



## **The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race**

*Willie James Jennings*

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Why has Christianity, a religion premised upon neighborly love, failed in its attempts to heal social divisions? In this ambitious and wide-ranging work, Willie James Jennings delves deep into the late medieval soil in which the modern Christian imagination grew, to reveal how Christianity's highly refined process of socialization has inadvertently created and maintained segregated societies. A probing study of the cultural fragmentation—social, spatial, and racial—that took root in the Western mind, this book shows how Christianity has consistently forged Christian nations rather than encouraging genuine communion between disparate groups and individuals.

Weaving together the stories of Zurara, the royal chronicler of Prince Henry, the Jesuit theologian Jose de Acosta, the famed Anglican Bishop John William Colenso, and the former slave writer Olaudah Equiano, Jennings narrates a tale of loss, forgetfulness, and missed opportunities for the transformation of Christian communities. Touching on issues of slavery, geography, Native American history, Jewish-Christian relations, literacy, and translation, he brilliantly exposes how the loss of land and the supersessionist ideas behind the Christian missionary movement are both deeply implicated in the invention of race.

Using his bold, creative, and courageous critique to imagine a truly cosmopolitan citizenship that transcends geopolitical, nationalist, ethnic, and racial boundaries, Jennings charts, with great vision, new ways of imagining ourselves, our communities, and the landscapes we inhabit.

## The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race Details

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## **From Reader Review The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race for online ebook**

### **James Smith says**

A book this is both a conceptual symphony and prophetic challenge.

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### **Stedwards says**

Dense, but thorough read on the intricacies of race and Christianity. Interesting proposal of the retrieval of "Israel" as concept/place (not literal) for new Christian place-making. Wish there was more constructive at the conclusion - maybe the next book?

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### **Kimberly says**

Jennings' book is a critically important work that should be read by any who wish to see the unity of the Church and reconciliation among peoples become a reality. Jennings lays a clear and long-standing case for white racial bias being imbedded in Western Christianity. Unless one realizes it is interwoven, one will miss how challenging overcoming racism will be. From colonial times through the modern era a faulty theology has created the idea of race and racial superiority. The idea that (white) Christians are the New Israel, meaning that Christians become the chosen ones as Israel was in the Old Testament, moved European nations to see themselves as having divine right and thus divine obligation to subjugate the "heathen" particularly those of color. Having black skin was seen as the most pernicious, lessening as skin lightened. People and space were separated, and domination of whites over all was spurred on by selective hermeneutics. It is this theology that has thread its way into every area of Western society with fiendish ramifications. Jennings later promotes an alternative understanding where Jew & Gentile unify within Christ, where chosen/not chosen are made irrelevant. All are one in Christ.

I cannot recommend this book enough, yet I must say it is often very difficult to read. The narrative is mired with complex vocabulary that while understandable to academics will leave most regularly intelligent readers shutting it in frustration. At times the narrative is clear and direct, a joy to read. Other times it hits road block after road block, and you never know when it will change. The message is too frequently lost in academic mumbo-jumbo, and therefore will have no impact on real people in the Church. Use of more common language would go a long way in improving the read as well as the impact of this important book. I was able to understand what Jennings said, loving the insight it gave me, but often it felt unnecessarily specious.

So I give this book a four star rating because it is important and should be read. But, for readability, it often is a 3 or even a 2 star book. Read it - I recommend you start with the conclusion and then go to the beginning - but be prepared.

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### **Brenton says**

This is amazing content! It is very heady, and it takes a lot of effort to study and understand the concepts suggested. But I think that it is worth the effort, especially in light of the racial conflict and tension that we are seeing daily.

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### **Jensen Troup says**

A treasure trove of theologically-based examinations of the formation of race originating in the colonialist period. Beginning with a discussion of Christian missions work in South Africa, Latin America, North America, etc., Jennings sets out a foundation for understanding the conception of race based on identity, land, and race — ultimately highlighting their inextricability. He emphasizes the importance of land in the shaping of one's identity and how moving away from that (displacement) is detrimental. Capitalism + colonialism = commodification, specifically as it relates to racialized bodies. Role of indigenous Christian faith and its implications for today's culture in the adoption of that framework/faith.

So many complexities and intricacies to mull over, especially as Jennings adds this unique perspective to the mix. A discussion of land, place, identity, race and a connection to our reading of the OT Israel and the Christian Church as a metaphor of our own impulse to "re-read." So much historical background at the start that it was quite dense/heady to get immediately interested, but subsequent chapters only get better and tie it all back together by the end. One to re-read soon enough!

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### **Darnell says**

This book's description suggests that it has historical analysis as a major component, but the introduction makes clear that it won't, in favor of theological reflections. I persevered through the rest, but I'm not sure how to rate the book because it was never intending to be what I wanted. For the record, it disappointed me in general.

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### **Drick says**

In this book Willie Jennings takes on the task of theologically examining the formation of race in the colonialist period. Retelling the stories of Christian missions in Latin America, South Africa, England, and in the slave fields of North America, Jennings asserts that identity, land, and race are intricately connected and by displacing people from their land, they robbed them of identity. Even in the efforts to translate the Bible into the vernacular of the indigenous people, that translation was done within the context of colonialism and so the Christianity that was adopted by the indigenous and enslaved peoples was done in the name of the empire. Add globalizing capitalism to that and race and racialized people became a commodity to be used for profit and material gain. Jennings ties this colonializing project back to the theological of supersessionism, which replaced Israel with the Christian Church in the interpretation of the Hebrew testament. He calls for a re-reading of the OT with Israel at the center and Jesus the fulfillment of Israel. The Jews were a people of the land, and Jesus was of those people, and those who follow Jesus must also see the intimate nature of the land for one's identity.

While I read the book closely, I only feel like I have scratched the surface of Jennings' thought, a feeling that there is more there than I am able to grasp at this time. What I do understand that a true indigenous Christian

faith must be done in a way to honor the heritage of culture of those adopting the faith, and not in the culture of those that have controlled, enslaved and colonized indigenous peoples for centuries. Not only should this view change the way indigenous persons practice their faith, but also those who are descendants of the enslavers and colonizers.

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### **Naomi says**

I have my reservations, questions, and frustrations (particularly over this still being a very male-ish book). But the man has a lot of good stuff here.

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### **Ron Willoughby says**

Reading Dr. Jennings book was like being with this amazing, trailblazing guide who could see things I would have never recognized. There were amazing vistas, confounding paths, and heart-breaking valleys. Most of this work I will need to think about and reread in the months to come before I can say what I have learned, not learned, etc.

Somewhere in the last 75 to 80 pages of the book, Dr. Jennings left me. I back tracked. I moved carefully forward. No joy. Once or twice I picked up his trail only to lose it again. By the conclusion of the book I was lost. I have no clue where Dr. Jennings went, but I couldn't seem to follow no matter how hard I tried. \*sigh\*

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### **Kevin Spicer says**

This book traces so many connections between, colonialism, capitalism, race, and theology that it can seem dizzying. The form the argument takes is hard to keep track of because it covers such a huge span of time, space, and disciplines. But it is impressive the way he pulls out similar themes from a such diversity of theological perspectives, and historical processes.

The argument seems to go something like this:

That theology, around the time of the discovery of the new world, in its conceptual grasping for ways to articulate how God lives and moves and works within the world, essentially parallels the works of colonialism, and instead of following the trajectory of the, “Son of God who took on the form of a creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection and intimacy,” marked by love. Christians “social imagination became ill” as it became “woven into processes of colonial dominance.” Instead, the joining of peoples that does come about through colonialism is a “cosmic horror” that theology became tied to in complex ways. He traces out the forces that generate this ill kind of theology as it led to the creation of the idea of race, and gave a green light to the brutality of colonialism.

I’m not gonna go into the whole argument, but something new for me was the idea of supersessionism.

Supersessionism becomes a large part of the church theology around this time. The act of justifying colonial dominance on theological grounds meant that theologians had to insert the colonial nation state into the role that only belonged to Israel as the one nation through whom God would reveal salvation. This superseding of

the church in the place reserved for Israel meant that European Christians forgot that their place in the landscape of salvation was originally a marginal one, that they were once Gentiles, and that they were included at all was a sign of grace. This vision of a humble and open Christianity stands in contrast to the kind of Christianity that indigenous people of Africa and the Americas encountered, which was largely a religion that demanded people to rid themselves of every marker of pre-christian identity, culture, language, and belief, and re-orient themselves around european culture while submitting themselves to exploitation and land theft.

This idea was buzzing a lot of bells in my brain as I was thinking about it. I think it is probably pretty prevalent in white churches in America. It is an ethnocentric vision of the gospel that places the power and responsibility of revealing salvation to the nations of the world through your people and your nation. Your culture, that is your abstractified and romanticized culture (think of Steve Bannon wearing spandex and a cape riding into battle like a crusader) is the bringer of light, of reason, of goodness to the land that dwelleth in darkness. God's favor toward Israel can be detached from Israel and reattached to another people.

Jennings tells several different stories that although in a work of academic scholarship seem somewhat disjointed and unwieldy next to each other, do actually have similar themes emerge out of them all. From a Spanish royal chronicler name Gomes Eames de Zurara, to a Jesuit scholar-priest working among Mayans and Andes, to an Anglican Bishop's work among the Zulu tribe in the 1800's, to Isaac Watt's hymnody.

He explores many ways theology became bound up with race, a couple of these are as follows:

First theology becomes displaced during colonialism. Theologians literally did not know where they were, Africans are being taken as slaves to new places. This begins a kind of disembodied thinking and living that becomes part of modernity. Identity, instead of being tied into the land, in relationships to animals, plant life, and seasons, becomes displaced, and skin color takes on a disproportionate weight in forming identities.

Second theology becomes encased in a pedagogical form that places instruction as a primary concern, relegating the way that discipleship and relationship ought to provide the context to teaching. This results in an endless teaching of the natives, which means a constant evaluation, which means that knowledge becomes a coercive power that has a disciplinary function. This kind of Christianity goes hand in hand with the colonial demand for docile, exploitable people. The evaluation that encountering natives provoked in the theological mind, gave way to more formalized scales used to judge indigenous people in relation to what kind of Christian they will make, this scale ranges from less barbarian to more barbarian, with the justification of using force to convert the latter.

The relation between race and place was really interesting. And that race as an identity marker isn't bad in and of itself (although it is an idea responsible for many genocides), but it stands for a much deeper, more complex, and more fulfilling relationship to land and community that has been destroyed in modernity. Rebuilding identities around these things, around our bodies, is an interesting project, and provides an unexplored dimension of what role theology could play in uniting alienated peoples.

The only critique I would offer, is that I wish that he would have addressed some of the arguments that would counter that theology and Christianity wasn't complicit in colonization or that colonization, because Christianity was acting within it, was a good thing, or that despite all evidence to the contrary, Steve Bannon does not leave a trail of slime wherever he goes. Because these arguments weirdly seem to be a pretty regular part of our public discourse within both the left and the right and whenever they get together to scream at each other.

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## **Bob Bixby says**

### **Powerful**

My mind longed for this new imagination and could not begin to think it until I read this book, finishing just in time for “Columbus Day” tomorrow and, consequently, I will have more than just a social reactionary distaste for the holiday, but I will have some objective theological, Christ-honoring grounds for using the holiday as a day to mourn and to imagine hopefully. Thank you, Dr. Jennings, for this book. I only wish I had read it sooner.

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## **Daniel Rempel says**

Chris Smith has stated that the book is “a theological masterpiece,” and he was right.

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## **Tiffany says**

Life-changing.

Also, even though Jennings speaks as a faithful theologian, for scholars not of a religious orientation, I think this book would be exceedingly helpful in thinking through theological/religious dimensions of the origins and genealogies of race--to add another dimension to studies that involve sociological/anthropological/economic factors. It is rich fare, extremely well-researched, and brings a crucial dimension--the theological (in his view heretical) erasure of land-based identity as a foundation for the racialization of bodies--to the conversation.

Excellent.

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## **Ben Sanders iii says**

Currently my favorite book on theology and race, "The Christian Imagination" does a masterful job of showing how Christianity is made synonymous with the work and logic of colonialism. Jennings argues that Christianity functions inside of a diseased social imagination that is inept to rethink its relationship to place, language, and intimacy.

I love that Jennings offers no easy answers. Instead he prioritizes painting a clear picture of the problem and, I think, challenges us to rethink the anatomy of theological discourse and, subsequently, our own identities.

The book is academically rich showing Jennings' handle on various disciplines, including Christian theology. And it is such without getting bogged down by too much "academse".

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## **E. says**

This is the third book in the last year that I have read about the entanglement between Christian theology and racism. Each has provided a slightly different perspective. Each has been well-written, provocative, and original.

Much like Carter in his *Race: A Theological Account*, Jennings believes that the way toward racism directed against black people was paved by the church's supersessionist anti-semitism. The thesis is convincing in both accounts. For Jennings it is a fundamental flaw dating back to the early days of the Christian church that has stifled the central Christian message throughout our history and has inflicted deep wounds in the modern era.

The central Christian message should be communion -- relationships of belonging built across divides, as Gentiles are brought into relationship with Israel and Israel's God through Jesus Christ. This should have paved the way for the church to become what was enacted at Pentecost, a diverse, multi-lingual body wherein every person was treated with love, respect, and mutuality. Instead, it has become something very different.

Jennings seems to claim that the central theological symbol of Christianity in the modern age is the slave ship. And the slave ship is a terrifying distortion of Pentecost, as a cosmopolitan mix of people are brought together in a community built around violence and death, not communion and belonging.

The universal perspective of the Enlightenment has furthered the problem (Carter makes a similar point) by ignoring the particular, especially the particularity of Jewish flesh in Jesus. For Jennings the major loss of the modern era is identity shaped by relationships with the land and environment. Instead, identity is now shaped by one's racial or ethnic group, as we have become displaced from the land. His vision is that a genuine Christian communion would enact a renewed doctrine of creation, restoring our relationships with the land and environment. I would love to hear a dialogue between him and Wendell Berry.

He argues that the methodology of Christian theology is fundamentally flawed because it has incorporated the hegemony of whiteness. It must expose this history and seek to be renewed. Theology should take as its aim the promotion of genuine communion and a restoration of creation.

Along the way, Jennings' book narrates elements of the history of theology that are often overlooked, focusing on figures like Gomes Zurara, the royal chronicler of Prince Henry the Navigator; Jose de Acosta, an early Jesuit missionary to Peru; John William Colenso, an Anglican bishop in the Natal; and Olaudah Equiano, who published his slave narrative in the 18th century. The first two help to construct a modern theology of race, the third works to move beyond it but reveals how one is trapped within it, and the fourth indicates possibilities for the path forward.

I thought in a handful of places the book resonated with the systematic theology of James McClendon -- the focus on bodies, the role of jazz, the importance of biography as theology, the ecstatic fellowship of all creation.

In its emphasis on how theology has abused Jewish and black bodies, I thought more attention should have been paid to other bodies. Native and aboriginal bodies did appear in the chapter on Acosta and were mentioned elsewhere, but could have had a little more development. Female and queer bodies were non-existent. Carter and Cone, in their books on race and Christian theology, devoted significant sections to

women, and Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way* focused almost exclusively on it. Queer bodies were noticeably absent from all except Coleman's book. I know it wasn't a focus of this book, but it could have been mentioned, especially when talking about the role of Jewish and African-American authors and artists in creating much of America's artistic culture and referencing James Baldwin as an example.

Despite these neglects, the book is a fascinating, thought-provoking read.

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