

Theological Librarians and the Cultivation of Belonging

by Chris Paige

NOTE: This essay is the winner of our 2023 Student Essay Contest. For more information on the winner and the contest, please visit: <https://www.atla.com/blog/winner-of-2023-theological-librarianship-student-essay-contest/>. Theological Librarianship plans to run another essay contest in 2024; announcements will go out soon.

ABSTRACT: Drawing together critique of theological education (Willie James Jennings) with care ethics (Joan Tronto), this essay unpacks the important role of care and belonging in theological education. Rather than basing belonging on shared identity, homogeneity, tolerance, or loyalty, this essay argues that practices of care are what allow belonging to emerge and be sustained. The essay then identifies theological librarians as exemplars of what Jennings calls “the art of cultivating belonging.” While not a full proposal for rejuvenation of theological education, this essay draws connections between critical pedagogy, Jennings’ pedagogy of belonging, library science, and diversity, equity, and inclusion in a way that sparks further dialogue about the essentials of theological formation in the 21st century.

In *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (2020), Willie James Jennings frames the task of theological formation broadly as “form[ing] us in the art of cultivating belonging” (17). Even as Jennings is widely known for pointing to issues of race, gender, and religious identity, his work also points to fundamental issues of care. This move, in fact, resonates with my experience of a theological librarian at my institution who did much to cultivate my own sense of belonging. The sense of belonging that I found with this librarian came not from finding the perfect resource, not from being presented with answers, but simply through gestures of interest, relationship, and care.

Even though Jennings is also engaging with issues of identity and representation, this centering of belonging moves the conversation about theological education toward processes and behaviors that cultivate a community of care. Jennings is not addressing the decline in theological education by drawing from sales and marketing strategies that emphasize impersonal concepts like shifting demographics, emerging “target audiences,” or new “product lines.” Instead, Jennings invites us to think about the decline in theological education as a failure to cultivate belonging—or, alternately, he proposes a “pedagogy of belonging” to rejuvenate theological education (and Western education more broadly). This essay seeks to put Jennings’ pedagogy of belonging in conversation with concepts from care ethics proposed by Joan Tronto, drawing the role of theological librarians into the conversation about the future of theological education.

JENNINGS’ POSITION

Jennings argues that not just theological education, but Western education more broadly is “troubled—in fact, deeply distorted” (2020, 12). He points to two implicit (sometimes explicit) aims ar-

Mx. Chris Paige (pronouns they/them) completed a Master’s of Divinity and Certificate in Medical Humanities in May 2023. This essay was written in appreciation of Dr. Jesse Mann (Madison, NJ).

ticated around (1) “forming white self-sufficient men” and (2) “a related pedagogical imagination calibrated to forming a Christian racial and cultural homogeneity...” (2020, 14). Jennings makes it clear that “white self-sufficient masculinity is not first a person or a people” (2020, 15). His critique is not about identity or even representation *per se*. Rather, he is speaking about “a way of organizing life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of *dense life together*” (2020, 15, emphasis added).

Jennings pointedly notes that “Western education (and theological education) as it now exists works against a *pedagogy of belonging*” (2020, 17, emphasis added). To rephrase Jennings, the possibility of a “dense life together” is disrupted by an emphasis on White self-sufficient masculinity, which drives the pedagogical imagination toward homogeneity or sameness. In a previous article (2017), Jennings calls this approach emphasizing the reproduction of knowledge, formation of personas, and distortion of identities, the “entrance trajectory” (2017, 59). Jennings claims that the entrance trajectory is intended to form “colonial subjects” (2017, 60)—to teach students to take their proper place in “civilized” society. In contrast, Jennings positions the “emancipatory trajectory” as a disruption of the status quo which allows the colonized to transcend their subjugation to take up a different position (still in that same “civilized” society) (2017, 60). Jennings goes on to note that these colonized subjects are then seen as “exceptional” (2017, 62).

While this essay is not intended to emphasize auto-ethnography, my experience in theological education was shaped by experiences where I was asked to be small and subordinate, not ask difficult questions, and know my place. I was being invited into this theological “society” as long as I was not too self-reflective about the shape of that society itself. Upon critique of the “society” and the place I was expected to hold, I was variously chastised, disavowed, or frozen out of dialogue entirely. Such admonishments severely undermined my sense of belonging, even as I gained knowledge.

Instead of either entrance or emancipatory trajectories, Jennings offers an “ecology of learning” and a “pedagogy of belonging” (2017, 63). Jennings claims that “the work of teaching must always be embedded in the work of learning, learning not only our students’ abilities and interests, but the worlds—social, cultural, geographic—out of which they come.” Jennings does not cite Paulo Friere or Henry Giroux, but easily could have. Critical pedagogy similarly pushes beyond the simple reproduction of knowledge—the possession or mastery of pre-existing notions—toward a sense of reciprocity between teacher and student. The goal of critical pedagogy is not for the student to simply answer questions posed by the teacher but for the student to ask their own emergent questions.

Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of public schooling and higher education, if not democracy itself. (Giroux, 2010, 717).

Neither Giroux nor Jennings is focused on knowledge acquisition. Jennings isn’t even focused on empowerment *per se*. He is focused on the cultivation of belonging. Still, like Freire and Giroux, Jennings is arguing against the emphasis on “possession, control, and mastery,” which is baked into “Western education (and theological education).” Following Jennings, theological formation should not be driven simply by the reproduction of knowledge and perspectives that would lead to homogeneity, cultural nationalism, and colonization. Theological formation must be cut free from such reproductive logics so that generative dialogue can emerge between the existing scholarly tradition and students entering that conversation anew.

Jennings, a theological dean himself, claims, “Formation is an elusive thing to see in practice” (2020, 12). He elaborates the theme:

Theological education is supposed to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people. We think them again, but now with others who must rethink their people. And in this thinking together we begin to see what we had not seen before: we belong to each other, *we belong together*. (2020, 17, emphasis added)

According to Jennings, a pedagogy of belonging would support a “dense life together.” It would support connectedness and interdependence rather than self-sufficiency, dialogue, and formation rather than possession, control, and mastery. The tradition would expand as new students, new kinds of students, become a part of this belonging together.

This kind of generative encounter is not just about students learning to become self-reflective, critically engaged citizens, theologians, and religious professionals. It is also about faculty and administration being self-reflective and open to critical engagement. As Jennings suggests, the existing tradition, as represented by those in charge of theological education, must think and re-think “their people” as they incorporate each new student, each perspective they “had not seen before.” To engage in theological formation is not just the distribution of knowledge and commodification of credentials in a consumer society. Through active renegotiation of caring relationships, theological education cultivates a true sense of belonging.

BELONGING AND CARE

Suppose we are to move beyond what Jennings called entrance and emancipatory trajectories to reframe theological education as an ecosystem of learning. In that case, we must explore what it means to cultivate belonging. Allen et al. argue that “Belonging can be defined as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places (Hagerty et al. 1992)” (2021, 88). In their integrative literature review on the topic, Allen et al. note:

There is general agreement that belonging is a fundamental human need that all people seek to satisfy (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Deci & Ryan 2000; Leary & Kelly 2009; Maslow 1954). However, there is less agreement about the belonging construct itself, how belonging should be measured, and what people can do to satisfy the need for belonging. These issues arise in part because the belonging literature is broad and theoretically diverse, with authors approaching the topic from many different perspectives, with little integration across these perspectives. (2021, 88)

Allen et al. note, “it is unclear whether the lack of a sense of belonging is equivalent to negative constructs such as loneliness, disconnection, and isolation, or if these are separate dimensions” (2021, 91). They offer their own integrative framework as a constructive intervention, which is useful. However, this essay will shift more specifically toward the ethics of care as a frame for understanding how belonging emerges.

Congruent with Jennings’ note that his concern is not about identity or even representation *per se*, this essay argues that neither care nor belonging is contingent on an individual’s static identity, language, or culture. There is no need for homogeneity or conformity to underpin belonging because belonging is not about shared identity. Instead, this essay proposes that this sense of belonging emerges through practices of care.

Joan Tronto is largely credited with the turn in care ethics from an emphasis on female or feminist epistemology to a more political and collective framing around democratic values. One of

Tronto's germinal articulations is the four (later five) phases of care (*Moral Boundaries*, 1993; "An Ethic of Care," 1998; *Caring Democracy*, 2013):

Attentiveness is caring ABOUT or the feeling of wanting someone to be well.

Responsibility is caring FOR or assuming the duty for care.

Competence is care GIVING or the actual action taken to meet a material need.

Responsiveness as care RECEIVING is about resonance and receptivity to the care that has been provided.

Trust/Solidarity is caring WITH in a way that establishes consistency over time and in congruence with shared values.

Using this framework from Tronto, we can then think constructively about what actions might cultivate belonging:

Attentiveness: Using Tronto's framework to connect care and belonging invites us to notice how belonging requires attention, not just proximal affiliation. If one is isolated or ignored by those closest to them, that lack of attentiveness undermines belonging. Being iced out of dialogue or relationship undermines belonging. The ease with which we give attention to those who have shared identities, languages, and cultures means that homogeneity may make care (and, thus, belonging) easier. Similarly, differences in identities, languages, and cultures may make attentiveness uncomfortable, which can lead to disengagement.

Responsibility: This framework suggests that belonging requires us to have some sense of duty to one another. I may feel affinity or interest for someone on the other side of the world, but for us to say "we belong together" means that we have taken up the duty to care for one another. Belonging is more than mere affect or emotional response across a distance (whether geographical or psychological). Belonging requires some sense of obligation to engage with the other personally—to show up, be loyal, and not fail the other in a time of need or crisis.

Competence: Even in the midst of mutual attention and responsibility, care must be given—that is, an action must be taken. This framework suggests that belonging is not a static state emanating from identity alone. Rather, belonging emerges and recedes through the presence or absence of care being given. As Jennings suggests, belonging must be cultivated, practiced, and lived out in relationships with others. While ego strength may allow us to belong to ourselves (or even to the God of our understanding), belonging is better understood as a social experience expressed through gestures of care.

Responsiveness: Belonging also requires responsiveness. It is not enough to give care. That care must be attuned and appropriate for the one(s) receiving it. In the absence of such resonance, there will be alienation and dissonance rather than belonging. While it may be easier to anticipate the needs of those with similar identities, languages, and cultures, such shared reference points are not essential for belonging. Clarity about needs does not have to be assumed. It may be accomplished through direct inquiry. Regardless of identity or even power differentials, the presence of competent, responsive care allows belonging to flourish.

Trust/Solidarity: Finally, this framework helps us to see that belonging is marked, over time, by the ebb and flow of care. In the presence of consistent, persistent, resonant care, belonging may flourish even through regular conflict and disagreement. In a homogenous group, there may be less

conflict and, thus, less challenge to belonging. However, in the absence of care, shared identities, language, or culture are not likely to be sufficient to sustain a sense of belonging.

As outlined here, homogeneity is, perhaps, a useful but not essential component in cultivating belonging. Indeed, it is through the challenges we face together that we get to experience care. Thus, belonging may be strengthened through negotiating differences and productive conflict.

LIBRARIANS CULTIVATING BELONGING

At this point, we return to the theological librarian as an example of care and belonging in theological education/formation. The librarian's role is to be attentive to needs, provide responsive care, and build rapport over time. In short, it is the librarian's role to care. A student feeling inadequate or overwhelmed may be buoyed by a librarian's attention, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Over time trust and solidarity may even emerge. Instead of feeling out of place, the student experiences connection in the face of such a well-met relational encounter; their sense of belonging is reinforced through such support.

Jennings' argument about white self-sufficient masculinity recognizes that students in Western education need to seek validation from the faculty in order to succeed. A sense of isolation emerges in this individual-assessment model, which resonates at least in part with theological propositions placing the individual alone before God. However, the theological librarian offers a different model—a model for interdependence and collaboration. Unlike faculty and administration, the librarian need not serve as a gatekeeper or authority figure. The power differential is reduced; it is not necessary to impress the librarian. Rather, it is by design that one approaches the librarian with vulnerability—a question, a confusion, a need.

Ideally, the librarian has the bandwidth to give attention and take responsibility for attending to the concerns that are being presented. Yet, the librarian is not a role model for self-sufficiency or perfect knowledge. The librarian need not even share the student's interests! Rather, the librarian listens to what questions the student brings with them and, in some way, accompanies the student through the student's search for answers—the librarian points, in humility, beyond themselves to other resources.

In my experience, this accompaniment included walking me through the stacks to find a resource. It involved pointing me to additional locations where I might find resources and teaching me about tools I might use for myself. The theological librarian was my first contact when I was an over-eager newly admitted student seeking advanced reading materials. They helped me feel a part of things before I had even arrived. This was someone who was available and responsive, who offered good humor (and sometimes bad puns), which made light of inadequacies (our own and the world around us). Over time, the library and this librarian became a place of refuge when I began to feel like a stranger on other parts of the campus.

The role of the librarian is not easy. It takes time to give this kind of attention in a relationship. I also saw this theological librarian being pulled in different directions, pressed for time with competing responsibilities. I dare say it took courage to stay engaged with me when my questions about the politics on campus made things complicated. As Jennings suggests, cultivating belonging is an art (not a science). But in the library, I didn't have to be normal; I didn't have to be extraordinary. I didn't have to leave my questions behind to try to fit in; I didn't have to travel alone.

The librarian was not the only person who allowed me to feel “we belong together” during seminary, but they were one of the most persistent testimonies to my belonging in a difficult three years.

CONCLUSION

This essay does not offer a full proposal for rejuvenating theological education. However, it does point to the importance of practices of care. Not just the sloppy sentimentality of thoughts and prayers but actual relational practices of care, which testify to the value and worthiness of each and every student who comes in asking for an encounter. As Jennings notes,

The cultivation of belonging should be the goal of all education—not just any kind of belonging, but a profoundly creaturely belonging that performs the returning of the creature to the creator, and a returning to an intimate and erotic energy that drives life together with God. (2020, 17)

It is the theological librarian who has this freedom. Yet, if each faculty member were similarly able to offer care with similar grace and abundance to an increasingly diverse student body, we would not have to talk about “white self-sufficient masculinity” anymore as we would be *living* that “dense life together.” Such belonging does not come from homogeneity, from somehow curating a “matching” set of students but from how we connect in times of need.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Kelly-Ann et al. 2021. Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research. *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73:1, 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>
- Giroux, Henry. 2010. Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the promise of critical pedagogy. *Policy Futures in Education* 8:6, 715-721. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.6.715>
- Jennings, Willie James. 2017. Race and the Educated Imagination: Outlining a Pedagogy of Belonging. *Religious Education* 112:1, 58-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1247320>
- . 2020. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Eerdmans.
- Tronto, Joan. 1993. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge.
- . 1998. An Ethic of Care. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 22:3, 15-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44875693>
- . 2013. *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York University.