

Will there be races in heaven?¹

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Drawing on work in the Philosophy of Race, this chapter argues that the existence of races in heaven is either incompatible or only questionably compatible with the mainstream Christian view of the afterlife. However, it also argues that there is a phenomenon adjacent and related to race that can exist in the afterlife, namely racial identity. If one thinks of racial identity as a kind of practical identity, it turns out that racial identity is primarily psychological. Thus, its existence in heaven is compatible with the mainstream Christian view that people with some semblance of human psychology continue on after death. Furthermore, the chapter offers reasons to think that we will need racial identities in the afterlife to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation. Finally, it suggests that preserving racial identities from this life to the next is, on balance, preferable.

The question at hand, “Will there be races in heaven?” requires some clarification. First, by “heaven” I have the notion of a life that begins after biological death, an afterlife.² So the question might be better put as, “Will there be races in the afterlife?” Furthermore, the conception of the afterlife I am working with is that offered by mainstream Christianity.³ Still, the conclusions presented here might apply to alternate conceptions of heaven, especially those held by other Abrahamic faiths—many forms of Judaism and Islam, for example.

There are at least two significant features of the (mainstream) Christian conception.⁴ The first is that, in the afterlife, the continuity of persons is maintained.⁵ The second is that, in the afterlife, people will have renewed changed bodies suited to a renewed created order. The Christian tradition refers to this renewed order as “the kingdom of God.” Now even if one does not care to think much about heaven, the question might still be useful to consider for the following reasons. First, it allows one to get acquainted with current work in the Philosophy of Race. Second, but perhaps more significant, races are “of this world,” so to speak. Imagining other types of worlds, like heaven, can open up new avenues for critically

¹ Thanks to Rico Vitz, Eric Brook, and Leland Harper for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Special thanks to the participants of the 2019 BSPR conference session at which an early version of this paper was first presented.

² There is a technical use of the word “heaven” in Christian theology that indicates the stage of existence of souls after biological death but before the resurrection. I am not using the term in this way. To avoid confusion, I tend to stick with variations like, “afterlife,” “next life,” or “hereafter” and generally stay away from “heaven.” Thanks to Eric Brook for making this important point clear to me.

³ Perhaps the best known articulation of mainstream Christian beliefs is found in C.S. Lewis’ (1996) work *Mere Christianity*.

⁴ From here on I will just refer to it as the Christian tradition with the understanding that I have the mainstream variety of Christianity in mind.

⁵ As I understand it, there is no commitment to a specific metaphysical explanation of continuity, just that the person that dies biologically is the same person that is resurrected.

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assessing race in the here-and-now. Indeed, such reflections often lead us to imagine a better version of society.⁶

Along with the features noted above, Christians typically view the afterlife as a place where the people of the world live in harmony.⁷ How this harmony is achieved is not so clear. In the absence of theological consensus on this matter, I will provide some reasons to think that Christian laity (at least in the U.S.) generally hold the view that races don't exist in heaven.⁸ Further, since in the next life we are relieved of our sinful condition, on the lay view, racism does not exist either. Without race or racism, racial harmony is achieved. While this view of harmony in the hereafter is well-intentioned and quite popular, I will argue that, in light of work in the Philosophy of Race, it is not quite right. Instead, I suggest an alternative. Races might not exist in the afterlife, but racial identities do, and racial harmony in the hereafter is achieved through forgiveness and reconciliation. This argument proceeds in three stages.

First, I argue that race, in all its conceptual iterations, is either incompatible or only questionably compatible with the Christian view of the afterlife. Second, I propose that some social identities are also practical identities and these are compatible with the afterlife. Third, I then show that there is a practical identity that is also a racial identity, which is compatible with the afterlife too.

Finally, I give reasons to think that the preservation of racial identity, from this life to the next, is both required and preferable. It is required because racial identities facilitate the forgiveness and reconciliation needed to realize the vision of harmony promoted in the Christian tradition. In addition, racial identities allow one to appreciate the justice and bliss of heaven fully. This preservation is preferable, because the existence of racial identities in the afterlife avoids identity erasure and homogeneity.

Before I get started allow me to offer two disclaimers. First, the arguments offered here try to stick to some very basic notions of what the Christian tradition says about the afterlife. However, discussions of the hereafter inevitably lead to speculation regarding some matters. I ask for the reader's charity in this regard. That is, I am asking the reader to go along with some of the more speculative suggestions to make progress on the central question the paper attempts to address.

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. in "The Vision of a World Made New" reflects on how visions of heaven can inspire change in the here-and-now (2007, 181–184).

⁷ A few representative examples of this view are found in Piper (2011) and (Keller (2020) as well as Harper (2019).

⁸ Anecdotally, I have found that quite a few clergy hold this view as well.

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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.⁹ However, by necessity I must put forward versions of the various contemporary accounts of race that are somewhat skeletal. The bones are there, but only enough meat is put on the bones to assess their relevance to questions about the afterlife. To understand the contemporary accounts, we must start with a much older approach to thinking about race that all contemporary work rejects in one way or another: the racialist account of race.

Racialism

The racialist account is a product of the exuberant new “sciences” of the 1800s and Europe’s colonial aspirations.¹⁰ Today, it has been thoroughly debunked by all serious thinkers on the matter.¹¹ But for centuries prior to its demise, the racialist ideology was used as a quasi-scientific justification for the colonization, enslavement, and oppression of millions of people. It is truly a world historical idea that has cast a long, dark shadow.¹² “Failure to grasp this concept,” Hardimon warns (2017, 14), “would make understanding the last five hundred years of human history difficult, if not impossible.” So what is this account?¹³

First, the racialist stipulates that the human species is divided up into discrete subgroups. Second, the groups are marked by visible differences (such as skin color, eye shape, hair texture, and bone structure). Third, these differences are thought to be the result of a shared essence. With the rise of empirical sciences, races were typically linked to a biological foundation every member of the race shared. Later, the biological foundation was taken to be genetic. Sometimes the racialist thinks it goes ontologically deeper: it is in one’s “blood” so to speak. Moreover, this supposed biological foundation produces visible and physical differences as well as behavioral differences, such as intellectual and moral traits. The biological foundation is passed from one generation to the next, and it is linked to various regions of the world (Africa, Europe, Asia, or North and South America, for example).

⁹ For a good sample of recent work see Zack (2017). For a good example of some of the arguments and counterarguments among contemporary theorists see Glasgow et al. (2019).

¹⁰ Examples of these early racialist theories are collected in Lott and Bernasconi (2000). Also see Bernasconi and Bernasconi (2001).

¹¹ See Mallon (2006, 529) and Meneses (2007, 36–39).

¹² See Hardimon (2017, 14).

¹³ My rendition of the racialist theory roughly follows Hardimon’s formulation (2017, 15–17).

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Lastly, races are set in a hierarchy of better to worse moral character, intellectual aptitude, civilization, physical prowess, self-governance, and so on.¹⁴

As I said, this theory is false. Nevertheless, the racialist ideology still rationalizes and inspires explicit racist hate today. More insidiously, it has less noticeable effects on societies built around the racialist system. These effects cause tremendous suffering in communities of color. This suffering continues because the racialist way of thinking has become both implicit and systemic. It is implicit insofar as judgments made by folks who are not explicit racialists might still be influenced by racial stereotypes and biases promoted by racialism. Judgments of this sort continue to reinforce patterns of racism in society. It is systemic, insofar as current policies, institutions, and infrastructure were created during the era in which racialist thinking thrived.¹⁵ While people have changed, these more permanent fixtures of society have only changed slowly or not much at all. Much has been written on the topic of racism (explicit, implicit, and systemic), and I leave it to the reader to further explore.¹⁶ At this point, I want to turn to a few well-known criticisms of the racialist ideology, particularly those criticisms raised by race skeptics.

Race skepticism

Race skeptics argue that if there really are such things as races, they have some of the properties articulated by the racialist.¹⁷ In particular, according to the skeptic, if there are races they must at least have a biological foundation. However, the evidence suggests there is no such foundation.¹⁸ Two examples make this point. If the racialist is right, one would expect to find some significant genetic variation between putative racial groups. As it turns out, genetic variation is only negligibly greater between members of different races compared to members of the same race.¹⁹ So these genetic differences don't support the groupings. Besides, the skeptic argues that even if we try to make the racialist account work, it will not get us their proposed racial distinctions. The only folks that come close to meeting the criteria of the racialist are groups like the Amish.²⁰ But the Amish, according to the racialist's own

¹⁴ This last feature is not always included in the description of the racialist account Appiah (1992).

¹⁵ Think, for example, of the long-term effects of "redlining" neighborhoods.

¹⁶ See, for example, Blum (2002), Frederickson (2002), Garcia (1996), and Shelby (2016).

¹⁷ Classic accounts of race skepticism (also called eliminativism or anti-realism) can be found in Appiah (1992), Appiah and Gutmann (1996), Zack (1993, 2002).

¹⁸ See Mallon (2006, 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.

¹⁹ See Appiah (1985, 31).

²⁰ See Appiah (1996, 73). Zack makes a similar point using Irish Protestants (2002, 69). For a recent discussion of what has come to be known as the *Mismatch Objection* see Glasgow (2019, 120–124).

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account, are not a 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. For these reasons and many others, the skeptic concludes that the racialist theory is a discredited science.²¹ As such, it ought to fade into irrelevancy like phrenology and other pseudo-sciences developed in the same era.²²

So, if the race skeptics are right, will race exist in the afterlife? The answer here seems obvious. There is an ontological 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 afterlife, such that every member of each racial group shared a distinct biological foundation that differentiated their group from others. In addition, every member of these new heavenly races would need to have visible and behavioral traits caused by the new biological foundation. Finally, God would have to retroactively link each biological foundation back to distinct regions of the earth. Of course, such a redesign is nowhere indicated in the Christian tradition, and it strains credulity. Thus, we have good reason to conclude that races, as defined by the racialist, don't exist in the afterlife (at the least the mainstream Christian version).

Perhaps there are other ways to conceptualize race that the skeptic fails to consider? It turns out that for the race skeptic, this is a non-starter. They hold the view that race as a concept can't shed the racialist ideology (Appiah 1996). For this reason, it ought to be eliminated from academic discourse and, in time, political and popular discourse. Other contemporary theorists disagree. These theorists don't defend the racialist. Instead, they think that one can make sense of race without the biological foundation and ontological commitments both the racialist and the skeptic believe are built-in, as it were, to the original concept. One such view is race constructionism.²³

Race constructionism

Race constructionism agrees with many of the skeptic's criticisms of the racialist theory. However, they argue that there is an alternative account that 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 defined by the following features. This rendition of the constructionist account roughly follows Sally

²¹ For the most exhaustive account of these reasons see Zack (2002).

²² See Zack (2002, 108).

²³ For representative constructionist accounts see Mills (1998), Haslanger (2000, 2019), and Taylor (2003).

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Haslanger's (2000; 2008; 2019). First, people in some society perceive others within that society as having a set of visible physical traits. Second, the perceived traits are thought, by members of that society, to connect these people to a geographic region by an assumed lineage. Third, the perceived traits mark people as inferior or superior by others in that society. This unjust discrimination, in turn, leads to advantages or disadvantages along a number of socially salient dimensions. When these conditions are met, a group is racialized.²⁴ Some important points to add, systems of racialization may be quite different from one place to another. Racialization can shift in the same location over time. We can also imagine a world without racialization and, therefore, without races (Haslanger 2000, 51). This world might still have groups of people who share visible traits, a common history, and perhaps culture. Even so, if the visible traits don't mark them by society as inferior or superior and lead to significant social advantages or disadvantages, the group is not a race.

Now, on the constructionist view will race exist in the afterlife? Here there is an obvious social problem. The afterlife, according to Christians, is a perfected world without unjust advantages or disadvantages. It is supposed to reflect St. Paul's claim that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free man or woman.²⁵ Earthly power structures are dissolved, and humanity lives before God in peace. Since race, according to the constructionist, is essentially linked to patterns of unjust discrimination marked by visible physical traits, and there are no such patterns in the afterlife, it seems racialization can't get started. Thus, races can't exist in heaven. Interestingly, it is my sense that most Christian laity in the United States agree with the constructionist on these matters. So let's look a bit closer at lay thinking on race in heaven.

Lay theology in the United States

For the constructionist, race is an artifact of social practices. It seems to me that Christian layfolk agree insofar as they think racial categorizations are, in some sense, "made up" by society and we would all be better off without them.²⁶ In an attempt to informally confirm this hunch, I asked a number of practicing Christians from a broad spectrum of Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, conservative, and progressive denominations to engage in a version of the following thought experiment.²⁷

²⁴ Blum (2010) offers a slightly different take on racialization, but he seems to agree with Haslanger on the basics.

²⁵ Gal 3:28.

²⁶ This assessment is based on many uncomfortable conversations over the years.

²⁷ Of course, this is meant to be primarily illustrative of my hunch, not dispositive evidence.

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Suppose you believe in an afterlife. Now suppose you arrive at heaven's doors, but before you're allowed in, you must fill out a few forms. One of these looks like the U.S. census question on race. It asks you to self-identify as White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Latino/a, some other designation or none. What would you answer?

The responses collected explained that the only categorizations relevant in the next life will be "human," "child of God," or "citizen of heaven." Or folks were apt to reject such a survey as unbecoming of heaven. Jokingly, a few said such a form would prove, "I'm in hell!" As I pressed for a few explanations, it seemed quite clear that very few believed races would exist in the afterlife due to the absence of sin.

Of course, the answers offered to the thought experiment do not give us a theologically sophisticated window into Christian thinking. Still, they do give us some insight into the folk theology of U.S. Christians in 2020.²⁸ As I said, the reasoning here seems to comport well with the constructionist line of thought: races are a result of unjust discriminatory social practices. These Christians put it another way. Races exist in this life as a result of sinful practices. However, in the afterlife, we will be free of our sinful condition, and therefore race will not exist.

In so far as the responses collected reflect lay thinking on these matters, I suspect one may also conclude that many Christians are both race skeptics and race constructionists. They tacitly accept the conclusions of the race skeptic's argument that there are (ontologically) no races and tacitly accept the constructionist insight that there are still immoral racializing practices in society. The combination of the two often lends itself to a quite vehement rejection of putting people in racial groups, discrimination based on race, and, it seems, talking about race altogether. This attitude is morally admirable insofar as it is decidedly against racism. However, it tends to obfuscate current forms of racial injustice. It also fails to consider other more nuanced accounts of race, like deflationary realism, to which we currently turn.

²⁸ This group was not very diverse, so the attitudes towards race reported may be quite different among non-white Christians. For a different perspective, see the interview with The Rev. Gabriel Salguero (NPR, 2013).

Deflationary realism

The final account of race to consider is deflationary realism. Here I follow Hardimon's work (2017).²⁹ Because this approach in some ways rehabilitates the biological foundation, it makes it clear that, at the same time, it rejects the deleterious implications of the racialist account. In particular, this approach rejects any suggestion that a biological account of race implies that races have essential intellectual or moral traits. Such claims are often used by racists to justify discriminatory practices. On the deflationary account, 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.

What we call races are groups characterized by visible phenotypical differences inherited from our ancestors, who, in turn, connect us back to geographic regions. These phenotypical traits are a byproduct of migration, geographic isolation, and, later, social isolation. The isolation of the groups, at least in the past, encouraged endogamy which perpetuates the phenotypical traits.³⁰

Since we live in an era of less and less geographic and social isolation and increasing exogamy, one could argue that races no longer exist today. Even if they do, the deflationary realist encourages us not to make more of race than it is. It ought to be socially and politically irrelevant. It is only a remnant of our ancestors' migration patterns. Although it may have some relevance in various scientific investigations—medical research, for example.

On the deflationary realist account, whether race exists in the next life will depend on whether our body in that life has the same or similar visible phenotypes as our body now. On this question, the Christian view of the body in the afterlife is unclear. Christians are not Gnostics. As noted earlier, existence in the next life is not bodiless. At the same time, it is acknowledged that in the afterlife the resurrected body is transformed.³¹ Not many specifics are given on what this transformation involves. However, there are a number of examples in the Gospel tradition.³² In some of these examples, the Evangelists report that Christ, after the resurrection, was not recognized by his disciples.³³ Thus, at first glance, it seems that visible phenotypical continuity is unlikely. Upon further consideration, though, even if he was not

²⁹ Different but related accounts of deflationary realism can be found in (Glasgow 2009) and (Spencer 2018a; 2018b).

³⁰ Andreassen (2005) and Kitcher (2007) argue that there are new accounts of biological subgroups in the human species that avoid the essentialist implications of earlier biological accounts.

³¹ For a philosophically informed discussion of this doctrine see Davis (2015).

³² 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.

³³ Jn 20:16, Lk 24:13–30, Jn 20:24–29, Jn 21:4.

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recognized, Christ still looked like a man, and, it stands to reason, he still looked like a man from Nazareth. While the specific features that might be used to identify him as an individual changed, he may very well have kept the visible traits that indicate his race in the deflationary sense.

However, since we can't be sure about this latter point, I think the best assessment here is that the deflationary account of race is only questionably compatible with the mainstream Christian view of the afterlife. To make any further claims, we would need to have a more robust theological reason to think that the resurrected body preserves racially salient visible phenotypical traits of the pre-resurrected body. I have no such theological insight to help settle things here. Instead, I want to turn to a phenomenon adjacent and related to race that, I will argue, does exist in the afterlife, namely racial identity. But before we get to racial identity, I need to take a step back to consider broader issues regarding social identities.

Social identity and practical identity

Thus far we have discussed race, but race is just one among many social identities. Social identities are any socially salient classifications that appropriately apply to a person. They include sister, father, Canadian, Lebanese, nurse, professor, etc. These identities map out the landscape of our social life and are integral to our personal development. There are interesting discussions to be had about what aspects of these social connections continue on in the afterlife.³⁴ That said, I want to focus on a special variety of social identities. Not all social identities matter to a given individual in the same way. I may not care that I can be legitimately classified as, say, a North American. But I may care deeply about being a Californian. So some classifications matter to an individual more than others, and some that matter might further operate as a *practical identity* (Korsgaard 1996, 2008, 2009).³⁵

A practical identity is a description of a normatively defined pattern of life with which an agent identifies and from which an agent finds reasons to act. The use of the term “identity” in this context can be a bit confusing. It differs from what we called “social identities” above and its traditional use in metaphysics.³⁶ Talk of practical identity can be found in some

³⁴ My development of practical identities focuses mainly on those social classifications an individual identifies with. But even if one doesn't identify with some social classification in this life, it still might be a relevant social identity to be maintained in the next life.

³⁵ As far as I can tell, the first philosophical use of “practical identity” is found in Korsgaard (1996). While I'm indebted to her work for introducing the term and some of its conceptual framework, I'm not presenting the account offered here as a development of her notion.

³⁶ For a discussion of how practical identity differs from metaphysical concerns about personal identity over time see (Matheson 2017) and (Atkins and Mackenzie 2010)

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discussions of moral agency (Watson 1996). The focus here is on human action. Whether or not we have criteria for determining the identity of a person at a time or over time, she still must act. And some of her actions will be motivated by thoughts about the kind of person she is and the kind of person she wants to be. These descriptions give her reasons to act. Likewise, whether or not it can be determined which social classifications can be legitimately ascribed to her, she still must act. And some of these actions will be motivated by descriptions of how she believes she fits into the social world. Furthermore, she might *identify* with some of these descriptions, and, thus, take ownership of the project of becoming the type of person described.³⁷ For example, take being a professor.

On the one hand, a professor is a description defined by a set of norms that articulate a pattern of what a professor does and does not do. On the other hand, if a person identifies with this description, these norms give her reasons to act. She must, for example, get the appropriate credentials, prepare for courses, contribute to her field, present papers at conferences, and so on. In this sense, the description with which she identifies, professor, acts as a telos for some of her actions. Actions are directed at *becoming* the person described or *maintaining* her status as a person who fits the description.

Notice that there is no ontological or social barrier preventing a practical identity from existing in the afterlife. It is psychological, not (primarily) biological or social. Also, according to the mainstream Christian account, persons with a psychology that have some semblance to our psychology in this life will exist in the next life. Thus, if a racial identity can be thought of as a practical identity, it would be compatible with the afterlife too. So now, we will need an account of racial identity. For that we turn to Kwame Anthony Appiah's work.

Racial identity as practical identity

Appiah's work on race has a negative project and positive project. On the negative side, he is a race skeptic (Appiah 1993; Appiah and Gutmann 1996). There are no races on Appiah's view; there are only *racial identities*. Explicating the notion of a racial identity constitutes his positive project (2007). Racial identity is not, first of all, biological or social. Still, that is not to say that our biology (particularly visible physical traits) and social environment don't contribute to racial identity formation. According to Appiah, here is how it works (2007).

³⁷ The paradigm cases of identification are usually set up as products of self-reflection. But I have argued elsewhere that identification with social classifications can occur without self-reflectiveness awareness, see (Placencia 2010).

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People identify with racial labels. No theory of race underwrites these labels. They are a result of social practices with complex histories. Also, there are social rules associated with the labels such that, if one is ascribed X (some racial label), one must have a certain set of (usually visible) traits and one must do what X's are supposed to do or not to do. It should be made clear that, according to Appiah, the fact that these rules exist does not mean that they deserve our approval (2007). Some of the rules that define a label might be morally suspect and damaging to those so labeled; others might be morally salutary or benign. Furthermore, over time, the norms that define a particular label might change. What is constitutive of these labels is that rules specify how a person who is labeled in a certain way ought to look and act. When we identify with racial labels that are defined by rules in this way, it seems we identify with a description of a normatively defined pattern of life. Identifying with such a description typically leads to action. Thus, we can think of Appiah's *racial identity* as a *practical identity* described above. Racial identity, of this sort, stands alongside and intersects with other practical identities, like those associated with our professional life, family life, civic life, political party, gender, and others. All of these identities serve as sources of reasons to direct our lives toward the end of either becoming the kind of person described by the practical identity or maintaining it.

Now we already established that practical identity, since it is psychological, is compatible with the afterlife.³⁸ Given that we can also conceive of Appiah's racial identity as a kind of practical identity, it ought to be easy to see how it is also compatible. For it to exist in the afterlife, all one needs to hold is that the next life will be the kind of place where persons with some semblance of human psychology exist. Unlike the racialist account of race, there is no ontological problem, and unlike the constructionist account of race, there is no social problem. Racial identity can exist in the afterlife. Whether or not it *will* exist is another question. Let me give some reasons to think it will.

Will there be racial identity in the afterlife?

Let me be clear. I don't have an argument to *prove* that racial identities will exist in the afterlife. Nevertheless, I want to offer some reasons to think that it is *likely* they will exist and some additional reasons to think that the preservation of racial identities from this life to the next is *preferable*. Remember, this question is about racial identities that are practical

³⁸ Matheson (2017) claims that our practical identity, if maintained in the afterlife, will lead to boredom. I don't think I agree with him on this point, but his argument assumes that practical identities are *compatible* with continuation versions of the afterlife. So, on that we agree.

identities. We already established that racist races will not exist in the afterlife; neither will races constructed by the racialization of groups. The question is when we get to the next life, will some folks still *identify* with some racial descriptor or another?

Given that humans with a semblance of human psychology will exist, and in most Christian accounts our translation from this life to the next maintains some psychological continuity, it is reasonable to suppose that some people will still identify with a racial descriptor like White, Black, Asian, etc. Just like it is reasonable to suppose that many people will still identify with practical identities associated with their professional life, family life, and civic life.

As it turns out, the continuation of some practical identities would seem to be required to experience the harmony of the afterlife. If, for example, a mother and an estranged son meet, part of the hoped-for harmony is that forgiveness and reconciliation can occur in the absence of sin. Except how will the mother and son be reconciled, if neither identifies as mother or son? If one is, say, a nurse in this life and tried to do well in his vocation, part of the bliss of the afterlife will be hearing from God, “job well done!” If one does not still identify with being a nurse in the afterlife, then it is not clear how this is possible.

Likewise, part of the afterlife’s racial harmony will need to be achieved through forgiveness and reconciliation.³⁹ However, it is hard to imagine this occurring without at least racial identities. The racial oppressor and the oppressed are reconciled by offering and accepting forgiveness. If no one in the afterlife identifies with the races that were oppressed or the races that did the oppressing, the parties needed would not be present.

Setting aside problems related to forgiveness, one might also wonder how the recognition and appreciation of racial justice would work in a world in which no one identifies with any racial descriptors. If, for example, a person who identified in this life as Black gets to the afterlife and experiences the new harmony of races, how will she appreciate this bliss if her racial identity is not preserved? Racial harmony would not seem to matter as much unless some people still identify with a race.

So those are some reasons to think racial identity will be preserved. Further, I also think that preservation is preferable. Without racial identity, thought of in the practical identity sense, the harmony of the afterlife would come at the cost of racial identities that were oppressed on earth and now erased in heaven. The fight against racism is not a fight against racial identity. Instead, its goal is to make a world where one is free to have a racial identity without fear that

³⁹ For a discussion of the possibility of forgiveness in heaven see (Byerly 2017).

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maintaining it will come with some societal cost. Sadly, if racial identity is not preserved in the afterlife, this work will not be realized. Moreover, the erasure of racial identity in the afterlife might come with its own type of injustice. Already today some want to get rid of racial identity altogether (D'Souza, 1995). They argue that we are better off without them.⁴⁰ Understandably, non-White folks are suspicious that, really, if there are no racial identities, White racial identity becomes the norm. In the next life, one might have a similar worry. An afterlife without any racial identities just sounds to many non-White folks like a White heaven.⁴¹

For these reasons, I think the preservation of racial identity in the afterlife is preferable. It seems preferable that some of us in the next life still identify with the racial descriptors available to us in this life. However, this need not be permanent. Even in this life racial identities change over time, and they change when we move into new communities with different schemes of naming this race or that race. Furthermore, if one assimilated to a community in which there were no racial naming schemes, then you could imagine one's racial identity slowly fading due to irrelevance.⁴² One could imagine such changes in the afterlife as well. In particular, one could imagine that racial identities, like many of our other practical identities, may no longer be sustainable in the kingdom of God. I might arrive in the afterlife with the practical identities of a father, professor, Latino, and so on. However, with time, these identities might naturally fade under these new conditions.

Now some might be inclined to think that racial identities in the afterlife are not preferable, whether or not they fade away. But what would be so bad about folks preserving this part of their psychology along with the other practical identities that might be preserved? My hunch here is that it is difficult to imagine racial harmony without homogeneity. So we 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 out there that any perceived racial difference, even if it is just in our psychology, will inevitably lead to racial tension. I hope for the opposite. True racial harmony, especially heavenly harmony, ought to be achieved not through erasure and homogeneity, but as a consequence of forgiveness and reconciliation.

⁴⁰ Think of politicians and commentators who advocate for a colorblind society.

⁴¹ It seems this worry is not unfounded. This vision of heaven was advocated by Ellen G. White, preacher, author, and founder of Seventh Day Adventism. In a sermon that was meant to comfort those who were suffering under segregation, she told parishioners to look forward to heaven because there we will all be White (Hamstra 2019).

⁴² Thanks to Leland Harper for this point.

Conclusion

So, will there be races in heaven? It depends. First, it depends on what is meant by “heaven.” My answer to the question explicitly addresses the mainstream Christian view of the afterlife, namely a life after biological death in which people maintain psychological continuity, have transformed bodies, and live in harmony with one another in a new, just world (the kingdom of God). While my answer is designed for this view, it might also apply to other religious traditions that have similar notions of heaven—most forms of Judaism and Islam. With that cleared up, now the answer depends on one’s account of race. If you are a race skeptic, the answer is clearly: no. Races don’t exist in this life, so we would not expect to find them in the next life. If you are a race constructionist, again, the answer is: no. Races are the result of unjust practices of racialization, and since in the afterlife such unjust practices will not exist, race will not exist. If you are a deflationary realist, the answer is: maybe. Since humanity has renewed resurrected bodies in the afterlife, whether or not deflationary realist races exist will depend on what these transformed bodies are like. Christians, as far as I can tell, don’t have definitive theological guidance on this matter, so the question can’t be satisfactorily answered.

That is the answer to the question as originally stated. However, I have argued that there is something adjacent and related to race that is much more likely to exist in heaven, namely racial identity. Racial identity is a psychic phenomenon produced when people identify with racial descriptors and follow the norms associated with those labels. Since a racial identity (taken as a practical identity) is psychological, there is nothing about the afterlife, either ontologically or socially, that would rule out its existence. So there are reasons to think it is *possible* for racial identities to exist in the afterlife, and there are additional reasons to think that they *will*. Racial identities are, arguably, required to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation, and they allow one to recognize and appreciate the justice and harmony of the kingdom of God. Finally, I suggested that the preservation of racial identities is preferable. Without racial identities, the transition from this life to the next would result in the erasure of oppressed racial identities and the homogenization of heavenly existence. Given these results, if we were to ask a slightly different question, “Will there be *racial identities* in heaven?” my answer is: yes (or at least it is highly likely).

As an addendum to this conclusion, I want to briefly introduce two ways that thinking about race in heaven might give us insight into the here-and-now. First, as an optimist, I hope for a future without racializing practices. If you are a skeptic about race this is a welcomed

result—societal practices will finally reflect the truth about the human condition. If you are a race constructionist, since race is constituted by racializing practices, you think that this is the end of race itself. If you are a deflationary realist, races (deflationary realist races) will remain, but they will occupy an appropriate place of relevance in society. But what about racial identities? I think here we can draw some of the same conclusions we drew about racial identities in heaven. Specifically, we might still need racial identities, at least to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation between oppressors and the oppressed. So my suggestion, that needs further development elsewhere, is that even if race and racialization, as we know it, is eliminated, racial identities might still be required.

Second, thinking about race in heaven might test our preparedness for a certain version of the afterlife and give us direction on how to live in this life.⁴³ Suppose the deflationary realist is right. That is, suppose race just is visible phenotypical traits that link us back, by ancestry, to different parts of the world. There is no biological foundation, there are no racial essences, and not all people that live today are part of one race or another. Still, for some of us, our bodies have visible traits that can be traced back to geographical regions. Some of us have traits that link us to Europe, some to the Americas, some to Asia, East Asia, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, or North Africa. And many of us have ambiguous traits, like yours truly.

Recall that on the Christian view in the afterlife people will have transformed bodies, like Christ's after the resurrection. Now imagine that our renewed bodies retain the visible physical traits in the afterlife associated with deflationary realist races.⁴⁴ In this thought experiment, then, we are to imagine that in the kingdom of God our bodies will be different, transformed, but we will still be Black, White, Brown, etc.

Here is the test: Anyone who can't love and live in harmony with their neighbor under these conditions is not ready for at least this version of the afterlife. I think it would be a mistake to presume we would easily pass such a test. Some critical introspection and a brief overview of current events is enough to dissuade us from this presumption. Perhaps, then, it is prudent to not wait for the afterlife to find out if we are actually ready for this variety of heavenly existence. As it turns out, we can begin to love and live in harmony with those neighbors now!

⁴³ A version of this thought experiment was suggested to me in a conversation with Alethia Placencia.

⁴⁴ As I mentioned earlier, on the Christian view, there is some reason to think that our resurrected body might have such traits. Christ's followers did not recognize him after the resurrection, but it is reasonable to assume that he still had the visible traits of a man from Nazareth.

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