

**Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*
Overview of “Introduction,” pp. 1-11**

(1) Locating ourselves: Who and where are we?

- a. “I could never take in all these stories. I had to simply let them wash over me, again and again, until I was able to locate myself in the stream of their historical consciousness” (p. 1).
- b. The goal of the book: tell the story of the Christian imagination—both in its diseased (e.g. racial imagination) and healthy form—so that we can locate ourselves within it.
- c. Jennings conceptualizes the Christian imagination in *relational* rather than strictly intellectual terms.
 - i. Relational dimensions: People, spaces and places

(2) Diseased relational imagination

- a. Two Examples of the Disease
 - i. Church: “In the small space of a backyard I witnessed a Christianity familiar to most of us, enclosed in racial and cultural difference, inconsequentially related to its geography, often imaginatively detached from its surroundings of both people and spaces, but one yet bound to compelling gestures of connection, belonging, and invitation. Here, however, we were operating out of a history of relations that exposed a distorted relational imagination” (p. 4).
 - ii. Academy: “But their gestures spoke something even more ancient, of a sense of connection and belonging and of a freedom to claim, to embrace, to make familiar one who is not. After chapel, we returned to class, where they assumed their proper pedagogical form, but the stark contrast between that moment and the theologically informed Christian education I was receiving was now overwhelming. Nothing else in my formal theological education corroborated that moment” (p. 6).
- b. Notable symptoms:
 - i. “It was the exercise of an imaginative capacity to redefine the social, to claim, to embrace, to join, to desire. Yet it is precisely the *episodic character* of this capacity among Christians that indicates something deeply, painfully amiss” (p. 6).
 - ii. “I realized what I was witnessing was . . . a complex process of disassociation and dislocation that was connected to *prescribed habits of mind* for those who would do theological scholarly work” (p. 7).

(3) Diagnosing the disease

- a. “One must look more deliberately at the soil in which the modern theological imagination grew and where it continues to find its deeper social nutrients” (p. 7).
- b. An Unexamined Intellectual Posture
 - i. “What I observed in the theological academy was fundamentally the resistance of theologians to think *theologically about their identities*. It was the negation of a Christian intellectual posture reflective of the central trajectory of the incarnate life of the Son of God, who took on the life of the creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection, and intimacy. Such a posture would inevitably present the likelihood of transformations not only of ways of thinking but of ways of life that require the presence of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with being in the social, cultural, economic, and political position to be transformed” (p. 7).
 - ii. “. . .but points to a history in which the Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance” (p. 8).
- c. Inverted Hospitality
 - i. “[Christianity] claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities” (p. 8).
 - ii. “. . .these are ways of being in the world that resist the realities of submission, desire, and transformation. A Christianity born of such realities but historically formed to resist them has yielded to a form of religious life that thwarts its deepest instincts of intimacy. . . Instead, the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then most certainly of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world” (p. 9).
- d. “A faith that understands its own deep wisdom and power of joining, mixing, merging, and being changed by multiple ways of life to witness to a God who surprises us by love of differences and draws us to new capacities to imagine their reconciliation . . . *What happened to [this] original trajectory of intimacy?*” (p. 9).