Conversations at the Center Show Notes & Resources

Dr Willie James Jennings interviewed by Dr. Joseph Tucker Edmonds

Bio: Jennings is a theologian who teaches in the areas of Christian thought, race theory, decolonial and environmental studies. Dr. Jennings is the author of The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race published by Yale University Press and recipient of the 2010 American Academy of Religion Book of the Year in the Constructive- Reflective Studies category. It is one of the most important books in theology written in the last 25 years and is now a standard text read in colleges, seminaries, and universities. Dr. Jennings is also the recipient of the 2015 Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his groundbreaking work on race and Christianity. Dr. Jennings's commentary on the Book of Acts won the Reference Book of the Year Award, from The Academy of Parish Clergy. He is also the author of After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging, which was the inaugural book in the much-anticipated book series, Theological Education between the Times, and has already become an instant classic, winning the 2020 book of the year award from Publisher's Weekly. It was also selected as a finalist for the 2021 American Academy of Religion Book of the Year in the Constructive- Reflective Studies category, and in 2023 won the Lilly Fellows Program Book Award.

Explore some of Willie's Work

The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (2010)

- Book Discussion Video (2020)

After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging (2020)

- Book Discussion Video (2021)

Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible Willie James Jennings (2017)

J.J. Thiessen Lecture | Featuring Dr. Willie James Jennings, Yale Divinity School (2023)

Theology, Race, and Inclusion: An Interview w/ Dr. Willie James Jennings (2024)

Mentioned in Conversation

W. E. B. Du Bois: American sociologist and Civil Rights Activist

- *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
- *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)

James H. Cone

- *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970)
- *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969)
    - Why This Text Matters Video: Black Theology and Black Power
- *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (2011)
    - *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* Conversation with Dr. James Cone Video
- *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972)

Show Notes

Question 1: This question comes from a question on terms; we often talk about "Africana studies" or "Black thought". What does it mean to be someone who studies and thinks about Black thought? How has that shaped who you are and the career you are in?

Willie: When I think about Black thought, it is a work of trying to make visible that which has been invisible, trying to make clear that there is a reality to life present that is often not understood and certainly ought to be looked at. Black thought for me is the important work of making visible not only black lives but the incredible enmeshing of black lives in so much of what we call life. In a sense, it is a way to give witnesses to our way of life.

Question 2: Can we create a genealogy of black thought for our listeners? Thinking about Debois and the beginning of folks who are thinking about this project we might call African American history or the study of African American contributions to our culture the creation of African American studies programs at universities and even the birth of something like black theology. How do we get from Black thought to Black theology? How do they coexist?

Willie: I always say when you want to think about the origins of what we are talking about, we have to think about what it means for people of what we would call Africa and of that diaspora to have to think themselves against those who, coming to them, were in effect trying to reconfigure what life meant. A reality of trying to understand who you are in the face of someone trying to remake you, that is to call you something like "Black" then "African" to then something like "Slave". In many ways it is the response to that work that constitutes Black thought. It is crucial in how the African diaspora is remade. People are presented with Christianity as the way in which they are invited to now understand themselves. When it comes to Christianity and its involvement in that, we have our three fundamental responses.

1. This is junk, this is nonsense. There was a form of living and thinking that was formed in opposition to the reality of Christianity. A reality of resistance that marks the thought.

2. Let's see if we can take pieces of this, Christianity, and we will weave it with whatever out own native ways of understanding life and the gods. Sometimes that weaving is done in front of people and in the open and others it is kept secret.
3. People take the Christianity and fully assimilate to it; they internalize all the negative language and ideas around Black people.

    3b. The people who heard the Christianity, saw how it was brought and began a life of critique and made it their own. This is where we start to see Black Christianity, Black religion, Black thought.

These things are all realities that run along with each other and are what constitutes Black thought. Black theology comes out of a conversation of what Black Christianity should look like. All of these are alive in every place and space where there is Black thought.

Question 3: This movement as you name it: Black religion, Black Christianity, and Black theology that are all operating simultaneously that are moving across time and imagining new ways of being in the world that are shifting how black folks see themselves and see themselves in relation to America. Can you talk to us about how we exclude these kinds of practices? As you are talking about these 3 moves within Black thought, how do we bring in the arts into this in the way in which everyday people gain access to this information?

Willie: No matter who you are talking to you about these things, you can sense the touch of these backgrounds and ideas. In many ways artistic expression is never really outside of the religious diaspora responses. What we are talking about in many ways is the origin of the artistic within Black life, that doesn't mean it's all religious but that it has grown out of religion.

Question 4: I want to talk to you about that, because I think that what shapes Black theology is really the essence of Black culture. All that beauty, all of the tension and texture that lives there is what is the creative force. What does it mean to be a Black theologian today and where are we seeing that field evolve and move to deal with the existential crisis that not only the Black community is facing, but our larger world is currently engaged in?

Willie: We want to keep in mind the two origins points of Black theology, one we already talked about and the other really is a moment in this country that centers around the great work of James H. Cone. There are two dynamics from his work that shape the field.

1. To speak against the white supremacy that is deeply woven into the Christian theological intellectual project.
2. To recognize the theological genius that is present in Black culture and to hold that up.

What we have now is people involved in theology who are even more deeply involved in rooting out those dynamics. The question for them becomes how deep does this idea of Anti-Blackness

go? And then that question becomes, what next? People are also trying to desperately make clear the black theological genius that is going on in the Black diaspora.

It is interesting to look at some of the creative work being done because it is Black women who are leading the creative work being done.

Question 5: In this moment we find ourselves in, this deep crisis around Anti-Blackness, the other, and the outsider that is puncturing our daily conversation as well as a debate around who's Christianity is going to win this debate. It seems to me that the divinity schools and seminary schools are sites where we can answer those deeply essential questions about the future. Can you talk to those in divinity schools and those who find themselves in departments of religion or American history, how do we push against this divide.

Willie: I think we are together in this one fundamental task. What does religion have to say in this moment of the creation of a better world? We are shoulder to shoulder in a work not only of repair but of reimagining what religion means in this moment especially, at the site of Christianity in this country. Christianity in America has always been, as one of my old teachers used to say, more about America that it is about Christianity. It has always been about the American experiment of establishing white male supremacy, and a certain vision of life inside of that. The challenge becomes; how do we offer an alternative to it? I always tell my students, whether you see yourself inside of Christianity or whatever religion, when you are at a major university, they don't see the difference between seminary and religious studies, they just think those are all the weird religious people. Glory in that weirdness, in that space there is freedom, and you can start to imagine something new. There is creative work that must come alongside intellectual work. There is also a moment of self-care that must happen when doing this work because it is heavy.

Question 6: I love the language that you use, the creative and constructive work which is often assigned to the theologian or the applied scholar. In your work in *After Whiteness* you push against that; you push against the university and the ways in which it privileges certain types of knowledge. I want you to talk a little bit about how you push back against whiteness in both your work and the work you are calling for us all to do.

Willie: One of the greatest problems for me is that we don't think enough about the formation work that goes into creating a scholar, and that formation work has been tainted from the very beginning. The modern university, as I explain in *After Whiteness,* grows out of the desires of the plantation masters. ... What is possible is a different understanding of education, intellectual life and what's at the heart of that is the desire to put at the center of an intellectual, the ability to gather people and build community. What shows excellence is showing points of connection with those who are at odds with one another. We need that at this moment, with education being

attacked, we don’t have a vision of formation on the table at most universities that can draw people together.

Question 7: You point at these three dismal characteristics, control, possession, and mastery, and how they haunt us and eat away at our wellbeing, and cancerous to our democracy and belonging. Some of your later work has focused on the natural world, what I see you arguing is that part of paying mora attention to space and place is about a critique to those characteristics, the natural world shows us something different, can you end up with your musings on why scholars of religion, theologians and why you have shifted to think about the natural world?

Willie: For me it is a recognition that something has been in front of our eyes, but we have ignored it. It is the connection with the natural world that grounds us in the world and in our work. It presses us to think about why we can't see and discern in a deep way that reality of connection is not only spiritual but also material. We are in great need of rethinking our intellectual life. This for me is now the crucial matter.