

ASIAN AMERICAN THEOLOGIES

Asian American theologies are critical and pragmatic intercultural theological reflections on the life realities of Asian Americans that are articulated by American Christians of Asian ancestry with firsthand knowledge and experiences of these realities. Contextual in orientation, Asian American theologies seek to juxtapose the life experiences of Asian Americans with the gospel's soteriological, prophetic ethical, and transformative power. This involves placing Asian Americans at the center of theologizing as sources, participants and collaborators, and not simply as the passive recipients of such theologizing. The Asian American lived experiences that form the basis for critical contextual theological reflections encompass a broad spectrum spanning from the diasporic, interstitial experiences of first-generation Asian immigrants to the United States at one end, and the life experiences of the 1.5 generation (that is immigrants born abroad but raised in America) and American-born Asian Americans at the other end. These life experiences often center on the construction of their socio-cultural identity and are characterized by their contested negotiations of the complex and difficult relationship between their Christian faith, culture, race/ethnicity and peoplehood within the contemporary United States society.

A common mistake is to limit the ambit of Asian American theologies to areas that are often assumed to be "relevant" to Asian Americans, for example, faith and culture, race relations, *evangelism, church-planting and young adult ministries. Asian American theologies seek to deal with the entire theological tradition that has been handed down, including those aspects that are commonly regarded as *dogmatic or *systematic. Working within the context of Asian American communities and responding to the wider sociocultural trends within and outside the Asian American racial-ethnic communities, many Asian American theologians have sought to enrich and reenvision the entire range of the theological enterprise.

This means that Asian American theologies are not simply theologies that have been articulated for specific racial-ethnic Asian American communities, but rather, theologies that also seek to contribute across racial-ethnic boundaries to the universal Christian theological

tradition. Ideally, Asian American theologies are not only shaped by, but also hopefully shaping and cross-fertilizing the wider theological enterprise within white, black, and *Latino/a Christianity in the North American context.

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1. Two Generations of Asian American Theologians.

Asian American theologians hail from a broad cross-section of United States Christianity. Many work from within mainline Protestantism, although new Asian American theologians are emerging from Catholic, evangelical, and Pentecostal traditions. While many of these theologians are first-generation immigrants who have settled down in the United States, an increasing number are American-born or 1.5 generation whose worldviews have been shaped by their experiences of growing up and living in the United States. Generally, Asian American theologians may be classified as the "first generation" and the "second generation."

The first generation comprises Japanese American, Korean American and Chinese American theologians who emerged in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Exclusively men, they carried out their theologizing from within mainline Protestant traditions. Faced with considerable challenges from church, community and society, they struggled from outside the theological establishment to challenge the entrenched racism and discrimination of both the mainstream United States society and Christian institutions. Inspired by the achievements of early black and Latin American liberation theologians, they focused on issues of race relations, faith and culture, and the forced assimilation that plagued the Japanese American, Korean American and Chinese American communities at that time. Prominent first-generation Asian American theologians include Roy Sano, Paul Nagano, Jitsuo Morikawa, Jung

Young Lee, Sang Hyun Lee and David Ng.

The second generation of Asian American theologians came into prominence from the 1980s onward. They hail from a broader and more diverse cross-section of Asian American Christians. The original cohort of male Chinese, Korean and Japanese American theologians has now been enriched by women, biblical scholars, church historians, Catholics, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Vietnamese Americans, Filipino Americans, Indian Americans and so forth. Well-known second-generation Asian American theologians include Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, Kwok Pui-Lan, Russell Moy, Samuel Ling, Enoch Wan, Timothy Tseng, Amos Yong, Eleazar Fernandez, M. Thomas Thangaraj, Rita Nakashima Brock, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Andrew Sung Park, Anselm Kyongsuk Min, Chung Hyun Kyung, Young Lee Hertig, Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Peter Phan. Biblical scholars such as Sze-kar Wan, Gale Yee, Khiok-Khng Yeo, Tat-siong Benny Liew, Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, Seung-Ai Yang, Uriah Yong-Hwan Kim, Mary Foskett and Henry Rietz are in the forefront of developing the field of Asian American biblical hermeneutics.

These second generation of Asian American theologians stand out for their innovative interdisciplinary approaches to theologizing on a wide variety of issues, including reconciliation, community transformation, faith and ethnicity/culture, Bible and ethnicity/culture, evangelism and ethnicity/culture, and the spiritual development and faith empowerment of all Asian Americans. More significantly, while the first-generation theologians were critical of external social structures but were reluctant to critique the negative aspects their racial-ethnic communities' internal structures, the second-generation theologians have no such qualms, especially on the issue of gender relations. Hence, many Asian American women theologians have taken on the challenging task of critiquing the negative and marginalizing effects of ethnic customs and cultural traditions on Asian American women.

2. Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics.

The variety and diversity of Asian American biblical hermeneutics point to the increasing interest of Asian American biblical scholars to reread the Bible within the context of specific Asian American concerns. Early Asian Ameri-

can biblical interpretations were inspired by the liberation theologies of black and Latin American theologians, and often utilized the Exodus-from-Egypt motif with its theme of liberation to characterize the Asian American theological quest for liberation from oppressive and marginalizing structures. However, the second-generation Filipino American theologian Eleazar Fernandez critiques the oppressive and triumphalistic dimensions of the Exodus-from-Egypt event, proposing an alternative Asian American hermeneutic of "Exodus-toward-Egypt" with the United States being the "Egypt" of unfulfilled dreams and nightmares for Asian Americans seeking a better future. Fernandez has also reinterpreted Tower of Babel and Pentecost narratives to provide an alternative hermeneutic for Asian Americans negotiating their life challenges in the pluralistic United States society.

Contemporary Asian American readings of the Bible seek to explore the implications of the varieties of Asian American racial ethnic identities on the interpretation of biblical texts, and in turn, how racial ethnic identities are shaped and nuanced by such readings. Many Asian American biblical scholars have adopted a multidisciplinary approach to biblical interpretation, drawing upon postcolonial theory, diasporic studies, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, Asian American studies and theology, in addition to traditional biblical exegetical and hermeneutical tools, to craft new, hybridized Asian American biblical hermeneutics that are attentive to the issue of reenvisioning Asian American ethnic-racial identities within their diasporic existence in the United States. For example, Gale Yee and Tat-siong Benny Liew are interested in formulating specific Asian American biblical interpretations that combine a radical reinterpretation of the Chinese *yin-yang* cosmology with contemporary postcolonial and diasporic hermeneutical tools.

3. Asian American Theological Reflections on Racism and Discrimination.

The pervasive racism that many Asian Americans encounter in their daily lives, whether in the civic arena or the church, whether subtle or blatant (e.g., the racist nativist agitations against Asian Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and dehumanizing

discrimination (e.g., the detention of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II), are starting points for many Asian American theologians. Responding, Asian American theologians not only challenge the sociocultural and political-economic status quo, but also propose innovative responses, such as the theologies of liberation (Sano), marginality (S. H. Lee, J. Y. Lee, Phan), pilgrimage (S. H. Lee, Nagano), diaspora/exile/migration/sojourning (Fernandez, Moy, Phan), a theology of “solidarity of others” (Min), and reconciliation and community-building (David Ng, Matsuoka, Hertig).

4. Faith, Culture and Tradition in Asian American Theologies.

In the case of the first-generation Asian American immigrants, it is inevitable that their various Asian racial-ethnic identities are indelibly imprinted on their lives and brought by them from the “Old World” to the “New World.” For them, the age-old sociocultural traditions, religious customs and theological perspectives that they carried with them from the “Old World” are given pride of place and juxtaposed with new traditions, customs and practices that they encountered in the “New World.” Terms such as *contextualization*, *inculturation* and *dialogue* are sometimes used by Asian American theologians to describe the process of retrieving and reformulating traditional Asian sociocultural and religious understandings.

Early Chinese American mainline Protestant theologians—for instance, Wesley Woo and David Ng—were interested in the interaction between the gospel and Chinese culture. For example, David Ng articulated a theology of “community” for Chinese American Christians that synthesized the New Testament paradigm of *koinonia* with the Chinese-Confucian paradigm of *tuangqi*. Contemporary Chinese American evangelical theologians such as Samuel Ling and Enoch Wan continue to reflect on the interaction between the gospel and Chinese culture. Their theological writings center around the concerns of the Chinese-born, 1.5 generation and American-born Chinese evangelical Christians in general and the quest to be fully Chinese and evangelical in particular.

Many Korean American theologians have utilized traditional Korean social, cultural and spiritual elements in their theological endeav-

ors. Jung Young Lee retrieved the Taoist *yin-yang* cosmology as the basis for reinterpreting the fundamental Christian doctrine of the Trinity in terms of harmony, balance and inclusivity, as well as constructing a theology of marginality that redefines the margin as the center of life-giving creativity. Andrew Sung Park has drawn upon the Taoist *yin-yang* cosmology and the Korean **minjung* paradigm of *han* (the deep suffering and guilt of victimized and oppressed people) to articulate a theology for Korean Americans to deal with the challenges of prejudice and discrimination. This follows his earlier endeavors to combine the Korean concept of *han* with the Christian doctrine of sin to provide a theological perspective on the scars and suffering experienced by victims of sin. Park has also built upon this Korean understanding of *han* as a hermeneutical framework to develop his theology of transmutation as a vehicle for understanding victimhood and suffering, transforming race relations, and building bridges between Korean Americans and African Americans following the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The Korean American woman theologian Young Lee Hertig has adapted the Taoist *yin-yang* cosmology to construct the theological and epistemological paradigm of *yinism* as a model for social activism for the Korean and Asian North American church.

5. Asian American Catholic Theologies.

One aspect that differentiates some Asian American Catholic theologians from other second-generation Asian American theologians is their theological reflections on the implications of the traditional cultural values, spirituality and devotional piety that many Asian American Catholics have brought with them from their Asian homelands (Peter Phan, Rachel Bundang). In doing so, they find themselves reflecting upon the transnational communal connections that continue to bind many Asian American Catholics to their families and communities in Asia. The Vietnamese American Catholic theologian Phan, in his essay “The Dragon and the Eagle: Toward A Vietnamese American Theology,” seeks to construct a Vietnamese American theology out of a dialogue between traditional Vietnamese cultural and religious traditions (as symbolized by the dragon) on the one side, and contemporary United States Christianity and the plu-

realistic United States society (as represented by the eagle) on the other. His subsequent essays, "Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology" and "Jesus as the Eldest Son and Ancestor," seek to construct a contemporary Vietnamese and Vietnamese American *Mariology and *Christology using traditional Vietnamese religious, social and cultural elements in the former, and Vietnamese Confucian virtues and practices in the latter.

6. Asian American Theologies for the 1.5 Generation and American-born Asian Americans.

In the case of many 1.5 generation and American-born Asian Americans, traditional Asian racial-ethnic identities and sociocultural norms are often voluntarily relativized or rejected. This is true not only among Asian Americans who out-marry or are adopted by non-Asian American families, but also among many Asian American evangelical Christians. For these latter, assimilation into the mainstream of generic American evangelical theology is the overarching goal.

Asian American theologies that seek to address the needs and concerns of the 1.5 generation and American-born Asian Americans tend to focus less on tradition-maintenance, that is, holding on to ethnic-bound traditions from the "Old World," in favor of *traditioning*: constructing new traditions, practices and theological positions that appeal to an incipient "pan-Asian American" identity construction that is emerging across Asian American racial-ethnic boundaries. For example, building upon their roots in the contemporary United States society, which is viewed as the permanent home rather than a temporary or exilic sojourn, Asian American theologians such as Matsuoka, Park, Hertig and Fernandez seek to challenge Asian Americans as citizens or permanent residents of the United States to take seriously their civic responsibilities and participate actively in nurturing the common good of the United States society. Their emerging theologies focus on contemporary social and economic currents and join the ongoing conversation about the shape of United States society.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the rich diversity of Asian American theologies is manifested in the range of issues and concerns being addressed. On one end of the spec-

trum, some Asian American theologians are beginning to discuss the problem of essentialism in defining the "Asian American" identity that first-generation theologians assumed. Foskett and Rietz have critiqued strongly the essentialism of the category of "Asian American," highlighting the tension between the *biological* reproduction vis-à-vis *cultural* reproduction in the construction of Asian American communities, and challenging all Asian American theologians to confront the invisibility and double marginalization of Asian Americans who are adopted by White Americans (Foskett), and biracial and multiracial Americans with some Asian ancestry or heritage (Rietz). Other Asian American theologians are tentatively confronting the implications of globalization, continuing immigration and growing transnational ties among Asian American communities in their theological reflections. Moving beyond the simplistic cultural essentialism and sociopolitical nationalism of the first-generation Asian American theologians who emphasized the *acquisition* of rights and entitlements, second-generation Asian American theologians have started grappling with the ambiguities that emerge when the blurring of the boundaries between Asians and Asian Americans is giving rise to an increasingly multivalent and complex intertwining of social, cultural and religious identities. On the other extreme of the spectrum, a handful of Asian American theologians (Kwok Pui-Lan, Patrick Cheng) have begun reflecting theologically on the life experiences of and challenges faced by Queer Asian Pacific Americans (QAPAs) and exploring creative theological paradigms, biblical hermeneutics and pastoral practices that do not exclude the QAPAs.

See also ASIAN THEOLOGY; CHINESE THEOLOGY; JAPANESE THEOLOGY; KOREAN THEOLOGY; RACE AND ETHNICITY.

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