

# Terence Keel's Divine Variations: A Symposium

with Terence D. Keel, "The Religious Preconditions for the Race Concept in Modern Science"; Yiftach Fehige, "In What Sense Exactly Did Christianity Give Us Racial Science?"; Ernie Hamm, "Christian Thought, Race, Blumenbach, and Historicizing"; Jonathan Marks, "The Coevolution of Human Origins, Human Variation, and Their Meaning in the Nineteenth Century"; Elizabeth Neswald, "Racial Science and 'Absolute Questions': Reoccupations and Repositions"; and Terence D. Keel, "Response to My Critics: The Life of Christian Racial Forms in Modern Science."

## CHRISTIAN THOUGHT, RACE, BLUMENBACH, AND HISTORICIZING

by Ernie Hamm

*Abstract.* Terence Keel's *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* attributes the origins of "racial science" to Christian intellectual history. This is a bold and original argument, but it is not without deep difficulties, particularly in the early sections of the book. The concept of "race" is not sufficiently historicized and the treatment of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach needs to be more firmly grounded in the world of eighteenth-century natural history.

*Keywords:* Johann Friedrich Blumenbach; Christianity; historicization of nature; race; science

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Terence Keel's *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (DV) offers an original and ambitious interpretation of science and religion, one that largely avoids framing these interactions in terms of conflict or compatibility, to address a very timely subject: race. Historians of science have over the past few decades developed a series of nuanced accounts of science (usually meaning one or more of the natural sciences) and religion (mostly Christianity) since the late eighteenth century. A triumphal story of secularization still has its followers, but historians tend to prefer less tidy stories and we know that religion was very much a going concern supported by powerful institutions such as churches, states, and confessional institutions of higher learning well into the twentieth century. That said, if it were possible to offer historical snapshots of Europe and North America in the early nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries, we

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would undoubtedly see a recent past in which religion plays a diminished role and secular arguments and institutions a much greater one in the sciences. Most would hesitate to argue otherwise, even for the case of the United States, where religion, organized and otherwise, continues to thrive. Keel argues something different and potentially more interesting for “the development of modern theories of human biodiversity.” *DV* makes the case that far from freeing themselves from religion, “Euro-American scientists inherited from their ancestors a series of ideas and reasoning strategies about race that have their origin in Christianity and continue to shape contemporary thought” (6).

In a time where some scientists with respectable institutional status and a knack for the sound-bite feel free to proclaim on all sorts of things, some unmasking of the cultural authority of scientists is most welcome. *DV* does some of this, yet it goes much further, making the stronger claim “that the modern scientific study of race is not merely shaped by Christian intellectual history but is engaged in a secular form of theology, a secular creationism” (13). It aims to provincialize “racial science” (a phrase that I will leave in the scare quotes) by showing that it can be traced directly to Christian thought—not to Christian churches, denominations, confessions, or other institutions; not even to theology per se or the Bible, but to an undifferentiated Christian thought. This is intellectual history in the sense of the history of ideas that can be traced as they move across space and time, culture and language. To say this book has a broad scope does not fully do it justice, for it moves from antiquity and the origins of Christianity, to eighteenth-century Göttingen and Blumenbach, to nineteenth-century American theories of polygenesis (the idea that the races have distinct origins), to early twentieth-century public health and race, to contemporary genomics and race. Along the way there are glimpses into the Middle Ages, comments on Luther’s translation and edition of the Bible, and much else. This is a very tall order for less than 150 pages of text, through all of which Keel remains focused on his argument. Is that argument sustained? The remarks offered here will address only the important early parts of the book, above all the claims about early Christianity and “racial reasoning” and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s ideas on race and biological development, and they are primarily concerned with the need to ground concepts historically, the historicization of nature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and matters of historical agency.

The central argument, as laid out in the Introduction of *DV*, rests on a reinterpretation of very early Christianity, that period of history where it was not yet clear what it meant to be Christian. Given Jesus was a Jew, were his early followers, many of whom were Jewish, espousing a version of Judaism with a change of focus from then current practices, or were they espousing a much more heterodox version of Judaism, or were they making a new religion? One way of addressing this question is that of

Paul, who in the Epistle to the Galatians states: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, male and female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, cited on p. 7). On one reading this expands Judaism far beyond its traditions and is part of creating a religion that aims to be universal and inclusive in scope. Another interpretation sees early Christianity as defining itself as distinct from and in opposition to Judaism, and the Pauline claim for universalism comes at the expense of Judaism, the "other" against which Christian identity is forged. *DV* takes the latter view and carries it further, adopting the interpretation of Denise Kimber Buell, a scholar of early Christianity who, Keel tells us, argues that early Christian peoplehood "functioned conceptually like an ethno-racial group" (8). *DV* then links this to the idea of "Christian supersessionism," that is, that Christians saw themselves as becoming God's chosen people, supplanting and superseding the Israelites and at the same time rejecting the Jewish origins of their faith. The argument proceeds briskly and acknowledges that it is built on the work of other scholars. Within the span of two pages, readers are told: "What we must draw from this history is that Christian thought has been sustained by a long tradition of racial reasoning" (9).

Must? There is nothing tentative about the interpretation, though surely the universalist claims of early Christianity are a matter of contention among historians of religion and theologians and are not likely to be settled any time soon, or definitively. Leaving aside such matters the crucial issue is the way in which "race" is employed in these parts of *DV*. Christians do indeed have a long history of strained relations with Jews, and even if one accepts that Christianity has made Judaism "other," this is not a demonstration that race was a concept at work in early Christianity or anywhere else in antiquity. The very idea of race, particularly "racial science," the subject of this book, is widely seen as grounded in the eighteenth-century natural historical taxonomies that developed alongside the horrific realities of the Atlantic slave trade. There were plenty of social categories available in the first century by which groups might be made "other," without drawing on one rooted in the eighteenth century. If there are first-century Latin and Greek cognates for "race" *DV* does not tell us, much less how such words might have been used and what they meant at that time. The phrase "racial reasoning" might imply something distinct from race and racism, but there is a great deal of slippage in the way this phrase is employed in *DV*. For example, the "racial reasoning" that is said to have sustained Christian thought is said to reveal the "fallacy of viewing Christianity as a belief system that transcends race" (9). Race, a profoundly social category, here becomes a concept that floats free of history, ranging across space and time, or as something that was there all along; to say that something "functioned conceptually like an ethno-racial group" does not show readers how human differences were understood in Mediterranean antiquity.

A similar challenge arises in the discussion of a colored woodcut depicting an Edenic Adam and Eve, from the 1534 edition of Martin Luther's translation of the Bible. Luther was very particular about the text, and *DV* argues (not unreasonably) that this applied to the illustrations too. Adam and Eve appear as white, the former brown-haired, the latter blonde. Keel says they are "Europeans" and that this "clearly reflected the racial reasoning that framed [Luther's] account of human creation" (39). More proximate explanations from art history, of art imitating art, are not considered. Lucas Cranach the Elder, a close friend of Luther's, had already depicted Adam as brown-haired and Eve as blonde, both with pale complexions; such depictions were a commonplace in sixteenth century art. "Racial reasoning" is invoked in a way that allows it to move freely across centuries and places, without need of intermediaries. The problematic character of some of this is discussed in a lengthy endnote (158–59, n. 72) focused not on Luther, but on Josiah Nott, the nineteenth-century American physician and notorious polygenist, and his views on the sons of Noah. In this note, Keel recognizes that biological and taxonomic concepts of race cannot simply be applied to earlier periods (though it is startling to read of the "post-Enlightenment obsession with classifying the species of the natural world," [159] as this obsession already had a strong grip on eighteenth-century Europeans). Yet in the text of Chapter 2, Nott's view that "Noah's descendants were Caucasian" is presented as consistent with the "racial reasoning" of Luther's 1534 Bible (73). An alternative explanation is that Nott's views and the concerns of nineteenth-century polygenists are being read onto Luther.

Similar things apply to the interpretation of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), who holds a prominent place in *DV*. Blumenbach is widely known to historians of science for his foundational contributions to natural history, including paleontology, mineralogy, and geognosy, and particularly the life sciences. His notion of the *Bildungstrieb* (formative force) in nature was a way of accounting for the development of new forms, an important matter for someone who was a strong supporter of extinction, a controversial concept in the eighteenth century. Blumenbach is also familiar well beyond specialist circles, thanks to his division of humans into five varieties, which are named American, Caucasian, Ethiopian, Malay, and Mongolian in the English translation of the 1795 edition of his book on human varieties (*DV* calls them African, American, Asian, Caucasian, and Malay). He did not invent the term Caucasian, as *DV* points out, but he certainly made it widely known, and he has a prominent place in the history of ethnology and anthropology; if anyone is often credited with founding some sort of scientific study of race, it is Blumenbach.

There are challenges in interpreting Blumenbach. In describing five varieties of humans distinguished by physical appearance, even with the crucial qualifier that these are part of one human species, he is practically a dictionary definition of a racist. That said, among eighteenth-century thinkers

he stands out as one of the least racist thinkers in that he strongly advocated that all human varieties were of equal intellectual capacity, was a great collector of books by Africans and took note that Africans had greater intellectual achievements than some European nations, even while living under the dreadful conditions of slavery. There is no need to repeat the appalling views of Hume, Kant, Voltaire (an adamant polygenist), and other lesser eighteenth-century luminaries on race to see how favorably Blumenbach compares with them. Then again, despite promoting a view of the social and intellectual equality of humans, he proposes a profoundly Eurocentric aesthetics that has Caucasians as the most beautiful variety of humans. As the historian Nell Irvin Painter has noted, “the mouth of Blumenbach’s work spoke out of two sides . . . he vindicated black people’s abilities, his aesthetic standards prized whiteness above all” (Painter 2003, 37).

Blumenbach’s varieties of humans were malleable and could over time change into one another, given certain environmental conditions—though, as *DV* emphasizes, it was easier for Caucasians to become black but very difficult for “Ethiopians” to become light skinned. (However, it is not clear that the modern notion of “pluripotency,” the term *DV* applies to Caucasians, is apt for describing Blumenbach’s view.) It is relevant that Blumenbach emphasized that there is much variation within each of the five kinds, no clear division between them, and that all the varieties belong to one species. This suggests the “kinds” themselves are a fiction and that there is no division between them besides a phony aesthetics; *DV* rightly is dismissive of the alleged Platonism of the latter. But the analysis of *DV* goes in a different direction, insisting that Blumenbach’s “racial science was conceived out of mongrel epistemology” (42). This use of mongrel, a notion retailed by dog breeders, flies in the face of the many excellences of so-called mongrel breeds of dog or other creatures. It seems better just to describe Blumenbach’s view of race as an epistemological mess, a dog’s breakfast.

Yet *DV* has much invested in a particular and unusual reading of Blumenbach. On the one hand it endorses the view that “Blumenbach’s career as a secular ethnologist extended well into the nineteenth century” and describes his professional writings as “remarkably secular” (23). On the other, it strongly rejects Blumenbach’s alleged secular thinking, and in its place *DV* presents a Christian creationist Blumenbach who adopts an Ussherian view of human history (six thousand years, more extended for other parts of nature) in which the “Caucasian was a secular Adam” (25). Blumenbach’s “mongrel epistemology” rests on “the illegitimate mixture of Christian creationism and the longing for a secular account of our origin” (42). This is a tenuous reading of Blumenbach.

Readers are not told what it is that makes Blumenbach secular or why his racial theories were understood as such by those who came later. It is difficult to see how anyone could read Blumenbach at any length and see

him as secular. The English edition of Blumenbach upon which *DV* relies includes *Contributions to Natural History*, the second edition of 1806, a work that makes multiple references to “the Creator.” It denies the universality of Noah’s flood in a passage worth repeating: “But, as one of the most sagacious and also certainly one of the most orthodox of theologians, R. Walsh [sic, Walch], has assured me, we are far from doing the slightest violence to the authority of Holy Scripture, when we deny the universality of the flood of Noah; and in like manner I cannot for my own part form any satisfactory idea, after what I gather from the history of animals themselves, about the universality of that deluge.” This is followed by his famous remark about the incomprehensible pilgrimage of the sloth from Mt. Ararat to South America (Blumenbach 1865, 286). These are no more the words of a secular thinker than they are of a Biblical literalist. It seems strange that *DV* needs to announce “that Blumenbach’s racial theories were not an expression of pure, untainted, secular, rationality” (17).

The wholly “secular” reading of Blumenbach seems to be so much wishful thinking on the part of, perhaps, his nineteenth-century polygenist readers. Moreover, the idea that the Biblical flood was local undermines an Ussherian chronology of humans, or even a clear divide between Earth history and human history. Humans might have traveled very far and wide, over unspecified lengths of time, before any deluge. Yes, most eighteenth-century naturalists, including Blumenbach, would have given “the creator” a crucial role in the development of humans and really everything, though many would have done so, as Lamarck did, as a primary cause that lies beyond human investigation, which must address the secondary causes everywhere at work and that are the proper subject of natural philosophy and natural history. The real challenge was not philosophical but empirical, of making a chronology of Earth history, even if people knew that the history was very long. Johann Anton Leisewitz, an eighteenth-century Göttingen dramatist, little known now outside of a specialist circle but surely known to Blumenbach (Göttingen was a small place), records in his diary in 1780 of “the foolishness” of reckoning the world to be six thousand years old (Leisewitz [1916–1920] 1976, Vol. 2, 24). There were some eighteenth-century thinkers who were not at all circumspect about a great age, such as Benoît de Maillet, who proposed an evolutionary, transformist account of Earth and life reaching back billions of years; most naturalists, including Blumenbach, preferred some more concrete evidence for specific chronologies before assigning dates. Naturalists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were much interested in the relation between geological events that took place in recorded history, but not because they were followers of Ussher or catastrophism (which *DV* generalizes as a “biblically inspired theory” [32]). Thus, Karl Ernst Adolf von Hoff, a friend of Blumenbach, compiled a massive account of geological changes noted in

recorded history (von Hoff 1822–1841); likewise, the iconic frontispiece of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* depicts first-century ruins at Pozzuoli, which bear evidence of geological change since that time. Reflecting on the effects of relatively recent geological change offered a way of thinking about processes, catastrophic or not, and relating them to change over much vaster time periods; it certainly does not imply acceptance of a limited geological time scale. *DV* has it that Nott and his American polygenist colleagues “did not endorse the ancient antiquity of the human race” (58), but this does not make the case for Blumenbach and his colleagues.

There are deep challenges in not reading the history of nineteenth-century unified and Imperial Germany back on eighteenth-century Göttingen, whose university played an important part in the intellectual life, particularly in the natural sciences, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *DV* argues that Blumenbach's racial theories and the theology of Johann David Michaelis played a key role in the shaping of nineteenth-century German identity. But Georgian Göttingen was not Frederick's Prussia, much less “the emergent Protestant German nation-state” (48), which also turned out to be Catholic, too. *DV*'s argument rests broadly on formal symmetries; these can be beguiling, but history is messy, full of pitfalls, blind alleys, and contradictions.

Any history has gaps and *DV* has to be highly selective, yet some account of why Blumenbach was chosen as the starting point for “racial science” would have been most welcome. His place deserves prominence, but not exclusivity. Voltaire, the noted polygenist, is one alternative; Linnaeus, Buffon, and Kant (all referred to by Blumenbach, and some at least as secular as he is said to be) are just the most notable eighteenth-century savants who had things to say about race. Blumenbach does not come at the beginning of racial taxonomies, but is participating in the midst of them, and might even be presented as coming at their end, which is where he appears in Justin E. H. Smith's rich account of nature, human difference, and race in early modern philosophy (Smith 2015; on Kant and his contemporaries, see also Mikkelsen 2013).

Perhaps the deepest challenge faced by *DV* is offering some account of how Christian thought comes to have historical agency. In this respect, Hans Blumenberg's concept of “reoccupation” has a crucial part in the argument of *DV*, because questions about race that might appear to be secular (or more to the point, were interpreted as secular) turn out to reoccupy “answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated” (cited on p. 15). In *DV* these questions come from Christian intellectual history and its accompanying apparatus of “racial reasoning” and “supersessionism.” But this raises two related questions. How does Christian intellectual history, or any history of ideas, come to have agency, and at what point are actors able to free themselves from the need to reoccupy inherited questions? Institutions, such as churches

or universities, might be important agents, but they are not at issue in this book, so are out of the question. If all thinking about any possible “other” is a form of racial reasoning, then ours is indeed a grim world, one that would seem to have little prospect of overcoming inherited positions. Even “The racial thinking of American polygenism is a manifestation of Christian supersessionism turned upon itself” (58). By this reasoning, avowed atheism can merely be another variant of Christian intellectual history, the racial reasoning of which has a tyrannical grip on the present. Does every attempt to stake out other questions and positions then become relegated to false consciousness?

Some figures, or at least one important one, in *DV* seem to have no trouble overcoming Christian intellectual history. Charles Darwin is able to address questions about the deep antiquity of the Earth and humans and arrive at an “open-ended view of evolution and renunciation of human racial speciation . . . in the *Origin of Species* and the *Descent of Man*” (128). *DV* says “one can hear Adam’s calling ‘Eve the mother of all living’ (Genesis 3:20) reverberate in Blumenbach’s claim that deviations from nature’s formative force were the ‘mother of varieties properly so-called’” (40). Yet something very similar could be said of the concluding paragraph of *Origin*: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one” (Darwin 1860, 490), a passage that did not appear in the first edition but did in the subsequent ones. Why does Blumenbergian reoccupation apply to Blumenbach but not to Darwin, in some respects a more likely candidate, given he was a student of divinity and a great admirer of the outstanding natural theologian of the day, William Paley? Natural theology still counts as some version of Christian intellectual history, if not the one on offer in *DV*. How is it that Darwin is simply able to step outside of his education and the mores and beliefs of his place and class, while others are trapped in theirs? It is difficult to see how such questions might be addressed within the framework of Blumenbergian reoccupation.

Keel is surely right to say that science does not have some “pure” origin. Demarcationist philosophy of science used to have a following some fifty years ago, but it went nowhere. Science’s history is intertwined with the economy, religion, states, political ideologies, and other parts of culture. Christianity has its share of things to answer for, as do other major religions. *DV* has not convinced this reader that “racial science” is one of them. The origins of that concept lie in the strange brew that fermented in what was once called “the age of reason.”

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