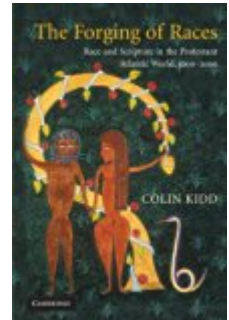
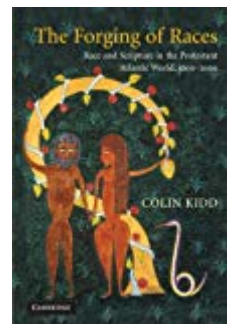


**Colin Kidd.** *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. vii + 309 pp



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**Reviewed by** Sylvester Johnson

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Colin Kidd's *Forging of Races* is a watershed volume that constitutes the first comprehensive study of Atlantic ideas about the Bible and race in the modern period. Kidd's international assessment of biblical interpretation is a richly conceived intellectual history that takes seriously the international nature of racial discourse and scriptural thinking from the early modern period through the twentieth century.

The first chapter unsettles any comfortable naturalistic notions the reader might entertain about race. Kidd delivers a very readable and persuasive explanation of why race is a social, not biological, reality. He examines the ironies and disjuncture that characterize the history of ideas about racial categories, noting how conceptions of

the number of races and discrete essences of respective races have changed over time and have constantly failed to achieve homogeneity or consistency.

After having cleared the ground with this contextualization of modern racial taxonomy, Kidd in the second chapter dives into developing the question that lies at the heart of this book. How was racial discourse related to modern biblical views about human origins? More specifically, did monogenesis, the belief that all humans shared descent from the same ancestors, inhibit or mitigate the acerbic nature of modern racism? Did polygenesis, the mildly popular view that different races derived from different ancestors--promote a more malicious racial consciousness?

*Forging of Races* takes up these questions through a subsequent chronological history of Enlightenment approaches to the Bible.

The third chapter examines ways that European interpretations of Genesis (especially of the Noah legend) were at once narrative templates for making claims about racial ideologies and discursive indicators of European Christian angst over the status of scriptural authority in light of advances in the sciences such as ethnology and early anthropology. Racial categories, Kidd argues, caused Europeans to question the Bible as a reliable and comprehensive source of authoritative knowledge about the empirical world because the Bible did not address the issue of race. With the expansion of European colonialism into the New World, furthermore, early modern writers had to explain why the Bible, which was supposed to be of universal applicability, never mentioned the Americas.

In chapter 4, Kidd defends the Enlightenment against two types of reductionist claims. Against the charge that the Enlightenment was simply racist, Kidd proffers instead that this intellectual movement among Europeans was more complicated, generating racist strategies of representation and also advancing a framework of natural rights whose ethical injunctions pertained innately to all persons. Second, Kidd rejects the secularism thesis, the common conception that the Enlightenment was fundamentally a rejection of religion. It was not; the secularizing strategies derivative of Enlightenment thought were not necessarily opposed to religion but rather enabled non-religious categories for conceiving of and participating in the world of human experience. At times, this might promote religious activity, a pattern that he demonstrates by discussing the growing trend among theologians who drew upon scientific studies of race, when convenient, in order to support the authority of scripture.

The fifth and sixth chapters respectively examine debates over slavery and taxonomies of re-

ligion based on racial essences. Chapter 7 surveys the history of religious movements conscientiously formulated on White racial identity (such as British Israelism), and chapter 8 assesses the history of Black religions (largely of the twentieth century) that have responded to White supremacy by promoting theologies of racial agency and Black nationalism (Kidd makes the bizarre assertion that African American Muslims and African American Jews are actually Protestant Christians!).

Colin Kidd's is an ambitious work. The author promises an assessment of four centuries of discourse about race and scripture. Readers who are looking for a comprehensive history of interpretive strategies, Enlightenment religion, and a rich treatment of primary sources that foregrounds problems of modernity, cosmology, and racial consciousness will be rewarded. The work is not without its problems, however. Critical historians of race and colonialism will find troubling much of Kidd's *explanation* of the data about biblical interpretation that he so ably catalogues. Ultimately, Kidd's theoretical fluency is strangely inhibited by what at least *seems* to be a strident commitment to defending the deeply and perversely racist history of Christian monogenesis and the attending monotheism. There can be no honest assessment of monogenesis that concludes it ensures a gentler, milder version of white supremacy vis-à-vis polygenesis.

It is not clear why Kidd thinks that monogenesis necessarily inhibits racism and radical otherness. This is not true for sexism or classism. Why should it hold for racism? Native American and African religions, on the other hand, embraced a worldview comprising polygenesis and polytheism, yet they never produced racial violence on the scale of that by European Christians. Christians who embraced monogenesis, on the other hand, were primary agents in genocidal wars against Africans and Native Americans. The Americas, in fact, were the locus of the largest-

scale episode of genocidal human destruction--over 95 percent of American Indians put to death, primarily by explicit execution of colonial and White nation-state policies of slavery, forced removal, and military campaigns of extermination (as opposed to disease, which accounted for a minority of these deaths). Millions of Africans were worked literally to death in the Americas. Where is the empirical basis for arguing that this destruction would have been worse if not for monogenesis? Not once does *Forging of Races* engage in a serious way the history of genocide that is interstitially instantiated in the history of White Christian colonialism. The closest the book comes to naming this violence is in chapter 3: "Theological orthodoxy and the narratives of sacred history underpinned notions of the family of man and the brotherhood of mankind, however much these notions were disregarded in practice in the imperial rush towards the possession of slaves and the dispossession of indigenous peoples" (p. 78).

It seems that what is decisive for Kidd is the superficial impression that if people believe in common origins, their interactions will be more humane. This assumption ignores the history of encounter between European Christian conquerors in the Americas and their Native and African subjects. It also ignores the analytical studies of scholars such as Itumeleng Mosala, Regina Schwartz, Keith Whitlam, and Jonathan Kirsch, who have demonstrated the linkages between monotheism and violence. What Kidd seems to assume, in other words, is actually a problematic ideal that lacks evidence. One is pressed to ask whether Kidd's theoretical [mis]handling of the history of scripture and race would look different if he had to respond to the material, historical relationship between biblical thinking and physical, psychological, and cultural violence and death that became a necessary part of European Christian colonialism--Itumeleng Mosala has addressed this very problem in his *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (1989). Would Kidd's explanation of

primary sources look the same if he included in his interpretive scope the deeply consequential and empirical *religious* hatred that defined encounters between monotheistic, monogenist Christian colonizers and their polytheistic victims?

Even the Enlightenment heroes--or, rather, *especially* these heroes--whom he so earnestly defends (his attempt to prove that David Hume and Thomas Jefferson do not deserve to be identified as racists is disappointing and unconvincing) should further prod him to recognize the extent of massive destruction of non-White peoples that is the context for the history of ideas he examines. Does a passionate defense of these victims' putative humanity ever become an imperative for explaining in critical terms "what happened"? Unfortunately, it does not in *Forging of Races*. Finally, Kidd joins a host of other writers when he incorrectly assumes that Black religious activists and thinkers only respond to Whites instead of also shaping and influencing the larger world of meanings that inform societal norms. Blacks are essentially unmentioned in his history of ideas until the latter chapter on "Black Counter-Theologies." What distinguishes Kidd's study, nevertheless, is not its problems--unfortunately, these are woefully familiar and plague numerous studies of European history and thought--but its strengths. Historians of race, religion, scriptures, and modernity most certainly cannot afford to miss what Kidd has to say; his meticulous research and generous notes will aid serious researchers for years to come. Furthermore, his clear and cogent explanation of race as a social system and his mapping of international relations of scripture and race will prove immensely valuable for teaching both graduate and undergraduate courses.

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