

Deirdre Cornell, *Jesus Was a Migrant*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2014. 133 pp. \$20.00. ISBN: 9781626980402.

This morning I attended a press conference where religious leaders in the newly formed Interfaith Welcome Coalition in San Antonio gathered to compel our hearers toward moral outrage at the current practice of imprisoning (for profit) young women and their children who have crossed the US-Mexico border as refugees. Just an hour outside of San Antonio, in Karnes City, there is a detention center where mothers, together with their children, spend their days behind locked doors. (This detention center that was recently in the national news for allegations of sexual misconduct by detention staff.) Many of these women have come from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, fleeing violence, escaping threats, having given all they have (and more) to traffickers and *coyotes* to get to the United States. Now they find themselves behind bars, needing to come up with bonds of thousands of dollars in order to be temporarily released while their cases are pending in the courts. Our government has called these young women and their children a security threat to our nation. The Welcome Coalition is raising money for their bonds and calling on people across the city and nation to raise their voices to say that we will not stand for this, that we recognize the humanity of these sisters and children, and that we will rise up as people of hospitality, justice, and compassion.

Deirdre Cornell's book *Jesus was a Migrant* is a timely resource at this point in our history. Controversy around immigration and migrant populations abounds, and Cornell sets out to show Christ's face in those who migrate and to advocate for broader understandings of migration and movement as central themes in biblical spirituality. "Surely a God who migrated from heaven to be born to a refugee family—to belong to a people painfully and intimately versed in Exodus and exile journeys—surely this God would ask us to look for his presence among migrants. Jesus was a migrant. How could migrants *not* matter?... My purpose for writing these reflections is to quicken our *desire* to glimpse the face of the Lord in the lives of migrants. For what love is not born of desire?" (12–13).

The Bible becomes the foundation for understanding stories of migrants while also claiming movement as a central aspect of our self-understanding (whether we have crossed geographical borders or not) as pilgrims, as resident aliens, longing for the culmination of God's kingdom come when we all, finally, will truly be at home. Cornell outlines the biblical narrative with an eye for people on the move, from Exodus through exile to the quintessential migrant in Jesus who moves from heaven to earth, from God to human form, dying on the cross in order to move us home to God.

Ultimately, what is most helpful in this book is the way that Cornell weaves migrant stories with the biblical narrative to nudge an opening in the hearts of her readers in order to recognize the living Christ in the journeys of contemporary

migrants who have risked everything for a chance to live. Listening to the stories of others (particularly those whose voices are so often left unheard) is holy work that can leave us changed, can bless and guide us to the heart of God.

Cornell challenges us to see migration as a central motif in our identity and action as church. In the formative ritual of communion, she writes:

I have come to think of the communion line as a migration. Christ is present, but we must *seek* him. We leave our pews, willing to be led to wherever *he* is. And when believers find it hard to put one foot in front of the other, we can take confidence in an extraordinary consolation. *He* has already come to *us*. And... Christ is about to send us. The slow migration to the altar rail will propel us along its continuing trajectory—to serve in the world.... Christ will take our hunger—and sharpen it. He will ignite our thirst—and leave us more parched than when we came.... Shuffling toward grace in the communion line, we bring with us not the pride of possession but the meagerness of what little we have. Jesus works miracles with even the most limited offerings. Perhaps after all is said and done, hunger and thirst are our most important gifts. In the communion line, we give them to the Lord. He will use them to feed the world (107–8).

Immersing ourselves in the stories of immigrants through the pages of this book and in the daily living of our lives in relationship with immigrants in our communities, our hunger and thirst are sparked—a hunger and thirst for justice, a recognition that “the realities lived by migrants do not coincide with what we understand as God’s plan for us” (9). As Christians, we struggle to bring the world into divine focus, to see as God sees and to live into the depth of God’s compassionate, justice-seeking hospitality.

Cornell describes a second formative tradition intimately related to migration. Las Posadas is a nine-day celebration that begins December sixteenth and ends on Christmas Eve, symbolizing Mary and Joseph’s difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and their search for a place to stay. In Cornell’s depiction, she gathers together with immigrants, all of whom have known the struggle to find a home in a new place, and each evening of Las Posadas they travel out into the cold of the New York night, knocking on the doors of potential hosts. The travelers stand outside and sing, asking for shelter from the cold and rest for the weary. Each time, those inside the house sing back a song of rejection, closing the doors on Mary and Joseph, sending them away into the cold night. Finally, on December twenty-fourth there is a turning point in the song as Joseph exclaims that Mary is the mother of the Savior. As her name is voiced, new possibilities open:

The pilgrims outside (by now, half frozen and eager to enter the warmth and light on the other side of the door) sing Joseph’s part: “My wife is queen of heaven and her name is Mary. Mother of the Divine Word she is soon to be.” Mary gave hospitality to Christ himself in her own body! Her name signals

a shift taking place. With this—the mystery of the incarnation—everything changes. Hospitality is suddenly and surprisingly transformed into eager hospitality. The inside chorus replies, in a burst of familiarity and largesse: "Are you Joseph? Your wife, Mary, is with you? Enter, good pilgrims; I did not recognize you!" In recognizing the hidden presence of Christ borne in Mary's womb, strangers are no longer unknown but called by name. Hospitality is no longer a favor to be granted or refused, but rather a privilege that a host is able to extend (99–100).

We become missional communities when we go out and learn to know the stories of our neighbors, when we share the give-and-take of guest and host, when we open ourselves to be changed through encounter with the Christ present in another. Dierdre Cornell's book helps us enter this mindset and prepares us to look for Christ in unexpected places and faces—and we are assured that the journey will bring blessing.

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**Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2010. 384 pp. \$27.50. ISBN: 9780300171365.**

Why did Christians accept and underwrite the brutality of colonialism? How was it possible for Christians to square the gospel message of love, unity, and the new humanity under Christ with violence, segregation, and dehumanization? Willie Jennings' award-winning book reveals the social performances by which Christians were able to release the tension of cognitive dissonance. That is, he analyzes how they responded to new encounters—how they cried, laughed, felt, spoke—in order to make sense of that newness while maintaining the European political, economic, cultural, religious, and intellectual status quo. The crux of the matter, Jennings tells us, is displacing bodies and establishing new ground for their identity. Race is the result of this displacement, produced by the need to identify people who moved from an essentially unknown place. Since the sixteenth century, Christian intellectuals have used the racial imagination and have theologically developed it to justify the manner in which dark flesh became a part of European social order.

Jennings does not do a history of the concept of "race" but tells the story of race as the story of place. Before racial identity, the land and its inhabitants facilitated cultural identity. The shift from land to race as the reference for self and society is the obstacle for Christian intimacy. Racial identity was formed as a result of modern Christianity's diseased social imagination. The Christian imagination was infected by an aesthetics that calculates bodies and places according to their capacity for productivity rather than apprehends them as participants in creation.