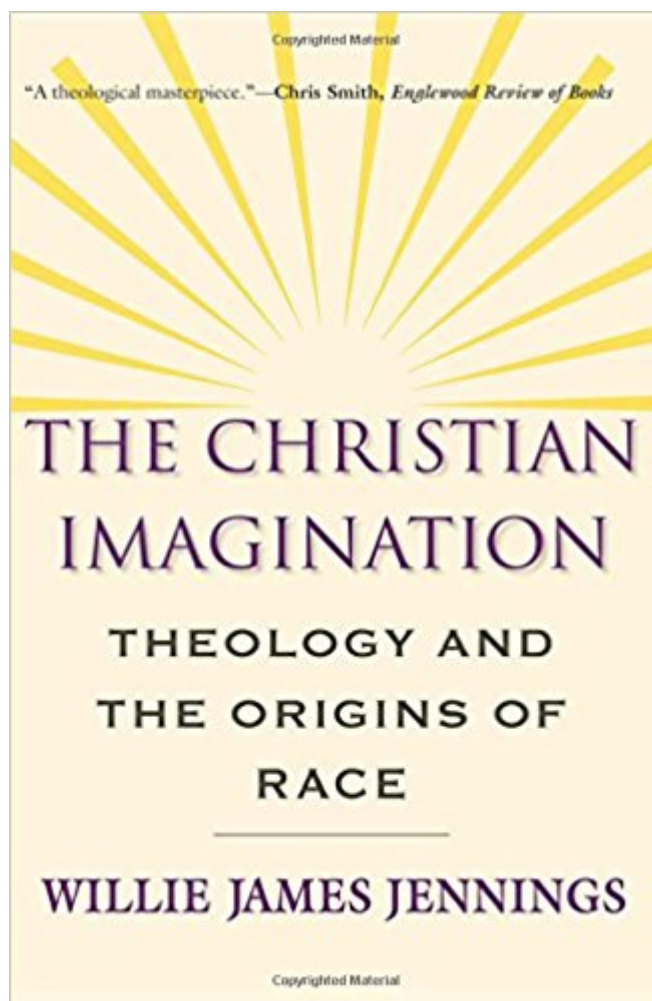


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# The Christian Imagination: Theology And The Origins Of Race



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In one of the first books of its kind, Duke theologian Jennings attempts to put theology in

conversation with contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism and globalization. He contends that the Christian theological imagination was historically woven into the processes of colonial dominance, thus requiring other peoples and ways of life to adapt and even morph into the colonial order of things. Drawing on narratives as diverse as Bishop John William Colenso's in South Africa and the former slave writer Olaudah Equiano's, Jennings seeks to provide both a historical account of where Christian theology faltered in its imagination of society, as well as a theological account of the way in which Christians can better tell and understand the story of the life of Jesus, who took on a human life of joining, belonging, connecting, and knowing others fully. Regrettably, Jennings's important argument gets lost in jargon ("but the analyses of this condition often don't get to the heart of the constellation of generative forces that have rendered people's social performances of the Christian life collectively anemic") and tortured prose; the book too often reads like a dissertation that would have benefited from a wiser editorial hand. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Sensitively descriptive writing. . . . This study lays out realities that must be honestly admitted."â "Nancy Hawkins, America "[A] theological masterpiece."â "Chris Smith, Englewood Review of Books "Jennings engages broad historical sources and cultural theory in uncommonly exquisite yet accessible prose. . . . This broadly conceived study promised to reconfigure the historical understanding of race, religion, and empire in the Americas and to stimulate theological reflection on Christian-Jew relations."â "S. A. Johnson, Choice "[An] astounding book. . . . Jennings's genius carries through. . . . A highly textured instance of theology at its best."â "Jonathan Tran, Religious Studies Review "Detailing the nooks and crannies of white supremacist Christianity, The Christian Imagination allows not only for greater sophistication when considering race and theology. It also points to possible cures to the disease so elegantly diagnosed."â "Edward J. Blum, Journal of Religion "Jennings excavates the major theological issues involved as the old world encounteredâ "violentlyâ "the new and engaged in displacement and racialization of the 'subjugated' peoples. At stake is a whole way of conceiving the self, the other, and the world of their mutual relations."â "Miroslav Volf, Yale University "There is no study that I know of that traces with such detail, consistency, insight, historical depth and geographic spread, the links between racism, capitalism and Christian theology. A brilliant piece of work."â "Walter Mignolo, Duke University "How did Christianity become so closely identified with racial segregation and oppression?â Jennings successfully addresses a question that others have

taken for granted or left unanswered. This original and important book has the potential to change the way theology is done henceforth in America."â "Cheryl Sanders, Howard University

Its rare for an academic book to propelled you to your knees in raw, supplicative prayer. Thanks to Jennings, that's what happened to me when I finished reading *The Christian Imagination*. An intellectual tour de force, his beautifully crafted text narrates a journey of earth shattering revelations. Jennings provides an unexpected answer to one of our faith's most troubling questions. Why has Christianity--a religion whose trajectory would seem bent toward boundary crossing intimacy and the formation of just social worlds--presided over, indeed led, so much of the oppression of the past several centuries, particularly toward people of color and blacks most dramatically? He locates the heart of his answer in supercessionism. The segregationist spirit that found its fullest treatment in America was first cultivated in Christians by our hegemonic colonial stance toward the world. This stance swapped Israel out for European imperial identities, and created a novel source of identity that exchanged land for bodies, continually evaluated against the totalizing glare of whiteness. That Christian performance has (on the whole) been remarkably abusive is fairly obvious to any casual reader of history. The agony of discovery in *\*Imagination\** issues from its exposure of just how deeply Western theology is infected, and how subtle warps in our faith provided generous space for domination. Rehearsing the complex historical analysis Jennings offers is impossible here. What I want to lift up are the two primary theological motifs he offers as both the sources of trouble and the sites of hope. First, Jennings takes great pains to reassert Christian identity as Gentile identity. We are those who did not belong at the table, but like the Canaanite woman gratefully grasped for the crumbs that fell from it. The story that makes sense of the world is not our story, it is Israel's. Most importantly, Jesus is not a white male. He is Jewish, and scandal of his particularity provides the context through which humanity can be guided into communion. Desire for Christ and the experience his hospitable embrace enfolding our life into himself allows us to likewise turn toward neighbor with a new desire to intake their concerns and dreams as our own. This, Jennings explains, is the kind of border-line erotic intimacy Christian theology should cultivate. Second, *\*Imagination\** uncovers a forgotten reality: before there were races, nationalities or even ethnicity, there was the land and one's place within it. Identity constitution was dramatically reworked in the colonial moment when Europeans showed up on inhabited shores and claimed it as their own. As they left their lands behind, they carried their body with them as the central determinant of self and culture. In lieu of place, whiteness took on geographic proportions, becoming a determinative of the true (intelligence), the good

(morality), and the beautiful (aesthetics) (277). We lost our way theologically in anthropology, creation, and in all aspects of the *missio Dei* (for starters). All else was obscured as we became the God-men recreating the world in our image. I am immensely grateful to be introduced to this text at this moment in my life. It wove together many of the themes I have been tugging at over the past few years, bringing them together in much sharper relief. Jennings precisely expresses what draws me so magnetically toward this faithful following of Jesus, "There is within Christianity a breathtakingly powerful way to imagine and enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging" (4). And yet time and again we seem to fall short. My prayer today is that his insights will bore into our collective unconscious, into our hearts, and seed there to inform our personal, communal and vocational lives that they may come to bear the fruit of genuinely generative love, a new social performance of our faith that breeds justice.

I eye roll when people say this, but truly this is perhaps the \*most\* important theology book that I have ever read. Jennings does an absolutely masterful job in articulating how colonialism and power in the west have insidiously shaped and permeated every facet of Christian theology in the last millennium. The scope of this book is truly awe-inspiring, but it is an artfully crafted theological narrative that every pastor and theologian should read and prayerfully consider. It is a heavy read, not for the faint of heart, but not inaccessible! Race and religion and power are all intertwined, coming together to form the limits and possibilities of our very fallen Christian imagination.

This is one of the best books on . It is unique and offers a perspective that is deeply informed and uniquely personal. Dr Jennings is a gem both in the way he has analyzed his life experiences and in the way he has thought deeply about others experiences. His understanding of humanity is worth the price of the book whether you are interested in race or not. I love the book for two reasons: First, because race is a borderline taboo subject in some Christian circles and we have few leaders who think like Dr Jennings. If you've ever thought deeply about race (including issues like racial reconciliation) this book is like a song. But if you have never thought about race, this book is a blueprint of humanity. It is an insightful autopsy of the human condition. I find it exhilarating to my thinking about social identity and racial identity. I really loved it. This book is definitely not for everyone, but if you're a deep thinker who wants to understand deep elements of human identity this is a gem of a book. If you're interested but not sure if you want the whole enchilada you can listen to Dr Jennings give a talk on this subject matter at [...]

It is no small feat to unveil, with vigor and virtue, the provocative yet comprehensive theological development of whiteness as the supercessionist engine; Jennings has masterfully done so. With poetic craft and acute tact, Jennings unearths the scandal of colonialism and Christian mission: the boogieman of Christian imagination. Yet, like all hopeful theologians driven by the passion of God's mission, Jennings revitalizes the Church's high calling and identity: life together.cf. sooholee.wordpress

Powerful work giving careful and scholarly articulation to Western Christian theology with its history of creating racial hierarchy. Careful and detailed explanation of how the marriage of Christianity and empire created a systemic means, through theology, to colonize. I am a Christian clergy-person and found this work helpful in engaging the roots of racism as a theological problem.

Dr. Jennings' analysis of the flaws in the foundation of Western Christianity is compelling. His documentation of the manifestation of white hegemony as both a producer and a product of the aspiration for global empire that drove colonialism is invaluable as a response to those who long for everyone to "get over it". May the conversation continue!

It presents a view of the development of Western Christianity that asks disturbing questions that need to be asked.

Challenges traditional societal thought and brings to light the reality of human condition. Great book written by an amazing man

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