

8 Blumenbach's race science in the light of Christian supersessionism

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Determining the intellectual ancestry of a theorist often generates as many questions as it produces answers. Despite what we know about Johann Friedrich Blumenbach we lack complete certainty about the intellectual traditions that shaped his beliefs about race and the life sciences. For example, only in the last few decades have scholars begun to accept that Immanuel Kant had less influence on the great patriarch of the Göttingen School than we originally imagined (Richards 2000; Zammito 2012). If the anti-metaphysical system of the great Königsberg philosopher did not provide the groundwork for Blumenbach's vision of nature and human biodiversity, who and what traditions might we list as proper inspirations? Moreover, acknowledging some intellectual distance between Blumenbach and Kant – the latter of which is the presumed spokesperson of modern secular scientific epistemology – opens space for rethinking the relationship between the emergence of modern racial “science” (which Blumenbach helped to create) and the long history of Christian ideas about human origins that predate the field of physical anthropology.

These are the questions that animate this chapter. What I argue is that Blumenbach's conceptions of human diversity and the life sciences are an outgrowth of Christian intellectual history, and thus not merely a product of Newtonian science or simply a derivative of Kantian epistemology. Drawing upon new scholarship in the field of religious studies I explore unrecognized Christian forms of reasoning at play in Blumenbach's vision of the Caucasian and in his account of race. By using the term “Christian intellectual history” I am speaking of much more than faith, belief, scripture, and theology. Instead, I am referring to patterns of thought and habits of mind about Christian peoplehood, non-Christian others, and creationism that shaped a long tradition of theorizing about ancestry and the origins of human life. I argue that these mental formations were part of the intellectual scaffolding that made up Blumenbach's vision of race and human beginnings. Blumenbach's theory of human descent from an original Caucasian ancestor is therefore not a product of pure secular reason – a freestanding science of human becoming that emerges out of some intellectual void to then completely supersede a religious view of racial origins. Instead, Blumenbach's *De generis humani varietate nativa* is a continuation of Christian intellectual history.

In what follows I begin with an analysis of early Christian accounts of peoplehood and the theology of supersessionism. Here I focus on the work of Justin Martyr and examine the racial implications of early Christian beliefs about the superiority of Christian identity over and against that of Jews and other non-Christians. From this I then discuss new scholarship within the field of religious studies documenting the long tradition of Christian ethno-racial reasoning. This literature offers a framework for understanding how rational practices derived from Christian intellectual history bind the “ancients” and the “moderns” in terms of conceptualizing race. Drawing upon these insights I make an argument for situating Blumenbach’s *De generis humani varietate nativa* at the center of an alternative “big picture” of racial science that resolves questions about the sources for Blumenbach’s racial ethnology. Key to this new “big picture” is taking account of the intellectual setting in which Blumenbach published his ethnology. The nationalism burgeoning in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century brought with it a new conception of law, morality, and citizenship (Sheehan 1989, 67–71; Hess 2002, 5). These sociopolitical transformations were anchored in a uniquely anti-Jewish racial logic that has its root in the supersessionist theology of the early church. These Christian reasoning patterns appear in Kant’s understanding of the ideal ethical community, Christian Wilhelm Dohm’s proposal for the civic integration of the Jew, and Blumenbach’s ethnology – all of which were written roughly within ten years of each other. By making this association I leave aside the question of whether these three thinkers directly influenced one another. Through this reassessment of Blumenbach’s racial thought, I look instead to shed light on a tradition of Christian thought that not only provided inspiration for his ethnology but also influenced discussions about morality and citizenship in Germany near the end of the eighteenth century.

Race and the Christian imagination

During the second century the Christian apologist Justin Martyr imagined an exchange between himself and a Jew named Trypho. In his *Dialogue With Trypho* Justin articulates an early version of what came to be known as the theology of Christian supersessionism. This was the theory that the truth of Christianity supplants the law and knowledge given to the ancient Israelites. In his imagined debate Justin tries to convince Trypho that Christianity marks a new covenant superseding God’s previous commitment to Israel. Justin writes, “For the true spirit of Israel [. . .] are we who have been led to God through his crucified Christ” (Martyr 2007, 200). Jesus is the messiah anticipated by the Old Testament prophets and represents for Justin the divine order (*logos*) consistent with the timeless rational structure of scripture. Justin, like many of the early church fathers, conceived of Christianity as a unique form of peoplehood where the specific social locations of its members were replaced by a superior social union (the church) – thus, the meaning of the apostle Paul’s letter to Christian communities in Galatia where he writes in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, male and female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” To be Christian

involved shedding one's inherited identity or ethnic differences and ascending into a boundless cosmological order of bodies. Not restricted by time, ethnicity, social position, or the beliefs of the Israelites, Christians are people without corporeal ancestors. In Justin's imagined dialogue, which was truly an act of self-creation, Gentiles displace the Jews and in return Christians come to sit at both the center and beginning of a truth that accounts for the complete meaning and end of human history. They are central because history is unintelligible without them. They sit at the beginning because their emergence as a social body marks a new truth (revelation) that bears on all living souls. Through its supersessionist theology, Christianity assumes the position of a universal account of the origins and ends of human history.

Justin's imagined exchange would hardly be intelligible to us were it not for the fact that within this dialogue lay the early forms of reasoning about ancestry, race, and Christianity that continue to occupy our modern ideas about human biodiversity. Recent scholarship on the formation of Christian thought has revealed the centrality of ethno-racial reasoning across the history of Christianity, leaving an intellectual legacy that shaped the development of modern systems of belief, which inform contemporary conceptions of race in European and American science (Keel 2013). For example, Denise Kimber Buell has noted that the early followers of Jesus understood their community in ways that were consistent with the ethno-racial logic of their ancient contemporaries. She argues that

Christian texts from the late first through early third centuries do not instruct readers to understand themselves as simply members of a new "religion," a voluntary cult that entails rejection of ancestral customs (for gentiles) or a radical reinterpretation of them (for Jews). Instead, many Christian texts explicitly guide readers to understand their entrance into these emerging communities as a transformation from one descent group, tribe, people, or citizenship to a new and better one.

(Buell 2009, 111–112)

Buell claims that early Christians possessed an understanding of peoplehood that functioned conceptually like an ethno-racial group and yet at the same time understood themselves to be superior to other forms of social membership by virtue of their claims to have knowledge about the destiny of all of humanity. Indeed, this was the knowledge of salvation that implicated all people.

Claims of Christian truth being superior to other ethno-religious knowledge had specific consequences for the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. J. Kameron Carter has argued that the effort of Christians to answer this question produced patterns of reasoning about race that would become deeply embedded not merely in Catholic and Protestant theology but in modern Euro-American epistemology (Carter 2008). According to Carter, "modernity's racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity's quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots" (Carter 2008, 4). The fallout of this severance, Carter argues, is that Jews were cast as a racial group and this racialization would later

drive a wedge between the Euro-American Occident and the assumed Orientalism of Jews.

Christian thinking about Jews had a profound effect on Europe's own self-understanding as well as on its perception of native populations in the New World. Jonathan Boyarin, in his study of the religious and racial diversity in Spain before and after the colonial encounter with the New World, argues that "the troubling instability of Jewish difference shaped both Christian Europeans' self-image and their reactions to those they encountered in the course of exploration and conquest beyond what became Europe's borders" (Boyarin 2009, 1). Boyarin notes that the persistence of Jewish otherness throughout the medieval period consolidated what it meant to be Christian and European.

In this consolidation whiteness would materialize into an ideal social marker that allowed Europeans to further distinguish themselves from Jews and natives. The Christian intellectual historian Willie Jennings argues that this use of whiteness to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian reveals how "Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination" (Jennings 2010, 6). Jennings explains that in the wake of the early modern colonial encounter "whiteness emerges, not simply as a marker of the European but as the rarely spoken but always understood organizing conceptual frame" (Jennings 2010, 25). Located now at both the center and beginning of human history Jennings argues that Christian identity became fully immersed within "European (white) identity and fully outside the identities of Jews and Muslims" (Jennings 2010, 33). This construction of European Christian whiteness modernizes the supersessionist theology of the early church that displaced Israel as God's chosen people. In its new form supersessionism would place white European identity into a "boundary-less reality," thus occupying the limitless position of the body of Christ imagined by the early church fathers. Simultaneously unrestrained and central to human history European Christian whiteness touches and unites all peoples through an "ecclesial logic" that finds all bodies organized under a single ontology and conception of peoplehood rationalized through the idea of common human descent (Jennings 2010, 33).

Race in the life sciences: An alternative big picture

The recent shift in the historiography on race among scholars of religion has opened the possibility of rethinking the links between the early church and modern views of human biodiversity, which Blumenbach helped establish. Yet this connection presents a challenge for historians of science who since the 1990s have moved away from crafting a "big picture" of knowledge that draws connections across multiple historical epochs (Cunningham and Williams 1993).

In their assessment of the modern origins of science Andrew Cunningham and Perry Williams note that the first generation of historians within the field constructed a grand sweeping view of science that covered the whole of human history within a single progressive narrative. The "scientific revolution" was a culminating point within this narrative, marking philosophical and moral shifts

that set the course for our current vision of science as a universal human activity. This “big picture” was common among science-supporting intellectuals during and after the World War period and was designed to establish both the importance of modern science and the need for a subfield within the profession of history. Cunningham and Williams, however, note the changing historiography on the scientific revolution that has decentered this initial “big picture” and with it the conception of science rooted in a “transcendent timeless logic and embodying absolute moral values of freedom, rationality, and progress” (Cunningham and Williams 1993, 418). As an alternative “big picture” they argue for an account of the origins of modern science that is bounded in time, space, and culture and would ultimately be concerned with identifying “the first appearance, the first practice, of something which is distinct and specific to our own region of time and space, rooted in the particular circumstances of our culture” (Cunningham and Williams 1993, 418). This formulation of scientific knowledge is thus one that emphasizes ruptures and cleavages across historical eras – most especially between ancient and modern projects of enquiry.

This shifting assessment of the modern origins of science explains two discernable features of the scholarship written about Blumenbach’s racial ethnology. The first is that historians of science and anthropologists have tended to look for the origins of race science that closely mirror contemporary formulations. In this pursuit there has been a tendency to construct Blumenbach as a secular figure detached completely from Christian thought, thereby crafting a picture that conforms to our present ideas about the disaggregation of race, science, and religion.¹ Consequently we can discern a second effect, which is that scholars of religion have largely reproduced this secular interpretation of Blumenbach and the origins of post-Enlightenment race science in their understanding of the relationship between Christianity and race theory.² What is noteworthy here is that the unchallenged secular reading of Blumenbach has also kept in play the very old narrative of religious decline that appeared in 1959 with John C. Greene’s seminal text *The Death of Adam*, written during the first generation of scholarship on the history of science (Greene 1959). In this work, and those that follow its blueprint, religion is understood as having a waning impact on the production of scientific ideas about race, beginning with Carl Linnaeus and Blumenbach during the Late Enlightenment and culminating with Charles Darwin’s linkage of humans and primates. The longevity of this decline thesis explains the inability of religious studies scholars to extend their claims about the Christian roots of modern racial thought into any substantive discussion about racial science beyond the nineteenth century.³ The alternative big picture proposed by Cunningham and Williams thus keeps us committed to the religious decline narrative that accompanied the grand picture of science during the time of Herbert Butterfield and Alexandre Koyré (Cunningham and Williams 1993, 410). What we have then is a recent reevaluation of the modern origins of science that has not fundamentally changed how historians think about the “big picture” of how the race concept is used across the life sciences.

Yet the scholarship on Christian thought and race has made it clear that it is time to reevaluate the modern origins of race science. I contend an important

step toward such a reframing involves broadening our understanding of “religion” to include intellectual history – again one constituted by racial reasoning strategies and habits of apprehending the social and natural world – that cannot be reduced to belief, scripture, and theology. Religion in this sense describes a system of meaning and thought rooted in intellectual traditions that predate modern definitions of religiosity. Rather than take for granted that modern (racial) science marks a rupture from the religious traditions of the past, we should consider instead how one of the characteristics of our modern scientific perceptions of race is its indebtedness to a Christian intellectual history that scientists and the scholars who study them have actively denied and repressed. We must denaturalize this denial and repression, along with the very concept of race this refusal enables, and instead see it as an expression of a unique feature of European Christian practices of thought and reason that have harbored hostility toward the religious (Jewish) roots of Euro-Christianity’s own intellectual horizon. The religious decline thesis that continues to shape the historiography of modern racial science and that constructs Blumenbach as a secular figure is merely a modern articulation of the logic of Christian supersessionism. It should be no surprise then that according to the present-day life sciences “we moderns” hold a conception of race and human origins that is unprecedented, lacks intellectual ancestors, and is thought to be superior to previous knowledge formations.

Placing the Jew in the German imagination

Blumenbach arrived at his supposedly modern secular conception of the human during a time when German states reconfigured their civic responsibility to Jews. Near the end of the eighteenth century the perceived ethnocentrism, backwardness, and moral degeneracy of Jews prompted German intellectuals to imagine a form of citizenship capable of integrating them into the social body (Hess 2002, 5). This new body politic was premised on the notion of the human as a natural being, or ontologically comparable, which was entitled to universal rights regardless of the social location of the subject in question (Sheehan 1989, 71). As the historian Jonathan Hess has argued, what emerged was a German vision of citizenry that was profoundly supersessionist and therefore Christian in its claim to having created a set of entitlements that brought various subjects into a polity that transcended cultural and social particularities, most especially Jewish life (Hess 2002, 11).

In this climate of legislative and bureaucratic modernization Kant and Dohm, a politically ambitious civil servant of the Prussian state inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, would articulate a vision of the ideal moral subject and the modern German *Staatsbürger* that was organized by the concept of a Christian polity and anti-Jewish supersessionist beliefs. This was not an entirely new orientation but an extension of a long-standing tradition of ethno-racial reasoning dating back to the early church. Revisiting these formulations is key for understanding how Blumenbach helped translate a Christian conception of peoplehood and the logic of supersessionism into an enduring characteristic of our modern racial science.

Let us consider the latent supersessionist Christian assumptions found within Kant's writings on religion, which were penned around the time Blumenbach began working on his theory of human biodiversity.

In 1781 Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which laid the groundwork for his writings on religion. The cornerstone of the *Critique* was Kant's belief that human thought is governed by laws of reason that structure and organize how we perceive the world around us. For Kant there was a key distinction between the world as it appears to us, which he called *phenomena*, and the life and existence of things outside and beyond our perceptions of them, or what he called *noumena*. Our minds are designed to understand the world through the universal structures of reason that figure our perceptions. Kant claimed that "we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself, but only insofar as it is an object of sensible intuition, i.e. as an appearance" (Kant 1998 [1781], Bxxvi–Bxxvi). Given these perceived limits of reason Kant would call into question traditional religious claims about God and revelation, as well as metaphysical speculation about the inherent order of nature, all of which were premised on the notion that the human mind could transcend the restrictions of our experience as organisms bound by time, space, and the structures of the mind. Kant also had doubts about the legitimacy of the biological sciences and the aspirations of its practitioners to disclose not merely natural phenomena as they present themselves to us but the true inner workings of the natural world that leap over the limits of empirical observations (Richards 2002, 236).

Kant would later build upon the universal principles of epistemology mapped out in the *Critique* to reflect on the purpose of religion for the modern world and ultimately the history of morality. These thoughts culminated in his 1793 publication *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. As the very title suggests, Kant hoped to explain how traditional religious concepts like God, sin, or the organization of the church could be used to orient and guide the needs of an ethical life while keeping in mind the fundamental limits of human knowing. In *Religion*, Kant also looked to provide an account of the universal history of morality, which he conceived as the history of reason's self-awareness and self-orientation toward the good (Yovel 1980, 9).

Judaism, however, occupies a conspicuous place within Kant's understanding of original sin and in his account of the history of morality detailed in *Religion*. Kant's *Critique* gave him the ability to distinguish between events, ideas, and experiences as they must appear to us (*phenomena*) versus things as they are in themselves (*noumena*). This distinction provided Kant with a framework in *Religion* to explicitly displace the truth claims and lived experiences of Jews and the ancient Israelites. The starting point for this supersession was Kant's interpretation of original sin to mean more than an initial state of depravity all humans inherit historically from Adam and the patriarchs of ancient Israel (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:40). Instead, Kant reimagines original sin as an unavoidable consequence of humanity's innate freedom (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:41).

Kant claimed that the source of human freedom was not derived from society (*phenomena*) but from a will that is inherently good, unencumbered, and imputed

to our species from a benevolent God that stands outside of history (*noumena*). For Kant, the human will was not bound by time, culture, or customs, which is to say not conditioned by acts or events that take place in history. Instead, Kant conceived of the human will as a self-legislating force (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:39–36:40). Thus, Kant concluded that original sin traditionally perceived as the beginning of evil’s manifestation in history is not a permanent state of imperfection that humans inherit from our ancestors. Original sin was an ever-present possibility, a by-product of our freedom, which has no first cause beyond our own will (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:43–46:44). For this reason Kant could say,

Whatever the nature, however, of the origin of moral evil in the human being, of all the ways of representing its spread and propagation through the members of our species and in all generations, the most inappropriate is surely to imagine it as having come to us by way of inheritance from our first parents.
(Kant 1998 [1793], 6:40)

According to Kant’s reasoning, our capacity for evil resides in our inherent freedom, not in an imagined inheritance shared with Adam and Eve.

There were clear theological and racial implications of this transformation of original sin into a consequence of a free will, as opposed to an inherited state of deficiency. Original sin and Adam’s fall sat at the center of the Christian notion of common human ancestry and the redemption of Christ since the time of the early church.⁴ The fallout of Adam’s sin was imagined by Christian theologians to quite literally be passed down ancestrally to all races, including of course the patriarchs of ancient Israel. The early church attempted to offset original sin by seeing the salvific death of Christ as part of a new covenant with God that supplanted the bond with Israel. This new covenant was universally open to all, creating the basis whereby Christ could be imagined as the ultimate truth. Later, Protestant theologians would argue that only through God’s grace could humans obtain salvation. Nonetheless, both the early church and its modern counterpart maintained a view of original sin that interpreted humanity’s depravity as a bio-spiritual phenomenon that united all races through redemption in Christ.

Yet in Kant’s view, original sin was not a genealogical or historical dilemma; the fall was an existential problem. Rational modern Christians were not the offspring of a bankrupt bio-spiritual inheritance. Their free will, which afforded them autonomy from history and the sociopolitical structures that shaped contemporary life, made sure of it. Indeed, freedom for Kant was the default human condition. Sin did not deform free will or place the modern German moral subject into a bio-spiritual bind with the ancient Israelites or any human predecessor. Citing the Roman poet Ovid, Kant would say, “Race and ancestors, and those things which we did not make ourselves, I scarcely consider as our own” (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:40). In Kant’s mind, no longer would German Protestants be required to carry the moral debts of their ancestors.

Kant’s ability to recast original sin from a problem of bio-spiritual inheritance to a consequence of free will carried implications for where Judaism sat

within his vision of modern morality. This (dis)placement of the ancient Israelites reveals the profoundly anti-Jewish and uniquely Christian commitments that shaped Kant's account of human moral behavior – indeed an account that looked to obtain the same level of universal applicability as Dohm's proposal and Blumenbach's monogenist ethnology. Kant believed Christianity was the ideal model for a rational moral community. Yet it could play this role because he believed the early church took an unprecedented leap in human history (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:93–96:95, 6:101–106:102). Kant claimed that the only history relevant to the drama of human becoming was one that began after humans became aware of the self-legislating power of their free will and an innate predisposition to the moral good. Christianity was the starting point for this universal history – an origin that eclipsed Judaism as well as the religious and cultural traditions of non-Europeans (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:124). Kant argued that “Christianity marked the total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated, grounded on an entirely new principle, effected a total revolution in doctrines of faith” (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:127). Prompting this revolution, according to Kant, was Jesus's appropriation of “Greek wisdom,” which had the effect of “enlightening [Judaism] through concepts of virtue and in spite of the oppressive burden of its dogmatic faith.” Through this enlightenment Kant claimed that “Christianity suddenly though not unprepared arose” (Kant 1998 [1793], 6:128). In Kant's system Jesus was no longer a Jew; he was a Greek philosopher of sorts, who was the first to model a moral life shaped by the self-legislating powers of a free will (Hess 2002, 154). This was a model to be emulated by enlightened Germans who hoped to live a moral life within the limits of reason.

Kant's claim that Christianity marked a radical rupture from Judaism is consistent with the forms of racial reasoning that have othered the Jew throughout Western intellectual history. As Jonathan Hess has argued, Kant's

view of Christianity as a rational religion that produced itself out of itself is symptomatic of a much larger problem within Christianity, an antipathy toward the historical past grounded in Christianity's inability to give an adequate account of its own Jewish origins.

(Hess 2002, 154)

Moreover, Kant diminished the significance of Judaism for modern German intellectual history by claiming that the beliefs of the ancient Israelites have no bearing on the contemporary moral subject.

In the time between Kant's *Critique* and the Christian-centric views he developed in *Religion*, German statesmen were occupied by debates over the emancipation and political integration of Jews into an emergent modern state (Hess 2000, 57). At the center of the controversy was a famous proposal written in 1781 by Dohm, titled *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (On the civic improvement of the Jews). Dohm argued that the moral, political, and physical state of degeneracy that marked European Jews was the end result of their oppression and neglect at the hands of Christians rulers who discriminated against them because

of their religious and cultural differences (Hess 2002, 3). To redress their disenfranchisement, Dohm put forth a comprehensive political solution that demanded the state intervene on their behalf, grant Jews civil protections under the law, and require that they serve in the military, and he proposed means to transition them into the agricultural economy, thereby moving Jews out of the practice of trade and money lending (Hess 2002, 3). Dohm had previously collaborated with his colleague and friend Moses Mendelssohn to intervene on behalf of Alsatian Jews under French territory, who were facing a current of anti-Jewish sentiment. Dohm's *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* was translated into French in 1782 and would sit at the center of several French treatises that eased some anti-Jewish restrictions and ultimately set the stage for the much larger debates on Jewish emancipation that ensued in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

At stake in Dohm's proposal was the viability of a modern secular conception of citizenship and the capacity of the state to transform its citizenry. If the Jews, who were perceived as morally, culturally, and physically degenerate, could be changed into productive citizens in Germany and France, this would demonstrate the success and superiority of a modern, secular state founded on the universal values of the Enlightenment (Hess 2002, 3).

Given their small numbers and marginalization across German states it would seem unusual that Jews would occupy such a large space within the burgeoning German nationalist imagination (Sheehan 1989, 67–71; Hess 2002, 5). This is a question raised by Hess, who insightfully observed, "The project of Jewish emancipation provided the ultimate test, in practice, of the rational ideals of the Enlightenment, the perfect arena for speculating about translating the lofty premises of Enlightenment universalism into concrete practice" (Hess 2002, 6). The possibility of the Jew as a citizen revealed the prospects and ideological limits of modern German notions of universal rights. However, an even deeper understanding of this utilitarian use of Jewish identity can be had if we keep in mind the long investment of Christian intellectual history in demarcating the boundary between Christian and Jew through practices of racial reasoning. Again, as Buell has argued,

Early Christian discourses of conversion share with modern discourses about race an abundance of metaphors for evolution-change, where Christian belonging is understood as a perfection, distillation, fulfillment of individual human and collective human potential [. . .]. Early Christian supersessionist arguments, which interpret Jesus' significance and Christian belonging as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, as contained in scriptures, portray Christianity as the realization, maturation, and in some cases restoration of Israel and Judaism.

(Buell 2009, 115)

If we take Buell's analysis into the modern context, it is imperative that we see the conceptual displacement of the Jew in German moral and political thought during the second half of the eighteenth century as an extension of the racial reasoning

practices and habits of mind drawn from Christian intellectual history. The visions of the Jew that Kant and Dohm maintained in relation to their vision of universal rights and ideal moral community were not novel formations but stemmed from a long-standing tradition dating back to the early church. To view these formations as uniquely modern or unprecedented is a symptom of a Christian consciousness that harbors an antipathy toward the historical past and is incapable of acknowledging the religious inheritance that shapes its own intellectual horizon.

We will see how Christian forms of reasoning shaped Blumenbach's ideas about the Caucasian and his account of human biodiversity, which he crafted and revised over this period of tremendous intellectual productivity across the fields of science, philosophy, and theology near the end of the century. If the nationalism burgeoning in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century brought with it a new conception of the law, morality, and citizenship, all of which consolidated white German Protestant identity, Blumenbach provided a scientific account of race that translated Christian ideas of peoplehood into a monogenist ontology of race that would further the supersession of the Jew by white Europeans.

My reading of Blumenbach adds to John Zammito's and Robert Richards's reappraisal of Blumenbach's relationship to Kant. If Blumenbach's vision of the life sciences was set prior to Kant's contribution to the field, as Zammito argues, it is reasonable to assume that a deeper intellectual history was at work in Blumenbach's theory of race (Zammito 2012). As I am arguing, this was a history tied to a Christian tradition of racial and ethnic othering. Turning to this deeper intellectual history also complicates Richards's observation that Blumenbach and Kant maintained different ideas about the life sciences. My analysis here concurs with Richards's assessment: Blumenbach surely wanted to explain the cause of life's organization by imputing teleology in nature, whereas Kant believed that the life sciences could not actually prove nature was designed toward ends without transgressing the limits of reason (Richards 2000). However, both men shared a Protestant intellectual heritage that inclined them to think in universal terms, to assume common human ancestry, and to harbor antipathy toward non-Christian (and specifically Jewish) traditions. For Blumenbach, as we will soon see, this heritage manifests itself in his racial science. For Kant, this heritage presented itself in his vision of human morality, which surely was teleological. Kant's view of morality also assumed the racial logic of Christian supersession that displaced the knowledge of the ancient Israelites. On this score, we will see that Kant and Blumenbach were closely aligned. Taken together Dohm's vision of modern citizenship and Kant's moral vision gave expression to a Protestant worldview that placed the modern white German Christian at both the beginning and the center of human history. Blumenbach's ethnology would prove to be the scientific counterpart to this Eurocentric and Protestant vision of social life.

Caucasian is a Christian concept

In 1781, the very same year that Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason* and Dohm launched a trans-European debate over Jewish emancipation, Blumenbach

published the second edition of his dissertation thesis, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*. In this version Blumenbach had yet to give proper names to the ancestral human types. He did, however, introduce the explanatory mechanism that would later allow him to do so. This was the concept of the formative drive (*Bildungstrieb*), drawn from a work also published in 1781 titled *Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte*, which made refinements to an essay written just the year before (Blumenbach 1781; Blumenbach 1780). In both the essay and book Blumenbach attempted to account for how previously unorganized organic matter came together to create lasting varieties of species. He also looked to explain what appeared to be nature's ability to repair itself. Blumenbach surmised there had to be a force inherent to nature capable of this task. Thus, he developed the notion *Bildungstrieb*, a concept that would have a major influence on post-Enlightenment perceptions of nature and offer Blumenbach a theoretical tool to explain human racial descent.

Blumenbach became a leading voice in the critique of preformation, devising what was then understood as a radical form of organic vitalism to explain the gradual development of embryos from unorganized matter (Richards 2002, 216). His studies on the apparent regenerative capabilities of living organisms led him to conclude that inherent to nature was a formative drive responsible for the reproduction, maintenance, and restoration of the parts of living forms (Richards 2002, 219). This *Bildungstrieb* was found within the genital fluid of living organisms and gave life to their offspring, where "its first business" was to "put on the form destined and determined" for the species in question (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 194). After providing each organism with its species-specific form and constituent parts Blumenbach claimed that this formative force nurtured and preserved the organism. According to Blumenbach, "if by chance [an organism] should be mutilated, [it] lies in its power to restore it by reproduction" (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 194). For Blumenbach the *Bildungstrieb* was a teleological force inherent to nature that created species out of formless organic material.

Blumenbach argued that nature's formative drive was ostensibly capable of turning "aside from its determined direction and plan" (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 195). Climate, diet, mode of life, hybridity, and hereditary diseases were all factors that could push an organism to degenerate from a primeval type and develop novel varieties (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 194–205). The idea that living things were capable of deviating from an original form was a notion Blumenbach borrowed from Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon and his work on the degeneration of animals published in 1766 (Richards 2002, 221). What differentiated their two theories was Blumenbach's introduction of the concept of formative drive to explain how original forms were maintained over time. He believed that extended periods of external stimuli on an organism "[have] great influence in sensibly diverting the [formative force] from its accustomed path." This deflection was "the most bountiful source of degeneration" which yielded nature's splendid diversity, including, of course, human racial varieties (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 196).

Blumenbach's mature ethnology appears in Section IV of the 1795 edition of *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*. Here the Caucasian provides the means for

situating white European identity within a “boundary-less reality,” where it is linked to all races and remains central to human history. The colorism of Blumenbach’s thinking is key to organizing humans under a single body – that of the white Caucasian – and thus within a modern ontology of race. He explains:

Besides it is the white in colour, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive colour of mankind, since, as we have shown above, it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white, when the secretion and precipitation of this carbonaceous pigment has once deeply struck root.

(Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 269)

The “races of man” inherit their form out of a pluripotent Caucasian body that is present within these new races yet never fully reduced to them. The African is not Caucasian, neither is the Mongolian, even though they both “degenerate” from this original population and thus fall within a unified conception of peoplehood – much like Kant’s ideal moral subject and Dohm’s modern citizenry. All three men assume an equivalency between varying bodies but it is Blumenbach who represents this commensurability in ethnological terms. According to Blumenbach the primeval source of human life transcends the geographically situated and phenotypically varied instances of human life. The truth that draws together these assorted racial forms is found in an omnipresent force (the *Bildungstrieb*) that first appeared in the white Caucasian and that subsequently binds humans into a shared peoplehood (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 269).

We have to see here that Blumenbach was predisposed to think in terms of a singular human ontology (a common peoplehood) as a result of a Christian intellectual inheritance shared with Kant and Dohm. But this equivalency between disparate bodies must itself be created – it is not simply out in nature waiting to be discovered. The idea that humans belong to a single species, that the races degenerate – to use Blumenbach’s language – from an original ancestor and thus can be organized under a single story of development, is neither a necessary formulation nor one that should be assumed universally present in all peoples at all times – even though the concept of peoplehood presupposed by Blumenbach and his Christian forbearers would have us believe this to be the case. To situate Blumenbach’s racial ethnology within a very specific Christian intellectual tradition forces us to recognize that the Eurocentric idea of a common peoplehood (or shared human ancestry) is not any more innate to this creature called the *human* than the notion that all people have reason, that science is a universal human activity, or that the capacity for religiosity is found within all cultures.⁵ These very recent creations emerged out of a Christian European epistemic worldview forged within the context of colonialism and are indigenous to the West, even though such ideas – like the body of Christ – presume what Jennings calls “an ecclesial logic applicable to the evaluation of all peoples” (Jennings 2010, 33).

If the specificity of this Christian Eurocentric vision of common peoplehood were not clear, one simply needs to consider Blumenbach’s thoughts on the Jew.

Of the many races noted in *Natural Variety*, Jews appear literally in the margins of Blumenbach's ethnology. Jews are integrated into the human species as white, a point that must be surmised from Blumenbach's mentioning in a footnote in the 1781 edition that the white variety includes "that part of Asia which lies toward us, this side of the Obi, the Caspian sea, mount Taurus and the Ganges, also northern Africa" (quoted in an editor's footnote to Blumenbach 1865 [1775], 99). In the final 1795 edition the "white variety" would take on the name "Caucasian." Yet, Blumenbach makes special note to argue in this final edition that Jews constitute a peculiar variety of Caucasian. Unlike the other white races, they appear incapable of transformation into different types and lack the aesthetic comeliness of their German counterparts. Blumenbach writes in the 1795 edition that

The ancient Germans gave formerly instances of the unadulterated countenance of nations unaffected by any union with any other nation, and to-day the genuine Zingari, inhabitants of Transylvania do the same; and above all the nation of the Jews, who, under every climate, remain the same as far as the fundamental configuration of face goes, remarkable for a racial character almost universal, which can be distinguished at the first glance even by those little skilled in physiognomy, although it is difficult to limit and express by words.

(Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 233–234)

Blumenbach elaborates on this racial character in the 1795 edition:

The great artist Benj[amin] West, President of the Royal Academy of Arts, with whom I conversed about the racial face of the Jews, thought that it above all others had something particularly goat-like about it, which he was of opinion lay not so much in the hooked nose as in the transit and conflux of the septum which separates the nostrils from the middle of the upper lip.

(Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 234)

Jews possess stable racial traits recognizable to even the most unscientific observer. We can infer from Blumenbach's writings that although Jews are white Caucasians, they lack the capacity to degenerate into other racial types because of a stubborn phenotype that consistently sets them apart from other groups.

Again we see a structure of Christian racial reasoning at play in Blumenbach's thinking. Jews have been displaced from the beginning of European history at a biological level. At the threshold of history now stands the white Caucasian – the patriarch of all races. Blumenbach integrates Jews into the drama of human becoming but unlike the white Caucasian they lack the pluripotency to yield new forms. The Jew is both displaced and provisionally integrated into Blumenbach's scientific account of human diversity.

Moreover, this supersession of the European over the Jew can be interrogated further when we consider Blumenbach's ideas on the primacy of the Caucasian form. If human varieties were created through a process of degeneration from

a primeval type, from what variety did the white Caucasian degenerate? When searching for an answer to this question one begins to see very large omissions within Blumenbach's ethnology – absences that reveal the place of Christian racial reasoning.

In Blumenbach's theory of formative force, nature created living organisms out of previously unorganized organic matter. This was true even in the development of life during what was called the pre-Adamite world (Blumenbach 1865 [1806], 287). Like most of his contemporaries Blumenbach assumed the earth to be hundreds of thousands of years old but remained a traditionalist when it came to his understanding of the recent creation of human life (Greene 1959, 235–238). We know this because the need to account for the length of time in the transition from one race to another never occurred to Blumenbach as a problem to be resolved. It must be recognized then that Blumenbach's racial ontology was suspended within a non-secular, which is to say Christian, temporal framework.

Assuming a sacred chronology is consistent with the creationist logic that structures both the formation of the earth and human life out of formless organic matter, Blumenbach wrote,

After therefore that organic creation in the Preadamite primitive epoch of our planet had fulfilled its purpose, it was destroyed by a general catastrophe of its surface or shell, which probably lay in ruins some time, until it was put together again, enlivened with a fresh vegetation, and vivified with a new animal creation. In order that it might provide such a harvest, the Creator took care to allow general powers of nature to bring forth the new organic kingdoms, similar to those, which had fulfilled that object in the primitive world.
(Blumenbach 1865 [1806], 287)

Following the first global catastrophe, Blumenbach argued that nature's formative force retained some sort of living memory of the first organisms and drew upon these forms to create new varieties. Blumenbach claimed that

the formative power of nature in these remodellings partly reproduces again creatures of a similar type to those of the old world, which however in by far the greatest number of instances have put on forms more applicable to others in the new order of things, so that in the new creatures the laws of the formative force have been somewhat modified.
(Blumenbach 1865 [1806], 287)

New species, in this theory, were derived from antecedent creations whose forms functioned as a template for the creative powers of nature's formative force. All of the plants and animals thriving at the time of Adam's creation were variations from the forms that were found in the pre-Adamite world.

We arrive now at the ontological assumptions that rest behind Blumenbach's vision of the white Caucasians. Humans were obviously not present during the first iterations of life on earth. Consequently, there was no template from the

pre-Adamite world for nature to draw upon to give to the original human. We know from Blumenbach's writings in *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1795) that he assumed the first human was a naturally domesticated species (Blumenbach 1865 [1806], 293–294). “His Creator has therefore fortified him with the power of reason and invention, in order that he may accommodate himself” to the “variety of climate, soil and other circumstances” that shape the human form (Blumenbach 1865 [1795], 183). Natural domestication was the birthright of the human being. Humans, Blumenbach asserted, possessed within their lineage no antecedent primitive form. What this means for the white Caucasian ought now to be clear. This archetypical human emerged from nothing. Richards has argued that Blumenbach's *Bildungstrieb* was responsible for giving creatures their form and “could not be an effect of organization, a property emerging out of organization”; it was instead “a cause to explain organization” (Richards 2000, 25). Thus, we must assume either that Caucasians are the product of a creation event directly from the *Bildungstrieb* or that they formed themselves out of themselves. In both instances, however, the white Caucasian stands on an ontological plane that is qualitatively distinct from the other races; they are the only population who was the result of self-creation and not degeneration.

Here the Caucasian and the Christian present themselves as interchangeable concepts. Both occupy the conspicuous role of bearing witness to a rational order (*logos*) that gives form and meaning to human history. Both displace the Jew by being situated at the beginning and the center of the human drama. For Blumenbach, this displacement creates a void out of which the Caucasian emerges *ex nihilo* to then give rise to the human species. The Caucasian is thus central to human history for all human becoming is unintelligible without exposing the natural mechanism (the *Bildungstrieb*) that gave rise to this original group. At the same time without the Caucasian there would be no template for the human form. Blumenbach's Caucasian – like Kant's enlightened moral subject, and Dohm's modern citizen – constitutes an imagined group determined by neither time, geography, or social location. Like the body of Christ imagined by Justin in his *Dialogue With Trypho*, Blumenbach's original Caucasians are people without corporeal ancestors.

Racial science, or Christian intellectual history by other means

New developments within the historiography of religious studies have provided insights for reimagining the links between Christian thought, race, and modern science. This literature reveals the commitment of Christian intellectual history to a long tradition of ethno-racial reasoning, which in turn prompts the need for an alternative “big picture” of the emergence and formation of the race concept in science. When Blumenbach's *De generis humani varietate nativa* is placed within this larger intellectual history his racial ethnology bears the influence of a Christian conception of peoplehood and a creationist epistemology that unite the human form under a single ontological vision. This history also links Blumenbach's race

“science” to conceptions of the moral subject and modern citizenry that were replicas of a Christian polity. What emerges then in late eighteenth-century Germany is a new body politic organized around a set of Christian European epistemic commitments that ultimately supplant the Jew with the white European. Within this intellectual setting Blumenbach presents the pluripotent Caucasian as a self-fashioning people, unbounded by history, geography, and social location. Indeed, the Caucasian was born out of an intellectual and corporeal void and gave life to other races. As a unifying concept to explain common human ancestry the very notion of the Caucasian sustained Christian habits of mind. These rational practices have predisposed us to tell the history of racial science as one of rupture and discontinuity from the premodern world. Yet in the final analysis, Blumenbach’s ethnology and his imagined racial ontology were surely extensions of a religious intellectual history often denied in the stories we tell about the origin of modern racial science.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Horsman (1981), Gould (1996), and Marks (2009).
- 2 I realize that it is anachronistic to use the term “race science” to describe the study of human differences during the Enlightenment. However, with this usage I am intentionally situating the study of race in the West within a long historical tradition, thus avoiding hard demarcations that too often prevent us from making connections across multiple historical periods. Moreover, it is common among historians and anthropologists to situate the origins of “race science” in the Enlightenment despite the fact that the term “science” had yet to be used to describe the study of human origins. See, for example, Kidd (2006) and Livingstone (2011).
- 3 For an excellent discussion of race, religion, and science during the nineteenth century see Johnson (2004).
- 4 See Sanlon (2014) and Kolb (2014).
- 5 See Masuzawa (2012), Nongbri (2013), and Harrison (2015).

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