

Excerpt from "Overcoming a Racial Faith" by Willie James Jennings, associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale University.

The Principality of Whiteness

Early Europeans inherited theological visions that collated the symbiotic tropes of whiteness and blackness with ideas of good and evil, light and dark, and life and death within theological language. During the colonial period in America, those notions of *white* and *black* would also house a theological way of seeing that formed ideas about truth, goodness, and beauty around bodies designated as white. Whiteness emerged as the ground for the universal, by which I mean the ability of the one to represent the many as well as the ability of the one to present reality on behalf of the many. White bodies were established as normative humanity in all its majesty or weakness.

Whiteness emerged out of Christianity and unleashed a power that remains difficult to comprehend— unless one understands that Christianity always invokes comprehensive vision. Anyone and everyone may be seen through the lens of sinner and saved, faithful or faithless. Whiteness not only designates white bodies as the exemplars of beauty, goodness, and truth, it also instigates patterns of thinking and ways of being that invite multiple people(s) to imagine their worlds through white bodies. *For a myriad of historical reasons, we have not had the conceptual ability to name whiteness for what it is: not a particular people, not a particular gender, not a particular nation, but an invitation, a becoming, a transformation, an accomplishment.* Waves of immigrant groups coming to these shores hoped to strip away their ethnic past and claim an American future, which was defined by achieving whiteness. Whiteness was and is a way of being in the world and a way of seeing the world at the same time. Whiteness is determined by the aspiration to and acceptance of this way of being and seeing in the world. Whiteness is not the equal and opposite of blackness.

Whiteness is a way of imaging oneself as part of the central facilitating reality, the reality that makes sense of, interprets, organizes, and narrates the world. Whiteness is having the power to realize and sustain that imagination. Indeed, in many parts of the world people live under the pigmentocracy of white preference that instructs all people to approximate fabricated white images of humanity and urges us to participate in the process of self-invention through consumption. We live under the tacit agreement that white bodies may be the carriers of our fantasies for the good life.