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The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000. by Colin Kidd

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Colin Kidd. *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000.*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Armand L. Mauss

Race, it should be clear by now, exists as a property of *our minds*, not of *their bodies*. It is a bogus scientific category rather than a fact of nature, and belongs not so much to the realm of objective biology as to the quite distinct realm of human subjectivity” (18, italics in original). Thus concludes the prologue to this very substantial exploration of the origins and consequences of the notions about race that permeated the culture of most of the Protestant world, including that of the Latter-day Saints, until very recent times. Colin Kidd is a professor of modern history at the University of Glasgow and has written several other books on the historical construction of ethnic identities in Scotland and Britain. His general approach is clearly in line with the “social constructionist” epistemology at the basis of the social sciences during the past half century. In this book, he explains in detail how the arguments over biblical exegesis, and between theologians and Enlightenment secularists, have been implicated in the construction of “racialist” definitions of “the Other” (13). Colin Kidd distinguishes, as I do, between “racialist” and “racist.” The former term conveys the assumption that race plays a salient, or even determinative, role in human nature and destiny. The latter term goes beyond that general characterization to imply invidious distinctions, prejudice, and discrimination based on attributions of race or racial characteristics. In either case, of course, the precise definition of “race” can be variable and is highly problematic.

The scope of the book is “Protestantism within the Atlantic world” (52) during the past four centuries, by which the author means western Europe and North America, with reference mainly (though not exclusively) to the English-speaking world. He does not explain why the Catholic world is not included in his purview, but my own assumption is that the Catholic Church has traditionally maintained greater central control over the creation and promulgation of doctrine. By contrast, as Kidd demonstrates,

doctrinal speculation, argument, and conflict over racial definitions (as over other questions) has always been rife among Protestants, even within the various Protestant communions. This proliferation of theories, furthermore, began as soon as Europeans discovered the varieties of human “Others” in the world and well before black slavery itself became an issue in European and American experience. Otherness was eventually implicated in slavery, but for most of this period the Otherness of slaves lay in their pagan origins, not in their color or race. Ham’s descendants were simply the chief perpetrators of paganism in the world, according to the unfolding Protestant ethnology.

The book has nine chapters, plus twenty-five pages of endnotes and a satisfactory index. The first chapter is a relatively short prologue, “Race in the Eye of the Beholder.” The final chapter has only six pages but provides a good summary. Chapter 2 is an introduction dealing with the general question of how race came to be a problem in scriptural exegesis. Chapter 3 explains the struggle over how to deal with race in the construction of Protestant Christian orthodoxy. Chapter 4 considers the impact of the Enlightenment upon both the construction of race and the authority of the Bible. Chapter 5 focuses on the nineteenth-century crisis of faith resulting from the European discovery of so many “Other” peoples not mentioned in the Bible or readily subsumable under biblical geography or the tripartite biblical ethnology (descendants of Noah through Shem, Ham, or Japheth).

Chapter 6 considers the nineteenth-century “racialization” of religion, as various scholars attempted to reconcile biblical geography and ethnology with the discoveries of philologists pointing to an ancient Indo-European language spoken by a people dubbed “Aryans.” Superior cultural and religious differences came to be ascribed to these “Japhethite” Aryans, which distinguished them from the “Shemite” Hebrews. The most “Aryan” of all eventually came to be known as the Teutonic peoples, who (after the Reformation) were by blood and temperament more inclined toward Protestantism, as contrasted with the gullible and easily led Catholic Celts. Of course, it did not take long for such racialist thinking to be pressed into the service of Protestant imperialism.

Chapter 7 considers four special expressions of “racialized religion”: Mormonism, British Israelism, the Christian Identity movement, and (more tenuously) Theosophy. Chapter 8, on black counter-theologies, is an intriguing look at black “vindicationism,” an African American inversion of “Eurocentric” or white scriptural hermeneutics. First arising during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries within the African Methodist Episcopal tradition, this motif expressed itself eventually in the more

recent black liberation theologies of James H. Cone and Cain Hope Felder, as well as in black Judaism and in the black Nation of Islam.

Certain crosscutting themes recur throughout the book. One is the intellectual struggle to figure out how to apply the geography and ethnology of the Bible to the increasingly distant and exotic “Other” peoples coming to the attention of Protestant scholars and theologians—especially those peoples discovered in the Americas. Another theme is monogenesis versus polygenesis: must it be assumed that all peoples on the earth descended ultimately from Adam (through Noah and his three sons)? Or are these Others best accounted for by assuming that there were other pre-Adamite creations outside the Bible’s creation narrative? If the latter, then how would the Christian doctrines of the Fall, inherent sinfulness, Atonement, and redemption apply to them? A third theme addresses the need to find biblical justifications for African enslavement in the stories about descent from Cain or from Ham through Canaan. Yet a fourth theme traces the transformation of the quest to understand the Others into a theory of racial superiority and European hegemony.

The argument over monogenesis versus polygenesis was implicated in nearly every controversy during the four centuries in question. Most of the time monogenesis was considered the orthodox biblical position, based largely on Genesis 10 and Acts 17:26–27. This position allowed scholars to hold that God had only one program for all peoples—one human nature, one gospel, one Fall, one Savior, and one Atonement. Yet, if all are children of the same God, why were “races” as such not mentioned in the Bible? Why was there no apparent explanation for the variety of peoples, and no justification for slavery (which increasingly seemed necessary)? The arrival of the Enlightenment broke the biblical monopoly on theories of origin, but ironically the more secular scholars of the Enlightenment were more likely to embrace polygenesis, and thus to make room intellectually for a slavery rationale.

Later, when Darwinism came along, the good news was that it preempted the argument over single versus multiple origins and established monogenesis as the eventual orthodoxy for science as well as for theology. The bad news, though, for the theologians, was that Darwinism in effect hijacked the monogenesis position by eliminating altogether the need for a biblical Creator and undercutting any of the Bible-based rationales for slavery that had developed among Christians. Darwinism was resisted by convinced polygenesis advocates, who were mostly secular, as well as by theologians. To some extent, both religious and secular scholars eventually found some common ground in the two different creation accounts of Genesis, one of which came to be accepted by some

theologians as pre-Adamite: “The pre-Adamite conjecture offered the only obvious solution to the vexed problem of reconciling nineteenth-century scientific developments with the basic features of the Mosaic story found in Genesis” (163). All of this left intact the various slavery rationales, whether religious or secular.¹

Chapter 7 is the one likely to be of greatest interest to LDS readers, since it considers Mormonism as a form of “racialized religion” (226–37). Against the extensive historical background and context of this study, it is difficult to gainsay such a characterization of traditional Mormonism. In the interest of full disclosure, however, I should note that in his treatment of Mormonism Kidd relies heavily on my own work, especially my most recent book.² He argues that Mormonism was influenced by the same biblical myths about marks and curses as was Protestantism itself, and that in addition, both British Israelism and secular Teutonism found expression in nineteenth-century Mormon teachings about “special” blood, lineage, and invidious racial comparisons.

This thorough study should convince both Mormons and non-Mormons that there was little or nothing about race or lineage in early Mormonism that was unique. It was virtually all imported from the Atlantic Protestant heritage. Any basis for the idea that Mormon racialist practices were founded primarily on divine revelation rather than biblical interpretation seems all the more doubtful in light of this and other careful historical studies.

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1. The biblical rationales are treated in much greater detail in other recent works: Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Benjamin Braude, *Sex, Slavery, and Racism: The Secret History of Noah and His Sons* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005). *Noah's Curse* and *The Curse of Ham* are reviewed by Stirling Adams in *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 157–69.

2. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003).