Modern Religion, Modern Race
By T. M. Vial (2016)
New York: Oxford University Press, xiii+277pp.

Reviewed by Susannah Heschel

KEYWORDS: RACE; MODERNITY; CHRISTIANITY; ISLAM

‘Religion and race share a genealogy’ as ‘fundamental conceptual building blocks of modernity’ (p. 1): this claim forms the basis of Ted Vial’s highly important new book, *Modern Religion, Modern Race*. Not only is the genealogy shared, it is intertwined because ‘race and religion in our modern social imaginary shape each other. Religion is a racialized category, even when as scholars of religion we are not aware that we are talking about race’ (pp. 190–1). The claim is startling, and Vial’s carefully constructed argument is dense and difficult, but wonderfully rewarding.

Most studies examine how the category of race functions, demonstrating the hidden, subtle manifestations and sharpening our ability to recognise this category at work. Other important studies have demonstrated that racism is the necessary ideological basis for colonialism. Vial’s goal is different. While we know racial theory arose during the modern era and served as an important tool of political and economic imperialism, he focuses on the structures of thought that gave rise to racial thinking. At the same time, as a scholar of nineteenth-century Protestant theology, Vial is struck by the parallels between race and modern understandings of religion. His argument, which is daring and dramatic, claims that both religion and race were born of the same intellectual structures, and indeed gave rise to one another. He is not blaming either for the other, but explores

Affiliation

Dartmouth College, USA.

email: susannah.heschel@dartmouth.edu

the kinds of philosophical assumptions that created the concepts of both religion and race.

Vial argues that these categories were not only constructed in parallel, but that 'religion is always a racialized category in the modern world' (p. 125).

He begins with Kant, who is clear about the physically distinct categories of people he thinks that nature has created, but doesn't explain why races have differing 'specific mental and moral characteristics' (p. 126). Moreover, Kant's understanding of religion carried certain limitations. Religion does not arise from Kantian autonomy, Vial points out. Kant's categorical imperative may give us the basis for moral judgment, but 'it does not give us a way to understand the modern sense of outrage on behalf of the tortured or the sick' (p. 182). Outrage depends 'on an expressivist sense that what it means to be fully human is the opportunity to develop, to express, to take some action as an agent in history' (p. 182).

In the conventional understanding, Friedrich Schleiermacher makes religion a feature of consciousness, removing it from history and society and placing it 'securely within the ineffable world of the individual's inner life' (p. 126). Vial disagrees, viewing Schleiermacher as understanding the social nature of religion. Indeed, he claims that both Schleiermacher and Herder represent an 'expressivism' (Charles Taylor's term for a theory of human nature) that, ironically, also gave rise to the modern categories of race. That is, both Schleiermacher and Johann Gottfried Herder provide the tools needed to understand groups of people as constituted by language and culture. It is the theological anthropology that is essential to race: taxonomies, imperialisms, biological sciences, and so forth, made important contributions to legitimating racial theory, but at the heart of racism is a definition of what it is to be human and how we come to define that humanity.

By differentiating people based on physical characteristics, Kant made the first step towards race thinking, Vial argues. He calls Kant 'the inventor of race' (p. 30) and asks how we might resolve the conflict between his philosophical contribution to human rights, on the one hand, and his essays on race, on the other. Yet Kant's contribution was not yet sufficient to create racial thinking because Kant does not explain why different races have specific moral characters.

The distinctiveness of modern race, in contrast to theories in antiquity regarding distinctions among groups, is that 'modern racial thinking assumes innate capacities' (p. 29), whereas Kant attributed physical differences to climate and other natural phenomena. The missing link, according to Vial, came with Herder and Max Müller, two figures who repudiated

racism even while providing a modern philosophical anthropology essential to it. The key question for race is, 'What is the link between physical characteristics and claims regarding intellectual and moral capacities?' Herder's answer comes with his understanding of national culture and language. He speaks of national character as 'a genius which expresses itself, outside individual diversities, in their favourite works of their spirit and their heart' (p. 183). Müller's taxonomy of languages provided a philological 'explanation' that he extended to a taxonomy of religions.

While Herder provided the vocabulary of national character and culture, he rejected race and does not present 'a fully modern race concept', but only a recognition that linguistic differences lead to cultural differences. Nonetheless, the connection between the physical and the cultural was established by linking bodies with culture. For the next step, Vial turns to Schleiermacher's understanding of how we attain religious experience, as well as his own evaluations of non-Christian religions.

For Kant, religion is a necessary postulate for a moral order; any rational person would understand that, he thinks. Vial argues that Schleiermacher introduced an understanding of religion as 'a feature of human nature', the ability to 'experience the infinite', that is made possible by 'group membership' (p. 172). For Schleiermacher, religion expresses a particular capacity of our humanity, rooted in feeling and intuition. Yet, as Vial points out, there is no unmediated experience for Schleiermacher – and that is the key point. Religion is not a pre-linguistic experience; 'cultural-linguistic groups share a language that both determines and expresses their experiences' (p. 87). Thus, religion is produced in unique ways by each group, rather than as a universal phenomenon.

That is, each individual culture gives rise to religious experience, making religion intrinsically linked to culture and, in that way, Vial concludes, 'Schleiermacher's discussions of religion are always and essentially racialized' (p. 187). Just as everyone has a race, a nationality and a gender, they also have a religion because religion is an outgrowth of the language of a community, as is race. Religion does not arise prior to language and culture, but is an expression of it, and is thus linked intrinsically to the language and culture in which we are raised. This point is driven home by Schleiermacher's concerns about the conversion of Jews to Christianity: they would bring an 'alien spirit' and 'a Judaizing Christianity would be the true disease with which we should infect ourselves' (p. 213). And while the Jews need help, the Australians, for Schleiermacher, may be beyond help. Religion itself is racialised.

Vial's discussion extends to the contemporary. His critique of the *Norton Anthology of World Religions*, especially its Introduction by Jack Miles, is

sharp and brilliant (pp. 218–19). Theories of modernity and progress are also subjected to Vial's skilled demolition. When he turns to the field of comparative religion, especially to depictions of Islam, his comments are sharp, as he demonstrates the assumptions about a teleological progression of religions that are used to denigrate Islam. Religions are evaluated along a temporal trajectory, labelling Islam as 'primitive', in ways that observers prior to Kant and the nineteenth-century thinkers did not claim.

Scholars have long demonstrated the role of race in earlier eras – for example, the racialisation of Muslims by European Christians, explored by Suzanne Akbari in her excellent book, *Idols in the East* (Cornell UP, 2009). Other scholars have also pointed to the demonisation of Jewish bodies during the Christian Middle Ages as an example of racism. However, it is not the body itself that poses the danger, in racial thinking, but the moral and spiritual degeneracy that is incarnate in it. How modern thought has arrived at a pervasive racist conviction that bodily differences are linked to cultural, moral and spiritual depravity and danger is the question that Vial addresses.

Vial's book is pioneering in demonstrating the intimate link between the emergence of the idea of a generic phenomenon called 'religion' and the development of racial theory among some of the most influential philosophers of the modern era, including Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher and Herder. Vial's important contribution is to raise our awareness to the simultaneous modern constructs of 'religion' and 'race' by European theorists that have given us a legacy affecting our understanding of religion to this day. He challenges us to rethink other categories as well, such as gender, and to recognise that racism is stamped in our minds as well as our politics and economics.

The book is daring and challenging, certain to be debated and disputed, for it is one of the most exciting and brilliant studies of religion and race of our era.