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Wit issie 'n colour nie (it is a "sermon")! After preaching, faith formation, and whiteness in contemporary South Africa[1]

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Abstract

There is a growing need to critically engage the three loaded key concepts in our title – preaching, faith formation, and whiteness – within the contemporary South African context. In doing so, I propose a reflective reading on the following three primary texts, namely Nathan Trantraal's *Wit issie 'n colour nie* (2018), Johan Cilliers' *God for us? An analysis and assessment of Dutch Reformed preaching during the apartheid years* (2006 [1994]), and Willie James Jennings' *After whiteness – A theological education in belonging* (2020). The background for this discussion is to recognise the "(white) elephant in the room", confess that it is not simply a mere matter of "(just) white noise", or telling "secret little (white) lies", and examine how whiteness in our sermons may be transformed and more transformative of more colourful and imaginative Christian witness.

Key words

Preaching; faith formation; whiteness; identity

1. Wit issie 'n colour nie

"I do not hate people with blonde hair. I do not hate people with a light skin. I do not hate people with blue and green eyes. I do not hate colours.

1 Based on a short paper delivered on 11 February 2022, at the annual SPTSA meeting in Bloemfontein, University of the Free State, with the conference theme of "Practical Theology in the context of responsible citizenship: Looking back and forward in a complex South Africa."

I hate white. White is not a colour, white is a religion" (Trantraal 2018:66) [translation – author].[2]

> "Lots of white people often tell me I must learn to forgive. I then look through them, and think to myself, where do you get the balls to speak to me on the issue of forgiveness. What do you know about forgiveness? … I do not believe in religion, but if I did, then I do not think De Klerk will make it all the way into heaven. But if he somehow makes it, then I'll say it is alright, and I'll just walk straight on into hell" (Trantraal 2021:11) [translation – author].[3]

Before I try to respond by diving into these loaded and perhaps very explosive ideas from Nathan Trantraal's work, and the remaining part of our title, a few qualifications are necessary. First, there is a very specific context and origin in speaking to this title. Not only am I white, male, Afrikaans, and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church in the central parts of South Africa, but I am also acknowledging that I speak first and foremost – though obviously not exclusively – to this context and community of which I am a member (whether I like it or not).[4]

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2 The original quotation reads: "Ek haat nie mense met blonde hare nie. Ek haat ie mense met ligte vel ie. Ek haat ie mense met blou oë en groen oë nie. Ek haat ie colours ie. Ek haat wit. Wit issie 'n colour nie, wit isse religion" (Trantraal 2018:66).

3 The original quotation reads: "Baie wit mense het al vir my gesê, ek moet lee om te vegiewe. Dan kyk ek dee hulle, en dink waa kry jy die balls om met my te praat van vegifnis? Wat wiet jy van vegiewe? ... Ek gloe nie in religion ie, maa as ek gegloe et, dink ek ie De Klerk sallit gemaak it tot innie hemel ie. En as hy it gemaak it sal ek gesêrit is alright, ek stap maa nou hie af hel toe" (Trantraal 2021:11).

4 This introductory statement is based on several premises regarding my self-location, setting/context, and primary audience. On the one hand it is an attempt to acknowledge and deal with what "whiteness" (read: the "blue-eyed scholarly boy" who boasts in doing "colour blind" research) often does, namely, to ignore the call towards self-reflexivity and positioning (cf. Bowers Du Toit 2022:22–23; Dawjee 2018:192–193; and Kim-Cragg 2021:29). In short, let me not be ignorant nor arrogant about the colourless gaze and log in the eye of this beholder. Assuming that I am prone to be (seen) last in self-location, I sense the need to put it first – make the invisible visible and get this log out of the way – and shift the focus from *self*-location towards self-*location*. Therefore, even though I sense to start here, I also admit, on the other hand, that I am no pioneer, nor alone, in engaging this challenge from where I am now situated. These introductory words are thus also an attempt to recognise some of the insightful work on "whiteness" and "white work" that have been explored by the likes of Dick (2018), Steyn (2001; 2012), Steyn & Foster (2008), Van der Riet & Van Wyngaard (2021), Van der Riet & Verwoerd (2022a; 2022b), Van der Westhuizen (2016), and Vosloo (2021), to name a few.

This idea of speaking from and to a very specific context and community is neither new nor unique, or special. Many colleagues have noted the call to explore this line of thought. I think, for instance, of Cobus van Wyngaard's (2016) work on Klippies Kritzinger that is surely worth citing in this regard. The value of Kritzinger's work was – especially in a time (mid- to late 1980s) when it was not fashionable to do so – to perceive and acknowledge the gift of Black liberation theology's value, not only in terms of the struggle, but also – and here is the important point – in terms of its potential and worth in reimagining white theology and ministering liberation theology to white people. Black liberation theology is not merely *per se* about black liberation, but also about what it can mean and teach us within a white ministerial context. In a recent interview with Kritzinger (Laubscher 2022), he acknowledged the value of revisiting and continuing with this challenge. The dramatic changes of the late 1980s, early 1990s, into the 2000s did cause us "to move on" with the times, only to realise a few decades later how much of the legacy of the past is still with us (and keeping us awake – perhaps even haunting us).[5]

Let me briefly take the matter from another angle, and perhaps be even more up close and personal by referring to Neels Jackson's (2021) most recent autobiographical historiography on change and "growth" within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) over the past three decades (1990–2020). Although the main chorus in Jackson's storytelling is optimistic and hopeful – the DRC may not be so big and powerful as in the past, but it is surely more whole, broad, and healthier in so many ways than in the decades pre-1990 (cf. Jackson 2021:71, 92, 110, 116, 135, 161–162, 199, 230, 269, 275, 279) – one cannot help but hear and wonder to what degree the

5 It is interesting to note that a few months before our interview, Kritzinger (2022) did some thorough self-critical reflection regarding his earlier work. After almost two and half decades, he realises some deficiencies in his initial take on the subject. For instance, though it was not entirely incorrect to formulate the matter as "white *responses* to black theology" (as both "rejection" and "sympathy" are indeed affirming the all too familiar colonial gaze in their respective responses), the third way ("response") envisioning White Theology being in "solidarity" with Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) could now rather be envisioned in a posture of deep listening where we seek actual and real *encounters* between white theologians/communities and BTL. In short, what White Theology (read: White theologians and communities) can learn from Black Theology (read: Black suffering and pain), is to trade our "response" for an actual *encounter* with God (who sides with black people in their suffering) and thus frame/envision the matter more concretely in terms of seeking "liberating white praxes" (LWP).

DRC has really grappled and redeemed itself in its struggle with apartheid (read: whiteness and white supremacy). Again, as with the chorus of his main theses, there is another subtle recurring theme throughout the book of "history continuing to repeat itself". For instance, Jackson (2021:55) articulates how, at the General Synod of 1990 (in Bloemfontein), there was this delicate balancing act between keeping to the change in direction upon which the synod decided, but also – and here is the crucial part – "not to alienate members who still supported apartheid" [translation – author]. As I said, this is not a mere isolated and once-off statement or even slip of the tongue, but the other offbeat chorus throughout his book. A few pages on, we hear it again, and now even more explicit and ominous:

> "Years later I heard Dirkie Smit at a synodic meeting for ministers in Natal. He said that what was formulated in the Confession of Belhar was, for the Dutch Reformed Mission Church at the time, so straight forward. They were really surprised that the DRC could not agree to it immediately. If the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar is indeed the acid test that the DRC has parted with apartheid, then unfortunately they still have not passed that test today" (Jackson 2021:64) [translation – author].[6]

I do not want to labour this point, but allow me one last, and I think, quite revealing quote from the book that many DRC lecturers/academics at the DRC's training centres might not only recognise immediately, in terms of what we often hear from some members in the media, but perhaps also reveal some other true colours (read "whiteness") in telling the following:

> In the previous political dispensation, being conservative meant one supported apartheid, and being liberal, one wanted to bring it to an end. So, when the DRC started to depart from the apartheid train, she was seen as now being "liberal". The term was used as if it was a theological concept, as if the DRC was also leaving the Bible behind and walking away from Reformed doctrine. In fact, what happened was exactly the opposite. The DRC adhered to the truth of the Word, and because of that parted with apartheid (Jackson 2021:219) [translation – author].

6 For what is exactly here at stake, see Smit (2001).

In short, I think that we hear the ambiguity and contentious nature of "great strides", "growth", "broadening", and "healing" within DRC theology. Some of these discussions are indeed not a thing of the past. In fact, in some instances and places, I wish we can realise that the past is not past; in fact, it is so alive and present with us (without meaning we are actually "with it"), that it always awaits us in the imminent future to be reckoned with (if you know what I mean). It is late in the day, or perhaps night, and we still need to have these conversations.

Secondly, it is not simply a mere matter of speaking from and to a particular community and critically wrestling and reimaging identity, but also a matter regarding a possible diagnosis and critical awareness of the current condition within academia as such. An important essay in this regard is perhaps the telling late inclusion of Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin's essay entitled "White practical theology" near the end of Cahalan and Mikoski's *Opening the field of practical theology – An introduction* (2014). In their opening words, they confess the following:

> This chapter was not originally in the table of contents for this book. Like many anthologies, the plan for this volume assumed that white racialisation was the norm of the discipline, and 'other' ethnic or racial groups needed to tell their story of how their cultural norms and racialised identity inflected the universalised (white) field of practical theology (Beaudoin & Turpin 2014:251).

One of the main reasons in motivating such a need is making "us" critically aware and conscious of who we are, and of how we too may operate. Again, in their own words:

> Those who inherit the 'winning' side of this history may have the benefit of not noticing their "colour", which is then free to operate in depth, without name. The "white" frame strongly shapes what counts as theological work in our field, making it difficult to make whiteness in practical theology appear not as an evanescent 'nothing' but as definite location (Beaudoin & Turpin 2014:253).

I put "us" deliberately in inverted commas, as one may indeed wonder: Who is this "us" to which he is referring? Or, as we say in Afrikaans, "Hoeveel *onse* is daar in jou pond? [How many ounces do you have in your

pound?]". Besides the earlier reference to Van Wyngaard and Kritzinger, in a noteworthy letter in *Academia*, Cas Wepener and Ian Nell (2021) articulated their acute awareness of who they are (identity), and where they find themselves (positionality and locality). In short, in the words of the letter's title – "White males teaching theology at (South) African universities? Reflections on epistemological and ontological hospitality" – they implicitly set the example to (or even challenge) the rest of society to put their (race) cards on the table; not to play the race card, but to put it – perhaps with other players and cards – onto the table.

Thirdly, let me also immediately acknowledge many temptations and pitfalls in engaging with this theme. As we shall note shortly, I think that it is crucial to critically discern and be very conscious of the various ways in which we are or want to be "after whiteness" (and for that matter also "'after" "preaching" and "after" "faith formation"). A recent work I have found to be of much help in this regard, is John McWhorter's (2021) *Woke racism*. Just as people on the far right of the political spectrum are a serious reason for concern, so too are people on the far left of the political spectrum. In fact, McWhorter calls them "The Elect", as they have become an important and very influential "religion" in the USA, and are hurting, even ruining, the cause of most people who are in deep solidarity with movements such as "Black Lives Matter" and other social justice issues. In short, by simply acknowledging and trying to join some of these discussions and pressing challenges, one may easily be grouped/trapped into some label/etiquette, causing further polarisation and estrangement. Ultimately, I am aware of how loaded and crooked my words may become as I am often lost in translation. However, the only way out is (still) through it.

Fourthly, all well said thus far, but so far not really a word on faith formation and preaching *per se*. This is to a certain degree true, but also a deliberate move. I can easily argue that readers are making a huge mistake if they think that this introduction has nothing really to do with preaching and faith formation. Perhaps it is fair to say that we stand in front of a unique opportunity to reframe this situation anew and to reimagine what some homiletical works from our immediate past may bring surprisingly to the fore. In retrospect, we seem to have exposed a certain lacuna and are now ready to enter.

2. Is Johan Cilliers' *God for us* (1994) still with us?[7]

7 Johan Cilliers, who formally retired at Stellenbosch in 2019, but who is still very productive and going, is a well-known and highly respected voice within various international homiletical circles (a former president of *Societas Homiletica*, often a leading voice at these and other national conferences and delivering guest lectures at various international universities over the past two decades). I state "the obvious" here, because my perception is that his critical insights, over many decades, into the state of "emergency" within especially white Dutch Reformed circles in South Africa still awaits proper recognition by the people implicitly implied by his writings. His work has a characteristic knack of seeing through most of the imminent forms of crisis in front of him. The kind of cultural hermeneutics he did as a practical theologian over the years within this context has a creative and original – read scholarly and prophetic – edge to it. Thus, a sense for the bigger context and oeuvre of Cilliers might be important to consider when reading the text in which we are interested. For instance, in his PhD thesis in 1982, he studied the sermons of Drs Andries Treurnicht (leader of the Conservative Party and opposition in parliament, and editor of [then still] Die *Kerkbode*) and Allan Boesak (leading voice in the struggle against apartheid and author of influential texts such as his PhD study, *Farewell to innocence – A social-ethical study of black theology and black power* [1976], and *Die vinger van God – Preke oor geloof en politiek* [1979]. His findings in this work caused such a stir that the Conservative Party (KP) threatened with court action, but nothing came of it in the end. It is, however, Cilliers' first published academic monograph a decade later (1994) that showed (and continues to offer) some severe resilient impetus into the state of DRC preaching, namely *God vir ons – 'n Analise en beoordeling van Nederduitse volksprediking (1960–1980).* In fact, this work has been translated in 2006 into English, and is now a prescribed text in many overseas universities in contexts and societies where people grapple with populism and various forms of nationalisms in an age of identity politics. His ensuing works showcased the same kind of resilience. His first trilogy also appeared between 1994 and 2006, when he responded to the crisis of moralistic preaching in a collection of sermons heard and studied on national radio during the early-to-mid 1990s (years of rapid change and transition in South Africa). The title of the monographs in the trilogy says a lot: *Die uitwissing van God op die kansel. Ontstellende bevindinge oor Suid-Afrikaanse prediking* (1996) [The extermination of God on the pulpit. Disturbing findings about the state of South African preaching]; *Die uitwysing van God op die kansel. Inspirerende perspektiewe op die prediking – Om God te sien en ander te láát sien* (1998) [God's witness on the pulpit? Inspiring perspectives on preaching that sees God] and *Die genade van gehoorsaamheid. Hoe evangelies is die etiese preke wat ons in Suid-Afrika hoor?* (2000) [The grace of obedience. How evangelical are the ethical sermons we hear in South Africa nowadays?]. Other academic monographs followed such as *The living voice of the gospel – Revisiting the basic principles of preaching* (2004) which one could view as culmination and summary of all the previous works. However, it is perhaps also important to note that this is not the only major work in Cilliers' oeuvre during this time that fits our description in the above. Another and perhaps even more (internationally) noteworthy book was the one he co-authored in 2012 with Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching fools: The Gospel as a rhetoric of folly.* So too should the work he did in liturgy, *Dancing with Deity – Re-imagining the beauty of worship* (2012) be seen as a continuation of the critical-yet-constructive engagement of DRC theology within the South African context. The same applies to the next trilogy on "grace" that appeared thereafter (2016, 2019, 2020). In sum: an extremely rich and well-versed oeuvre that not only re-searched something unique in terms of preaching and worship but did so

The apparent "yes" to this question needs some obvious qualification. In fact, a first glance at this work and our context suggests otherwise. As indicated in the previous section, there is a narrative that seems to suggest that the DRC dramatically changed from what we used to know from the heydays of apartheid theology (1960–1980). Of course, there are some elements of truth to this, but as I have also stated, this does not mean the past is past, and/or can only be found in the past. Robert Vosloo (2017), for instance, indicated in his brilliant collection of essays entitled *Reforming memory – Essays on South African church and theological history*, that it is important to constantly grapple with the idea of an archive that is not closed, because the archive is open to the future. "[I]t is always possible to reinterpret and re(con)figure the archive. The archive can never be closed. This future-orientation of the archive […] confronts us with ethical and political responsibility" (Vosloo 2017:42). Embracing a possible new future inevitably assumes that the past will have the power to illuminate the present.

Against this background, it is important to re-emphasise again what Cilliers (2006:9) states in the introduction to his book, namely the distinction between "superficial structure" and "depth structure". Glancing at the surface of these studied sermons, they are obviously all unique and different, and yet closer inspection reveals a shared and deep ground structure throughout all of them. In fact, as Cilliers' (2010:72; 2012:185) research through the decades has shown, this phenomenon is still with us to this day. Stated differently, there might be organic growth and development within DRC preaching over the past sixty years, constant contextual mutation of keeping up with the Jones' and staying "with it", but as we say in Afrikaans, "jakkals verander van hare, maar nie sommer van snare nie". Do not be so easily fooled, because if you look deeper, you shall see its hidden presence in our midst. "Silencing white noise" calls us

within a very particular context over the past four decades. Stated differently, in reading Cilliers' work, as we shall now do with the 1994/2006 text, it helps to bear in mind that we do this conscious of his bigger oeuvre that constantly tries to reimagine homiletics and liturgy within the South African story. Cilliers' (internationally acclaimed) academic work on homiletics and liturgy – and for that matter also practical theology in general – provides us with more unique insight into the South African history and "changes" during the (so-called) "transition" from apartheid to (post)apartheid/post-apartheid South Africa.

first and foremost to turn up the latter's volume (cf. Francois III 2022). In short, there is no clear and explicit reference in Cilliers' text to "whiteness", and yet the idea of it resonates so strongly in hearing these insights a few decades later. In each of the three hermeneutical moves characteristic of the preaching during the apartheid years, there are, to my mind, some white plastered cracks that may just let some light through for us to see a new day dawning.

Concerning the first of these hermeneutical moves, "backwards into, and out of history", a telling description reads as follows:

> Thus, in preaching, it is of cardinal importance that one frequently asks: What "story" (history) is being told to whom and why? *A study of the analogical*. The first hermeneutical step *schematism, as it functions in these sermons, illustrates that a single aspect of the told salvific reality has become fixated and abstracted, normally with a reduction of the biblical horizon, with the objective of justifying the present situation.* The biblical image must cover the contemporary image. In the process, the (told) reality becomes a comparison with one point, instead of an analogy that honours the complexity of the ancient situation and that of today (Cilliers 2006:24–25).

I do not think that it is farfetched by any stretch of the imagination to summarise the above by saying that this is nothing but a "whitewash" of a complex (varied and colourful) reality, in front of which we are standing. The people, and God who is proclaimed and worshipped here, and their unique stance within and throughout history, appear to be snow-white. Clean and completely captured; sterile, still, and stuck; monumentalised and mastered in white granite – in sum, *God for us*! Or, in some other and earlier potent words of Cilliers (2006:23):

> Actually, this kind of analogical schematism is a way of escaping from time, from the continuation of time, and from God's self-revelation *in* time; it is a grasping back into history to avoid contemporary realities and the future. It represents a particular form of anti-prophecy that does not dare to jump ahead, but rather arrests time and reproduces history. In this arrest and reproduction, God becomes comparable and inactive.

Self-declared "whiteness" (read: the nation's history) is merely projected upon God (read: salvific history), in order that a seamless exchange and swap of places can occur. The history of the people becomes divine (for the myth to function), and revelation (also of the myth as such). "In the process, God is not only de-historicised, but He also becomes historicised nationally in the sense that he must legitimise the national history" (Cilliers 2006:34). Our whiteness is now whitewashed by God, and thus powerfully on its way with the necessary theological sanction and legitimisation. The holy white cow shows obviously no cracks whatsoever, as it is unquestionably told over as holy truths. Such a whitewashed revelation denies both God and humanity at their core, because such a White man has no humanity (nor divinity), and such a White god has no divinity (nor humanity).

A similar logic can be heard in the second hermeneutical move of the gospel changing into law (or: "inwards, into the potential of the 'people's' soul"). The kind of human who emerges now is indeed the long awaited "Whites only", a super White human being, an *Übermensch*, who possesses unlimited power. The proverbial sun shines undoubtedly from this kind of human being over all reality.

> All these forms of legalism presume a person with potential, a person who can even undo sin. *As the point of departure, legalism takes not only an unreal, absent God, but also a vital, intact person, a homo intactus instead of a homo peccator* (Cilliers 2006:49).

The "White only" human being, strangely enough, still refers to a White god, but the latter only serves as an addendum, smoke screen, or filler – all in order to hide the shortcomings of the self who emerges so intact, strong, and upfront from the centre. References to divinity have the sole purpose to plaster and hide the apparent cracks in the system of the so-called white wolf. There is a grave, but it is obviously not open, nor even showing any cracks (all plastered and washed in white, without any cracks). Such a closed grave obviously cannot fathom any reference to a cross and start to imagine an unbearable black Friday at the heart of this system.

However, believers who operate within this system will be quick to respond and show that it does need a black sheep and scapegoat to operate fully, because, as the third hermeneutical move indicates, "Whites only" cannot really operate without creating "Non-Whites" at a distance. The

above inward move into the people's potential simultaneously assumes an outward move with the projection of guilt. White innocence needs to project its fear and guilt upon the black other. Or, as this disturbing and very offensive language assumes, "Whites only" allow "Non-Whites" only to the degree that it reaffirms and professes Whites' centrality and normativity within this kind of (white) world. All that whiteness now further creates polarisation, distance, and estrangement.

> This polarization by means of speech forms and images implies that actually there are *two addressees* in the sermon: the congregation and the oppositional forces who are addressed indirectly. … In the process, distance is created between the congregation and the indirect audience. By speaking with extreme restraint about their own implication in the "problem" and with extreme expressivity about the implication of the other, a *hostile image* is outlined to the congregation. There can be no community, no unity between those who are near and those who are far (Cilliers 2006:66).

It is important to note that this kind of black enemy is needed to keep the system going, meaning of course that it keeps its proper and thorough distance from the centre. Thus, it is so ironic how often whiteness requires a kind of shibboleth stance towards the devil – even becoming, within this ecclesial context, more up close and personal in requiring from fellow members some kind of "profession of faith" in regard to the devil's existence. No question marks after God, nor (especially) behind the name of the devil (cf. Du Toit 2000 and note the question mark in the title and the controversy it continues to cause within some of the ranks within the DRC). In short, be careful and cautious in not taking this devil seriously, because soon you will be labelled a traitor and danger to the core group of inner circle believers. As Cilliers (2006:69) eloquently states, "In this theological framework the others are not only conceived in terms of demonic activity, but the nation is also conceived in terms of God's predestining actions."

Moreover, and still following on from the above, sin becomes inevitable and nothing other than having the audacity to question (the myth) of whiteness. Stated differently: you should be white, and act white accordingly, without ever assuming that you can become and behave so white by asking all kinds of critical questions to the white masters of this system. Whiteness does

not have any cracks, and therefore it cannot be questioned. Or, as Steyn (2012:10) has shown in her work, the "ignorance contract" of Whiteness' dominance should be seen "as a social accomplishment, not just as a failure of individual knowledge acquisition". Another way of stating this is to acknowledge that Whiteness and its repertoire of white talk thrives on keeping their ignorance and innocence intact by a system and society which produces another form of ignorant black people (Steyn 2012:19). In short, a White god has no danger or judgment for us being so true and yet so false (read: "ignorant", "innocent" and "colourblind"), as

> the link between the threat and God's judgement is totally absent. In fact, they repudiate this link. *The projection of guilt fulfils in this – as I interpret it – a second function: not only is it an act of self-justification, but it [also] serves as an escape route out of God's judgement – flight away from it.* Sin, thus also God's judgement, is left at the address of others. The nation is kept innocent and free of judgement (Cilliers 2006:73–74).

Thus, in the words of Trantraal, "wit issie 'n colour nie; wit isse a religion". Perhaps we should even add, "white is also an all too familiar sermon we have heard before."

3. Preaching and faith formation *After whiteness* (2020)?

This is an important work of Jennings, but not his first. By now, most of the people within the world of systematic theology are all very familiar with his acclaimed book, *The Christian imagination: Theology and the origins of race* (2010). Not only is the subtitle quite telling and revealing (theology and the origins of race), but even more so when it as such constructs his main title, "the Christian imagination". Thus, it is no wonder then that essays that followed this work, asked questions such as "Can 'white' people be saved? Reflections on the relationship of missions and whiteness" (2018); and "What shall we teach? The content of theological education" (2014).

After whiteness thus follows on the back of, and within an oeuvre well-versed and phrased concerning the issues and challenges in a seemingly thorny subject such as pondering the meaning of "whiteness" and even

going "after whiteness".[8] Let me share a few crucial insights from Jennings' text, and then briefly reflect upon them.

Besides the book's relevant and intriguing title, Jennings (2020:4–5) furthermore captures my attention when he states the following early in the introduction:

> Formation. Formation. Formation. This is the most important word I will consider in this book … my goal in this extended essay is to point theological education toward a future beyond distorted formation. Even more ambitiously, I want to suggest that theological education carries the resources necessary to reframe Western education beyond that distortion.

Reminiscent of what was said in the beginning regarding the "change" and "growth" within the DRC (cf. Jackson 2021), it is interesting to hear him mention that "the crisis formed by decline is not as crucial as the crisis formed by distortion" (Jennings 2020:6). In other words, the actual crisis in higher theological education, and note not only in North America, is in fact not a financial, administrative, or managerial issue, but rather of a deep theological nature. Or, to state it perhaps slightly differently, but more to the core of the matter, it is not as though *raced* bodies will soon be *erased*, but it can perhaps be *graced*, and *raised*.[9] Again, the words might all sound so similar, but they are surely not. It is crucial to hear him state the following in this regard:

> White self-sufficient masculinity is not first a person or a people; it is a way of organizing life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of a dense

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8 Anthony Reddie (2021:1026) concludes his reflection on Jennings' *After Whiteness* with the following thoughts: "*After Whiteness* is a stunning book. In time, it will become, in its own way, every bit as influential as Jennings's earlier and now classic, *The Christian Imagination. After Whiteness* is in many respects an admirable sequel, but in other ways it is so much more." Shelly Rambo (2021:998) adds to this when she states: "For months, I picked it up and put it down. I walked around it. I waded through a chapter, and I put it down again. And when I finally gave up, I began to feel its weight. Its impact, I believe, is weighty and revolutionary. But it is not aiming to convert those who refuse to see; instead, it is aiming to revive those who may be gasping for air. It is the work of a trustworthy insider with well-tuned spiritual intuitions, steely sensibilities, and Holy Ghost fire in his belly. It clamours, spirals, and conjures."

9 This phrase is partly inspired by the reading of Sheppard 2019.

> life together. … "whiteness" does not refer to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and effective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning making … I hope to show that the deepest struggle for us all is a struggle for communion … *Theological education is supposed to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people* (Jennings 2020: 8, 9, 10).

There is much more to Jennings' text than simply these few early formulations, but the foundations are hereby clearly being laid. What interests me, in this instance, is how "we" – and again, I assume a "we" from where and towards I am situated – hear this phrase. What do "we" hear in the phrase "After whiteness"?

After living with this text and its ideas for numerous months, reading it together with a few colleagues in the faculty, over a six-week period, and pondering what theological identity might entail for our faculty in our present context, I came to the following realisation. I think that it is important to realise that there are at least *three* possible ways in which one can interpret the idea of being "after whiteness". Stated differently, I do not think that we should get too enthusiastic-and-embracive nor too antagonistic-and-hostile when we hear the term as such. It is not a gun either to use or from which to flee. (It is not a gun, but a dove!) In short, I think that it is ambivalent, and covers a variety of positions on a wide spectrum, and we need to hear and familiarise ourselves with all three of them.

First, there is a sense in which we embrace the term with much enthusiasm and passion without – and this is important – necessarily even realising it (or at least most of the time, often without any consciousness of being in this state). It implies that one is "after whiteness" without really knowing it, because in my world everything is white. Whether I whitewash or white bash, white (still) determines everything. This "white" state of mind – white as a religion, constantly fuelled by a sermon – resonates with a phrase I remember hearing as a young child growing up in rural Northern Cape: "Moenie vir jou kom staan en wit hou nie" ("Do not come and pretend you are white"). I think that it is also important to note, in this instance, that although people of colour were often on the receptive side of this abusive

slur, it could also be used by "white people" to put a fellow white minor in its "rightful" place. In short, it is not merely exclusively about race and colour, but also – and perhaps even more so – about claiming sole power – and shaming others in with your ignorant and so-called innocent privilege – in relating to others. Their particularity is universalized, and often manifests in multi-layered intersectional realities (cf. Rattansi 2020:94–146). Therefore, it is also not strange to find people rejecting the phrase, because they are unconscious of their own state of denial in this regard. In fact, any attempt to question, or even simply open the discussion is experienced as an actual conversation killer, because this first kind of "after whiteness" position does not have any interest, or show any curiosity, in exploring other possibilities of what good could come from such a (loaded) phrase. As is often said, "De Nile is not just a River in Egypt", but an unconscious state of whiteness (cf. Boesak 2009:261).

Furthermore, besides allowing the discourse as such, it should also be noted what it does to myself and others. (In Afrikaans you can say "heil" [salvation] and "huil" [misery] and it might sound the same, but you spell it differently – meaning also different things! Where there is no sense of "heil", there is no sense of "huil", and vice versa. Stated differently: If one struggles to hear the 'No!' in this regard, you probably also have no sense of the 'Yes!'). Although this rhetoric might sound cruel, brutal, and hard to hear, difficult to fathom and shallow once again, it might continue to mutate and manifest itself – especially within church and academia – in often very sophisticated ways. Those familiar with Jennings' text will know that there are numerous examples in this regard. As Reddie (2021:1021–1024) rightfully notes, "this is not just a problem for white folks". In short: "whiteness" and "white trash" is not (necessarily) the same thing – nor "whiteness" and a "white skin". (Do not get me wrong: it often tends to be, but it is no given. Such simplistic equations underestimate the subtleties of whiteness; such lines of thought can even be symptomatic of whiteness.) White bashing is the flipside of white washing – it consumes everything. The clowning of the powers is unfortunately mistaken as the cloning of the powers (cf. Cilliers 2009).

Secondly, "After whiteness" would then actually entail to become critically aware and conscious of the above state of denial. Such overpowering consuming of people can now critically be questioned and interrogated.

Getting through the above state of denial into a critical awareness of such a condition, spurs one on to interrogate, expose, and counter such a one-dimensional centring of the self within the world. Stated differently, such a "centring" of the self may often manifest in bracketing its "c" to show its hybrid identity that is constantly on the move – (c)entering: *centring* as entering (cf. Drichel 2008:605). Again, given the sophisticated ways in which it hides and manifests itself, this task should not be underestimated. And if this is indeed true, then whiteness perhaps has a variety of colours in which it may manifest itself. White is not a colour; thus, whiteness can manifest in a variety of colours. Or, let me put it like this: The proverbial elephant in the room is by no means a proverbial "white elephant"; the noise in and around us is by no means mere "white noise"; the lies we tell, are by no means mere "white lies", and the crimes we commit, are by no means mere "white-collar crimes". The worst and most devastating forms of violence often come and manifest in the most sophisticated and subtle matter-of-course, and thus not that easy to question. For this reason, the critical awareness and interrogation of whiteness is so important, because the colonial project can mutate and spread in and through each of us.

This brings us, of course (which is by no means a matter-of-course), to the third possibility in the phrase "after whiteness", because, for Jennings, it has ultimately to do with a hermeneutic in belonging; a theological education in which we crave – erotically! – for be-long-ing together. Theological education, or as he says "formation-formation-formation", and we may add "preaching-preaching-preaching" can ultimately produce knowledge whereby we are able to "ken", "erken", "herken", yes even "beken" and become "erkentlik" to each other. (Knowledge is not simply rational and cognitive; it is also full of desire, yes even erotic, be-longing to and towards all other bodies.) Being "after whiteness" in South Africa nowadays is not supposed to be such a flat, alienating, superficial, simplistic, self-evident, and one-dimensional exercise, because for Jennings (2020:11) "after whiteness" ultimately implies "returning to an intimate and erotic energy that drives life together with God … we are erotic souls".

4. An emerging conclusion

White is not a colour, but it can easily still be (or become) a sermon. Thus, I think that it is important to re-emphasise and acknowledge (for now) that my *raced* body cannot be *erased*, but it can be *graced* and *raised*. (These potent and loaded political discourses can also be engaged theologically.) This raised body, especially when taking on God's Word on our lips, does not want to whitewash nor do white bashing, nor be part of the white noise in the background, but transforms whiteness into true Christian witness; from whiteness to witness. The elephant in the room is not a mere "white elephant", and as they say, the only way to eat such an elephant, is bite by bite, bit by bit – gebed-by-gebed (prayer-by-prayer) – becoming more versed and articulated, more nuanced and sensitive for all three possibilities of "after whiteness" in contemporary South Africa. Then – with or without balls (Trantraal) – I can say that our sermons and the kind of a Christian people they form might become more colourful, because white is indeed not a colour (nor supposed to be a sermon).

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