

The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race. Willie James Jennings. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 366pp. \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-15211-1.

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The Christian Imagination laments the impact of western hegemony on the transmission, translation, and spread of Christianity in non-western soil with a view to recommend a program for theological construction imbued with racial and postcolonial sensibilities. Willie Jennings, associate professor at Duke Divinity School, argues his thesis by retrieving four historic east-west engagements at the political, sociological, economic, and religious fronts, and by showing that the spread of Christianity and the process of theologization in these regions (Venezuela, Peru, India, South Africa, Nigeria) rests on a western colonial paradigm, an unwitting common denominator. As a corollary, a misguided European view that the western white race is superior to all other races creeps into the historic spread and introduction of Christianity and Christian theology to these regions between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The upshot of his research is that the unexamined imperialistic paradigm (more blatant then and more subtle now) proves detrimental to Christian imagination. In this review, I summarize Jennings' retrieval before I proffer some trajectories that one may be expected after Jennings' contribution.

Jennings organizes his project in three parts. In Part 1, Jennings demonstrates how colonialism brings about a displacement of the natives' identities when the colonizers seized the land and subjugated native beliefs and practices with a supposed superior western ideology. He does so by retrieving history through the lens of Gomes Eanes de Azurara (or Zurara), a royal chronicler of Prince Henry of Portugal since 1444, and Jose de Acosta Porres (or Acosta), a Jesuit theologian to Peru and India from 1572 onwards. Central to part 1 however is not the historical accounts *per se* even though Jennings' impressive historiographical retrieval supports his argument on the overbearing relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. At the heart of part 1 is that a supersessionistic view – that Gentile Christian nations have replaced Israel as the elect of God – have unwittingly led western Christianity on the pathway of not only displacing Israel as crucial to its theological pilgrimage, but also the displacement of other nations and peoples of color as insignificant when compared to themselves (the western colonizers, which often operated under the edict of their Christian nation leader) as the elect of God. The result is a hegemony that claims superiority

and power to dominate and subjugate others for their own imperialistic avarice.

In Part 2, Jennings narrates the change that took place in the heart of John William Colenso, an Anglican bishop sent to Durban, South Africa, and especially his later transformation when he translated the Bible to Zulu language, wrote biblical commentaries for the Zululan people, and performed ministry among the Zulu between 1854 and 1865. Consequent to Colenso's later acceptance of Zulu culture (which meant he no longer embraced a supersessionistic and imperialistic colonializer mentality), he was labeled a heretic by the Church of England. For Jennings, the account speaks of the tragedy of an imperialistic, ecclesiocentric view of the translation and transmission of the Christian faith, operating under the vision of an European cultural hegemony. To complement Colenso's account, Jennings designates a chapter on Olaudah Equiano (b. 1745)'s auto-biographical journey of a continent's invasion by western civilization. Jennings shows how Equiano struggled with his displaced identity both as a Christian and a former African slave in the slave-ship and slave-trade (endorsed by the Queen Elizabeth I). Equiano's encounters with his Christian masters reveal a Christian performance shaped by a European superiority vision. Jennings show how Equiano still lamented his peril even after he bought his own freedom (unusual for his time) because he could not escape his black identity in a white-dominated world! Jennings analyzes the problem of intimacy and belonging together, and of literacy and pedagogical instruction under a humanistic western hegemony, that sees the white race as superior when compared to the black in the two chapters of part 3.

We may say with Jennings that Alasdair MacIntyre's view that "theological reflection is quintessentially a traditioned enterprise" (pp. 68-69) is proven in all of Jennings' historical retrieval of western Christian civilization entering non-western soil. It is not just Christianity but a cultural form of Christianity that encroached onto the foreign soil, argues Jennings.

In the remade world born of the colonialist moment, Christian possibilities of communion and cultural intimacy have been subverted to draw all peoples towards an existence marked by its telos [socially, economically, politically and even ecclesially] ... this perversion of space and communion draw from Christian logics pervade many parts of the world (p.288).

Because Jennings locates his research in the late medieval to modern times when Christendom was still the center of Western life and thought, contemporary theologians would do well to pay attention to Jennings' analysis and examine their own works so as not to render a bad name to the future of Christian engagement with society.

Taking *The Christian Imagination* seriously, we may expect at least three scholarly trajectories. First, Jennings provides a solid case for reconstructing theology (against the grain of a western hegemonic perspective) so that Christian theology may remain true to its fundamental characteristic of a global God seeking intimacy and communion with a diverse humanity. I have however found the subtitle “Theology and the Origin of Race” rather misleading: Jennings does not attempt to offer a theology of the origin of race (although he did say something of the human race and civilization after Shem, Ham, and Japheth). It is *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press, 2008) by J. Kameron Carter, one of Jennings’ mentee and now colleague, that explores a theology of race, and in particular, a theological, historical and political re-reading of the Israelite and Christian identity as the earlier perpetuators of a ‘western white’ hegemonic Christian vision. While both Carter and Jennings obviously share the same vision for the future of theology, Jennings’ interest (the book under review) rests more on theological imagination in light of race and political, economic, social, and ecclesial hegemonies (instead of a theology of the origin of race *per se* as the subtitle of Jennings’ book suggests). We may even read Jennings as hinting at a prospect for human flourishing by means of a true Christian vision as a non-white perspective. If Jennings’ thesis is defensible, it should alter the future of theology and theological method, especially written from the western hemisphere. Perhaps, theological observers may look forward to a revisioning of global theology even beyond the imagination of William Dryness, et al.’s *Dictionary of Global Theology* (IVP Academic, 2008).

A discerning reader may wonder about my concern nevertheless about the indefensibility of Jennings’ thesis. Part of my concern here lies in the none-white superiority that Jennings tried to show subtly. I am not decided as yet as to whether all kinds of theologization (process of theology, rather than theology itself) from white to non-white context reflect a western/white hegemonic ethos. I can see myself buying into Jennings’ argument and the apparent reality of it working in western and non-western Christian context. But, I still think it too strong to make a generalization from Jennings’ brilliant historical evaluation of cross-contextual realities, unless it is true that what is presenting itself is a cultural, white hegemonic Christianity entering other spaces - and in which the case, I would have to wonder how that may be demonstrated definitively. Also, while I see the value of postcolonial work, I think it too farfetched to decry postcoloniality as a better methodology. Thus I am undecided if the thesis is defensible.

Second, and in spite of my slight reservation, it is undeniable that Jennings opens up spaces for rewriting global history from the perspective of the margins and the underdogs. If Eugen Weber, a late professor of the University

of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is right that history is inevitably written from the perspective of the powerful (see Weber's 52-volume lecture series on "The Western Tradition"), then, Jennings' historical-theological retrieval may be read as an attempt to recover the colonized's voices so as to provide a more accurate account of what transpired historically. Jennings' work, albeit centered on four retrievals from the late medieval and modern era, has by itself open up a vista for rewriting the history of human civilization in all its multi-faceted disciplines.

The rewriting of history carries with it serious implications for global politics, which is the third prospective impact of Jennings' work. Potentially, we may look forward to a recalibration of global politics, economics, and religions. Anthony Pagden, another UCLA distinguished professor of political science and history, suggests that the east and the west have been struggling for 2,500 years (see *Worlds at War*, Random House, 2008), and often under the banners of politics, economics, and religions. In the same spirit, Jennings shows that where westernization enters non-western soil, it has created a "diseased social imagination" (pp. 6-7) with a set of political, economic, social, and religious hegemony that contravenes the "counter hegemonic reality" of true belonging together in a global world (pp. 266- 269). Considering Jennings' work in light of Pagdenian perspective, one wonders if the present international relations and balance of powers in the aftermath of the two world wars, the cold war, "the axles of evil" (recalling the words of former US President George Bush), and the economic hegemonic rise of the Chinese economy is to lead to a brave new world order?