European Christian missionaries and their false sense of progress

What does maturity look like? Whiteness is a horrific answer to this question.

by Willie James Jennings in the November 7, 2018 issue

British missionaries, local evangelists, and others in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, early 1900s.

Can white people be saved? For some, the question is deeply offensive. It suggests that there is a category of people whose existence raises the question of the efficacy of salvation. But for now I am less concerned about the efficacy of salvation and more interested in the status of two keywords in the question: *salvation* and *whiteness*. These terms point to a history that we yet live within, a history where whiteness as a way of being in the world has been joined to a Christianity that is also a way of being in the world. It was the fusion of these two realities that gave tragic shape to Christian faith in the new worlds at the dawn of what we now call the modern colonialist era, or colonial modernity.

It is precisely this fusing together of Christianity with whiteness that constitutes the ground of many of our struggles today. We have always had difficulty in seeing the deeper problem of this fusion. Beside bewilderment, the typical response I get to the idea that whiteness is a problem is a mixture of guilt and anger, and of course the inevitable pushback.

It is an ironic truth of Christian life that most people perform a faith, embody a faith, that is far more complex than they articulate. There is a vastness to our lives in faith that we cannot adequately capture with our words. The difficulty with racial existence and with whiteness in particular is that it has woven itself into that vastness, making seeing the fusion and seeing our way beyond the fusion very difficult work.

To speak of whiteness is not to speak of particular people but of people caught up in a deformed building project aimed at bringing the world to its full maturity. What does maturity look like, maturity of mind and body, land and animal (use), landscape and building, family and government? Whiteness is a horrific answer to this question formed exactly at the site of Christian missions.

Whiteness as we now know it and experience it emerged at a moment in human history when the world in all its epistemological density was opening up to those we would later call Europeans. Early Europeans entered worlds overwhelming in every way, not just in majestic beauty but also in stunning landscapes, not just with inexplicable animals in their mind-bending variety but with a vast array of differing languages carried by different peoples. These settlers in these new places asked themselves the question, Who am I in this strange new place? This is the right question, the holy and good question. The newness of place should provoke such questions. The question is never the root of selfishness. Selfishness grows from its answer.

These Europeans answered the question without the voice or vision of the peoples of the new worlds. They self-designated. This was bad enough, but the horror continued as they designated vast numbers of remarkably different peoples. As they did this, they quickly began to suture different peoples, clans, and tribes into racial categories. They, the Europeans, were white, and the others were almost white, not quite white, or nonwhite, or almost black, not quite black, or black. They created a viral world of designation between white and black, capable of capturing all people in racial identity. What began as harmless designating soon took its place in a matrix

of harm, and these categories took on an aggressive life of their own.

But the work of these early Europeans naming themselves white and others not white was only one side of what constituted racial identity. The other crucial part of that constitution was the formation of modern private property and the destruction of place-centered identities.

For the first time in human history, peoples (especially in the colonized worlds) were forced to think of themselves in disorienting ways, to think of themselves away from land and away from animals and into racial encasement. They were forced to reduce their identities to their bodies and the activities of the body. Why? Because the land was being taken, the animals were being captured and killed at a monstrous rate, and the plants and the landscape were being altered irreversibly. Christian settlers understood themselves to be present in the new worlds only by the hand of God, through God's ineffable providence. They were there for one central purpose—to bring the new worlds into maturity, mature use, mature development, and of course a mature perception of the world.

The goal of missionaries was not simply to bring new world peoples into the reality of salvation. It was also to see themselves as centered selves who project meaning onto the world and who may bring nature to its full purpose and use. This crucial educational hope was to disabuse Native peoples of any idea that lands and animals, landscapes and seasons carried any communicative or animate density, and therefore any ethical or moral direction in how to live in the world. Instead, they offered peoples a relationship with the world that was basically one dimensional—we interpret and manipulate the world as we see fit, taking from it what we need, and caring for it within the logics of making it more productive for us; that is, we draw the world to its proper fulfillment.

From the beginning of colonialism, salvation and the transformation of land and peoples have been coupled together, and that coupling turned Christianity's creative powers against itself. Christian faith is about new life in Christ and forming life inside that newness. The new situation of colonial power enfolded the newness that is Christian faith within the newness of transforming land, people, earth, and animal.

The problem here is not the impulse to transform. Transformation is not inherently evil. The horror here is the colonialist's denial of the voice and vision of peoples who inhabit a place, denial that defies the logic of life together in a place as the basic

wisdom that should shape transformation. The horror is the emergence of a form of creating that destroys creation.

Death began with denying the voice of peoples and the voice of the earth, thus minimizing peoples' identities as bound to places. Death expanded its reach by designating peoples and the earth in reductive categories, isolating lives into fragments in order to make them useful, turning everything into commodities. We learned to reassemble life as interchangeable, exchangeable, and connectible bodies, buildings, goods, and services. We have remained on this trajectory, which captured the energy and logic of Christian conversion and placed it inside whiteness as a formation toward maturity.

Whiteness emerged at a particular moment in human history.

Let me be clear: no one is born white. There is no white biology, but whiteness is real. Whiteness is an invitation to a form of agency and a subjectivity that imagines life progressing toward what is in fact a diseased understanding of maturity, a maturity that invites us to evaluate the entire world by how far along it is toward this goal. White agency and subjectivity form when people imagine themselves being transformed in three fundamental ways: from being owned to being an owner, from being a stranger to being a citizen, and from being identified with darkness to being seen as white.

From owned to ownership. The purchase of a life, the taking back of it from enslavement, is a powerful motif of our salvation. Someone gave what is necessary for us to be freed from slavery.

In the new colonial worlds, labor that led to ownership was necessary for freedom. People had to wrestle with two questions. First, what would you do in order to work in a way that would bring you to ownership? Second, what would you do if you were forced to work as if you were owned? Both questions converge in a single question: What would you do to survive?

It all comes back to the land. From the 16th century forward, as more and more land was seized, enclosed, and turned into private property, labor was fundamentally transformed. People were placed on a trajectory that is inescapable—you must see your own body as raw material just like the land. Two kinds of workers become paradigmatic, the indentured servant and the slave. All bodies in the new world were captured in narratives of development and processes of commodification. If the

slave was property, then the indentured servant was temporary property, and between them labor and work formed in the new world.

This means that labor formed in the new world as first a sacrifice of the body, an offering up of the body. The well-being of the body was never a central part of the calculus of work. Work as survival, yes. Work bound to well-being and to flourishing, no.

Flourishing life was reserved for ownership. Ownership of property and of one's own labor meant freedom. Advancement from being raw material to owning property and labor meant you would move from vulnerability to invulnerability, from being without voice to having some measure of voice in society. Historically, owning land not only connected one to the land but also connected one to the growing nationalist ideologies of land ownership as the prerequisite for freedom.

From stranger to citizen. Coming to the new worlds as an immigrant, especially to the place that would come to be called the United States, meant you were willing to tame the wilderness. Taming the wilderness meant much more than clearing land. It meant that you were willing to place your bodies in the unfolding drama of destroying the Native inhabitants. Participating in the destruction of indigenous peoples was how immigrants signaled to the world and to themselves that they were part of the formation of a white nation in contrast to the "Indians." Yet taming the wilderness was also an analogy for stripping away their immigrant past—that is, those cultural artifacts that signaled indebtedness to the old country, the old cultural ways, and the primitive mentalities of the old world's lower classes.

To look like a native—of the new world or an old world—was to be deemed inappropriate to the new order emerging in America. Barbarians signaled by their appearance that they were not ready to participate in the formation of this new nation. They showed immaturity. This meant that transformation was the order of the day. To transform not only requires creation out of destruction, the stripping away of the foreign worlds inappropriate to this new national space, but also creation by the concealment of those worlds. Immigrants conceal, not always quickly and almost never uniformly, but always aimed at dismissing that for which they might be dismissed or determined to be barbarians.

Only when you resist the performance of whiteness do you begin to see it.

Nationalism formed between the twin energies of immigrant angst and the privatization of property where old logics of boundaries and borders transformed inside the new logic of the commodification of space. That is, boundaries and borders matured.

Nationalism was a new way to reassemble life with land. Nationalism was never life inside the land, never life lived in serious reciprocity with plant and animal, sky and season, dirt and water, listening, learning, and finding a way to know oneself as deep partner in the world through a particular place. It was property ownership made the universal right of a people to their space. Yes, there was attachment to the land; yes, there was blood bound to soil; and yes, there were deep sentiment and sensibilities born of living in a land. But this was different. Nationalism was owning the land rather than being owned by the land. It was speaking for the land as one who controls it, not having land and animal speak through you.

Nationalism places people inside borders and borders inside people. Place-centered identity removes the borders between people and the world, pointing to the artificiality of all borders. Few people see the artificiality of borders because the transformation toward citizens has distorted our view of the world. It creates a sense of sovereignty that Christian conversion has been forced to serve. Conversion to the faith has been brought inside the cultivating work of turning immigrants into citizens. Christianity indeed makes good citizens.

From darkness to white. Work transforms us and labor ennobles us—this is what colonial settlers in many ways imagined for themselves and their Native subjects. They imagined a moral transformation that captured both body and labor, drawing all workers toward an idealized vision of the morality of work.

Central to the formation of labor in the new world was the juxtaposing of two racialized body types energized through the mechanisms of modern slavery and indentured servitude. Between these two body types the entire world of bodies and labor would be judged, gauged, and articulated. There was the white body—the civilized, honorable, and beautiful prototype—and the nonwhite body, most centrally the black body—the uncivilized, primitive, dangerous, and ugly body. In the new world of indigenous peoples, Native bodies were perceived as closer to nature and its raw condition of unproductivity, of potentiality, yet to be realized.

Under colonialism's transformational regimes, work was framed inside a project of morality that meant different things for racialized bodies. No matter how hard the black slave worked, her work was read through the prism of a primitive and uncivilized body, one that was inefficient, lazy, and in need of constant supervision. These dark bodies must be drawn through work from their raw condition of potentiality. White workers and their work have always been read as the bearers of an inherent moral integrity. It's not that white workers were never accused of being lazy or inefficient, but this was never assumed to be their natural state, a state out of which they must be disciplined.

The labor of white workers *revealed* the honor inherent to the white body. The labor of black workers (and all whose bodies were associated with the black body) *proved* that they were worthy of honor; through working they were moving away from the primitive and uncivilized black body. That is, black workers *held at bay* dishonor by their work.

These three imagined transformations—from raw material to owner, from stranger to citizen, and from darkness to whiteness—formed at the site of hope for Christian settlers, who did not simply want to make the new worlds their world but wished to make them the way the world ought to be.

I am not saying that all European Christian settlers in the new worlds from generation to generation understood that this is what they were doing. They did in fact understand themselves to be doing a normal planting and a natural harvesting, a normal tearing down and a natural building up.

But the difficulty we face at this moment is the success of that work. Whiteness feels normal and natural because it is woven into how we imagine moving toward maturity. Like extremely comfortable clothing that moves with the body, whiteness becomes what Anne Anlin Cheng calls a second skin.

Whiteness is being questioned at this moment like never before, and that questioning feels terrible to many people. It feels as if we are abandoning the goal of progress because we have been led to believe that the way life has formed over the colonial centuries is the only viable way open to us. Some argue that everything good produced through modern economics outweighs its collateral damage—the denial of indigenous ways, the reductionism inherent in scientific investigation, and the commodification, fragmentation, and reassembling of life into products for

exchange.

Those who are uncomfortable with the questioning of whiteness also feel as though we have become obsessed with matters of identity and have lost a sense of common purpose. There is a sense in which whiteness is invisible, not because it cannot be seen but because the point was never to see it. The point was to perform life toward it. Only when you resist that performance can you actually start to see it.

People have resisted from the very beginning—resisted the loss of life in a place; resisted being designated racially; resisted their lives being commodified; resisted being forced to live inside global systems of exchange, debt, and money; and resisted as long as they could the relentless systems of education and evaluation that supported these things. They sought to perform a different life than the life demanded by whiteness and to suggest a different path to a common purpose.

But the issue was never having a common purpose. The issue has always been who gets to define the common purpose and what energies and instruments have been used to force people into a common purpose that destroys life. So, from the beginning of the workings of whiteness, people have used the only weapon consistently at their disposal to challenge that common purpose—their bodies, their stories, their memories, and their hopes, all found in their identities.

We need at this moment a Christian faith that can start to break our deep connection to whiteness by resisting its vision of maturity. The paths that have been formed by whiteness, carved on the earth and in bodies, cannot be undone. But they can be redirected, drawn into new paths that lead away from death and into life. It begins with the land: with dirt, air, water, cities, towns, neighborhoods, and homes. It begins with new kinds of intentional communities that challenge where people live and how people live in places. It comes to rest in geography and living spaces, just as whiteness comes to rest in space. The maturity that whiteness aims at always forms segregated spaces, bordered life lived in separate endeavors of wish fulfillment.

Segregated spaces must be turned toward living places where people construct together an everyday life that turns in health-giving directions. Overcoming whiteness begins by reconfiguring life geographically so that the flows of money, education, support, and attention move across people who have been separated by the processes that have formed us racially, economically, and nationally.

We start with the communities that have been left behind in the movement toward maturity—those no longer imagined through the goals of ownership, citizenship, or productive labor—and we join them, move to them, stay in them, form them, advocate for them, or protect them. This work belongs not only to Christians, but to all who are willing to live toward a different formation of places. We fight against the segregation that shapes our worlds, and we work to weave lives together.

Indeed, this is what Christian mission at its best was always aiming at—following Jesus into new places to form new life, life together. I advocate compelling people to live together across all the lines of formation that divide us and have habituated us to be comfortable with those divides. Why? Because I want to turn us from a formation that compels people to aim their lives toward a vision of maturity that is bound in death. I want to save us from being or becoming white people.

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