced that the South African white population was degenerating. The growth of urban slums and the migration of landless Afrikaners and Africans to these areas in search of employment threatened the new social order in South Africa. The medical profession in the early 20th century was particularly concerned about the escalation of “feeble-mindedness” among white people and attributed the condition to the degeneration of the white race as a result of racial mixing. Alongside the concern about “feeble-mindedness” was the fear that racial lines would be eliminated through interracial relationships.²² This would in turn bring political, social, cultural and economic devastation to the South African white population. At the heart of the miscegenation and “feeble-mindedness” debate was racism and the preservation of white “purity”, white superiority and white dominance.²³

It has been argued that racism and science have always been interlinked as it played itself out in the history of South Africa.²⁴ Even though racist practices were commonplace in the first three decades of colonialism in South Africa and loomed large throughout its history, the theoretical orientation of the concept was a British construct which was expanded by the South African colonial medical profession early in the 20th century. It was, however, not uncommon for scientists and the medical professional alike to oscillate between difference in race and sameness. While discussions among South Africans on the issue of eugenics were less nuanced and less intense than Europe, its practice was rapidly growing.²⁵

Religion and the construction of race in South Africa

Racism is the particular focus of many South African scholars from various fields for obvious reasons. Many have claimed that Afrikaner Christian Nationalism was the catalyst of a racist ideology which benefited only the minority white population of South Africa and marginalised and discriminated against the majority black population under colonisation and apartheid. This article suggests that, while there is significant validity to the claim, the separation of racism in science and racism in religion has contributed to too narrow a view of racial formation in South Africa. The article argues for a correlation between racial science and racial religious thought perpetrated by Afrikaner Christian Nationalists. To that end, the historiographical obsession with establishing and authenticating Afrikaner national identity is examined.

According to a prominent English-speaking South African historian, David Yudelman, English-speaking South Africans are not significantly more liberal than Afrikaners on issues of race, yet they depicted Afrikaners as villains and fanatics who perfected and institutionalised racism.²⁶ Hermann Giliomee pointed out that historical analysis of Afrikaner Nationalism has neglected several areas. The importance of religion as a socio-political force and the interrelationship between language and nationalism, among others, are greatly

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ S Klausen, “For the sake of race”, p 27.

¹⁹ S Klausen, “For the Sake of Race”, p 27.

²⁰ Dubow, *Illicit Union – scientific racism in modern South Africa*.

²¹ S Klausen, “For the sake of race”, p 27.

²² Ibid, p 36.

²³ J Lewin, *Sex, colour and the law*, p 64.

²⁴ H Deacon, “Racism and medical science in South Africa’s Cape Colony”, *Osiris* 15 (2000), pp 190-206.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ D Yudelman, *The emergence of South Africa*, pp 13-14.

underestimated by historians.²⁷ I argue that concomitant with this is the influence of the eugenics theory which contributed directly to the racial ideology designed by Afrikaner nationalists.

According to Giliomee, the political zeal and ideological bigotry applied by Afrikaner nationalists went beyond economic interests.²⁸ Their main interest was ethnic survival. Giliomee goes on to say that the concern for survival is a 20th century phenomenon which has its roots in 19th century developments. In the history of the Cape Colony, the burghers felt threatened by the thought that their children would lose their European culture. Moreover, the Anglo-Boer War instilled the fear among Afrikaners of being wiped out as a nation. The widespread white poverty of the 20th century threatened the dominance of the white race. Therefore, at the heart of the decision to institute apartheid was the survival prospects of the Afrikaners.²⁹ My contention is that eugenics thinking facilitated the establishment of apartheid and that the racist thinking of white South Africans left it unquestioned and accepted as scientific fact. Having said that, I must hasten to add that I am not suggesting that white attitudes towards apartheid were homogenous but, rather, that it was condoned or accepted by the majority of white South Africans as the natural order of things.

In 1941 the FRK (Federale Raad van Kerke³⁰) noted that there was a strong need for a report stating the validity and justification for apartheid.³¹ The FRK produced a report in 1943 citing the biblical books of Genesis and Acts as theological basis for the support of apartheid. According to the report, God separated the nations and God expected every nation to seek its own salvation with nationalistic fervour. The account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 was the main text and was interpreted as a justification for the existence of separate languages, cultures, nations and races. According to the FRK, they were obligated to institute apartheid on the abovementioned grounds. It was the desire of the FRK that “the Black man can be himself, with his own church and his own Bible”.³² However, a comprehensive document was only produced in 1947 by Prof EP Groenewald, Chair of New Testament at the University of Pretoria.³³

Prof Groenewald believed that the Christian Afrikaner should not to back down from any argument concerning the justification of apartheid using biblical scriptures. He claimed that there was broad consensus concerning biblical justification for apartheid. According to Groenewald, the Bible upheld human unity even though unity was not uniform. But, the Bible also speaks of different races and nations as seen in Genesis 1:21, Matthew 19:4 and Acts 17:26. It was Groenewald’s contention that God intervened when the people began to build the tower of Babel and with this the diversity of races and nations was brought into effect. Every nation was given its own time and habitation as seen in Amos 9:7 and Acts 17. The events at Pentecost, in Acts 2:8, confirmed the segregated condition which nations found themselves in and segregation will continue until the end of time.³⁴

Groenewald went on to say that it was clear from the history of the Israelites that God brought curses on those who ignored the boundaries of which he (Groenewald) spoke. He claimed that the validity of scriptural apartheid is evidenced by the way in which the nation of Israel was set apart. The New Testament substantiated this in Philippians 3:4 when Paul encouraged nationalism. The social apartheid of Israel included the rejection of intermarriage and the practice of distinct food habits as seen in Deuteronomy 7:3-11 and 1 Corinthians 7-8. Groenewald went on to say that a higher spiritual unity than this did not exist until the coming of Christ. This, according to Groenewald, was the natural order that God ordained. However, the right of one nation to exist separately did not absolve that nation from responsibility towards other nations (*voogdyskap* or guardianship, implying paternalism). Groenewald hastened to add that the principle of *voogdyskap* did not have direct scriptural warrant but this could be deduced. He maintained that there was a correlation between the relationship between authority and piety and that of responsibility towards fellow human beings.³⁵

In summary, Groenewald’s perspective was that the division of the races was a conscious act of God. God divided people according to their colour and originality. Each person belonged to the race where the texture of hair and skin colour matched. God wished to maintain the separateness of people in every aspect of life, be it national, social, political or religious. Apartheid enjoyed the full blessings of God.³⁶ Groenewald developed a cultural theory claiming that it was a divine commandment from God to “fill the earth”. This was God’s way of nation-building. Therefore, whites and blacks were to develop separately. Groenewald’s most important view was that the church opposed any form of equality between blacks and whites as blacks were inferior to whites. He was convinced that blacks and whites were on different levels of the equality scale and that there was

²⁷ H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: biography of a people*, p xvi.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p xvii.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp xvii-xix.

³⁰ The FRK was a federal structure linking the four autonomous DRC regional synods. A united DRC, with a General Synod only came into being in 1961.

³¹ PB Van de Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Part 4: 1905-1975*, pp 87-92.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

scriptural justification for his perspective on race relations.³⁷ Groenewald concluded his report by stating that “this report concludes that the principles of apartheid between races and nations, as well as missions and mission churches, are to be seen in scripture and the principles of ‘voogdyskap’ [guardianship] as formulated by our church and accepted by our church is in agreement with scripture”.³⁸ The FRK concluded, on the basis of Groenewald’s report, that the principles of apartheid between races and nations are present in the Bible.³⁹

Acceptance and polemics concerning Groenewald’s report

The document was accepted by the FRK (as stated earlier) as well as the Transvaal and Free State Synods. However, Prof Ben Marais, from within the ranks of the DRC itself, questioned the scriptural grounds for the endorsement of apartheid. He believed that the concept of apartheid was justifiable from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, rather than biblical scripture. Marais stated that apartheid was necessary for Christianity to flourish. He claimed that the nation of Israel was not normal and principles relating to the Israelite nation, as put forward in biblical scriptures, could not be applied to South Africa. According to Marais, the nations with whom Israel was not allowed to mix were all Semite and, on the basis of that, racial difference was not the issue. Moreover, the Jews proselytised many nations and were never reprimanded. He went on to say that today’s Church is the nation of God and what separates the nation of God should not be over-emphasised at the expense of that which unites it.⁴⁰ Surprisingly, Marais’s response was seconded by PJ Viljoen, Assessor of the FRK and accepted by the joint Synod.⁴¹

Groenewald objected to Marais’s rejection of the report, stating that it reflected badly on his academic capabilities and that his exegetical knowledge had been undermined. He stated that he upheld his conclusions with a clear conscience. Groenewald’s anger at the rejection of the validity of his report influenced the joint Synod and they, once again, accepted his report.⁴² The fickle nature of the Synod’s response can be seen in their initial agreement with Marais’s objections and the complete turnaround after Groenewald’s objection. However, it must be noted that the Synod slightly modified the report. The Synod’s findings were widely publicised. Prof PV Pistorius, a classical scholar at the University of Pretoria, denied the validity of Groenewald’s report, stating that the arguments put forward by Groenewald had no merit. He raised strong objection to the misuse of biblical scriptures and emphasised that nowhere in the Bible was there an objection to the admixture of races.⁴³

In defence of Prof Groenewald’s report, Dr HS Rossouw remarked that the principles of apartheid ran like a golden thread throughout biblical scriptures. Dr ER Venter noted that the Israelite nation had clear instructions from God to remain separate. Furthermore, that those churches cannot be founded on practical grounds and that if the Church did not stand up to the test of scripture, it was sinning against God.⁴⁴ Marais responded by saying that he did not deny that apartheid was the right thing for South Africa and that colour apartheid should be implemented. He believed that, under certain conditions, it was a necessity of life but, he suggested that the scriptural warrant used to buttress it was unconvincing. He noted that people who provided scriptural justification for apartheid used the history of Israel and the Old Testament indiscriminately. In so doing, they made two errors. Firstly, they viewed Israel as a racial entity rather than a faith entity and, secondly, Israel’s unique standing with God was not taken into account. Marais maintained that the Bible should not be used in a haphazard fashion and that the scriptures did not teach racial apartheid, but apartheid of sin. The scriptural backing of apartheid was to be reconsidered based on these two points. However, he argued, conditions in South Africa justified separate development and separate churches provided that the “brotherhood” of humanity was not denied. As long as apartheid as the vision of the state was driven by racial selfishness and racial superiority, it should not be implemented in South Africa because the sacrifices it demanded were too self-serving. Marais stated that the only positive recourse for South Africa was to look for “a golden midway between absolute apartheid and absolute integration”.⁴⁵

In 1947 National Party leader, DF Malan, noted that apartheid was a precedent set by the major churches in South Africa. He remarked that, “it was not the state but the church who took the lead with apartheid. The state followed the principles laid down by the church in the field of education for the native, the coloured and the Asian”.⁴⁶ In 1948, South Africa was plunged into nearly forty years of institutionalised racism. The National

³⁷ G Manavhela, *An Analysis of the Theological Justification of Apartheid in South Africa: A Reformed Theological Perspective*, pp 48-49.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ PB van de Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Part 4: 1905-1975*, pp 87-92.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 460.

Party had the full backing of the three Afrikaans churches in South Africa. Church and politics were intertwined and decisions made by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) had an impact on the entire country.⁴⁷

Eugenics versus religion

Afrikaner nationalist theology provided the framework and justification for apartheid. While the Bible was used to justify racial separation, biblical support was not the primary pillar for the policy of apartheid. The policy of apartheid was an ideological construct for which a religious background was devised that supported the existing ideology.⁴⁸ Religion, in this case Christianity, was made subservient to national ideology. This national ideology was conceptualised in the colonial era masquerading under the guise of science. Gradually, the emerging European ideology of racism became entrenched in South African societies. So, what was the extent of the influence of the Bible on South Africa's racial ideology? While his aim was to emphasise the importance of scripture on the issue of race relations, Groenewald's approach was sociological rather than biblical. Clearly, Groenewald's caricaturing of people was in accordance with eugenics rather than with biblical scripture. The idea that racial mixing caused degeneration and dilution of white "purity" was rooted in the Social Darwinian hierarchy of race which originated in Europe. Scientific racism was entrenched in white South African thinking. A clear reflection of scientific racism was evident in HF Verwoerd's statement in 1960. On the issue of Coloured representation in the House of Assembly, he declared that he was not the man who would lead the Afrikaners to "bastardisation". He strongly rejected the plea for Coloured representation on the grounds that it would be a springboard for the integration of the races, leading to biological assimilation.

Twentieth century scientists assert that there is no evidence to support the dividing of humankind into biologically diverse race groups. The notion that humanity can be divided along racial lines is rooted in history rather than in biology. The history of science and genetic studies of the last few decades have failed to justify the existence of biologically different race groups.⁴⁹ Scientists have calculated that the average genetic difference between two randomly chosen individuals is 0.2 per cent of all the genes, and that the physical traits used to distinguish one race from another - such as skin colour, eye colour, nose width, and hair - are determined by about 0.01 per cent of the genes. Moreover, these genes can adapt rapidly to environmental factors.⁵⁰ So, in a nutshell, what modern day scientists are saying, is that there is only one race, the human race.

Conclusion

Racial prejudice and discrimination were not invented overnight. It is the culmination of a long and complex process. The church and theology were involved in this process to a large extent but, when considering the factors that led to South Africa becoming the racially stratified nation that it is, one must take into account all the factors of its historical development. The main driver of the race theory, racial prejudice and white supremacy in South Africa was the inferior science of eugenics practiced in colonial times which laid the foundation for institutionalised apartheid decades later.

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⁴⁷ G Manavhela, *An analysis of the theological justification of apartheid in South Africa: A Reformed Theological perspective*, pp 48-49.

⁴⁸ L Naicker, *The role of selected churches in Natal in the development and maintenance of interracial relationships in the context of apartheid*, p 45.

⁴⁹ IF Haney-Lopez, "The social construction of race" in *Critical Race Theory*, p 164.

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