

# Allan Kardec's Views on Race Revisited\*

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## 1 – Introduction

In Chapter 11 of the book *Genesis*, Allan Kardec theorizes about the beginning of the human species on Earth. He states that when climate conditions became suitable for human life, the incarnation of human Spirits began. According to him, these first Spirits must have been very undeveloped and also displayed an array of characters and aptitudes, which naturally impelled the similar ones to be grouped by analogy or sympathy. Furthermore, the bodies in which those Spirits incarnated were compatible with their level of aptitude and desire to progress, thus leading to the formation of different races distinguished not only by their physical characteristics but also their moral standards. In Kardec's words [1],

Progress has not then been uniform among all human species. The most intelligent races have naturally advanced before others, without counting Spirits newly born into spiritual life who, having come to incarnate themselves on Earth among first arrivals, render the differences in progress more sensible. It would be impossible, indeed, to give the same antiquity of creation to savages, scarcely distinct from monkeys, as to the Chinese, and still less to civilized Europeans.

These Spirits of savages however belong also to humanity. They will attain some day the level of their elders, but this will certainly not be in the bodies of the same physical race, improper to certain intellectual and moral development. When the instrument will no more be in rapport with their development, they will emigrate from this place, in order to incarnate themselves in one of a superior character, and so on in succession until they have conquered all terrestrial grades, after which they will quit the Earth to pass into worlds more and more advanced (*“Revue Spirite”* April 1862, p 97: “Perfection of the Black Race”)[4].

It is clear from Kardec's thoughts that he actually believed that there were races inherently more intelligent and morally advanced than others, which might raise a legitimate question by anyone who reads these texts almost 150 years after they were written: “was Kardec a racist?”, or even “is Spiritism complacent with racism?” For those who know the Spiritist Doctrine as well as the fraternal and liberating nature of its philosophical and ethical foundations, the answer to these questions is a resounding NO.

However, in order to understand the context in which his manuscripts were written, it is necessary to have a more in-depth understanding of the scientific theories about human races that existed in Europe (and France, in particular) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, it is very important to emphasize that Kardec, as a man of science, firmly believed in the

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innate interdependence between Spiritism, whose object is the study of the laws that govern spiritual principles, and conventional science, whose object is to study the laws of matter. According to him, *the knowledge of one cannot be complete without the knowledge of the other* [2], and his effort to re-examine some of the current scientific theories under the viewpoint of Spiritism is in complete alignment with this principle. Consequently, when Kardec attempted to explain the existence on Earth of the different human races and the reason for their differences, his rationale was based on the well-established scientific fact of his time that there were races considered to be superior to others

The primary goal of this article is to revisit Kardec's writings about human races focusing on how they were influenced by the race theories then currently in vogue. A description of some of these theories is presented in the next section.

## **2 – The science of race in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century**

The first time the concept of race was examined from a scientific point of view was in 1735 by the Swedish biological taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus, who grouped human beings into the skin color varieties red, yellow, white and black, referring to the American Indians, Asians, Europeans and Africans, respectively. He also attributed a set of personal traits that were specific to each group: *the whites, for example, were described as keen minded and innovative, the blacks as lazy and careless* [5].

Linnaeus' race classification was modified and expanded by the German physiologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, considered to be the father of physical anthropology, in the work published in 1776 entitled "On the Natural Varieties of Mankind". His classification of human races consisted of Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays, reflecting the prevailing physical types found on the different regions of the known world. Contrary to Linnaeus', Blumenbach's classification was based solely on the general physical characteristics of the individuals of different races and it did not rank the races according to the intellectual abilities or moral standards displayed by those individuals. However, being a white European, his ethnocentric bias was revealed when he associated the white race with the region of Caucasus, due to the alleged beauty of its population. He actually stated that *Caucasians were the original race from which the others have originated or degenerated. They were the most handsome and becoming, having the most beautiful form of the skull* [8].

But at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were ethnological thinkers that insisted on the existence of a natural ranking of the various human races. The French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, assumed that Europeans were intellectually superior to Africans [9] and, in 1798, the German philosopher Christoph Meiners published the "Outline of the History of Humanity" establishing a racial correlation between physical beauty and intelligence, declaring that *"fair" people were superior in both respects, while the "darker colored peoples," he deemed both "ugly" and at best "semi-civilized."* [10]

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century two main ethnological views dominated the debate about racial differences. Influenced by the New Testament, the monogenesis view asserted that all human beings were of one blood and the observed differences displayed by the various racial groups were due to their exposure to distinct climatic and environmental conditions. With a wider acceptance by French scientists and intellectuals, the polygenesis view proclaimed that different races were due to separately created species with different aptitudes and unalterable capacities. In fact, *the polygenetic theory dominated French anthropology ... and the proceedings of the Ethnological Society of Paris for 1841-1847 contain extreme racist statements that aroused little dissent.*[11]

Aligned with the polygenetic discourse was the Swiss physician and naturalist Louis Agassiz, who believed that blacks were a separate and inferior species rather than just individuals who were part of a less developed culture. His academic credentials and prestige lead him to the United States and become a professor at Harvard University. In 1850 he expressed his views on racial differences in the paper entitled “The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races”, where he affirmed that *scientists had “the obligation to settle the relative rank among ... races,” because it would be “mock-philanthropy and mock-philosophy to assume that all races have the same abilities ... and that in consequence ...they are entitled to the same position in human society.”* [6]

Another voice to join the chorus of the defenders of polygenesis was the French novelist and diplomat Arthur de Gobineau, who in 1855 wrote the essay “Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines”, translated into English in 1915 as “The Inequality of Races.” In this work Gobineau gave his scientific justification for the superiority of the white race and explained why the lower races could never achieve higher levels of civilization. Gobineau’s views had many supporters including the German composer Richard Wagner, who, in 1881, founded the Gobineau Society to disseminate this ideology to the world [13].

The above discussion illustrates very clearly the scientific views that shaped the understanding of the observed differences among various human races in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In France, particularly, the superiority of the Europeans (or the white race) was an undeniable fact endorsed by the scientific community, consequently being the framework in which Kardec wrote his considerations in the mentioned texts [1] and [4]. However, an important distinction must be made. The scientific racism practiced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, recognized today as *an attempt to make nature herself an accomplice of political inequality* [7], was used to justify and defend slavery and later became the basis for the oppression and atrocities committed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the name of ethnic purity and racial intolerance. On the other hand, without conflicting with the current scientific knowledge, Allan Kardec offered a plausible explanation where reincarnation was the mechanism that restored the concept of equality and brotherhood among individuals of different races. The next section discusses this point further.

### 3 – Conciliating racial differences and equality

Kardec's concern with racial differences appears already in the initial chapters of *The Spirit's Book*. This matter is first addressed in Chapter III, questions 52-54, where he questions the causes for the physical and cultural differences that exist among the human races, and then in Chapter IX, where he examines in more depth what he perceived to be a serious conflict between the acknowledged superiority of some races over the others (an indisputable scientific truth of his time, as described in the previous section), and the inalienable equality endowed by the Creator to all human beings. He conjectures [14]

Why are some groups of people in the world more progressive in their attitudes than others? If we took a Hottentot<sup>1</sup> baby and bring her up in the most renowned school, could we make her a Laplace or Newton?

What philosophy can solve these questions? Either the souls of human beings are equal at birth, or they are not. But if they are equal, how come discrepancies exist?

To Kardec, the solution for these discrepancies resided in the concept of reincarnation. In his view, divine justice could only be fully manifested if everyone were created equal and were given the same opportunities, through many successive incarnated lives, to advance morally, spiritually, and intellectually. Such discrepancies arise when one tries to see divine justice through the distorted lens of a philosophy that awards humans with a single existence only.

Kardec proceeds arguing that [14]

...one may reply that the Hottentot is of an inferior race. In such case, we beg to inquire whether she is not a human being. This being the case, why God refused her and her whole race the privileges granted to Caucasians? The Spiritist Doctrine does not admit the existence of different classes of human beings. Instead, it argues that spirits living on Earth are in different stages of development, and they are all equally capable of attaining the same progress. Does not this view of the human race seem more compassionate and in agreement with a loving God?

Kardec's argument evidently shows that he did believe in a natural ranking of capacities exhibited by individuals of different races, as the science of his time dictated, but, most importantly, he also believed unquestioningly in the innate equality among all human beings.

Five years later, Kardec revisited the theme of racial differences in the article "*Spiritualist and spiritist phrenology. Perfectibility of the black race*" [4]. Phrenology was a very popular scientific field in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that correlated the physical sizes and contours of a person's skull with his/her tendencies for a given personality trait. This field of study was later abandoned due to the lack of a solid scientific foundation. But in

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<sup>1</sup> The hottentots, from southern Africa, were seen by Europeans *as the most denigrated of all races both because their nomadic, nonagricultural way of life was considered highly uncivilized and because in physique and physiognomy they were perceived as deviating more from the European somatic norm than did other Africans.*[12]

the 19<sup>th</sup> century, phrenology had been used to justify the superiority of the white race and to explain the irremediable nature of the more inferior races [13].

In this article Kardec examined from the Spiritist's point of view the alleged unfeasibility of perfecting the black race, as predicted by many phrenologists. He accepted phrenology's claim that the brains of black individuals lacked the main physical elements that would prevent them from having the same level of intelligence exhibited by the whites, consequently rendering very difficult their intellectual progress as a race, but also contended that the ability to think and learn was an attribute of the Spirit and not the brain. Therefore, Spirits incarnated as black individuals were perfectly capable of achieving spiritual, moral and intellectual progress through successive incarnations. They were like the Spirits of children that have a lot to learn and advance and, therefore, needed to be nurtured with care in order to gradually change their more primitive tendencies until they reach a point in their spiritual path when they can start to reincarnate into more evolved bodies.

By today's standards, Kardec's views towards the black race (and other non-white races, for that matter) can be considered discriminatory and paternalist, to say the least, but taking into account the French scientific and cultural environments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which they were expressed, these views represented a progressive voice that rescued the concept of equality shared by every human being, which had already been lost at that time.

#### **4 – Conclusions**

Since Kardec discussed his views on racial differences, almost 150 years have passed and remarkable progress has been made in our understanding of the genetic variations that determine the various racial and ethnic groups that exist on Earth, giving no room for racial discrimination. But it has been a long and bumpy road. Many atrocities have been committed, many fundamental human rights have been violated and many injustices have been perpetrated. But we as a civilization are learning our lessons. Today the scientific community understands that there is no scientific basis for any hierarchical grouping of individuals by race, and it fully endorses the same rights to freedom, justice, respect and dignity for all individuals of the human species [15]. Slavery became unlawful and morally unacceptable, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been created, segregation laws have been abolished, and racial tolerance has been more practiced and disseminated.

Kardec's views on race were undoubtedly influenced by the European ethnocentric biased scientific data of his time, and not by what he inferred from the teachings delivered by the many enlightened Spirits who guided his studies and his work and who never implied that different races are characterized by different levels of inherently immutable abilities or moral standards. He was able to, nevertheless, preserve in the discussion about race the Spiritist Doctrine's message of equality, brotherhood and fraternal love among all human beings. This is brilliantly demonstrated in his statement [3]

With belief in reincarnation, the prejudices of races and castes fall dead, since the same spirit can be reborn rich or poor, lord or beggar, master or subordinate, free or enslaved, man or woman. Of all the arguments brought against the injustice of servitude and slavery, against the subjection of the weaker to the rule of the stronger, there is no one of them which expresses so logically the reason therefore as the law of reincarnation. If, then, reincarnation is founded upon a law of nature which is the source of universal brotherhood, it is based upon the same law as that of the equality of social rights and of freedom.

## 5 – References

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