

EXCERPT



When God Became White

Dismantling Whiteness for a More Just Christianity

May 7, 2024 | \$18, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0939-0

Grace Ji-Sun Kim explores the historical origins and theological implications of the myth of the white male God. Examining the roots of the distortion and its harmful impact on the world, Kim shows what it looks like to recover the biblical reality of a nonwhite, nongendered God, leading us to a more just faith and a better church and world.

White Christianity

I am going to say something that may sound extreme, but if you stay with me, you'll understand why it's true. Everything is connected to race.

Race might be considered a social construct, but we can see how race affects culture, history, religion, employment, laws, and ideas. Race influences how we act and behave daily. It forms our perceptions of each other and affects how we act in different circumstances. The societal views of immigrants, natives, and refugees have a profound impact on our ability to relate to people of different races. It has also greatly influenced Christianity and our understanding of God.

When I began to realize the enormous impact of race, I knew it was important for me to study race, racism, and ethnicity to understand how we have come to construct a white Christianity and a white God. This is how I began my explorations for writing this book. My own life has been impacted by race relations because it has ultimately defined me, had a negative influence on me daily, and has formed my own understandings of a white Christianity and a white God.

When I was growing up in the 1970s in London, Ontario, we began elementary school each morning by reciting the Lord's Prayer and singing the National Anthem. It was very clear to me as an immigrant child that Canada was a Christian country and that I needed to become a Christian if I was going to fit in to my new home. Our family did not have any religious affiliations when we first immigrated in 1975. But a very nice young Korean couple started asking my older sister and me to go to church with them. My sister and I eventually began attending and had a lot of fun at church. We met other Korean kids our age and we made lots of new friends there.

Soon, my parents started attending church with us as other Korean immigrants encouraged them to join us at the local Korean church. They were happy to meet other Korean immigrant families at the church and it became a community for us. We did not know anyone when we moved to Canada, so the church became our extended family. We held birthday parties, weddings, anniversaries, and any other celebrations at church. It was a place for us to become a family with other Korean immigrant families.

Through attending church, our family eventually became Christians. We ended up attending a Korean Presbyterian church on Sundays, but midweek and on Friday nights, my parents dropped my sister and me off at a white Baptist church and a Christian and Missionary Alliance church for Bible studies, fellowship, and worship. Church soon overtook our lives; everything was planned around church events.

I made lots of friends at these different churches. Part of the purpose for attending so many different churches was that, in a way, it provided free English classes. My parents were worried that our English wasn't good enough for us to excel at school, and they thought by being immersed in white churches, we would learn to speak better and to understand the white culture we were living in.

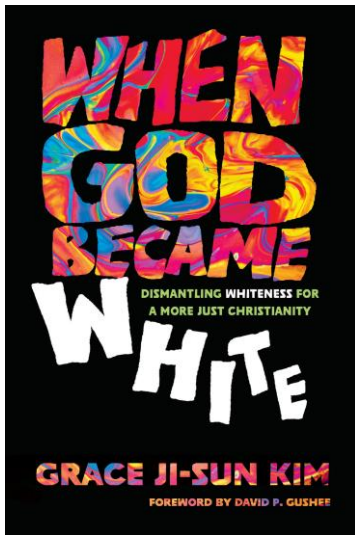


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“I urge even—especially!—those who may not feel ready for the strength of the critique Grace Ji-Sun Kim offers to ask God to help you lay down any spirit of defensiveness and instead to be open to the breath of inspiration and new life.”

—David P. Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, from the foreword

I was an Asian immigrant girl who grew up with a white Jesus. And that wasn't just at church. We had a white Jesus hanging on the wall in our living room—the extremely popular *Head of Christ* by artist Warner Sallman. I never found out where my dad got this famous print, but I am certain he didn't buy it.

We were too poor to buy even food and basic clothing, never mind nonessentials like decor. I am sure my dad must have found it someplace near the garbage or some stranger at his factory gave it to him for free.

My mother treated this print image as if it were a holy art piece and carefully packed it every time we moved. That image was one of the first things unpacked in the new place. In every place we lived, she hung it behind the living room couch so we could see the image of Jesus every day and any visitors to the home would see it immediately.

The white Jesus on our wall was a depiction to me of how God looked as well. I pictured God as an old white man, just as everyone else did. There was no reason to question that notion. It was everywhere: in paintings, stained glass windows, and storybooks. I never questioned it. I didn't even think twice about whether Jesus was white or not. It was not in my consciousness to question anything that was taught by my mother or the church. Both pushed a white Jesus, and I just took it as the truth.

What I didn't know then that I know now is how influential that picture was on my own theology and faith development. That image of a white Jesus was imprinted on my brain and body so that I could not even question whether Jesus actually looked like that. It was a given, as it was the most famous picture of Jesus. I went to visit family in Korea twice during my youth, and even my family members there had the same picture of the white Jesus in their homes. The Korean churches also had the same picture of white Jesus. Furthermore, when I traveled to India during my seminary years, all the churches that I visited had this same white Jesus picture. This confirmed to me that this must be the real Jesus, as it is universally understood to be the image of Christ.

Living in white spaces as a nonwhite person is exhausting. It is so depleting that it sucks the life out of you. I have experienced racism throughout my life. I have tried to understand racism and how it functions, and I have learned that the only way to fight it is to address whiteness and dismantle it.

After growing up in an environment that reinforced the whiteness of God, not just with the Sallman's image but through other biblical and church teachings and practices, it was a devastating revelation that these images of a white Jesus might be wrong and even intentionally created to reinforce white supremacy in Christianity, society, and culture. This book is about the religious journey I took to make sense of my own experiences and place them in context. It explores the emergence of a white Jesus and what the implications of this are on racialized minorities. In this process, I came to understand how whiteness has tainted our understanding of each other and God. If we are to overcome the devastating effects of whiteness, we need to move forward and adopt a theology of visibility so we can embrace the other and live in peace with our neighbors.

I hope my questions and challenges of a white Christianity will help you in your own explorations of faith, spirituality, and God. Please join me on this inner journey of unpacking whiteness, white Christianity, and a white God.

-adapted from the introduction, "White Christianity"



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Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *When God Became White*

"In the book you are about to read, Grace Ji-Sun Kim does three very important things. First, she offers a sustained critique not just of whiteness but of white maleness as an ideology and a theology. Second, she tells parts of her own story as a Korean immigrant first to Canada and then the United States. Third, she offers a way of thinking about God that can contribute to the dismantling of inherited theology that she seeks."

—David P. Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, from the foreword

GRACE JI-SUN KIM received her M.Div. from Knox College (University of Toronto) and her Ph.D. from the University of Toronto. She is Professor of Theology at Earlham School of Religion.

She is the host of the *Mandang* podcast and has published in *TIME*, *Huffington Post*, *US Catholic*, and *The Nation*. Kim has appeared on MSNBC, PBS and C-Span. She has been a guest on BBC Radio, Soul Search Radio, WBEZ Radio, and Keeping Hope Alive Radio. She is an ordained PC(USA) minister and enjoys being a guest preacher on most Sundays. Her many books include *Invisible*, *Reimagining Spirit*, and *Healing Our Broken Humanity*.

Kim has written more than seventy book chapters, journal articles, and book reviews. She is a sought-after lecturer and has given papers/lectures throughout the United States and in Malaysia, Korea, Myanmar, Spain, Qatar, Brazil, Switzerland, Peru, England, South Africa, Paris, and Canada.

Kim served on the board of directors for the American Academy of Religion (AAR) as an at-large director. She also sits on the editorial board for the *Journal for Religion and Popular Culture*. Kim is an advisory board member for the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School and is a member of the working group on climate change for the World Council of Churches. Kim served on the board for the Korean American Clergywomen and is also a member of the Presbyterian Church's (USA) Social Ethics Network.

Kim was included in the *Englewood Review of Books*'s list of "Ten Important Women Theologians That You Should Be Reading." She is also one of the "Top 10 Writers Shaping Our Movement" put together by the Center for Progressive Renewal.

For more about Grace Ji-Sun Kim, visit gracejisunkim.wordpress.com.



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