Ethnicity, Race, and Religion in Early Christian and Jewish Identities: Overview of a Research Project

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Ethnicity, race, and religion have long been among the most powerful indicators of group identity, distinguishing 'us' and 'them', defining who is a neighbour and who is a stranger, who does and does not belong to 'our people'. Yet as is so often the case with seemingly clear and defining labels – we tick boxes on forms to indicate our ethnicity, and our religion – these categorisations are complex, contested, and overlapping. They are also bound up in some of the most intractable and prominent conflicts in the contemporary world. We might perhaps think that religious affiliation – as Christian, Jew, Muslim, etc. – is distinct from ethnic, racial or national identity, but each of these religious identities is also bound up, in complex and historically variable ways, with *perceptions* and constructions of ethnicity, race, and nationality, and thereby to the question of who belongs and who does not, who is a member and who is an outsider. We might think of the long-running sectarian conflict in the north of Ireland, the violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and, more broadly, of the history of antisemitism and Islamophobia in the historically Christian countries of Western Europe. To give a more specific example, a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Centre showed that 32% of Americans interviewed agreed that "being a Christian is very important for being truly American", a figure that rose to 57% among white evangelicals – and this despite a constitutional commitment to freedom of religion that prohibits the "establishment" of any religion within the USA.[1] The connections between religion and racialisation, and specifically the links with antisemitism and Islamophobia, were the focus of a special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36.3 (2013), edited by Nasar Meer. Contributors argue for the need to integrate much more

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[1] The first amendment of the US constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." See https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/ (accessed 12 May 2021).

closely the study of race and racism on the one hand and antisemitism and Islamophobia on the other.[2]

The study of Christian origins is much more central to this subject than might initially appear: as Meer notes, the argument can be made that the modern "category of race was co-constituted with religion" and specifically the Christian religion, which, James Thomas argues, "provided the vocabularies of difference for the Western world."[3] In a major study of 'race' from a theological perspective, Kameron Carter argues that the modern construction of race (and the collocation of whiteness and Christianness) is an essentially theological achievement, stemming from the severing of Christianity from its Jewish roots.[4] These arguments, whether they are found convincing or not, begin to indicate the possible connections between the scholarly construals of early Christian identity vis-à-vis Jewish identity and the epistemological foundations of Western European Christian self-identity.

These issues were the focus for a research project undertaken at the University of Exeter's Centre for Biblical Studies, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant reference: AH/M009149/1).[5] In its focus on ethnicity, race, and religion in the construction of early Christian and Jewish identities, the project's key questions were intended to encompass both the historical and contemporary facets of these issues, focused in particular on the field of New Testament studies. The overall aim was to explore and illuminate how ideas and ideologies of ethnicity, race, and religion contribute to the construction and interpretation of Jewish and Christian identities in biblical and early Christian and Jewish texts and in the traditions of scholarship dealing with those texts. Two key questions may be highlighted, though they are intrinsically interrelated, and immediately open up many more subsidiary questions, which cannot be detailed here.

1. How do ideas and practices that we would associate with ethnic or religious identities feature in the construction of early Christian and Jewish identities? For example, we might ask about how and where the language of 'peoplehood' (using γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός) is used, or about practices concerning marriage and the raising of children.

2. In what ways do modern scholarly construals of these group identities reflect the historical, religious and ethnic/racial contexts in which that scholarship has been produced? More specifically, how far do depictions of Christian and Jewish identity in the field of New Testament studies reflect the shaping of the discipline in the white, Christian countries of Western Europe (and latterly the USA)? For example, we might ask

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[2] See the introductory essay by NASAR MEER, "Racialization and Religion: Race, Culture and Difference in the Study of Antisemitism and Islamophobia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (2013): 385–98.

[3] MEER, "Racialization and Religion," 389; JAMES M. THOMAS, "The Racial Formation of Medieval Jews: A Challenge to the Field," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (2010): 1737–55, 1739.

[4] J. KAMERON CARTER, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2008).

[5] A brief overview is available at http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/ethnicity_race_religion/. The two main publications from the project are: DAVID G. HORRELL, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); KATHERINE M. HOCKEY and DAVID G. HORRELL, eds., *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018). This edited volume is available open access at https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/ethnicity-race-religion-identities-and-ideologies-in-early-jewish-and-christian-texts-and-in-modern-biblical-interpretation/.

about how contrasts are drawn between 'Christian' and 'Jewish' identities, and how far these imply the superiority of the former, specifically in terms that reflect the values of Western political liberalism.

Probably every reader of these questions will find that they raise further questions, many of which have been subject to extensive scholarly discussion: How was 'ethnicity' understood in antiquity?[6] How should we translate the term Ἰουδαῖος – is it essentially an ethnic or a religious identity?[7] How far can modern social-scientific understanding of ethnicity, race, and religion illuminate our enquiries? How much have shifting paradigms within the discipline of New Testament studies changed our perspectives on these issues? But rather than multiply the questions further, a brief summary of key findings and proposals may offer more constructive and substantive material. What cannot be included in a brief report is the discussion, evidence, and justification for these summary points.

1. Ethnic and racial identities – in both the ancient and the modern world – are socially constructed, somewhat fluid and flexible, even though they are often perceived and presented as if they were 'objectively' determined by birth. Ethnicity and race are themselves contested and overlapping terms, whose resonances differ in different contexts (*Rasse* in Germany has a very different history and contemporary significance compared to 'race' in the USA, for example).[8]

2. Religion is often bound up with ethnic identity. The criteria offered for identifying ethnic groups include such things as religion, customs, culture, and language. What we define – not unproblematically – as 'religion' often forms part of a 'way of life' that is taken to be constitutive of ethnic identity, or belonging to a people.[9]

3. The overlapping categories of religion and ethnicity, and the constructed character of religious and ethnic identities, indicate the importance of language, or discourse, and social practice. As Rogers Brubaker has argued, the existence of 'groups' – whether ethnic, religious or whatever – should not be taken as self-evident, but rather as precisely a focus for analysis: How are discourse and social practice used to *invoke* or create a particular sense of groupness?[10] Rather than ask whether a certain group is or is not an 'ethnic' group, it may be better to ask if and how ethnic language is used and

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[6] See TERESA MORGAN, "Society, Identity, and Ethnicity in the Hellenic World," in HOCKEY and HORRELL, *Ethnicity, Race, Religion* (n. 5 above), 23–45.

[7] See JOHN BARCLAY, "Ἰουδαῖος: Ethnicity and Translation," in HOCKEY and HORRELL, *Ethnicity, Race, Religion* (n. 5 above), 46–58.

[8] On the issue of terminology, see KATHY EHRENSPERGER, "What's in a Name?: Ideologies of *Volk*, *Rasse*, and *Reich* in German New Testament Interpretation Past and Present," in HOCKEY and HORRELL, *Ethnicity, Race, Religion* (n. 5 above), 92–112.

[9] See further DAVID G. HORRELL, "Religion, Ethnicity, and Way of Life: Exploring Categories of Identity," *CBQ* 83 (2021): 38–55.

[10] See ROGERS BRUBAKER, "Ethnicity without Groups," European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie 43 (2002): 163–89; idem, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also his more recent discussion of ethnicity and ethnic identity in ROGERS BRUBAKER, *Grounds for Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

for what purposes, as in Denise Kimber Buell's generative analysis of 'ethnic reasoning' in early Christian texts.[11] The deployment of language that indicates self-consciousness as a 'people', or belonging together as siblings who share common ancestors, is a powerful means by which such group-identity is constructed, legitimated and maintained. Social practices such as marriage, raising children, sharing meals, and marking time, are governed by rules and given particular significance in displaying and sustaining that identity.

4. New Testament and early Christian texts construct the identity of their addressees in ways that invoke many of these features of ethnic identity: shared ancestry, identity as siblings, marriage within the group, and commitment to a common way of life, in which children are raised. The language of peoplehood also emerges in some later NT writings and gradually becomes more established in the early centuries. For example, 1 Pet 2:9-10 is the first text to use γένος of the Christian groups, and brings together all three 'people' words, γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός, to emphasise their identity as a people. Since early Christian texts, most famously Gal 3:28, also express the conviction that people of all ethnicities can join the group in Christ, it may seem incongruent to describe the group-identity as effectively ethnic in character. But this is to fall into the error of reifying or ontologising our own categories: it is clear that the early Christians saw themselves – and came to be seen – as a 'people', identified and marked by various forms of discourse and social practice, even if they also invited all to join, in what Buell calls an "aggregative" mode of ethnic reasoning.[12]

5. New Testament studies has long been characterised by comparisons between Judaism and Christianity that depict the former as exclusive, ethnocentric, or simply ethnic, while the latter is inclusive, non-ethnic or trans-ethnic. Despite changing paradigms and new perspectives, and an increasing concern to understand the earliest Christian movement 'within Judaism', the basic contours of the contrast continue to be reinscribed. Yet without in any way downplaying the differences between the two traditions, as they emerge and develop in the early centuries, this kind of contrast may be questioned. The evidence seems rather to suggest that both identities were depicted and maintained in ways that draw on the language and practices commonly associated with (what we call) ethnic groups, though both groups were also open to outsiders, in various ways. Ancient references to the popularity of Jewish customs, and evidence for sympathisers and full proselytes associated with Jewish communities, indicate that it was not only Christian communities that could be inclusive and welcoming.

6. Since the emergence of the modern discipline of critical biblical study is bound up with the religious history and racial ideologies of Western Europe, we need to assess critically how far depictions of the early Christian movement and the Judaism from which it emerged reflect their origins in this specific context.[13] This is often easier to do with

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[11] DENISE KIMBER BUELL, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
[12] BUELL, *Why This New Race*, 138–65.
[13] See, for example, the probing critical analysis of SHAWN KELLEY, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

scholarship of the past; it is harder to appreciate how far our own work may continue to be shaped by such history and ideologies, if only implicitly and unintentionally. For example, Paul's famous vision in Gal 3:28 is subject to changing kinds of positive appreciation, often set explicitly in contrast to a more negative depiction of Jewish 'ethnocentrism' or similar kinds of exclusivity. But if we find that the *terms* in which scholars depict the positive achievement that Paul announces happen to coincide with the values of modern Western liberalism – that Paul is championing inclusivity, acceptance, tolerance, and so on – should we not suspect that the reading is shaped by its modern context and values, both in religious and racial terms?[14] For all its claims to historical detachment and careful exegesis, the dominant perspectives in New Testament studies are products – to some extent at least – of a white, Christian tradition, accustomed to offering apparently benevolent inclusion on its own (often exclusive) terms. As Willie James Jennings comments, "Western Christian intellectuals still imagine the world from the commanding heights."[15]

7. Acknowledging and naming the particularity of the perspectives and approaches that continue to be dominant may be one important part of facing the challenge of 'decolonising' and globalising our discipline.[16] Studies of 'whiteness' have highlighted how often this racialised identity is "unmarked" or "unnamed," taken simply as a norm.[17] As Richard Dyer remarks:

> It has become common for those marginalised by culture to acknowledge the situation from which they speak, but those who occupy positions of cultural hegemony blithely carry on as if what they say is neutral and unsituated – human but not raced… there is something especially white in this non-located and disembodied position of knowledge, and thus it seems especially important to try to break the hold of whiteness by locating and embodying it in a particular experience of being white.[18]

In the field of biblical studies, this kind of critical analysis helps us to make sense of the practice whereby certain kinds of perspectives and approaches are specifically named – Feminist, Asian, African-American, Minority, and so on – while other kinds of perspective do not have their particularity named, simply going under the label 'biblical studies' or 'New Testament Studies' (and not, for example, English perspectives, German approaches, or whatever).[19] This implicit allocation to unnamed 'core' and

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[14] See further DAVID G. HORRELL, "Paul, Inclusion, and Whiteness: Particularising Interpretation," *JSNT* 40 (2017): 123–47.

[15] WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

[16] In UK universities, for example, there is currently energetic – though not uncontroversial – discussion about "decolonising the curriculum". See, e.g., https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/decolonisation-curriculum-conversation (accessed 21 May 2021); https://www.theguardian. com/education/2019/mar/20/academics-its-time-to-get-behind-decolonising-the-curriculum (accessed 21 May 2021).

[17] E.g., RUTH FRANKENBERG, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 6: "Naming 'whiteness' displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance."

[18] RICHARD DYER, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

[19] See further DENISE KIMBER BUELL, "Anachronistic Whiteness and the Ethics of Interpretation," in HOCKEY and HORRELL, *Ethnicity, Race, Religion* (n. 5 above), 149–67; MA. MARILOU S. IBITA, "Exploring the (In)Visibility of the Christ-believers' 'Trans-ethnicity': A Lowland Filipina Catholic's Perspective," in HOCKEY and HORRELL,

alternative (and optional) named 'approaches' serves to sustain a structure of core and periphery, which highlighting the contextual and located shape of all perspectives can help to deconstruct. This is important for many reasons in a globalised and (notionally) postcolonial age, when the majority of Christians live in the Global South. But one particular reason why it is important has to do with epistemology: if what we apprehend and come to know is shaped – in part at least, and in ways that generally escape our own awareness – by our identity and location, then bringing together a wide range of perspectives may enable us all to see and to know more, and to understand more richly. The future of the discipline requires that we address such challenges.

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Ethnicity, Race, Religion, 183–201; WEI HSIEN WAN, "Re-examining the Master's Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies' Race Problem," in HOCKEY and HORRELL, *Ethnicity, Race, Religion*, 219–30.

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