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Divine, Scientific, and Phrenological:

A Study of American Religion and Phrenology in the Nineteenth Century

Loyola Marymount University

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Dr. Bittel

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Divine, Scientific, and Phrenological

Nineteenth century America was not only a time of struggle and change for Americans, but also one in which many used science and technology to understand the human body and grow closer toward achieving an idealized human perfection. Religious Americans in particular sought after ways they could better understand the abstracts of Christianity and develop strong benevolent characteristics in order to create a unique American identity fashioned under the leadership of God.[1] However, the religious concepts and intangible perceptions produced difficulties for Americans seeking to better understand their faith. In addition to the interest in theology, the rise of globalization, industry, and knowledge in the nineteenth century also gave way for the development and investigation of new sciences throughout the United States and Europe. Phrenology, first studied by Franz Joseph Gall, was once a commonly believed science by many that claimed the "brain was an organ of the mind," and that the size of different areas of the brain indicated specific mental faculties such as benevolence, self-esteem, and for this study specifically, spirituality.[2] In order to comprehend their innate God-given abilities and characteristics, the spiritual and religious of the nineteenth century used phrenology to understand their own divine characteristics granted to them by God, as well as, used the science to further establish "natural" racial and gender hierarchies to reinforce the roles and boundaries of gender and race.

Phrenology was both a technology and a science that linked the body, mind, and the concept of divinity together using the external body to determine signs of the inner spiritual state,

[1] John L. Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and their Metaphors*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 121.
[2] Christopher G. White, "Minds Intensely Unsettled: Phrenology, Experience, and the American Pursuit of Spiritual Assurance, 1830–1880," *Religion and American Culture* (Summer 2006): 234.

or soul.[3] O.S. Fowler, a leading American phrenologist in the nineteenth century, hoped that his text, *Creative and Sexual Science*, "may benefit every reader, and enhance the number of inborn capacities and excellencies of 'God's noblest work'".[4] Fowler suggests near the beginning of his work that Phrenology and the study of the mind enable the reader to engage the work of God. Fowler claimed throughout his work on phrenology that the science single-handedly proved, and was evidence for, the existence of God.[5] For believing religious Americans of the nineteenth century, phrenology had become a tool toward understanding the complexities of religion, which were often seen as complex and difficult for the common layman to comprehend in full. John Lardas Modern describes that discernment and the ability to experience God in the nineteenth century "was necessary in order…to achieve 'discrimination and clearness' about how the self was both independent from God yet wholly inspired by him."[6] Phrenology was a window for believing religious Americans, who could use the science to tap into the divine characteristics that God had predestined and created within them.

The area of the brain that phrenologists used in order to support their link to the innate divine characteristics bestowed onto the individual by God was the organ of 'spirituality'. Fowler claimed that the organ of spirituality was found at the top of the head, and was the "interior perception of TRUTH, what is BEST, [and] what is about to transpire."[7] At this time, Modern reminds us that 'spirituality' had become "increasingly associated with the *human capacity* for religion and not only a quality of the divine."[8] In order to satisfy needs of spiritually hungry Americans, phrenologists and advocates were able to use phrenology in order to link God with

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[3] White, "Minds Intensely Unsettled," 227.
[4] O.S. Fowler, *Creative and Sexual Science*, (New York: Physical Culture Publishing Co., 1870), x.
[5] Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 173.
[6] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 127.
[7] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 122.
[8] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 121.

humanity as well as associate the science with man's inherent capacity for becoming godly. In other words, the organ of spirituality had become a divine organ, linking humans to God in a tangible manner. Modern further goes on to express that Fowler's distinction of spirituality, "was about fixing…the object of the spirit, identifying its code for the purposes of *communicating* with it."[9] Phrenologists promoted that the organ of spirituality created an open door for religious Americans, where one could communicate with their spirit, soul, or inner-self, connecting science to religion, and God to man in a way the world had not seen before.

Phrenology had become a catalyst for Americans to understand societal morals, philosophy, and the Christian values. For example, in 1842 Pliny Earle Chase wrote a letter to his sister Lucy Chase describing that the inner soul was where man looked for the image of God.[10] He went on to expresses in his letter that "for this reason the study of Phrenology is eminently useful, for that science was the first twilight ray that heralded the dawning of a new day, and the departure of the metaphysical darkness."[11] Pliny Chase identifies that the technology of phrenology brought a light to the darkness, removing the confusion of the abstract and metaphysical. His reaction and support for phrenology illustrates how Americans could use phrenology to understanding the divine characteristics granted to them by God and interconnectedness of religion with knowledge and morals. Similarly, in 1855 Horace Mann, a reformer of education and politician from Massachusetts, was quoted in an advertisement for Fowler's and Well's phrenology and publishing company in the New York Times, professing: "I look upon phrenology as the guide to philosophy and the handmaid of Christianity..."[12] Mann

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[9] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 122.
[10] Pliny E. Chase, "Letters from Pliny Earle Chase to Lucy Chase, September 9, 1842," in *Chase Family Papers*, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2009), 2.
[11] Chase, "Letters from Pliny Earle Chase," 2.
[12] "Classified Ad 11 -- no Title," *New York Daily Times (1851-1857),* May 18, 1855, Accessed December 4, 2012 from ProQuest, 8.

illustrates how phrenology was a gateway toward understanding ethical principles and Christian values in American society. In both cases, Pliny Chase and Mann describe how the technology produced a link between science, morality, and Christianity. Phrenology had become a technology that could be used to better understand the inner characteristics and values of Christianity. The organ of spirituality created a divine correspondence for those who believed reassuring their faith in God as well as their faith in science.

Phrenology's unique ability to establish a visible link between science and religion greatly affected religious revivalists and leaders at the time. For example, Edward Beecher, nineteenth century Christian theologian and brother to Harriet Beecher Stowe, described that after witnessing the science of phrenology his "doubts and perplexities fled like morning vapors chased away by the rising sun."[13] Beecher explains how phrenology for many believers felt as though a veil had been removed from their blinded eyes. One Christian group in particular that showed little objection to the science of phrenology was the Unitarians. William Ellery Channing, a prominent Unitarian leader in the early to mid nineteenth century, described at the funeral of Johann Spurzheim, a leading phrenologist who brought the science to the United States, that his phrenological writings "contributed excellent views on the subject of the improvement of the human race."[14] Not only were many Unitarian leaders believers in the science, but also became associated with the promotion of it. For example, the Boston Phrenological Society (BPS) was mixed with phrenologists as well as Unitarian ministers including George Bradburn and John Pierpont.[15] Unitarian leaders found that "humans were inherently religious" and that the science had settled the questions of religion.[16] Unitarian

[13] Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling,* 177.
[14] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 150.
[15] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 150.
[16] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 150.

educator John Hecker also found the teachings of phrenology to be beneficial, expressing that the spiritual faculty noted by Fowler was factual, and was activated through the power of the Holy Spirit.[17] The use of the Holy Spirit here is especially interesting because it ties together both science and part of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). Hecker suggests a link between the organ of spirituality and the Christian trinity, thus tying both science and phrenology with his faith and Christianity. Phrenology enabled religious leaders, particularly Unitarians, to not only reconfirm their beliefs toward God's existence by using "modern" science and technology, but also adapt and engage it in their beliefs and practices.

In addition to opening a divine door for the communication of the spirit and God's image in humanity, phrenology reinforced socially constructed gender roles already established. Fowler states numerous times throughout his phrenological work *Creative and Sexual Science* that men and women were endowed with specific predetermined characteristics by the creator, which could be better understood through the science of phrenology. For example, Fowler described that men, such as Caesar Augustus, George Washington, and Brigham Young, possessed the characteristics of bravery, leadership, and courage, unlike women who naturally could never attain these characteristics because they were not prominent faculties in a woman's mind.[18] Modern explained in his research that phrenologists often labeled these men instinctually and suggestively superior to that of women, largely because they had superior reasoning and spiritual organs, which in turn granted men with superior spirituality and leadership.[19] Similarly, Hachaichi described in her research that "[Phrenology] bolstered and was itself bolstered by an

[17] White, "Minds Intensely Unsettled," 239.
[18] Fowler, *Creative and Sexual Science*, 115-121.
[19] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 157.

already available set of assumptions about women's biological inferiority."[20] Both Modern and Hachaichi describe that phrenology was not setting up any new assumptions about a women's sense of inferiority to men, but rather reconfirmed their inferiority through the use of science and technology. Fowler more explicitly encouraged man's innate divine leadership over women when describing a woman's instinctual need to follow, rather than lead: "Women love to look up to their natural 'lord and master,' but not to be looked up to."[21] Phrenology, in this sense, was able to strengthen already established perceptions toward a women's role as subordinate to that of men. Phrenology connected the stressed relationship between science and religion in order to verify and confirm a women's role in the private sphere, under the leadership of men, which was granted to men by the authority of both God *and* science.

Although phrenology encouraged male superiority, it also brought to many women an open communication with their inner spirit and God, as well as tangibly described what unique characteristics, skills, and gifts God had bestowed onto them exclusively. For example, after hearing George Combe, a leading promoter of phrenology, Harriot Hunt found herself to be in awe of the science. She describes in her memoir that George Combe's teaching "were revelations — bread for a hungry spirit, and water for a thirsty soul."[22] She also expresses that "[George Combe] opened to us the labyrinth of life; he lighted up its mysterious chambers, and bade us enter and explore; he gave us the golden clue of connection between cause and effect and end."[23] Hunt, a female physician in the nineteenth century, vividly illustrates how phrenology had become the missing key toward unlocking the mystery of divine communication and a blueprint

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[20] Ihsen Hachaichi, "'There Is Sex in Mind': Scientific Determinism and the Woman Question in Lady Audley's Secret," *Brno Studies in English* (2012): 90.
[21] Fowler, *Creative and Sexual Science*, 121.
[22] Harriot Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses: Fifty Years Social, Including Twenty Years Professional Life,* from Google Books (Cleveland, OH: Jewett, Proctor and Worthington, 1856), 142.
[23] Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses*, 142.

to the soul. She also states in her reflection: "I needed a more earnest consciousness of laws, — I needed to realize that they govern every department of life; and these lectures supplied my need."[24] Phrenology had given to Hunt a realization of the 'natural laws' that had been endowed to her by God and science. Hunt finds that the abstract laws, values, and morals established in society were first put in place by science and God. In this case, phrenology and the lectures of Combe had served as a way for women to understand the interworking of physiology, science, and divinity.

Similarly, Emily Gillespie, an ill Universalist from Iowa, found phrenology to be a gateway toward hope and understanding God's plan for her own life. In April of 1887, she describes in her diaries how providence and phrenology went hand in hand.[25] Bunkers and Huff describe in their book, *Inscribing the Daily,* that both Emily and her sister Sarah *Gillespie "*were staunch adherents to the philosophy of phrenology as a means of interpreting human character."[26] Gillespie believed phrenology, and other groundbreaking sciences such as mesmerism, could be used to better understand God's providence in her life.[27] Phrenology gave hope for marriage, encouraged the preexistent Christian values, and helped reestablish hope in her faith in God. Both men and women saw the science of phrenology as a technology that granted hope toward understanding some of the more abstract parts of life.

Phrenology had also become a tool for women who saw phrenology as a technology toward utilizing their own intelligence and benevolent, motherly, nature. In 1847, M. Broussais, professor of general psychology at the University of Paris, stated in a lecture about phrenology

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[24] Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses*, 143.
[25] Suzanne Bunkers & Cynthia Huff, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 225.
[26] Bunkers & Huff, *Inscribing the Daily*, 225.
[27] Emily H. Gillespie, "Diary of Emily Hawley Gillespie, April, 1887," in *A Secret to be Buried: The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858-1888*, (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 340; Bunkers & Huff, *Inscribing the Daily, 225*

that "women constantly remain more sentimental and impassioned than men," leading to their biological distinguished roles as mothers and care givers.[28] Lydia Fowler, physician, supporter of phrenology, and wife of Lorenzo Fowler, took M. Broussais' beliefs about women and phrenology one step further when in 1852 when she voiced to the National Woman's Rights Convention: "Let each woman here assembled…labor to accomplish some great and useful end, either in the bosom of her own family, [or] in perfecting her own 'God-inspired self-hood."[29] As she continues her speech, she described that women must "fulfill the instincts of her genius" and achieve the most they can from of life.[30] She supports Broussais belief that a woman's place as mother of her household is crucial, but adds as a woman of medicine, that they have the capacity for genius and success in society. Both of these advocates of phrenology, along with Harriot Hunt, assured women that they had *unique* roles, duties, and positions in society given to them by God and science. These and other female supporters of phrenology found it to be a beneficial link toward understanding faith, science, and society and their place in it. Even though phrenology greatly supported preexisting gender boundaries and benefitted men more than women, it did provide some with hope and a sense of peace, centered on the established social norms surrounding a woman's role in society and religion.

In addition to supporting gender boundaries and roles, the science reinforced racial distinctions based on 'natural' classifications that produced inequality under the authority of science and divinity. In the nineteenth century, racial stereotypes as well as notions of white superiority and racial inferiority were at the forefront of numerous areas of society including politics, economics, and religion. In the area of religion and race, phrenology was able to

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[28] M. Broussais, *Lectures on Phrenology*, from Google Books. (London: George Routledge, 1847), 548.
[29]Lydia F Fowler, "Address of Lydia Folger Fowler to the National Woman's Rights Convention, Syracuse, NY, Sept. 10, 1852" in *The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, Held at Syracuse, September 8th, 9th and 10th, 1852*, (Syracuse, NY: J.E. Masters, 1852), 76.
[30] Fowler, "Address of Lydia Folger Fowler , 76.

reassure the religious American mission of Christianization as well as the superiority of the white race above all others. Anna Scott, an American missionary to Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, described in her book *Day Dawn in Africa*, that it was the duty of Christians to instruct and lead the "heathens" for "this is the sphere to which Providence directs American philanthropy and Christianity."[31] Similarly, David Livingstone, a deeply religious Scottish physician and missionary to Africa, also described in his travels: "We may hope that they [people of Africa] find mercy through his [Christ] blood, though little are able to appreciate the sacrifice he made."[32] Both note the importance of teaching religion to the ignorant and child-like nature of the Africans. This is seen as a duty to both Scott and Livingstone and is labeled as the will of God, linking the mission to Africa to providence. Livingstone once notes the practice of phrenology in his travels when describing the Manyema in Western Tanzania, writing: "Finely formed heads are common, and generally men and women are vastly superior to the slaves of Zanzibar and elsewhere…[but] must go deeper than phrenology to account for their low moral tone."[33] Although Livingstone describes that they 'must go deeper' into phrenology in order to describe the morality in the Manyema, he notes that there was a distinguishable racial superiority among the Africans based on phrenology, as well as a divine presence in the science. Phrenology in this case is supported the religious missionaries in linking racial hierarchy with God's providence, suggesting that social hierarchy is indeed a *divine* racial hierarchy, and thus good and right in the eyes of God.

Phrenology promoted a God-given superiority to those of the white race and reinforced already established racial hierarchies through the diverse studies of the brains and skulls of both

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[31] Anna M. Scott, *Day Dawn in Africa*, (New York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1858), 29.
[32] David Livingstone, *Perilous Adventures and Extensive Discoveries in the Interior of Africa*, (Phila[delphia] & Boston: Hubbard Bros., 1872), 87.
[33] Livingstone, *Perilous Adventures and Extensive Discoveries*, 542.

racial groups. In 1862, Marvin T. Wheat described in his book, *The Progress and Intelligence of Americans,* that there was a divine purpose and destiny that only Caucasians had the ability of attaining: "No less in art than in science, are we, the Caucasians, rising from dust to fill that great destiny ordered in the creation of man, in the image and after the *likeness* of his Creator."[34] While discussing phrenology, he describes: "if he [God] had intended all races to be possessed of the same understandings…it would have been as easy to have molded all after him, but it is evident that it was not."[35] It is important to note here that Wheat suggests that it was obvious that God did not intend on giving all the races equal capacities. From here he specifically states that the African brain "never goes beyond that development in the Caucasian in boyhood; and, besides other singularities, it bears in several particulars to a marked resemblance to the brain of the orang-outang," thus diminishing the skull and therein the abilities of the black race by God's purpose, noted in his crafting of the skull.[36] In comparison, George Combe notes in *A System of Phrenology* that the skull of Africans, although strong in veneration and hope, was deficient in the areas of reflection, cautiousness, and ideality.[37] Both Wheat and Combe claim that the African brain is fundamentally inferior and lack the ability to guide and lead through science, harking back to the divine superiority of the Caucasian.

Combe's research also displayed the inferiority of other groups, including Native Americans. He once explains that the "Jesuits attempted to civilize a number of these tribes…[and] if their brains had possessed the European development…fostered for years by a protecting hand, would have sprung up…and produced an abundant harvest of permanent

[34] Marvin T. Wheat, *The Progress and Intelligence of Americans*, (Louisville: s.n, 1862), 7.
[35] Wheat, *The Progress and Intelligence of Americans*, 132.
[36] Wheat, *The Progress and Intelligence of Americans*, 133-134.
[37] George Combe, *A System of Phrenology*, (New York: William H, Colyer, 1843), 433.

civilization."[38] Combe notes here that the Native American race lack civilization because their minds were not given those faculties by God, and thus did not possess the proper faculties in order to create lasting communities. This is unlike the Caucasians whose capacities toward creating civilization were crafted by God in the faculties designed by God.[39] Wheat and Combe both advocate that God's intended purpose was social hierarchy, built in his (God's) design of the human skull and brain. This distinction placed the Caucasian race as the superior and leader to all others. By predestining and standardizing the skulls and minds of different races through the use of phrenology, supporters and promoters of phrenology were able to use the science in order to encourage and generate race specific faculties for each group granted by both science and religion. Thus reinforcing social hierarchies based in the superiority of Caucasian men and an inferiority of all others through science phrenology, believed to be designed by God and nature.

In summary, phrenology was used as a technology and science for understanding the innate characteristics granted by God and science, which in turn enabled nineteenth century Americans to define their values and character as divine to reassure "natural" gender and racial roles/boundaries. The faculty of spirituality gave believers a tool for experiencing God and their inner soul based in phrenological studies and exams. Although women were explicitly labeled as inferior by the science, phrenology offered to women control in their relationship with God and a place in society exclusively given by their divine unique skills and character. The science further assured nineteenth century Americans of a divine social hierarchy based on race, that subordinated those of non-Caucasian decent based on natural, divinely established, characteristics found in the brain and skull. It is important to include that not all religious

[38] Combe, *A System of Phrenology*, 432.
[39] Combe, *A System of Phrenology*, 432.

Americans believed in the science and perceived it as false. Those who dismissed the science of phrenology taught against its practice, asserting that it was a "false system that supplied simple, materialist answers to the subtle and mysterious questions of the spirit."[40] However, we do find that although some religious Americans disregarded phrenology altogether, others believed in its ability to link Christianity, science, and philosophy together as one.[41] To these believers, phrenology had become a tool of both science and technology that could be used as a method for understanding their own unique innate abilities, reassure differences and superiorities of race and gender, as well as comprehend the divine nature of God in science and humanity.

[40] Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling,* 176.
[41] White, "Minds Intensely Unsettled," 238.

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