

**Review and Reflections on Dr. Jennings' *After Whiteness*
... by a white male Calvinist... missionary... and ecumenist
(Dr. Larry Golemon of the Washington Theological Consortium)**

Dr. Willie Jennings' book, *After Whiteness: an Education in Belonging* is a difficult read, but a compelling one. It is difficult for some people because it weaves narrative, essay, and poetry in a way that eludes theological system-building and ideological trenches. The author also positions this work in the in-betweens of Scripture and hermeneutics, doctrinal and praxis-theologies, traditions and fragments, embodied aesthetics and discourse. These and other in-betweens are designed to create new spaces for reflection, introspection, and truth-telling between those of us in and of the system, and for truly attending to those we do not yet hear or see.

I will share these reflections based on who I am: a white, male Presbyterian from baptism (in the New Divinity, reformist tradition), an ordained minister who takes Reformed confessions seriously, a mission-educator who was transformed in the Philippines, and a committed ecumenist in my daily work and my vision of the Church. Layered through it all is the Whiteness of growing up in Texas with parents raised in southern Alabama from working class roots. At best, I am half-woke on issues of race, thanks to strong and patient colleagues in the Philippines, historically Black theological schools, Catholic seminaries, and Asian scholars in the theological Consortium I now serve.

At the outset, Jennings seeks to create a new discursive space between two audiences: one from defenders of existing theological education as reformable to include diverse cultures, nations, races, and genders in life-giving ways (this has been my stance); and the other by those who struggle against the current educational system for greater ethnic, cultural and racial autonomy in the sources, methods, and outcomes of formation. Jennings creates a space where proponents of these views can (and should) re-examine and rebuild their approaches, in order to move toward greater communion.

There are tropes and themes in the book that might be off-putting to white men like me (and perhaps others), but my strong advice is *don't let them*, as they are here for good reasons. These include claiming that all we have to work with are fragments in the theological and biblical traditions, (de)formative practices, and student outcomes in theological education; universalizing the triad of whiteness, colonialism, and male hegemony to all theological education in the U.S.; analyzing how this triad distorts the dynamics of attention, affection, and desire in our education; unearthing how the institutional unconscious of building institutions, pedagogies, and faculties is haunted by the specter of a white, Southern plantation master (who reminds me of a cousin of mine); demonstrating how reason, ideas, vocation, and relationships have been commodified by a warped exchange system; and analyzing how human desire and embodied aesthetics are key to understanding the current problem. The chord that binds (and strangles) all of these together is that of self-sufficient, masculinist whiteness—which pervades the culture, instruments, and ideals of theological education that all of us swim or drown in.

Jennings defines his terms just enough to narrate how they are performed. (For example, his notion of self-sufficient masculinist self is derived from a little-known article by Schillebeeckx, 30.) Here I will not rehearse those definitions or performances, but I will describe them as I see them at work in my life. I strongly recommend that readers (especially white men) engage this book *first through introspection and reflection* by answering: “How have these dynamics been performed (by others and by me) in my own personal and professional life?” To begin, I grew up in a church marked by a progressive Reformed orthodoxy, under a white pastor that quoted the Bible, literature, psychology and theology (in that order), and engaged Scripture with issues that ranged from McCarthyism (before my time) and the possible threat of a Catholic president (Kennedy), to the violent imperialism of the war in Vietnam and the importance of the civil rights struggle and “its prophet” (my pastor’s words) Dr. King. Nonetheless, my pastor preached about the singular heroes of Scripture (male and female) who relied primarily on God, not others. This pastor modeled the self-sufficient, white masculine hero that I wanted to be: one who could lead educated white Protestants into a knowing-faith and the battle for social righteousness.

Jennings targets theological education in this work, but he is clear that the above themes infect all forms of Western education. In my case, this infection was explicit. I attended Robert E. Lee public high school in Houston, Texas, where we waved the battle flag at football games, and glorified the general as a Southern and American icon. (Thank God that school is now named for a local African-American educator, Margaret Wisdom.) My high school experience only reinforced the family education I received when we returned to Alabama each year, where we sang Dixie, visited family graves of CSA soldiers, and remembered the Lost Cause. I came to believe that it was an honor to be named (middle name) after a gray-clad, Civil War Veteran in the family. I was taught to respect *hard-working* Black folks, and I learned that a *few of them*, like Barbara Jordan, were exceptional. Nonetheless, I swam freely in white privilege and supremacy, confident that white male leadership was still the best and the brightest.

Progressive educators believe that the formation I received as a youth can be broken down and reformed by a good liberal arts education; but in fact Dr. Jennings claim that all Western education is infected by the same thing is largely accurate in my case. A very progressive university on the West Coast, an enlightened Divinity School in New England, and a post-modern graduate department in the South did not deconstruct my self-sufficient white-male formation; but they did make it more open, versatile, dialogical... and therefore more cunning. I was challenged most by second-wave (white) feminism through strong feminist professors and classmates, but most (not all) of these professors taught like their white male counterparts. I tried to ally myself with feminists by learning the discourse and by marrying a strong one; but I lost much of myself there, in part, because no clear model of a mutual partnership emerged. Jennings’ book is a bit thin on how feminists and womanists have transformed many sites of theological education (even if they have not exorcised the white man completely), except for a footnote in chapter 3 and his engagement with feminist scholarship on human desire and divine Eros (like W. Farley). I would like to see more of this.

Jennings is clear, however, that what changes the structures of theological education and exorcises the plantation master’s ghost are a new aesthetic and a form of desire that change how we relate to one

another as faculty, students, and administrators--all for the sake of an education in belonging. His vision may sound utopian to some, but Jennings demonstrates that he himself is working in and through educational systems that are still haunted by the Man.

How do I make sense of Jennings' vision? ... primarily through the glimpses of desire, growing collegiality, and deeper communion I have experienced with people I care about deeply. With Filipino colleagues and students, I learned how to name and begin resisting the history, horrors, and ongoing traumas of white, American colonialism (even as I enjoyed its privileges as an expat). There, I became more of a contextual than a systematic theologian in an attempt to make a positive contribution to their struggle. With colleagues at historic Black theological schools I work with in a theological consortium, I have experienced the power of Black theology, racial-ethnic autonomy, and learned the beginnings of building allyship. With Catholic colleagues I have learned to admire their rich intellectual traditions, even as I continue to struggle against the Protestant anti-Catholicism and the implicit nativism I grew up with. (I learned later the *real honor of my middle name* comes from its origin in English-Catholic ancestors that migrated to Mobile, AL: a fact which my parents hardly mentioned.) Half-woke, at best, I find this slow transformation a process of peeling back of the skin I was given: painful but regenerative.

Historians (like me) might quibble over certain claims in this text. The white-male-plantation paradigm, for example, does not account for American theologies and churches that promoted local merchants and family-farming (not the enslaving plantations and their global economy), and which at times supported abolition. Likewise, attributing the creation of race as a system of human classification to Christianity (as Jennings does here and in his masterpiece, *The Christian Imagination*), by-passes how Egyptian and Roman classifications of skin color were used for domination (especially of the Nubian empire). But *please don't get caught up* in such details, because you might miss the author's main argument: the degree to which white-masculinist-supremacy and colonial interests have invaded and in-toxic-ated our theological traditions and educational enterprises.

Those looking for a blueprint forward in this book will be disappointed, as Jennings himself admits: "Education formed in this dream is yet to emerge" (152). I do not hear this dream as utopian, however, because there are clear signs in the book for beginning the journey of tearing down and building up. Most pointers involve clarifying what theological education is about: it is NOT the question of survival, resources, or professional/educational outcomes but that of "Why do we gather?" Jennings suggests that we must place "the crowd" (143)—that includes the unconventional, the yearning, and yes the unruly—at the center of our teaching, learning, and relationships. These are the same people that Jesus spent time with and the ones God still desires. If we learn to form relationships with them (some of whom are our students), we can learn "to witness to God's embrace of the creature" as our main purpose in theological education (143). (There is a profound doctrine of grace here.) All this requires creating new spaces (within ourselves and with each other) for deep human desire and the eros-energy that God has for us, because these can bring us together in new and powerful ways (149).

Jennings calls on us to place God’s longing and desire for the creature (in all its crowded forms) at the heart of our work in theological education, so that we can begin to change the “structure of relationality” (146) that constrains us. This is a structure ruled by an exchange system that treats ideas, resources, students, and teachers as commodities utilized for certain outcomes. The burden of this social fabric can be shed and gradually “remade” to weave a new fabric of “intimacy, communication, reciprocity, and mutuality” (147), which in turn positions students, faculty, and staff as co-journeymen in the education process. “Education is an endeavor deployed inside desire,” Jennings writes, and this growing desire for one another is fueled by God’s unending desire for all of us. For traditionalists (like me), I would point out that this divine desire is already embedded in classic traditions, like Eastern Orthodoxy, whose theologians write of the “energies” of God that engage the creation, including the energy of “Divine Eros” (cf. Ephraim, Chrysostom, Simeon the New Theologian).

This reference to Orthodoxy brings me to a major question for the author. The book implies that ALL theological traditions, creeds, and confessions are captive to the European (and American) colonial, white supremacist enterprise. Yet, some of the traditional practices he names, such as monastic contemplation, were formed as communities of sanctuary, not empire (especially under invasions in the West and the East). Opening up this space in Jennings’ text, it seems to me, allows us to re-engage other traditions as well. For example, I would argue that the ecumenical creeds of the early church are expressions of faith born of contention, debate, and rapprochement—practices which are needed for the future of theological education. As a Calvinist, I read Reformation Confessions as texts born of protest, contest, and compromise—again practices that can help us navigate our current journey. Historic creeds and confessions are not always imperial; in the right hands they can be used against the very structures they have created (as in tearing down the Calvinist Apartheid of South Africa).

As a committed ecumenist, I believe that breaking open, re-interpreting, and at times reconstructing historic creeds and confessions can further the unity of the Church by deconstructing the strictures of colonialism and masculinist, white supremacy that have divided Christians. In short, traditions must be (re)constructively engaged (not jettisoned) for Ecumenism to advance. Finally, as a missionary, I would argue that 20th and 21st century missions have been more effective than the rest of (white-dominant) Western churches in contextualizing and indigenizing Christian traditions elsewhere in the world, precisely by letting go of (Western) Christian traditions into the creative hands and minds of indigenous and post-colonial peoples in order to marvel as they re-create these traditions in light of their own cultures and life-together. In the end I believe Jennings wants to reconstruct inherited creedal and theological traditions toward his dream; I just wish he would say so.

One last note on the poetry in this book, which is replete with tears. The desert father Evagrius wrote, “Pray first for the gift of tears...” I believe tearful prayers are needed for us all to move forward together... different tears and different prayers, yes, but all pointing to a beloved community ahead.

First day of fall, 2021, Saint day for Thomas Villanueva,
Augustinian theologian (as Calvin saw himself...)