




7-1-2021

Jennings' "After Whiteness: An education in belonging" (book review)

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Recommended Citation

Stout, Andrew C. (2021) "Jennings' "After Whiteness: An education in belonging" (book review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 64: Iss. 1, Article 14.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.2259>

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Book Reviews



Jennings, W. J. (2020). *After Whiteness: An education in belonging*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 175 pp. \$19.99. ISBN: 9780802878441

Willie James Jennings wants to see theological education transformed in some fundamental ways. This first entry in the Theological Education between the Times series is ambitious in its vision. Jennings developed a critique of Christianity's diseased racial reasoning in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (2011). In *After Whiteness* he applies that critique to the entire project of Western higher education. "Formation" is a buzzword with which anyone involved in theological education will be familiar. Jennings affirms the importance of education as holistic formation while exploring the distorted ways that theological institutions so often form those who pass through them. The heritage of colonialism, imperialism, and the master/slave relationship has shaped Western education in ways that cannot be easily reversed. By stepping back to see how our theological institutions have been formed by whiteness, we can begin to discover ways to participate in the formation of students that align with the gospel and cultivate belonging rather than division.

Jennings articulates his vision for the transformation of education through a mixture of theological reflection, memoir, and poetry. This cross pollination of genres demonstrates in form what Jennings is arguing for in theory, as he calls into question the traditional boundaries and frameworks of theological education. Jennings' abstract, often allusive prose, is grounded by his anecdotes from his years of experience as a professor and administrator. Even in his prose, he employs a specific, poetic vocabulary to which the reader must gradually acclimate. As he describes the "fragments" that make up theology and challenges the "designs" and "motions" of European and North American higher education, we are slowly inculcated into a different understanding of the educational task. Getting accustomed to Jennings' unique language and style acclimates us to a mode of education that focuses on the cultivation of communion rather than the mastery of material.

The "whiteness" that Jennings rejects is not a dismissal of the European, but rather, a refusal to prioritize modes of being in the world that emphasize self-sufficiency and mastery of the other. This leads Jennings to challenge certain cherished Western notions, such as the role of "tradition" and the cultivation of the "servant leader." The stories that he tells of his relationships with students and colleagues illustrate

the difficulties encountered when people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and orientations with varied goals and expectations are thrown together in educational institutions. His poetry gives voice to the pains and possibilities involved in this endeavor. *AfterWhiteness* is an essential book for all those in the trenches of theological education, and it is a promising first look at what is sure to be an important series.

Reviewer

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