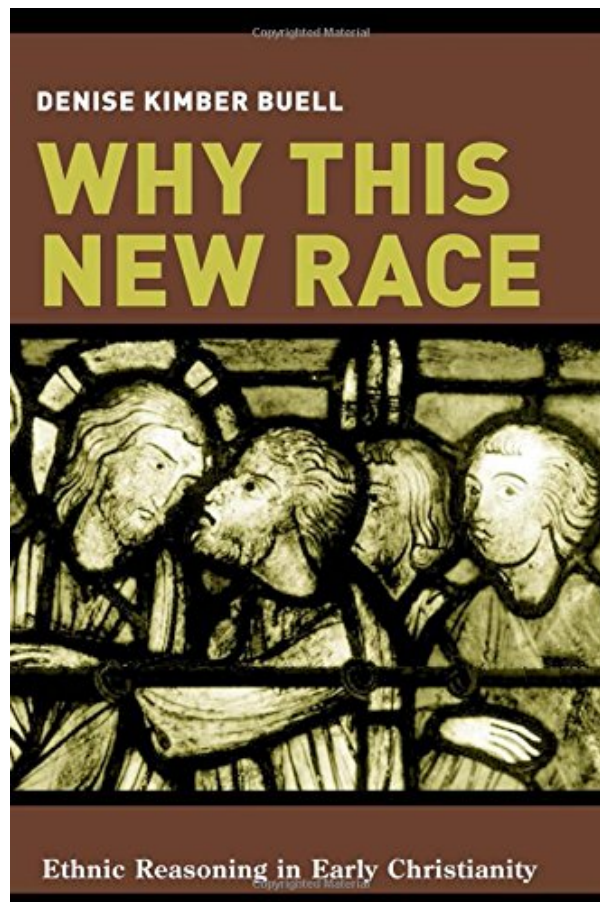
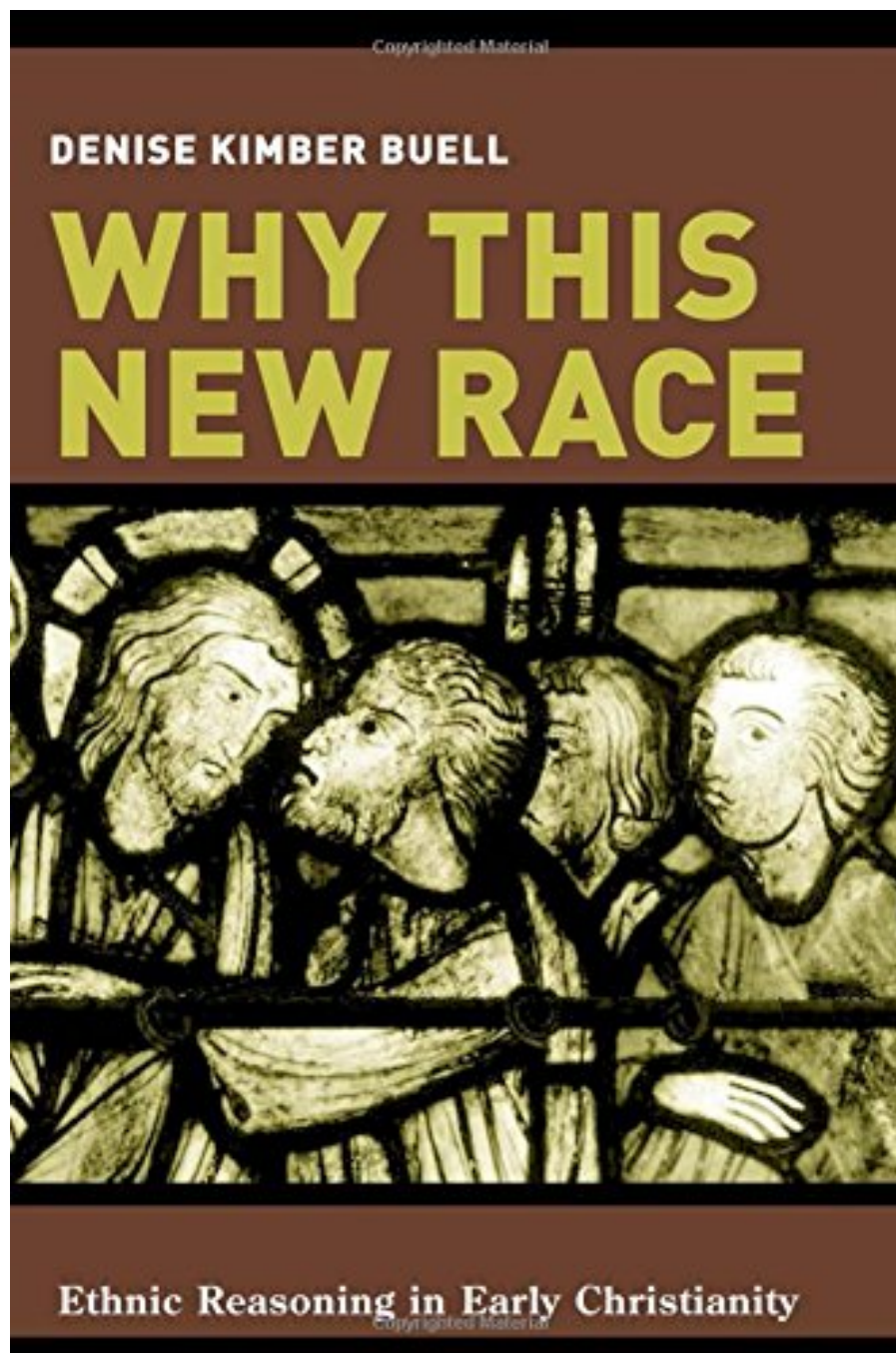


# **WHY THIS NEW RACE: ETHNIC REASONING IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY BY D. BUELL**



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## Review

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## Recommended.

(Choice)

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(Vincent L. Wimbush, Claremont Graduate University, author of *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*)

Why This New Race is a stunning contribution to the history of Christianity. Buell masterfully demonstrates how ethnic reasoning permeates early Christian theology and identity formation. She shows how Christian claims to universalism did not exclude particularistic claims to peoplehood which set boundaries between insiders and outsiders, orthodox and heretics. A must-read for anyone interested in the problematic intersections of Christianity, race, and religion in antiquity and the modern world.

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## About the Author

Denise Kimber Buell is professor of religion at Williams College and the author of *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy*.

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Why This New Race offers a radical new way of thinking about the origins of Christian identity. Conventional histories have understood Christianity as a religion that from its beginnings sought to transcend ethnic and racial distinctions. Denise Kimber Buell challenges this view by revealing the centrality of ethnicity and race in early definitions of Christianity. Buell's readings of various texts consider the use of "ethnic reasoning" to depict Christianness as more than a set of shared religious practices and beliefs. By asking themselves, "Why this new race?" Christians positioned themselves as members of an *ethnos* or *genos* distinct from Jews, Romans, and Greeks.

Buell focuses on texts written before Christianity became legal in 313 C.E., including Greek apologetic treatises, martyr narratives, and works by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian. Philosophers and theologians used ethnic reasoning to define Christians as a distinct people within classical and ancient Near East society and in intra-Christian debates about what constituted Christianness. Many characterized Christianness as both fixed and fluid—it had a real essence (fixed) but could be acquired through conversion (fluid). Buell demonstrates how this dynamic view of race and ethnicity allowed Christians to establish boundaries around the meaning of Christianness and to develop universalizing claims that all should join the Christian people.

In addressing questions of historiography, Buell analyzes why generations of scholars have refused to acknowledge ethnic reasoning in early Christian discourses. Moreover, Buell's arguments about the importance of ethnicity and religion in early Christianity provide insights into the historical legacy of Christian anti-Semitism as well as contemporary issues of race.

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Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy. She lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent research, rich, and thought-provoking

By Collin Braun

Professor Buell's work is a fascinating exploration of the beginnings of Christian conceptions of race and ethnicity and serves as a unique reminder how ancient constructions affect our understanding of each other today.

2 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Ethnicity and Race in First Century Christianity

By Michael A. Smith

Buell is without a doubt a good scholar and her thesis is both interesting and provocative. The major problem with this book is the writing. I can attribute the problems in reading and understanding to a decisive postmodern penchant for words, with little concern for meaning. In fact, the author gives no definitions, and the reader is forced to engage in a lot of skillful mining of the material to find the kernel of truth hidden away. I cannot help but give an example of what I mean.

"The conceptualization that I have adopted in this book of race and ethnicity as being characterized by both fixity and fluidity suits the prismatic approach because it highlights the shape-shifting instantiations of these complexly interrelated concepts without insisting that they have any intrinsic essence." (p. 168).

In the end the question is one of consistency and clarity. While she makes every effort to dissolve boundaries, many of the examples she uses, like Martyr and others, do their best to erect boundaries, and very clearly define both Jews and Christians in racial and ethnic terms. Her answer is to reject a metaphorical reading of those who disagree. After such a wordy and detailed treatment the reader is left wondering if her effort was worth the time and expense.

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