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978-0-521-79729-0 - The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000

Colin Kidd

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Prologue: Race in the Eye of the Beholder*

The scriptures do not immediately present themselves as a racial battleground. Nor is race usually associated with theology. Yet it is the argument of this book that interpretations of the Bible and certain branches of the discipline of theology have played an influential role in shaping racial attitudes over the past four centuries. The focus of the book is not on religion as a social movement, but upon the intellectual history of the ways in which scripture has been mobilised in the pursuit of certain theories of race, ethnic identities, racial prejudices and anti-racist sentiments. Some aspects of this history show Christian theologians in a very positive light, but others exhibit pernicious exploitation of the scriptures to advance obnoxious strategies of racial subjugation. Indeed, much of what follows will seem shocking to most readers.

Nevertheless, history is not a straightforward matter of distributing praise or blame to our forebears. We of the present are no smarter than our ancestors; we differ from them rather in that we have been raised and live with a different set of cultural expectations. Readers who suspect that a vacuum of moral relativism lurks at the heart of this book are wrong; but a reticence about pronouncing judgement on the evils of the past is one of the proprieties of historical discourse which, it is hoped, the future will similarly accord the present. The role of the historian is to understand the intellectual universe which justified slavery, segregation and imperialism, however much he or she might deplore these phenomena; similarly, the historian hopes that his or her own generation will not be demonised by future generations for eating meat, say, or despoiling the environment – or some other offence of which the present is barely conscious. Indeed, if history shows anything, it is the failure of past generations to predict which aspects of their moral life future generations will find intolerable.

While it would seem helpful to offer clear definitions of race and racism at the outset of this study, the temptation needs to be resisted. It is unhelpful for either the author or the reader to start out with a set of

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rigidly defined concepts. In the work that follows the reader will perceive that race has sometimes been conceived over the past four centuries in terms of outright physical appearance, at others in terms of the assumed common descent of a group. Of course, these categories often overlapped significantly, but they neither were, nor are, ever entirely congruent. Moreover, the ethnic turn in the modern scholarship on race emphasises the distinction between race-as-ethnicity and an older emphasis upon race-as-biology. But people in the past did not make this same distinction. For instance, as Michael O'Brien has noted in his encyclopedic study of Southern intellectual life before the American Civil War, nineteenth-century conceptions of race were 'more loose jointed' than the hard-and-fast distinctions found in the modern literature on race, embracing both 'race-as-ethnicity' and 'race-as-biology'.<sup>1</sup> To pinpoint our subject matter too precisely at this stage with an overly tight definition of race would risk losing sight of a moving and fuzzy target. Similarly, racism or racial prejudice includes both an unthinking, instinctive dislike of other races as well as a more thought-out, reflective, doctrinal racialism. The reader will encounter both of these types of racism in the course of this work, as well as positions combining elements of both conventional xenophobia and more sophisticated kinds of racial theory. Indeed, racial theory did not always move in tandem with racist attitudes, and readers will come across some decidedly unexpected positions on race, which combine antipathy to racial hatred or oppression with a belief in the scientific reality and importance of racial distinctions.

Most accounts of race and racism focus upon power. They emphasise the ways in which people of one race fail to acknowledge the full humanity of peoples of different colour or physical appearance, and, as a result, come to oppress, enslave or dispossess the victims of racial prejudice. By contrast, the historical analysis that follows takes a very different tack. The subject matter of this book concerns not so much the physical powers of coercion enjoyed by one race over another as the ways in which the apparent 'facts' of race threatened the intellectual authority of Christian scripture. This involves re-centring the narrative of race, with the power of the Word displacing power relations as the focal point of our story. For example, my focus will not be on the nature of the encounters between white Christendom and the peoples beyond Europe, but on the questions of whether and how far such encounters compelled reinterpretations of scripture.

Nevertheless, it is important to enter a vital qualification at this point. The subject matter of this book is not the Bible itself, but its human

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interpreters. The Bible itself is largely colour-blind: racial differences rarely surface in its narratives. The Bible tells us very little about the racial appearance of the figures and groups who feature within it. Even in the Old Testament which is, of course, preoccupied with the doings of the people of Israel, there are very few attempts to engage – except on the level of religious observance – with the ethnic differences between the nation of Israel and the peoples and cultures of the surrounding world.

This prompts a further caveat, a significant matter of definition which does need to be clarified at the outset of this volume, and indeed provides the marrow of this very necessary prologue. Just as the Bible says nothing about race, and functions, in this respect, merely as a screen on to which its so-called interpreters project their racial attitudes, fears and fantasies, so race itself is a construct, an interpretation of nature rather than an unambiguous marker of basic natural differences within humankind.

Race is in the eye of the beholder; it does not enjoy a genuine claim to be regarded as a fact of nature. This assessment will probably surprise many readers. However much we might despise racial prejudice and the non-sensical boasts of racial superiority that accompany it, one might honestly reason, surely we observe real, natural racial differences around us all the time. Can we not trust our senses when we notice the obvious physical differences between a white European, say, and a black African? Clearly, there are physical differences between a typical white European and a typical African, but to divide humanity into clearly demarcated races upon that basis would be to build a system of classification on a biological mirage. This is because the biologist finds those observable racial differences which seem so obvious to the layperson to be superficial and misleading. A wide range of evidence drawn from the biological and medical sciences directly contradicts the layperson's assumption that external indicators of race are biologically meaningful. Race is quite literally no more than skin deep, as well as scientifically incoherent.

It turns out that by employing human characteristics other than colour, facial configuration and hair type – the mainstays of racial certainty – quite different 'racial' mappings begin to materialise. Fingerprints, for example, which enjoy considerable respect among the general public as an aid to criminal investigation, tell a story which runs counter to popular assumptions about race. It turns out that there are distinctive geographical variations in the patterns of loops, whorls and arches found in fingerprints. Loops are more common among most Europeans, black Africans and east Asians; whorls among groups such as Mongolians and

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Australian Aborigines; and arches among the native Khoisans of southern Africa and some central Europeans. The geographical map of fingerprint patterns confounds our expectations of racial classification.<sup>2</sup>

Cerumen – or ear wax – provides another decisive challenge to conventional racial categories. There are two distinctive types of human ear wax: a wet and sticky type controlled by a dominant gene, and a dry and flaky type determined by a recessive gene. A majority of Asians (80–90 per cent) have the dry type. On the other hand, ear wax once again unexpectedly groups together most Europeans and Africans as members of the ‘race’ of wet, sticky ear wax people. The biologist Stanley Garn recognised the peculiar racial significance of cerumen: ‘earwax polymorphism’, Garn realised, ‘separates east from west, and unites black and white Americans’.<sup>3</sup>

Alternatively – and more visibly than ear wax – body hair presents another quite different test, whereby a hairy ‘race’ based upon the hirsuteness of the male body would group together the unlikely combination of Europeans, Australian Aborigines and the Ainu people of northern Japan. Nor is body hair linked, it seems, in any straightforward way to climate. We might expect the peoples of cold climates to have more body hair than those of warm climates. But the peoples of the Middle East tend to have quite a lot of body hair, while Eskimos and the indigenous people of Tierra del Fuego tend to have little. By contrast, male baldness is also common among the hairy peoples of Europe and the Middle East, but is rare among black Africans, Asians and native Amerindians. Moreover, as Daniel Blackburn notes, ‘hair color transcends contemporary racial divisions’. Blond hair can be found among the Berbers of North Africa and Aborigines of central Australia, Papua New Guinea and Melanesia; nor, warns Blackburn, is this a product of ‘European admixture’. The form of hair also varies unpredictably: a taxonomy based on the straightness or curliness of hair would distinguish a ‘race’ of people with helical, or loosely curled, hair, including Europeans, Inuit and Ainu, from the straight-haired race of eastern Asians and native Amerindians and from a race of people with tightly curled hair drawn from sub-Saharan Africa, southern Arabia, India, Malaysia, the Philippines and New Guinea.<sup>4</sup>

Other tests further complicate matters. Possession of the lactase enzyme – which permits the digestion of the lactose in milk – is more common among milk-drinking peoples. Adult lactase is a feature of the populations of northern and central Europe, Arabia and the north of India, as well as some milk-drinking peoples in Africa, such as the Fulani, but does not tend to be found as commonly among other black African

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peoples or among the peoples of southern Europe, or among east Asians, Australian Aborigines or native Amerindians. As the biologist Jared Diamond has argued, 'races defined by body chemistry don't match races defined by skin color', Swedes, for example, belonging, in this instance, with the Fulani of West Africa in a 'lactase-positive race'. Even the study of urinary excretion provides unusual racial groupings. While east Asians tend to excrete a lot of the non-protein amino acid beta-aminoisobutyric acid in their urine, it is rarely excreted in any appreciable amount by Europeans or by Australian Aborigines.<sup>5</sup>

The map of blood groupings demonstrates the flimsy and subjective nature of conventional racial classification. One early survey of populations according to the A/B/O system of blood grouping led to some very odd conjunctions. The study classified populations according to the frequency found within them of the A and B groups, placing less emphasis upon the O grouping which is found to be common throughout the world. While Amerindian populations tended to monopolise the categories of 'low A, virtually no B' and 'moderate A, virtually no B', populations classified as 'high A, little B' included the Baffin Eskimo, Australian Aborigines, Basques, Polynesians and the Shoshone of Wyoming; 'fairly high A, some B' embraced English, Icelanders and Lapps as well as Melanesians from New Guinea; and 'high A, high B' encompassed Welsh, Italians, Thai, Finns, Japanese, Chinese and Egyptians. Such classifications defy easy racial categorisation. Moreover, Richard Lewontin's later study of variation in blood groups and other variations detected in serum and blood cells showed that most variation occurred not between regions of the world, but within single populations. Such studies explode notions of 'white blood', 'black blood' and the like which are the common currency of racist rhetoric. Indeed, scientists are aware of a wide range of human blood-group typologies beyond the A/B/O system – such as the MNS, Rh, Kell, Kidd, Duffy, Diego and Lutheran blood-group systems, which further complicates any sense – other than in ill-informed colloquialism and metaphor – of a connection between blood and race.<sup>6</sup>

The sickle-cell gene mutation, which provides resistance against malaria, is another invisible criterion for mapping human populations. It is common in Arabia, southern India and tropical Africa where malaria is found, but the sickle-cell gene is much rarer among the black population of southern Africa, such as the Xhosa, and absent, less surprisingly, in northern Europe. Once again, as with classification based upon the possession of lactase, component groupings of the presumed black

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African race are easily realigned with populations supposedly belonging to other races. Any notion of black African racial homogeneity does not withstand scientific scrutiny. After all, if stature, one of the more visible human traits, were proposed as a test of race, Africa would be found to contain some of the shortest people in the world – pygmies of four and half feet – as well as some of the tallest, the Nilotic peoples in East Africa having average heights of six and a half feet. Indeed, less visibly and more conclusively, geneticists have shown that there is more genetic variation within Africa than there is in the rest of the world put together. In this case, according to Diamond, ‘the primary races of humanity’ should then ‘consist of several African races’ – the Khoisan for one, and a few other groupings of African blacks and pygmies – ‘plus one race to encompass all peoples of all other continents’, with ‘Swedes, New Guineans, Japanese and Navajo’ all belonging to the same racial group. Other such tests similarly debunk the notion of a distinct Asiatic race. Epicanthic folds over the corners of the eye are found, for example, not only in the Far East, but also among the Khoisan of southern Africa, while the shovel-shaped incisors common in the front teeth of Asiatic populations are also found in Sweden. The world’s major racial groupings begin to look somewhat arbitrary and unscientific. Nor should we forget intra-racial variations within the indigenous population of the Americas. Contrast, for example, using the obvious criterion of body size, the heavy build of the Papago people of southern Arizona with the slender people found in the rainforests of South and Central America.<sup>7</sup>

Just as the study of DNA demolishes any notion of a particular black ‘African’ race, so too this field lays down a decisive challenge to the scientific legitimacy of race in general. According to the eminent geneticist Kenneth Kidd, ‘no human population is genetically homogenous – high levels of genetic variation are ubiquitous, even in small, isolated populations’. Such findings demolish the notions of racial purity much insisted upon by generations of racists. The examination of data on genetic variation between populations does, however, generate a pattern of geographical clustering. Nevertheless, the variations being mapped in this way are not abruptly discontinuous in their distribution and thus do nothing to validate the concept of race. Kidd concludes that ‘no definitive boundaries exist among the myriad variations in DNA’, and that, therefore, no ‘dramatically distinct “races” exist among human beings’. Generally speaking, according to Steve Olson, today’s genetic scientists estimate that approximately ‘85 per cent of the total amount of genetic variation in humans occurs within groups and only 15 per cent between

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groups'. Moreover, it seems likely that only a very small proportion of the genetic variation within human DNA is responsible for skin colour and other visible features of racial difference. It becomes easier to understand why a biologist such as Alain Corcos might argue – at first sight, implausibly – that races are mere 'figments of our imagination'. Common sense about races turns out on closer inspection to be a 'myth' of race.<sup>8</sup>

Although colour differences are real, of course, these turn out to be trivial and to constitute something of a red herring in the investigation of human populations. As the geneticist Steve Jones notes, 'colour says little about what lies under the skin'. There are myriad sorts of human variation – of which visible racial differences amount to only a small proportion. Moreover, the different types of variation do not move in parallel; much less do they generate any consistent sort of racial patterning. Colour is only one among the many biological variations found among humans. A chorus of commentators takes the view that, whatever the visible features of race, these do not conform to the various other improbable patterns and groupings which surface within the biological and medical sciences. James Shreeve concludes that 'there are no traits that are inherently, inevitably associated with one another. Morphological features *do* vary from region to region, but they do so independently, not in packaged sets.' Blackburn summarises the scientific evidence in a very similar way: 'Patterns of overlapping variation prevent the classification of humans into biological units, unless a very limited number of features are arbitrarily chosen.' Even if we resort to the traditional benchmarks of race, we still end up with confusion rather than a clear pattern. According to Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, 'The global map of skin color . . . bears little resemblance to the map of hair form or to the map of head shape. One can thus map races only if one selects one particular trait as more essential than others.' The selection of any one particular trait as the test of racial difference is intrinsically subjective. From a biological perspective, the evidence is so cross-grained that arbitrariness is intrinsic to any system of racial classification. Race, so the consensus runs, belongs firmly in the realm of human culture.<sup>9</sup>

The world of racial classification is, to all intents and purposes, a realm not of objective science, but of cultural subjectivity and creativity, for 'race' involves the arbitrary imposition of discontinuities on the continuous physical variation of the world's peoples. Nowhere is the disjunction between superficially objective science and cultural creativity more telling than in the calculus of – supposed – 'blood' fractions. Consider the fantasia of racial hybridity which Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry



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(1750–1819) set out with mathematical exactitude in his *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (composed between 1776 and 1789, and published in 1797). Saint-Méry produced a spectacularly detailed survey of the nuances of colour found among the mixed-race coloureds in what was then the French colony of Saint-Domingue, later to become Haiti. He started with the assumption that a pure white and a pure black was each composed, respectively, of 128 units of white blood or black blood. Between these ranges Saint-Méry traced a complex asymmetric gradation of racial classes composed of varying proportions of white and black blood. A 'sacatra', for example, was the class of mixed race which approximated closest to a pure black and was composed of 16 units of white blood, 112 of black; a 'griffe' came next with 32 units of white, 96 of black blood; then a 'marabou' with 48 units of white, 80 of black; a 'mulâtre' with equal shares of 64 units of both white and black blood; next a 'quarteron' with 96 units of white, 32 of black; a 'métif' with 112 units of white, 16 of black; a 'mamelouc' with 120 units of white and 8 of black; then, finally, with infinite care devoted to the detection of the minutest strains of black inheritance, a 'sang-mêlé', with 126 units of white and only 2 of black. With painstaking precision Saint-Méry also described the various pathways by which such racial classes might be formed. For example, he described twelve different combinations which resulted in a 'mulâtre', twenty different sorts of union which would result in a 'quarteron'. Nevertheless, such combinations revealed the crudity of the system: of the six combinations of métif, the component parts ranged between 104 and 112 parts white, and between 16 and 24 parts black; or, of the five ways of becoming a 'mamelouc', the end-product covered a spectrum between 116 and 120 parts white, and 8 and 12 parts black. Similarly, within such grey areas the child of a 'sacatra' and a 'nègresse', for example, would be composed of 8 units of white and 120 units of black; or the union of a 'marabou' and a 'griffonne' would yield offspring comprising 40 units of white, 88 of black; or a 'sang-mêlé' and a 'nègresse' would fall just to one side of inter-racial equilibrium, with 63 units of white inheritance, 65 of black. Without apparent irony, Saint-Méry apologised for the crude approximation of his system: 'l'on ne peut offrir que les approximations que j'ai établies'.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, this system stands at the extreme end of racialist fantasy, but it is – at bottom – no more ludicrous as science than the basic racial distinction between black and white. All theories of race – from the simplest and most obvious to the most sophisticated and contorted – are examples of cultural construction superimposed upon arbitrarily selected



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features of human variation. All racial taxonomies – whether popular or scientific – are the product not of nature but of the imagination combined with inherited cultural stereotyping as well – to be fair – as the empirical observation of genuine (though superficial, trivial and inconsequential) biological differences.

If it has seemed to most people an obvious matter of common sense that races exist as a fact of biology, then it should be equally obvious how many races there are. Tellingly, there has been no consensus among race scientists as to the number of races of humanity. The answers range from three to over a hundred races. Three was, of course, long a common answer, as one of the most influential taxonomies of race was the tripartite scheme derived from the story of Noah and his three sons. However, alongside this biblical model a wide range of ‘naturalistic’ systems of racial classification have sprung up since the age of the Enlightenment.

One of the first writers to pose an alternative to the biblical scheme of racial taxonomy was the French traveller François Bernier, who proposed instead four or five races. Similarly, the pioneering Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus categorised mankind into four basic races: Americanus, Europeus, Asiaticus and Afer. He also included additional categories for monsters and feral wild men, though he did not consider them properly ‘races’ as such. The leading racial theorist of late eighteenth-century Europe was the Göttingen anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), who began his career by subscribing to a four-part division of humanity similar to that of Linnaeus (1707–78). However, by the third edition of his canonical work of racial classification, *De generis humani varietate*, he had divided mankind into five basic racial types: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malay and American. The Caucasian, Blumenbach argued, had been the original racial form of mankind, of which the four later types were degenerations. The Ethiopian and the Mongolian stood at the two extremes of degeneration, with Malays intermediate between Caucasians and Ethiopians, and Americans, similarly, a point of racial degeneracy midway between the white Caucasian norm and the extreme of Mongolian degeneration. The influential nineteenth-century German ethnologist Oscar Peschel (1826–75) divided mankind into seven racial groups: Australasians, Papuans, Mongoloids, Dravidians, Bushmen of southern Africa, Negroids and Mediterraneans. For some ethnologists, even the white people of Europe did not form a homogenous mass. W. Z. Ripley (1867–1941), the eminent American anthropologist and economist, distinguished three different races in Europe – the Nordic or Teutonic, the Alpine and the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup>

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Among modern scientists who retained some adherence to the notion of racial classification there is no consensus. Stanley Garn listed nine 'geographical races' – 'Amerindian, Polynesian, Micronesian, Melanesian-Papuan, Australian, Asiatic, Indian, European, African' – and no less than thirty-two 'local races' – 'Northwest European, Northeast European, Alpine, Mediterranean, Iranian, East African, Sudanese, Forest Negro, Bantu, Turkic, Tibetan, North Chinese, Extreme Mongoloid, Southeast Asiatic, Hindu, Dravidian, North American, Central American, Caribbean, South American, Fuegian, Lapp, Pacific Negrito, African Pygmy, Eskimo, Ainu, Murrayian Australian and Carpenterian Australian, Bushmen and Hottentots, North American Colored, South African Colored, Ladino, Neo-Hawaiian'. On the other hand, William Boyd disaggregated humanity into thirteen races in seven groups. Boyd's European group included the Early European, Lapp, North-West European, East and Central European and Mediterranean races; outside Europe the other races were the African, Asian, Indo-Dravidian, American Indian, Indonesian, Melanesian, Polynesian and Australian races.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, scientific observers of race have never been able to agree about the number of different races of humankind, nor about the characteristics that determine such groupings. Such disagreements do not mean that the scientific taxonomy of races is a holy grail which has still to be achieved, but that such a quest is, in fact, a fool's errand. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, a leading pioneer in the application of genetics to the study of 'race' and ethnicity, writes of the 'absurdity of imposing an artificial discontinuity on a phenomenon that is very nearly continuous'. Racial taxonomy is, of course, a scientific chimera.<sup>13</sup>

Even bureaucracies, which tend to be associated in public opinion with rigorous and rational approaches to matters of social policy are, when it comes to issues of racial classification, no less prone to creative and unscientific whimsy than other institutions or indeed than the public at large. The racial classifications employed by the United States government in its decennial censuses bear eloquent witness to the instability of racial categories. Subcontinentals from India were classed as 'Hindu' in three censuses between 1920 and 1940, in the following three counts as white, and from 1980 as 'Asian'. Mexicans were counted as white before 1930 when they were given their own category, which led to protests from the Mexican government; as a result they were once again enumerated as whites, though from 1970 a new ethnic category of Hispanic was added to the census. Today, the census includes five primary race categories – white, black, Hawaiian/Pacific islander, Asian, native American/Alaskan – with a