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# Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*

Reviewed by Tom Simpson

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concludes that by 1893 “Mormon women had woven themselves into the fabric of domestic and international feminism” (p. 102).

Yet, as Neilson’s account suggests, the members of the Relief Society achieved inclusion first and foremost as women and only secondarily as Mormons. This is indicative of what Neilson identifies as the larger paradox of the LDS assimilation strategy in the decades following 1893, when the church would go on to participate in a number of world’s fairs. Mormonism, he writes, was “mainstreamed into American culture as a *religion* because of its *nonreligious* achievements” (p. 178). In other words, while world’s fairs have often celebrated the exotic and even the peculiar, these classic American spectacles became a way for Mormons to portray themselves as a less peculiar people.

**Peter J. Thuesen** is professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, where he also serves as coeditor of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. His most recent book is *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford, 2009), which received the 2010 *Christianity Today* Book Award for History/Biography.

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Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

*Reviewed by Tom Simpson*

IN HER 1977 ESSAY “THE IMAGE-WORLD,” Susan Sontag wrote about the revolutions in culture and consciousness precipitated by a new photographic realism—a new way of seeing, remembering, and constructing our world—whose origins lay in the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth century. Employing her academic training in the study of religion, she noted that “image-making at its origins . . . was a practical,

magical activity, a means of appropriating or gaining power over something.” The camera shared and expanded these powers “in order to reanimate what is usually available only in a remote and shadowy form.” In the eyes of Sontag, it was precisely the photograph’s material basis, its chemical and physical connection to that which it represented, that gave it such power to shape our identities and worldviews. She concluded that whereas “the primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things . . . our inclination [now] is to attribute to real things the qualities of an image.”<sup>1</sup>

It seems no accident, then, that from the nineteenth century to the present, image-obsessed Americans have turned their eyes and hearts to Christ, fashioning an extraordinary and dizzying array of images that reflect the complex histories and trajectories of American power and desire. In its simplest and perhaps most powerful form, the desire has been to reanimate the sacred past, to resurrect, as it were, the embodied Christ, whose physicality is essential to faith but whose physical features have been shrouded by the passage of time. In a 1913 article for the *Juvenile Instructor*, for instance, Mormon artist J. Leo Fairbanks noted with pleasure the power that modern renderings of Christ have to shape the devotions of youth. He wrote: “Art causes us to feel that Christ was a man, that He lived a physical existence, that he was mortal, sympathized with sinners, moved among beggars, helped the infirm, ate with publicans and counseled with human beings for their immediate as well as their future spiritual welfare. It is to art that we turn for help in seeing the reality of the facts of the religious teachings of this divine human” (*Color of Christ*, pp. 147–48).

Of course, in a more tragic and sinister way, all the new image-making, on balance, led to a radical re-formation of Christ as white, as the fair-skinned, blue-eyed One too often idolized as “a totem of white supremacy” (p. 169). It is this thesis—that the nineteenth century was the historical and cultural crucible for the racialization and whitewashing of images of Christ—that lies at the heart of Edward J. Blum and Paul

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1. Susan Sontag, “The Image-World,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 350, 356, 353.

Harvey's outstanding book, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. Pitched to an undergraduate and lay audience, the authors' collaboration has produced a paradox in the literature of US religious history: a Christocentric, yet brilliantly inclusive and synthetic, chronological survey spanning the colonial period to the present.

Some of the book's essence is familiar. We know, for instance, that Warner Sallman's iconic *Head of Christ* (1941), now so thoroughly omnipresent in the United States and beyond, is a figment of the American racial imagination. More surprising and profoundly valuable is Blum and Harvey's careful, textured reconstruction of the complex and contingent historical processes that brought us this far. Before the nineteenth century, they argue, images of Christ were few—Protestant iconoclastic sensibilities carried the day—and tended to portray Christ in a far less racialized manner, as bathed in light and blood, not clothed in white skin. As late as the early nineteenth century, moreover, most Americans “had never viewed paintings or etchings of Christ. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had probably never seen a visual representation of God's son. If they had, it was at most a small and crucified figure with few details. . . . The connections between whiteness, Christ, and power had yet to be made, mass-produced, and mass-marketed” (p. 74). In other words, the American iconography of a white Christ did not simply or inevitably accompany colonial invasion and settlement; it took centuries to emerge, and it was conceived, in many ways, in distinctively American sin.

Playing a central role in the distortions were the historical fictions of the “Publius Lentulus letter,” a medieval text purporting to offer a Judean governor's detailed, eyewitness account of Jesus's hair and facial features. Here is Jesus, with “a slightly ruddy complexion,” a full beard, and hair “the color of the ripe hazel nut,” parted in two. “Puritans knew it was a fraud,” Blum and Harvey write, “and so did Americans for much of the nineteenth century. But over the course of that century, as slavery expanded and whiteness became a symbol of civic status, the reputation of the letter ascended” (pp. 20–21). In the context of Reconstruction and the reshaping of American understandings of citizenship, race, identity,

and power, cultural productions as divergent as Henry Ward Beecher's *The Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871) and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) soon cemented the image of a white Christ in the American popular imagination. Decades later, Warner Sallman's art would do the most to export this racialized image abroad, in the baggage of American evangelism and empire; the painted version of his *Head of Christ* "exploded into national and world consciousness like no other piece of American art" (p. 208).

In this particular narrative of religion in American history and culture, which uses race as its primary hermeneutical lens and principle of selection, Mormonism takes on real, enduring significance. Joseph Smith makes his first appearance at a crucial moment for the book's thesis: the very beginning of the third chapter, "From Light to White in the Early Republic." Blum and Harvey concede that "Smith was in many ways an outsider" who did little in his lifetime to shape mass perceptions and visualizations of Christ. Nevertheless, "in his rendering of Jesus . . . he and his church were part of a broad and sweeping transformation. They were present at and participated in the birth of the white American Christ, an advent that paralleled the birth and rise of the white male citizen as the embodied figure of civic inclusion in the United States. All throughout the United States of the early nineteenth century, being a white man was becoming a marker for political status, power, and opportunity" (p. 77).

At the end of the book as well, Mormons are central to the narrative and thesis. After offering a brief account of the origins and power of the *Christus* statue in Mormon culture, as well as how, "by the 1990s, Jesus art was a vital part of Mormon culture and everyday experience," Blum and Harvey turn down the home stretch of the book's argument. "So much had changed since the age of the Puritans," they conclude, before modern media and iconography had shaped our consciousness of Christ irreversibly (p. 255). By implication, Mormonism typifies the ambiguities, tensions, and ironies associated with modern representations and rematerializations of Christ in America. Ultimately, according to the authors, no group in America today is better than the Mormons

at pulling off the peculiar sleight of hand that allows white Christians to affirm rhetorically that Jesus is not white, while maintaining a powerful culture and machinery of iconography that keeps the white Jesus—a Jesus who is “white without words”—emblazoned on the individual consciousness (p. 253).

Accordingly, for Latter-day Saints engaged in critical reflection on issues of race and racism in the church’s past (and present), *The Color of Christ* is essential reading. As many other commentators have noted, one of the great challenges for the twenty-first-century church will be to foster in its members a soul-searching honesty about the church’s—and America’s—intimacy with white supremacy. *The Color of Christ* offers little cause for Mormon celebration, but it does provide something arguably more important: an occasion for ethical, intellectual, and spiritual courage in coming to grips with the past and charting a global future in solidarity with those who suffer.

In the broadest terms, *The Color of Christ* makes a tremendous contribution to the field of US religious history by documenting the ascension and omnipresence of the white Christ in American culture. Equally valuable is its consistent presentation of powerful and prophetic counterclaims by Christians who have historically undermined and destabilized attempts to affix whiteness permanently to Jesus. We have William Apess, a Pequot born to a slave mother, launching a devastating criticism of “the whiteness of Christ and its links to American racism” in his 1833 “Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (p. 105). Later in the century, amid efforts to stimulate pan-Indian renewal, we find the Paiute prophet Wovoka, a.k.a. Jack Wilson, in whom some saw the long-awaited Messiah appearing before them as “an Indian . . . [who] stood in judgment of whites.” In the age of segregation and struggles for civil rights, we find James Baldwin, after the bombing of Birmingham’s Sixteenth Baptist Church, hoping that the damage done to the church’s white, stained-glass Jesus would finally spell the demise of the slavemasters’ and segregationists’ “alabaster Christ,” while from the dust and ashes of that horrific tragedy we hear the voice of the grieving and enraged Mississippian Anne Moody, who told God, “I know you must

be white. And if I ever find out you are white, then I'm through with you. And if I find out you are black, I'll try my best to kill you when I get to heaven" (p. 3).

Blum and Harvey's dramatic story of Christ in the American imagination culminates with a jarring concluding chapter, "Jesus Jokes," which analyzes contemporary popular culture's wide-ranging and often bewildering appropriations and portrayals of Jesus. Often weary of the cartoonish racism of the past and a more recent, countercultural "chaos of liberation theologies" (p. 238), audiences now confront Jesus "in a variety of forms, but few Americans can explain where they came from, how they got there, what they mean, or why most of them are white" (p. 276). A reader can be forgiven a certain intellectual nostalgia, or a peculiar twenty-first-century nausea, when a book that begins with the distilled, anguished eloquence of Baldwin and Baez ends with the ironic, adolescent self-indulgence of *South Park*. In the end, however, my overwhelming feeling toward *The Color of Christ* was one of gratitude for a brilliant, original retelling of the story of religion and race in America. Courses in US religious history, the history of Christianity, religion and race, Native American religions, and religion and popular culture should make strategic use of *The Color of Christ*, along with its companion website, <http://colorofchrist.com/>, which includes additional materials for classroom use. Wider lay audiences interested in the intersections of religion and race would be wise to read the book as well, because it makes such a timely and essential contribution to the understanding of our complicated and volatile past.

**Tom Simpson**, PhD, teaches religion, ethics, and philosophy at Phillips Exeter Academy. His current book projects are *Authority, Ambition, and the Mormon Mind: American Universities and the Evolution of Mormonism, 1867–1940* and *All We Have Left*, essays and poetry about postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina.