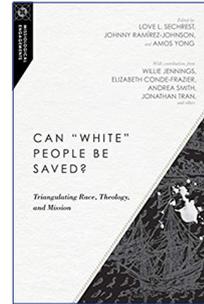


## Book Review

Love L Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, Amos Yong (eds).  
*Can White People Be Saved? Triangulating Race,  
Theology, and Mission (Missiological Engagements)*  
Inter Varsity Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-8308-5104-1. \$30.

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Can White People be Saved? While some will scoff, and others take offense at this provocative question in the title of a compilation of essays from the Fuller Missiology Lectures (2017), it would be a grave mistake to write this book off as the product liberal theologians trying to discredit the church. On the contrary, the authors provide a significant theological and theoretical contribution toward deconstructing “whiteness” from the theological and missiological enterprise. Those unfamiliar with the conversation may take this as an attack on white people, but this would misunderstand the nature of the argument being put forth. Instead, the authors explore centuries of an unholy marriage between colonialism, racism, and Christian mission, and how that marriage has normalized white values, beliefs, and practices in a church that exists within a multicultural world. This normalization, and often prioritization of white, Eurocentric values, beliefs, and practices within various organizations and institutions—in this case the evangelical church—is what the authors are seeking to highlight, and ultimately, deconstruct. Through detailed historical, critical, and theological analysis, they challenge the evangelical church to reflect more critically and theologically about the intersection of race and racism, migration, theologizing, and mission in light of 21st century realities.

The eleven essays presented in the book are organized into five sections, with each exploring a particular aspect of the nature of race and mission in light of distinct historical and contextual realities that have, or, continue to shape the mission praxis of the church. The first section, consisting of essays by Willie Jennings and Andrea Smith, explores the topic of race and place at the dawn of modernity. Together, they suggest that the project of whiteness has been inextricably linked with Christian mission, and propose a pathway forward centered on the church revisioning her relationship to place and the land. In section two, Daniel Jeyaraj, and Akintunde Akinade and Clifton Clark examine the relationship between race and colonialism in India and Africa, while Elizabeth Conde-Frazier and Angel Santiago-Vendrell do the same in section three in Latin America and the Caribbean. Each essay presents a nuanced look at the impact of colonialism, race, and mission in the context being addressed, and explore possible pathways forward that give consideration to relevant contextual factors.

Section four brings the discussion to North America, with three essays exploring what it means for an evangelical church that has been so shaped by racialization and centered in whiteness to live missionally in its context. Andrew Draper, for example, explores what it would look like for white Christians to develop an anti-racist identity by de-centering white identity and entering vulnerably into

uncomfortable cultural spaces. Hak Joon Lee then challenges the reader to look beyond the Black-White binary, suggesting Martin Luther King's "beloved community" as the goal of the *missio dei*, while Jonathan Tran challenges Asian American Christians to live missionally by rejecting the pursuit of whiteness, and instead living toward mutuality through dispossessive empowerment. Finally, section five includes two essays by Johnny Ramirez-Johnson and Love Sechrest that suggest an ethno-racial hermeneutic shaped by narratives in the New Testament centered on encounters with the "other." Ramirez-Johnson begins by constructing a model of intercultural communication built on a God-centered model of anthropology based in the Genesis creation account, while Sechrest uses Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 to suggest that all missionary activity moving forward should be carried out in humility informed by the understanding that Christians of all races have been included into a group from which we were formerly excluded.

Overall, I find this to be an extremely timely and valuable book for those interested in exploring not just the history of colonialism and race in Christian mission, but the enduring legacy of this unholy relationship in the church's mission praxis today. While some essays are stronger than others—as is the case with most edited compilations—the overall body of work is highly beneficial in at least two ways relating to the church's mission in an increasingly intercultural and interconnected world. First, by drawing on the wisdom and insight of several scholars of color, this book provides a much needed vantage point from the margins. For far too long, white western male voices have been prioritized in theological and missiological discussions surrounding the

*missio dei*, resulting in Eurocentric, and, often paternalistic views and approaches toward mission that endure even today. Collectively, these essays demonstrate the harm that many of these views and approaches have caused on communities of color around the globe, and provide a necessary corrective to the "White man's burden" that still subtly and insidiously informs a great deal of what we call urban mission today. By providing a theoretically and theologically grounded critique of white normativity within the church and the academy, they challenge white evangelical and mainline assumptions in ways that invite us toward critical and biblical reflection on our praxis. Accordingly, while this book may not fit as the primary text in a course on missiology, it will be an extremely valuable supplemental reading for professors of mission and missiologists seeking to learn from diverse voices in the field, and who wish for their students to do the same.

Second, for those of us willing to listen, these essays invite many in the white evangelical church to consider our posture in the world, especially one that is increasingly less white and more globally interconnected. Several essays are helpful here, but Jennings' and Draper's are particularly beneficial. Jennings suggests that whiteness is not so much about color, but about providing a telos for humanity that posits European and white North American norms and standards as the ideal for all to aspire to. He then traces how this led to the enmeshment of modern colonialism and Christian mission in ways that centered whiteness in the theological enterprise, and that still endure today. With this understanding, Draper then suggests several ways to de-center white identity and instead construct an anti-racist identity that reshapes our mission praxis. In summary, he highlights the importance of learning from and submitting

to the leadership of people from ethno-racial backgrounds not our own, who will introduce us to cultural and theological resources that can expand our view of God and how He is at work in the world. This requires that we immerse ourselves in places and structures where we will be learners so that we can recognize and repent from our complicity in systemic sin as we learn how to give up power and control and move toward interdependency.

Finally, it is important to note that the message contained within the pages of this book will be incredibly challenging and difficult for many to hear, especially those of us in the white evangelical church. Because of this, we may be tempted to minimize this work in at least two distinct ways. First, we may be tempted to look around for examples where whiteness is not dominating or influencing our churches. This is a natural tendency when one is receiving criticism, especially when that criticism feels outdated or biased. And, if we look hard enough, we might certainly find instances that seem to contradict the assertions put forward in this book. We might look to the recent example of the United Methodist Church, for example, where the delegates from the Global South stopped what they perceived to be a liberalizing of the UMC by the White, Western delegates. Or, we might look at the recent rise in missionaries sent to the West from Africa or Korea as further evidence of the waning influence of whiteness in the church. What the authors would point out, however, is that these (and possibly other) isolated instances have not yet had a sustained, significant effect on deconstructing the ideology of whiteness that is still prevalent among many theologians and missiologists in the West. Consider, for example, that the ethno-racial composition of the faculty in the majority of evangelical seminaries in the United States

is still overwhelmingly White. Or, that the everyday vernacular of the majority of (white) North American and European theologians within evangelicalism still refers to African, African American, Latino, and Asian theologies as contextual theologies, and our own simply as theology. The authors would contend that this use of language and the lack of ethno-racial diversity within the evangelical scholarly community continues to normalize White Western theology, and marginalize others.

Second, many of us will be tempted to see the contents within as an attack on our race, on our churches, and maybe even on our faith. I encourage the reader to resist this temptation, however, for if we listen closely to the voices within, what we may actually hear instead is an invitation from our brothers and sisters of color. An invitation to partner with them in God's redemptive mission as co-laborers. An invitation to enter into relationships of mutuality and solidarity rather than marginalization and domination. An invitation to live into a purer form of Christian faith and mission, characterized not by the ideology of whiteness, but instead by the eschatological reality of the already and still coming Kingdom of God in all of its multicultural splendor.

