

a theological masterpiece.”—Chris Smith, *Englewood Review of Books*

THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

THEOLOGY AND
THE ORIGINS OF
RACE

WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Mary, my mother, taught me to respect the dirt. Like many black women from the South, she knew the earth like she knew her own soul. I came along late. I was the last of her eleven children, born not of the South but of the North, the fruit of the great migration when black folks wearied of the Jim Crow South and, in search of work, pointed their hopes toward northern cities and replanted their lives in colder air.¹ So I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and found myself each spring with my mother, Mary, in her garden in the backyard.

There near the soil Mary deepened my understanding of her life, her history, and her hopes. My mother and my father, Ivory Jennings, were both magnificent storytellers. They told stories the way water cascades over Niagara Falls or runs down the Mississippi, stories that encompassed larger or smaller fragments of people, places, jokes, incidents, sayings, sermons, arguments, clothing, foods, meals, body parts, and prayers. I could never take in all those stories. I had to simply let them wash over me, again and again, until I was able to locate myself in the stream of their historical consciousness. Yet running through their amazing stories were several themes. Like large, immovable rocks that shaped the contours of the water's flow, these themes carried the keys for understanding every story.

Foremost was Jesus. Ivory and Mary loved Jesus. To say they were devout Christians is simply too pale a descriptor. A far more accurate characterization would be, "There were Ivory, Mary, and Jesus." Woven into the fabric of their lives was the God-man Jesus, who, rather than simply serving as an indicator of their orthodoxy, became the very shape of their stories. The stories of Jesus and Israel were so tightly woven into the stories my parents told of themselves, their lives in the South and in the North and then with their youngest children in the North, that it took me years to separate the biblical figures from extended family

members, biblical sinners from the sinners all around us, and biblical places of pain from their places of pain. I was never able to separate biblical hopes from their real hopes. They knew the Bible, but, far more important, they knew the world through the Bible.

Ivory and Mary also channeled what Toni Morrison so eloquently called "the hurt of the hurt world," the knowledge of the deepest struggles and contradictions of black folks living among white folks.² My mother was one of those black women who carry intimate knowledge of slave voices. As a little girl she lived with her grandmother, a former slave. She also knew from her own experiences the lives of poor folks in the South who picked cotton, got cheated for their back-breaking labor, and worked diligently to stay out of harm's way with whites. The experience of agricultural labor, life in the dirt, also brought her into a contradictory but very intimate relationship with the land itself.

My parents loved the soil, the earth, the outside, and in their garden I saw the freedom they felt with it. The garden announced to them and the world that they were absolutely free to be themselves. My mother was a small woman with very muscular hands formed in the crucible of picking, pulling, holding, and hauling. She had a strong back, and when she bent over to touch the earth you could sense her power. She moved through her garden like it was an extension of her body. While in her garden, momma loved to talk about the Native American side of the family, her mother looking and her grandmother being part Cherokee.³ She had irrefutable evidence for this native lineage, but I could rarely follow all the names, places, and events, especially as I was more content with observing how she worked the plants and the dirt with such brilliant efficiency. I was more interested in the corn, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, blackberries, carrots, and other gifts she brought forth from the earth. It was while she and I were in the garden that they came upon us.

To reach the garden in the backyard, you had to walk up the long driveway of our house and cross a gravel area and then walk across some grass. From the garden you could hear anyone walking across the gravel, the sound of pebbles crunching announcing their presence. But on one memorable occasion, I did not hear them. All I heard was the sound of feet moving through grass, and as I turned I saw two white men walking toward us. I knew my mother was at the farthest end of the garden, and I wanted to alert her. But that was unnecessary. I don't know how she knew or how she moved so quickly, but as I turned to find her with my eyes she was already positioning her body in front of mine. Her actions were ancient and modern—a mother moving her body in front of her child in the presence of strangers, a black woman placing her body between the body of her tender young son and the bodies of white men.

"Hello," they said, "I am — and this is —. We are from First Christian Reformed Church down the street." They went on to ask my mother her name, which she told them in her regal southern voice: "I am Mary Jennings." She did not tell them my name. This was for my protection my mother would say. White men should not know the names of young black boys, as such knowledge would never be used for my good. The older man proceeded to talk about their church, the activities they had for kids, and what they were hoping to do in the neighborhood. He talked for a long time and quite formally, like he was giving a rehearsed speech. The younger man stood looking around nervously. After what seemed to me hours, the younger man showed his impatience with his fellow missionary's speech and bent down to speak to me. This was an odd gesture, I thought, not only because it too seemed rehearsed but also because it seemed inappropriate. I was about twelve years old, and when he bent down he was facing my navel. His words and verbal gestures were equally misplaced. He talked to me like I was a kindergartener or someone with little intelligence: What was my name, what school did I go to, did I like school? Does any twelve year old like school?

The strangeness of this event lay not only in their appearance in our backyard but also in the obliviousness of these men as to whom they were addressing—Mary Jennings, one of the pillars of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. I thought it incredibly odd that they never once asked her if she went to church, if she was a Christian, or even if she believed in God. Mary and her twin sister, Martha, were about as close to their scriptural counterparts as you could get. Without fail they were in their customary seats in church every Sunday, and you could calibrate almost every activity of the church by and around them or us, their children. In addition, every Sunday they would visit every single person on the sick and shut-in list. The depth and complexities of Mary's faith were unfathomable, as unfathomable as the blindness of these men to our Christian lives.

My mother finally interrupted the speech of this would-be neighborhood missionary with the words, "I am already a Christian. I believe in Jesus and I attend New Hope Missionary Baptist church, where Rev. J. V. Williams is the pastor." I don't remember his exact reply to my mother's declaration of identity, but he kept talking for quite a few more wasted minutes. Finally they gave her some literature and left. I remember this event because it underscored an inexplicable strangeness embedded in the Christianity I lived and observed. Experiences like these fueled a question that has grown in hermeneutic force for me: Why did they not know us? They should have known us very well.

The church they were from—down the street—was not simply any church. It was First Christian Reformed Church, a mother church of the Christian Reformed denomination, a denomination that has its spiritual roots in the theology

of John Calvin, its ethnic roots in the Netherlands, and the branches of its consciousness shaped by the historical contours of American immigrant life. Our house at 717 Franklin Street was about two hundred yards from where that beautifully majestic church stood. I knew the church grounds very well because they had the nicest basketball court in the neighborhood. The court stood at the end of the large church parking lot, and that was where I planted, in John Edgar Wideman's beautiful characterization of every aspiring basketball player's beginning, my "hoop roots."⁴ Unlike Wideman, however, I never harbored any illusions of being a serious basketball player because I was too short and too slow and had a pitiful jump shot. But what I lacked in talent I made up for in effort. So usually if you were looking for me and I wasn't riding my stingray bike, playing with my best buddies, Kevin and Troy, or running with my nephew Jonathan in the neighborhood, I was, along with many other black boys and young men, in that parking lot playing basketball. And every Sunday, we drove back and forth past that church and that court heading to New Hope.

Why did these men not know me, not know Mary and Ivory, and not know the multitude of other black Christians who filled the neighborhood that surrounded that church? I am not asking why they weren't familiar with us, and I am certainly not asking about the logistics of their missional operations. The foreignness and formality of their speech in our backyard signaled a wider and deeper order of not knowing, of not sensing, of not imagining. The most common way to narrate this historical reality of Western Christianity displayed in my backyard is to speak of different Christianities, white and black, or different cultural expressions of Christianity, (European) immigrant and (African) slave, or even of a sinful division by faith formed from the historical realities of slavery. However, such narratives draw away too quickly from the strangeness displayed at the edge of my mother's garden. In the small space of a backyard I witnessed a Christianity familiar to most of us, enclosed in racial and cultural difference, inconsequentially related to its geography, often imaginatively detached from its surroundings of both people and spaces, but one yet bound to compelling gestures of connection, belonging, and invitation. Here, however, we were operating out of a history of relations that exposed a distorted relational imagination.

There is within Christianity a breathtakingly powerful way to imagine and enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging. I could sense that power not only in the courageous yet wooden display of those neighborhood missionaries but also in the beauty and ease of my mother as she worked the ground, the earth. Though very different, their gestures drew from a crucial aspect of Christian existence and Christian desire buried inside the more mundane sense of what it means to be a Christian. In order to understand this I need

to tell you another story. Years later I found myself a student at the very college founded by that church and that denomination, Calvin College. By the time I arrived at Calvin College I was sure I was called to be a minister. My road to this self-revelation was quite rocky, not because I resisted my intense Christian upbringing but because very early I emerged as a precocious provocateur of the poor pastor of my church, the Reverend J. V. Williams. I questioned everything and brought those questions to Reverend Williams, who had no earthly idea how to answer any serious theological inquiry. My questions and questioning were as constant and long as a Michigan winter, and my youthful patience as short as its summer heat waves. Needless to say, I did not endear myself to the pastor. This meant that I lacked the usual (for most black Baptist young men) fatherly mentoring of a young minister by their pastor.

I think he realized that such mentoring would have in fact been wasted on me, not only because of my thorn-in-the-flesh constant queries but also because I represented a generation of postmigration black children who tore large rips in the garments of racial and denominational identity we dutifully wore out of respect for our elders. He was so right to be suspicious of us. We were poised to imagine our belonging in ways unanticipated by our parents and grandparents who had fled the hateful South. But those imaginative possibilities desperately needed guidance. They needed theological voices that would have drawn us beyond the cultural nationalism, or the conservative theo-political ideologies, or the crass materialism that would beckon in the coming decades.

So it was that I found myself as a student at Calvin College being asked to preach in chapel. It was a last-minute invitation, the scheduled speaker having reported he would not be available for the program. The irony of this occasion was that it served as the site of my trial sermon. Here this son of Mary did not preach his first words among his own people, in the womb of the black church, but at the Dutch Reformed School, shaped in the austere aesthetic of John Calvin. I remember the text, Galatians 2: 20, but not the sermon. I was glad when it ended. But something strange happened afterward.

As people milled around, gathering up books and book bags to return to class, I noticed moving toward me a line of my professors, about five of them. Anyone who has been around Dutch Reformed professors (especially theology professors) would never accuse them of being given to exaggerated displays of emotion. Their classroom demeanor matched the orderly presentation of the buildings and the grounds: clear, precise, thoughtful. But as they approached me, I remember vividly how each reached for my hand, some clasping it with both their hands, others hugging me, all looking into my eyes with eyes that exposed fatherly love and appreciation. They each said in their moment of touching me,

"Willie, thank you for the Word of God." I knew their words were standard and proper responses to sermons heard in Reformed churches with histories much older than I, that young black man. But their gestures spoke something even more ancient, of a sense of connection and belonging and of a freedom to claim, to embrace, to make familiar one who is not. After chapel, we returned to class, where they assumed their proper pedagogical form, but the stark contrast between that moment and the theologically informed Christian education I was receiving was now overwhelming. Nothing else in my formal theological education corroborated that moment. Indeed it juts out as a moment of clarity regarding the deeper reality of theology and theological identity hidden beneath historical tragic developments.

I could narrate this story as a moment of Freudian transference built on a psychological replacement, Dutch professors in the place of a black Baptist pastor; or I could invoke current sensibilities and narrate this as an aspect of the psychic exchanges common inside of colonized subjectivity. I mouthed words, I performed rationalities conducive to the further production of knowledge and self-knowledge within certain white Western regimes of identity formation and was rewarded for it with displays of approval. However, such accounts sound like jazz musicians who have not learned to hear the intricacies of standard classic jazz tunes and subsequently can neither play what they hear nor hear what they play. I am not dismissing such narrative possibilities, but more is going on than these narrations can see. On that day in that space, I saw and felt what I had seen in my mother's garden and in the many hospital rooms she visited in pastoral care and in the few snatches of time when someone's actions move them toward a depth of intimacy both unanticipated and startling. It was the exercise of an imaginative capacity to redefine the social, to claim, to embrace, to join, to desire. Yet it is precisely the episodic character of this capacity among Christians that indicates something deeply, painfully amiss.

This book attempts to narrate exactly what is missing, what thwarts the deepest reality of the Christian social imagination. Indeed, I argue here that Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination. I think most Christians sense that something about Christians' social imaginations is ill, 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. Those shortsighted analyses suffer on the one side from unfamiliarity with the deep theological architecture that patterned early modern visions of peoples, places, and societies and therefore lack the sense of what was turned horribly wrong theologically. And on the other side, Christian theology now operates inside this diseased social imagination without the ability

to discern how its intellectual and pedagogical performances reflect and fuel the problem, further crippling the communities it serves. That is, theology lacks the ability to see the profound connections between an embrace by very different people in the chapel and theological meditations articulated in the classroom, between connecting to the earth, to strangers, and to the possibilities of identities formed and reformed precisely in and through such actions.

This inability is not due to conceptual gaps in the history of Christian thought, nor is it due to incoherence in doctrinal logics, nor should it be attributed to any number of intellectual problems and challenges arising with the Enlightenment. One must look more deliberately at the soil in which the modern theological imagination grew and where it continues to find its deeper social nutrients. One crucial site where I have watched the display of this interrupted social imagination is in the theological academy. As student, professor, and academic dean, I have watched with a sense of melancholy the formation process of Christian intellectuals. I watched what at first I took to be a cultural and social clumsiness that seems bound to what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "the scholastic disposition."⁵ Later I realized that what I was witnessing was not a social clumsiness at all but a highly refined process of socialization. I watched a complex process of disassociation and dislocation that was connected to the prescribed habits of mind for those who would do scholarly theological work.

This process of disassociation and dislocation I watched was not the theory/practice split in conceptual work, or the split between the classical and practical disciplines, or the separation of the church from the academy, or a split between orthodox and orthopraxis; neither can it be characterized through the arguments regnant in the tired debates about the nature, purposes, and values of abstract thinking versus situated thinking and all the permutations of that conflict. This process touches on these matters. What I observed in the theological academy was fundamentally the resistance of theologians to think *theologically* about their identities. It was the negation of a Christian intellectual posture reflective of the central trajectory of the incarnate life of the Son of God, who took on the life of the creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection, and intimacy. Such a posture would inevitably present the likelihood of transformations not only of ways of thinking but of ways of life that require the presence of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with being in the social, cultural, economic, and political position to be transformed.

The social vision that holds court in the theological academy imagines its intellectual world from the commanding heights of various social economies: cultural, political, and scholastic. I don't mean that scholars in the theological academy think they are in charge of the academic or political worlds. I mean

that the regulative character of their intellectual posture created through the cultivated capacities to clarify, categorize, define, explain, interpret, and so forth eclipses its fluid, adaptable, even morph-able character. This eclipse is not due to the emergence of a new intellectual style but points to a history in which the Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways of life had to adapt, become fluid, even morph into the colonial order of things, and such a situation drew Christianity and its theologians inside habits of mind and life that internalized and normalized that order of things.

Adaptability, fluidity, formation, and reformation of being were heavily weighted on the side of indigenes as their requirement for survival. As Christianity developed both in the old world of Europe and in the new worlds of the Americas, Asia, and Africa, it was no longer able to feel this tragic imbalance. Indeed, it is as though Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality. It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities. Thus the persistent preoccupations of the modern theological academy with various enlightenment problems bound up in such matters as answering the intellectual threat of atheism, reasserting the importance of orthodoxy, engaging in new forms of the conservative-liberal debate, determining how one should read sacred texts, or the obsessive labeling and positioning of theological trends (for example, Barthian, *ressourcement*, liberationist, postliberal, radical orthodoxy, feminist, womanist, postcolonial) not only display the continuing encasement in racial logics and agency, but also reflect the deep pedagogical sensory deprivation of this horrific imbalance. Western Christian intellectuals still imagine the world from the commanding heights.

My claim here would seem to fly in the face of a number of theologians and philosophers who believe that societies have now entered a post-Christian or post-establishment Christian reality in the Western world in which the easy alignment of Protestantism with the quasi-religious sensibilities of the nation-state has vanished. Whatever the claimed cause of this situation for the church in the modern "post-Christendom" world, the conclusion is the same: Western Christians are a minority, an exilic people in a strange land.⁶ While the old Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony may be over, such readings of the reality of Christian existence in the West are painfully superficial. They bypass the deeper realities of Western Christian sensibilities, identities, and habits of mind which continue to channel patterns of colonialist dominance.

At one level these are the historical commanding heights imagined by Western, white, male identities, but at another level these are ways of being in the

world that resist the realities of submission, desire, and transformation. A Christianity born of such realities but historically formed to resist them has yielded a form of religious life that thwarts its deepest instincts of intimacy. That intimacy should by now have given Christians a faith that understands its own deep wisdom and power of joining, mixing, merging, and being changed by multiple ways of life to witness a God who surprises us by love of differences and draws us to new capacities to imagine their reconciliation. Instead, the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then most certainly of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world. What happened to the original trajectory of intimacy?

In this book, I want to answer that question by telling the story of modern Christianity's diseased social imagination. It was not my intent to write a history of the problem. This book is not a historical account that moves through all the complex realities of churches and colonialist nations, indigenes and slaves, land and commodity forms, racial formation and social imagination, nation and ecclesial dispute, all from the fifteenth century through the twentieth. Such a multivolume project would be a welcome addition to what I have done here. But as a theologian, my goal has been to paint a portrait of a theological problem in order to suggest a way forward. In order to arrive at my goal I take the reader on a journey into the lives of several people who may seem completely unrelated. These are people from diverse places and times who are drawn into my circle of concern first because they are Christians attempting to live as Christians at various times in the colonialist moment. But, more important, they illumine aspects of the problem in profound ways.

They are neither the progenitors of the problem nor its triggers. They represent microcosms of the great transformation. What I am doing is working like a film director. Rather than telling the story of a devastating flood by reviewing its meteorological antecedents or tracking the rise of the water or focusing on the flow patterns of the water (the buildings it topples, the crops it destroys), I focus on the person trapped on the roof with no place to go, the woman in a shelter with her children waiting for word on missing relatives, a dog desperately trying to swim to a spot of land to rest. Thus the majority of the chapters build around various peoples and their approach to their new situation in the newfound worlds. Yet a central argument and a theological position flow through the text.

At this point, however, I simply want to invite readers into my exploration of the Christian capacity for intimacy and why Christians have been so unable to enter fully into this marvelous gift given by God's Son to the world. I could speak of this gift in terms of reconciliation. But I have purposely stayed away from the

theological language of reconciliation because of its terrible misuse in Western Christianity and its tormented deployment in so many theological systems and projects. The concept of reconciliation is not irretrievable, but I am convinced that before we theologians can interpret the depths of the divine action of reconciliation we must first articulate the profound deformities of Christian intimacy and identity in modernity. Until we do, all theological discussions of reconciliation will be exactly what they tend to be: (a) ideological tools for facilitating the negotiations of power; or (b) socially exhausted idealist claims masquerading as serious theological accounts. In truth, it is not at all clear that most Christians are ready to imagine reconciliation.

The smaller steps I take in this book are to outline specific things that changed and in so doing brought us to the present moment. Understanding these changes involves considering concepts, Christian doctrines, and events together that to my knowledge have not been thought of together. To draw these things together I have attempted to listen quietly and patiently to voices rarely heard by theologians and to ask questions about things only now entering the horizon of theological reflection, questions of race, space, place, geography, and identity and of the theological significance of Native American identities and Jewish–Gentile identity in relation to black–white racial identity as well as the importance of translation, literacy, and language. I draw attention to all of these matters in this book, but I must warn that the journey I take here will be different, and the turns should not be anticipated but followed and only at the end should readers decide whether this was a sure route and a good destination.

This book is a work of Christian theology, although it may not seem so to those readers steeped in Christian theological discourse. Admittedly, this text does not enter into extensive conversation with Western or Eastern theologians of the past. It is not in that sense an exercise in retrieval and comparison. However, it does enter into sustained theological analysis of particular Christian performances in order to capture the social condition of Christianity itself. This act of analysis is coupled with an act of retrieval in which I attempt a recalibration of a theological trajectory in order to posit a new vision for theology itself. In effect, I am attempting to do theology in a different modality—*theological analysis of theology's social performances*—in hopes of articulating a vision more faithful to the God whose incarnate life established and establishes the contours, character, and content of Christian theology.

This work also joins the growing conversation regarding the possibilities of a truly cosmopolitan citizenship. Such a world citizenship imagines cultural transactions that signal the emergence of people whose sense of agency and belonging breaks open not only geopolitical and nationalist confines but also the strictures

of ethnic and racial identities. This is indeed a noble dream even if it is a moving target given the conceptual confusions and political struggles around multicultural discourse. Yet I hope to intervene helpfully in this conversation by returning precisely to the question of the constitution of such a people and such a citizenship. However, rather than building the hope of a cosmopolitanism from the soil of an imagined democratic spirit, I seek a deeper soil. That deeper rich soil is not easily unearthed. It is surely not resident at the surface levels of Christianity and ecclesial existence today. Yet Christianity marks the spot where, if noble dream joins hands with God-inspired hope and presses with great impatience against the insularities of life, for example, national, cultural, ethnic, economic, sexual, and racial, seeking the deeper ground upon which to seed a new way of belonging and living together, then we will find together not simply a new ground, not simply a new seed, but a life already prepared and offered to us.