

Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition

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The view that early Christians neither defined themselves nor were perceived in terms of race or ethnicity finds support in a broad spectrum of scholarly and popular thought.¹ I want to suggest, however, that ethnicity and race *have* in fact been central to formulations of early Christian self-definition—in two quite different ways, one historical and the other historiographic. First, ancient ideas about race and ethnicity were valuable for early Christians in their varying attempts to define Christianness; many early Christians defined themselves using ethnic reasoning, that is, by using language that their contemporaries would have understood as racial or ethnic. Second, modern ideas about race and ethnicity, as well as about religion, have also shaped understandings of early Christian self-definition but have led to the opposite conclusion—namely, that Christians, from the very beginning, viewed race as a form of human difference to be transcended or made irrelevant.

Ideas about race, ethnicity, and religion (as well as gender and sexuality) and their possible interrelations change over time; furthermore, competing views coexist

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in any given historical and cultural context.² We have failed to recognize the importance and functions of ethnic reasoning in early Christian self-definition largely because of the way dominant *modern* ideas about race inform our approaches to and presuppositions about the meanings of race, ethnicity, and religion (including their possible relationships).³ Modern understandings of race as inherent and immutable have been used especially to differentiate Christians from Jews, and ethnicity still serves as a common shorthand for scholars to denote distinctions between these two categories. But this is not how early Christian texts use race. Instead, many early Christian texts depict Christians as members of a race or people, like Jews, so that “race” does not mark the dividing line between Jews and Christians. Modern understandings of race have also been used to spur intra-Christian reform, and/or to critique non-Christian institutions and practices. At least since the early nineteenth century, the notion of Christian origins as racially-inclusive and egalitarian has authorized opposition to Christian and non-Christian practices that sanction differential treatment on the basis of race. By contrast, a number of early Christian authors find it strategically valuable to speak about Christianness as a racial category, although they formulate it as an inclusive one (as a race one can join). That is, instead of

²Audrey Smedley offers one of the most comprehensive studies of the way ideas about race in Europe and North America have changed over time: see her *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (2d ed. [1st ed. 1993]; Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999). Sheila Briggs lucidly articulates how both time and social location produce differences in understandings of race (as well as sex and religion) in her “‘Buried with Christ’: The Politics of Identity and the Poverty of Interpretation,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* (ed. Regina Schwartz; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 283, 285. Ann Laura Stoler usefully historicizes scholarly interest in writing the history of race, especially preoccupations with tracing the origins of concepts of “race” and “racism” in her “Racial Histories and their Regimes of Truth,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 11 (1997) 183–206. More recently, Gerd Baumann has articulated an approach to ethnicity in the contemporary West that takes account of two contrasting views about ethnicity (namely, that ethnicity is “given” and that it is a social construction) by arguing that these two views function dialectically and are mutually reinforcing in most contexts (even though one position might be explicitly emphasized at any given point); see his *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1999) esp. 91–94.

³In this essay, I deliberately use the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably; see also Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998) 189 n. 1; and Werner Sollors, “Foreword: Theories of American Ethnicity,” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (ed. Sollors; New York: New York University Press, 1996) xxix–xxxv. This decision is intended to signal my views that neither term has a one-to-one counterpart in antiquity and that neither term can be neatly distinguished from the other even in modern parlance. I also want to keep modern readers alert to the contemporary stakes of historical work. By excluding the category of race from work on classical antiquity we risk conveying the implications that our modern legacy of racial thinking can be shut off when we turn to examine ancient texts, and that our versions of ancient history are either irrelevant or alien to the ways that we tackle questions of human sameness and difference in the present.

positioning Christianness as not-race, many early Christian texts define their version of Christianity as a race, sometimes in opposition to other rival articulations of Christianness, and sometimes in contrast to non-Christian groups and cultures (including, but not limited to, those defined as “Jews”).

These arguments were possible for early Christians to make because of the ancient spectrum of understanding about human difference and about how human difference pertains to religion (as well as to political and civic organization). Ethnicity or race—as defined, contested, and displayed in Roman antiquity—provided individuals and groups with a central organizing concept for defining Christianness, and for legitimizing *particular* forms of Christianness as the universal, most original manifestation of humanity, expressed primarily through religious beliefs and practices. Ethnic reasoning, or a rhetoric of race, also offered Christians a tool for internal debate, as they competed with each other to assert their visions of Christianness as authoritative.

Early Christians found ethnic reasoning useful in their projects of self-definition for many reasons. In this essay, I discuss two that are especially crucial.⁴ First, race was often deemed to be produced and indicated by religious practices. Second, although ancient authors frequently refer to membership in a *genos*, *ethnos*, *laos*, and *phylos* as a matter of one’s birth and descent, ethnicity was nonetheless seen to be mutable. Early Christians adapted both of these points in their projects of self-definition. In combination, these Roman-period ways of thinking about race and ethnicity allowed Christians to define themselves as a race that one can join, a race characterized especially by religious practices. To reread early Christian texts in light of their rhetorical uses of ethnoracial concepts allows us to reimagine the relationship between religiosity and race in our conceptions of Christianness. This rereading also poses new questions and challenges for tackling modern racism and anti-Judaism.

Modern notions of race as they emerged in Romanticism defined race as natural, heritable, and immutable; by the late nineteenth century, this organic understanding of race had been produced as objective, authoritative knowledge by the newly dominant disciplinary practices of the biological sciences. As the academic discipline of the comparative and historical study of religion emerged in the late nineteenth century, these understandings of race were used to define and classify religions, especially to mark the dividing line between “particular” and “universal” religions.

Proponents of quite different theological and political commitments have used modern definitions of race to define Christianness specifically in contrast to race. For mainstream scholarship, modern notions of race as a biological, natural identity

⁴My current book project, “‘Why This New Race?’ Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity,” develops four interlocking strategic uses of ethnic reasoning among early Christians; these are summarized below in the conclusion.

category have served as the primary criterion by which one can classify Christianity as a special kind of religion, universal precisely because it is not linked to race.⁵ By contrast, marginalized voices both inside and outside the academy have often used modern conceptualizations of race as given to define Christianity as its opposite, that is, as a voluntary religious affiliation, open to anyone. By means of this oppositional juxtaposition, people of all colors working against racism have sought social reforms (such as the abolition of slavery) or intra-Christian reforms, usually in the name of re-establishing what is held as an original racially-inclusive ideal.⁶

The mainstream perspective generally makes race a seemingly irrelevant topic for Christianness. Voices from the margins make race *central*, in order to critique and reform Christianity or racism in scholarly interpretations of Christianity. Despite their significant differences, however, these two constituencies share a stake in preserving a vision of Christian origins that defines them over and against racial differences. From both vantage points, the foundations, the very definition of earliest forms of Christianness, *depend upon the rejection* of race or ethnicity.

⁵E.g., “Most religions limit themselves to a particular people or nationality, and if they spread and are accepted by other nations, it is as part and parcel of the civilisation to which they belong; but these two alone [Buddhism and Christianity] address themselves, not to a single people, but to all men [*sic*] and to every nation in its own language. . . . In short, Buddhism and Christianity are universalistic in character, while all other ethical religions are in the main particularistic” (Cornelius P. Tiele, *Elements of the Science of Religion* [2 vols.; New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1897] 1:125–26). See also Jonathan Z. Smith’s discussion of Tiele in Smith’s “Classification,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London: Cassell, 2000) 41–42.

⁶So in his 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, which was banned in the South, the African-American Bostonian businessman David Walker writes: “Surely the Americans must believe that God is partial, notwithstanding his apostle Peter, declared before Cornelius and others that he has no respect for persons, but in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted with him. . . . Have not the Americans the Bible in their hands? Do they believe it? Surely they do not. See how they treat us in open violation of the Bible!!” in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (ed. Milton C. Sernett; Durham: Duke University Press, 1985) 190–91; see also Acts 10:36. Slightly later, Walker continues: “How can preachers and people of America believe the Bible? Does it teach them any distinction on account of a man’s color? Harken, Americans! To the injunctions of our Lord and Master, to his humble followers: ‘And Jesus came and spake unto them saying, “all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye, therefore, and *teach all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.’” [Matt 28:18, 19, 20]. . . . Do you understand the above, Americans? *We are a people*, notwithstanding many of you doubt it” (194, my emphasis).

A more recent example, of the experiences of Korean-American Christian immigrants to the United States, contains a similar critique: “A large number of Christian immigrants came to the United States from Asia . . . and they have built their own Christian communities and sought a fellowship with the existing U.S. Christian establishment by joining their denomina-

The problem with the resulting consensus that earliest forms of Christianity sought to transcend or obliterate racial distinctions is not that modern ideas about race and ethnicity distort our historical analyses per se; we can only interpret history in and through the constraints of the present. The problem is rather that we have failed to grapple with the modern history of our very tools for imagining history; that is, these interpretations of Christianness as not-race are responding not simply to the ancient Christian texts, but also to modern interpretations of them and to modern assumptions about concepts such as race and religion.

■ Historicizing Contemporary Thinking about Race and Ethnicity

Most historical reconstructions published in the last twenty years depict earliest Christianity as an inclusive movement that rejected ethnic or racial specificity as a condition of religious identity. "Christianity swept racial distinctions aside," proclaims Frank Snowden, Jr., a classicist whose influential scholarship has helped to reframe the way we think about race in antiquity.⁷ Similarly, Anthony Smith, writing for anthropologists as well as historians, states that earliest Christianity "helped to . . . transcend existing ethnic divisions."⁸ And the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts that "class, ethnicity, and gender are . . . specifically singled out as the divisions overcome by redemption in Christ."⁹ These are only three examples, ranging across three disciplines, but they are typical in making the rejection of the relevance of race or ethnicity a defining feature of earliest Christianity.

In their own ways, each of these scholars is wrestling with the legacies of prevailing modern notions of race as they emerged both in Romantic ideas about

tions. However, because they are from cultures very different from the dominant U.S. culture, they have received a very cool reception . . . the U.S. establishment is not willing to accept culturally different immigrants unless they are totally acculturated into American life. They seem to have forgotten the fact that right from the beginning, the Christian community has been as diverse as twentieth-century America in respect to its cultural mix and ethnic composition. . . . The early Christian community accepted the cultural and ethnic diversity among its membership as a norm; it accepted ethnically as well as culturally diverse gentile Christians into its fellowship without asking them to follow the religious practice of a particular group. Peter realized that this was God's intention [referring to Acts 10:1–11:18]" (Chan-Hie Kim, "Reading the Cornelius Story from an Asian Immigrant Perspective," in *Reading from This Place*, volume 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* [ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995] 171–72).

⁷Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 99.

⁸Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 35.

⁹Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism and God-Language," in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 156.

ethnic or national essences and in scientific racism. The interpretation of Christian origins formulated by the nineteenth-century French philologist Ernest Renan illustrates the kind of scholarly legacy that Snowden and Ruether have sought to challenge. Renan's 1863 *Life of Jesus* was hugely popular—it went through more than sixty-one editions in French, was translated into English and German, and was widely commented on within a year of its publication.¹⁰ His work has been credited with introducing “racial categories into theological discussion” by distinguishing between Semitic and Aryan Jews. For Renan, Jesus was an Aryan Jew and his main rivals, the Pharisees, were Semitic Jews.¹¹ The upshot of this, as Susannah Heschel notes, is a “convoluted and often self-contradictory” portrait of Jesus and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Although this racial mapping allows Renan to portray Christianity as arising naturally out of Judaism, his category “Aryan Jew” also permits him to write that Christianity “over time rid itself of nearly everything it took from the race, so that those who consider Christianity to be the Aryan religion par excellence are in many respects correct.”¹²

As Heschel observes, Renan's scholarship “formed an important religious legitimation for the rise of racial anti-Semitism in the 1880s,”¹³ a point that was not lost on his contemporary, Abraham Geiger. Geiger, often hailed as a founder of Reform Judaism, wrote pointedly of Renan's work: “His was not the opinion of the Christian about Jews and Judaism, it is the race-jealousy between the Aryan . . . and the Semite.”¹⁴ Geiger saw that Renan distinguished between Christians and Jews by interpreting early Christians as a racial group.

Nineteenth-century relations between Jews and Christians in Germany could be and were played out at a historical remove by discussing the relations between Christians and Jews in the first centuries of the common era. This sleight of historical hand was not so easily accomplished in America. In contrast to the situation in Germany, where Jewish emancipation occupied significant public attention, on the American scene, slavery and its ghosts, as well as ongoing incursions against native peoples, infused the ways in which ideas of race were formed as well as contested. European Christian settlers in the colonies spoke initially of free or enslaved non-Christian people from Africa and the Americas

¹⁰Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 276 n. 116. For an English translation of Renan's work see Ernest Renan, *Life of Jesus* (trans. Charles Edwin Wilbour; New York: Carleton, 1864).

¹¹Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*, 156.

¹²Ernest Renan, *Oeuvres complètes* (ed. Henriette Psichari; 10 vols.; Paris: Colmann-Lévy, 1947–61) 5.1142; cited from Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*, 156, 277 n. 129.

¹³Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*, 156.

¹⁴Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Its History* (trans. Charles Newburgh; New York: Bloch, 1911) 200–01 (German original, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte* [3 vols.; Breslau: W. Jacobsohn, 1910]); cited from Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*, 157, 277 n. 130.

as heathens,¹⁵ a move *parallel* to Christian/Jewish discussions in Germany and France to the extent that the distinction was between Christian and not-Christian. But even this tentative parallel of Christian/not-Christian differentiation broke down and gave way to alternative articulations of difference (especially biologically-based explanations), particularly to justify slavery and the displacement of native peoples but also to restrict immigration. By the end of the nineteenth century, scientific racism was adopted as the dominant theoretical model for imagining human differences as natural and immutable—both between Jews and non-Jews and between blacks and whites.¹⁶ Protestant Christians, like whites, were constructed as normative and unmarked; but whereas whiteness might still be intelligible as a racial construct,¹⁷ Christianness was constructed precisely in contrast to race—as racially inclusive, thus universal.

This shift meant that religion was no longer the privileged domain from which racial differences were explained,¹⁸ but religion and race continued to be defined

¹⁵See, e.g., Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 16–45. See also Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 171–72. Jacobson (3–4, 171–72) notes that European Christian colonists in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also classified Jewish differences in terms of religion rather than race.

¹⁶See e.g., Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1982); and Sander L. Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity at the Fin de Siècle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). In a coauthored piece, they trace some of the forms of resistance to scientific racism: Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman, “Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism,” in *The “Racial” Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future* (ed. Sandra Harding; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 170–93.

¹⁷Whiteness has, however, only recently become the object of systematic analysis as a racial construct. See, for example, Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (2 vols.; London: Verso, 1994); Babb, *Whiteness Visible*; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Pantheon, 1998); Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (New York: Continuum, 1999); and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999).

¹⁸In his recent examination of the mutual construction of Indian and British national cultures, Peter van der Veer notes how this shift needs to be understood not only in terms of the rise of scientific authority but also in terms of imperial and political goals; see his *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 13, 53–54, and 134–57. For further discussion of the role of religion in producing various, competing understandings of racial differences prior to the nineteenth century, see Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

in relation to one another as scholars of religion accepted as authoritative the theoretical assumptions of the scientific method that undergirded new, biologically-determinative understandings of race.¹⁹ This paradigm shift in imagining human differences also influenced historical reconstructions of Christian origins. In Germany and France, attention to Christian origins focused especially on the question of what made Christians different from Jews at all, given the Jewishness of Jesus; the universality of the Christian gospel (notably to all gentiles) was held up as the special difference of Christianity from Judaism. By contrast, on the American scene, appeals to Christian origins as racially-inclusive by both African-Americans and European Americans were and are more often invoked for the purposes of intra-Christian antislavery or antiracist critique. Renan's attempt to align Christians with a particular race was undone, replaced by a widespread view of Christianness as not-race.

■ Reflecting on the Modern Consensus of Race as Incongruent with Early Christian Self-Definition

I see two major problems with this investment in defining Christian origins and especially Christian universalism in contrast to race. First, it fails to explain early Christian texts that define Christianness in terms of race. "Why this new race [*genos*]?" was a question posed by an early Christian author about Christians (*Diogn.* 1). Other early Christian authors describe Christians as members of the "righteous race [*genos*]" (*Ign. Mart. Pol.* 14.1, 17.1; *Hermas Sim.* 9.17.5) or "the god-loving and god-fearing race [*genos*]," (*Mart. Pol.* 3.2). While all of these examples use the Greek term *genos*, other early Christian texts employ additional terms that also connote membership in a people, such as *ethnos*, *laos*, and *phylos*, often interchangeably.²⁰

¹⁹Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has written extensively about the theoretical, ethical, and political implications for biblical studies of adopting late-nineteenth-century scientific approaches. See most recently, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000) 16–25.

²⁰My translations of these terms are also interchangeable, and emerge from the contexts of their use; I indicate the Greek term being translated in each case. Because of the connotative range of these terms, I employ "people," "race," and "ethnicity" as the cluster of possible translations for these terms. An unofficial survey of the sources suggests that *laos* and *phylos* are most likely to be employed when an author is citing, paraphrasing, or alluding to an earlier biblical or classical text. *Genos* and *ethnos* appear to be the preferred terms in the Roman imperial period for Christians and non-Christians alike to refer to ethnoracial groupings, but there is considerable variety in what might constitute an ethnoracial group in antiquity. *Ethnos* and *genos* are often used interchangeably. As Jonathan Hall has noted about the range of meanings and applications, *ethnos* "may be applied to inhabitants of a *polis*" or "may refer to a larger population which inhabits several *poleis*" (34); "many of the populations that are referred to as *ethnē* are also often described as *genē*" (35). Because "*genos* is related to the verb *gignesthai*,

Second, defining Christianness in contrast to race has not solved the problems of modern racism and anti-Judaism. While important for antiracist interventions, this definition has not eradicated modern racism within Christianity, as churches remain primarily organized along racial and ethnic lines.²¹ This definition also sustains an anti-Jewish interpretive lens. If universalism is defined in contrast to racial specificity, and universalism is seen as a distinctive feature of Christianness, then Christianness is defined as not-race particularly over and against Jewishness as race. Even when the goals of this logic are valuable—to end racism, for example—this construction of universalism paradoxically perpetuates racist anti-Judaism in the name of antiracism.²² It can also mask the racially-informed character of mainstream theology.²³

My work is indebted to the efforts of African-American and liberationist scholars of all colors because their frameworks identify ethnicity or race as categories of concern to followers of Christ. But portrayals of early Christianity as *transcending* racial or ethnic distinctions make it difficult to see how various forms of Christianness are themselves constituted in and through understandings of race and ethnicity, as well as gender and status. We need to ask why ethnicity in particular *continues* to surface as a crucial explanation for differences between Jews and Christians, and why many contemporary Christian theologies and historical

which means ‘to be born,’ ‘to come into being’ and so eventually ‘to become’ ” (35), *genos* is also used to refer to a family group. But *genos* also “can be applied to a category of any size that recognizes its members to be enlisted automatically by birth” (35). In both ancient Greece and imperial Rome, however, “birth” relations were achieved through ritual, not just biology, so *genos* is used in contexts, including Christian ones, that construe “birth” broadly. All citations from Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic identity in Greek antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For more on the connection between kinship, ethnicity, and ritual, including their implications for social relations, political power and enfranchisement, see Nancy Jay, “*Throughout Your Generations Forever*”: *Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Caroline Johnson Hodge, “‘If Children, Then Heirs’ [Rom 8:17 and Gal 4:7]: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in Romans and Galatians,” chapter one (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, forthcoming).

²¹The situation at least in mainline Protestant denominations has not changed drastically since Martin Luther King Jr.’s well-known remark in 1956 that “the most segregated hour of Christian America” is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning; cited from Brad Verter, “Furthering the Freedom Struggle: Racial Justice Activism in the Mainline Churches since the Civil Rights Era,” in *Quietly Influential: The Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans; Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

²²As Katharina von Kellenbach writes, “the left-wing myth asserts that Jews are an anachronistic religious and national group . . . opposed to universal egalitarianism and internationalism . . .” (*Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994] 42).

²³For example, James Cone forcefully critiques white theologians for not taking race and America’s history of racism into account when articulating and analyzing their theologies in his *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998* (Boston: Beacon, 1999) 130–33.

reconstructions of Christian origins insist on the *irrelevance* of race and ethnicity to the formation of Christianness in antiquity, even as we welcome critical studies that explore how Christianness is inflected with notions of gender and status.

To answer these questions about the elusive but entrenched presence of race in contemporary scholarly models, we need to cultivate a prismatic vision to reimagine the relevance of race and ethnicity to ancient articulations of Christianness in light of the continued political, social, ideological, and theological challenges posed by modern racism and anti-Judaism.²⁴ That is, we need to modulate between a critical consideration of the present, for how our commitments and social location condition our historical analyses; of the recent historical past, for how it has shaped and constrained both our interpretive frameworks and our present commitments; and of the ancient historical period in which early Christian texts were produced, to gauge their interests and constraints. This approach builds on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's call to develop an "ethics of interpretation" and an analysis that modulates between "the rhetoric of interpretation in the present and the rhetoric of interpretation in the past."²⁵ In so doing, we can recognize how the practices of historical interpretation have concrete implications for the present and evaluate their adequacy both in terms of the limits of the material under consideration and the interpretive framework being employed.

■ Mutual Constitution of Ethnicity and Religiosity

Although religiosity and ethnicity/race need not have anything to do with each other, in the conceptual landscape of the Roman world, religious practices were often deemed key indicators of ethnic or civic identity.²⁶ It is surprising that scholars of Christian origins have interpreted the religious practices of Christians in

²⁴The notion of prismatic vision is inspired by Donna Haraway's proposed metaphor of diffraction; she offers this image as an alternative to that of reflexivity. Haraway writes, "Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere" (*Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* [New York and London: Routledge, 1997] 16). To aim for diffraction in how one sees, to see prismatically, is to value the production of patterns of difference and to resist the "false choice between realism and relativism" (16). By taking into account not just our own locations and the early Christian texts under consideration, but also the history and locatedness of the fields in which we work, we move from a double vision (now vs. then) to at least a triple vision.

²⁵Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 199; while the entire book outlines and illustrates the "ethics of interpretation," she offers a useful appendix highlighting its main features, 195–98. Her *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (2000) offers a book length application of the ethics of interpretation to scholarship on the historical Jesus.

²⁶This association between religion and race has been widely accepted by scholars interpreting non-Christian materials across a broad historical and cultural sweep. See, for example, on Hebrew Bible materials, Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of*

sharp distinction from those of non-Christians on this point. Ethnic reasoning was a valuable rhetorical strategy for early Christian authors in part because religiosity and race were already perceived as mutually constitutive in Roman period texts, institutional practices and policies. Early Christian authors preserve much more than challenge the prevailing associations between race and religious practices. By adapting the notion that religious practices and ethnicity are constitutively interrelated, early Christians could define themselves as members of a people unjustly deprived of their right to worship or as a resisting people who embody an alternative to dominant peoples in the Roman empire, especially Romans and Greeks (depending on location).

By the first century C.E., religion was well-established both as a public discourse and specifically as a way of asserting, contesting, and transforming racial, civic, and national identities across the Mediterranean basin. Cicero, writing on the brink of the Roman imperial period, locates religion as a feature of a people: "If we care to compare our characteristics with those of foreign peoples [*externis*], we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion [*religio*], that is in worship of the gods [*cultus deorum*], we are far superior" (Cicero *Nat. d.* 2.8). What Cicero means by religion and by peoplehood is not self-evident, but he yokes them together. Religion stands out as an element that both defines and differentiates Romans from other peoples.

Religious practices also helped to define and cohere other ethnic and civic identities. Although ethnicity was at least nominally linked to geography (Syrians, Egyptians, etc.), Philo of Alexandria, for example, argues that Jews constitute an *ethnos* and *genos* unlike all others because they are spread out over the world.²⁷ For Philo, it is religious practices that unify Jews even when far away from Judaea. If Judaeanness challenged the conventional association between territory and ethnicity, Romanness took this challenge one step further by blurring the boundaries between civic membership and ethnoracial membership. Because Romanness

Monotheism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 121; for ancient Greece, see Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* ([1933] Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) 18–19; for Roman culture, see Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 221; for Judaism in Hellenistic and Roman periods, see Judith Lieu, "Race of God-Fearers," *JTS* n.s. 46 (1995) 483–501.

²⁷See esp. *Legat.* 214–16 (the vast numbers of Jews spill over the boundaries of Judaea), 281–84 (in this context, Agrippa uses the dispersion of Jews to try to persuade Gaius by saying that Gaius's actions in Judaea will have effects throughout the empire, resulting in empire-wide praise of Gaius); see also *Flaccus* 44–46 (in which Philo explains that there are too many Jews for one country to hold them all).

develops out of and maintains its civic ties to a particular city even while it takes on universal connotations through the practices of empire,²⁸ it shows the impossibility of imposing rigid distinctions upon categories that were more nested than bounded in Roman antiquity.

Religion played a key role in the imperial period as a central marker of “what was to count as ‘Roman’ and what was not.”²⁹ And since the content of the rituals and festivals used to demonstrate Romanness could and did shift over time, we should recognize that Romanness was a work-in-progress, something to be argued for, not merely asserted.³⁰ That is, the acceptance or rejection of a cult offered one mechanism for either transforming or clarifying what counted as Roman.³¹ Religion also offered a means for making connections between different groups; for example, Dionysios of Halicarnassus cites similarities in religious practices as his most crucial evidence in his efforts to prove that Romans were descended from Greeks (e.g., *Rom. ant.* 1.21, 7.70.3–4; 7.72.14, 18).

Religious practices were also central to the way that at least the elites of some cities negotiated their allegiances with the Roman Empire while preserving a sense of distinctiveness. As Douglas Edwards has noted: “[C]ities like Aphrodisias used the myths, symbols, and general popularity of their deities to define themselves amidst the Roman world of the first and second centuries C.E. . . . For Aphrodisias, group identity and group success—at least among the ruling class—centered on Aphrodite.”³² By displaying images of Aphrodite on statues and coins, as well as depicting her power in literature, Aphrodisians could signal “dual allegiance to hometown and Empire.”³³

By understanding how closely interconnected religious practices were seen to be with civic, ethnic, or national identities, we can begin to see the value of ethnic reasoning for those attempting to define Christianness. Clement of

²⁸See Eve D’Ambra, *Roman Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 13.

²⁹Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1.212.

³⁰The relative weight given to religion as a defining feature of ethnic or civic identity varies according to context, and other factors play important roles as well, including language and legal customs. For nuanced discussions of how factors other than religion played shifting roles in defining Greekness and Romanness, see Greg Woolf, “Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* n.s. 40 (1994) 116–43; and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “To Be Roman, Go Greek: Thoughts on Hellenization at Rome,” in *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman* (ed. Michel Austin, Jill Harries, and Christopher Smith; London: Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 1998) 79–91.

³¹Indeed, the eventual use of certain forms of Christianity as emblematic of Romanness offers just one striking example of this phenomenon of change over time in using religion to demonstrate Romanness. For further discussion of this link between Christianness and Romanness, see David M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) esp. 30–50.

³²Douglas R. Edwards, *Religion and Power: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greek East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 58.

³³D’Ambra, *Roman Art*, 55.

Alexandria's *Stromateis*, written at the end of the second century C.E., offers one example of how early Christians linked religious practices with ethnicity, and used this link to portray the process of becoming a Christian in ethnic terms. In the sixth book of the *Stromateis*, Clement cites from the earlier Christian writing the *Preaching of Peter*. The passage Clement quotes juxtaposes Christian practices with the religious practices of two other groups, Jews and Greeks: "Do not worship . . . as the Greeks . . . neither worship as the Jews. But we, who worship [God] in a new way, in the third way [or form] [*genei*], are Christians" (*Strom.* 6.39.4; 41.2; 41.6).

This passage classifies humans into three groups—Greeks, Jews, and Christians; the differences between them are marked by religious practices. So what are these groups? Religions? Races? Clement's use of this text defies this oppositional framing; for him, ethnic distinctions consist especially of differences in how one worships.³⁴ In this context, the mere use of the term *genos* does not signal the presence of ethnic reasoning;³⁵ instead, this reasoning emerges contextually in the appeal to religious practice as the most salient marker of peoplehood. Other early Christian texts, including Aristides's *Apology* and the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus*, also use this intersection between human group and religious practice to classify Christians as a distinct *genos*.

In his ensuing elaboration on the *Preaching of Peter*, Clement emphasizes that religious practices produce the distinctions among races: "Accordingly then, those from the Hellenic training and also from the law, who accept faith are gathered into *the one genos of the saved people* [laos]: not that the three peoples are separated by time, so that one might suppose [they have] three different natures, but trained in different covenants of the one Lord" (*Strom.* 6.42.2).

³⁴Adolf von Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (trans. James Moffat; 1904–05; 2 vols.; repr., New York: Arno, 1972) 1.309. Harnack identifies this citation as the first stage in what he sees as an aberrant trend in some early Christian texts that culminates in the formulation of Christians as a third *genos/genus*. The other texts are Tertullian, *Nat.* 1, and Pseudo-Cyprian, *De pascha computus*. Harnack states, "so far as I am aware, the blunt expression, 'We Christians are the third race,' only occurs once in early Christian literature subsequent to the *Preaching of Peter* . . . and that is in the pseudo-Cyprianic tract *de pascha computus* (c.17), written in 242–243 A.D." (1.313). But he notes that this is also true for the phrase "we are Jews," despite the fact that Jews were clearly recognized as a distinct people (1.337).

³⁵In trying to reconstruct the significance of the term *genos* in this passage, as it appears here in the dative case, Harnack argued that *genos* here has the sense of "kind" or "type" of worship, and does not connote ethnicity or corporate peoplehood. While I agree that the use of *genos* in the dative case makes the translation "in a third way" more plausible than "as a third 'race,'" the rhetorical effect of the statement still construes Christians as a people (comparable to Jews and Greeks) distinguished precisely by how they worship (so also Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996] 107).

Clement's text demonstrates the untenability of imposing a sharp distinction between belief and practice in distinguishing between Christian and non-Christian religions. For Clement, these three peoples differ not in *what* they worship but in *how* they worship; Christians constitute the race that not only correctly understands the deity it venerates but also knows the proper practices for this veneration.³⁶ Furthermore, this passage reads race and ethnicity as mutable, contingent practices and habits, not as "natures" or essences.³⁷ Clement speaks of three peoples—Greeks, Jews, and Christians, differentiated by their religious practices—but he views the first two as eligible to become members of the third: "the one race" saved by faith.³⁸

The process of defining Christianness and ethnicity together is even more obvious in literature classified as apologetic, as in Athenagoras's treatise *Legatio pro Christianis*. Athenagoras frames the text as if it is for imperial consumption, by addressing it to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. The text opens by comparing Christians with other categories of people in the empire, specifically as they constitute *ethnē* and cities:

The inhabitants of your empire, greatest of kings, follow many different customs and laws, and none of them is prevented by law or fear of punishment from cherishing their ancestral ways. . . . All these both you and the laws permit, since you regard it as impious and irreligious to have no belief at all in a god and think it necessary for all to venerate as gods those whom they wish, that through fear of the divine they may refrain from evil. . . . To us, however, who are called Christians, you have not given the same consideration (*Leg.* 1.1–3).

³⁶As Lieu notes, religious integrity in early Christian texts is often elaborated with reference to *eusebeia* or *theosebeia*, which she translates as piety and god-fearing (other related terms also come into play); *eusebeia* is one of the central Greek terms for religiosity and *theosebeia* is used in Jewish literature. Because these terms are concretely related to how one lives and what one does, these cannot be interpreted as only pertaining to belief or faith. See Judith Lieu, "Race of God-Fearers," 487–90, 493–97.

³⁷Clement's explicit rejection of *physis* as the basis for differences among these three groups indicates that he knows alternative ways to articulate human difference. In this rhetorical context, however, we should be careful not to conclude that Clement is opposing a view resembling modern biological racial definitions. Indeed, it is more likely that Clement is here referring to a rival Christian view, most likely of Valentinian Christians; it is important to note, however, that what we have is Clement's portrayal and critique of this view, not a transparent summary of a Valentinian position (let alone of the interpretation Valentinians might offer about their view of human difference).

³⁸For Clement, it is also crucial that these three peoples, although differentiated by how they worship, are not different in *what* they worship. Christians constitute the people who correctly worship the same God that the Greeks and Jews worship incorrectly. This assertion of a common deity, particularly of a deity understood as the creator, is why Clement can insist both that the different peoples of the world do not differ "by nature" and that the ideal form of humanness is to become Christian.

Athenagoras depicts Christians as an *ethnos* that should, according to the logic of the empire, have the same rights to worship its own god in its own way, as any other people might.³⁹ But instead of developing an argument as to why Christians ought to count as a people with ancestral customs worth tolerating, Athenagoras proceeds as if this were to be taken for granted.

This is an astute move: it allows him to ignore tough questions about the appropriateness of classifying Christians as a people. After all, the Romans did not colonize the Christians as the members of a specific city or territory, or even as a named group(s). Rather, Athenagoras constructs Christians as a colonized group, with the rights of worship and customary law pertaining to other such groups. He does this in part by defining and defending Christians in light of the imperial concerns about atheism and social stability that he specifies in the opening: the emperors permit other ethnic groups and cities to follow ancestral ways “since you regard it as impious and irreligious to have no belief at all in a god” (atheism). Belief in god(s) is portrayed as causally linked to social order because it is “through fear of the divine” that one will “refrain from evil.” Athenagoras refutes the application of these charges against Christians of atheism and its corollary of social disruptiveness later in the treatise. He reasons that the allegation of atheism against Christians arises because most people “measure piety by the rule of sacrifices” and thus accuse Christians “with not acknowledging the same gods as the cities.” He counters this charge by asserting that the Christian God does not demand anything but “bloodless sacrifice and ‘the service of our reason’ ” (13). Thus, Athenagoras redefines what counts as sacrifice without rejecting the centrality of sacrifice to the understanding of religion.⁴⁰

Athenagoras does not merely fit Christians into ancient conceptualizations about religion and its integral connection with ethnic and civic identity, however. He also recasts these views, implying that it may be non-Christian groups who pose a threat to Roman social order, not Christians. To make this claim, he returns to his initial point about people in different places having different gods, this time developing the point in a new way. In the opening, the argument was: if various cities and peoples can worship gods of their choice, why can Christians not worship their own god? Now this variety is used to obscure how Christians, as inhabitants

³⁹See also Frances Young, “Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman and Simon Price, in association with Christopher Rowland; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999); she writes with reference to Athenagoras’s work, “to legitimize their position, Christians claimed to be a people or a race, alongside others to whom rights were given” (103).

⁴⁰For a discussion of the significance of Christian refusal to sacrifice, see Stanley K. Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of Greek Religion,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Studies in Honor of Wayne Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) 293–333.

of these cities and among these *ethnē*, live in *disjunction* with local customs. He holds up the religious differences between cities as a sign of mass confusion about the true nature of the divine:

[A]s to the other complaint, that we do not pray to and believe in the same gods as the cities, it is an exceedingly silly one. Why, the very ones who charge us with atheism for not admitting the same gods as they acknowledge, are not agreed among *themselves* concerning the gods. . . . If, then, we are guilty of impiety because we do not practice a piety corresponding with theirs, then *all* cities and *all* peoples [*ethnē*] are guilty of impiety, for they do not all acknowledge the same gods (*Leg.* 14.1,2).

In this passage, Athenagoras brackets the question of how Christians interrelate with their non-Christian neighbors, focusing his attention upon differences between civic and ethnic customs.⁴¹ He contends that intercity differences in observance, not alleged *Christian* atheism, signal impiety. Here, he implies that uniform consistency in worship offers the solution to impiety (or the proof of piety), but this universalizing solution remains implicit. His near contemporary Justin Martyr, however, develops this position more fully.

In contrast to Athenagoras's *Legatio pro Christianis*, Justin Martyr's *First Apology* does not seek to carve out a space for Christians on a par with other civic or national bodies, but rather positions Christianness as that which properly supersedes these. Nonetheless, ethnic reasoning is in fact central to Justin's argument. My reading contrasts with Judith Lieu's assertion that "the language of 'race' does not provide Justin with a way of understanding the Christians' place in the world."⁴² While Lieu is correct insofar as Justin does not name Christians as a *genos* or *ethnos* in the *First Apology*, he constructs his argument by defining Christians as a distinctive group formed out of the two kinds of humans, Greeks and barbarians (which includes Jews in this context).⁴³ That is, in a move similar to that of Clement's in the *Stromateis*, Justin positions Greeks and barbarians as eligible to become members of another people, the Christians.

⁴¹By contrast, other Christian authors of this period, like the anonymous writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, assert instead that Christians share customs with their neighbors even though their true allegiances lie elsewhere (*Ep. Diog.* 5.1–10; 6.1–8).

⁴²Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 177.

⁴³We can view this argument as a form of "aggregative" ethnic self-definition, in which an ethnicity is constituted and depicted in terms of connections between otherwise distinct groups (Ionians, Dorians are both Hellenes). This mode of ethnic self-definition coexisted in the Roman period with one more familiar to modern readers, namely, an oppositional mode. Oppositional ethnic self-definition defines one ethnicity by an exclusive contrast with one or more other groups (such as Greek/barbarian or Jew/gentile). See Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic identity*, 47–51. I adapt Hall's rubric in my current book project.

Justin uses the idea of racial differences to argue for the positive effects of Christianity in a manner that echoes and refracts strategies employed by the cultural elites in his home region of Asia Minor. The local elites of Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Smyrna and other cities employed the theme of “the preservation of the cities’ ancient rights and traditions” as a “means by which the Greek cities [of Asia Minor] integrated Roman foreign power into their traditions of independence,” a tactic Athenagoras adapts to defend Christians.⁴⁴ As Steven Friesen has shown, this theme of civic independence persists despite the fact that “the cities of Asia Minor were becoming increasingly interdependent . . . social networks were becoming regional, and cultic life needed to reflect this situation.”⁴⁵ Imperial cults, especially provincial ones, offered a site for both insisting on the continued importance of the civic unit and enacting the universalizing trend brought by Roman rule and policy. The provincial Cult of the Sebastoi, based in Ephesus, “affirmed local religious traditions and the larger heritage of the Greek world as a mode of life in the period of Roman supremacy.”⁴⁶

Justin echoes these strategies by affirming his version of Christian beliefs and practices as the mode of life that best supports Roman goals of unification, peace, and piety. But he refracts these provincial strategies by depicting Christians as more than mere “caretaker[s] of the cult that was offered by all cities of the province,” as Ephesians could claim of the cult of the Sebastoi.⁴⁷ Justin seeks to trump not only the particular civic identity that Ephesians and others might wish to preserve while also acquiring Romanness, but also the Romanness that such a unifying cult might produce. He combines claims of Christ’s universal power with the ideal of ethnic mutability—that all ought to become Christian, not Roman.

Justin asserts that in the past, people of different *phyloi* fought with each other and refused to associate with each other because of differences in their customs. This portrait of prior conflict among “tribes” implies that “custom”—one of the buzzwords for *valuable* practices in Roman and Greek discourse—is divisive, while the practices ensuing from belief in Christ and God unify. In speaking about the changes in behavior that result from conversion to Christianity, Justin includes moral improvements such as sexual morality, charitable acts, and decreased ethnic tensions: “we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with people not of the same tribe [*ouk homophylos*] because of [their different] customs [*ethē*], now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they . . . may share with us

⁴⁴Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 154.

⁴⁵Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 154.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 156.

the good hope of receiving the same things [that we will] from God, the master of all" (*I Apol.* 14.3). Justin closely correlates religious practice with social order, participating in the conventions of his day, but argues that Christian practices evince unjust aversion in non-Christians because they actually create the most just race of people. Justin, like other Christian apologists such as Melito of Sardis, invokes Roman imperial goals of unification and peace to his advantage here, by implying that it is Christ and Christianness that accomplishes this unification of and peace among diverse peoples.

For all three of these Christian authors, Clement, Athenagoras and Justin, religious practices not only define Christians but serve to mark them as a race or people. Religion was crucial for "challenging, dissecting and reconstructing embedded notions of what it was to be, and act like, a Roman" as well as a Jew, Egyptian, Greek, and even Athenian and Aphrodisian.⁴⁸ When early Christians made religiosity central to their self-definition as a people, they could have understood themselves and been understood by others as participating in a pervasive mode of civic and ethnoracial self-definition.

■ Ethnicity as Mutable

While religion could demarcate the differences between peoples, it was also a means by which one could change one's race. For example, Dionysios of Halicarnassus, writing at the very beginning of the Roman imperial period, appeals to religious practices to claim that certain Greeks have ceased to be Greek:

By living among barbarians many others have soon forgotten [*apemathon*] all their Greek heritage, so that they neither speak the Greek language nor observe Greek customs nor acknowledge the same gods nor have the same equitable laws . . . Those Achaeans who are settled near the Euxine sea prove my point; for, though originally Eleans, descendants of the most Greek people [*ek tou Hellēnikōtatou genomenoi*], they are now the most savage of all barbarians (*Rom. ant.* 1.89.4).

As this passage indicates, the adoption or rejection of particular religious practices (as well as language, customs and laws) could signal that one had crossed an ethnoracial boundary.⁴⁹ Early Christians inhabited a world in which many facets

⁴⁸Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1.166; see also Edwards, *Religion and Power*.

⁴⁹Dionysios here selectively ignores other categories available to him, such as descent, appearance, or place of residence. While genealogical claims, as well as place of residence, could be and were frequently altered (by rewriting genealogies, through adoption, by migration, etc.), these categories are most frequently invoked in ethnic discourse when making arguments about the stability of race or ethnicity. The categories that Dionysios invokes here—language, customs, worship, and laws—were famously articulated centuries earlier by Herodotus in his definition of Greekness, although Herodotus also includes shared "blood"

of one's self, including race or ethnicity, were perceived as mutable—sex, status, citizenship, even humanness.⁵⁰ Religion could be held up as a marker of ethnic specificity or as a means of ethnic transformation.

The idea of changing one's race may sound strange to us, since we live in a world that accustoms us to view race and ethnicity as “givens.”⁵¹ And the idea that Christianity is a religion to which one converts would seem to locate Christianity in contrast to a race or ethnicity, when these are defined in terms of birth or physiology.⁵² But the very principle of ethnic mutability allows Christians to use ethnic reasoning to speak about conversion. This insight helps us to rethink the measures we use to draw the boundaries between Christians and Jews, as well as how we understand the possible relation of each to ethnicity or race.

(*Hist.* 8.144.2). See also discussion in Denise Kimber Buell, “Ethnicity and Religion in Mediterranean Antiquity and Beyond,” *RelSRev* 26 (July 2000) 246–47.

⁵⁰That is, the boundaries between animals, humans, and gods, those between slave and free, and those between male and female were all seen to be breachable. See, e.g., Leonard Barkin, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Natalie B. Kampen, “Gender Theory in Art,” in *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome* (ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson; New Haven: Yale University Press Art Gallery, 1996; distributed by the University of Texas Press, Austin) 14–25.

⁵¹Nonetheless, Dionysios's example may resonate with our notion of cultural assimilation, since he links proximity to barbarians with the loss of Greekness. Many recent sociological and anthropological studies argue that individual and group practices display mutability even when ethnicity is articulated as a “given” aspect of identity; see, for instance, Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*; and Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990].

⁵²In discussing how Jewishness was defined, redefined, and contested in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany, Sander Gilman shows how arguments about conversion to Christianity were an especially volatile site for both Jews and Christians about how and where to draw the lines between religious and racial identities. As he notes, throughout most of the nineteenth century, religious conversion was offered by Christians and by some Jews as the dominant model for trying to “remedy” Jewish difference. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of “scientific” racialized explanations for Jewish difference, “conversion was no longer seen as a viable alternative” (69). Gilman summarizes the contrast this way: “As long as ‘Jew’ was primarily a religious or national label, it could be changed; once it became primarily a racial label, the question of conversion—at least in one generation—became moot” (72). But Gilman immediately exposes the instability of this shift: “And yet the Jews of Europe were converting. . . . Indeed, the highest rate of conversion among German-speaking Jews seemed to be in Freud's Vienna. At exactly the moment when it was felt that Jewish integration into the Aryan world was impossible, the reality was that there was a sense that this biological integration was occurring and that the hope of the mid-nineteenth century assimilationists . . . would be realized. The greater the potential reality became, the more intensely the theoretical possibility was denied” (72, 73). All citations taken from Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud*.

Before exploring Christian adaptations of ethnic mutability and its implications for historical interpretation, however, let us fill in the contours of ethnic mutability in non-Christian sources further. Greek literature attests to the notion that “barbarians” can “become Greek.” This is especially noteworthy, since the very concept of the barbarian emerges in the context of the Persian Wars as the overarching category to signify not-Greek.⁵³ This oppositional concept simultaneously served as a powerful counterpoint from which to define Greekness; nevertheless, the barbarian was not seen to be divided from the Greek by means of an impermeable boundary. For example, in the early fourth century B.C.E., the orator Isokrates declared the prowess of Athens as follows: “. . . [Athens] has made the name of Greeks to seem to be no more of *genos* but of thought, so that those who share our education, more than those who share a common nature [*physis*], are to be called Hellenes” (*Paneg.* 50). Here, Isokrates uses *genos* and *physis* to invoke the notion of fundamental differences between Hellenes and non-Hellenes, but he reasons that the barrier between the two is porous since non-Hellenes can become Hellenes through *paideia*.⁵⁴ The possibility of acquiring Greekness through *paideia* indicates not that Greekness has ceased to become an ethnicity but that Isokrates signals a redefinition of ethnicity from *genos*, which here seems to connote birth-linked (marked by a shared “nature”), to one of mindset or thought. As Rachana Kamtekar has shown, Plato had already sought to define race in terms of relative achievement of virtues rather than physical descent,⁵⁵ so Isokrates’s audience would not necessarily have understood birth or a material *physis* as the only way to define race or ethnicity.

From the mid-second century B.C.E. on, some texts also speak about people “becoming Judaeans.”⁵⁶ While Shaye Cohen has persuasively argued that Jewish authors adapted “Greek political thinking” to reformulate Judaeanness “as a way of life and as a citizenship” that one can join, he views this way of thinking—for both Greeks and Judaeans—as an indication of the “removal of the ethnicity from the concept of ‘Hellene’ ” and *Ioudaios*.⁵⁷ In Cohen’s view, any sign of mutability

⁵³For the most fundamental studies of this process, see both Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) and François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁵⁴Note also that Isokrates’s argument about the status of “Helleneness” simultaneously positions Athenianness as the privileged site for defining what it means to be a Hellene.

⁵⁵Rachana Kamtekar, “Distinction without a Difference? Race and *Genos* in Plato,” in *Traditional Philosophers on Race* (ed. Julie Ward and Tommy Lott; London: Blackwell, forthcoming).

⁵⁶In 2 Maccabees and in Judith; see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 31; Berkeley, 1999) 129–30.

⁵⁷Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 127.

marks an absence of true ethnicity. So, he writes in light of the Isokrates passage cited above that, “ ‘Hellene’ changed from an ethnic or ethnic-geographic term to a cultural one.”⁵⁸ Similarly for Cohen, if there is the possibility of conversion to Judaism, *Ioudaios* is no longer purely an ethnic category. For Cohen, religiosity is a cultural category and contrasts with ethnicity because it is an achieved or voluntary status rather than an ascribed one. But this interpretation is problematic both because it presupposes an intactness and givenness to ethnicity that is not demonstrable in ancient sources,⁵⁹ and because it insists upon such a sharp distinction between ethnicity and religious affiliation. It is better to say that terms such as *Ioudaios* and *Hellēn* remain concepts culturally intelligible as ethnicities but that what is understood to constitute a *Ioudaios* or *Hellēn* changes over time.⁶⁰

Not only is change possible from one ethnicity to another, it is better to change in one direction than the other: for example, in many contexts, it is culturally more valuable to be a Greek than a barbarian. Whether construed in terms of totalizing binaries (Greek/barbarian) or geographically-linked categories (Egyptian, Syrian, etc.), ethnic identities were often ranked hierarchically (as are the differences within other categories, such as male/female). Any group can arrange identity categories hierarchically to communicate competing ideals. For example, Philo of Alexandria, at the beginning of the Roman imperial period, conjectures that if *Ioudaioi* were given “a fresh start,” “I believe that each [*ethnos*] would abandon its own ways, and, throwing off their ancestral ways [*patrioi*], turn to honoring our ways [*nomoi*] alone” (*Life of Moses* 2.44). This idealization of one ethnicity relative to others, in conjunction with the principle of mutability, permits one to present that particular ethnicity as the universal ideal. This view is one that early Christians develop.⁶¹

Texts do not merely speak about people changing ethnicity or race, however; authors also effect such ethnic transformations, through the construction and reconstruction of genealogies, patterns of migration and settlement, customs, political systems, and religious practices. So, Dionysios of Halicarnassus, writing in Asia Minor at the beginning of the Roman imperial period in the late first century B.C.E., seeks to rewrite Roman origins. Specifically, he argues that Romans are of Greek

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁹Naomi Janowitz also criticizes Cohen for drawing an overly sharp break in the definition and understanding of *Ioudaios* in the second century B.C.E. that turns on what he sees as a new possibility for people to convert to Judaism. See Janowitz, “Rethinking Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity,” in *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (ed. Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatx; London: Duckworth and The Classical Press of Wales, 2000) 207–09.

⁶⁰So David Konstan argues in “*To Hellēnikon ethnos*: Ethnicity and the Construction of Ancient Greek Identity,” in *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*” (ed. Irad Malkin; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001) 29–50. See also Buell, “Ethnicity and Religion in Mediterranean Antiquity and Beyond,” 243–49, and Janowitz, “Rethinking Jewish Identity,” 214.

⁶¹I develop this point further in my current book project.

rather than barbarian ancestry: “I shall show in this book who the founders of the city were, at what periods the various groups came together, and through what turns of fortune they left their native countries. By this means I engage to prove *that they were Greeks . . .*” (*Rom. ant.* 1.5.1). In so doing, Dionysios authorizes Romanness by linking it to respectable roots—Greekness; but, since he is in the business of promoting Romans as the legitimate powerbrokers of empire over and above other Greeks, he also maintains a distinction between them—Romans appear to be the culmination of Greekness. He does not claim that Romans are Greek, but that they *were* Greeks. Christian claims to be the “true” Israel also rely on this logic of constructing one’s genealogy backwards to respectable roots while at the same time claiming to have surpassed that heritage.

Many early Christians capitalize on ethnic mutability to portray Christianness as achieved through a change in race. For example, Clement of Alexandria positions Jews and Greeks (or sometimes Greeks and barbarians) as assimilable peoples who can and should cross the boundary to produce a new, “special people” (*periousios laos*; cf. Titus 2:14, alluding to Exod 19:5), i.e., Christians: “the middle wall which separated the Greek from the Jew is taken away, in order that there might be a peculiar people [*laos*]. And so both meet in one unity of faith; and out of both comes one election” (*Strom.* 6.106.4–107.1). Clement’s allusion to Ephesians does not proclaim race to be irrelevant but stresses that the new people emerges out of the aggregation of “Greeks” and “Jews.” As we have already seen, for Clement, religious practices and beliefs are both the means for changing one’s race, from Greek or Jew to Christian, and the defining characteristic of one’s race.⁶²

One generation later, in the early third century, we find the idea of mutability expressed somewhat differently in Origen’s concept of free will. For Origen, as discussed in his *De principiis*, ethnic distinctions as well as those of status, gender, and health can be explained as the embodied consequences of the better or worse exercise of free will. He states this in contrast to the alleged views of rival Chris-

⁶²Clement’s proclivity for stressing that Greek philosophy, as well as Jewish scriptures, contain divine truths can be understood as helping to make persuasive his assertions that all humans are capable of becoming Christian, that they are assimilable. Natalie Kampen has shown how Roman art deploys gender and sexual norms to accomplish this effect of the potential for barbarian assimilation. Even while barbarians are depicted in ways that mark their difference and inferiority, especially by dress or positioning of the body in Roman art, they are also largely depicted in male-female couples, sometimes with children; for Kampen, this indicates a Roman preference for viewing the barbarian as “assimilable,” as capable of fulfilling Roman ideals. She writes: “the barbarian couple may become Roman . . . they, like freed slaves or people from the provinces, may move from one category to another” (Kampen, “Gender Theory in Art,” 20). Kampen’s insights shed light on how some Christians, Clement as well as others, such as the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, can present Christians as a new *genos* while also insisting that they share some values and practices in common with their contemporaries.

tians, to whom Origen credits a view of human difference as arising from “a diversity in the nature of souls” or else “accident or chance” (2.9.5). Origen asserts instead that “[God] created all creatures equal and alike. . . . But since these rational creatures . . . were endowed with the power of free will, it was this freedom that induced each one by its own voluntary choice either to make progress through the imitation of God or to deteriorate through negligence” (2.9.6). The ideal goal of this progression for Origen can be stated in ethnic terms: the goal is to become an Israelite, but not just any Israelite—specifically, an Israelite who has entered “into the church of the Lord” (3.1.23):

And perhaps the present Israelites will be deprived of their *genos* for not having lived worthily of their noble birth, being changed as it were from vessels of honor to vessels of dishonor; while many of the present Egyptians and Idumaeans who have come near Israel will, when they have borne more fruit, ‘enter into the church of the Lord’ no longer being reckoned as Egyptians or Idumaeans but for the future becoming Israelites. Thus according to this view some people by the exercise of their wills make progress from worse to better, while others fall from better to worse (*Princ.* 3.1.23).

We see from these two examples that these Christian authors both use ideas about ethnic boundaries and the possibility of changing ethnicity or race in order to speak about Christianness. Where Clement emphasizes that Christianness is formed from the aggregation of Jew and Greek as a peculiar people in a “unity of faith,” Origen redefines what it means to be a true Israelite as an ideal culmination of the exercise of free will, a redefinition that disenfranchises “present Israelites” who have not entered “the church of the Lord.”

Seeing ethnic mutability as a concept useful to early Christians in defining the process or consequences of becoming Christian raises profound questions about prevailing reconstructions of differences between Christianness and Jewishness in antiquity. Besides veneration of Jesus, Christianness is most often distinguished from Jewishness in ethnic terms; as the authors of a recent study of religions in Rome bluntly state: “Christianity lacked the ethnic links of Judaism.”⁶³ That is, Christianness is defined by contrast with Judaism—Judaism has “ethnic links,” while Christianity does not. This kind of argument has two problems. First, it implies some substance to “ethnic links” that is impossible to demonstrate. It is insufficient to read the language of peoplehood in Christian texts as “figurative” over against some “real” peoplehood imagined to apply to others—especially Jews, but also others. We should not be too quick to essentialize the contours of the “pre-conversion” lives of those who comprised the membership of early Christian groups. Our modern assumptions about the

⁶³Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1.276.

naturalness of “ethnicity,” “kinship,” and “ancestry” make it easy for us to gloss over the ways that reckoning race or ethnicity *even by descent* is a social process; such reckoning changed radically within Jewish communities, as Shaye Cohen has demonstrated was the case in the rabbinic innovation of the principle of matrilineal descent.⁶⁴

There is a second reason why it is problematic to draw the contrast between Judaism and Christianity as that between “an ethnic monotheism” (Judaism) and “a proselytizing monotheism that had cut loose from the ancestral ways” (Christianity).⁶⁵ This contrast is misleading because it is the conceptualization of peoplehood that undergoes transformation, not the notion of membership in a people. The rhetorical and ideological claims of some of the surviving Christian texts to speak for a unified, universal (imagined) community do not merely speak about bringing previously distinct peoples together, they also speak of the new community as a people distinct from the rest of humanity. 1 Peter’s paraphrasing of Hosea illustrates this shift: “You are a chosen race [*genos*], a royal priesthood, a holy nation [*ethnos*], God’s own people [*laos*] . . . once you were no people [*laos*] but now you are God’s people [*laos*]” (1 Pet 2:9–10). Instead of explaining 1 Peter as pointing to a metaphoric people in contrast to a “real” people, we can use the principle of mutability to help understand *all* claims to peoplehood as ideal conceptions, not real, immutable fact.

Distinguishing Christianness from Jewishness by emphasizing that Christianity is also for gentiles emerges out of exegesis of prophetic texts like Isaiah and Micah that envision the future inclusion of gentiles, as Tessa Rajak has recently shown is the case in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*.⁶⁶ When interpreting Christian texts, we should distinguish between rhetorical distance placed between Christianness and Jewishness by some authors and the dependency of these same authors on the conceptual framework drawn especially from Judaism to imagine Christians *as a people*. Rather than arguing that Christians lack the ethnic links of Judaism, it is better to say that early Christians adapt Jewish strategies of articulating religious practices as emblematic of ethnicity. Whether the Christian people is said to be the authentic form of the “true Israel” or a “new people,” Christian supersessionism can be understood in part as a product of the Christian claim to embody themselves authentically as the *people* of God precisely through their religious practices. This claim is consistent with ethnic reasoning, not a sign of its absence.

⁶⁴Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 263–307.

⁶⁵Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 70.

⁶⁶Tessa Rajak, “Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetic as Anti-Judaism in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 68–80.

■ Conclusion

I have sketched out two central ways early Christians found ethnic reasoning valuable for Christian self-definition: 1) because religious practices were already closely associated with ethnicity in the early Roman empire, ethnicity provided one way to define and defend the boundaries of Christianness; and 2) because race was understood to be mutable, “becoming Christian” could be depicted in ethnic terms. These two points lay the groundwork for two more arguments: first, that 3) the principle of ethnic mutability also allowed Christians to present Christian universalism in ethnic terms: moving from the possibility that anyone *can* become a Christian to the normative claim that all *ought* to become members of this people; as for example we see Justin doing.⁶⁷ Finally, 4) because the meaning of Christianness was far from secure in the pre-Constantinian period, early Christians also could use ethnoracial language to denounce Christian rivals as barbarians and Jews, or as otherwise falling short of embodying a particular version of *the* authentic Christian universal.⁶⁸

What should now be clear is that early Christians did not reject the notion of peoplehood. Rather, they defined Christianness in various ways as membership in a new people, marked especially by its religious practices and beliefs. The principle of ethnic mutability allowed Christians to relativize the significance of the ethnic and racial identities of their converts, by arguing that conversion entailed the transformation of one’s race. But this transformative process did not result in the erasure or transcendence of ethnicity. Rather, this process was understood as leading to the formation of a new people. By conceptualizing race as both mutable yet “real,” early Christians could define Christianness both as a distinct category in contrast to other peoples (including Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, etc.) and also as inclusive since it is formed out of individuals from a range of different races.

This approach also views Christianity not as an essence but as a contested site—one defined and claimed by competing groups and individuals—and Christian history not as an evolving totality but rather as a series of ongoing struggles, negotiations, alliances, and challenges.⁶⁹ Our interpretive models should seek

⁶⁷See Denise Kimber Buell, “Race and Universalism in Early Christianity,” unpublished article, for an examination of this aspect of Christian ethnic reasoning.

⁶⁸My current book project, “‘Why This New Race?’ Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity,” develops all four of these arguments at length.

⁶⁹Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, among others, has argued this point. See most recently Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, 48–51; and *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 48–49, 145–48, 191. See also the important programmatic essay by Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig, “Drawing Large and Startling Figures: Reimagining Christian Origins by Painting like Picasso,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (ed. Castelli and Taussig; Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996) 3–20.

not an original essence for Christianity but rather highlight the processes and strategies of negotiation, persuasion, contestation, and contingency that permeate the very production of Christianness. Attention to ethnic reasoning allows us to honor this diversity and to evaluate its legacy.

What is “ethnic” or “racial” cannot be defined as the particular over and against the universal in early Christian texts. Even though many early Christian texts claim to speak for all Christians, universalizing claims emerged from particulars, just as Isokrates’s claim about all Hellenes is based upon what *Athenians* have accomplished.⁷⁰ As Christians sought to authorize their own versions of Christian thought and practice relative to those offered by other Christians, the rhetorical functions of ethnic reasoning unfolded in complex ways. An author might appeal to Christians as members of a people, but excoriate Christian rivals for just this rhetorical move. In these contexts, which are best known in so-called anti-gnostic polemic, the Christian rival may be portrayed as holding an overly narrow concept of “race,” as insisting that innate characteristics determine one’s possible inclusion in the ranks of Christians. For modern readers, this rhetoric echoes modern views of race sufficiently that we not only fail to see it as a rhetorical argument but also fail to see how other notions of race—as mutable, as formed in and through religious practices—undergird the Christian self-definitions posed in contrast to “gnostic” ones. Furthermore, because gnosticism remains stigmatized as a form of Christianness that did not “succeed,” insufficient attention has been paid to the ways that ethnic reasoning unfolds in gnostic writings themselves.⁷¹

Those of us interested in Christian origins need to consider questions of race and ethnicity more thoroughly than we have. Mainstream theology and historical scholarship on Christianity have much to gain from the challenges and visions offered by voices marginalized by ideology and/or social location. The presuppositions and frameworks that still dominate prevailing reconstructions of Christian origins have both racist and anti-Jewish consequences—even when interpreters explicitly seek to avoid these consequences. We need to change our ways of thinking about early Christian history, which means also changing our ways of thinking about what race, ethnicity, and religion are.

⁷⁰This is an insight that also grounds feminist and liberationist analyses, which not only authorize their critiques with reference to particularity (especially based on experience) but also expose as partial and particular the bases for universal claims made by others. Of course, this insight also applies not just to how we read early Christian texts, but also to how we evaluate the readings we produce, given our own affiliations and aims. See Haraway, *Modest_Witness*, 23–45; and Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, 23.

⁷¹For an important exception, see Michael A. Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (NHS 29; Leiden: Brill, 1985) esp. 158–85.

Because we undertake historical study within the context of our participation in modern struggles over the meaning and significance of these concepts, we cannot simply insist that our present views have no bearing on our historical interpretations.⁷² We live in a country that is still deeply racist, and one in which anti-Judaism also persists. In the United States today, we continue to grapple with the legacy of a view of race as a natural, biological, inherited characteristic. “[Q]uasi-biological metaphors of ‘type,’ ‘species,’ ‘genus’ and ‘race’ ” cast a long shadow into the present,⁷³ persisting in pernicious works like *The Bell Curve* and posing conundrums for the U.S. Census Bureau.⁷⁴ Even when race and ethnicity, as well as religion, are persuasively presented as “meaningful social fictions” rather than genetically encoded or divinely inspired realities, the material effects of ethnoracial and religious differences remain and demand our attention.⁷⁵

One way to address this contemporary conundrum is to bring together two kinds of discussions that have been largely kept distinct—discussions about the relationship between Jewishness and Christianness and discussions about the relationship between Christianity and race, which in America has been especially dominated by a black/white binary. Bringing these discussions together entails questioning the value of distinguishing ethnicity from race and opens up for examination the problems with defining Christianness as not-race in all historical periods.

⁷²This understanding of the “interestedness” of history has been articulated by many. I am especially indebted to the formulations by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* [Boston: Beacon, 1992] 101, and *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 11, 28, 49); Karen King (“Mackinations on Myth and Origins,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins*, 166); Vincent Wimbush (“Introduction: Reading Darkness, Reading Scripture,” in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* [ed. Wimbush, with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman; New York: Continuum, 2000] 9–10, 13–14, 19); Avery Gordon (*Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997] esp. 137–90, 196, 206–08); and Michel de Certeau (*The Writing of History* [trans. Tom Conley; French original 1975; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988] esp. 1–2, 35–49, 99–102).

⁷³Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 48.

⁷⁴Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994). As has been well publicized, the U.S. Census for the year 2000 offered for the first time the category of “mixed race,” which still presupposes that race is an inherited, biological characteristic, but nonetheless tries to account for the way that individuals do not conform to clearly demarcated racial classifications.

⁷⁵A number of important works have tried to wrestle with this tension between arguing for the constructedness of race, including when defined as a matter of biological or genetic “stuff,” and the persistence of material inequalities and oppression along the lines of racial constructions. I have found most provocative for my own thinking the work by David Hollinger, *Post-Ethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and especially Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1998).

My argument that early Christians employed ethnic reasoning bears on two contemporary goals: first, by offering a reading of Christian origins in which alternative constructions and contestations of race and ethnicity are at play, we can support current efforts to dismantle racist logic in the present, especially as it plays out in American deployments of white supremacy; and second, by calling into question readings that naturalize the differences between Christianness and Jewishness along an axis of non-ethnic/ethnic, where ethnicity is defined as a given, biological category, we can further efforts to dismantle Christian anti-Judaism. Attention to the function and presence of language about peoplehood in early Christian writings can help to accomplish these two tasks.

I am convinced that interpretive frameworks that implicitly or explicitly make race or ethnicity a primary site of difference between Jewishness and Christianness in the ancient world will continue to produce a harmful modern paradox. If Christianness is defined as ideally non-racial and nonethnic, in contrast to Jewishness, then even critiques *within* Christianity about the tradition's failure to realize this ideal may unintentionally reinforce a form of racially inflected Christian anti-Judaism. In other words, definitions of Christianity's racially inclusive ideal will perpetuate a racially-loaded form of anti-Judaism if the implied point of contrast to Christianity's inclusiveness is Jewishness. A reconstruction of early Christian history that demonstrates *both* the egalitarian and universalizing impulses in Judaism *and* how early Christians themselves made universalizing claims using ethnic reasoning cannot only resolve but remove this paradox.