doi:10.1017/aju.2024.15

SYMPOSIUM ON RABIAT AKANDE, "AN IMPERIAL HISTORY OF RACE-RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL LAW"

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CONTEXTUALIZATION OF "RACE-RELIGION"

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In her wide-ranging article, "An Imperial History of Race-Religion in International Law," Rabiat Akande delves into the realms of history illustrating how the "race-religion" constellation became formative in current international law, specifically in Western discrimination toward minorities. As Akande writes, "the legacy of that past survives in the continuing interplay of the racial and religious othering of the non-Euro-Christian other."[1] This racialized-religious heritage, for instance, is evident in Western debates on the Hijab, Jewish circumcision (*Brit Milah*), and various other rituals practiced by religious minorities in the West. As a historian of the nineteenth century, in this essay I mainly focus on Akande's reconstruction of the historical aspect of the "race-religion" nexus. I begin by partially validating Akande's argument concerning the emergence of race-religion during the end of the nineteenth century, and by emphasizing Western racial discrimination against Islam and Judaism—the two "sister Semitic" religions. I then add what I see as important nuances that must be considered in the historical analysis of race-religion. Primarily, I illustrate how race-religion was "fluid" at times, allowing specific groups to "enter" Western civilization, while in other cases, race-religion was rigid, barring the inclusion of groups. Akande argues that the nineteenth century colonial expansion (in Africa, the Middle East, and India) dramatically contributed to the rise of the shared European categories of whiteness and Christianity. This emerging Western identity was antagonistic to the alleged "barbarism" of the non-whites and non-Christians. Nevertheless, further nineteenth-century inner-European contextualization is needed since the exclusion through race-religion also targeted, exactly at the time of this European imperial expansion, other "fellow Christian whites," such as the Catholic Irish and Poles. It is not only "whiteness" per se that became prevalent, but a specific form of "whiteness" (e.g., Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, Aryan) that was constantly reimagined and redefined.

Although, as Geraldine Heng and others show, there were early modern European adoptions of race-religion,[2] the popularization of this constellation mainly occurred in the nineteenth century. This popularization principally relates to the term "race" which, resembling the nineteenth-century ascent of nation and nationalism, became entrenched in the scholarly and public discourse of the period. It was through the association between language and race as well as the "biological" classification of human types that race was bestowed with an assumed scientific aura.[3]

Nineteenth-century European scholars based racial typologies on two dominant reasonings that could be crudely framed as "biological" and "civilizational." The biological assumed fixed physical differences between

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[1] Rabiat Akande, *An Imperial History of Race-Religion in International Law*, 118 AJIL 1 (2024).

[2] Geraldine Heng, Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy (2003).

[3] Maurice Olender, The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century (1992).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2024.15 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human types with some human groups claimed to be superior to others. For some racial thinkers, biological differences could never be altered.[4] In contrast, others asserted that a process of racial assimilation could transform the group or the individual's biology (for better or worse). To put it simply, civilizational reasoning assumed a hierarchy that differentiated between "civilized" and "barbarian" societies. Theoretically, through an extended process of learning Western "customs," every human group could move up the imagined "civilizational ladder." For example, conversion to another religion, particularly Christianity, could connote a major civilizational leap forward. Hence, "race," according to some nineteenth-century readings, was also "cultural" and could be transformed through religious conversions.[5] It must be noted that the biological sometimes merged with the civilizational, and scholars who adopted one reasoning sometimes referred to the other (even in the same work). Furthermore, at first sight, civilizational reasoning seemed less fixed and less malignant than the biological one. However, civilizational transformation could take a very long time or never even come to pass if the racial-religious other failed to demonstrate the requirements of "progress." The practical implications of biological and civilizational forms of reasoning were that some races were marked as superior and attained the right to rule and exploit "inferior races."[6]

Race-Religion: Excluding and Integrating Groups

The racial reasonings above were deployed by Europe to stress the alleged superiority of its white-Christian civilization and to legitimate its imperial expansion into non-Christian and non-white lands. The construction and use of the white-Christian category was evident already in the imperialistic conquest of indigenous lands in the Western Hemisphere and later during the "scramble for Africa," when Europe's territorial possessions increased from 10 percent in 1870 to around 90 percent on the eve of the Great War. As many Europeans claimed, whereas white-Christian societies purportedly denoted civilized, progressive, and moral societies, the non-whites and their religions were autocratic, stationary, and corrupt.[7]

Such condescending views of the "Other" were, of course, not limited to Africa. During the Russo-Turkish War in 1878, as the European Powers bickered over Ottoman territories (the "Eastern Question"), the liberal English historian Goldwin Smith stated: "Islam, the military religion of the plundering Bedouin . . . never can produce civilization—moral, political, or even material. Industry, liberty, science, and progress of every kind are essentially alien to it. Militarism, despotism, fatalism, polygamy, concubinage, slavery, cleave to it as parts of its nature, everywhere and in all times."[8] Although there is no reference in Smith's words to the racial origins of Muslims, the race-religion constellation is implicit in what can be labeled as the "static time" condition. While the West with its Christian values advances throughout history, Islam includes an innate malicious and stationary core that is "everywhere [in all Muslim territories] and in all times." Such descriptions, as Edward Said showed, were common in Western descriptions of the ostensible inferiority of the Orient.[9]

In the same year that Smith published these Islamophobic words, he also wrote a few virulently anti-Jewish essays, such as "Can Jews be Patriots?," concluding that Jews could never fully integrate into English/Anglo-Saxon society. Smith, Freeman, and other "vulgar liberals," as the famous Victorian poet Matthew Arnold titled them, merged their anti-Muslim and Jewish racism, especially during the 1870s, when the Conservative Benjamin

[4] A notorious example is Robert Knox, The Races of Men: A Fragment (1850).

[5] Edward A. Freeman, The Ottoman Power in Europe: Its Nature, Its Growth and Its Decline 46 (1877).

[6] Michael Adas, *Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology*, 15 J. World History 33 (2004).

[7] Christopher Gevers, *Slavery and International Law*, 117 AJIL Unbound 71 (2023).

[8] Goldwin Smith, *The Eastern Crisis*, 23 Fortnightly Rev. 648 (1878).

[9] Edward W. Said, Orientalism (1979).

https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2024.15 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Disraeli was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.[10] Disraeli, who was born Jewish and baptized at the age of thirteen, was accused of allying himself with the Ottomans because of his inborn "Asian" affinity with the Muslim Turks. Disraeli, according to these liberals, could never be considered a patriotic Englishman: neither his conversion to Christianity nor his status as prime minister were sufficient to validate his Englishness since he could not escape his innate Semitic condition.

In the eyes of some, Jews remained outsiders despite their social/political/economic integration and even conversion into Christian societies. Race or Semitism prevented their full amalgamation into "Aryan" societies. I argue that this is also the main reason for the emergence of the modern race-religion constellation. The binding together of race and religion posed a barrier to any assimilation of these specific minority groups. Famously, in the case of Blacks, the abolitionists attempted, as demonstrated in the saying "Am I not a man and a brother" (Wedgwood Slave Medallion, 1787), to underscore the shared humanity and Christianity between whites and Black slaves. Still, despite their Christianity, Blacks were regarded as "outsiders" for racial reasons. It was possible for minority groups to religiously convert and to some extent become part of the dominant culture but with the nineteenth century emergence of the socially constructed category of "race," integration became far harder, as "race" was regarded as innate. Nevertheless, as illustrated later, there were circumstances in which religious conversion could transform racial belonging, allowing groups to "escape" their allegedly inferior status.

The case of the Armenians in the late 1800s shows that through race-religion, the West also endeavored to integrate some minority groups. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Armenians living under Ottoman rule suffered from ongoing persecutions. Interestingly, when Western mainly informal non-state advocates campaigned for Western aid to the suffering Armenians, many portrayed them as both fellow Christians and Aryans. Under this framing, due to racial-religious affinities with the Armenians, the West had to come to their aid, protect them against the Turkish-Muslims, and support the refugees who mainly settled in France, Britain, and the United States. Western support for the Armenians was thus viewed through a prism of what I define as "racial humanitarianism"—promoting and justifying aid through racial hierarchies and affinities. Put differently, extreme religious beliefs, nationalism, and even racial ideologies were sometimes the driving forces of such advocacy initiatives.

I argue that Armenians were identified as Aryans—not only as Christians—for two reasons. First, their particular Christian dogma, adhering to Monophysitism, the belief in Christ's single nature, seemed somewhat detached from the main theological Christian branches, believing in Christ's dual natures. Because of this difference, and in order to raise awareness of Armenian persecution, Western advocates also underscored the West's racial commonality with the Armenians. Second, many associated the Armenians with the Semitic Jews. Both peoples possessed ancient historical roots, represented religious uniqueness, comprised very small numbers, were known as traders, and did not possess any territorial sovereignty.[11] Through race-religion, therefore, some sought to differentiate between the Armenians and the Jews, as the main religious and ethnic "other" of the Christian West. Succinctly put, the race-religion constellation not only excluded but also justified the inclusion of minority groups, such as the Armenians.

In any case, for many nineteenth-century European scholars, "race" originated long before religion. The periods and dates when religions emerged were known, whereas races thrived on Earth from the unknown beginnings of humankind. Religions, for that matter, were the byproducts of races. The Semitic races produced Judaism and later Islam, while the Aryan race produced Hellenism and finally institutional Christianity. As D. Kimon, a French-Greek writer who became known for his anti-Semitic and Islamophobic arguments, wrote:

[10] Clare A. Simmons, *The Claim of Blood: Gladstone as King of Greece*, 13 Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdis. J. 227 (1989).

[11] Jean-Michel Johnston & Oded Y. Steinberg, *Armenians, Jews, and Humanitarianism in the "Age of Questions," 1830–1900*, 66 Historical J. 72 (2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2024.15 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Christianity is derived from an evolution, from Aryan civilization, the last phase of which was the pinnacle of Hellenistic philosophy."[12]

Of course, this latter argument was problematic, to say the least, because Jesus was born and crucified as a Jew. Due to this fact, some nineteenth-century scholars, such as Kimon and the far more famous French philologist Ernst Renan, attempted to deny Jesus's Semitic roots. The "Aryanization" of Christianity was also a result of a geographical shift westward: "It must be remembered that we are no longer in Syria. Christianity has passed from the Semitic world into the hands of races intoxicated with imagination and mythology."[13] Indeed, it was the influential Renan who, at least in his early writings, established the dichotomy between the "stagnant" Semitic Jew-Muslim and the "creative" Aryan-Christian.

Interestingly, the Aryan-Semitic typology, as understood in the nineteenth century, was simultaneously directed toward the "outside Others" as well as "inside Others." The dominant, enduring "inside Others" were the Semitic Jews living within Christian European societies for centuries, while the "outside Others" were the Semitic Muslim Arabs. Additional "outside Others" were the Turanians, namely, all the Asian nations that originated in the land of Tur (Central Asia) and were neither Aryans nor Semitic.[14] The Turks represented one of the main branches of the Turanian race and it was because of their Muslim faith that they were usually defined as "allies" of the Semitic Muslims and enemies of Aryan-Christian Europe. Interestingly, some considered other "Turanian nations," such as the Bulgarians, as an integral part of Aryan Europe. The Bulgarian conversion to Christianity and adoption of a Slavonic language, it was claimed, transformed their racial origins. As the historian E.A. Freeman wrote: "The history of the Bulgarians . . . shows that it is quite possible if circumstances are favorable, for a Turnian people to settle among the Aryans of Europe and to be thoroughly assimilated by the Aryan nation among whom they settled."[15] Now and then, cultural factors may alter racial belonging, especially if a non-Aryan nation converted to Christianity. This is an example of the possible "fluidity" of race-religion, allowing the inclusion of the Bulgarians in the European Aryan-Christian civilization.

Racial-Religious Prejudice Against "Fellow" White-Christians

As stated, the overall white-Christian identity of Europe acquired a central position during the late nineteenth century, particularly in contradistinction to the African Muslim or Indian Hindu "Other." Nevertheless, rather than eliding tensions within Europe, my argument is that this emerging, ostensibly inclusive, Christian European racial-religious identity co-existed with inner European racial-religious discrimination. It was exactly when white-Christian identity became rooted from the 1870s–1880s that a more intensive inner European racial-religious bigotry also targeted groups, such as the Irish Celtic-Catholics or Polish Slavic Catholics. Hence, differences between Christian denominations were still central during the end of the nineteenth century and even later. Racial identity was occasionally entwined with a specific form of Christianity, harshly demarcating the borders between "Anglo-Saxon-Protestant" and "Celtic-Catholic."[16] There was, however, an important difference: although many racialized against the Catholic Irish and Poles during the nineteenth century, they were, unlike

[12] Fernando Bravo López, *The Genocidal Islamophobia of a Late Nineteenth-Century French Anti-Semite: D. Kimon and* The Pathology of Islam, 25 Islam & Christian–Muslim Relations 101 (2014).

[13] Ernest Renan, The History of the Origins of Christianity, Vol. 4, 41–42 (1890 [1873]).

[14] F. Max Müller, The Science of Language, Vol. 1, 276 (1861).

[15] Freeman, *supra* note 5, at 46.

[16] Saree Makdisi, Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture (2013).

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other groups, considered as "white" and Christian. As Patrick R. O'Malley writes, "it is essential to distinguish between forms of disadvantage."[17]

An illustrative case is Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* against the Catholics and the endurance of anti-Catholic policies under his successors aiming to construct the newly united Germany on a dominant Prussian Protestant ethos.[18] Such policies predominantly targeted the Catholic ethnic Poles living in regions such as Posen. Bismarck, for instance, expelled thousands of Poles and Jews from German territories (1885), restricted Polish education, and encouraged ethnic German settlement in Polish territories. Unlike the "civilized" Germans, Poles, it was claimed, lacked *Kultur* and endangered the "progress" of the German state. For instance, the influential historian Heinrich von Treitschke advocated racial-cultural views claiming that the backward Slavic Poles were incapable of building cities, and it was only owing to German rule over Eastern Europe that urban life developed in these regions.[19] The famous sociologist Max Weber continued in the same vein, arguing in the 1890s that contact between the ethnic German worker and the ethnic Polish worker was harmful to the "industrious" character of the Germans. Dominant cultural racism, therefore, characterized Germany's internal policies against Catholic Poles. Following my earlier point, Imperial (Wilhelmine) Germany (1871–1918) victimized ethnic Poles while implementing racist policies in Germany's newly acquired African colonies.[20]

It was also exactly during the European imperial expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century that the Irish Question erupted as the most pressing issue of British politics. Certainly, clashes over the legitimacy of the British conquest of Ireland and discrimination toward the local Irish Catholics lasted for centuries. Still, from the Fenian Uprising (1867), the Irish struggle against British rule, and later the Home Rule debate, regarding Irish autonomy, Irish Catholics suffered from the most disparaging racial-religious attitudes. Popular Victorian figures (e.g., Thomas Carlyle and Charles Kingsley) defined the Irish as naturally inferior due to their "barbaric" Celticism and despotic Catholicism.[21] Race and religion merged in the Irish case, classifying them as a lower or, according to Charles Dilke, a "cheaper" race, which like the Chinese or various Indigenous populations could never overcome Protestant "Saxondom."[22]

Conclusion

Certainly, the Christian European strife in the decades if not centuries following the Protestant Reformation was far bloodier and cannot be compared to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' Christian antagonisms. Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century racialization against the white-Christian Irish and Poles exemplifies that inner European racial-religious hierarchies flourished when Western imperialism was at its height. Therefore, a more composite picture must be considered when speaking of the historical endurance of race-religion from the nineteenth century. That being said, I concur with Akande's thesis that especially in recent decades, also due to growing migration, the inner white-Christian prejudice has become marginal in comparison to the discrimination against the Black-Muslim "Other." Furthermore, I find Akande's study of the long history of race-religion

[17] Patrick R. O'Malley, *Irish Whiteness and the Nineteenth-Century Construction of Race*, 51 Victorian Lit. & Culture 167 (2023).

[18] Culture Wars: Secular–Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Christopher Clark & Wolfram Kaiser eds., 2003).

[19] Heinrich Von Treitschke, Politics 108 (1916).

[20] Max Weber, Der Nationalstaat Und Die Volkswirtschaftspolitik: Akademische Antrittsrede (1895); Andrew Zimmerman, *Race and World Politics: Germany in the Age of Imperialism, 1878–1914*, *in* The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History (Helmut Walser Smith ed., 2011).

[21] Guy Beiner & Oded Y. Steinberg, *Racializing Irish Historical Consciousness*, *in* Race in Irish Literature and Culture (Malcolm Sen & Julie McCormick Weng eds., 2024).

[22] Charles Dilke, Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries 405 (1868).

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immensely significant since she illustrates how the endurance of this constellation from the nineteenth century is formative in contemporary realities.

The crises of the last decade validate this point. For instance, while the majority of Western states are apathetic toward the hundreds, if not thousands, of Muslim and Christian African migrants that drown every year in crossings in the Mediterranean Sea, Europe has welcomed white Christian refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine with open arms. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Western governments should have treated the suffering Ukrainians with the same indifference as their southern counterparts. Instead, my objective is to highlight an abiding humanitarian hierarchy that is shaped by racial-religious perceptions. Indeed, mainly due to the horrors of the Holocaust, certain imagined categories, particularly "Aryan," are no longer spoken of, yet their destructive meanings linger on, still shaping attitudes and practices. Akande's contribution, for that matter, adds another facet to our understanding of how race-religion operates in our present reality.

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