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Oludamini Ogunnaike

College of William and Mary, oogunnaike@wm.edu

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Oludamini Ogunnaike*

From Heathen to Sub-Human: A Genealogy of the Influence of the Decline of Religion on the Rise of Modern Racism

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Abstract: This essay traces a genealogy of the modern concept of race, and modern racism, in relationship to the intellectual shifts that led to the secularization of knowledge during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Through an analysis of the evolution of the central concept of “The Great Chain of Being” from the Classical through Medieval and Early Modern periods, I argue that the decline of religion in the West was a necessary condition for the rise of modern conceptions of race and racism.

Keywords: Intellectual History; Race; Racism; Philosophy; Religion; Enlightenment; Secularization

The medieval European world... knew the black man chiefly as a legend or occasional curiosity, but still as a fellow man... The modern world in contrast, knows the Negro chiefly as a bond slave in the West Indies and America. Add to this the fact that the darker races in other parts of the world have, in the last four centuries lagged behind the flying and even feverish footsteps of Europe, and we face today a widespread assumption throughout the dominant world that color is a mark of inferiority.

W.E.B. DuBois. *The Negro*

Western European Civilization is unique among world civilizations for many reasons, most obviously because it was the birthplace of the modernity within which nearly every human on the planet now lives and works and thinks. It also is unique because it is the birthplace of two important intellectual/social perspectives or trends: the secular and the racist. Limited materialist and “secularist” movements can be found in classical Indian, Chinese, and especially the late Greek and Roman civilizations, but these perspectives were always marginal, and never achieved the intellectual prominence and indeed dominance that the secular perspective enjoyed and enjoys in post-Enlightenment Western Civilization and the modernity it spawned. It was in the post-medieval Western Europe where the schism between reason and religion, philosophy and faith, science and mysticism that characterizes modern and post-modern thought was fully realized.¹

Similarly, it seems fair to claim that every society in the history of humankind has stereotyped and denigrated outsiders to one degree or another, but modern racism, defined here as racial essentialism coupled with a hierarchal ranking of races, is a phenomenon that appears to have arisen only in post-Enlightenment Europe. For example, many prominent Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, believed that the Greeks were superior to all other people in the world, whom they designated as barbarians,

¹ See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; King, *Orientalism and Religion*, and Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* for a more detailed account of the emergence of the category of the “secular” in Western thought and life, and the uniqueness of this phenomenon.

*Corresponding author: Oludamini Ogunnaike, The College of William and Mary, USA; E-mail: oogunnaike@wm.edu

but this Greek/barbarian distinction was less essential and biological and more linguistic and cultural, so that a barbarian could become a Greek and vice-versa.

In this paper I would like to examine the role of the first trend, that is, the shift from a religious, hiero- or theocentric perspective to the modern secular, anthropocentric perspective, played in the rise of the second trend, modern racism. I will argue that the latter took place within the former, and that the decline of religion in the West was *sine qua non* for the rise of modern racism.

From the outset, it should be recognized that the emergence of modern racism is a many-faceted, and exceedingly complex intellectual, social, and economic phenomenon, and that I only intend to examine one among the many influential factors that contributed to the rise of this uniquely troubling element of modernity. Furthermore, in asserting that racism did not exist in non-Western, non-modern societies, I am in no way proposing that prejudice, discrimination, and violence against groups did not exist. On the contrary, history is replete with such examples. However, since the concept of race as a biological, essential, and static entity was born in post-Enlightenment Europe, modern racism, the classification and discrimination amongst groups based on race, could only arise out of this particular intellectual climate.²

Man in the Image of God to God in the Image of Man

The most relevant aspect of the secularization of the Western intellectual tradition is the effect the schism between the rational and the religious had upon the intellectual theories of the nature of man.³ This shift is best summarized as a move from the perspective of man as *imago Dei* to the modern perspective of God as an invention of man, and the humanist position of the inherent dignity and worth of all people by virtue of their humanity in and of itself, not because of their deiform nature. Although the nature of man in medieval European thought was complex and varied, the prevailing perspective is summarized by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologicae*:

Since man is said to be the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature. Now the intellectual nature imitates God chiefly in this, that God understands and loves Himself. Wherefore we see that the image of God is in man in three ways.

First, inasmuch as man possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men.

Secondly, inasmuch as man actually and habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace.

Thirdly, inasmuch as man knows and loves God perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory. Wherefore on the words, “The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us” (Psalm 4:7), the gloss distinguishes a threefold image of “creation,” of “re-creation,” and of “likeness.” The first is found in all men, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed.⁴

There are three important elements of this perspective: first is its definition of man as a fundamentally theomorphic being, second the location of the essence of this theomorphism, and thus the nature of man himself with the intellectual faculty, and thirdly, the ranking of humanity based on the degree of theomorphism (all men, the just, and the blessed).⁵ Naturally, these three elements played a significant role in the reconfiguration of the image of man in general, and of certain groups of humanity in particular which resulted in racism.

² See Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, and Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* for complementary and thorough analyses of the history of race and racism in the classical, medieval, and modern Western worlds.

³ Used here and throughout the rest of the paper in the sense of the androgynous Greek *anthropos* or the Arabic *insān*, that is, referring to the totality of humanity, male and female.

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* I.93.4.

⁵ These three features are commonly found in definitions of man in religious intellectual traditions ranging from the Islamic to the Hindu to the Taoist/Neo-Confucian. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s “Who is Man? The Perennial Answer of Islam,” in Needleman (ed.) *The Sword of Gnosis*, 203-17, and the chapter “Man as Microcosm” in Toshiko Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism*.

The 13th century scholastic Lully further elucidated this first concept of theomorphism in his *Compendium Artis Demonstrativae*, “The likenesses to the divine nature are imprinted upon every creature according to that creature’s receptive capacities, greater or less in each case... thus every creature carries, more or less, the sign of its Maker.”⁶ This description of the graded theomorphism of creation is an example of the cosmological perspective of “The Great Chain of Being” which enjoyed great prominence, if not eminence throughout the history of Western thought, from the classical period, through the Middle Ages and Renaissance and well into the modern period.⁷ A. Lovejoy’s definitive work on the subject, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, locates its beginning in the Platonic dialogue *Timaeus*, wherein the issue of theodicy, or the origin of evil in the world given the Absolute nature of the Platonic “Good” or God, is explained by appeal to the simultaneously Infinite nature of this Supreme Entity. Being infinite, the Good must manifest itself in all possible ways, and this is the origin of the creation of the universe from the gods on down to gross matter. All creation is a manifestation of the single Divine Principle, which by its Infinite nature must manifest itself in all possible forms, including those forms which are ugly, evil, or bad. These ugly/evil/bad forms are “privations” of the Principle the way shadows are a privation of light, but they must exist, otherwise the Divine Principle would be lacking in plenitude, and would not be perfect. Thus the imperfections of the world are the result of the perfection of plenitude of the Principle.

The *Timaeus* dialogue sets up a model of the Universe with the expansive Good presiding above a vague hierarchy of creation, graded according to the presence of the Good in the various forms of manifestation, or inversely, the degree of privation of these forms. Although Aristotle rejected the principle of plenitude inherent in this model, his insistence of the continuity of nature was to be combined with the Platonic principle of plenitude to complete the picture of the hierarchy outlined in *Timaeus*. Furthermore, Lovejoy argues that it was Aristotle “who chiefly suggested to the naturalists and philosophers of later times the idea of arranging (at least) all animals in a single graded *scala naturae* according to their degree of ‘perfection’.”⁸

The Great Chain of Being found its fullest classical exposition in the work of Plotinus, the most prominent figure or even founder of Neo-Platonism. Plotinus unites the principles of plenitude and continuity in his elaborate ontology which explains the creation of the Universe as a series of emanations from the perfect, self-sufficient, infinite, Absolute. “The One is perfect because it seeks for nothing and possesses nothing, and has need of nothing; and being perfect it overflows, and thus its superabundance produces an Other.”⁹ This first emanation from the hypostasis of the One is described as a result of its self-contemplation producing an image of itself, which is the second hypostasis of the *Nous* or Universal Intellect of the supra-sensible world of the Forms. The *nous*’ contemplation of its origin, the One, empowers and “impregnates” it, allowing its self-contemplation to give rise to a second emanation and hypostasis, the *Psyche* or the dynamic “Universal Soul.” The *Psyche* is also not content “to remain within itself” but, “first looking back upon that from which it proceeded, it is thereby filled full and then going forward in the opposite direction, it generates an image of itself,”¹⁰ which is itself the sensible world. The sensible world is so removed from the One (the source of all) that it possess neither the faculty of self-contemplation nor the contemplation of its origin, and thus the chain of emanations ends in the sensible world of barely or non-sentient matter.¹¹

This process of emanation is driven, governed, and limited only by the laws of logical necessity. Anything that is must be, and anything that can be is. Furthermore, all of existence is part of a grand hierarchy, ranked according to its participation in the nature of the Good. “The world is a sort of Life stretched out to

⁶ *Compendium Artis Demonstrativae* III, 74 quoted in Wiener, *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 327.

⁷ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.

⁸ It should be noted, however that Aristotle himself rejected such an idea, pointing out that a creature which may be superior to another in respect of one characteristic, can be considered inferior to it in respect to another characteristic, and thus he did not advance any single exclusive scheme of classification, but rather several different schemes of classification and hierarchy depending on the characteristic in question. See Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 56.

⁹ Plotinus, *Enneads* V, 2, 1-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Sometimes Plotinus adds a further hypostasis, physis or Nature, as the lowest projection of Soul and the dim consciousness within plants, between Soul and the Sensible World.

an immense span, in which each of the parts its own place in the series, all of them different, and yet the whole continuous, and that which precedes never wholly absorbed in that which comes after.”¹² This is the cosmological perspective which the medieval scholars, particularly the Neo-Platonists, adopted and used as a foundation for their own theories and doctrines. The clear resonances, if not genealogical relationship, between the theomorphism of Lully and Aquinas and Plotinus’ “participation in the nature of the Good” is sufficiently obvious to require no further comment here. Lovejoy quotes Macrobius, a 5th century CE Roman Neo-Platonist who provides a fundamental summary of the doctrine in Latin,

Since from the Supreme God Mind arises, and from Mind, Soul, and since this in turn creates all subsequent things and fills them all with life and since this single radiance illumines all and is reflected in each, as a single face might be reflected in many mirrors placed in a series; and since all things follow in continuous succession, degenerating in sequence to the very bottom of the series, the attentive observer will discover a connection of parts, from the Supreme God own to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without break. And this is Homer’s golden chain, which God, he says, bade hang down from heaven to earth.¹³

With the necessary Christian modifications, this became the dominant medieval cosmological doctrine, wherein every aspect of nature, from different types of metals to species of plants and animals to different types of men,¹⁴ could be assigned a place in the cosmic hierarchy. Lovejoy writes, “The result was the conception of the plan and structure of the universe which, through the Middle Ages and down to the late eighteenth century, many philosophers, most men of science, and indeed most educated men, were to accept without question – the conception of the universe as a ‘Great Chain of Being’.”

Since this was the dominant view of the intellectuals who first formulated secular philosophy and science in general, and racial essentialism and hierarchy in particular, the place that man occupied in this hierarchy is of particular relevance. For Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists in general,

Man has come into existence, a living being but not a member of the noblest order; he occupies by choice an intermediate rank; still, in that place in which he exists, Providence does not allow him to be reduced to nothing; on the contrary he is ever being led upwards by all those varied devices which the Divine employs in its labour to increase the dominance of moral value.... Man is, therefore, a noble creation, as perfect as the scheme allows; a part, no doubt, in the fabric of the All, he yet holds a lot higher than that of all the other living things of earth.¹⁵

The medieval scholastics generally followed the classical neo-Platonists in ranking man as the highest living creature on earth, “a little lower than the angels”¹⁶ (the celestial realm of the angels took the place of the Platonic world of forms in Christian Platonism) and above the beasts of the air, land, and sea. But what are we to make of these “varied devices?” of the Divine and what of the hierarchy of men within humankind? People clearly differ from each other and as Lovejoy explains, in the doctrine of the Great Chain of Being, “Difference of kind is treated as necessarily equivalent to difference of excellence, to diversity of rank in a hierarchy.”¹⁷

To answer these questions we must turn to the microcosmic or psychological dimensions of this doctrine. In Plotinus’ exposition, the individual human soul is a fragment of *Psyche*, the third hypostasis or Universal Soul, but this fragment is further divided hierarchically into three related but distinct elements or faculties. The Irrational or Animal soul is limited to physical desires and emotional passions and occupies the lowest rung of this hierarchy. Above it sits the Rational Soul, which is the highest level of the ordinary human

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 63.

¹⁴ It is important to note the “types” of men discussed in Plato and Aristotle have little to do with race or ethnicity, and much more to do with natural temperament. These types are outlined in Plato’s *Republic* ranging from the philosopher-kings to the men who are driven by their baser, animal instincts. Although Aristotle seems to draw some connections between barbarian nature and the base or slave nature in his *Politics*, he explicitly mitigates this tendency, writing, “for it must be admitted that some are slaves everywhere, others nowhere” *Politics I 6*.

¹⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads III*, 2.9.

¹⁶ Psalm 8:5.

¹⁷ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 64.

psyche, but it is limited to discursive reason and speculation. At the summit of the soul is the Intellect or *nous*, identified with the second hypostasis of the same name, it is unfallen and does not descend into the sensory world, but remains in perpetual contemplation of the eternal and universal *Nous* (indeed the former is the latter's self-contemplation), which in turn is in eternal contemplation of the One.¹⁸ This view was popular amongst Muslim and Christian Platonists, neo-Platonists, and mystics alike during the Middle Ages, and even influenced the understandings of Aristotle, particularly Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) and his school.

In *De Anima* (III.3-5), Aristotle divides the soul (*psyche* in Greek and *anima* in Latin) into the vegetative soul which has the capacity for self-nourishment and reproduction, the animal soul which has the capacity for sensory perception and self-movement, and the intellect (*nous* in Greek and *intellectus* in Latin), which unlike the other two souls can exist apart from a body, and has the capacity for intuition, rational thought and memory. Aristotle further divides the *nous* into an active intellect (*nous poietikos / intellectus agens*) which is separate, immortal, and eternal, and a passive intellect (*nous pathetikos / intellectus possibilis*) a term whose meaning has been subject to extensive debate since the time of Aristotle himself, but which is generally held to be associated with the rational and mental faculties which are affected by knowledge. In medieval Scholasticism this view was combined with neo-Platonic doctrines to produce the distinct concepts of the intellect (*intellectus*), a divine, sometimes uncreated, faculty of human beings through which they directly perceive God and divine truths, and the rational faculty (*ratio*), the seat of reason and discursive thought (*dianoia*), ranked lower than the intellect.

Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, author of the most famous medieval commentaries on the Aristotelian corpus, somewhat blurred the distinction between the active and passive intellect, and posited that both were universal, existing as one outside of individual human beings, in contrast to Ibn Sina who posited that only the active intellect was universal, the passive intellect being individual. Averroes was also more of a pure Aristotelian than Avicenna, and eliminated the angelic world from his cosmology. Although his work did not become popular in the Muslim world, he was held in great reverence by Dante, and in scholastic tradition he was known simply as "The Commentator," so extensive was the influence of his commentaries upon Aristotle (they formed the basis of much of Thomas Aquinas' work). Some have linked the influence of Averroes' Aristotelian thought in 12th century Europe to the increasing rational and this-worldly, and even secular turn of thought leading up to the 17th century in contrast to the markedly other-worldly and Platonic/neo-Platonic thought which characterized the early Middle Ages. The validity of this argument is outside of the scope of this article,¹⁹ but the overall trend in thought is highly significant, and we will return to it shortly.

Returning to the hierarchy of human beings, Aquinas had previously given us the tripartite distinction between all men, the just, and the blessed, based on their knowledge, love, and likeness to God. Conforming with the doctrine of the Great Chain of Being, an individual human's place on the hierarchy of existence is determined by his participation in the nature of the Good, that is the degree to which he conforms to the image of God. In medieval neo-Platonic Christian thought, the participation of the nature of the Good in man is accomplished through the intellect (*nous*), often identified with the immanent Holy Spirit, and it is the degree to which the soul is governed by and identified with the intellect that determines man's place on the hierarchy. Aquinas provides a summary of the more Aristotelian version of this view, "While in all creatures there is some kind of likeness to God, in the rational creature alone we find a likeness of "image" as we have explained above (1,2); whereas in other creatures we find a likeness by way of a "trace." Now the intellect or mind is that whereby the rational creature excels other creatures; wherefore this image of God is not found even in the rational creature except in the mind."²⁰ Given that an individual (and indeed

¹⁸ This perspective, an extension of the supra-rational (*nous/noiea*) rational, discursive (*logos/dianoia*) soul/knowledge divide of Plato, was later fused with the vegetative, animal, and rational soul-levels of Aristotle by Islamic philosophers to produce a neo-Platonic Aristotelian synthesis upon which the Scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus based their work.

¹⁹ Indeed Ibn Rushd was deeply concerned with the reconciliation of reason and revelation. See G. Durand's *On The Disfiguration of the Image of Man in the West* for an argument linking his influence with the increased rationalism of late Medieval thought.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* I.93.6.

everything else) is ranked on this version of the Chain of Being according to his likeness to God, it is the degree of intellect, the image of God in man, which determines one's ranking in the cosmic hierarchy. Here, in contrast to the more Platonic and Neo-Platonic strands of thought, we see that the rational faculty or "mind" also plays a prominent role in this account. This will be significant for the future of the Chain of Being in the rational Enlightenment. But even more significant is the degree to which the body or any physical characteristic of an individual is downplayed or completely ignored. Aquinas writes further, "Man is called to the image of God; not that he is essentially an image; but that the image of God is impressed on his mind; as a coin is an image of the king, as having the image of the king. Wherefore there is no need to consider the image of God as existing in every part of man."²¹

This lack of attention to the physical and material aspects of both man and nature was characteristic of much of medieval Christian thought, and was highly influential in the course of Western Civilization. Here however, its significance merely lies in the fact that the dominant ontological hierarchy of humans of medieval Europe downplayed if not ignored the physical aspects of humans and focused on the spiritual/intellectual sphere where the *imago Dei* was located. The greater the likeness to God or Christ, as achieved through acceptance of Christian doctrine, orthodox practice, and grace, the higher on the Chain of Being one was. Thus saints occupied the places on the chain nearest the angels, and sinners the levels nearest the beasts. Dante's cosmology, as elaborated in his *Divine Comedy*, placed respected heathens such as Cicero, Averroes, Aristotle, and Plato in Limbo since they conformed to the image of God insofar as it was deemed possible through the "natural revelation" of their own natures and the natural world. Thus, it can be seen why a hierarchical ordering of human beings based on physical characteristics was impossible in this intellectual climate—the physical characteristics of human beings, and matter in general, simply didn't matter enough.

All of this changed however with the advent of the Renaissance and the rise of humanism. Humanism began as a mode of learning opposed to the medieval scholastic method of resolving contradictions between commentaries and authors, humanists would study ancient texts in the original, and appraise them through a combination of reasoning and empirical evidence. Although a markedly diverse movement, early humanism has been characterized as "the movement to recover, interpret, and assimilate the language, literature, learning and values of ancient Greece and Rome"²² in Western Europe which focused on the "the genius of man ... the unique and extraordinary ability of the human mind," in the words of the early Florentine humanist Gianozzo Manetti. It is significant that these words were written in a 1452 work entitled *De dignitate et excellentia hominis libri IV* ("On the Dignity and Excellence of Man in Four Books"), a direct response to Pope Innocent III's *De miseria humane conditionis* (On the Misery of the Human Condition). This strong reaction if not rebellion against church authority characterized much of European intellectual activity from the late 15th century until the late 18th century, when the Western European intellectual tradition had virtually broken free of the dominion of the Roman Catholic church.

During the late Middle Ages (13th and 14th century) the Roman Catholic Church reached the height of its political power and established its hegemony over the Western intellectual tradition through the institution of the centralized Papal Inquisition in 1233 and the rigid enforcement and adoption of Aristotelianism as official Church doctrine on matters philosophical and natural. Perhaps as a result of the endorsement of Aristotelian philosophy, particularly those forms influenced by Averroes, this period is characterized by a marked exteriorization of thought: a transition from the preoccupation with the spiritual or internal world associated with the intellect and the noetic world of Forms/angelic realities to a focus on the external, physical world associated with the rational faculty and sensory perception. The French cultural anthropologist and literary critic Gilbert Durand describes it thusly, "In the thirteenth century...the Church established its temporal hegemony and Avicenna's philosophy was replaced by that of Averroes. This made it possible for Aristotelian physics to become the prescientific way of knowing the world of *res* as separate from the world of *voces*. This consequently cut Western man off from direct access to transcendence,"²³ in Platonic and Neo-Platonic doctrines, this direct access to transcendence was the *nous* or Intellect.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Burke, "The spread of Italian humanism," 2.

²³ Durand, *On the Disfiguration of the Image of Man in the West*.

However, during this period and the Early Modern/Renaissance period which followed it, the concept of the supra-rational intellect and its direct perception of philosophical/spiritual forms and truths declined, and was eclipsed by the more Aristotelian notion of a united rational faculty/intellect. Finally, by the time the humanists of the Renaissance were translating classical texts from the original Greek and Latin, the intellect had all but disappeared behind the rational faculty.²⁴

The elimination of the intellect from the anthropology of man was of tremendous significance in philosophy, religion, and science. It was a short philosophical step from the proto-rationalism of the late Aristotelians and Renaissance humanists to the rationalism and empiricism which characterized the 17th century Age of Reason, epitomized by the philosophies of Descartes and Bacon. Descartes and the rationalists focused on the rational faculty (by this point a conglomeration of late Aristotelian and revived Stoic ideas) as the primary source of knowledge, whereas the empiricists, led by Bacon, focused on the sensory faculty as the primary source of knowledge. Except among a small school of Italian neo-Platonists and Hermeticists,²⁵ the supra-rational Intellect was no longer considered the primary source of knowledge. Naturally, the loss of this faculty in the microcosm was accompanied by the loss of the level of reality to which it corresponded in the macrocosm, and thus the elaborate angeologies and cosmologies of medieval Europe disappeared from mainstream intellectual life and thought. Furthermore, the rational faculty replaced the *nous* as the *imago Dei* in man in late Aristotelianism and the early modern period.²⁶ But as God himself was no longer directly perceived by the *nous*, but abstracted from sensory data and the rational faculty, his role in Western intellectual thought became more and more vague and distant, culminating in the 19th-century view that he was an invention of the mind of man.²⁷ Naturally, this trend was concurrent with the gradual separation of theology and philosophy.

These shifts, however, did not do away with the paradigm of the Great Chain of Being, rather, as Lovejoy records, it remained an important concept around which philosophers and scientists continued to organize the universe. However, with the disappearance of the intellect/*nous*, and the noetic realms of reality perceivable only by it (the Divine and an angelic realms or world of Platonic Forms), Western man found himself in the curious position of being atop the Great Chain of Being. To be sure, God and heaven still lurked in the background or up in the clouds somewhere, but in terms of the knowable, perceivable, *intelligible* universe of philosophers and scientists, man was at the summit. Lovejoy records the general program of the Royal Society written by its first historian in 1667, which captures this novel *zeitgeist*:

Such is the dependence amongst all the orders of creatures; the animate, the sensitive, the rational, the natural, the artificial; that the apprehension of one of them is a good step towards the understanding of the rest. And this is the highest pitch of human reason: to follow all the links of this chain till all their secrets are open to our mind and their works advanc'd or imitated by our hands. This is truly to command the world; to rank all the varieties and degrees of things so orderly upon one another; that standing on the top of them, we may perfectly behold all that are below, and make them all serviceable to the quiet and peace and plenty of Man's life.²⁸

Here the “highest pitch” of human thought is not the contemplation of angelic forms or the Divine Essence above, but the external exploration and exploitation of all that lies below. It is not coincidental therefore, that this transition from inward, spiritual contemplation to outward, physical investigation and exploration coincided with the European Age of Exploration. Backtracking a bit, this increase in interest

²⁴ For a more thorough description of this transformation see Durand, *On the Disfiguration of the Image of Man the West* and Nasr *Religion and the Order of Nature*. Furthermore, the error of translating *nous/intellectus* as rational faculty or mind that arose during the late Renaissance became endemic throughout the modern period as modern thinkers read their own rationalist tendencies into classical authors, see Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*.

²⁵ Marsilio Ficino, Pico di Mirandella, Giordano Bruno, and Angelus Silesius and Paracelsus in Northern Europe, and other mystics were notable for their revival or continued adherence to the neo-Platonic concept of a *nous* at once transcendent and immanent.

²⁶ Thus whole groups of men came to be judged and ranked by their apparent rationality or lack thereof, as we will see when we turn to the Enlightenment's version of the Great Chain of Being.

²⁷ See Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*.

²⁸ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 232.

in the physical world seems to have had its origins in the late 13th century and this was unfortunately combined with the hardening of Catholic philosophical dogma, so that many natural philosophers who attempted to systematically observe the natural world found themselves on the wrong side of the official dogma and victims of a long and often painful Inquisition process. More relevant to the topic at hand however, is the effect that Western man's ascent to the top of the Chain of Being had for his views of the physical world in general, and the physical beauty of bodies in particular.

With the gradual disappearance of the intellect from Western discourse in the early Modern Period/Renaissance (1300s-1600s), the immaterial became more and more immaterial, and partly in reaction to Medieval Scholasticism's neglect and/or denigration of the physical world in general and the body in particular, this period saw the revival of the Greco-Roman cult of the body, partly in conjunction with the trend of increased interest in the material world, and strongly motivated by the Renaissance's self-conscious re-interpretation or revival of classical Greek and Roman heritage.

The this-worldly humanist art of this period epitomized by Giotto, Da Vinci and Raphael in its early phases (1300-1500-the Early and High Renaissance), and Michelangelo, El Greco, and Rembrandt in its later phases (1500-1700-the Mannerist and Baroque period) and finally culminating in the neoclassical movement of the mid-18th epitomized by David and Ingres, stands in sharp contrast to the other-worldly and iconic medieval art which preceded it, and demonstrates this newfound interest in and even worship of the human form. The religious paintings of these artists also foretell and demonstrate the philosophical shift from man being made the image of God to God literally being created in the image of man in works such as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

This movement culminated in the Enlightenment wherein God was replaced by universal reason or man's own rational faculty, and contemplation of the angelic and Divine beauties was replaced by contemplation of physical beauty, particularly the beauty of the human form. It is significant that it was Western Man who seated himself atop of the Chain of Being, because as he replaced God, *his image*, both physical and mental, replaced the *imago Dei* as the discriminating factor determining classification on the cosmic hierarchy. Thus, the overall trend can be described as one in which the Intellect is replaced or eclipsed by the rational faculty, God is replaced by Universal Reason or the being in possession of it, and the world of the forms or angels is eclipsed by the world of physical form, particularly human physical form. Thus the elaborate angelologies of medieval Europe were replaced by the elaborate racial hierarchies of the 18th and 19th centuries. Whereas in the Middle Ages, humanity was judged by participation in or proximity to a transcendent spiritual, Divine ideal (Christ or God), the secularization process of the early Modern Period and the Enlightenment resulted in humanity being judged by proximity to the immanent ideal of rational, enlightened European man. The elevation of man to the top rung of the Chain of Being (or alternatively, his elimination of all that stood above him) is the philosophical foundation of the modern anthropocentric perspective, in which rational man, in and of himself, is the measure of all things, and an end unto himself.

Seminal scholar of Islamic Studies and Historian of Science Seyyed Hossein Nasr designates this seismic shift in the image of man as the transformation from "pontifical man" or man as bridge between heaven and earth (as evidenced by his central place on the Chain of Being), to "Promethean man," man as a defiant rebel against heaven who seeks to make the world in his own image.²⁹

Having summarized this transition from the perspective of man being created in the image of God to God being created in the image of man, and highlighted some important theoretical conclusions and corollaries, I will now turn to the shift from traditional ethnocentrism to modern racism in late Medieval and early Modern Europe, referring back to this section as necessary to illuminate the relationship between the development of modern racism and the rise of the anthropocentric position described above.

²⁹ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Chapter 5.

Ethnocentrism to Modern Racism

A particularly interesting trend that occurred within or alongside the secularization of knowledge described in the previous section was the rise of modern racism. In this section, I will attempt to present a rough sketch of some of the important religious and philosophical developments related to the rise of modern racism from the medieval period (7th to 16th century) through the early modern period (16th to 18th century). As mentioned earlier, the development of racism is a staggeringly complex phenomenon, and it is impossible to do justice to the topic in the space of this paper, so I will be focusing on a few intellectual contributions from religion and philosophy to the development of modern racism which I deem representative and important. These highlighted examples are by no means exhaustive, but they attempt to highlight certain aspects of intellectual history of racism and its relationship with religion.

As stated earlier, I follow numerous scholars, most recently Fredrickson and Isaac in defining modern racism as a belief in the essential nature of a racial character, and the hierarchical ordering of these races/racial characters. Ethnocentrism, or the belief or attitude that one's ethnic/cultural group is superior to all others is distinguished from modern racism in that ethnicity is not defined as a static, essential aspect of a person's being. Racial essentialism is all that is needed to transform the hierarchical view implicit in ethnocentrism into full-blown modern racism. The general consensus amongst the literature on the history of racism is that thus-defined, modern racism first emerged in 17th century Western Europe, despite the fact that prejudices, folk mythologies, and socio-economic motives for the development of racism existed in numerous other civilizations and societies throughout history, but the existence of elements hostile to the development of modern racism seem to have prevented its emergence.

Proto-Racism in the Classical Period

In *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Benjamin Isaac convincingly argues for the existence of what he terms as “proto-racism” in classical Greece and Rome. This proto-racism is distinguished from ethnocentrism, ethnic prejudice or xenophobia in that it attributes “to groups of people common characteristics considered to be unalterable because they are determined by external factors or heredity.”³⁰ For example, Plato, Aristotle, and Herodotus all asserted (and Romans such as Cicero and Juvenal repeated), to one degree or another, that the nature of barbarians was similar to those of slaves, and the nature of Greeks similar to that of masters, and thus it was just that Greek should rule over barbarians, just as masters rule over slaves. Furthermore, these differences in character and nature could be explained to a large degree by the influence of climate upon the temperaments of its inhabitants, and to a lesser extent, the acquired characteristics of their ancestors. Aristotle writes in his *Politics*

Nature would like to distinguish between the bodies of freemen and slaves, making the one strong for servile labor, the other upright, and although useless for such services, useful for political life in the arts both of war and peace. But the opposite often happens- that some have the souls and others have the bodies of freemen. And doubtless if men differed from one another in the mere forms of their bodies as much as the statues of the Gods do from men, all would acknowledge that the inferior class should be slaves of the superior. And if this is true of the body, how much more just that a similar distinction should exist in the soul? But the beauty of the body is seen, whereas the beauty of the soul is not seen. It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right... And again, no one would ever say he is a slave who is unworthy to be a slave. Were this the case, men of the highest rank would be slaves and the children of slaves if they or their parents chance to have been taken captive and sold. Wherefore Hellenes do not like to call Hellenes slaves, but confine the term to barbarians. Yet, in using this language, they really mean the natural slave of whom we spoke at first; for it must be admitted that some are slaves everywhere, others nowhere.³¹

³⁰ Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 38.

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics I*, Chapter V-VI.

The ideas in this passage would be invoked all over Europe throughout the Medieval and particularly in the Modern period in defense of slavery and the hierarchical ordering of humanity. However, it is important to note that in this passage, Aristotle writes that “Nature *would like* to distinguish between the bodies of freemen and slaves,” but in reality, she does not. What makes a man free or a slave, noble or base, is the condition of his soul, not his body, nor his ethnicity (barbarian or Greek), nor even his status (enslaved or free), but the rank of his soul. Such opinions can be classified as proto-racist however in that many if not most Greek and Roman thinkers held that barbarians in general had souls of inferior rank due to factors such as climate and culture outside of their individual control.

Thus proto-racism differs from modern racism in its philosophical and scientific underpinnings. The racism of the 18th century was based on a mixture of a natural hierarchy and scientific essentialism, linking the biology of racial groups to moral and intellectual qualities, and the proto-racism of antiquity was largely based on a somewhat supernatural hierarchy and cultural and climactic determinism. Furthermore, the existence of prominent intellectual traditions in which differences in physical ethnicity (along with the physical world in general) were considered far more peripheral and less important to the make-up of man, mitigated these proto-racist views. In 18th century Western Europe, there were no dissenting intellectual traditions of comparable to that of neo-Platonism in the Greco-Roman world at the beginning of the millennium. According to Plotinus,

None the less, in spite of physical resemblance and similar environment, we observe the *greatest difference* in temperament and in ideas: this side of the human being, then, derives from some quite other Principle [than any external causation or destiny]...The soul of nobler nature holds good against its surroundings; it is more apt to change them than to be changed, so that often it improves the environment and, where it must make concession, at least keeps its innocence.³²

However, just as the rational, materialist turn of philosophy of the Renaissance and Enlightenment was pre-figured in the late classical period, Isaac’s work demonstrates the pre-figuration of modern racism in the rise of proto-racism in the late classical period (after 5 B.C.) and Roman Empire. While the argument advanced in the first half of this paper is one possible explanation for the co-occurrence of these trends in antiquity, such an analysis is outside of the scope of this paper, and the fact that the rationalist, materialist turn of the late Greek and Roman intellectual traditions and the post-Renaissance intellectual tradition produced or coincided with similar ideas of racial essentialism can only be seen as circumstantial evidence for this argument. In any event, it is clear from Isaac’s work that Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars revived proto-racist concepts and ideas and derived much of their theories of race from these classical sources.

Proto-Racism in the Medieval Period

The literature on race in the medieval Islamic world suggests that while the infidel-believer distinction trumped ethnic and cultural differences, this distinction was often conflated with ethnicity such that strong ethnic prejudices bordering on what Isaac would call “proto-racism” existed under the guise of religious discrimination. Furthermore, the early medieval period was marked by Arab prejudice against non-Arabs and increased interest in heredity and purity of blood. The religious injunction against enslaving fellow Muslims led to the importation of a large number of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe and led to an association between sub-Saharan Africans and slavery.³³ However, given that heredity was primarily paternally determined (for example, Arab royal families often had maternal African, Persian, and even European ancestry due to the diversity of the wives and concubines of even the rulers of “pure” Arab blood), notions of ethnicity and ethnic hierarchy were far more fluid and detached from physical appearance than in the European classical and medieval worlds. Furthermore, the dominance of Islam in the intellectual and social traditions of the Muslim world continued until the colonial period, and its

³² Plotinus, *Enneads* III 1.5-8 (italics mine).

³³ Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam*.

explicit anti-racial doctrines mitigated these trends of ethnic prejudice by emphasizing the piety and faith of individuals over and above their ethnicity.³⁴

The Christian doctrine of universalism expressed by the apostle Paul as, “For as many as you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”³⁵ also played a significant role in the suppression of ethnic prejudice and racism within medieval Christendom. As in the Muslim world, religion trumped ethnicity officially, but given the relative ethnic homogeneity and insularity of medieval Western Europe as compared to the medieval Muslim and Byzantine worlds, ethnicity and religion were often conflated. To be European meant to be Christian and to be Christian meant to be European. Thus, it is difficult, if not impossible to separate the ethnic and religious dimensions in negative depictions and descriptions of non-Europeans in the early medieval period. During this period, foreigners, particularly black Africans, were seen as threatening, even demonic heathens (due in large part to the powerful, and expanding Muslim polities which were conquering Europe’s Christian North African neighbors at the time) on the one hand, and a powerful symbol of the universalism and sanctity of Christianity³⁶ on the other. The image of the foreigner as a depraved heathen seems to have reached its peak in the years leading up to the beginning of the 10th Century CE, after which the image of the foreign Christian demonstrating the universality of the Church became more dominant. The case of St. Maurice, a 3rd century Egyptian Christian martyr and Roman legionnaire, merits special mention here. St. Maurice (his name means Moor) became the patron Saint of the Holy Roman Emperors, and in 926, Henry I went so far as to cede the present Swiss canton of Aargau to an abbey in return for the saint’s lance, sword and spurs. Due to his Egyptian heritage, St. Moritz was often depicted as a “black Moor” or sub-Saharan African and he was increasingly venerated in the High Middle Ages in Germany and Bohemia, and a 13th century image of him adorns the Cathedral of Magdeburg next to the grave of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I. However, the status of St. Maurice and other black saints such as Benedict the Moor began to decline in the mid 16th century, probably due to the influence of the African slave trade and the association of blackness with slavery and religio-cultural otherness.³⁷

Until the advent of African slave trade, however, Western Europeans had relatively little interaction with Sub-Saharan Africans. The medieval Christian encounter with the Jewish population in Europe was to have much greater influence on the development of ideas of race and racial hierarchy in the Western intellectual tradition during this period. “Jews created a special problem for Christians because of the latter’s belief that the New Testament superseded the Old, and that the refusal of Jews to recognize Christ as the Messiah was preventing the triumph of the gospel,” writes Fredrickson in his study of the history of racism. “Anti-Judaism was endemic to Christianity from the beginning, but since the founders of the religion were themselves Jews, it would have been very difficult for early Christians to claim there was anything defective about Jewish blood or ancestry.”³⁸ This however, changed during the medieval period, as the Jews of Europe became associated with the Jews of the gospel crucifixion who declared, “His blood be upon us and our Children.”³⁹ Jews were increasingly and collectively held responsible for the “worst possible human crime,” that is, deicide.

³⁴ The collections of Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi contain the following hadith, “The Prophet said: Let people stop boasting about their ancestors. One is only a pious believer or a miserable sinner. All men are sons of Adam, and Adam came from dust” and this passage from the Prophet Muhammad’s last sermon is often cited, “An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a black has no superiority over white, nor a white has any superiority over black, except by piety and good action (*taqwa*). Indeed the best among you is the one with the best character (*taqwa*)” along with the following (unsubstantiated) saying, “Your Lord is One. Your ancestor is one. Your religion is one. Take heed. Arabism is not conferred on you through your mother or father. It is through the tongue (i.e. the language of Arabic), so whoever speaks Arabic, he is an Arab.”

³⁵ Galatians 3:27-9, KJV.

³⁶ Bindman, David, Henry Louis Gates, and Karen C. C. Dalton. *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Vol II, Part 1, *From Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood* and Part 2 *Africans in the Christian Ordinance of the World* (14th to 16th century).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 18.

³⁹ Mathew 27:25, KJV.

However, the conversion of the Jews was seen as an important Christian duty and indeed even essential to the salvation of the world based on certain prophecies in the New Testament. Bewildered and frustrated by what must have been perceived as the Jews' continued refusal to convert and assimilate, and motivated by xenophobia, conflicting economic interests, and martial holy fervor stirred up by the Crusades, the populace of Western Europe began massacring Jews shortly after the First Crusade. To the church and aristocracy however, Jews were useful as fiscal agents, and were tolerated, and sometimes even protected from these mobs. However, at the popular level, a growing folk mythology depicted Jews as inherently evil, still open to the possibility of conversion to Christianity, but inherently opposed to it because of their Jewish heredity. This is one of the first and most important instances of ethnic or racial essentialism linked to an ontological hierarchy in medieval thought. However, this view remained little more than a folk belief as officially and intellectually, medieval theologians and philosophers held that Jews were ontologically inferior to Christians because of their religion, not their heredity. But this would change in the 16th century.

Certain other predominantly-Christian ethnic/cultural groups faced discrimination, ghettoization, and persecution in the late Middle Ages as national identities and cultures began to emerge. The Irish were segregated into separate "Irishtowns" and were legally barred from trade guilds and from marrying Englishmen or women in 14th-century colonial Ireland. Similarly, Slavs and Germans were forbidden to intermarry in the Holy Roman Empire during his period, and German descent was a requirement for holding certain political offices and membership in guilds. However, such policies were frequently denounced if not actively opposed by the Church as unjust mistreatment of fellow Christians. Fredrickson writes, "What was missing – and why I think such ethnic discrimination should not be labeled racist – was an ideology or worldview that would persuasively justify such practices...these ethnic exclusions were usually the self-interested action of conquering families and lineages and were likely to be condemned by church authorities..."⁴⁰ The declining power of the Roman Catholic Church and the emergence of the secular intellectual tradition would allow for the development of such ideologies and worldviews which could support and justify such practices. The most relevant example can be found in 16th-century Spain and the emergence of what I call Iberian proto-racism.

After the completion of the so-called Spanish *Reconquista* in 1492, threatened with expulsion or death, over a half million Iberian Jews and Muslims converted to Christianity. The converted Muslims, known as *Moriscos*, were severely persecuted and remained segregated second-class citizens until nearly their entire population was expelled from Spain during the first 20 years of the 17th century. The Jewish converts, known as *conversos*, were better integrated into Spanish society, and were much more numerous, although they faced serious discrimination on account of their ancestry. They were particularly targeted by the Spanish Inquisition who viewed their Jewish ancestry and cultural distinctiveness as a signs that they had not fully accepted Catholicism, and were prone to revert to Judaism. The notion of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), meaning Christian ancestry, became a popular and important belief and even doctrine which was used to define status, Spanish identity, and discriminate against *conversos* during this period. Several Spanish institutions, including the bishopric of Toledo, and local governments required certificates of pure blood for membership or employment. The concept of "noble blood" was nothing new to Spain, but the large-scale discrimination against a population, and denigration of "blood" based not on nobility but ethnicity was a significant development. As before, this doctrine was justified by the argument that Jewish "blood" made one more resistant to embracing Christianity, but now this folk belief was officially endorsed as doctrine by many officials in the Spanish church. In light of Lully's statement on the hierarchy of creation, "The likenesses to the divine nature are imprinted upon every creature according to that creature's receptive capacities, greater or less in each case...", Jews perceived lesser degree of receptivity to Christianity equaled a lower placement on the chain of being and therefore the hierarchy of humanity. This may be the first, and certainly was the most prominent case in which ethnicity was officially linked to an ontological hierarchy in post-classical European thought. That is, this seems to be the first time that Jews, or any other people, were officially and doctrinally designated as subhuman due to their ancestry, not their religion. Fredrickson writes,

⁴⁰ Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 24.

16th and 17th century Spain is critical to the history of Western racism because its attitudes and practices served as a kind of segue between the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages and the naturalistic racism of the modern era. The idiom remained religious, and what was inherited through the “blood” was a propensity to heresy or unbelief rather than intellectual and emotional inferiority. Innocent “savages” who embraced Spanish civilization and Catholicism did not carry impure blood. Discrimination against Indians persisted after they were baptized, but it was based on culture more than ancestry. *Mestizos* who had adopted Spanish ways could be admitted to religious orders that excluded Jewish *conversos*.⁴¹

Another important development in history of proto-racism in Spain was the famous debate between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas over the nature and therefore, status of the native inhabitants of Spain’s new colonial territories. Sepúlveda argued that all native Americans belonged to the Aristotelian category of “natural slaves,” and thus were not in full possession of the rational faculty, and could and should be made useful to the Spanish through enslavement. Las Casas described the native American *indigenes* as living under Aristotle and Aquinas’ “natural law” and invoked the Biblical doctrines of Christian universalism to argue that they were potential converts, and thus fellow human beings. Las Casas won the debate, setting the course of official Spanish religious and state doctrine for converting and schooling the “innocent savages” of the new world in Christianity and civilization rather than enslaving them. Following this debate, Pope Paul III issued a bull against slavery, entitled *Sublimis Deus*, in the year 1537. He wrote:

...The exalted God loved the human race so much that He created man in such a condition that he was not only a sharer in good as are other creatures, but also that he would be able to reach and see face to face the inaccessible and invisible Supreme Good... Seeing this and envying it, the enemy of the human race, who always opposes all good men so that the race may perish, has thought up a way, unheard of before now, by which he might impede the saving word of God from being preached to the nations. He (Satan) has stirred up some of his allies who, desiring to satisfy their own avarice, are presuming to assert far and wide that the Indians...be reduced to our service like brute animals, under the pretext that they are lacking the Catholic faith. And they reduce them to slavery, treating them with afflictions they would scarcely use with brute animals... by our Apostolic Authority decree and declare by these present letters that the same Indians and *all other peoples* - even though they are outside the faith - ...should not be deprived of their liberty... Rather they are to be able to use and enjoy this liberty and this ownership of property freely and licitly, and are not to be reduced to slavery...[emphasis mine]⁴²

However, given the declining temporal power of the Church (sovereigns were no longer cowed by the threat of excommunication, and in fact the Popes often had to bow to political pressures from military and political leaders), Spanish practice differed, often significantly, from official doctrine. Nevertheless, even if this doctrine was not effective in dictating the behavior of conquistadors and colonists, it remained influential in shaping their worldviews. For example, Europeans in general preferred buying already enslaved people, to enslaving people themselves, not only saving themselves labor, time, and money, but cleverly eluding the papal interdiction against “depriving” peoples of their liberty. The Spanish also followed another one of Las Casas’ suggestions from the debate, using Africa as a source of slave labor.

The medieval Spanish predominantly encountered sub-Saharan Africans as the slaves of the lighter-skinned Moors, since the Moors, like the medieval Christians were forbidden to enslave members of their own religion, the cheapest source of slave labor in the Maghreb were the non-Muslim peoples of the Western Sahel. The medieval Moors also held light-skinned slaves from Europe, North Africa, and even Asia, but due to their higher price, they were spared the more menial and physical tasks which fell to the African slaves.⁴³ Thus, even before the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Spanish had come to associate Sub-Saharan Africans with menial labor and slavery, and Aristotelian category of “natural slave.” As the last Slavic groups in the east converted to Christianity in the early 16th century and the Europeans gradually stopped selling each other as slaves, Portuguese navigators opened up the West African slave market, and the colonial missions and papal interdiction against enslaving “Indians” created a strong demand for labor in the New World.

⁴¹ Ibid., 40.

⁴² Parish, *Bartolomé de las Casas, The Only Way*, 114-115.

⁴³ See Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam*.

The brutal exportation and exploitation of African slaves “fit the bill” for many reasons, among which are that the Spanish and Portuguese already associated sub-Saharan Africans with menial slave labor, they could buy African slaves and did not need to enslave them, circumventing potential problems with the Church, and being heathens, Africans were not entitled to the same kinds of rights or considered to be of the level of humanity as other Christians. In fact, the Protestant Dutch and English limited missionary activity within their slave colonies because slave-owners worried that baptism would give the enslaved a claim to freedom. Simultaneously, however, slave traders and plantation owners presented their activities to the Church as part of a civilizing/Christianizing mission. The Catholic Church and the newly formed Protestant denominations both condemned and were simultaneously complicit in both the brutal institutions of the exportation of Africans across the Atlantic and their exploitation in the New World. However, the official intellectual position of the majority of religious figures during the 16th and early 17th centuries remained that of Christian universalism, even in the face of racialized slavery and popular justifications such as the curse of Ham.⁴⁴ The racialized nature of the Atlantic slave trade is best understood as an example of popular European thought and practice ignoring or circumventing the crumbling political, moral, and intellectual authority of the Church. In this case, popular practice and belief in proto-racism preceded its intellectual justification.

Thus the stage was set for the rise of modern racism in the 18th century. The official medieval doctrine of Christian universalism was weakened by the anti-Semitism of the Spanish Inquisition which enshrined popular beliefs about the resistance of Jews to Christianity in official doctrine, and consistent with the logic of the medieval chain of being, classified them as subhuman, providing an official religious and intellectual justification for their persecution. By asserting that *conversos*, although Christian, were inferior due to their ethnicity, Iberian proto-racism developed the idea of racial essentialism. Moreover, the classification of Black Africans as Aristotelian “natural slaves,” Indians as “innocent savages living under natural law,” and the Spanish as the defenders and champions of the “One True Faith” created a color-coded racial hierarchy. In Iberian proto-racism we find both the beginnings of racial essentialism and racial hierarchy, but “to achieve its full potential as an ideology, racism had to be liberated from Christian universalism.”⁴⁵ Although the Catholic Church, and Christianity in general, lost much political power and intellectual control during this period, the intellectual authority of basic Christian doctrines such as universalism had not yet been directly challenged by secular ideologies. Furthermore, the medieval social hierarchy also had to be overturned for modern racism to emerge. In medieval society, social inequality based on birth was nearly universal, as everyone from the king to the peasant found him or herself in a hereditary social position, and to be human meant to be part of a hierarchy. The enslaved status of Africans in particular fit this general pattern of hierarchal social arrangements, and thus did not necessarily exclude them from the sphere of humanity. Their enslaved status could not fully contribute to their philosophical dehumanization until this status became intellectually and socially exceptional, as it did in the 18th century Enlightenment, when human relations came to be viewed as egalitarian. Paradoxically, the rise of egalitarianism contributed to the dehumanization of Africans in particular, but also of other races of humanity, in that their position outside of egalitarian societies marked them as being outside of human society.

⁴⁴ From the story of Genesis 9:20-7 in which Noah cursed the descendants of his son Ham for his indiscretion. The curse actually refers to Ham's son Canaan, “And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (verse 25). Although the Torah assigns no racial characteristics to Ham, the Cushites and Egyptians are numbered amongst his progeny, however these “black” peoples are not numbered amongst the descendants of Canaan in the Torah, and thus it assigns no racial characteristics to the curse. The association of the curse of slavery with dark skin apparently originated in the Rabbinic literature and later entered classical Christian and Islamic literature where it was strongly contested by a number of scholars who pointed out that the curse was on Canaan, the progenitor of the Philistines, and not Ham himself. Despite these intellectual refutations, the story remained a popular, but contested, explanation and justification for the enslavement of dark-skinned peoples from the 3rd century through the 20th.

⁴⁵ Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 47.

The Rise of Modern Racism in the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment movement of the 18th century was characterized not only by this egalitarian impulse, but more generally by the tendency to look to the works of the classical Greco-Roman tradition (often radically re-read) and nature, in terms of secular science, to support the intellectual and social revolt against the Christian dogmas of the Middle Ages to create a new (or to revive the classical) tradition of Western European learning. Five main ideas or trends characterize the nascent modern racism of this intellectual movement. The first is the quest to “fill in” the revised Chain of Being discussed at the end of the first section of this paper, combined with the added temporalization of this concept. The second is the “normative gaze” or system of classification within this chain based on physical appearance, particularly the divergence from the newly defined ideal. The third is the system of classification within the chain of being based upon the presence and exercise of the rational faculty. The fourth is the egalitarian impulse discussed above, and the fifth is the biological and hereditary nature of the previous three traits: physical beauty, rational thought, and a love of liberty.

Voltaire, perhaps the man who epitomizes the Enlightenment more than any other, epitomizes these attitudes in his “Essay on the Moors”:

Their round eyes, their flat nose, their lips which are always thick, their differently shaped ears, the wool on their head, the measure even of their intelligence establishes between them and other species of men prodigious differences... If their understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seem formed neither in the advantages nor the abuses of our philosophy... As a result of a hierarchy of nations, Negroes are thus slaves of other men ... a people that sells its own children is more condemnable than the buyer; this commerce demonstrates our superiority; he who gives himself a master was born to have one.⁴⁶

Here the “Moors” or Black Africans in general are judged to be lower on the “hierarchy of nations” due to their physical appearance, different or lack of European modes of thinking, and lack of the love of liberty. In this revised Chain of Being, which proved so influential during the Enlightenment, Enlightened European man sits atop the chain, and all of nature is ranked below him, based on its similarity to or participation in the nature of this new ideal. In the 19th century, Hegel explicitly enunciated this doctrine declaring Western Europe “the land of the elevation of the particular to the universal,”⁴⁷ and 18th century English dissident philosopher James Beattie wrote, “That every practice and sentiment is barbarous which is not according to the usages of Modern Europe seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our critics and philosophers.”⁴⁸

This insight was penned in response to a 1754 essay by David Hume entitled, “Of National Characters” which included the following famous footnote, “I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious, manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences...there are negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity.”⁴⁹ Here Hume, ever the empiricist, says nothing of the lack of rational faculty in “all other species of men,” but comments extensively upon the lack of evidence of this faculty, “no arts, no sciences,” and here again we have another example of non-white humanity being judged as inferior to white humanity based on their apparent difference in the development of their rational, intellectual faculties. When James Beattie pointed out the tautology (Everything which is not like modern Europe is bad, non-Europeans are not like Europeans, therefore they are bad) and numerous examples of civilizations, arts, and sciences produced by non-white people, Hume retracted the footnote.

⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Essai sur les maures* qtd. in Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*, 85, 133.

⁴⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 122.

⁴⁸ Beattie, “An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism” in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 36.

⁴⁹ In Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 33.

But why did Hume feel the need to divide the races of man into different species based on appearance, and attribute all the achievements of civilization to one of them? The French physician Francois Bernier is generally credited with the first use of the term “race” to categorize human beings based on physical appearance, primarily skin color, in his 1684 work, “*Nouvelle Division de la Terre par les Différentes Espèces ou Races qui l’Habitent*.”⁵⁰ The categorization of man into races was seen as a part of uncovering the divinely established hierarchy or “natural order” of the entire natural world, from minerals to man. Carolus Linnaeus coined the term “natural order,” and in his 1735 *System of Nature* advanced the highly influential idea that it was man’s duty to discover this “natural order” and classify everything that exists within it. Here we must return to the previously cited quotation from the 1667 Royal Society, because the continuities are so striking.

And this is the highest pitch of human reason: to follow all the links of this chain till all their secrets are open to our mind and their works advanc’d or imitated by our hands. This is truly to command the world; to rank all the varieties and degrees of things so orderly upon one another; that standing on the top of them, we may perfectly behold all that are below, and make them all serviceable to the quiet and peace and plenty of Man’s life.⁵¹

Within this great chain of being, “difference in kind is treated as necessarily equivalent to difference of excellence, to diversity of rank in a hierarchy.”⁵² Thus the quest to understand and discover the “natural order” implied its classification in a hierarchy. Although Linnaeus himself does not mention the Chain of Being explicitly in his writing, his “natural order” is clearly an 18th century manifestation of this same trope. The same is true for many of the authors of the Enlightenment; even if they do not explicitly cite classical and medieval ideas such as the chain of being or theories from Aristotle’s politics, the implicit presence and strong influence of these concepts is undeniable.

In keeping with the anthropocentric chain of being, Linnaeus described the European race as the epitome of beauty an intelligence being, “gentle, acute, and inventive,” and the Black race as “crafty, indolent, and negligent.... Governed by caprice.”⁵³ Furthermore, in accordance with the “continuity thesis” of the great chain model, Linnaeus posited that black women could probably mate with male apes, revealing both the place of the black race within his hierarchy (at the bottom of humanity, just above the apes), but also the role of gender in his “natural order.”⁵⁴

The Comte de Buffon, another prominent racial theorist and natural historian of the 18th century revived the classical theories of environmental determinism to explain the variety of races within the single species of man. He maintained that man was originally white, indeed that all infants are born white, but that the influence of the environment changes the color of the skin and the formation of the body. Being an environmentalist, Buffon held that other races could become civilized, but in his *A Natural History, General and Particular* (French publication 1748-1804), he writes, “All these savages, though they never think, have a pensive, melancholy aspect.”⁵⁵

Johann Blumenbach adopted or agreed with Buffon’s theory that man was a single species composed of a few varieties, or races, of common origin. However, he was more explicit in his classification, designating the Caucasian race⁵⁶ as the original race from which the other four races, the Mongolian, the Ethiopian, American, and Malay “degenerated.” This theory was elaborated in his 1776 book *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, which became one of the most authoritative texts on racial classification, and remained so well into the 19th century. Blumenbach justifies his hierarchy by arguing that the Caucasian race displays, “in

⁵⁰ “A New Division of the Earth by the Different Species or Races Which Inhabit It.”

⁵¹ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 232.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵³ Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 13.

⁵⁴ The role of the modification of the great chain of being on gender is ripe ground for future research see Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* for an introduction to the influence of the Enlightenment on conceptions of gender.

⁵⁵ Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 19.

⁵⁶ Blumenbach coined the term “Caucasian race.”

general, that kind of appearance which, according to our opinion of symmetry, we consider most handsome and becoming,”⁵⁷ and that its features represent is the mean around which the other races diverge.

This opinion shows the influence of, or at least resonance with the influential theories of J. J. Winckelmann. In 1764, Winckelmann published *The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks*, which defined the classical ideal of beauty, particularly physical beauty, for the Enlightenment. Winckelmann established rules of governing the ideal angle of the forehead, size of the eyes, nose, hands, feet, and even eyebrows. In short, Winckelmann developed and defined the physical component of the human ideal that became the basis for classifying human beings along with the rest of nature on the anthropocentric chain of being or “scale of nature.” The revival of the Greek cult of the body described in the first section of this paper, found its fullest exposition in Winckelmann’s work. Cornel West describes his work as having established a “normative gaze” through or against which other human forms were judged.⁵⁸ Thus, the humanity of individuals and races was judged on the basis of their conformity to or distance from this physical ideal. The importance of the physical, aesthetic dimension of the ideal form atop the modified chain of being for the development of 18th century theories about race cannot be overstated. The degree to which one differed mentally or physically from this ideal determined one’s place in the natural hierarchy, and thus one’s humanity or lack thereof.

Immanuel Kant infamously demonstrated the logic of this physical/mental hierarchy by refuting the statement of a “Negro carpenter” by declaring, “this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.”⁵⁹ While Kant followed the standard Enlightenment racial hierarchy outlined in the previous paragraphs, he contributed two significant ideas to its development: the temporalization of the Great Chain of Being and the permanence of racial heredity. While Kant followed Buffon in maintaining that black infants were born white and “blackened” by their environment, he observed that children of Africans born and raised in North America, and Europeans born and raised in the tropics maintained their racial identity in contrast to what Buffon’s environmental theory of races predicted. Therefore, Kant posited that while environment could influence race over long periods of time, race was an inherent and inherited feature of people. It is important to remember that for Kant, racial inheritance did not just mean the inheritance of black or white skin, the concept of race included intelligence, beauty, and other moral characteristics such as the propensity for hard work, rational thought, and a love of liberty. Kant concludes on of his lectures on *Physical Geography*, “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.”⁶⁰ This component of racial essentialism was crucial for the establishment of modern racism.

Kant’s other significant contribution to the rise of modern racism was his temporalization of the Great Chain of Being. Before Kant, the chain of being was largely regarded as unchanging in time, although Buffon and Blumental’s theories foreshadowed Kant’s concept of the chain of being unfolding and reaching maturity over time. That is, the plenitude of all possible forms of being in the world is not already manifested, but rather manifests throughout time, becoming more and more full and complete as time passes. This temporal and teleological conception of creation was a dramatic shift from previous doctrines, which held that creation was already completed and perfected.⁶¹ This notion of evolution or progress, found perhaps its fullest early philosophical expression in the works of Immanuel Kant. Kant, like many other theorists of the Enlightenment, sought to create a narrative in which the rational faculty was responsible for the linear development or progress of mankind from the “primitive” to the “civilized,” a teleological view of civilization that remains prominent in the modern world to this day.

⁵⁷ Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 84.

⁵⁸ West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, Chapter 2: “A Genealogy of Modern Racism.”

⁵⁹ Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶¹ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 56.

This teleological temporalization of the Great Chain of Being found its fulfillment in Hegel's theory of the progress of the World Soul.⁶² Hegel's evolutionary theory established a temporal continuum with evil, ignorance, darkness, the past, the "primitive" and the non-white races of humanity on one end and good, knowledge, light, the future, "civilization", progress, and the white race on the other. In his 1822-8 *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel combined this teleology with environmental determinism and Aristotelian arguments for the right and duty of the conquest, subjugation, and even elimination of the dark side of the continuum by the light.⁶³ These ideas were and are still important in justifying Western imperialism, colonization, and are implicitly invoked today in everything from development work to Marxist coups to white supremacist ideology. On Hegel's modified, temporalized chain of being, modern, or rather future Western Man is at the top of the chain, while other segments of humanity lie further down the chain and in the past, if not outside of history all together. Thus Hegel implies that non-Europeans are subhuman because they are un-Enlightened, and his importation of racial essentialism seems to imply that they (we) may be irredeemably so.

Conclusion

Thus we can see how the Great Chain of Being, distorted by rationalism and temporalized, formed the philosophical backbone of modern racism. This anthropocentric chain of being generated the quest to classify and rank the human species into sub-groups and produced a physical, mental, and socio-political ideal of humanity against which all other human types were judged and ranked. Thus, a combination of scientific, biological racial essentialism and a hierarchal arrangement of these essential racial categories combined to form modern racism. Racial essentialism developed from the 17th century division of humanity into races and Kant's theory of inherited racial identity; and the ranking of races was a direct result of a particular transformation of the hierarchical cosmology of the chain of being. In this way, the philosophical foundations for modern scientific racism were established in Western Europe during the Late Medieval to the Early Modern period. Modern racism's origins were based on a revised chain of being, with "Enlightened," European man on top, coupled with the rise of biological racial essentialism and determinism.

In summary, the decline of religion and the secularization of knowledge in the West during the Renaissance and Enlightenment led to a radical reconfiguration of the cosmos, represented by the chain of being. In this reconfigured model, Western, Enlightened man, instead of God, sat atop the chain, and became the measure and master of all things. As 18th century scientists sought to discover and classify all elements of reality within this great chain, they ranked varieties of humanity based on their proximity to this ideal. Furthermore, the rise of racial essentialism made these rankings static. In this way, medieval Europeans and contemporary members of non-white races were intellectually classified as sub-human, justifying the discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes and practices of the general European populace. This is but one angle from which to view the emergence of modern racism, but it is an important one, as it lays bare the basic philosophical structure underlying many of the diverse and divergent theories, beliefs, and actions underlying the modern forms of racism that continue to plague our societies around the world.

While much anti-racist literature has focused on debunking the racial essentialism of modern racism, demonstrating that race is a social construct, this analysis suggests that contemporary scholars of religion, theologians, and anti-racist/de-colonial scholars and activists should also focus their efforts on re-evaluating the legacy of the far more pervasive and implicit notions of "progress," "reason," and "civilization/development" that also form an integral part of modern racism, especially its more subtle varieties.⁶⁴ Without attending to these dimensions of modern racism, we risk committing the same error of making certain ideals of certain segments of Western Civilization (and its conquered territories) the measure

⁶² Itself a strange conglomerate of the Platonic or neo-Platonic *Psyche* and the universal rational faculty of the Enlightenment, but thrust into the river of time.

⁶³ Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 112-153.

⁶⁴ See the works of Walter D. Mignolo, such as Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and De-Colonial Freedom," for an example of such efforts.

of all things, again naïvely subjecting the philosophies, theologies, cultures, practices, and peoples of other civilizations and segments of humanity to the same provincial and prejudiced standards.

In the epigram to this article, DuBois wrote that “the darker races in other parts of the world have, in the last four centuries lagged behind the flying and even feverish footsteps of Europe.” We must critically interrogate such notions of “lagging behind,” “progress,” and “development,” and understand the history, underlying assumptions, and often unsavory concomitants of these ideas. If one were to replace “Modern Europe” with “liberal, secular, ‘developed,’ democracy,” James Beattie’s lament, “that every practice and sentiment is barbarous which is not according to the usages of Modern Europe seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our critics and philosophers,” still rings true today.

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