

Race in the afterlife: an Eastern Christian approach

In a previous paper, I addressed the question: Will there be races in heaven? (Placencia, 2021). ¹ There I argued that the answer to that question depends on one's view of heaven and one's account of race. After sorting out these concepts, I defended the conclusion that racial identity, but not race, is compatible with the mainstream Christian account of the afterlife in which persons are psychologically continuous from this life to the next. However, I left open the question of whether deflationary realist races (what I will refer to as *minimalist* races in this chapter) are compatible with the Christian view of the afterlife. The primary reason this question went unanswered was because it required further theological description of what bodies in the afterlife might be like. In this chapter, I revisit this question from an Eastern Christian perspective. This tradition has a robust theology of bodies in the afterlife (often referred to as the "age to come" in Eastern theology) that can guide us toward a more substantive answer. To that end, the chapter proceeds in four stages.

First, it surveys four accounts of race—the racialist, skeptical, socialrace, and minimalist. Second, it shows that the racialist, skeptical, and socialrace accounts of race are incompatible with the Eastern Christian view of the age to come. Third, it offers reasons to think that the minimalist account of race is compatible with a strong current of Eastern Christian thought that emphasizes the embodied character of the afterlife. St. Theodore the Studite's theology exemplifies this theological current. In St. Theodore's iconophilic writings, one finds a theology of resurrected bodies that emphasizes continuity with pre-resurrected bodies. This theology of resurrected bodies taken with a minimalist account of race implies that the resurrected Christ is a member of a race and that resurrected people will maintain their race in the afterlife as well. Fourth and finally, the chapter looks at several implications of this conclusion: the existence of race in the afterlife avoids the racial homogeneity found in alternate accounts of heaven, it presents a moral challenge to those who seek racial reconciliation in this life or the next, and it gives us a perspective from which we can consider what minimalist races might offer humanity in a world without racism.

Before I get started, allow me to address some of the parameters of this current chapter. First, the arguments offered here draw from one stream of Eastern Christian thought. However, the broader tradition is not monolithic, especially on more speculative matters regarding the age to come. For example, it's a matter of dogma enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed that there will be a final resurrection of those who have fallen asleep. ² But what our resurrected bodies might be like is, to some degree, a matter of rational speculation. That is, we are in the realm of theologoumenon, which is why I indicated in the title that what is offered here is "an" not "The" Eastern Christian approach. Even so, my arguments in this chapter rely heavily on a distinctive and highly influential theme of reasoning found in the East. In response to different waves of iconoclasm, theologians in this tradition worked out a thoroughly incarnational Christology that has implications for the question at hand. However, since my expertise lies in the philosophical issues surrounding race and not Eastern theology, I rely heavily on contemporary scholarship on this tradition, specifically Alexis Torrance's recent work on St. Theodore's theology (2020).

Second, the Philosophy of Race as an area of specialization in English-speaking philosophy has come into its own over the last four decades. It currently operates at a high level of sophistication and nuance. As expected of such work, there is a complex thread of arguments and counterarguments worthy of consideration. ³ In my previous article (2021), I attempted to survey this field of study as it relates to the question of whether there will be races in heaven. In this chapter, instead of a broad survey, I will present Michael Hardimon's most recent attempt to lay out the main features of the various accounts of race. In addition, I will focus in more detail on his concept of a minimalist race (2019). To begin things, we must start with an older approach to thinking about race that all contemporary work resoundingly rejects: the racialist account of race.

Racialist Races

The racialist concept is a product of the new "sciences" of the 1800s and Europe's colonial aspirations. ⁴ It has been proven false, and scholars have identified its pernicious intent. ⁵ But for centuries before its demise, the racialist ideology was used as a quasi-scientific justification for the colonization, enslavement, and oppression of millions. It is a genuinely world-historical idea that casts a long, dark shadow. ⁶ "Failure to grasp this concept," Hardimon warns (2017, p. 14), "would make understanding the last five hundred years of human history difficult, if not impossible." So what is this concept of race? ⁷

The racialist stipulates that the human species is divided up into discrete subgroups associated with distinct regions of the world. They call these subgroups: races. Hardimon identifies four central characteristics of racialist races. First, the racialist holds "that each member of each race exhibits a fixed set of fundamental 'heritable' ... characteristics" (2019, p. 104). These characteristics include moral, intellectual, behavioral, social, and cultural traits. Second, the racialist concept "requires a 'strict' correlation between a race's distinctive pattern of visible physical features ... and its constellation of moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics" (2019, p. 104). That is to say, the racialist thinks that the visible traits, like skin color, hair texture, and body structure, are always associated with the non-visible characteristics listed above. Third, the racialist "demands that a race possess a hidden or underlying biological structure" (2019, p. 104). In other words, these differences are thought to be the result of a shared biological essence. Sometimes the biological essence is taken to be genetic. Sometimes the racialist thinks it goes ontologically deeper: it is in one's "blood," so to speak. The racial essence is passed from one generation to the next. And it is supposed to be the

cause of visible and physical differences between races, as well as intellectual and moral traits. Fourth and finally, the racialist concept “requires that races be rankable” (2019 , p. 104). Races are set in a hierarchy of better to worse moral character, intellectual aptitude, civilization, physical prowess, self-governance, and so on. As I said, this theory is false. But more importantly, in so far as racialist races were invented as a rationalization for racial domination and oppression, the idea is fundamentally immoral. ⁸ Thus, the racialist concept is incompatible with the Eastern Christian view of the afterlife. ⁹

Take, for example, this description of heavenly paradise from the hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian (1990 , originally c. 363, hymn 7.11):

No blemish is in them,
for they are without wickedness;
no anger is in them,
for they have no fiery temper;
no mocking scorn is in them,
for they are without guile. They do not race to do harm—and so themselves be harmed;
they show no hatred there,
for they are without envy;
they pronounce no judgment there,
for there no oppression exists.

In this hymn, St. Ephrem captures the Eastern Christian view (a view shared with other Christian traditions) that the heavenly age to come is a place for those who are morally transformed. ¹⁰ The moral depravity of the racialist way of thinking is, of course, not consistent with this moral transformation. Therefore, there can be no racialist races in the hereafter. That is to say; there is a moral problem. The morality of the heavenly paradise Christians look forward to is fundamentally at odds with racialism. That said, it is crucial to examine where the logic of the racialist concept goes wrong. For this analysis, I want to turn to a few well-known criticisms of racialist ideology, particularly those criticisms raised by race skeptics.

Against racialists races

Race skeptics argue that if there really are such things as races, they have the properties articulated by the racialist. ¹¹ In particular, according to the skeptic, if there are races, they must have a biological essence. However, the evidence suggests there is no such essence. ¹² Two arguments make this point. Here is Hardimon’s articulation of the first argument (2019 , p. 104):

The main argument, which comes from population genetics, is that the portion of total human genetic diversity that falls within human populations (93–95 percent) is larger than the portion that falls between human populations (3–5 percent). This consideration counts against the existence of racialist races because the “genetic profile” of the racialist concept of race requires that the portion of genetic diversity that falls between human races be greater than the portion that falls within human races. Otherwise, there are no racialist races. Since the portion of human genetic diversity falling within human populations is greater than the portion of human genetic diversity between human populations, racialist races do not exist.

So these genetic differences among the putative racial groups give no support to the racialist claim that these groups have anything like a biological essence. The second argument is sometimes referred to as the “mismatch” objection (Glasgow, 2009, pp. 120–124). Here’s how it goes. The only groups that get close to meeting the genetic differences required to be a racialist race do not fit the racialist’s proposed racial classifications. ¹³ For example, the Amish in the US comes close to meeting the criteria of a racialist race. But the Amish, according to the racialist’s own account, are not a race. They would be members of the White racialist race. Thus, there is an apparent mismatch between what the racialist articulates as the properties of racial groups and those things in the world, on their own theory, that might have those properties. ¹⁴ For these reasons, among others, the skeptic concludes that the racialist theory is false. Hardimon agrees with the skeptics and emphasizes that the arguments against racialism lead to three clear results: racialist races do not exist, no person has a racialist race, and no person is a member of a racialist race (2019 , p. 104).

So, if the race skeptics are correct, will race exist in the afterlife? The answer, I take it, is obvious. There is a metaphysical problem. If races don’t exist in this life, it would be a great surprise to find them in the next! God would need to redesign the human species in the age to come, such that every member of each racial group shared a distinct biological essence that uniquely differentiated their group from others. In addition, every member of these new races would need to have visible, moral, and intellectual traits caused by the new biological essence. Finally, God would have to retroactively link each biological essence back to distinct regions of the earth. Of course, such a redesign is nowhere indicated in Eastern Christian thought. Thus, we have good reason to conclude that races, as defined by the racialist, won’t exist in the age to come.

The race skeptic holds the view that race as a concept can't shed the racialist ideology (Appiah, 1992). For this reason, once we as a society are free from the deleterious effects of racialism, according to the skeptic, the language of race ought to be eliminated from academic discourse and, in time, political and popular discourse. Hardimon agrees; he writes, "the concept of racialist race is an empty, empirically refuted concept. Because it is empty and pernicious, use of the racialist concept of race ought to be eliminated." (2019, p.104). However, on Hardimon's view, the skeptic fails to consider other ways of conceptualizing race. These theories offer no support to the racialist. Instead, they show that one can make sense of race without the biological and metaphysical commitments both the racialist and the skeptic believe are built-in, as it were, to the original concept. One kind of alternative approach is to think of race as a social reality. [1](#)

Socialrace

The view that race is a social reality agrees with many of the skeptic's criticisms of the racialist theory. However, it argues that an alternative account more accurately captures what race is. Race, on this view, is not primarily biological; it is social. Another way to put it, race is not a natural category, as the racialist would have it; it is a social category. To make this distinction clear, Hardimon introduces a helpful neologism, socialrace. "A socialrace," he says, "is a social group that is taken to be a racialist race." (2019, p. 105). The "taken to be" part of this definition is significant. Even though racialist races are decidedly not real, people still *believe* and *treat* other people *as if* they are members of racialist races. According to Hardimon, "the fact that people are treated differently gives socialrace a reality outside belief." (2019, p. 105). Socialraces exist due to differential treatment. Since people believe others fit into racialist races, they also treat these people as if they are inferior or superior. This discrimination, in turn, leads to unjust advantages or disadvantages along a number of socially salient dimensions. The sustained pattern of mistreatment creates the social reality of socialrace.

Now, will socialraces exist in the afterlife? Here, there is a clear social problem. Eastern Christians, along with all other Christians worthy of the name, believe that the age to come is a perfected world without unjust advantages or disadvantages. It is supposed to reflect St. Paul's claim that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, man nor woman in Christ. [16](#) Earthly power structures dissolve, and humanity lives before God as equals. Since socialraces are essentially linked to and sustained by social patterns of unjust discrimination, and there are no such patterns in the afterlife, socialraces can't exist in such an environment. Thus, we reach the same conclusion, like the other accounts of race, socialraces can't exist in the age to come.

However, Hardimon has argued that socialrace doesn't fully capture the phenomenon of race. While it's clear that much of the popular thinking about race relies on false beliefs, there still seems to be a fact about the human species that none of the theories surveyed so far explain well. The fact is that humans from different regions of earth *look* different. He argues that while racialists get the explanation of this fact terribly wrong, socialrace doesn't quite explain it. Hardimon's concept of a minimalist race is supposed to fill in the gap here. So let's turn now to consider this account.

Minimalist race

The final account of race to consider is minimalism. A minimalist account of race is realist about races but deflationary (Hardimon, 2019). It is deflationary because it argues that the racialist idea of distinct racial groups, racial essences, and racial hierarchies is clearly wrong. Insofar as the racialist way of thinking has made it into our academic, political, popular, and personal conversations, we are wrong too. We are not talking about something real in these contexts. To this extent, the minimalist agrees with the skeptics. However, something that looks a bit like racialist races is real. Thus, it is a realist account as well. What is real is minimalist races. So what's a minimalist race? Hardimon offers three core components (2019, p. 107). [17](#)

First, it is a human group that "as a group, is distinguished from other groups of human beings by patterns of visible physical features." The visible features he has in mind are skin, hair and eye color, hair texture, and body structure. Notice that intellectual, moral and cultural traits are not on this list. Hardimon's account in some ways rehabilitates the biological foundation of race, but it is clear that at the same time, his account rejects the deleterious implications of racialism. In particular, it disclaims any suggestion that a minimalist view of race implies that races have essential intellectual, moral, or cultural traits that are rankable as better or worse. Racists often use such claims to justify discriminatory practices.

The second component of a minimalist race is that it is a human group "whose members are linked by a common ancestry peculiar to members of the group" (2019, p. 107). Third and finally, a minimalist race is a human group "that originates from a distinctive geographic location." (2019, p. 107) Additionally, on the minimalist view, racial groups are not discrete; instead, they have fuzzy boundaries. And not all individuals will be sortable into one racial group or any racial group. So to sum up, according to Hardimon, what we call races are groups characterized by visible differences inherited from their ancestors; these ancestors, in turn,

connect people who share these visible traits back to geographic regions. The visible characteristics are a byproduct of migration, geographic isolation, and social isolation. Hardimon encourages us not to make more of race than it is. It ought to be socially and politically irrelevant. It is, after all, only a remnant of our ancestors' migration patterns.

On the minimalist account, whether race exists in the next life will depend on whether our body in that life has the same or similar visible features as our bodies do now. Here the Christian scriptural tradition is unclear. The New Testament does not teach gnosticism. Existence in the next life is not bodiless. At the same time, it indicates that the resurrected body in the afterlife is a transformed version of the pre-resurrected body. [18](#) Scripture does not give many specifics on what this transformation involves. However, several accounts of Christ's resurrection in the Gospels might provide insight. [19](#) In some of these examples, the evangelists report that Christ, after the resurrection, is not recognized by his disciples. [20](#) Thus, at first glance, it seems that visible continuity is unlikely. Upon further consideration, though, even if not recognized, Christ still looked like a man, and, it stands to reason, he still looked like a man from Judea. He may very well have kept the visible traits that indicate his race in the minimalist sense.

However, based on the scriptural evidence, we just can't be sure about this latter point. To make any further claims, we need a more robust theological reason to think that the resurrected body preserves racially salient visible traits of the pre-resurrected body. Here is where the Eastern Christian theological tradition can help. Many thinkers in this tradition have reflected carefully on what scripture and tradition tell us about embodied existence now and in the age to come. One such thinker is St. Theodore the Studite. In the next section, following Alexis Torrance's reading of Theodore's theology ([2020](#)), I will outline the Studite's claims about the resurrected body of Christ and show how these claims have implications for our question.

An Eastern Christian theology of resurrected embodiment

One issue that motivated theological reflection in the East that one doesn't find as much attention to in the West is the controversy surrounding the use of icons of Christ and the saints in worship and prayer. The church in the East suffered various waves of iconoclasm. The iconophiles eventually won the day. And the veneration of icons was established at the 2nd Council of Nicea. One of the central iconophilic arguments is that to deny that Christ can be depicted in images as an embodied human being is to deny the incarnation and full humanity of Christ. St. Theodore the Studite was one of the great defenders of the veneration of icons that made arguments along these lines. [21](#) Furthermore, according to Torrance, Theodore's defense of icons also articulates a fully incarnational Christology which can help us determine if bodies in the age to come retain the visible characteristics central to the minimalist account of race.

On this reading of Theodore's corpus, the central claim that he argues for is that a necessary condition of being human is to be embodied in a particular body. For Christ, this is the body that grew in the womb of his mother, St. Mary. For us, we are the specific body that grew in our mother's womb. That is why both Christ and the saints are depictable in icons. According to Theodore, "Christ can be portrayed...because he is differentiated by his hypostatic [individual] properties from all other members of his species [humans]" (Theodore, [2015](#), p. 99). It is for this reason, according to Theodore, Christ can be "crucified and has a certain appearance." ([2015](#), p. 99). Bodies are the kinds of things that can suffer and be depicted, unlike the abstract idea of universal humanity, for example. Thus, Theodore argues that icons affirm the Chalcedonian Christology, namely that Christ, the person, is both fully God and fully human. Moreover, if he is fully human, he lived, died, and, most importantly, rose again in a particular body (Torrance, [2020](#), p. 90).

Yet, one may wonder whether the body remains depictable after the resurrection. After all, as noted earlier, in the scriptural tradition Christ isn't recognized by the Apostles. Here is what Theodore has to say, "Our Lord Jesus Christ became man. If he became man, as is indeed the case, you must also believe that he truly had flesh and bones, even after the resurrection." (Theodore, [2015](#), p. 84). This is just one argument among many that Theodore makes regarding Christ's embodiment after the resurrection. Thus, Torrance concludes that it is clear for Theodore, "if Christ is depictable...then he possesses all his human properties intact, only now, in the resurrected state, no longer subject to corruption." ([2020](#), p. 90). So, on this view, whatever changes occur to Christ's human body after the resurrection, it retains all the human properties it had before the resurrection.

However, one might still wonder if the retained "human properties" include the visible and thus depictable traits of the pre-resurrected body. According to Theodore, in the incarnation, Christ took on humanity in the particular body born of Mary, the Holy Theotokos. It must be this body that dies and rises again and is now Christ's heavenly body. Torrance again emphasizes that Theodore "...insists on the permanence of all the distinguishing properties of Christ's specific humanity as belonging always and forever to the person or hypostasis of the Son after his incarnation." ([2020](#), p. 90). To make himself very clear, Theodore argues that the risen Christ retains the same specific and complete physical traits, which include skin color, hair, nose, even "eyelids" (Torrance, [2020](#), p. 90). [22](#)

So, if the Studite is correct, why didn't the disciples recognize Christ after the resurrection? If one looks more closely at these passages, it appears that their inability to recognize Christ wasn't due to a change in Christ's visible characteristics. For example, in the encounter on the road to Emmaus, the text says that the apostles' eyes "were restrained." [23](#) St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, says, "This was

said not of their bodily eyes, but of their mental sight.” Chrysostom goes on to note that whether one recognizes Christ or not is a matter of preparation. For example, St. Peter recognizes him first, just as he is first to acknowledge Christ’s divinity. For St. Luke and Cleopas, it was only after the Eucharistic meal that they were prepared to recognize him. ²⁴ Thus, the gospel here seems to indicate that the inability to recognize Christ had more to do with the spiritual state of these disciples than the way Christ looked.

Thus, the claim that Christ no longer looks the same is not supported by textual evidence. In fact, Theodore even mentions that, like Christ’s visual characteristics, the extraordinary powers of Christ’s body after the resurrection are not all that dissimilar from the powers of Christ before the resurrection. For example, in his pre-resurrected state, Christ can miraculously walk on water; in his resurrected state, he can miraculously enter a room that is locked (Torrance, 2020 , p. 91). To sum up Theodore’s view, Torrance (2020 , p. 91) drives the point home:

There is a continuous refusal in Theodore to allow any sense in which Christ ‘escapes’ from his humanity, whether in terms of possessing the whole integrity of human nature in himself, or of possessing his particular individuating or hypostatic characteristics (ὁποστατικά ιδιώματα) right through his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension.

For Christ to remain human through his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, he must be depictable; to be depictable is to have a body with visual traits. That’s the Eastern Christian view of Christ’s resurrected body articulated by the Studite. With Theodore’s Christology sorted, we’re now in a position to consider whether this approach can help us determine whether Jesus Christ is a member of a minimalist race.

Minimalist races and resurrected bodies

Recall that for an individual to be a member of a minimalist race, they must have the three following traits. They must have racially salient visible characteristics, the visible traits must be inherited from a family lineage, and this lineage must link them to a specific region of the world. So let’s apply this to the resurrected Christ. Christ certainly has a lineage that connects him to a region of the world. His mother, Mary, is a Hebrew from Bethlehem. ²⁵ In the 2nd temple era, her people were simply known as Judeans. Thus, Christ was a Judean too. So the 2nd and 3rd criteria of minimalist race apply. What we get from Theodore is the view that Christ’s resurrected body retained its human traits. Thus, Christ is a Judean after the resurrection as well.

However, one might still wonder whether his visible traits are distinctively associated with a region of the world. That is, we might wonder whether Judeans looked like they were from Judea. Joan Taylor (2018) has recently argued that there is good evidence that the people of Bethlehem, Christ’s ancestral home, had visual traits typical of that region of the world at that time in history. Our best estimation of what Judeans looked like around the time of Christ is found on burial portraits in the tombs of Alexandria and in contemporary Jewish populations that settled in other parts of the Mediterranean and Middle East (Taylor, 2018 , ch. 12). Given these facts, the evidence suggests that the risen Christ is a member of a minimalist race. However, on the minimalist view, all that is meant by this designation is that Christ looks like his mother; his mother connects him to his ancestry and to the land his ancestors inhabited. So if St. Theodore the Studite’s iconophilic account of the resurrected Christ is right, Christ is a member of a race. But what should we expect of those who have fallen asleep and await resurrection in the age to come? Will they still be members of minimalist races at the resurrection? To answer this question, we need to turn to a Pauline insight.

In 1 Cor. 15, after St. Paul reports the many saw Christ after his resurrection, he goes on to write, “... Christ is risen from the dead and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” and then later, “But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits: afterward those who are Christ’s at his coming.” Paul is teaching here that Christ’s resurrected state is what the followers of Christ can expect in their resurrection. So just as Christ died as the embodied Jesus, the son of Mary, and rose with the same body, we should expect the same. This point is echoed in the writings of St. John of Damascus. The Damascene tells us that the general resurrection is “...the resurrection of the dead, and by resurrection we mean the resurrection of bodies,” and then he says, “It is, then, this very body which is corruptible and liable to dissolution, that will rise again incorruptible.” (2019, originally c. 743, bk. IV ch. 7). Our body will retain its traits, and among those traits are racially salient visible features. That is, in the resurrection, one should expect people to be members of a variety of races. Not just that they were this race or that race before the resurrection, but they will maintain their race in the glorified state as well, just as Christ does. But there is room for some confusion here. Remember, we are not talking about racialist races or even social races. The claim here is that people will maintain minimalist racial differences from this life to the next. Now some might be inclined to think that keeping these racial differences in the afterlife would be undesirable. I address this worry in the next section.

Racial homogeneity in the age to come

So why would preserving these features of embodiment be undesirable? My intuition is that it is difficult for many folks to imagine racial harmony without homogeneity. Some think that to achieve harmony, we must first have homogeneity, or if we achieve

the former, the latter naturally follows. There is a deep suspicion among many that any perceived racial difference will inevitably lead to racial tension. I hope for the opposite. True racial harmony, especially heavenly harmony, ought to be achieved not through homogeneity but as a consequence of forgiveness and reconciliation. Besides, racial homogeneity in the afterlife might come with its own type of injustice.

Already today, some want to get rid of racial distinctions altogether (D'Souza, 1995). They argue that society is better off without recognizing these kinds of differences. ²⁶ Understandably, non-White folks are suspicious that, really, if there are no racial differences, White racial identity becomes the norm. In the next life, one might have a similar worry. An afterlife without races sounds to many non-White folks like a White heaven. In fact, such suspicions are not ill-founded. Consider this remark in a sermon meant to encourage Black converts by the founder of Adventism, Ellen White, "Remembering this, you will be able to bear the trials which you meet here. In heaven there will be no color line; for all will be as white as Christ Himself. Let us thank God that we can be members of the royal family." ²⁷ I've tried to show here that, on this Eastern Christian approach, we should expect something very different from what this preacher describes. ²⁸ People will not all be White in heaven, and in fact, Christ himself is not White. Christ is a Judean, and those resurrected with Christ, will have visible traits of all sorts; they will be races of all types. I think this vision of heaven presents a moral challenge to anyone who holds views similar to Ellen White's. Allow me to explain.

If the conclusion I've argued for is correct, people will maintain their race in heaven. Renewed bodies will retain the visible physical traits in the afterlife associated with minimalist races. So we should imagine that in the kingdom of God, bodies will be different, transformed, but they will still be Black, White, Brown, etc. Here is the challenge: Anyone who can't love and live in harmony with their neighbor under these conditions is not ready for heavenly life. So if someone, like Ellen White, thinks harmony in heaven requires no color line and no color, they're not prepared for heaven. I think it would be a mistake to presume most of us would easily pass such a test. Some critical introspection and a brief overview of current events should be enough to dissuade us from this presumption. Perhaps, then, it is prudent not to wait for the afterlife to find out if one is actually ready for racial harmony in the age to come. As it turns out, we can begin to love and live in harmony with those neighbors now! We can do our best to eliminate racist practices in society, especially our own. If we are successful in this endeavor, perhaps we can see the beginning of what society might look like after racism, a post-racist world. This hopeful peek into a better future might make one wonder what significance race would have in a post-racist world. In the final section of this chapter, I consider this question by reflecting on race in heaven.

Race without racism

In contemporary discussions of race, one cannot help but confront the seemingly intransigent problem of racism. For this reason, the minimalist is quick to point out that while minimalist races are real, they shouldn't be significant to social life, and they certainly don't offer support to any racist practices. However, imagining races in heaven might give one a perspective on the significance of minimalist races without racism.

First, race in the age to come connects people to their ancestors. People have visible traits that they inherit from their mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, and so on. I find it hard to articulate philosophically why this information matters to so many of us. First, race in the age to come connects people to their ancestors. People have visible traits that they inherit from their mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, and so on. I find it hard to articulate philosophically why this information matters to so many people. But it no doubt does. If the current interest in commercial ancestry services is an indication, it matters a great deal (Copeland, 2021). Race visibly shows this connection to those who came before us. Moreover, on the view of the age to come I have argued for above, this connection is maintained not just as a matter of record or history but as part of embodied existence. Second, minimalist races connect people to geography, the land of their ancestors. Culture, ethnicity, and language, especially after the age of European colonization, don't neatly line up with geography. But minimalist races are connected to the places our ancestors lived.

Again, I have difficulty philosophically articulating why this information matters to so many people; but it undoubtedly does. As evidence, consider the current fascination with genetic geographical mapping services (Copeland, 2021). ²⁹ If the Eastern Christian perspective on the resurrection I've articulated above is right, this connection to the earth is maintained in the afterlife. Not just as a matter of historical fact, but present embodiment. I think that these two reasons why race will have significance in heaven might also apply to race in a post-racist world. In a post-racist world, race might still be significant because it connects us to our ancestors and the places our ancestors inhabited. Our minimalist race is a visible physical connection to this geo-ancestral identity. ³⁰ As I said, I have a hard time explaining philosophically why geo-ancestry matters to people. Getting to the bottom of this significance is a task worth pursuing, but beyond what this chapter can accomplish. That said, here are some of my provisional thoughts on the topic. I offer three as a down payment toward future work.

First, the importance of narrative for human psychological formation and well-being is now well-established (Bauer et al., 2008). Knowing our ancestry helps us tell our story. It's part of our origin story, as it were. Minimalist races help us form this narrative. Second, humans are a species of the earth. We live on land, work the land, walk the land, and, sometimes, move to different lands. As such, knowing the land of our ancestors helps us get a concrete sense of our connection to the earth. Minimalist races can help us figure out these connections. Lastly, *why* geo-ancestry matters might be less important than *that* it matters to some people. Because the fact that it matters might form the basis for developing, what I have called elsewhere, a practical identity (Placencia, 2010, 2021). Let's consider an example. I grew up in a town in California called Riverside. I no longer live there, but my identity as a Riversidian still matters to me. Why it matters is hard to explain. But it does. The fact that it does has practical results. I keep track of the news, politics, and events in the city. I donate to various charities in my hometown, and I try to make time to visit. In a small way, my practical life is guided by the fact that I care about being someone from Riverside, CA. Maybe something similar is going on with geo-ancestry and minimalist races. We may not have a good grasp on why it matters, and it might matter to some folks but not to others. Even so, for those that do find these things significant, there are practical ways in which these facts enrich life.

Conclusion

While still preliminary, I hope that the suggestions above are enough to give a sense of how reflecting on race in the age to come can provide insight into questions about race in the here and now. However, the central work of this chapter was to determine if there will be races in the afterlife. I have shown that there are good reasons to think that, on an Eastern Christian approach, the answer is: Yes. If we follow Torrance's reading of St. Theodore, Christ's resurrected body is visibly continuous with his pre-resurrected body. Additionally, people in the resurrection can expect to have a body like Christ's. That means if Christ retains racially salient visible traits, people in the age to come will as well. Thus, Christ is a member of a minimalist race in the afterlife, and many of those resurrected will be as well.

I've offered this conclusion as an Eastern Christian approach. But it is important to point out that Theodore's iconophilic theology is the heritage of all Christians, East and West. Roman Catholics accept the 7th Ecumenical Council as normative, and Theodore the Studite is a pre-schism saint. It is certainly true that contemporary Orthodox churches with historical ties to the East have maintained the fully immersive iconophilic spiritual and ritual traditions that Theodore championed. But these traditions are not the property of the East. In fact, we might as well say that Theodore's theology represents *classical* Christianity. From this perspective, the claim that minimalist races will exist in the age to come is not only an Eastern Christian approach, but simply the Christian view on the matter. [31](#)

Finally, I want to end with a brief reflection on a well-known and well-loved scene from chapter 7 of St. John's Apocalypse:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

One tempting way to read this passage is that the people of God in heaven are gathered from different nations, tribes, and peoples. But these differences are historical facts that are no longer relevant in the age to come. Of course, there is some truth to this interpretation. Christians are gathered together as a new people in Christ. But this doesn't mean our differences are erased. In particular, those visible physical differences that indicate our minimalist races will still be present in the age to come. They have to be for this scene to make sense. This is St. John's *vision* after all. As such, he is reporting what he sees. What about those gathered tell him they come from different tribes, nations, and peoples? If, as John writes, the congregation is clothed in white robes, it can't be the way they are dressed. Of course, the answer must be that the people he sees have distinct visible embodied differences that indicate their geo-ancestry. That is, John sees minimalist races. And so this great heavenly scene gives us a picture of the age to come in which humans have learned to live in harmony with these differences, not despite them—a post-racist world. May it be on earth as it is in heaven.

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Notes

[1](#) Sections from Placencia (2021) on Racialism, Race skepticism, and Race constructionism are used with significant modifications and additions for this chapter's material. Other sections on racial homogeneity and the moral challenge of race in heaven include some of the ideas developed in Placencia (2021). All other sections and the main conclusions of this present chapter are unique and original.

[2](#) Of course, all Christian traditions that assent to this creed hold this view of the age to come. But here, my concern is with theology in the East. In my concluding remarks, I note how the findings of this chapter might apply to the broader Christian tradition.

[3](#) For a good sample of recent work, see Zack (2019). For an excellent example of some of the arguments and counterarguments among contemporary theorists, see Glasgow et al. (2019).

[4](#) Lott and Bernasconi (2000) collected examples of these early racialist theories. Also see Bernasconi and Bernasconi (2001).

[5](#) See Mallon (2006, p. 529) and Meneses (2007, p. 36–39).

[6](#) See Hardimon (2017, p. 14).

[7](#) My rendition of the racialist theory roughly follows Hardimon's formulation (2017, p. 15–17).

[8](#) This last feature is not always included in the description of the racialist account Appiah (1992).

[9](#)

[10](#) This view is not exclusive to Eastern theology, of course. But the idea that heavenly paradise is an achievement is a distinctive theme of this tradition.

[11](#) Classic accounts of race skepticism (also called eliminativism or anti-realism) can be found in Appiah (1985, 1992), Appiah and Gutmann (1996), Zack (1993, 2002).

[12](#) See Mallon (2006, p. 529). Naomi Zack (2002) has the most exhaustive presentation of the race skeptic's arguments against the racialist and other more contemporary naturalist accounts of race.

[13](#) See Appiah (1992, p. 73). Zack makes a similar point using Irish Protestants (2002, p. 69).

[14](#) For the most exhaustive account of these reasons see Zack (2002).

[15](#) For representative constructionist accounts see Mills (1998), Haslanger (2000, 2012), and Taylor (2003).

[16](#) Gal 3:28.

[17](#) Different but related accounts of deflationary realism can be found in (Glasgow, 2009) and (Spencer, 2018a, 2018b).

[18](#) For a philosophically-informed discussion of this doctrine, see Davis (2015).

[19](#) Jn 20:16, Mt 28:9, Lk 24:13–30, Lk 24:34, Lk 24:36, Jn 20:19, Jn 20:24–29, Jn 21, Jn 20:30, Mk 16:19, Lk 24:50–53.

[20](#) Jn 20:16, Lk 24:13–30, Jn 20:24–29, Jn 21:4.

[21](#) We have at least two of his works translated into English see Theodore (1981, 2015).

[22](#) Torrance is referencing a fascinating passage from Theodore's Epistle 359 in which Theodore goes into great detail describing the depictable features of the risen Christ.

[23](#) Luke 24:16

[24](#) These comments from Chrysostom are recorded in Aquinas's *Catena Aurea* commentary on Luke 24:13–24 and 24:25–35 (2014, originally 1263)

[25](#) During the second temple era, *Ioudaios*, Latinized and translated into English as *Judean* or *Judaeian*, was the standard nomenclature to refer to the people of this region. It is both attested in the writings of the Greeks and Romans as well as Jews writing about their own region and people see Mason (2014) and Taylor (2014).

[26](#) Think of politicians and commentators who advocate for a colorblind society.

[27](#) See excerpts and critical discussion of this sermon in (Hamstra, 2019).

[28](#) I assume here that the racial designation “White” is mainly used to describe visual traits that link people to European geography. Although sometimes people from all over the Mediterranean are put in this category too. On this minimalist view of race, this is likely a mistake since the various regions of the Mediterranean have distinct visible physical traits.

[29](#) The use of biogeographical DNA technology is not without controversy see Gannett (2014).

[30](#) Thanks to Eric C. Brook for giving me the neologism “geo-ancestral identity” in his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[31](#) Thanks to Eric C. Brook for helping me clarify this point.