Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science

By T. Keel (2018)

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Reviewed by Craig Prentiss

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Terence Keel, associate professor of History and Black Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, has written a timely, thought-provoking, and important book. *Divine Variations* argues that the scientific search for human origins, including today's field of genetic science, participates in a set of discursive practices shaped by ideological concerns traceable to Christian theological assumptions. The penchant of the scientist toward '[u]niversal narratives of human becoming ... are derived from Christian European traditions of thought and belief that conceal their parochial foundations' (p. 2), and Keel sets out to demonstrate this thesis in an easily digestible monograph of fewer than 150 pages of engaging prose. The book's publication at a moment in history when genetic science has fueled a now multi-billion-dollar industry for a popular audience eager to trace its genetic roots is fortuitous. On the day I sit down to write this review, the contested meanings of a Massachusetts senator's DNA test in relation to her Native American ancestry is front-page news nationwide, while *The New York Times* is running a feature on the misappropriation of genetic science by contemporary strands of white supremacists (Amy Harmon, 'Why white supremacists are chugging milk (and why geneticists are alarmed)', October 17, 2018). Both stories serve to illustrate a central

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concern of Keel's: that racial imaginings gleaned from Christian exegesis of stories in Genesis not only continue to haunt the public imagination, but also continue to be replicated in the way many scientists organize their data. In so doing, they often unwittingly – one assumes – participate in the reconstitution of racial hierarchies.

Keel reminds us that Christian theological discourse has been historically invested in the notion that humankind was created in its complete state by God, who differentiated humans from other species and placed them atop an ecological hierarchy. In addition, biblical narratives traced social boundaries to the sons of Noah, whose descendants were imagined to have populated the world. These characteristics, coupled with a biblical penchant for genealogies to mark lines of authority, informed a Christian impulse to root present-day social divisions in primordial lines of descent. *Divine Variations* is written to show us that these impulses have remained at work in the science of human origins since the late eighteenth century.

Keel begins his argument in Chapter 1 with a look at Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), the Göttingen University scholar who was the first to promulgate five 'types' of the human species: African, Asian, American, Malayan, and Caucasian. Blumenbach sought an entirely naturalistic alternative to Christian theological explanations for human existence. Yet, as Keel shows, the boundaries of Blumenbach's imagination were delimited by a framework set forth in the biblical account of creation. Few features of Blumenbach's thought illustrate this as effectively as his assertion that *Bildungstrieb* – an idea traceable to sixteenth-century theories of vitalism – was the generative force behind the organization of organic matter into the range of complex living organisms, and the elixir behind 'nature's ability of repair itself' (p. 26). Through *Bildungstrieb*, Blumenbach was able to smuggle the 'attributes of God the creator' (p. 27) into a purportedly scientific narrative without direct appeal to the divine. Nature itself now had the impulse and the drive to not only create, but to create purposefully, as all animals were made to be in harmony with their 'mode of life' (p. 34) in Blumenbach's teleological cosmology.

Of special interest, of course, is Blumenbach's account of humanity. For all other species, Blumenbach held that the animal world descended from organisms existing in the most ancient of times (a timeframe Blumenbach restricted to Archbishop James Ussher's (1581–1656) calendar, which placed creation roughly 4,000 years before Jesus). Blumenbach characterized this descent as a process of 'degeneration.' Variation within a species could be traced to degeneration from an original form of that species existing in the 'pre-Adamite' period – a period that ended in catastrophe, as evidenced by fossil records. But for humankind, Blumenbach asserted an

autochthonous creation derived from no other form of life, like the creation of humankind in God's image described in Genesis 1:26. Most importantly, Blumenbach's first human was of the 'Caucasian variety,' as he asserted that 'it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white ...' (p. 29).

Keel contextualizes Blumenbach's assertion within the framework of Lutheran biblical illustrations, Luther's conception of beauty, and the exegetical work of biblical scholars at the Göttingen University – particularly Johann David Michaelis (1717–91) – who were instrumental in developing supersessionist arguments seeking to displace Judaism from its pivotal role in the formation of Western culture. Michaelis even went so far as to locate the Garden of Eden in today's region of Kashmir and Tibet, while situating Abraham's native Chaldea near the Black Sea by (not surprisingly) the Caucasus. This socio-cultural context informed Blumenbach's worldview and made his scientific claims seem plausible to both himself and others.

Chapter 2 explores the polygenist theories of one of America's most influential nineteenth-century thinkers, Josiah Clark Nott (1804–73). Nott, a pro-slavery, southern medical doctor, was distinctive for being among the earliest to reject the normative monogenist reading of human creation in scripture as being unscientific. In Nott's case, the evidence geologists had provided for a much older planet, coupled with the cultural narratives of peoples in non-Christian communities around the world, suggested that a far older planet than the prevailing six millennia hypothesis found in Ussher's scriptural reading was more likely. The five racial types that Blumenbach identified would have needed far longer to have 'degenerated' from primeval Caucasian humans, Nott reasoned, than Ussher's timeline allowed for. This flaw in Blumenbach's monogenetic model opened up a space for Nott and others to argue instead for polygenism, rendering the races a common genus, with each race constituting a distinct species. Nott's hypothesis undergirded his lifelong obsession with proving that 'mixed-race' peoples suffered from poorer health and shorter lifespans. Keel argues, however, that Nott's willingness to unburden himself from the bounds of Christian theological reasoning did not extend to a rejection of the Christian conviction that species, and consequently races, carried within them permanent, static traits. Even when Darwin provided a monogenetic account that included a much more ancient timeframe for life's existence, Nott rejected Darwin's theory on the faith grounds that species were immutable and self-contained.

The continuation of Nott's polygenist logic in a post-Darwinian world continued into the twentieth century's racial imagination. Keel's third chapter focuses on the ways that Nott's logic, and that of other

nineteenth-century polygenists, infected approaches to medicine in the decades to come. The German statistician Frederick Hoffman, whose 1896 book *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* impacted the American scientific community to a degree comparable to the 'impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* before the Civil War' (p. 97), insisted that certain races were more predisposed to disease than others. Higher mortality rates for Blacks bore no relationship to their environment and oppressed status, according to Hoffman, but could instead be traced to 'the fact of an immense amount of immorality, which is a race trait, and of which scrofula, syphilis, and even consumption are the inevitable consequence' (pp. 95–6). Concessions to Darwinian monogenism were overwhelmed in practice by polygenist assumptions, even when not fully articulated, that enabled the medical community, including the US Public Health Service (the earlier iteration of the National Institutes of Health), to continue treating medical disparities between racial groups as if they resulted from immutable characteristics of distinct species. These assumptions also informed a eugenics movement that was growing rapidly throughout the 1920s. Keel dedicates a portion of this chapter to the work of an African-American physician, Dr Charles V. Roman, who struggled tirelessly to counter the polygenist logic operative in medicine at the time. Yet Roman's own monogenetic stance was informed in part by his Christian theological commitments. As such, he fell prey to the notion that some diseases, especially sexually transmitted ones, were nature's response to immorality.

The age of DNA science has reaffirmed Darwin's evolutionary account of human origins and sealed assurances that all homo sapiens share a common ancestral lineage. Despite this, Keel's fourth chapter makes clear that, as scientists are individuals shaped by the cultures in which they reside – cultures whose social hierarchies remain invested in racial imagination – the interpretation of genetic data continues to be colored by the racialized concerns of earlier generations. Racial typologies dating back to Blumenbach, whose own taxonomy expanded on that of Noah's three sons, remain operative in both the current widespread desire to marshal the forces of DNA science to identify one's 'true' origins, as well as in efforts to identify single nucleotide polymorphisms that may mark ancestry – ancestral lines conveniently packaged in taxonomies corresponding to divisions eerily similar to Blumenbach's own.

Keel's history of hypotheses surrounding Neanderthals is particularly instructive here, as readers are guided through a series of efforts to link Neanderthals to nearly every population except Europeans, only to end in the discovery that Neanderthal DNA is almost exclusive to Europeans and Asians. (Keel does not point out that, upon this discovery, magazine articles

and television programs have been springing up all over to announce that Neanderthals must have been much more creative than previously credited. One wonders how those articles and programs would have characterized Neanderthals had we learned that their DNA could be found exclusively in, say, Africans.) As Keel summarizes it, “The meaning scientists attribute to human difference is a reflection of the social, political, and values [sic] they have internalized as historical subjects’ (p. 142).

Keel’s argument is compelling, although there are questions that deserve more thorough exploration. When speaking of ‘the Christian roots of racial science’ (p. 145), do we give too much weight to the category of ‘Christian’ as a stable concept? Teleological thinking preceded Christianity by centuries and is a key feature of Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian thought. The tribalistic tendencies to identify and codify social groupings evident in Genesis (a text that pre-dates Christianity by centuries) can also be found in the *Rig Veda*, the Persian *Avesta*, and other ancient texts. No doubt Keel is correct when he asserts that these Western thinkers encountered their racial classification scheme through Christian sources. But just as Keel explains that humans are ‘mongrel creatures’ and ‘at no point in our history has there been a member of our species not mixed with another human and nonhuman group’ (pp. 135–6), it is worth remembering that ‘Christian’ is a complicated signifier that, as much as theological discourses might guide us to believe otherwise, is its own mongrel creation formed of constantly shifting social structures. While this does not negate the utility of the signifier, its complexity may have been worth more attention than Keel has given it here.

None of this should detract us from Keel’s impressive argument. We live in a world of silence until we fill it with words, with categories, and with questions. The fact that even in a scientific venue, popularly understood to be value neutral, we continue to be invested in accounting for human difference along imagined racial lines tells us a great deal about the hold that these classificatory schemes, grounded in machinations of power, have on us. *Divine Variations* will reward its readers with as many questions as answers. It is a significant contribution to the cultural history of science and religious studies, and is accessible not only to scholars, but to undergraduates as well.