

The Grawemeyer AwardsTM

How Should We See Race?

*Grawemeyer lecture delivered by the Rev. Dr. Willie James Jennings,
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It is the questions that we wrestle with that define a life. And my life has been defined by questions that moved between Christian faith and race. They were questions birthed in me with the faith birthed in me and questions placed in me by the racial challenges that confronted me the minute I begin those hear the voices of this world telling me who I was and who I was not. In my journey as a scholar thus far, there have been three crucial questions that shape my work. They flow through one another and together press on me the urgent task of trying to make sense of both the world of faith and the racial world at the same time. The first question has to do with the church.

Can the way Christians imagine church ever witness God's full embrace of humanity and the rest of creation? Christianity has been deeply infected with race, that is, with the racial imagination. For many Christians in this world and especially in America race shapes who they imagine they belong to and who they wish to include. This is the racial imagination, a way of imagining connection and belonging through race. But there is a different way of imagining connection and belonging that is at the heart of Christianity. This different way rooted in the teachings and life of Jesus envisions belonging in ways that press against boundaries and constantly works toward deepening relationships that would be stronger than any family, any clan, and any people. This different way is a way of radical joining and life together.

Yet the reality we face is that racial belonging is stronger and more powerful in its imaginative capacity than Christian belonging. But does this have to be the case? Is there a way to activate among Christians and others a deeper sense of connection and belonging that would issue in a desire to move toward one another? It is this idea of connection that drove me toward a second crucial question.

Christians, like peoples of many faiths, believe in a God who creates and that this world and all that exist is that God's creation. That belief commits us to see all that is in the world as profoundly, irrefutably connected. But why does that commitment do so little work in the way many Christians behave toward others and toward the rest of creation? What work should belief in the world as creation do for how we understand our connection to one another? What seems to be missing or at least blocked in our thinking that hinders us from seeing and living into the connectivity of all things?

I realized that this blockage had something to do with something else embedded in the racial imagination and that is geographic segregation. The racial imagination, thinking race was somehow connected to segregation, spatial/geographic segregation. There is a relationship but no one seemed to be able to articulate this relationship. I don't mean that no was able to explain the reasons for segregated living spaces. I mean that what was not clear to me was why race and segregationist ways of thinking and living seemed to be meant for each other, they seemed to give life to each other. It made no sense to me that people who were Christian and

trying to think as Christian would be susceptible to segregationist ways of thinking and living. But this problem drove me to a third question.

What does it mean to think as a Christian, to be a Christian intellectual? I have been trying to understand the precise contours of embodied Christian intellectual life. I have always been disappointed with the lack of Christian engagement with ways of life *as a way of life*. Why have Christians not followed the way of our God who entered into the full reality of human and creaturely life by being willing indeed eager to enter the lives of people not our own? How is it that Christians have been formed not to see the expansion of our identities toward those around us as part of what it means to be Christian? These are the questions that I am wrestling with in *The Christian Imagination*.

What is the fundamental thesis of my book? That Christians in the western world, Christians who have been directly or indirectly shaped and/or touched by modern colonialism (from the 15th century forward) have inherited a diseased social imagination. The way we imagine connection, belonging, and our obligations to join with other peoples have been deeply distorted and must be rethought from the ground up. This is too big of a story to try to tell in one book, so I told several smaller stories to show the effects of this diseased social imagination. I asked my reader and now I ask you to consider this in three aspects, displacement, translation, and intimacy.

Displacement – as the word suggests – is something that is out of place, disjointed, maybe even broken at the foundations of Christian identity. Christian belief in God begins with an astounding claim that we have met God in a Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth, a vagabond rabbi who came not to us, but to his own people, Israel. The “us” in that sentence is Gentiles, those not of Israel, those not Jewish. And by Jewish I mean (crudely speaking) all those inside the history of Israel, who would identify themselves, theologically or ethnically inside that history. We gentiles were outsiders, outsiders to Israel. We were at the margins.

Somewhere probably in many places and many times, Gentiles Christians got tired of remembering that they come from the margins, that they were included in Israel’s promise. They decided, we decided that those who followed Jesus were the only people of God and that Jewish people, Israel in the flesh, was no longer the people of God. We also decided that we should look at the world as though we were at the center of it and not at the margins with a Jew named Jesus. We forgot we were Gentiles, the real heathens. In fact, many early church writers called Jewish peoples heathen, called them Gentiles. A Christian world was turned upside down and remade into our image.

As early European Christians entered the new worlds we call Africa, the Americas, the pacific islands and other places that were to become colonial holdings, they did so as inheritors of this theological amnesia, this gentile forgetfulness. Their sense of power over those new peoples and spaces coupled with their sense of pride in being the chosen people of God created the conditions through which they believed their judgments about everything and everybody were in a real sense sanctioned by God. They imagined themselves as the people God ordained who could make sense of the world. As they looked out onto the new worlds, they did two things as they looked.

First, they turned simple observations about bodies *into ways of understanding bodies*. They designed vast numbers of people and vastly different peoples through a racial scale with white being at one end and black being at another and everyone able to be placed somewhere in between. This was a simple observation that began to deepen and take on a life of its own. Race slowly emerged not only as a way of being seen but also as a way of seeing and discerning different peoples.

The second thing they did as they looked is that they changed the earth. There was a time not too long ago when people would have never imagined themselves as a people as white or black or anything in between. There was a time not too long ago when people would have never designated themselves as peoples, black or white or something in between. There was a time not too long ago when peoples would never have imagined their identities separate from the land they inhabited and the animals they lived with. The land and the animals

were in them and the skin of their bodies was deeply connected to the skin of the animals and the skin of the land.

Yet these early Europeans, these Christian settlers saw the peoples separate from the land and saw the land as property to be taken and owned, that is, as private property. This double looking at people and at the land/animals as separate, disjoined, and usable and sellable destroyed place centered identity and it created something that had never existed before: people encased in something called race. People were taught to see their identities as having little or nothing to do with the land they inhabited. That land was inconsequential to who they really were – racial being, black or white or something somewhere in between.

This history is what has been missing from most accounts of race and its beginnings. Until we understand how the birth of race is tied to the emergence of private property disconnected from people, tribes, and clans, we will never understand the true power of race.

We have been displaced from the earth. The ground, the land, the animals play no significant role in our self-understandings. The land no longer speaks to most of us, and we look on animals in pure utility, as only things for our use. This displacement worked its way into the ways Christians imagined what it meant to share the faith with others. The world became for Christians a place you transform because it belongs to you and the native peoples need to be transformed as well. Transformation is turned outward. It is an outward work to be wrought on the natives. Christians came to look on the native populations through (what I have termed) an unrelenting pedagogical imperialism, that is, the Christians saw themselves as perpetual teachers and the world as perpetual learners. This created a Christianity trapped in a mind numbing insularity that resisted being open to being changed and transformed by those worlds and those peoples it encountered.

Of course there were Christians (missionaries) who pushed against this way of being and thinking and there were indigenous peoples who became Christian who refused to see that being Christian meant living this kind of displacement and who understood their life with the land and the animals to be fundamental to being a Christian. These Christians constituted an important but minority report.

From displacement to translation – Christianity is a translatable religion. In fact, some historians have said that this translatability is at the heart of Christianity. But modern Christianity was caught in the middle of two kinds of translation. First, the translation of space and place into private property and second the translation of native worlds into the languages of the Europeans. Together these mutually enforcing realities of translation offered up Christian identity as a citadel of conformity that drained Christian life of its deepest beauty, its stunning appeal as a site of divine love through the enjoyment of learning of, about, and with other peoples. Christianity caught in this tragic reality of translation unleashed on many indigenous people(s) evaluative visions that forever locked them in derogatory, hyper-critical, obsessively judgmental perspectives of their own peoples and cultures. It introduced the idea of backwardness that primed people to believe that the only way to be mature was to grow beyond the cultural ways of their people.

This tragic history of translation has a lot to do with the modern forms of Christianity in the world today. Those forms grew out of the modern history of biblical translation through which peoples were given the bible in their native tongues. The legacy of biblical translation has been both gift and curse. It is gift born of the desire of many missionary translators to present the word of God in native tongues. It has in that regard captured part of the movement of God into the world. What I mean by that is the divine entering into the space of the creature. God speaks to every people in their mother tongue. However translation has also been a curse in that it fostered segregation and nationalism because it has inadvertently concealed the way of the translator and focused attention of the product of translation, a bible. *But the way of the translator is the way of the Christian.* The translation of the bible into different cultures and different worlds has meant the non-necessity of a translatable life.

What do I mean by that? Our legacy of translation has meant that we do not see our bodies necessary for translation. Our bodies must be the go-betweens - between different peoples, different ways of life. Our bodies must bear within themselves multiples ways of being, multiple meanings in order to translate. The bible is not

just a product, it is a process that should show us the way of the Christian. Christians lost sight of all that is involved in learning a language as a fundamental aspect of the Christian life.

How do you learn a language? -- By committing yourself to the slow and patient task of listening and learning, yielding and submitting to the sounds of another people. And if you will become fluent in a language (unless learning languages comes remarkably easy to you), at some point the learning must encompass the loving. You must come to love the language, the way it sounds, and the meanings of its words, and if that love is complete then you will love the original speakers of that language, love their stories, their jokes, their happiness, their sadness, their strength and their weakness performed in that language and still further come to learn and love the land that is signified by that language, the circled earth on which that language came to life and has come to life in you. Such learning not only of a language but also of a life is basic to the Christianity born of God who became flesh.

This brings me finally to the third aspect – intimacy. Intimacy has always been a troubled idea for modern Christianity shaped in colonialism. The first aspect of that trouble was the way a translated bible enriched the piety of people but bound that piety in a movement toward their own people. The more they mediated on the word of God in their own language, the less they mediated on the word of God for them in the language of others. What would mean to fall in love with the God of another people through learning their language, Christianity is formed inside this fact. The movement toward God through joining another people, joining Israel was concealed to us through reading a translated bible. Reading the bible never really did the deeper work that it should have done for Christians, that is, it never constantly reminded us of our movement toward another people that made us Christian in the first place.

Modern Christianity, however, was formed inside an intimacy. It was the intimacy of whiteness. This was the result of the legacies of colonialism and slavery through which Africans and many other native peoples were forced to live inside the intimate spaces of white people. But this was a forced intimacy governed by the domination, oppression, and assimilation. We yet live in the legacy of that forced intimacy as we continue to be conditioned by white images that define for us the true, the good, the beautiful, the noble, and the human. The church has never come to grips with this painful form of forced intimacy. In response to it, many people(s) have gladly formed churches where they can obtain some relief and release from forms of intimacy that they experience as non-affirming and life draining. The church in North America and in many other places has formed itself inside of (what I call) segregationist mentalities which means more than simply segregated churches.

Christians have been shaped to believe that their sense of safety, comfort, and normalcy can only be found when they are with people of their same race and culture. Even if the church is filled with strangers or people who barely know each other, there is yet a sense of safety, comfort, and normalcy that comes with being with your own, racial speaking. This is a deep distortion that not enough people see as a deep distortion or even accept it as a problem.

I don't believe that Christians are forever locked in a diseased social imagination, nor do I believe that churches are forever locked in racial segregationist mentalities. We can move forward if we commit ourselves to three steps. First, we must retell the story of gentiles becoming Christian as central to understanding what it means to be Christian. We are people who have joined another people (Israel) and in this way learned of our God. We are people with Israel who have been moved by the Spirit of God toward those who we would prefer not to be with, but this is the will of God for us and a profound sign of the Spirit's presence – found in the joining.

Secondly, we must begin to take place and space seriously as the real site on which we live out our faith. The land, the earth, the animals should matter deeply to us not simply because of their use value but because they are the basis of knowing who we are and sensing our deep connection to one another. Without a deep sense of connection there can be no real sense of belonging.

And thirdly, we must enter into a new intentionality of life together. Real belonging for the Christian involves reaching down into the spaces where they live and touching the lives of those around them. It means paying close attention to how life is configured spatially, in every way from where our foods come from, to where we are being channeled to shop, and who we are being turned to see and not see by where we live, recognizing always that race always factors into those geographic turnings.

What I have not done in this presentation is tell the stories that gave shape to *The Christian Imagination*, which in many ways is the heart and soul of the book. But I do want to end with the story that shaped me, the story of Mary and Ivory Jennings Sr., my parents. My father is still me. He is 97 years old this year and I am forever grateful for his life and his witness.

My parents picked cotton in the South. That legacy of life in the dirt is the royal heritage of so many black people. To be of the dirt is to be formed of a power that one can barely articulate. Everything comes from the dirt. There in the dirt God breathed life. How ironic that my parents also experienced so much racial oppression precisely at the site of the dirt, where cruel bosses pushed them to work sun up to sun down, dragging heavy sacks of cotton on their sturdy backs. While the dirt was just, they knew that they would get no justice for the work they did in the dirt, because every season they would be cheated out of fair wages for honest work. The scales on which the cotton was weighed never balanced toward justice.

But in those fields, my parent's faith formed through song and hymn flung across the vastness of the land. A faith formed with each burdened step down row after row of cotton, moving in time with the timekeeping singer. That is the faith inside of me, one of the dirt, with eyes aimed at justice, looking for a new day.

ABOUT THE REV. DR. WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

The Rev. Dr. Willie James Jennings is associate professor of theology and black church studies at Duke Divinity School. His research interests include liberation theologies, cultural identities and anthropology. He is an executive member of Scholars for the Future of North Carolina, an academic alliance working to benefit communities through scholarship, and has been closely involved in Moral Mondays, a coalition the NAACP launched in North Carolina two years ago to protest unfair treatment and discrimination in government. A consultant for the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Religion and Theology and the Association of Theological Schools, Jennings also takes part in cross-disciplinary academic initiatives such as University of Virginia's Project for Lived Theology and Yale University's Joy and Religious Traditions Project.

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