

Willie James Jennings. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020. x + 165 pages. \$19.99.

Willie James Jennings's *After Whiteness*, the first volume in Eerdmans' new "Theological Education between the Times" series, is bracing, convicting, and inspiring. It is essential reading for contemporary theological educators. Jennings expertly weaves together vignettes from his 30-year career in the theological academy, moving original poetry, and astute and penetrating evaluations of texts, persons, communities, institutions, histories, and buildings to diagnose the maladies of theological education and to imagine new possibilities for the formation of communities of hospitality and service that pulse with the fullness of life instead of dealing death.

Jennings argues, and convincingly shows, that contemporary theological education is characterized by pedagogies for the formation of the finished, cultured (white) man. "Whiteness" in the title names not a skin tone, but a tested, chosen, and socially received approach to human formation of domination and mastery that insidiously and ubiquitously colors the institutions and social arrangements of twenty-first century theological education. To the extent that theological education reproduces such ideals and desires, it is a project of malformation. In contrast, Jennings argues, "theological education must capture its central work—to form us in the art of cultivating belonging" (10).

Any theological educator must ask the question: What is the purpose of what I do? The answer most of us have received is that a theological educator must master, control, and articulate intellectual materials, texts, histories, concepts, etc.; the successful theological educator, who reproduces his success in his charges (ministers and other religious leaders), is the one who has made the grade, who can locate himself or herself, intellectually and socially, not relative to community/communities but to languages, conceptualities, and non-local histories. He (or even she) does not merely locate himself, though; such classification locates institutions, cultures, and even persons hierarchically relative to one another. Within the ideal of "whiteness," the theological educator can explain, quite impressively, an overarching account of reality where everything and everyone is in its "right" place. Such an approach reproduces the orders or logics of colonialism and the plantation. *After Whiteness* thus builds upon Jennings' brilliant analyses of those histories in his justly celebrated *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University, 2010). Theological educators will not be able to hear the word "mastery" in conversations about pedagogy in a neutral way after reading this book.

So what is the solution? Theological educators must take responsibility for reimagining theological education in a way that cultivates belonging instead of mastery. Jennings states that such reimagining involves the joining of the fragments. While the ideal of "whiteness" promotes the mastery of intellectual fragments, Jennings insists that such fragments must be joined to the cultural fragments of the diverse populations participating in theological formation. The fragments of histories, languages, and concepts can thus be "aligned with the work of loving and learning together" (39). The approach to theological education Jennings describes thus requires attention to design that "opens toward more intense listening and learning from one another" (67).

Since creatures build by nature, Jennings argues, the building of theological education must find its place within the building that the Creator is doing. We can either build towards death, the effect of the ideals of colonialism and plantation, or towards life. Building towards life entails that all participants in an institution are empowered to share in the gifts of building and

creation. Such building requires that we reject the calculus of engaging persons, or ignoring them, on the basis of what we can get from them (think of the malformed dynamics of “social” events at conferences, where folks move from person to person surreptitiously staring at nametags and not faces). We need instead a “productive inwardness, one in which introspection and introversion are life giving and communion gesturing” (122). In addition, Jennings argues that theological education has as its “fundamental resource erotic power” (151). Such power is the originary power of “God who has ended hostility and has drawn all of creation into a reconciliation that we do not control” (152).

Jennings has written movingly and beautifully in *After Whiteness*, inviting his readers into an arresting and compelling future for theological education. It remains to see what institutions and persons will bravely, in the grace of God, commit to the vision he describes. My hope and prayer is that his words, alongside other likeminded contributions, will serve as a means of such a revolution.

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