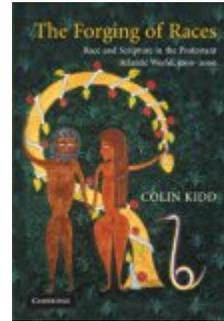


Colin Kidd. *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 309 S. \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-79729-0; \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-79324-7.

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Published on H-Atlantic (November, 2007)



Adam and Eve, the Lost Tribes, and Questions of Race and Humanity

Colin Kidd confesses that he began the study that led to *The Forging of Races* with the “suspicion” that the displacement of scripture from the center of western culture “was a necessary prelude to the emergence of modern racism” (p. 271). Many scholars have shared that suspicion, especially, perhaps, scholars who share a Christian heritage. It may seem obvious (before reading Kidd’s study, at least) that the Bible asserts the unity of humankind in Old Testament accounts of creation and that the New Testament offers a path to salvation for a single, undivided humanity.

But Kidd leads his readers through many writings produced on both sides of the Atlantic and demonstrates that the Bible provided evidence for those inclined to theories of multiple creations as well as single creations, for those who posited separate paths to salvation for different groups of people as well as those who affirmed that Christianity required a single path. In the early modern period, Europeans faced a confusing multiplicity of peoples and they produced an equal multiplicity of theories about them.

Kidd reinforces the scholarly interpretation of recent decades that makes race *per se* secondary to other considerations and perceptions in the early modern encounter of peoples.[1] As Europeans ventured outward across the globe, “racial Otherness tended to be overshadowed by a more pressing concern about pagan Otherness” (p. 73). European and American Protestants had a strong investment in their identities as Christians, and many of them

took little interest, or expressed mere curiosity, in the physical differences between peoples. For Kidd, one of the most important results of the commitment by many Christians to the idea of monogenesis was the power of that idea to work against racism.

Still, did the Enlightenment not push the unifying stories of scripture to the side of western intellectual life? Kidd warns that too much emphasis on the radical extremes of Enlightenment thought obscures the dominant reality of Enlightenment attachment to Christianity and to scriptural foundations for all areas of knowledge. Thus, although Voltaire may have favored theories of polygenesis, the Scottish Enlightenment’s James Beattie and influential American Samuel Stanhope Smith embraced monogenesis and asserted the importance of the unity of humankind.

It may be that Kidd does not succeed in placing “‘Race-as-theology’ ... alongside accounts of ‘race-as-biology,’ ‘race-as-ethnicity,’ and ‘race-as-class-or-caste’” (p. 19). In Kidd’s account, the theological construction of race is often reduced to a dependent variable, following rather than leading other racialist constructs. Nonetheless, the forms of racialist thought have surely been influenced by the categories, symbols, and stories available in scriptural accounts.

Although much of Kidd’s story centers on dominant Protestant groups in England and North America, he pulls in an occasional example from continental Europe. These examples often add up to detours rather than to a

complete fleshing out of the whole Protestant Atlantic World of the subtitle. When Kidd reaches the twentieth century, his coverage is eccentric in a different way: he tours a number of (mostly North American) religious groups without a clear focus. In a single chapter he discusses Christian Identity, Theosophy, and other forms of twentieth-century “racialized religion”; the chapter on “black counter-theologies” touches on James Cone, black Jews, and others. It is in this section, too, that the reader encounters the result of Kidd’s decision to count both the Mormon Church and the Nation of Islam within the Protestant world.

Although readers who seek a single, coherent line of argument will be disappointed with Kidd’s work, ultimately the book is an absorbing excursion. He begins with a useful summary of ideas about race as a social

and cultural construct. He brings us pictures of a variety of (especially) British and American intellectuals wrestling with the joint implications, for example, of encounters with Africans and the story of Ham. He finishes with a perhaps too quick but nonetheless fascinating glimpse at a number of recent religious groups and their wide variety of racial ideologies. It is an enjoyable and thought-provoking journey that succeeds in placing serious Christian thought at the center of early modern views of the newly diverse world.

Note

[1]. A recent, useful, brief summary of some of these issues is in Jennifer M. Spear, “Race Matters in the Colonial South,” *Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 3 (August 2007), 579-588.

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Citation: Ruth Doan. Review of Kidd, Colin, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

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