

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

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'.¹ 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

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

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.²

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’.³

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.⁴

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

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.⁵

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 racialist 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.⁶

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

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.⁷

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 homogeneous – 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

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 ‘fragments of our imagination’. Common sense about races turns out on closer inspection to be a ‘myth’ of race.⁸

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.⁹

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

(1750–1819) set out with mathematical exactitude in his *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île 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 'négresse', 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 'négresse' 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'.¹⁰

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

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.¹¹

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 Negro, 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.¹²

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.¹³

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 unsentimental 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

supplementary ethnic category of Hispanic. Whereas mulattoes formed a separate census category between 1850 and 1930, it was only in 2000, in the face of a rising multiracial movement which urges government to recognise the fact of inter-racial sexual unions, that a new generation of mixed-race Americans were able to tick more than one primary race category on the return. Procedures of racial classification have not only been oppressive in their social consequences, but have also been ludicrous in their judgments, by any standards. Even the South African apartheid bureaucracy found itself stymied by the daunting task of reconciling rigid man-made racial categories with the stubborn complexities of natural difference. In 1966, for example, its Race Classification Board deemed an eleven-year-old girl to be 'coloured' despite the fact that her siblings as well as her parents were all classified as 'white'.¹⁴

Nor have law courts been any more consistent than scientists or bureaucracies in the classification of races. Consider the example of the United States, where the legal classification of race has been popularly understood to operate in terms of hypodescent, or the 'one-drop' rule. Under the one-drop rule any visible sign of black ancestry was often sufficient for a person to be classified as 'black'. Nevertheless, this picture of the place of race in American jurisprudence is itself something of an oversimplification, for the one-drop rule was not a consistent feature of American law. Hypodescent appears to have been a widespread custom, especially in the South, but was slow to be formally enshrined in legal codes. By 1910 Tennessee was the only state where the one-drop rule had been codified, and Virginia did not introduce until 1924 its notorious law of hypodescent which defined a white person as having 'no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian'. Case law reveals even greater complexity and a variety of unexpected contingencies in the legal formulation of racial categories and divisions. For instance, the theory of blood fractions could, on occasions, run counter to perceptions of racial colour. Although, generally, there would be considerable overlap between race determined by blood fractions and race determined by physical appearance, each category was underpinned by a quite different logic of racial classification. Consider the case of *People v. Dean* which wound its way up the Michigan Supreme Court in 1866. This revolved around the electoral franchise which under the state constitution restricted voting rights to 'white male citizens or inhabitants, and certain *civilized* [my italics] male inhabitants of Indian descent'. William Dean, whose qualification to vote in Nankin Township, north of Detroit, had been challenged, claimed to be of Indian descent but – not being a member of a tribe – civilised,

and therefore entitled to vote. The state, on the other hand, argued that Dean's African-American ancestry precluded any rights to the franchise. At the initial trial court a physician who examined Dean's skin, hair and 'cartilages of the nose' on behalf of the prosecution concluded that Dean had African blood in him, but 'very much diluted, not exceeding one-sixteenth part'. The state also contended that Dean, who had been born in Delaware, had been known there as a mulatto, of mixed white and African blood. Curiously, the Michigan Supreme Court neglected Dean's claim to be a 'civilized Indian'. Instead Dean's blackness became the issue at hand. Justice James V. Campbell, writing for the Michigan Supreme Court's majority opinion, employed two distinct criteria of racial classification in his judgement, the empirical but somewhat vague test of colour and the genealogical mathematics of blood fractions. Although Campbell noted that it had 'never been the case that any one having visible tokens of African descent has been regarded by the community generally as a white person', he nevertheless concluded that the facts of genealogy must trump appearance, that 'persons of precisely the same blood must be treated alike, although they may differ in their complexions'. Campbell proposed a quarter-blood standard, by which those who had less than a quarter African heritage might have a 'reasonable claim to be called white', with Dean falling on the white side of the new one-fourth rule.¹⁵

Even more bizarre in its unmasking of the shifting and unstable fantasies which underpinned apparently objective legal definitions of race was the case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, decided in 1923. Thind was a Punjabi who had come to the United States in 1913, had enlisted in the army and had successfully petitioned in 1920 to become an American citizen. This petition before the Ninth Federal Circuit Court in Portland, Oregon, had been a tricky matter for his lawyers, as under naturalisation provisions dating back to 1790, only 'free white persons' could become naturalised citizens of the United States. Were Asians white? Thind's legal case rested on the anthropological consensus that the Caucasian race embraced two groups, the Aryans and the Semites, of which the former embraced not only most of the peoples of Europe, but also many of the peoples of northern India from which Thind originated. Thind, it appeared, was racially Aryan and Caucasian, and therefore surely met the whiteness test laid down in 1790. Although the Circuit Court agreed with this line of argument, its decision was overturned when the US Supreme Court upheld the challenge of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization that Thind was a 'Hindoo', and therefore was neither white nor worthy of citizenship. In 1923 the US Supreme

Court ruled that Thind might be ethnologically 'Caucasian', but as a 'Hindoo' – actually Thind was a Sikh, a distinction beyond the wit of the authorities – was not 'white'. Contemporary racialism rested upon sciences of race which confidently bandied around terms such as 'Caucasian' and 'Aryan' as synonyms for white; but a racialist jurisprudence adopted other criteria for whiteness when ethnological classifications of this sort opened up the danger of the unrestricted immigration and naturalisation of Caucasian Asians. The racial casuistry adopted by the US Supreme Court on this occasion depended upon the attainment of modern western modes of civilisation as a test of potential assimilability to white American standards. Neither descent from a common racial ancestry, such as the Aryan family, nor colour itself provided a reliable test in this regard. Indeed, the Supreme Court deemed dark-skinned Europeans to be white under this new dispensation.¹⁶

Having no real substance in nature or in science, 'races' are inherently unstable, liable to change their definition and composition from one society to the next, and within the same society from one era to the next. Adjacent cultures have classified races in staggeringly different ways. Just because the 'facts of race' appear to be obvious to the average person, and the assumptions about what constitutes racism appear to be similarly clear, it does not therefore follow that the concepts either of race or of racism can be extrapolated cavalierly back into past societies as unproblematic tools of analysis. Cultures do not all read 'nature' in the same way. Nor do they notice the same things about human 'Otherness'. The 'Other' has assumed distinct, often surprising and sometimes unpredictable forms in different places, times and cultures, not all of them racial. As Frank M. Snowden Jr has shown in his classic study *Before color prejudice* (1983), the world of Greco-Roman antiquity seems to have had little sense of colour-based racial difference, notwithstanding the practices of slavery within those cultures and indeed the sharp ethnocentric distinctions made between civilised and barbarian societies.¹⁷ This kind of xenophobia was not predicated on anything like biological racism. Even more unexpected patterns emerge in Joyce Chaplin's *Subject matter* (2001), her magisterial study of the early encounters between English colonists and native peoples in North America. Chaplin shows that it was the natives' susceptibility to disease, not the outward physical features of race or even any sense of cultural or technological superiority (which was surprisingly absent in the early phase of contact), which served as the primary marker of differentiation.¹⁸ Furthermore, even when race is the benchmark of Otherness, it proves less portable than one might

imagine. The idea of race transfers only with superficial ease from one culture or era to another. Like other products of culture, racial taxonomies necessarily vary from place to place. The child of one black and one white parent, for instance, would be classified as 'white' in Brazil; as 'coloured' in South Africa; as 'black' in the United States. Gloria Marshall argues that skin colour plays no role in Japanese racial classification. The outcast Burakumin, for example, are physically identical to other Japanese, but are considered to be racially inferior. On the other hand, perceptions of something as natural as skin colour might themselves be culturally determined. In 1940 the Chinese scientist Zhu Xi classified the races of mankind into ten distinct categories based on colour, including three distinct varieties of yellowness: pure white, red-white, ash-white, red-brown, black-brown, deep brown, black, dark yellow (native Americans, Indo-Malaysians, Polynesians), yellow-brown (Malaysians) and pure yellow (the Chinese alone). If race were a part of nature rather than a product of culture, then racial benchmarks should be static and relatively stable. Nothing could be further from the truth. Cultures have disagreed not only over the boundaries but also over the basic constituents of such apparently self-evident groupings as the white race.¹⁹

'When did your ancestors become white?' The question is almost certainly impolite, but not far removed from the surprising realities of cultural history. This is because research has shown that classification by colour is not quite as obvious as the layperson thinks. In North America and in Britain, people of Irish stock are now regarded as unambiguously white. But scholars have shown that this has not always been the case, and that it is only in the relatively recent past that the Irish, as it were, became 'white'. By contrast, native Americans were once thought of as 'white' and were later reconceptualised as 'redskins'. If anything, 'whiteness' – something perhaps taken for granted by most 'whites' today – has been just as mutable – and, not least for those at the margins who wished to be considered 'white', perilously unstable – as the shifting cultural differences between ethnic groups. Today's United States possesses a more capacious category of whiteness which includes groups who now pass as 'white' yet were once seen as racially inferior. Along parallel lines, L. P. Curtis Jnr has shown that Irish immigrants in Victorian Britain were routinely depicted with simian features, most particularly by nineteenth-century cartoonists, and were generally seen as an ape-like race quite distinct from the peoples of Britain only a short voyage away across the Irish Sea. Whiteness – a counter-intuitive, but persuasive body of argument now runs – was 'invented'.²⁰

The most sophisticated exposition of this phenomenon comes in Matthew Frye Jacobson's wonderfully insightful book *Whiteness of a different color* (1998). Jacobson reminds us that today's 'visual economy and racial lexicon' are recently coined and contingent. Past generations of Americans did not see races as today's Americans see them, nor did they deploy quite the same nomenclature. Moreover, the passing of old racial taxonomies and vocabularies has intellectual as well as social consequences, for people of today are oblivious of the racial differences once so apparent in the past: 'entire races have disappeared from view, from public discussion, and from modern memory, though their flesh-and-blood members still walk the earth'. Where, for example, asks Jacobson, are the Teutonic, Celtic, Iberic and Mediterranean races, 'races' which were so obvious to nineteenth-century Americans? The history of 'race', according to Jacobson, is a narrative of shifting 'public fictions'. In particular, he points to a prevailing system of racial classification in the nineteenth century whereby 'one might be both white and racially distinct from other whites'. The Anglo-Saxon American response to mass European immigration between the 1840s and 1924 meant that this period of American history 'witnessed a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races'. Only towards the end of this period was racial whiteness 'reconsolidated', as 'probationary' white groups at the margins were granted full scientific status as 'Caucasians'. The key expression in Jacobson's analysis is 'the alchemy of race', the somewhat mysterious process by which apparently white European immigrants who were not recognised as such by 'white' Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans became transformed into 'whites'.²¹

A similarly unexpected taxonomy of race is observable on the other side of the Atlantic. Whereas the people of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Scotland tend to be proud of their national identity as Scots and also consider themselves as part of a Celtic fringe – Scotland, Ireland, Wales – which sits at the northern and western peripheries of Saxon England, their nineteenth-century forebears, at least in the Scottish Lowlands, took a fundamentally opposing view, boasting instead of their Anglo-Saxon racial identity and their ethnological affinity with the people of England; the people of Ireland, Wales and the Scottish Highlands they deemed to be parts of an inferior, albeit white, race of Celts. Race had a spectacularly different range of meanings for Scots of the Victorian era compared to that held by their descendants in the second half of the twentieth century. The very term was itself unstable, with 'race' often used to denote what we might now call nations or ethnic groups, as well as peoples of

different colours or widely differentiated physical features. Nineteenth-century Britons imagined racial differences between white Saxons and white Celts, deluding themselves that Irish Celts bore traces of simian characteristics.²²

As well as being subjective, colour was in recent centuries only one among several benchmarks which have defined race for – so-called – scientific racists. Historians of racial attitudes know that there is more to race than colour. Indeed, skin colour has not always been the prime determinant of racial difference. Cranial capacity, the facial angle and the cephalic index all held out the prospect to scientists of apparently objective, accurate measurement, whereas colour by itself could not.

From the late eighteenth century the most fashionable means of determining race was the calculation of the ‘facial angle’, a method devised by the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper (1722–89). The facial angle was calculated at the intersection of two lines, one running from the forehead to the front point of the lips, the other from the ear to the nostrils. Although Camper was by no means as committed a racist as he is sometimes portrayed, the facial angle became a tool for scientific racists throughout the nineteenth century. The angle of the average European was about eighty degrees, the average for an African about seventy degrees; the facial angle of an orang-utan was about fifty-eight degrees. This appeared to suggest that there was a hierarchy of racial intelligence from the animal world up through the lower races to the higher races. Nineteenth-century racial commentators coined the terms *prognathous* and *orthognathous* to describe racial types based upon the facial angle.²³

During the nineteenth century there was a general fixation upon the cranium, but the various schools of racial science which flourished at this time adopted different ways of relating the cranium to race. Some craniologists simply measured the capacity of the skull, whereas phrenologists found this much too crude an indication of character. Instead, phrenologists produced a map of the skull divided into thirty-seven different zones, each representing a localised faculty or phrenological organ. For instance, at the front of the skull the phrenologists tended to locate various intellectual faculties, including ‘calculation’, ‘comparison’ and ‘causality’; at the crown of the skull some of the higher ethical elements of character, including ‘conscientiousness’ and ‘hope’; and towards the base of the skull some of the more instinctive characteristics such as ‘combativeness’ and ‘amativeness’. The cranial conformations of different racial groups were assessed and compared against this plan of the phrenological faculties. The Swedish craniologist Anders Retzius also

coined the ‘cephalic index’ as a means of classifying skulls into long-headed (dolichocephalic) and wide-headed (brachycephalic) types.²⁴

Or might the key to racial classification reside in a quite different part of the anatomy far removed from the cranium? Around 1800 the length of the forearm became a major issue in British anthropological debates about racial difference between whites and blacks. More bizarrely, the nineteenth-century French scientist Etienne Serres (1786–1868) constructed a hierarchical racial taxonomy based on variations in the position of the navel and umbilical cord in the embryos of different human types. Some racial benchmarks were even more eccentric. For instance, the British entomologist Andrew Murray (1812–78) studied variations in human lice gathered from people in different countries and concluded from tests that body lice were racially specific and could not survive on the bodies of other races. Or take the case of the distinguished British anatomist and evolutionist Sir Arthur Keith (1866–1955), who began his career with a detailed study of the external configuration of the ear. The shape of the ear, Keith believed, provided a decisive clue to racial identity. Between 1895 and 1897 Keith carried out examinations of 15,000 ears, with the aim of garnering evidence of racial characteristics. This analysis of the outer shape of the ear now seems somewhat misguided; though, as we now know, the ear wax within might have yielded some interesting results of racial differences. During the nineteenth century there was also considerable interest in eye and hair colour. John Beddoe (1826–1911) deployed an authoritative-looking mathematical formula to calculate the ‘Index of Nigrescence’ in the populations of the regions of Britain and Ireland: $D + 2N - R - F$ (or the dark-haired plus twice the black-haired – doubled, according to Beddoe, ‘in order to give its proper value to the greater tendency to melanosity shown thereby’ – minus the red-haired and the fair-haired, with brown hair neutral). Nor should we forget that during the nineteenth century and the rise of Aryan linguistics, language – mistakenly conflated with matters of anatomy and physiology – became a central determinant of racial categories.²⁵

Sometimes colour trumped other racial characteristics; sometimes race scientists insisted upon the incontrovertibly objective mathematics of cranial measurement as a substitute for the subjectivity associated with the study of complexion; sometimes the ‘facts’ of physical appearance found themselves at odds with the ‘facts’ of genealogical blood fractions; sometimes – as with some, though not all, Aryan philologists – language was considered a more decisive test than the superficial appearance of

anatomy; sometimes a whole battery of tests, including hair type, eye colour, bodily constitution and the like, were deployed in the quest for 'race'. The historian of race becomes, inevitably, a connoisseur of polymorphous perversity.

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. Attitudes to race are determined both by real – but inconsistent – physical features and by the symbolic universes, the cultures, in which humans translate the misleading facts of physical difference into racial ideologies, stereotypes and folklores. If race, then, is more properly a social and cultural construct, what are the social and cultural factors that have shaped its construction?

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 Prologue: Race in the Eye of the Beholder	i
2 Introduction: Race as Scripture Problem	19
3 Race and Religious Orthodoxy in the Early Modern Era	54
4 Race, the Enlightenment and the Authority of Scripture	79
5 Monogenesis, Slavery and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Faith	121
6 The Aryan Moment: Racialising Religion in the Nineteenth Century	168
7 Forms of Racialised Religion	203
8 Black Counter-Theologies	247
9 Conclusion	271
<i>Notes</i>	277
<i>Index</i>	305

CHAPTER I

- 1 M. O'Brien, *Conjectures of order: intellectual life and the American South, 1810–1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London, 2004), p. 250.
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