

The Dybbukast

Season 3, Guest Episode: "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages"

Transcription

Host Aaron Henne: This is Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. Welcome to *The Dybbukast*.

I'm excited to announce that, beginning in February and going through June, we will be offering a five episode series presented in collaboration with The Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, also known as the NEJS, at Brandeis University. Each episode in the series will feature a scholar from the NEJS discussing a text from their area of study. The series will explore pieces of writing from a variety of places and time periods. As is standard for *The Dybbukast*, the scholarship that is offered will be intercut with readings of the selected texts by actors from theatre dybbuk.

While we prepare for the release of that series, we are taking an opportunity to share with you something we discovered as we researched topics connected to our next theatrical project.

In May, we'll be premiering a new live show that investigates Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and uses it as a vehicle to explore issues connected to race, identity, and power in our world. You can learn more about our *Merchant* project on the "in development" page on our website, theatredybbuk.org. As part of our process for developing this new work, we came across some fascinating information in a podcast from the American Academy of Religion titled "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages" which features a conversation with Dr. Geraldine Heng.

In the episode, Dr. Kristian Petersen interviews Dr. Heng, who talks about obstacles in conceptualizing race in premodernity and the evidence for racialized thinking in the European medieval period.

We hope you find the podcast as informative as we did.

And Now: "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages"
A Conversation with Dr. Geraldine Heng



Host Kristian Petersen: Welcome to Religious Studies News. I'm your host Kristian Peterson. Today, I'm here with Geraldine Heng, professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Texas at Austin, and winner of the AAR Book Award in historical studies. She's here to speak to us about her book, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, published with Cambridge University Press. Congratulations and thanks for joining me, Geri. How are you?

Dr. Geraldine Heng: Thanks very much. I'm well, Kristian. Lovely to have a conversation with you.

Kristian: This is great. Your book, you really, I think, hit the key task of a comparative work in the sense that I really could see this book stimulating and motivating further conversation and giving us a model of how to examine the tendencies and patterns of race-making, especially as it relates to religious communities. I'm excited to talk to you, and congratulations on writing such a wonderful book. Now, can you start a little bit with how this project emerged for you? You write about this in the book, that this is a very long process. And then as the book started to take shape for you, can you tell us what are some of the broader conceptual interventions you were hoping to accomplish with the book?

Geraldine: Actually, the process is longer than I specify in the book. The book took 12 years to write, but conceptualizing pre-modern race took very much longer. I've been working on pre-modern race since the 1990s. My first book, *Empire of Magic*, actually has a couple of chapters where I begin to think about how to understand and conceptualize race in a period that wasn't modern, where the magisterial discourse governing race wasn't science, but religion. I began initially because I was in many conversations in critical race studies. My good friend, David Theo Goldberg, is very, very prominent in critical race studies. He created a series of conversations, workshops, conferences, and residential groups at the University of California Humanities Research Institute.

One of the things I noticed in critical race theory is that the understanding of race is that it is a phenomenon belonging only to the modern periods. Modernity is defined anything from the early modern period, meaning the 16th and 17th centuries, all the way to today. There've been lots of explanations for the so-called origin of race in modernity. There's plantation and chattel slavery, that's a very important moment in

racial formation. There's been colonization, Europe's maritime empires of the 16th centuries all the way through to the 20th century. There've been class struggle, if you read Michel Foucault, as a type of matrix of race. Industrial Western capitalism as a matrix for the formation of racial thinking, racial practices. What seemed to be lacking was a longer history of race than just the modern period.

Premodernity and the medieval period, which is my scholarly background, is so different from the modern periods in terms of its economics, in terms of its social organization, in terms of its world views. It took a long time to conceptualize what race might look like in premodernity. What was helpful was that I looked at all the archives that were insufficiently read in the premodern period, and I kept seeing signs that we would identify as racial today if they were to recur.

For example, Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 specifying that Jews and Muslims had to wear a badge to mark them off from not ... not a badge, a difference of dress to mark them off from Christians at a glance. It became a badge in England in 1218. England was the first nation to specify what kind of difference of dress had to be produced. So, there was a badge. Using England as a case history, I discuss the Jewish badge.

For instance, I discuss the herding of people into special towns where they could be monitored and put under surveillance; first, for economic reasons and then later, for more social reasons, like whom they could marry, what kinds of jobs they could have, how they could interact with or not interact with Christians. And then the kinds of stories that began to circulate, and then to be ascribed to a whole population of peoples, like what's called the ritual murder libel, that Jews needed to periodically torture and kill little Christian children, especially boys, to reenact the killing of Christ, the deicide of Christ. And what's called the blood libel, where Jews are said to need the blood of these Christian children for their rituals, or to replace the blood loss that Jewish men suffered by uncontrollable bleeding, as if they were women, as if they were menstruating women.

I looked at documents that said Jews had a special smell, a stench, or they had a special face, or they had horns and a tail; both somatic differences as well as sociocultural differences. Differences of religion, religious differences. And then how they were herded into particular towns, and eventually by 1275, how a statute told

them that they could not live among Christians at all. I see this as the beginnings of the ghetto.

How also in England, a special branch of government was created, called the Exchequer of the Jews, just to monitor Jewish lives; originally for tax purposes, but later for all kinds of other things, intruding into every aspect of Jewish lives. I thought, you look at all these practices and these phenomena, the pogroms and the judicial killings of Jews for these lies, like ritual murder, wouldn't we say today, if they occurred today, that these are the signs of race, the marks of race? And if we would, then what is preventing us from calling these things, these phenomenon, these practices, these kinds of thinking, racial in the medieval period in, in premodernity?

Does the word race have to occur before there are racial practices and racial actions or racial phenomena? I think not. I think that sometimes the phenomena, the institutions, the actions happen before there is an adequate vocabulary to identify them, to name them, and to discuss them. But I had to convince people. I had to convince critical race theorists, some of whom have now been convinced since the book was published in 2018, and some of whom use the book in teaching their courses, and I also had to convince premodernists that the notion of race had traction in premodern periods. It began by looking at the archives and then by conceptualizing a longer history of race so that we don't have truncated understanding of the racial that only begins in modernity.

Kristian: This is a great spot to think about this idea of race because you articulate this, I think, in unique ways or unexpected ways for some readers. You talk about race and race making, which is an important part of this, and I think you expand the markers or the ways of race making, so in the sense of thinking about it as in a religious context. You talk about it as a cartographic context, epidermal of course. Can you help us think about what does and race making mean in your work? How might people that might have an everyday thinking about the idea of race, how might they come into tension with your definition of race and race making?

Geraldine: I don't see race as a content, a substantive content. I see race as a sorting mechanism. I see it as a structural relationship for the management of human differences. I have a definition of race in the book. I think of race as an important name for a repeating tendency to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are then selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental in order to

distribute powers and positions differentially to human groups. This is a definition that would be acceptable in critical race theory today. It's not a naive definition because it assumes both these somatic physiological forms of race-making, as well as the socio-cultural, the ideological, the religious forms of race-making.

Now, as you know, the magisterial discourse of the European Middle Ages is religion. It is not science, as it is for the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The magisterial discourse of religion makes religion amenable to the facilitation of race-making. Jews, of course, are one example. The Jews of England were expelled in 1290, in the first expulsion in Western Europe. The badge, the expulsions, the pogroms, the lies told, the stories told about Jews that define them as an entire population of God killers and child killers, and the creation of a bureaucracy to monitor them, these were racial mechanisms, a kind of racial signature on the lives of medieval Jews. Jews weren't the only people racialized in the medieval period. My book covers Muslims and Africans and Native Americans and Mongols and the Romani as well.

Muslims were a particularly interesting case, I know you're an Islamic studies scholar. The medieval period saw the creation of a name for Muslims that told a lie about them in the course of describing them and defining them as liars. The word is Saracens, Saracene. Saint Jerome told a story about Arabs that later got ramified into a description of Muslims after the seventh century; a story in which Arabs, and then later Muslims, lie that they are the descendants of Sarah, the legitimate wife of Abraham rather than Hagar, the bond woman and the concubine, because they were ashamed of their origins.

This is a really ingenious lie because it defines a whole population of very diverse heterogeneous peoples through their religion. It is really quite ingenious, right? There were many kinds of Muslims in the medieval period from different regions, different countries, different ethnicities, they spoke different languages. There were vastly different and yet Western European writers, outside the contact zones of the Mediterranean, were able to describe them by one name, Saracens, that told a lie about them while defining them at the same time as liars.

Of course, medieval Jews were ensconced in all the cities of Europe because of the nature of their livelihoods. They were the bankers of Europe; they were the financiers of Europe. But medieval Muslims were the international enemy with whom Christendom was in competition for territory, for political, military, ideological, spiritual supremacy.

The medieval period has sometimes been said to be like the period of the problem of Islam because it has a long history of confrontation, that we call today the history of the Crusades, in which there was international holy war.

Now, I don't know if people know this, but Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint Bernard, who co-wrote the rule for the monastic order of the Templars, actually also defined Muslims in such a way as to prevent the killing of Muslims from being considered heinous and a moral problem. He said, for example, that the killing of Muslims wasn't really homicide, the killing of fellow humans, but malicide, the extermination of evil that has been incarnated and personalized in human form. It was okay then for him to exhort Christians to extirpate from the face of the earth the enemies of the Christian name, because you weren't really killing fellow humans then, you were just killing evil incarnated.

There are lots of ways in which different peoples were racialized, and different kinds of stories were told about them; stories that defined them as liars and as heretics, or as pagans when they were monotheists, and then attributed moral qualities to the people who are so defined. With Africa, for example, Saint Jerome, the same church father responsible for the definition of Muslims as Saracens. Saint Jerome also said that black is the color of sin and therefore Ethiopia, a country of black people, was a country of sinners. Sin became, in time, colorized. Black became the color of sin, the color of damnation, and then the color of devils, the color of demons.

A wonderful art historian, Madeline Caviness has suggested that Christian Europeans began seeing themselves as white some time in the middle of the 13th century. Up to that point, she suggests flesh tones in medieval art depicted a range of color: pinkish, tannish, creamish, and so on. But she says from the middle of the 13th century onwards, whiteness became the color of Christian European identity. It arose to become definition of identity.

This is very interesting because opposed to blackness, sin, is whiteness, which represented sanctity and salvation and purity. Eventually, various documents, medieval encyclopedias, medieval treatises began to pontificate on whiteness and on blackness as definitional terms for whole populations of people. Bartholomew, the Englishman, has an encyclopedia in which he says that hot lands produce black peoples and cold lands produce white peoples. Now, this is a climate theory that descends through the medieval period from antiquity, but then he moralizes what that means. He says the

white people from cold lands are strong and brave because whiteness is a marker of inner courage. Whereas the people from Africa possessing black faces and short bodies and crisp hair are cowards at heart and guileful.

Color becomes moralized, racialized. It's not just color as different, but color bearing particular kinds of religious meanings, ethical meanings. There is a treatise called the *Cursor Mundi* in which people turn from black to white, and then after they kiss rods that will be blessed by Moses. And then in this case, the text says whiteness is the color of nobility and noble bloodline. So, white becomes the color of class as well. What does that make black?

On the one hand, it might seem to people like this is just a kind of form of colorism. But by the end of the 12th century and all through the 13th and after, the blackness becomes associated not just with hermeneutic Africans, but with real bodies. There are these wonderful volumes called *Image of the Black in Western Art*, or medieval art. From the late 12th century through the 13th and onwards, you start to see black Saharan Africans depicted as the killers of John the Baptist or as the torturers of Christ. The color becomes attached to physiognomy, physiology, somatic features, faces. So, not only are these people sinners, but these people are the torturers of Christ and the killers of the Baptist.

Obviously, this is highly problematic and there is a strong racialized discourse about color in the medieval period. But color in the medieval period is also very interesting to theologians and the church fathers, who are very witty and who are very erudite and they are interested in play upon color. I have part of a chapter in the book that talks about how blackness, although it is the color of evil, sin, damnation, devils, demons, and so on, when color is laid upon a holy figure, like a black Saint Maurice of Magdeburg, this is a sandstone statue that was suddenly depicted as a black Saharan Africa in the 13th century, after a million years in which he was color free; nobody thought about his color or his race.

When blackness is laid upon a holy figure, someone who is a saint, or the Virgin Mary, the Black Virgin, or a holy figure like a saint ... a much admired figure like Balthazar, one of the magi, one of the three magi. When color is laid upon someone like that, it functions differently. It enables a penitent, a Christian, to look at the sainted figure and think, "Huh, even someone who is the color of sin can be saved and can in fact be a

saint. That means there's hope for me as well, even though I am a sinful person and a sinner."

Blackness can serve in very interesting paradoxical contexts in the medieval period. There is no doubt that there is a virulent, aggressive discourse, a negative discourse on color and on Africa and Africans in the medieval period. But on the other hand, when blackness is laid upon and attached to a holy figure, it can shelter in some ways and reassure and comfort, and produce a context of reassurance for a Christian penitent. It's a fascinating discourse.

Kristian: This is a large book and there's so much more to it. You have several chapters where religion is a through line, but not the central focus on Native Americans and Mongols and the Romani, so people will certainly have to track this book down to find out more. Before I let you go, I'm wondering if you could just reflect on how you think others in the study of religion might benefit from reading the book.

Geraldine: Well, I think the book is useful in the sense that it supplies a variety of examples. It doesn't just talk about race as one thing; skin color, or physiology, anatomy. It talks about race not having a specific content per se. I think it's useful if you were to think of race as a sorting mechanism. It doesn't have to have a permanent content. It is a means by which people can go into racialization and out of racialization. What's useful is I think the book points to, points in the direction of, why people are racialized. Why a particular set of peoples at a particular time in a particular context is sorted out as different in absolutely fundamental ways; as absolutely different, as fundamentally different. And why that happens, and what are the gains from that kind of description of them as racial.

I'm a Europeanist, so all my examples are European examples, but I think for example if I were an Indologist, someone who works on India, I would be interested in how the caste system functions, and how the internecine conflicts between Hindus and Muslims function. Are there virtual racists created through religion in India, for example. There's a book by Bruce Hunt on Africa that talks about the modern period, but suggest how at a particular moment in time, Berbers who ... Berbers racialize black Saharan Africans as absolutely and fundamentally different from them because Berbers could trace their religious affiliations through so-called invented Arabic genealogies, Arab genealogies. Because they were Arabized and because they were Islamized, they were able to distinguish themselves from the Saharan Africans who were then racialized.

If we see the sorting mechanism as a racial mechanism, race as a structural relationship rather than a fixed content, a permanent content, I think we can then incorporate racial analysis into all kinds of work, including work in religious studies. That's a take away I'd love people to have, if that's possible.

Kristian: Yeah. I mentioned this in the beginning, I think you do set up a new conversation, and I hope others will continue the work you've done. Especially in these other contexts, I could certainly see it being valuable in a global scale. Well, thank you for making the time to talk about this wonderful book and congratulations again.

Geraldine: Thank you so much. This has been a lovely conversation.