

# *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."

## IN WHAT SENSE EXACTLY DID CHRISTIANITY GIVE US RACIAL SCIENCE?

by *Yiftach Fehige*

*Abstract.* In my contribution to the interdisciplinary discussion of Terence Keel's study on the Christian roots of modern racial science, I focus on its philosophical assumptions and implications. My primary concern is to relate the findings of this study to recent appraisals of the philosophical notion of a secularized Western modernity. I raise a twofold question: in what sense can one say that traditional Christianity links intimately to modern racial science, and which historiographical decisions inform the substantiation of such links?

*Keywords:* Jürgen Habermas; historicism; modernity; reoccupation; secularism

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Terence Keel's very dense, and yet most readable, historical study invites philosophical discussion. His views on the entanglement of traditional Christian thought and modern scientific theories concerning the origins of human diversity rest on philosophical assumptions and have important philosophical implications. Philosophically interesting, or so I will argue in the following, is his contention that the history of racial science shows that the process of secularization of all of science did not come to a conclusion in the nineteenth century, as it is commonly assumed today (see Keel 2018, 143). If we only look carefully enough—as he claims to have done—then we will see the traces of the theological past of Western reason even in today's scientific inquiries into our biological origins. The continuation

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of the entanglement of past religious thought and modern science up to the present, he finds exemplified in recent work on the genetic links between “us” and the Neanderthals (see Keel 2018, 113–36). We just do not have the full picture, Keel argues, if we follow secularist assumptions in our historical narratives about racial science. For example, proslavery politics may be considered an important aspect to be factored in when analyzing the scientific discourse on race in the work of Josiah Clark Nott (1804–1873), “America’s most vocal critic of the theory of common human ancestry” (Keel 2018, 55). But this is not the full story to be told, Keel shows: “Polygenism . . . grew out of an unresolved conflict dating back to the seventeenth century—a conflict between a sacred account of human history and secular knowledge from non-European cultures that called into question the truth and primacy of the Christian creation narrative” (Keel 2018, 57). What Keel finds in Nott’s work is a “racial thinking” that is basically “a manifestation of Christian supersessionism turned upon itself—an attack on its own theological foundations that would further remove explicit reference to religion and lay the groundwork for the present-day misunderstanding about the secularity of biological theories of race” (Keel 2018, 58).

Keel finds traces of past Christian thought in scientific discourse on race from the beginning to the present. The methodology that allows him to do so is partly in debt to the German philosopher and intellectual historian, Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996). More specifically, Keel draws on Blumenberg’s thesis that modernity means also the “reoccupation of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated” (Keel 2018, 15). For example, in the work of the eighteenth century German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach we find that an original Caucasian race reoccupied the position that the biblical Adam had occupied in Christian thought on the origins of humanity (Keel 2018, 25). It is a reoccupation insofar as it was Blumenbach’s intent to displace theological discourse on human origins in favor of theories that satisfied exclusively the scientific standards of the time. Such a reoccupation also occurred with respect to the culturally widespread Lutheran antisemitism. What we find is that a racial ambivalence reoccupies the position of soteriological ambivalence that has been characteristic of the image of the Jew in Christian theologies (see Keel 2018, 51). The Jew was inside the Christian community insofar as Jesus was Jewish, like many of the first Christians, and because much of the Christian Bible was shared with the Jewish people. The Jews were outside of the Christian community insofar as they did not accept Jesus as the Christ in fulfillment of their Messianic hope. Accordingly, “Blumenbach makes a special note to argue . . . that Jews constitute a peculiar variety of Caucasian” (Keel 2018, 51).

I am having difficulties disagreeing with Keel with respect to the big picture. The results of the many groundbreaking studies of historians

of science and religion in the past fifty years cohere well with both Keel's findings and many of the conclusions that he draws from them. And philosophically it is especially the influence of the work of Jürgen Habermas on my thinking that makes me very receptive to Keel's views on the link between secularism and science. Empirical evidence and moral considerations compelled Habermas to revise his views on the role of religion in democracies of liberal states (see Habermas 2008, especially 114–47 and 209–49). For example, Habermas cites the fact that the majority of the world's population remains religious despite the claimed globalization of secularized Western culture. Moreover, Habermas observes, even in the West we see the rise of religious movements of considerable size that claim spaces outside of the established institutions of traditional religions. As for the moral considerations that inform his position with respect to the role of religion in secular societies, Habermas notes an asymmetry in the cognitive position of secular and religious citizens in democratic decision-making processes of the liberal state. While he reaffirms his ban on religious reasons in courts of law and parliaments, he finds it unjust to expect religious citizens to first translate their religious reasons into secular terms in order for them to be admissible in democratic decision-making processes within the confines of the public sphere. Such a requirement not only seems unfair but also unrealistic, because it assumes the presence of a cognitive compartmentalization in religious citizens along the lines of secular versus religious reasoning.

The larger context of Habermas's reassessment of the admissibility of religious reasons in democratic decision-making processes at the level of the public sphere is the crisis of the Enlightenment. It is part of Habermas's project of a critical enlightenment to search for sources of normativity and knowledge that may be hidden in that which is perceived as the "other" of reason, such as religious traditions. Habermas is convinced that the liberal state can only benefit when religious and secular citizens engage in processes of mutual learning. Such an engagement will allow theology to function well as a pacemaker for modernity in religious communities. And it may lead to a stronger liberal state if the learning outcome will be norms and knowledge that result from a successful translation of religious views into secular reasons, which in turn are then admissible at higher levels of democratic decision-making processes. Habermas argues that we should not demand less of secular citizens than we expect of religious citizens in terms of a willingness to stay away from any kind of fundamentalism. Scientism means as much of a threat to the liberal state as religious fundamentalism. Despite the truth of atheism, philosophy must be agnostic, therefore! And the best way to achieve such agnosticism is by means of postmetaphysical thinking, which is not to be mistaken as anti-metaphysical thinking.

Given his postmetaphysical and atheistic conviction, the question arises as to what exactly it is that makes Habermas think that religious traditions,

such as Christianity, have still anything meaningful to contribute to democratic discussions about the foundations and operations of the liberal state. Have religious traditions really still anything substantial to contribute today? Is not it obvious to any reasonable person that religions are a matter of the past only? I let Habermas answer for himself:

The secular awareness that we live in a postsecular society finds philosophical expression in postmetaphysical thinking. This mode of thought . . . rejects . . . the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason . . . to catch up with itself, as it were . . . . In the process, postmetaphysical thinking . . . reconfirms its internal relationship to those world religions whose origins . . . date back to the middle of the first millennium before Christ. . . . Greek concepts such as “autonomy” and “individuality” or Roman concepts such as “emancipation” and “solidarity” have long since been invested with meaning of Judeo-Christian origin. . . . Religious traditions appear to have remained present . . . , even if they at times present themselves as the opaque other of reason. (Habermas 2008, 140–42)

Keel’s study offers additional examples that may be taken in support of Habermas’s position. For example, he notes that Blumenbach’s teleological reasoning is guided by a Christianized teleology. In Keel’s own words, “Indeed, the explanatory mechanism Blumenbach used to account for species diversity—a mechanism he called *Bildungstrieb*—effectively reoccupies (to invoke Hans Blumenberg) the creative powers of the God in the Genesis narrative. This divinized conception of nature is threaded throughout his account of the organic world and human racial diversity” (Keel 2018, 24–25).

Here is then the topic that I wish to introduce into our discussion of Keel’s study on racial science and Christian thought. On the one hand, it has the potential to translate into support for Habermas. Keel’s study provides further reason (in addition to what we know already about the continuing entanglement of modern science and traditional Christian thought) to think that religious traditions are not exclusively a matter of the past. They are still with us, although in very subtle ways at times, and this presence even concerns the genealogy of our current notion of reason. On the other hand, one may use Keel’s findings to counter Habermas’s optimism with respect to the anticipated outcomes of the learning processes that we are encouraged to let occur between members of secular and religious camps for the benefit of democracy in liberal states. What Keel’s study unearths may be taken to validate the suspicion that religion means nothing but harm for an enlightened society—whatever the “entanglement situation” may be. On top of all the well-known documented atrocities that were committed in the name of Jesus, Christianity also gave us racial science, according to Keel. Here is my question then: *in what sense exactly can we say that Christianity has given us racial science?*

One way to address this situation may be in terms of a Foucauldian “discourse analysis.” After all, we are indebted to Michel Foucault for giving us a notion of power that allows us to bring to light the simultaneity of liberation and oppression in the generation of knowledge (see Detel 2005, 6–57). Pursuing this line of reasoning here would require more work than would be appropriate in the context of a critical appraisal of Keel’s study. What I will do instead is to bring another study into the discussion that shares many of Keel’s premises, but which does not employ Blumenberg’s notion of “reoccupation” when unearthing the theological dimension of modern thought. To be clear: I am submitting my considerations for discussion primarily to give Keel the opportunity to elaborate on the Blumenbergian notion of “reoccupation” concerning its historiographical merits and perils, insofar as it is to help us in our analysis of modernity, which Keel confirms is driven by Christian theology to a considerable extent. And this is done to invite Keel to clarify in what sense exactly we can say Christianity has given us racial science.

What I read is that “modern scientists have inherited racial reasoning practices and habits of mind derived from Christian intellectual history” (Keel 2018, 139). We can also read, however, that Christianity “predisposed” modern science “to a variety of racial reasoning strategies which includes giving preference to nature when attempting to explain perceived differences across human populations” (Keel 2018, 139). These are, of course, two different claims. The first is that Christianity was *racist* in itself in the sense of affirming the moral significance of racial differences. This racism was then passed on to modern science. The second claim states that Christianity *enabled* racism. This I take to mean that reasoning patterns unrelated to racial thinking were in place in Christianity that made racism possible in the context of modern science. Thus the question is: which claim does Keel think his findings support? In my view, they support only the second claim.

Moreover, if that is true, then I wonder about the extent to which Blumenbergian reoccupation helped Keel to substantiate this claim. For example, I can see why Keel claims that Blumenbach’s Caucasian race was a plausible candidate to reoccupy the “answer position” that the biblical Adam had occupied concerning the “question” of common descent. But I can see this only given what Keel has to say about contemporary art. He reports that Adam was depicted as a white European in the paintings to which Blumenbach was exposed. And—among many other considerations—this fact, Keel argues, should be used to explain why Christianity’s biblical Adam was eventually replaced by an original Caucasian race in Blumenbach’s allegedly secular work on humanity’s origins and racial diversity (see Keel 2018, 39). Reoccupation, it seems to me, would support the first claim outlined above. But when it comes to the second claim (which I assume Keel is actually substantiating) we are dealing with much more

than reoccupation. Keel's reference to contemporary art and the depiction of Adam and Eve in paintings about the Garden of Eden clearly show this. Historiographically speaking, I am wondering, therefore, whether the category of "cultural schemas" may not serve us better in understanding the dynamics at play here. To clarify what I have in mind, I would like to take the liberty to introduce another recent study that looks at the impact of the Christian image of the Jew on modern science. This is not to distract from Keel's inspiring study; it is to sharpen the focus.

Alan Chad Goldberg's study *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* (Goldberg 2017) employs the category of "cultural schemas" successfully, I find, in tracing the impact of traditional Christian reasoning about the Jew in classical social thought in the German context. One of the reasons that Goldberg offers to justify the use of the category is that it allows the historian to bring to light the *products of the imagination* of the historical actors, as it were, to explain the emergence of reasoning patterns that became characteristic of classical social thought. That is to say that *structural forces* and *material relations* (including the relations among texts) (see Goldberg 2017, 109) are not sufficient to capture how images of the Jew helped to establish the Jews "as symbols of modernity or its antithesis" (Goldberg 2017, 16). For example, Goldberg claims that we can "explain the patterned ways of German social thinkers described by the relationship between Judaism and modern capitalism" in terms of the cultural schemas established by traditional Christian theology. This is an acknowledgment "that portrayals of Jews in German social thought had a material basis while affirming the idealist insight that the facts never speak for themselves" (Goldberg 2017, 73, 75). Cultural schemas play a decisive role in their selection and interpretation. The schemas precede experience and observation in shaping the reception of facts. What is suggested is "that the relevant schemas in this instance have a religious origin in Christian theology transmitted via the Protestant cultural milieu shared by" Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart, and Max Weber (Goldberg 2017, 75). For example, the "early Marx, it is shown, echoed the venerable discourse of 'judaizing' that began in Paul and periodically reappeared in Christian Europe. . . . As reconstructed in this discourse, the Jews showed the gentiles the image of their own unwelcome future" (Goldberg 2017, 46). The situation is different in the more mature Marx: "the Jews, after contributing to the creation of modern capitalism, were subsequently supplanted and surpassed. This later narrative can be understood as a secularized version of Christian supersessionism . . . transposed by Marx to the material realm of economic history" (Goldberg 2017, 47).

I am drawing on Goldberg's noteworthy study in our discussion of Keel's work, because he shares a conviction that I ascribe to Habermas and Keel, namely that "the point of historical inquiry is not to discover forms of life different from our own, as in historicism, but to recover what has been

forgotten to emancipate ourselves from it” (Goldberg 2017, 111). Emancipation does not mean rejection, of course. The category of “cultural schemas” when applied to Keel’s subject matter has the advantage that it makes us receptive to such questions as the genealogy of the representation of Adam and Eve as white Europeans in the fine art of the day at the time of Blumenberg. And, of course, *prima facie* such questions raise some doubts about the assumption that Christianity *as such* employed *racial* reasoning strategies that helped establish a racial *science* in Blumenbach’s work on human origins and diversity. In light of Goldberg’s affirmation of the secularism framework, my question then is: does Keel prefer Blumenbergian reoccupation over cultural schemas, because only reoccupation allows him to challenge the secularist assumptions of history of science?

To conclude my considerations, here is then my twofold question for Keel in a nutshell: is the evidence that *Divine Variations* presents conclusive enough to say that scientific thinking about race is basically “transmitted” “religious beliefs” (Keel 2018, 145), and is it primarily Blumenbergian reoccupation that renders the evidence conclusive in this sense?

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