

Why This Old Racism?

The Intersection of Race and Religion in Ancient and Modern Times

Guy Lancaster, Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture

Review Essay

And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them (2 Nephi 5:1).

[1] So says the Book of Mormon, anyway, offering forth an explanation as to the skin color of the Native Americans, one that explicitly correlates religious practices and the one physical marker most often associated with race – they turned from the Lord, and the Lord thus made them dark so that they would not be enticing to those who remained faithful to God. But there is hope for these Lamanites, as they are called in this scripture:

And the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them; wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which was had among their fathers. And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and delightsome people (2 Nephi 30:5-6).

Darkness, described here, is not simply linked to physical appearance but to the way in which one views the world, but of particular interest with regard to this book is that the majority of pre-1981 editions of the Book of Mormon read “a white and delightsome people,” a textual variant which suggests that, by reintegrating themselves with “true”

religion of their people, the Lamanites might regain their white skin, the skin that marks one as a follower of God.

[2] Keep this in mind. We will return to it later.

Early Christian Conceptions of Race

[3] “Early Christians used ethnic reasoning to legitimate various forms of Christianness as the universal, most authentic manifestation of humanity, and it offered Christians both a way to define themselves relative to ‘outsiders’ and to compete with other ‘insiders’ to assert the superiority of their varying versions of Christianness,” writes Denise Kimber Buell in *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (2), which constitutes a tremendous addition to the scholarship that will no doubt influence not only future studies of early Christianity but also the study of Christianity’s influence throughout the world. Indeed, much of the rhetoric of the Christian experience, from its earliest days until today, presents a thoroughly racialized view of the world, one that we have not always been able to recognize given that these modes of thinking are so omnipresent, constituting in part the intellectual foundation of the Western world, as to be rendered invisible; also, there is the reluctance to use as a framework of interpreting earlier times the very modern categories of race and ethnicity, or at least our modern understandings of what those categories constitute. But the disparity between earlier understandings of race and our own does not mean that race as a metaphor cannot be used in order to illuminate the rhetorical strategies utilized by early Christians.

[4] Kimber outlines four facets of the use of ethnic reasoning in early Christianity:

1. That race and ethnicity were “often deemed to be produced and indicated by religious practices.”
2. Which fact makes membership in a *genos* or *ethnos* as much a mutable reality as it is a matter of birth or blood.
3. That “this juxtaposition of fluidity and fixity enabled early Christians to use ethnic reasoning to make universalizing claims, arguing that everyone can, and thus ought to, become a Christian.”
4. And that Christians used ethnic reasoning to compete with one another, as a means of delineating orthodoxy and heresy (2-3).

[5] Of course, Christianity did by no means invent ethnic reasoning, which was “a valuable rhetorical strategy for early Christian authors in part because religiosity and race were already conceivable as interrelated in Roman-period texts, institutional practices, and policies, as well as in early texts used by Roman-period authors” (35). Buell brings forth the example of Caracalla’s 212 C.E. edict calling for the expulsion of Egyptians from Alexandria, an edict defining Egyptians primarily according to their occupation and social status. One can ascribe to ethnicity or race a fixed quality, usually linked to genealogical claims that “function to support assertions of identity as fixed, inherent, [and] primordial,” or one can look at ethnicity as primarily malleable and even possibly attainable, stressing “the centrality of common purpose, common language or education (*paideia*), way of life, or religious practices” (40-41). As the author makes clear, Romans often considered religion an

ethnoracial trait, and Jews and Christians had a model of this very dynamic in Abraham, who began an entirely new people (that is, he ceased being a Chaldean) through the alteration of his religious practices (like the aforementioned Lamanites) – and, as Paul notes, gentiles acquire Abraham as an ancestor through Christ. Ethnicity is perceived as both fixed and fluid, depending upon the situation.

[6] Buell highlights how central religion is to ethnic identity, noting, “Any perceived or unsanctioned variations of religious belief or practice – any fluidity – is decried as a potential threat to the coherency of the group” (48). This comes to bear later with regard to reactions toward heresy, but it also illustrates just why Roman authorities found the refusal of Christians to carry out simple acts of sacrifice – acts that defined Romanness – so puzzling and disreputable. It also underscores the coalitional dynamics that Pascal Boyer finds at work in modern fundamentalism:

[A] good part of fundamentalist violence is directed not at the external world but at other members of the same cultural, religious communities. The most imperious domination is exerted inside the community: by leaders over mere members, by dedicated followers over noncommitted people, and above all by men over women . . . [C]oalitional dynamics would predict that whatever outsiders do is of little concern to fundamentalists. What matters is what other members of the group are likely to do (295).

For Romans, this concerned the traditional practices of the Roman people; for Christians, this was a matter of proper belief.

[7] Christians, being members of a new religion, an innovation, appealed to the past for their self-identity, just as those embodying new religious movements have often done (Wicca is a return to ancestral nature religions, Pentecostalism is a return to the practices of the apostolic Church, etc.). “Just as Augustan innovations were clothed in the language of restoration, so too did Christians manage perceptions about their teachings and practices in the language of restoration – of Israel and/or all humanity,” writes Buell (70). One of the ways in which Christians claim to be restoring ancient Israel is through a careful manipulation of fixed and fluid notions and ethnicity and descent:

By depicting an alternative definition of race as based on descent “according to the flesh,” Justin constructs a foil for his argument that the Christian race is formed through faith in Christ and obedience to a “universal” law. That is, the idea of Jewishness as physically determined follows rather than precedes Justin’s assertion that Christians constitute a people. He claims that his Jewish interlocutors mistake flesh and blood for the *correct* essence of faith, spirit, and obedience to God. Justin resituates the notion of an ethnoracial essence (something “fixed”) by defining faith, not blood, as the essence of Christianness. It is the conceptualization of peoplehood that undergoes transformation, not the notion of membership in a people (98)

Thus Christian supercessionism can “be understood in part as a product of the Christian claim to embody themselves authentically as the *people* of God precisely through their religious practices” (115). Indeed, not only do early Christians imagine themselves as

precursors and inheritors of Jewish identity but of a fundamental human identity as well, with Christianness having “an ‘essence’ (a fixed content) that can be acquired,” thus defining “conversion as both the transformation of one’s ethnicity and the restoration of one’s true identity. And by portraying this transformation as available to all, Christians universalized this ethnoracial transformation” (138).

[8] Indeed, Christian attacks against the heterodox, such as the Gnostics, often revolved around presenting Gnostic beliefs in light of this dichotomy of fixity/fluidity – much in the manner that Christians characterized Jews. The chief crime of Gnostics, Christian apologists argued, was that they limited salvation to the elect; that is, they were racial and religious particularists:

Clement and Origen both emphasized universal access to salvation, and they linked this to a universal human capacity for free will. . . For both, becoming a Christian could be imagined as an ethnoracial transformation accomplished by using one’s free will wisely. This transformation entails becoming a member of God’s people. Clement contrasted this view with what he construes as its alternative: namely, the view that certain humans are “naturally” related to and thus saved by God (119–120).

The argument is one over who rightfully holds the title as the people of God, and it is essentially an ethnic argument.

[9] Thus, even though scholars have long argued that the true accomplishment of Christianity was to erase race as a factor in one’s worth, to open the doors of salvation to all humankind and not a select few, it is bordering on fatuous to argue that race simply disappeared from the picture. The creation of a universalist view of peoplehood relied upon ethnic reasoning that positioned this new group in contrast to holdouts against their own universal potential. Christians therefore became a new race and behaved and thought as such.

Universality and Whiteness

[10] The applicability of Buell’s work, however, does not lie simply in an analysis of a past over 1,000 years gone. She serves to illuminate trends in the modern era, trends that exist simply because of the continued centrality of Christian modes of thought in our culture.

[11] The Christian experience has, perhaps, allowed us to imagine all religions as universal. That is to say that the rhetoric of Christianity is that of a religion not only capable of encompassing all races of humankind but one destined to do so – all races reach their ultimate expression as part and parcel of the body of Christ. Followers thus imagine that other religions must have similar ideologies and similar goals – a universal worldview competing for the souls of the human race. What falls into our category of “proper” religion is thus not limited to a particular tribe or group of people but can cross racial and cultural boundaries. St. Thomas can venture to India to bring the Gospel to its people, and conversely The Beatles can venture there to learn from the Maharishi.

[12] Most of us who thus imagine that the religious experience is that which transcends provincial boundaries take issue with those who assert otherwise, who adhere to a

particularist worldview. We often equate that worldview with the xenophobic ideologies of Christian Identity's belief that non-white equals non-human or Asatru's right-wing fringe with its Nordic, neo-Nazi system of paganism or the black separatist rhetoric of the Nation of Islam. Early anthropologists, unabashed Romanticists, and the free market have all conspired to universalize the religious systems of indigenous people who probably never imagined their rituals possessive of any meaning outside their tribal circles – today, major bookstores are stocked with tomes on Navajo spirituality and Tlingit shamanism written specifically for the urban American practitioner. Particulars are to be condemned.

[13] Thus the Jews.

[14] As we have noted regarding Buell's fine book, Christian universalism arose out of a conscious contrast to an imagined Jewish particularism, the results of which have been catastrophic, related as they are to a Christian mythologizing of Jewish identity. Unlike pagans or communists or Muslims or the homosexual conspiracy of fundamentalist rants, the Jews have never been assumed to be a threat to Christianity due to a relentless proselytizing on their part, rabbis in the streets and on the radio seeking converts; rather, it is precisely because they do not, because they have resisted the pressure to surrender their peoplehood in the face of the universal and "people-less" Christian promise. It is part of the stress of Christian mythologizing of the Jews: they were God's chosen people set apart by their beliefs and praxis, but now God has offered his peoplehood to all races and tribes, making the particular people a universal one, even as this universal tribe is to remain particular and set off from the world – a city on a hill, open to all. More than that, their scriptures and heritage testifies to the reality of Christ, yet they remain resolute in their Jewishness. Yet in many ways, this stubbornness keeps them as God's chosen people in the Christian imagination, which has historically viewed the plight of the Jews through the same deuteronomistic lens that underlies much of the Hebrew scriptures: that is, what happens to them testifies to God's approbation or disapprobation. Thus is born what Stephen R. Haynes calls the "witness-people myth," in which Jews become signs and symbols for Christians, "theological types and antitypes, not to mention cultural and literary stereotypes," rather than "real individuals with the same hopes, failures and foibles as non-Jews" (5).

[15] Let us return for the moment to those poor, swarthy Lamanites stuck in their dark and godless bodies. What an interesting metaphor. Much of American history has essentially been the quest of its underclass to achieve a white identity – the hope and dream of Roxy for her son in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. As Michael Phillips has noted, the eschatological vision of Cyrus Scofield, who advanced a modern permutation of the witness-people myth, "gave modern Jews a pivotal role in God's plan of salvation and even conceded Jews a path to salvation outside Christianity," thus granting them a whiteness conditional in many places (Dallas being the center of Phillips's study) upon Jewish approbation for the white elite ends, such as limiting the effects of the modern civil rights movement (51). "The process of Americanization in Dallas," writes Phillips, "thus involved trading a specific culture for an identity based on both the absence of blackness and contempt for people of color" (75). Mexican Americans got in on the game, as did poor whites, who could find themselves facing such labels as "white trash" (that is, not of legitimate, Anglo-Saxon stock) if they advocated against elite rule (like Caracalla's Egyptians). Southern Catholics likewise worked to gain their white identity in a hostile region by holding, for example, Christ the King

observances centering “on the themes of anti-communism and patriotism and the deleterious impact of modern secular society” (Moore: 53); anti-Catholicism only waned in the South with the advent of the modern civil rights movement, which brought together white Southerners across the religious spectrum as it made one creed more important than all others – that of white supremacy.

[16] As we can see, racial identity in the American experience is thus malleable, is often predicated along the axis of practice, and that practice often includes religious beliefs. The closer you are to the Protestant ideal that is the foundation of American white identity, the more likely you are to be accorded some tentative whiteness from on high. Whiteness can generously subsume, but it cannot be subsumed – rather like the Christian doctrine of supersessionism. Eliza R. L. McGraw noted, regarding the Southern Baptist Convention’s public evangelism of the Jews:

Jewishness, the rhetoric implies, already lies within Southern Baptist belief. If Jewish people would accept Jesus as a messiah, they could be subsumed beneath the canopy of Southern Baptist doctrine, and the Convention would have proof for its contention that its brand of Christianity supersedes Judaism. Missionaries for the SBC attempt to claim Jewishness specifically to prove that the Second Coming is at hand, but their overweening mission points toward a desire to own Jewishness and make it safe for Southern Baptists (96).

[17] White is our American universal. We are suspicious of particulars. White is our Christianity. Even an author such as S. Steve Kang, who tries to present a “churchly plural reading of scripture,” falls into this mode of thinking when, attempting to argue that different cultures bring their own experiences to the reading of Christian sacred texts, he notes that, for example,

African American women read Scripture communally to set one another free and to mend wronged relationships in Jesus Christ, who liberates all God’s people from bondage. Thus, they approach scriptural reading as an essential part of their God-given kingdom vocation to free the church – both the oppressed and the oppressors – from sexism, classism, and racism that have been and continue to be the fabric of society and of the church (231).

Kang does not mean to do so, but his words envision black women acting upon the church as if outside it – that there is a norm for the church that can, ever so graciously, include these women, but this is a norm not in their likeness.

[18] “And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and delightsome people”

[19] We imagine “white” as the absence of race. We imagine “Christian” as the absence of a people. And yet we use ethnic reasoning to advance these blank notions of universality.

[20] An aside on universalism: as Regina M. Schwartz has written, “Universalism comes in different shapes, as an ideal of genuine toleration, as an effort to protect universal rights, and as a kind of imperialism that insists that we are all one and that demands an obliteration of difference” (88). We have seen the latter in the anti-heretical rhetoric of the early Christians, in which universalism automatically equated uniformity. We have seen it in the desire of the Southern Baptist Convention to convert the Jews. And we have seen it in the Dallas elite and their granting of conditional whiteness to those groups who adhered to the hegemonic agenda. And that last one is most interesting, because it shows just how the white and Christian mind has reacted to an ethnic diversity that refuses to be simplified along the traditional black/white dichotomy. It is not that we cannot imagine the reality of other races as they are – but rather we are beset by a fundamental division between the universal and the particular. Not so ancient laws as to what blood quantum qualified someone as black speak to the particularity with which we have historically viewed the descendants of Africans in this country – and do so still.

[21] It makes one wonder . . . Buell notes, with regard to early Christianity’s concern for “racial” (ideological) purity, that women were “viewed as especially susceptible to heresy and Judaizing” (28). It recalls recent American history, when anti-miscegenation laws meant that “white women were given the burden of upholding white ‘racial purity.’ Preventing relationships between black men and white women became the responsibility not only of the state but more immediately of white men, who in their role as fathers, brothers, and husbands were expected to control the behavior of women in their family” (Romano: 5). Using Buell’s analysis of Christian ethnic reasoning, it becomes easy to see “race mixing” as a kind of heresy, the implantation of foreign ancestors upon a pure and sacred tree. Gender, after all, is another level of the universal/particular divide (we do generalize about “mankind”) in which the male is made the universal; as Gerda Lerner notes, the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve “defines Woman in a very special way as a ‘natural’ part of man, flesh of his flesh, in a relationship which is a peculiar inversion of the only human relationship in which such a statement can be made, namely, the relationship of mother to child” (181). The female is subsumed by the male, just as the Jewish is by the Christian. The particular, the women (white women, in this case), must be on guard that they do not infect themselves with further particularization – that of color; the white man is simply immune from such ontological alternations in his nature via heterosexual contact with those of other races. Whether or not people through the ages have made the conscious connection, they have treated race mixing as heresy: “In 1900, religious writer Charles Carol referred to miscegenation as ‘the greatest of all sins’ and to the mulatto as the offspring of an unnatural relationship. Carol suggested that mulattos were the rapists and criminals of his time and questioned whether or not they had the right to live” (Robinson 85). How very interesting that this religious writer should replace blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, described in the New Testament as the one unforgivable sin (and the ultimate act of heresy), with miscegenation. And how very interesting that he attacks the mulatto, the “heretic,” rather than this person’s darker-skinned father, calling to mind Boyer’s statement that fundamentalists are far more concerned with in-group behavior than out-group – for Carol, the mulatto is the absolute sign of in-group misbehavior.

Religious and Ethnic Diversity in the American West

[22] Let us see if these dichotomies hold true by taking a trip out west.

[23] The American West, probably more than any other region of this country, is conscious of the reality of a non-binary diversity. In the South, to contrast, most Indian groups were quickly extirpated, and non-white minorities – Hispanics, Chinese, Jews – remained marginalized enough so as not to interfere with the imagined bigger picture. However, in the West, those Indians remained a viable population; pre-American Hispanic settlers were still on the scene; and Asian immigrants in significant numbers brought yet another racial dynamic to the region. As Fay Botham and Sara M. Patterson, editors of *Race, Religion, Region: Landscapes of Encounter in the American West*, a collection on the religious experiences of the American West, note, “In the American West, the traditional dichotomies of race and religion – black-white, Christian–non Christian – fracture along numerous fault lines” due to the racial and religious convergence of so many groups (3). The West provides an important minority report when it comes to this nation’s consciousness of itself:

The impulse that turns Americans eastward for their histories of race and religion also directs them toward the east to understand the formation of American identity. The common conception that American identity began with the thirteen English colonies demonstrates the basic belief that we are indeed an eastern nation. We tend to take the West into account only as its territories were subsumed under the United States government (8–9).

[24] So the question arises, do the traditional twin strategies of Christian rhetoric regarding the fixity and fluidity of race survive in an area where traditional dichotomies are not so easily established? The answer is yes.

[25] Let us begin with an extreme example, as is presented in Daniel Cady’s “Bringing in the Sheets: Robert Shuler, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Southernization of Southern California,” which outlines “the ways in which Midwestern transplants [to California] embraced both white southerners and some of the more contentious elements of white southern culture in the years before World War I” (40). Trinity Methodist, the center of white southern culture in Los Angeles, “offered transplanted southerners the opportunity to worship in accordance with ‘old time’ southern religion. Parishioners could avoid the liberalism they believed infected most northern churches” (43); this harkens back to the restorationist discourse examined by Buell. As Cady notes, in Los Angeles, “the evidence suggests that most klaverns maintained an intense identification with the Klan of Reconstruction. Through a combination of ritual, revisionist history, and popular culture, Klan neophytes fostered an understanding of post-bellum white southern society as entirely noble” (45), rather like early Christians (or modern Christians) identifying with the early Israelites. Shuler himself “went so far as to equate the nation’s Klansmen, Klanswomen, and Junior Klansmen with Jesus’ twelve disciples” and called upon the Klan to “battle to save the entire world,” exhibiting both the restorationist tendencies as well as the universalist (50).

[26] Trinity Methodist, the center of this activity, drew not merely poor Southerners, “not from top or bottom but from the middle of Los Angeles society,” including many people with professional careers, and that many non-Southerners found themselves drawn to an

organization promising the revitalization of Southern ideals suggests that they shared a worldview in which ancestry was more fluid than simple genealogy (58). Though typically viewed as a primarily racist organization, the Klan actually exercised a fluid view of race, one determined primarily by action: “Thus in the name of Americanism, Shuler and the Klan attacked not only immigrants but unions, modernism, and even the Social Gospel” (54). However, where early Christians claimed that Jews (and heretics such as Gnostics) viewed their ethno-religious identities as intrinsic, or fixed, Shuler and his cohorts claimed their own belief in the fixity of Jewish identity, thus adopting an ontological perception that was part and parcel of their rhetorical strategy: “To both Shuler and the Klan, the transformation of Jewish Americans into 100 percent Americans was deemed impossible” (54). James Carroll’s thesis that anti-Jewish rhetoric in Christianity’s early centuries paved the way for a transformed view of Jews themselves as innately other is perhaps as good an explanation as any for this dynamic.

[27] The Klan is, by no means, the only group in the American West operating under the presumed auspices of Christ, but in the actions of groups less hostile to the perennial “other,” we still uncover Christian ethnic reasoning. In “Going Against the Grain: Multiculturalism and the Fate of the Social Gospel in 1920s Los Angeles,” William Deverell and Mark Wild examine the history of the Church of All Nations, an attempted multicultural religious body begun by G. Bromley Oxnam. As a community, it focused more on the social aspect of the church community – “religious devotion, services, or ministry were not necessarily key components of Oxnam’s leadership” (23). The authors describe the organization “as another iteration of the classic western desire for a more perfect community, albeit one that claimed to reject the racist baggage characteristic of so many other efforts” (26). Though emphasis upon the Social Gospel movement meant lessening the centrality of Christ, it was only done so with the aim of furthering that Christian universalism, thus recalling early Christian rhetoric of the universal transformation of all races into one race via Christ.

[28] A very interesting example of this expressed transformation can be found in Laurie Maffly-Kipp’s “Engaging Habits and Besotted Idolatry: Viewing Chinese Religions in the American West.” In two images therein created by Christian missionaries, three Chinese students pouring over volumes of Christian teaching are presented with fairly Caucasian features: “Race has been at least partially erased as a feature of this encounter” (65). Is this perhaps because they are studying Christianity and so, in the eyes of their Christian teachers, are not as alien as before, are being subsumed into a greater race? The fluidity of racial and religious identity is again demonstrated in Protestant reaction to the many aspects of the Chinese work ethic, “who consistently noted those features as evidence that the Chinese were halfway to Christianity already” (86).

[29] The Mormons show up as supreme exemplars of ethnic reasoning in Armand L. Mauss’s “Children of Ham and Children of Abraham: The Construction and Deconstruction of Ethnic Identities in the Mormon Heartland.” From their early experiences up to the settlement in Utah, Mormons constructed “a framework of divine definitions about certain lineages. The Latter-day Saints were of Israelite lineage, not merely symbolically or ‘by adoption,’ but actually chosen by God in a premortal life to enter the world as literal Israelites, mainly through the lineage of Ephraim” (117). Here, they go beyond early

Christian fluidity for a fixity that trumps everything. The notion of racial fixity as a determinant of religious worth manifested itself in Mormon restrictions on the priesthood – namely, that African Americans could not qualify for it based upon their perceived nature as descendants of Cain. However:

All in all, the twenty-first-century Mormon positions on race have increasingly emphasized universal outreach and inclusion. One rarely sees in recently Mormon literature or pulpit discourse any reference to lineage as a relevant category among God’s children. The church proclaims that all who accept Christ have become the spiritual children of Abraham, and all who are yet to be converted enjoy the same potential (120).

[30] Interestingly, ethnic reasoning in the West has not always been used to advance the cause of Christianity, as Tisa Wenger uncovers in “Modernists, Pueblo Indians, and the Politics of Primitivism.” “Primitivism,” Wenger writes, “predisposed modernist reformers to understand Indians as timeless and unchanging representatives of an ancient race, ultimately incapable of adapting to modern America and in need of benevolent protection from it” (102). Here, we have the restorationist rhetoric usually used by Christians to claim the authority of ancestry used instead for the other, while that other remains fixed in identity, “incapable of adapting.” However, this fixity is identified with spirituality rather than with the “world of the flesh,” as it was with the Jews in early Christian rhetoric, for it is the modern world that has gone awry. In this framework, assimilation and Americanization equaled heresy in the eyes of reformers espousing primitivist rhetoric: “[P]rimitivism identified the Indians as an ancient, timeless, and spiritual race whose purity needed to be protected. . . For [Commissioner of Indian Affairs John] Collier, religion was central to their ‘primitive’ racial identity. He wrote that the Indians’ religion was ‘their original racial fountainhead’” (107).

[31] This survey does not cover every essay in *Race, Religion, Region*, but I hope it has been enough to demonstrate the applicability of Buell’s analysis of early Christian ethnic reasoning to a study of modern religion. *Race, Religion, Region* is an excellent volume that, in its own right, ably examines this tripartite intersection in the American West.

Mysticism and the End of Ethnic Reasoning

[32] There is, of course, a problem here.

[33] Subtle analyses of race and religion rarely completely satisfy readers, particularly American readers, particularly Christian American readers, for race, as we say, is our number one cultural problem. We often speak of it as a proper noun – Problem. It is a problem for Americans because our history of racial conflict simply will not remain history but keeps coming back up, reminding us that we have not created the perfect and colorblind nation we like to advertise to the world. It is a problem for Christians because this history of racial conflict has resulted in primarily monochromatic congregations that simply do not seem adequate representations of the ideal of the Body of Christ.

[34] The problem of this Problem lies in our inability to overcome symbols. As Stephen Haynes noted above, many Christians are unable to perceive of Jews as anything other than representations of some archetypal Jew who symbolizes either the wicked ways of the world

or the promise of Christ's return. This is a consequence of ethnic reasoning. Joseph Smith's belief that the Indians were simply Jews who had acquired their swarthy skin due to their turning away from the true God made Indians symbols of possible redemption, just as they were symbols of savagery in need of correction for other assimilationists. Catholics in the American South were symbols of foreignness until the Civil Rights movement contrasted them with the even stronger symbol of black uprising.

[35] That is ethnic reasoning at work. Ethnic reasoning transforms entire peoples into symbols, representations of ideologies or lifestyles, depending upon the needs of the one doing the reasoning. How do we get past this and begin working on the skills needed to envision individuals not through the group lens but through the individual? Is there a prescription one can offer, a remedy to ethnic reasoning and the evils that have been perpetrated as a result of it?

[36] I think so. First, we have to recognize that ethnic reasoning depends upon – and is strengthened by – the tradition of literacy. As Jack Goody has noted, “You cannot practice Asante religion unless you are an Asante; and what is Asante religion now may be very different from Asante religion one hundred years ago. Literate religion on the other hand, at least alphabetically literate ones, are generally religions of conversion, not simply religions of birth” (5). Albert Furtwangler has done an admirable job of detailing how difficult a time Christian missionaries had in the Pacific Northwest due to the difference between literate and oral cultures. For one, the Indians there had no concept of an immutable law, which is a feature of the literate cultures in which words can be preserved, unchanged, across the generations. And without law, there was no sense of law having been broken, no sense of a need for atonement; notions of doctrine mattered less to Indian communities than did a sense of collective well-being: “In such a world, the eternal welfare of an individual soul mattered much less than the immediate well-being of entire households and villages. When the missionaries tried to impart ideas of personal repentance and salvation, they had to pry an individual out of this tightly-linked situation, just to make him an individual in the first place, an isolated, reader-like kind of person” (119). In some ways, ethnic reasoning serves as a compensatory measure for the individual who is thus stripped of his organic community – it is the adoption of a community linked by soteriological connections rather than practical or cultural ones.

[37] As Richard Fletcher has written, “People can entertain the notion of ‘a new religion’ only when they are accustomed to the idea of religious pluralism” (17). The same holds true for religious tenets. Universalism as a religious tenet, a mode of ethnic reasoning, can only exist in contrast with others. Furtwangler noted:

it seems to follow that whether converts become literate or not, the first conversions start a radical upheaval in oral societies. A one-way movement has to begin once a literate evangelist manages to attract even one or two adherents. Once those first conversions take place, the society is evidently divided and it is impossible to hold to a universal way any longer. [“Universal” in this case meaning that practice which held total sway within particular cultural confines.] Adhering to the old ways becomes a matter of choice, too . . . (179).

And that choice moves recalcitrant individuals that much closer into the realm of literate thinking, whether they will it or not. The old ways thus become components of a religion of conversion.

[38] Even more pernicious, literacy allows for the codification of symbol systems for a mass audience. As a vehicle for ethnic reasoning, it allows for the replication of ideas as to another's ontological state outside the experiential realm. Christians, for example, can read all about the nature of the Jew without ever having met one, and the weight of that symbology makes seeing a Jew as an actual human, not a sign for something else, much more difficult. Literacy allows for a massive "tree of talking," to use Tor Nørretranders's communicative model.

[39] To communicate, a person "has to summarize an experience, an emotion, or a memory. Lots of information gets discarded, just as in a computation . . . [This discarded information Nørretranders calls *exformation*.] When her mental state is summarized through the discarding of a whole load of information [a process called *incitation*], there are some words left that can be said." When these words are said, in the mind of the listener, there occurs the process of *excitation* in which the information received is "unfurled into more information" (110–111). For example, if I am trying to describe to a friend of a woman I met whom I found to be quite feisty, I might condense all my impressions and refer to her as a young filly; however, if my friend's only experience with horses was being trampled by one in the fifth grade, if his experience of the object of my metaphor was completely different, we will not have similar "trees of talking."

[40] But literacy serves to give everyone a standardized experience with others one need not have met. Literacy thus allows otherness to be perpetrated and perpetuated on a massive scale, a scale consciously and unconsciously made massive due to the universalism inherent in the literate religious tradition. This near universal "tree of talking" sidelines personal experience in favor of abstract ideas transmitted: "A culture that uses an alphabet as its primary communication tool hugs less and laughs less than those that do not" (Shlain: 431).

[41] How do we move beyond the problems that literacy has – if not created – at least facilitated? As noted above, literacy creates an essential problem of religious diversity. If we consider religion as a core constituent of an individual or a group's ethnicity, then a problem of religious diversity is also a problem of racial diversity, and vice versa.

[42] Philosopher Mark S. McLeod-Harrison has recently proposed an interesting solution to the problem of religious diversity, one which could well be effective when dealing with the pernicious effects of ethnic reasoning. McLeod-Harrison believes the problem of religious diversity to be primarily an internal one, since there is no real means of securing any kind of "epistemic certainty" with regard to a particular belief system externally. The origin of this problem, says he, is a lack of humility, and he uses the Genesis tale of Eden as his central metaphor for this. He claims that "it is both their ontological and epistemological limitations that [Adam and Eve] attempt to overcome" by eating the forbidden fruit, adding, "Pride, at first blush, seems to involve the unfounded belief that I am better than I actually am, ontologically" (51). Adam and Eve thus "put themselves forward as epistemic arbiters of salvific theological truth," as do those, in his view, who abandon religion due to the problem of religious diversity (58). Humility, on the other hand, is an accurate assessment of oneself.

Humility, too, is the first step in the mystical path, a path which moves from belief to certainty through intense experience. At the height of the mystical experience, “all pretence and claim to control is gone by one’s own choice” (115) through an awesome act of humility, thus, in McLeod-Harrison’s view, accomplishing a journey “back to the Garden” to rewrite one’s ontological nature in terms defined by obedience rather than resistance. Certainty is thus accomplished, and the problem of religious diversity is erased for the individual.

[43] It is certainly a novel solution to an interesting problem, but is there anything we know for certain of the mystical experience that would lead us to believe such might be a workable solution to the divisions created in our society through the omnipresence of ethnic reasoning? Yes. Randall Studstill’s essentialist theory of mystical consciousness posits that “mystical traditions initiate common transformative processes in the consciousness of mystics. Though mystical doctrines and practices may be quite different across traditions, they nevertheless function in parallel ways” (5–6). The function of the mystical experience is to make us comfortable with information that conflicts with our own self-perception.

[44] According to Studstill, the human mind is “essentially an ongoing locus of resistance requiring continuous maintenance and monitoring” in order to perpetuate a homeostatic state between self-perception and sensory input that might contradict it (115). The internal narrative we all process at all moments of wakefulness “functions as a reinforcing mechanism, by continuously ‘telling the story’ of self and world as defined by our conceptual constructs”; in an example he provides, a person who has just kicked a dog in a moment of anger may, throughout the day, deal with conflict between self-perception and action by rationalizing his action in hindsight or replaying the event in his head as it should have happened (117). Because we are constantly bombarded by challenges to our internal narrative,

[h]omeostasis therefore requires *continuous* denial, correlated with a tendency to increasingly withdraw from life and immerse attention in the internal narrative. In such a state, experience becomes abstracted out of the unpredictability of external sensation and into the more manageable world of fantasy. By disassociating from sensory input, experience becomes more malleable and therefore easier to conform to one’s constructs (118–19).

One can see how, in a world rife with the rhetoric of ethnic reasoning, sharing similar views of other races and peoples via the mode of literacy, and thus sharing a similar tree of talking, that the maintenance of psychic homeostasis, of one’s own internal sense of self-worth, can be accomplished by conforming one’s sensory experience to a narrative that externalizes faults within those whom one’s culture considers the “other.” It is a form of compensation to keep one’s internal narrative functioning in a self-reinforcing manner.

[45] The mystical experience, on the other hand, creates the

option for the cognitive system . . . to allow the discomfort, resist the impulse to return to the familiar, and settle more deeply into the unknown, i.e. open system boundaries even more. . . From a systems perspective, openness allows the systems to evolve, to organize into a new pattern of

psychic organization characterized by freedom from dualistic conditions – what Dzogchen calls enlightenment and what the German mystics describe as union (239).

Mysticism is in many ways the sidelining of doctrine in favor of a direct experience, for the “very process of undermining” doctrinal strictures is “a necessary step toward the attainment of certain types of mystical experience” – or rather, “mystical experience occurs only when conceptual activity ceases” (74). Too, such experience “not only contradicts the concepts that define the good in conditional terms, it also encourages a re-orientation of awareness to the present moment that directly opposes the continuous dislocating processes of ordinary consciousness,” as in the internal narrative, the constant daydream that imagines an idealized past and present and future for the individual (234). That is, the mystical state entails the erasure of symbol systems and the fundamental confrontation with reality as it is, which includes dealing with people on an individual basis rather than through the lens of the culturally prescribed symbol system which holds individuals as representatives of larger collectives, collectives that are ascribed ontological characteristics via the dominant tree of talking.

[46] We cannot undo the dominance of literacy that has facilitated the omnipresence of ethnic reasoning in our ways of thinking. Likewise, we cannot simply go back and reconstruct Christianity’s beginning to eliminate the power of ethnic reasoning, for it has so influenced our cognition, the way we think and categorize, that any reconstruction will, consciously or unconsciously, simply perpetuate or create symbol systems out of groups of real and individual people. The only solution is to push beyond those symbols and challenge the internal narrative each one of us possesses, challenge our individual and collective psyches with the “subliminal pain associated with the ongoing dissonance between our dreams, ideas, fantasies, etc. and actual conditions (both internal and external)” (237). Unless we do, other people will still be for us mere symbols – some symbols of good to be cherished, others symbols of evil to be exterminated. For a world that has witnessed the exterminationist agenda run rampant, it might be time for a new approach.

Bibliography

Botham, Fay, and Sara M. Patterson, editors

2006 *Race, Religion, Region: Landscapes of Encounter in the American West*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Boyer, Pascal

2001 *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Buell, Denise Kimber

2005 *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Carroll, James

- 2001 *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Fletcher, Richard.

- 2003 *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Mubummad to the Reformation*. New York: Viking.

Furtwangler, Albert.

- 2005 *Bringing Indians to the Book*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Goody, Jack

- 1986 *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haynes, Stephen R.

- 1995 *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Kang, S. Steve

- 2007 "The Bible and the Communion of Saints: A Churchly Plural Reading of Scripture." Pp. 223–240 in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*. Edited by R. J. Priest and A. L. Nieves. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lerner, Gerda

- 1986 *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGraw, Eliza R. L.

- 2005 *Two Covenants: Representations of Southern Jewishness*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press.

McLeod-Harrison, Mark S.

- 2005 *Repairing Eden: Humility, Mysticism, and the Existential Problem of Religious Diversity*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Moore, Andrew S.

- 2007 *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945–1970*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Nørretranders, Tor

- 1998 *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*. Translated by Jonathan Sydenham. New York: Viking.

Phillips, Michael

- 2006 *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841–2001*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Robinson II, Charles F.

- 2003 *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.

Romano, Renee C.

- 2003 *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Schwartz, Regina M.

- 1997 *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Shlain, Leonard

- 1998 *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*. New York: Penguin Compass.

Smith, Joseph, translator

- 1981 *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Studstill, Randall

- 2005 *The Unity of Mystical Traditions: The Transformation of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism*. Leiden: Brill.

Twain, Mark

- 1998 *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Other Tales*. Edited by R. D. Groder. Oxford: Oxford University Press.