

REVIEWS

“An Icon of White Supremacy”?

Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 340 pp. Hardcover: \$32.50. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3572-2.

Reviewed by John G. Turner

Jesus and I were the only white people in the sanctuary. One summer, while outside Washington, D.C., on a college internship, I walked across the street to church. When I opened the door and went inside, I saw only black people—with one prominent exception: Above a side door, the church displayed a picture of Jesus. It was Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ*. I wasn’t sure how church members felt about white visitors, but I didn’t think it appropriate to leave a church simply because of race. So I sat down. In this church, the deacons sat at the front and looked out at the congregation during the service. I wondered what they thought about a twenty-year-old white kid sitting in their church. It turns out they were extremely welcoming. I also wondered why a group of African American Baptists had a picture of a white Jesus.

Ed Blum and Paul Harvey’s *The Color of Christ* would have helped me answer that question. This black church had a white Jesus because previously iconoclastic American Protestants began mass-marketing images of a white Christ in the 1840s. In the early 1800s, American Protestants, including a young Joseph Smith, described visions of Jesus in terms of blinding light. They did not often reflect on his skin color, and they did not depict him in artwork. By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans—white, black, and Indian as well as Catholic, Protestant, and Mormon—almost universally thought about Jesus as having white skin.

In telling their story, Blum and Harvey counter several “myths” about the American Jesus. The first is that “racial and ethnic groups necessarily create God or gods in their own image.” Puritans, Indians, and African Americans for the most part did not depict Jesus in their own image. The American Puritans, grandchildren and cousins of those iconoclastic European Prot-

estants who had stripped altars and destroyed roadside crosses considered it idolatrous to depict Jesus in artwork or in illustrations. “They did not know what Jesus looked like,” write Blum and Harvey. “They did not want to know. And they celebrated not knowing.” (40) Many non-Puritan American Protestants inherited a general suspicion of religious images from their iconoclastic ancestors. As late as the middle of the nineteenth century, many Protestants would not suffer crosses to adorn their churches, considering the cross a sign of “popery.” Those who question the Christianity of the Latter-day Saints because of the absence of cross on their meeting houses and temples would do well to consider how most Protestant churches looked in antebellum America.

Gradually, however, Protestants set those iconoclastic concerns aside. As roads and canals coupled with new publishing houses made the mass distribution of educational and evangelistic tracts possible, Protestants came to realize the evangelistic and pedagogic power of imagery. This brings us to the second “myth” countered by the authors, that “Americans inherited iconography through European artwork and merely replicated it.” (20) Americans, the authors contend, did not primarily draw on European artwork once they decided to depict the savior. Instead, they modeled their Christs on the description the “Publius Lentulus letter,” a fraudulent document claiming to come from a Judean governor during the lifetime of Jesus. The letter describes Jesus as having hair “the color of the ripe hazel nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled . . . parted in two on the top of the head, after the pattern of the Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and very cheerful, with a face without a wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly ruddy complexion. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is abundant, of the color of his hair, not long, but divided at the chin.” (20–21) Earlier generations of Protestants knew the letter was a fake, and most nineteenth-century Protestants did as well. Still, in the minds of many white Americans and English, the letter’s description of Jesus seemed right. “[W]hile we believe it to be false,” wrote one English author, “we perhaps wish that it were true.” (83) Depictions of Jesus Christ based on

the Publius Lentulus letter circulated broadly around the United States and, increasingly, the world.

By the early 1900s, images of Jesus more often included blond hair, in keeping with the heyday of Anglo-Saxonism, and Jesus often became more muscular in appearance. Beginning in the 1920s, Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* became the dominant image of Jesus, not only in the United States but around the world. "This new Jesus," Blum and Harvey explain, "had smooth white skin, long flowing brown hair, a full beard, and blue eyes." (208) Many Christians recognized their image of Jesus when they gazed upon Sallman's painting. "I have had visions of our Lord Jesus Christ and his painting is a very close resemblance," one letter writer informed the flagship evangelical periodical *Christianity Today* (209). Eventually, Sallman's painting found its way into the black Baptist church I visited twenty years ago.

Not all Americans, of course, imagined and depicted Jesus in the way that white Protestants advised. From the earliest years of colonial settlement, Catholic missionaries showed crucifixes to Native Americans. Both Indians and African Americans, moreover, continually refashioned Jesus, though not typically in their own image. Black slaves turned the faithfully suffering Jesus "into a trickster of the Trinity," white as snow but small in stature (9). This Jesus tricked white masters into thinking their slaves were quiescent, all the while teaching the enslaved to maintain their dignity and prepare for freedom under the reign of "King Jesus." Both white abolitionists and African-Americans saw the Son of God in the cabins of the enslaved descendants of Africans. As early as the 1830s, some Americans explicitly rejected a white-skinned Jesus. William Apess, a Pequot born to a slave, informed his readers "that you are not indebted to a principle beneath a white skin for your religious services but to a colored one." Jesus was not white, Apess insisted. "Christ as Jew is recalled as a man of color," he explained. These early reactions to the increasing whiteness of Jesus in antebellum America serve to introduce the final myth that Blum and Harvey engage, the idea that "black liberation theology was born in the 1960s" (21). Instead, they contend, "marginalized peoples" (and certain white Protestant allies) consistently conceived and depicted Jesus in ways that served their own purposes.

What do all of these various images of Jesus mean? Blum and Harvey identify their subject as “the creation and exercise of racial and religious power through images of Jesus and how that power has been experienced by everyday people” (13). What is the connection between white images of Jesus and white supremacy? This remains unclear by the end of the book. In only the first two pages of the introduction, the authors identify the white American Jesus as “a conflicted icon of white supremacy,” a “shape-shifting totem of white supremacy,” and “never a stable or completely unifying symbol of white power” (7–8). That the whiteness of Jesus both reflected and contributed to white supremacy seems unobjectionable. But exactly how? Certainly, associating a white Jesus with the Ku Klux Klan, as did the 1915 blockbuster *Birth of a Nation*, attempted to sacralize the Klan’s mission and its members. The black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier concluded that in displaying blue-eyed, brown-haired, white-skinned Christs, the black church “does little to give Negroes a sense of personal worth and dignity in a world where everything tends to disparage the Negro. . . . The religious ideology of the Negro church tends to perpetuate such notions as a white God and white angels, conceptions which tend toward the disparagement of things black” (182). Blum and Harvey could do more, however, to explain the connections between white Christs and white power more clearly.

Over the last two-thirds of the book, Blum and Harvey periodically discuss how Latter-day Saints imagined and depicted Jesus. At times, their findings provide a fresh examination of the Mormon Jesus; at other times, they work too hard to fit Mormonism into their thesis. In keeping with the way that other Americans described their visions of Jesus, Joseph Smith initially described Jesus in terms of blinding light. Smith’s 1832 account informs that he saw a “a pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day.” The crucified-but-resurrected Jesus informed Joseph that his sins were forgiven. Throughout the 1830s, Smith never described Jesus’s appearance. Perhaps reflecting the greater willingness of American Protestants to imagine and depict a white-skinned Christ, Smith in 1844 described Jesus as having “light complexion [and] blue eyes.” “In less than twenty years,” Blum

and Harvey conclude, “Smith’s account of seeing Jesus had shifted from one of lightness to one of whiteness” (76–77).

So far, so good. This conclusion, however, seems more tenuous: “No new American religion was as successful, as reliant upon sacred interventions, or as committed to a white Jesus as Mormonism” (84). The Book of Mormon strongly associates dark skin with God’s curse, and it identifies Mary, the mother of Jesus, as “exceedingly fair and white” (1 Nephi 11:13). The latter reference certainly suggests that Jesus shared his mother’s complexion, but very little about early Mormonism illustrates any sort of commitment to a white Jesus. Brigham Young insisted in 1852 that “this people commonly called Negroes are the children of old Cain . . . [and] cannot bear rule in the Priesthood, for the curse on them was to remain upon them until the residue of the posterity of Michael and his wife receive the blessings.” Young predicted on a number of occasions that someday the natives of Utah would become a “white and delightsome people.” Even Young, however, did not place any emphasis on the whiteness of Jesus. Instead, in the above-quoted 1852 speech, he joked that he “never saw a white man on earth. I have seen persons whose hair came pretty nigh being white, but to talk about white skins, it is something entirely unknown.” “We are the children of Adam,” Young added, “who receive the blessings, and that is enough for us if we are not quite white.”¹ What is missing from Blum and Harvey’s discussion of the Mormon Jesus is any sense of when Latter-day Saints became committed to describing and depicting Jesus with white skin.

At some point, however, that commitment did develop. After a mention of the fairness of Jesus in a 1913 stained-glass depiction of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, Blum and Harvey briefly return to Mormon artwork in the 1960s. They reference John Scott’s *Jesus Christ Visits the Americas*, which features Jesus with fair skin and light-brown hair. Then, they devote one paragraph to the placing of a replica *Christus* statue in a Temple Square visitors’ center. “Mormons resurrected an old Danish statue,” write Blum and Harvey, “to affirm their commitment to Jesus, whiteness, and power” (254). Certainly, the replica of *Christus* is made out of white marble. And in the context of the civil rights movement, the color of Jesus took on a greater importance across the country, as did the exclusion of black men from the LDS priesthood. How-

ever, it seems likely that LDS leaders welcomed the *Christus* statue only in order to “affirm their commitment to Jesus.” They probably did not stop to think about “whiteness and power.” Perhaps that was the problem. Still, *Christus* is a symbol of Mormon christocentricity, not—at least not in any simple, straightforward sense—Mormon racism.

Blum and Harvey cover a tremendous amount of ground in their provocative book, and they raise important questions for all Christians, Mormon and otherwise. Depictions of Jesus as white have both reinforced and contributed to white supremacy in the United States—sometimes. How are we to make sense of it all? When is a white Christ “an icon of white supremacy,” and when does Jesus just happen to have white skin or white marble? Even setting aside “white and delightful,” have other references to skin color in Mormon scriptures made it more difficult for Latter-day Saints to paint, draw, or sculpt Christs with darker skin? Does Mormon scripture contribute to notions of white superiority? Do those scriptures produce feelings of inferiority in non-white church members?

Blum and Harvey note that because depicting Jesus in human form inevitably raises uncomfortable questions of race, most evangelical megachurches have removed all images of Jesus from their sanctuaries. Crosses, yes. Visual depictions of Jesus, no. That is a simple solution, but it is a troubling solution for believers in an incarnate Christ. Blum and Harvey quote Mormon artist J. Leo Fairbanks about the connections between artwork and the doctrine of the incarnation: “Art causes us to feel that Christ was a man, that he lived a physical existence, that He was mortal, sympathized with sinners, moved among beggars, helped the infirm, ate with publicans and counseled with human beings for their immediate as well as their future spiritual welfare. It is to art that we turn for help in seeing the reality of the facts of the religious teachings of this divine human” (147–148). Can you imagine a children’s Bible without pictures of Jesus? Perhaps the best solution is for Christians to produce and utilize a multiplicity of Jesus images. If we can only summon up in our minds Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* or the *Christus* statue, we could stand to broaden our image of Jesus Christ, maintain the power of the incarnation,

and help all human beings to grasp that they are a reflection of God's image.

Note

1. Brigham Young discourse of 5 Jan. 1852, George D. Watt transcript, Box 1, Folder 17, CR 100 317, Church History Library.

Anti-Mormon Moment

J. Spencer Fluhman. *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 256 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0807835715.

Reviewed by Christine Hutchison-Jones

With Mitt Romney's loss and the end of the 2012 campaign season, many have declared an end to our current Mormon Moment. But while America's recent attention to the Mormons may have been unusually focused—particularly on exploring the actual beliefs and experiences the Latter-day Saints—it was hardly new. In fact, Mormonism has been a staple of popular culture and discourse about religion in the United States since it first appeared in upstate New York nearly two centuries ago, and popular depictions haven't always painted a pretty (or realistic) picture. In *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*, J. Spencer Fluhman, Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University, explores the roots and development of the American fascination with and antipathy toward the Saints. He also demonstrates that the nation's long, troubled relationship with its most successful homegrown religion is illustrative of Americans' complicated and fluid understanding of what makes a "real" religion: "through public condemnation of what Mormonism was, Protestants defined just what American religion could be" (9).

Fluhman's book contributes to the growing body of literature on anti-Mormonism in American history. His approach, however, differs from that of many of his predecessors. Whereas *"A Peculiar*