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## ROBERT MOFFAT AND HUMAN EQUALITY

BRUCE RITCHIE

Robert Moffat (1795-1883) was born in the village of Ormiston, East Lothian, near Edinburgh, and he became a major figure of the *London Missionary Society* in its heyday of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From 1817 to 1870 Moffat worked as a missionary in southern Africa, with only one visit home from 1839 to 1843 before final retirement from the mission-field. Moffat's base was at Kuruman, on the edge of the Kalahari, many hundreds of miles north of Cape Town. His daughter Mary married David Livingstone. Over a period of 30 years he translated the entire Bible into Setswana; and he laid the foundation for Christianity in what is now modern Botswana.

The immediate reason for his home visit from 1839 to 1843 was to supervise the printing of Setswana New Testaments. But during that visit he toured the length and breadth of Britain, speaking at meeting after meeting, as the most celebrated missionary of the *LMS*. It was towards the end of this tour that Moffat became aware of allegations concerning the supposed innate intellectual inferiority of Africans: allegations which he stoutly rejected.

Like the overwhelming majority of Christian missionaries of his era, Moffat accepted the *monogenetic* theory of human origins, rather than the *polygenetic* model. He believed that all humanity had a single common origin rather than a multiple of independent origins. Thus, for Moffat, all humanity was of the same family. And, for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionary, the ultimate physical foundation of this *monogenetic* theory was Adam, the progenitor of all humanity. Moffat also held that not only did all humanity have a common physical origin but, because of this common origin, all humanity had a common innate intellectual capacity.

This year, 2010, sees the celebration of the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. It is therefore timely to stress that, contrary to widespread modern assumptions, the vast majority of the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries, who worked before 1910, had in fact a high appreciation of the moral, spiritual, and intellectual capacities of the peoples amongst whom they worked. The perceived truth today is that missionaries, like other colonists, had a low regard for indigenous peoples. But the opposite was overwhelmingly the case. Indeed, it was the missionary societies who consistently stood steadfast against growing pseudo-scientific racist theories which developed as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed. It is within this con-

text that, in this article, we examine Robert Moffat's missionary defence of African innate intellectual ability.<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE PHRENOLOGY PROBLEM

Moffat's defence of African intellectual ability during his 1839-1843 tour was ignited by the aspersions cast on Africans by some phrenologists. Phrenology is the pseudo-science of character analysis, based on characteristics of the skull. It was founded by Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), and elaborated by Johann Caspar Spurzheim (1776-1832), and it enjoyed fashionable approval through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Franz Joseph Gall proposed that particular brain regions are associated with controlling particular parts of the body: not dissimilar to modern theories of the brain.<sup>2</sup> However, and much more controversially, Gall also assumed that abstract moral qualities such as integrity or depravity were similarly localized and he associated them with specific bumps and ridges of the skull. Most phrenologists usually concentrated upon the shape of

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<sup>1</sup> This article impinges upon central areas of debate in modern studies on classical missions. Did 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries have racist presuppositions, whether these were conscious or unconscious? To what extent did attitudes change during the 19<sup>th</sup> century? What was the effect of Enlightenment thought on missionary attitudes? Has the paternalistic and apparently 'judgmental' language sometimes employed by missionaries been misunderstood out of its 19<sup>th</sup> century context? By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thus by the time of the 1910 Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, had a 'racialized perception of human identity' emerged alongside the 'traditional evangelical emphases on the unity of human nature'? A recent article which discusses some of these issues, starting with the example of Robert Moffat and charting changing attitudes, is Brian Stanley's, 'From 'the poor heathen' to 'the glory and honour of all nations': Vocabularies of Race and Custom in Protestant Missions: 1844-1928', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34/1, 3-10. If Stanley has a relatively favorable view of the missionary enterprise, then a more critical position, which argues that language and art were used as imperialistic tools in conversions by missionaries, is argued by Paul Landau, in: *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), and by Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For a wide ranging discussion on the whole impact of Enlightenment thought on the changing nature of missionary methodology see the series of essays in Brian Stanley (ed.), *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> George H. Calvert (ed.), *Illustrations of Phrenology* (Baltimore: Neal, 1832), pp. 11-17.

the skull, not simply its size. However, in the popular mind, phrenology implied a correlation between skull size and intelligence. Thus, even a serious 19<sup>th</sup> century writer on phrenology such as George Calvert declared: 'The broad phrenological doctrine is that a small brain *cannot* manifest a powerful capacious mind.'<sup>3</sup> On such assumptions, sweeping conclusions were made concerning the intellectual, moral, emotional and spiritual capacity of various people groups. Races with small bodies and correspondingly small skull size, such as in southern Africa and Polynesia, were assumed to have lesser intelligence and inferior moral capabilities.

In Britain phrenology reached its zenith during the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and prompted a vigorous debate concerning the nature of humanity. Its negative conclusions concerning foreign races brought it into direct opposition to Missionary organizations. This was because it was a *sine qua non* of the missionary community that all peoples, including aboriginal indigenous peoples, had immortal souls given by God, and therefore were intelligent human beings in the full sense.<sup>4</sup> Without this conviction the whole missionary enterprise, and the dedication of missionary lives to the conversion of such peoples, lacked sense. Yet, although these assumptions were accepted within the missionary community, wider European society had doubts concerning the capacities of some races, and phrenology gave a pseudo-scientific basis for these doubts. Indeed, some extreme phrenologists such as George Combe of Edinburgh doubted whether some non-European peoples had any adequate religious capacity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Calvert (ed.), *Illustrations of Phrenology*, 1832, p. 29. On p. 22 Calvert attempts to 'prove' this thesis by comparing drawings of the skull of the artist Raphael who had a 'full, round, capacious skull', with that of a native from New Holland (Australia), who had a 'flattened skull with shallow retreating forehead'. Calvert's conclusion from skull shape alone was that Raphael's skull showed a man of extraordinary artistic and intellectual gifts, whereas the other displayed low potential for either. Raphael's skull was larger, but also more developed in the frontal skull region, hence his genius!

<sup>4</sup> Moffat's theological tutor, the Rev. William Roby of Manchester, taught that the soul was 'a thinking substance subsisting distinctly of itself' (Roby, *Theological Lectures*, Lecture 37: 'The Creation of Man'). Roby's theology was in line with most Calvinist thinking which equated the soul with the rational part of human nature. It therefore followed that if foreign peoples had immortal souls then they were also rational, intelligent, thinking persons. Moffat's copy of Roby's *Lectures* is available in the LMS archives of the *School of Oriental and African Studies* (SOAS), London.

<sup>5</sup> In classical phrenology the capacity for 'religious reflection' was linked to a person's ability to experience *veneration*, *wonder* and *awe*. Capacity for *veneration*, *wonder* and *awe* was indicated by the size of the appropriate area of

## 2. GEORGE COMBE

George Combe<sup>6</sup> (1788-1858) was largely responsible for popularizing phrenology in Britain. He was an Edinburgh Lawyer's Clerk, becoming a Writer to the Signet in 1812. Combe was first attracted to Johann Spurzheim's ideas around 1817, and in 1820 Combe became a founder member of the Phrenological Society. Combe published his *Elements of Phrenology* in 1824, but it was his 1829 *Essay on the Constitution of Man* which became his most famous book, with fifty thousand copies being sold by 1838, just before Moffat returned to Britain in 1839. The book caused a sensation, and many religiously inclined members left the Phrenological Society as a consequence of Combe's *Essay on the Constitution of Man*. Thus, by the time Moffat arrived back in Britain the whole phrenology issue was a hot topic, especially in Edinburgh. Combe claimed that phrenology demonstrated there were certain groups of 'humanity' who quite simply did not have the required intellectual or religious capacity to adopt civilization or Christianity. Combe wrote: 'Certain savage tribes are incapable of so slight a thing as civilization, even though we attempt to thrust civilization upon them.'<sup>7</sup> Combe further stated: 'It appears to me that the Na-

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the skull. However, this area was not the same as the area which indicated intellectual ability; hence it was feasible for some skull types to be high in the capacity for *veneration, wonder* and *awe*, but low in the capacity for *intellectual reflection*. When the capacity for *veneration etc.* was deemed large, but that of intellectual reflection was deemed low, then, in such cases the person (or race) was deemed to be predisposed toward *superstition* rather than pure religion, and therefore would find difficulty in grasping a 'higher' intellectual religion such as Christianity. Was phrenology inevitably atheistic? David de Giustino, *Conquest of Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), points out: 'Free-thinkers as well as atheists derived encouragement from phrenology, which they advertised in their books and journals. Thus, while the philosophy of Combe and Spurzheim was not explicitly atheistic, it was suspicious by the company it kept' (p. 128). De Giustino adds: 'Combe [explained] that the fundamental 'error' of Christian society had always been to 'seek a basis of religion in the supernatural instead of the natural'. This basis ... made it unduly difficult for any two persons to agree on the proper use and objects of man's religious impulse, the inborn faculty of *veneration*' (p.128f.). De Giustino also stresses that although some phrenologists accepted the idea that certain races were inherently inferior, many were strongly against slavery (p. 69ff.).

<sup>6</sup> *National Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 4, 'George Combe', pp. 883-5.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Gillespie, *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical Principles set forth in Mr. Combe's 'Constitution of Man'* (Edinburgh: pamphlet, 1837: National Library of Scotland, ABS.2.97.33 (19)) p. 5.

tive American savages and Native New Hollanders,<sup>8</sup> cannot, with their present brains, adopt Christianity or civilization.<sup>9</sup>

Combe's teaching caused an outcry in religious circles, especially in groups which were missionary minded. It is true that not all phrenologists shared Combe's conclusions, but he did represent a significant body of opinion. Responses to Combe's work were published, and in Edinburgh in 1837 W.H. Gillespie published an influential pamphlet in response to Combe, entitled: *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical principles set forth in Mr. Combe's 'Constitution of Man'*. Gillespie did not always represent Combe's thinking accurately, but it is his reaction to Combe's perceived position on innate racial distinctions based on phrenology which is important.

### 3. WILLIAM H. GILLESPIE

William H. Gillespie<sup>10</sup> (1808 -1875) was a prominent member of the Nicolson Square Methodist Church in Edinburgh, and, like Combe, he belonged to Edinburgh's legal profession. Significantly, Gillespie's fundamental axiom in his argument against Combe was theological, and it had two points of attack. First, Gillespie argued that the Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:19) to evangelize the entire world undermined Combe's basic thesis.<sup>11</sup> Gillespie argued that Jesus' command was to take the Gospel to all peoples: *therefore* all peoples must be intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually capable of responding. Second, Gillespie pointed out that Combe's *a priori* argument could not cancel the actual fact of conversions having already taken place amongst some of the very peoples whom Combe had described as inherently incapable of becoming Christians. Drawing his evidence from the *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Report* for April and October 1836,<sup>12</sup> Gillespie stated: "The facts set

<sup>8</sup> New Hollanders were Aboriginal Australians.

<sup>9</sup> Gillespie, *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical Principles*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> See: 'Gillespie, William H.', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p. 361. Gillespie wrote a number of apologetic works, including a book against the German philosopher D. F. Strauss entitled *The Truth of the Evangelical History* (1856). He also published: *The Theology of Geologists* (1859); plus a defence of the cosmological and ontological arguments entitled *The Argument, a priori, for the Being and Attributes of the Lord God the Absolute One and the First Cause* (1872).

<sup>11</sup> Gillespie, *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical Principles*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Gillespie, *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical Principles*, pp. 12ff.

forth in these extracts are not reconcilable with phrenology as set out by Mr. Combe'. Gillespie continued:

The dogma that no human being whose skull resembles the common type of the skulls of American Indians, or New Hollanders, can become a Christian is legibly enough written in *The Constitution of Man*. The dogma is sufficiently contrary to Scripture. It opposes the expectations, it mocks the sacrifices, of Christians.<sup>13</sup>

In Gillespie's view, real-life missionary activity had both an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* impact on Combe's version of phrenology. (a) *A priori*: missionaries could not accept the conclusions of Combe's phrenology since that would mean that their enterprise was doomed before it started, and that the Great Commission given by Jesus was incapable of fulfilment. (b) *A posteriori*: missionary results showed that Combe's predictions were demonstrably untrue since profound and lasting conversions were actually taking place amongst the very peoples whom Combe had declared to be inherently incapable of receiving Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

Gillespie did not reject the whole science of phrenology. He simply stated his disagreement with Combe's conclusions concerning certain races being excluded from the possibility of understanding and responding to the Gospel. That was the fundamental anthropological point which Gillespie would not yield: the capacity for meaningful religious response. Thus, Gillespie was prepared to concede some ground to the phrenologist. But he argued that even if some of phrenology's conclusions were correct, and even if certain skull sizes and shapes are possibly indicative of lesser intellectual or moral capability, did intellectual and moral ability have to be possessed to an incredibly high level before a person could become a Christian?<sup>15</sup> Gillespie's conclusion was that any difference of intellectual,

<sup>13</sup> Gillespie, *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical Principles*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> It is true that Combe had in fact accepted that conversions, religious advance and civilization (to a certain extent) among south sea islanders had taken place, and he wanted some skulls to examine; George Combe, *A System of Phrenology* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1825), pp. 474f. However Combe also stated quite clearly that the power of mental manifestation bore a proportion to the *size* of the cerebral organs, and the Hindu head was small, and the European large, 'in precise conformity with the different mental characters' (p. 465). Moreover, even the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of one of Combe's works stated: 'all other things being equal, the mental manifestations are vigorous in proportion to its *size*. ... the larger and more prominent the forehead, the greater will be the intellectual powers'. Combe: *Elements of Phrenology* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan & Stewart, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1873), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Gillespie, *Exposure of the Unchristian and Unphilosophical Principles*, p. 8.

moral or spiritual capacity which *may* result from differences in skull capacity could never be so great as to make a race unable to fully know, understand, or respond to the Gospel.

Robert Moffat was to have a similar approach to that of Gillespie, disagreeing with some of phrenology's conclusions but not necessarily with the whole science.<sup>16</sup> However, Moffat, from his actual contact in southern Africa with the San, Khoikhoi, Tswana, and Ndebele, took a much stronger line than Gillespie regarding the intellectual abilities of such races. Moffat argued for full equality of intellectual capacity between races, whereas Gillespie, who had no significant direct experience of other races, conceded the possibility that phrenological analysis might point to some peoples having lesser abilities. Moffat robustly rejected such thinking. He vigorously affirmed that Africans had an intellectual potential equal to any European.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. ROBERT MOFFAT AND THE PHRENOLOGY DEBATE

As a missionary who had committed his life to evangelism, and as someone with experience of actual conversions in the field, Moffat was concerned to dispel the prejudice that the indigenous peoples of South Africa had inadequate intellectual, emotional, spiritual, or social capacities. As already noted, when Moffat returned to Britain in 1839 the phrenology debate was in full swing especially in Edinburgh, and thus references to phrenology in Moffat's writings come from that period. It is particularly interesting that it was after Moffat visited Edinburgh in early November 1842, that he began to refer to the issues raised by phrenology.<sup>18</sup> Thus, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1843 Moffat preached in London, stating:

<sup>16</sup> Moffat, *Barbican Sermon*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1843, in: Campbell (ed.), *The Farewell Services of Robert Moffat in Edinburgh, Manchester and London* (London: Snow, 1843), p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> This was the general LMS viewpoint, not just Moffat's. The LMS southern Africa Superintendent John Philip wrote: 'So far as my observation extends, it appears to me that the natural capacity of the African is nothing inferior to that of the European. At our schools, the children of Hottentots, of Bushmen, of Caffres, and Bechuanas, are in no respect behind the children of European parents.' John Philip, 'Letter to J.B. Purney, May 1833', in *Letters of the American Missionaries: 1835-1838*, ed. by D. J. Kotze (Cape Town: The Van Riebeeck Society, 1950), p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> The first references to phrenology in Moffat's extant writings and speeches come in late 1842, near the end of his furlough. There are no references to phrenology in his 1842 book, *Missionary Labours*, which was written for the most part during 1841. But after Moffat's speaking tour to Edinburgh in the autumn of 1842, references to phrenology appear in his presentations. After



People [thought Bushmen to be madmen] because wise men and philosophers and phrenologists, who could measure by the inch all the bumps on the head (I am not reflecting on phrenology) had concluded that the Hottentot was only just an animal to fill up a gap between the ourang-outang<sup>19</sup> and the human species.<sup>20</sup>

A few months earlier, at Walworth Church in Manchester in late November 1842, shortly after his Edinburgh visit, Moffat had been even more forceful:

Most of you have heard an awful character of the Africans – that they were just the connecting link between the baboons, or the ourang-outang and the human species. People of the greatest gravity imaginable, after a sober enquiry into the subject, after a rigid investigation into all the angles and developments of the skulls of Scotchmen and Irishmen and Englishmen and Africans, and no one knows who else, brought together from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and placed under the judgment of some great phrenologist, have come gravely to the conclusion that while the heads of the rest were heads of men, the head of a Hottentot was not the head of a man, and therefore he got classified in the position in which they in their wisdom placed him, between the ourang-outang and the human species. The first missionaries, consequently, to the Hottentots, were regarded by such characters as enthusiasts; they were spoken of as fanatics because they went to preach the Gospel to beings, or rather to animals that were supposed to be incapable of comprehending the great doctrines of divine revelation. But let our Hottentot churches bear testimony.<sup>21</sup>

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returning to Africa he made several additional references, especially in his *Journals*.

<sup>19</sup> 'Ourang-outang' is Moffat's spelling. Modern orthography has 'orang-utan'. A century before Charles Darwin, Lord Monboddo in Scotland and Jean Jacques Rousseau in France had speculated that human beings had descended from primates such as the Orang-utan. Under this scheme even if various races were 'human', different races may be at a different stage of development (or 'evolution') from the primal type of ancestor. Hence the Monboddo/Rousseau school, in breaking away from the biblical idea that all humanity was essentially the same, brought in the possibility that there were immense variations of status depending upon different rates of progress. It was probably the Monboddo/Rousseau speculations which Moffat had heard of.

<sup>20</sup> Moffat, *Barbican Sermon*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1843, in: Campbell (ed.), *Farewell Services*, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> Moffat, *Walworth Address*, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1842, in: Campbell (ed.), *Farewell Services*, p. 70f.

The relatively small physical stature of the typical Khoikhoi [Hottentot], with correspondingly small skull size, had led some phrenologists to assume that they had lower intelligence, or even occupied a lower place in the order of living creatures. But Moffat rejected this reasoning on two counts: (a) he rejected it on the basis of his experience of native intelligence; and (b) he rejected it on the basis of an *ad hominem* argument that, even if this dubious phrenology were accepted, then the size of some African heads should actually indicate greater intelligence, not less. And here we can cite examples of Moffat arguing on both fronts:

**(a) Robert Moffat's view of 'Native Intelligence'**

In his Edinburgh address of the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1842, and probably mindful of Edinburgh being at the forefront of the phrenological debate through the publications by Combe and Gillespie, Moffat stated:

Let me assure you, after twenty-three years of experience of Africans, that they [Africans] *can* be taught and that they *will* be taught until that infamous libel that they are incapable of learning, with which they have been branded, shall have been forever wiped away.<sup>22</sup>

Moffat saw evidence of intellectual ability not only in the Tswana eagerness to learn, but also in the sophisticated nature of their societal arrangements:

Go into one of their public parliaments, and there you will see the profoundest order, while orator after orator, or senator – call them if you please – after senator, rises and describes the state of the nation, the different movements that are to be attended to, or plans that are to be devised, or exertions made, in order to save the state or the town.<sup>23</sup>

In his book *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, Moffat wrote that although the Tswana's general 'untidy' appearance did little to impress the outsider, they were in fact 'acute reasoners and observers of men and manners'.<sup>24</sup> Moffat's use of the term 'reasoner' is significant.

<sup>22</sup> Moffat, *Edinburgh Address*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov. 1842, in: Campbell (ed.), *Farewell Services*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Moffat, *Walworth Address*, 1843, in: Campbell (ed.), *Farewell Services*, p. 75. Moffat argued that the intellectual abilities of the Tswana (p. 75f.) and also the emotional qualities of the Tswana (p. 76f.), confirmed they were unmistakably human in the same sense as any European.

<sup>24</sup> Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London: John Snow, 1842), p.237.

In the Scottish Calvinism which moulded Moffat's thinking as a young man, one of the main features which distinguished a human being from other species was the ability to 'reason', with 'reason' being regarded as an essential component of the *Imago Dei* in humankind. *The Westminster Confession* described humanity as being created with 'reasonable and immortal souls'.<sup>25</sup> It was this 'reasonable and immortal soul' plus the gift of 'knowledge, righteousness and true holiness' which constituted the *Imago Dei*. Hence, stating that a people were 'acute reasoners' was recognizing them as true human beings with abilities and talents given by God, equal to those possessed by their European counterparts.

**(b) Robert Moffat's view of 'Cranial Capacity'**

But what of the popular view that small head size resulted in reduced intellectual ability? Here again Moffat was unequivocal. Moffat knew that small physical stature was certainly not the case with the Ndebele peoples, and Moffat exploited that point. Moffat argued that phrenologists, who made disparaging conclusions based on skull size, were contradicting their own logic when it came to the Ndebele. Moffat pointed out that *even if* skull size indicated intelligence – and his emphasis was very much 'even if' – then the average Ndebele must be the equal of the European in brainpower, if not more! Moffat stated that Moselekatshe, the chief of the Ndebele, had a head more advanced phrenologically than his own. Thus, in 1857, Moffat wrote in his *Journal*: 'I feel sure phrenologists would pronounce his developments (bumps) to be far superior to mine. They, with shaven head, can be seen to effect.'<sup>26</sup> In 1857, on the same missionary

<sup>25</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 4, section 2. See also the *Larger Catechism*, Question 17. The *Shorter Catechism*, Question 10, leaves out the phrase 'reasonable and immortal souls' and concentrates on God giving 'knowledge, righteousness and holiness'.

<sup>26</sup> Moffat, *Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1857, in J. P. R. Wallis (ed.), *The Matabele Journals of Robert Moffat, 1829-1860. Volume 2* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1945), p. 119. In fairness it should be stressed that Combe, certainly by 1856 (after sustained critique by missionary organisations), was aware that some Africans, especially Negroes, had large cranial capacity: 'The argument that the Negroes are incapable of civilization and freedom is prematurely urged ... The Negro head presents great varieties of moral and intellectual development, and I have seen several which appeared fully equal to the discharge of the ordinary duties of civilized men' (Combe: *The Constitution of Man considered in Relation to External Objects*, p. 272). And even as early as 1825 Combe had been aware of large Negro skulls: 'The skull of the Negro evidently rises in the scale of development of the moral and intellectual organs' (Combe: *A System of Phrenology* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, Second Edition, 1825), p.

journey to the Ndebele, Moffat added that some Ndebele had heads appropriate for a University don:

Those who listened to me today are my fellow creatures from the common stock; many, very many, having countenances and heads, one would think, enough to entitle them to the philosopher's or professor's chair.<sup>27</sup>

Moffat was at pains to stress that the Ndebele were not hampered by lack of intelligence. In Moffat's view, if they were hampered by anything, then it was the conservatism of their culture:

It has always been a mystery to me in human nature that people with capacities and heads that might stand beside our great geniuses cannot of themselves go a handbreadth beyond what was done by their earliest forefathers.<sup>28</sup>

Moffat wrote this after forty years in Africa, and there is nothing in his earlier writings to indicate that he ever thought differently. But what he now found was that he could refute the derogatory pseudo-scientific racism of some phrenologists on their own grounds. Moffat had no doubts regarding the innate intellectual capacity of indigenous Africans. In Mof-

468). However, Combe's argument was that the overall *shape* of the African skull, quite apart from its size, indicated a basic deficiency in intelligence and in an ability to reflect intellectually: 'One feature is very general in description of the African tribes; they are extremely superstitious. They purchase fetishes, or charms, at a high price, and believe them to be sure preservatives against all the evils of life. This character corresponds with the development which we observe in the Negro skull, for they exhibit much Hope, Veneration, and Wonder, with comparatively little reflecting power. Their defective Causality incapacitates them for tracing the relation of cause and effect, and their great Veneration, Hope and Wonder, render them prone to credulity' (Combe: *A System of Phrenology*, p. 470). Here Combe admits that the religious capacity was high, but because the intellectual capacity was low, then religion was manifested as *superstition* and not as a *rational faith*.

<sup>27</sup> Moffat, *Journal*, 11<sup>th</sup> October 1857, MJRM-2, p. 94. Moffat's view of the intellectual abilities of the African was quite different from the view of a man such as Carl Mauch who, in 1871, was the first European to see the Zimbabwe ruins. Mauch 'never imagined that these ruins might be the work of black men' (E. H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1934* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 2). Mauch speculated that Hebrew and Phoenician architects and artisans were responsible during the days of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Unlike Mauch, who came to Africa much later than Moffat, Moffat believed in the equal abilities of black and white.

<sup>28</sup> Moffat, *Journal*, 30<sup>th</sup> October 1857, MJRM-2, p. 108.

fat's view it was climate and circumstances which had resulted in them not 'fulfilling their potential', plus the major inhibiting factors of culture and tradition. In his view, these fostered a reluctance to utilize intellectual curiosity, and were why, in Moffat's phrase, these people did not go 'a handbreadth beyond what was done by their earliest forefathers.'

A modern cultural anthropologist would severely criticise Moffat's conclusion that culture and tradition had hampered the peoples he worked with in Africa. Today, Moffat would also be criticised for assuming that European culture was superior to African culture. Comparisons are odious, and cultural comparisons are particularly invidious. After all, European progress and development in technology and the fine arts did not necessarily mean that European Society had advanced in human dignity over other societies. Moffat, as a man of his time, assumed that it had. He assumed that sophisticated European culture had 'progressed' further than its simpler, less complex, African counterpart. But his comments must be understood from the perspective of his times. On this issue he can be criticised. But Moffat was crystal clear on the question of innate intelligence: all humanity – European, African, or other – had equal intellectual ability.

## CONCLUSION

Moffat's understanding of humanity, and therefore his overall anthropology, informed and moulded by his faith and his experience, was of an enlightened and liberal nature in comparison to the creeping racist philosophies of the 19th century. Moffat totally rejected any notion of an innate intellectual superiority of the European. And Moffat's view was the general missionary view. All humanity had immortal souls, created by one God, as one human family. This was why the missionaries campaigned against slavery; why they educated both males and females; and why they preached the Gospel of the Cross to all – whether black or white. A missionary such as Robert Moffat was often heavily paternalistic. But he would have had the same paternalistic attitudes to his flock if he had ministered in Scotland rather than in Africa. It was the manner of the times. Despite that paternalism, which is often at odds with 21st century culture, Robert Moffat and his fellow missionaries were not racist. This was because a belief in the equality of humanity, in terms of its intellectual and spiritual potential, was a pre-assumption of the thousands of missionaries who spent their lives in evangelism, fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission: '*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*'