U.S. Latino/a Theology and Asian Theology: Partners in the Postmodern Age?

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At first glance U.S. Latino/a theology and Asian theology seem to have little in common, rooted as they are in two different socio-political contexts as well as in divergent cultural and religious traditions. While acknowledging the differences between these two theologies, this essay highlights their convergences in terms of their methods, hermeneutical approaches, and basic themes. These convergences arise partly from the fact that both theologies, born in postmodernity, face the same task of meeting the challenges of the postmodern twins, namely, post-colonialism and globalization, and partly from their common debt to Latin American liberation theology.

The essay will begin with a bird’s eye view of the contours of postmodernity, postcolonialism and globalization, with a special reference to their notion of culture. It will next outline the challenges posed by postmodernism and the attendant processes of postcolonialism and globalization to Latino/a and Asian theologies and describe the ways in which these two theologies attempt to meet them. It will conclude with suggestions for an effective collaboration between these two theologies so as to produce a truly intercultural theology.

Two recent works that bring several American ethnic theologies into a conversation with one another include: A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001) and The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue, ed. Anthony B. Pina and Benjamin Valentin (New York: Continuum, 2001). For a helpful recent account of Hispanic theology, see Eduardo C. Fernández, La Coscrlm: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology (1972–1998) (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000). By Asian theology is meant here that which is developed by Catholic and Protestant theologians in South and East Asia (mostly India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Vietnam).
Postmodernity, Postcolonialism, Globalization

My intention is not, nor is it possible within the narrow compass of this essay, to present even a cursory overview of postmodernism.\(^3\) However this slippery term is defined, especially its historical and ideological relationship to modernity, there is little doubt that something distinct from the Enlightenment has been for several decades the cultural mood of our times, at least in the West.\(^3\) Conventionally, the overarching term postmodernity refers to the cultural and social shift that emerged since the 1930s and has been making its way from the West to the other parts of the world through the process of globalization, while postmodernity is used to connote the same historical period.\(^4\) Three or four decades later, during the 1960s, this phenomenon made its influence felt first in architecture and the arts, then invaded literature, philosophy and theology, and by the 1980s became a general characteristic of popular culture and a subject of widespread and lively discussion.\(^6\)

The Postmodern Ethos

In his description of the postmodern ethos, Stanley Grenz mentions pessimism, holism, communitarianism, and relativistic pluralism as its main characteristics.\(^4\) Pessimistic, because postmodernism abandons the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress and highlights the fragility of human existence; holistic, insofar as it rejects the modern privileging of rationality and celebrates emotions and intuition; Communitarian because it eschews modernity’s individualism, rejects its quest for universal, supracultural and timeless truth, and emphasizes the role of the community in creating the truth; and relativistic and pluralistic, because there being many different human communities, there are necessarily many different truths.

These characteristics do not however constitute postmodernism as a coherent philosophical worldview. Indeed, for postmodernism, there is not a “world” about which one can construct a unitary true “view”; there is not a single objective world to which our knowledge must correspond. What we call the “real world” is, for postmodernists, nothing more than our ever-shifting social creation. Ours is a “symbolic” world which we create through our common language. Hence, knowledge is indissolubly interpretation. As Stanley Grenz has pointed out, postmodern epistemology is built on two basic assumptions: postmodernists view “all explanations of reality as constructions that are useful but not objectively true” and deny that “we have the ability to step outside our constructions of reality.” With this constructivist rather than objectivist outlook, postmodernism rejects the correspondence theory of truth and adopts a pluralistic view of knowledge.\(^8\)

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\(^1\) The theological literature alone, not to mention the literary, artistic, and philosophical, on postmodernity, has grown by leaps and bounds. For our purposes two introductions are especially helpful: Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996) and Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). The former work contains a useful bibliography on postmodernism (197–202). Generally, the term postmodernism refers to the cultural mood and intellectual ideas that are contrasted to those of modernism (here the preposition post is taken not only in the chronological sense but also as a rejection—at least partial—of modernism). Postmodernity refers to the epoch or era in which postmodern ideas and values shape the outlook of a particular society. I will follow this usage in this essay.

\(^2\) My own view is that postmodernism is a crisis within modernity, and therefore as a movement it stands in both continuity and discontinuity with its predecessor. It is the ideals of modernity themselves, in particular critical reflexivity, that enable postmodernism to question and reject certain values of modernity.


In terms of culture, postmodernism spells the demise of "metanarratives," to use Jean-François Lyotard's expression. By metanarrative is meant the system of myths that bind a society together and by which it legitimates itself. Not only do postmoderns no longer cling to the modern metanarrative of progress, which is itself founded on the Christian narrative and is at best a "useful fiction." They also reject any appeal to metanarratives as social legitimation. The age of the "grand récits" is over; what is left is local narratives which one constructs in one's particular community.

Together with the death of metanarratives, Lyotard points out, came the end of modern science which has been based on the political myth of freedom and the philosophical myth of the progress of knowledge. The loss of credibility of the grand narratives of scientific progress does not however mean the death of science but only a particular model of science, namely, that of Newtonian mechanistic understanding. Not science as such but only the modern assumption that the universe contains an internally consistent order from which a quantitative analysis will yield universal laws permitting the prediction of other natural occurrences has been questioned. In the post-Newtonian science, other physical theories have been formulated that have fundamentally undermined our previous way of viewing the world, such as quantum theory, the relativity theory, chaos theory, and the Uncertainty Principle.

All together, these theories suggest that the universe is not something that can be fully and completely described by science but is ultimately an unfathomable mystery. The ever-changing universe not only has a history but is a history that cannot be controlled and predicted by scientific methods. Moreover, these theories contend that science is not a culturally neutral fact, as modernity has assumed. Rather, it is a social construction of reality (a "paradigm," to use Thomas Kuhn's expression) that controls what the scientist sees. Every experiment ultimately rests on a networks of interests, theories, opinions, traditions, often buttressed by money and power, and the resulting knowledge is not a collection of objective universal truths but a formulation of research traditions done within a particular cultural community.10

**POSTMODERN THEORY OF CULTURE: CULTURE AS A "GROUND OF CONTEST IN RELATIONS"**

This leads to the question of how, in contrast to modernity, postmodernism understands culture. The modern concept of culture is rep-


11For a development of this concept of culture, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 25–37.
The modern anthropological concept of culture has its own advantages. As Robert Schreiter has noted, the concept of culture as an integrated system of beliefs, values and behavioral norms has much to commend it. Among other things, it promotes holism and a sense of coherence and communio in opposition to the fragmentation of mass society, is congenial to the harmonizing and way of thinking prevalent in oral cultures and many Asian cultures, and serves as an antidote to the corrosive effects of modernity and capitalism. Religion as a quest for meaning and wholeness is seen as a boon to these positive aspects of culture.

In recent years, however, this modern concept of culture has been subjected to a searing critique. The view of culture as a self-contained and clearly bounded whole, as an internally consistent and integrated system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that functions as the ordering principle of a social group and into which its members are socialized, has been shown to be based on unjustified assumptions. Against this conception of culture it has been argued that: (1) it focuses exclusively on culture as a finished product and therefore pays insufficient attention to culture as a historical process; (2) that its view of culture as a consistent whole is dictated more by the anthropologist's aesthetic need and the demand for synthesis than by the lived reality of culture itself; (3) that its emphasis on consensus as the process of cultural formation obfuscates the reality of culture as a site of struggle and contention; (4) that its view of culture as a principle of social order belittles the role of the members of a social group as cultural agents; (5) that this view privileges the stable elements of culture and does not take into adequate account its innate tendency towards change and innovation; and (6) that its insistence on clear boundaries for cultural identity is no longer necessary since it is widely acknowledged today that change, conflict, and contradiction are resident within culture itself and are not simply caused by outside disruption and dissension.

Rather than as a sharply demarcated, self-contained, homogeneous, and integrated whole, culture today is seen as "a ground of contest in relations" and as a historically evolving, fragmented, inconsistent, conflicted, constructed, ever-shifting, and porous social reality. In this contest of relations the role of power in the shaping of cultural identity is of paramount importance, a factor that the modern concept of culture largely ignores. In the past, anthropologists tended to regard culture as an innocent set of conventions rather than a reality of conflict in which the colonizers, the powerful, the wealthy, the victors, the dominant can obliterate the beliefs and values of the colonized, the weak, the poor, the vanquished, the subjugated, so that there has been, in Serge Gruzinski's expression, "la colonisation de l'imaginaire." This role of power is, as Michel Foucault and other masters of suspicion have argued, central in the formation of knowledge in general. In the formation of cultural identity the role of power is even more extensive, since it is constituted by groups of people with conflicting interests, and the winners can dictate their cultural terms to the losers.

POSTCOLONIALISM

The issue of power brings us to the theme of postcolonialism. As is well known, the theory of postcolonialism was developed by Edward Said, according to whom the forms of knowledge and representation by means of which colonizing Western nations sought to analyze and understand other cultures, especially the Islamic cultures, are primarily acts of cultural construction in which acts of representation and the

10 For a detailed articulations of these six objections against the anthropological concept of culture, see Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture, 40-56.

11 The phrase is from R. Schreiter, The New Catholicity, 54.


exercise of power are inextricably conjoined. Hence, it is impossible to divorce culture, which is a powerful source of identity, from the relations of intercultural domination. The task of the analyst of Western interpretations of Asian cultures is not only to unmask their inherent racism and imperialism but also to draw out and give voice to those who have been silenced and marginalized in these interpretations.\(^{20}\)

Another important exponent of postcolonial thought is Homi Bhabha. For him, culture is not something pre-existent to be irrecuperably transmitted, but a “third space” to be constructed amid the struggle for survival, between self and other, beyond colonizer and colonized. It is always fragmentary, conflictive, and multiple. It is characterized by a “double vision,” frequently acquired by the marginalized and immigrants, that is, the awareness of both the promises of the encounter between the global and the local cultures and their de facto contradictions.\(^{21}\)

**GLOBALIZATION**

This predicament of culture is exacerbated by the process of globalization in which the ideals of modernity and technological reason are extended throughout the world (globalization as *extension*), aided and abetted by a single economic system (i.e., neoliberal capitalism) and new communication technologies.\(^{22}\) In globalization geographical boundaries, which at one time helped define cultural identity, have now col-

\(^{20}\) See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993). Of course Said is referring to the attitude of Europeans toward the Middle East and Islam, but his remarks can be extrapolated to South and East Asia. While heavily influenced by Michel Foucault’s “power/knowledge” theory, Said later recognizes that in the postcolonial period, with sophisticated scholarship and critical consciousness, Westerners may be able to approach the East with a “decolonizing” knowledge, without oppression and bias. For an exposition and critique of Said and Orientalism, see John J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), in particular 22–8; 205–9.


Lapsed. Even our sense of time is largely compressed, with the present predominating and the dividing line between past and future becoming ever more blurred (globalization as *compression*). In this process of globalization, a homogenized culture is created, consolidated by a “hyper-culture” based on consumption, especially of goods exported from the U.S.A., such as clothing (e.g., T-shirts, denim jeans, athletic shoes), food (e.g., McDonald’s and Coca Cola), and entertainment (e.g., films, videos, and music).

Such globalized culture is not however accepted by local cultures hook, line and sinker. Between the global and the local cultures there takes place a continuous struggle, the former for political and economic dominance, the latter for survival and integrity. Because of the powerful attraction of the global culture, especially for the young, local cultures often feel threatened by it, but they are far from powerless. To counteract its influence, they have devised several strategies, namely, resistance, subversion, compromise, and appropriation. And in this effort religion more often than not has played a key role in alliance with local cultures.\(^{23}\)

Like the anthropological concept of culture as a unified whole, the globalized concept of culture as a ground of contest in relations has its own strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, it takes into account features of culture that are left in the shadow by its predecessor. While recognizing that harmony and wholeness remain ideals, it views culture in its lived reality of fragmentation, conflict, and ephemerality. Cultural meanings are not simply discovered ready-made but are constructed and produced in the violent cauldron of asymmetrical power relations. It recognizes the important role of power in the formation of

\(^{23}\) For a brief discussion of globalization, see Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 4–14. Social scientist Arjun Appadurai lists five factors that have contributed to the “deterritorialization” of contemporary culture: “ethnoscape” (the constant flow of persons such as immigrants, refugees, tourists, guest workers, exiles), “technoscape” (mechanical and informational technologies), “finanscape” (flow of money through currency markets, national stock exchanges, commodity speculation), “mediascape” (newspapers, magazines, TV, films), and “ideoscape” (key ideas such as freedom, welfare, human rights, independence, democracy). See his “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy,” *Public Culture* 2:2 (1990) 1–24.
cultural identity. Furthermore, it sees culture as a historical process, intrinsically mutable, but without an a priori, clearly defined telos and a controllable and predictable synthesis. On the debit side, this postmodern concept of culture runs the risk of fomenting fundamentalistic tendencies, cultural and social ghettoization, and romantic retreat to an idealized past.24

Asian and Latino/a Theologies, Partners in the Postmodern Context?

What are the challenges that postmodernity with its twins of postcolonialism and globalization pose to Asian and Latino/a theologies, and how do these theologies respond to them? In the answers to these two questions similarities and convergences as well as differences between these two theologies will emerge.

Postmodern Challenges to Christian Theology

1. The first and perhaps the most difficult challenge regards how these two theologies as academic disciplines conceive their goals and objectives in view of the postmodern rejection of the possibility of grand narratives. Is the narration of the Christian story, which both theologies must do as part of their tasks, a “grand récit,” which is deemed an impossibility by postmodern epistemology? If so, should they content themselves with being local narratives of particular Christian communities of discourse, without pretension to universal validity? In this case, how can the universality and normativeness of the Christian story be preserved without falling into cultural and ecclesiastical imperialism? Should there not be a new understanding of the catholicity of both the Gospel and the Church? How is this new catholicity to be conceived in the context of postmodernism, postcolonialism and globalization, a catholicity that is not a melting pot with its stubborn Eurocentric provincialism but a multicultural mosaic that tends toward a universalistic outlook and at the same time nurtures local differences and regional particularities?

2. If Asian and Latino/a theologies are local theologies, how do they regard their relationship to the academically and ecclesiastically dominant theology? Is the latter (including the Magisterium) to be taken simply as another local theology among others? Can and should Asian and Latino/a theologies “dialogue” with it, and if so how? Can they cross the cultural boundaries between them and the dominant theological tradition? Here certain fundamental issues in epistemology and interpretation come into play such as cultural relativism, translation, incommensurability, historical understanding, and the nature of rationality itself. These issues pose severe if not insurmountable challenges to cross-cultural communication among various theologies. Incidentally, these issues arise not only in the dialogue between Asian and Latino/a theologies and the dominant Euro-American theology but also in the conversation between these two theologies themselves as well as between each of them and other ethnic theologies.

3. Both Asian and Latino/a theologies have been forged in and from the experience of centuries-long colonial exploitation by Western powers in the past and presently under the economic, political, military, and cultural domination of the United States as the world’s only surviving superpower. Given this historical background, how will these theologies view the dynamics of power, which postmodernism has highlighted, in the rise and transmission of the hegemonic theology? How do they take into account the role of racism, classism, sexism, militarism, and cultural oppression in the formation of theological knowledge? How can they give voice to the voiceless, preserve the “dangerous memory” of the “underside of history,” and help the victims become the subjects and authors of their own liberation? Furthermore, how do they conceive the task of reconciliation between victimizers and victims, between oppressors and oppressed, between the centers of power and the marginalized periphery, once these forms of domination and exclusion have been unmasked, named, and combated?

4. To carry out all these tasks effectively in postmodernity, what method and hermeneutical strategies should Asian and Latino/a theologies adopt? Beside the threelfold mediation, namely, analytic, hermeneutical, and practical, of the method of Latin American liberation theology, which both Asian and Latino/a theologies have appropriated, is there anything specific to their socio-political and cultural locations, i.e., Asia and the United States respectively, that will import new elements of their own into the methods and hermeneutical approaches of Asian and Latino/a theologies that make them different from their common ally and source of inspiration?

5. More concretely, are there sources and resources from which Asian and Latino/a theologies can and should draw in order to construct their own interpretations of the Christian faith, resources and sources different from those of Latin American liberation theology? If
there are, do these resources still preserve their distinctiveness in spite of the constant onslaught of the homogenizing "hyper-culture" of globalization, as both extension and compression? If these resources are still distinctive and are pressed into service—myths, people's stories, philosophical theories, sacred texts, religious rituals and practices, popular religion, songs and dances, art and architecture, and so on—how are they to be related to the official sources of Christian theology, namely, Scripture and Tradition? Are these indigenous resources simply "contexts" to which Scripture and Tradition are "applied" or at best "adapted," or are they loci theologici in the proper sense of the term which must be taken into account when Scripture and Tradition are read cross-culturally and cross-religiously? In this cross-cultural and cross-religious hermeneutics, will our understanding of Scripture and Tradition be corrected, complemented, and enriched by these resources, just as the latter will in turn be enriched by the Christian Scripture and Tradition?

6. Lastly, postmodernism has put some key Christian doctrines in jeopardy, such as those concerning God, Christ, and Church. By rejecting the possibility of meta-narratives postmodernism implicitly denies the feasibility of at least a salvation history that intends to offer a coherent and overarching account of God's activities and providence in the world. Furthermore, by espousing a thoroughgoing relativism and religious pluralism, it also challenges the doctrine of Christ as the unique and universal savior. Finally, whereas the postmodern emphasis on community over individualism and the processes of geographical extension and temporal compression in globalization may strengthen the Church's catholicity, is there not a risk that the Church will be turned into a uniform super-culture, reinforced by a central authority, with identical organizational structures, doctrinal formulations, moral codes, and ritual practices all over the world, to the detriment of the Church universal as communitio of truly local churches, as a communion of communities?

ASIAN AND LATINO/A THEOLOGIES WORKING IN TANDEM IN THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT

Even though Asian and Latino/a theologies did not originate as deliberate responses to postmodernism, nevertheless it is instructive, for the purpose of comparing these two theologies, to examine how they answer its various challenges, especially those outlined above. Here the stress will be laid on Asian theologies, since they are the lesser known of the two. For Asian and Asian-American theologies, the bibliography is immense. The most important source for Asian Catholic theology is the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and its various offices and institutes. The FABC was founded in 1970 during the visit of Paul VI to Manila, Philippines. It is a voluntary association of episcopal conferences in South, Southeast, East and Central Asia. It functions through a hierarchy of structures consisting of the Plenary Assembly, the Central Committee, the Standing Committee, and the Central Secretariat with its seven offices (evangelization, social communication, laity, human development, education and student chaplaincy, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, and theological concerns). The decisions of the Federation are made without collegial voting; their acceptance is an expression of collegial responsibility. For a collection of the Final Statements of FABC's plenary assemblies as well as assorted documents of FABC's various institutes, see For All Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: Documents from 1970 to 1991, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) and For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996, vol. 2, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1997). These volumes will be cited as For All Peoples of Asia, followed by their

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respective years of publication. Later documents of the FABC are available from FABC, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong.

Asian and Latino/a Theologies as
Minority Literature and Minority Discourse

In light of the postmodern and postcolonialist understanding of culture as a ground of contest in relations, which is fortified and spread by globalization, Asian and Latino/a theologies do not start from a universalized concept of culture, inevitably shaped by the dominant culture, and then proceed to apply it to ethnic cultures. Rather, as academic disciplines, they are what Fernando Segovia has aptly termed Christian “minor literature” and “minority studies.” Taking a cue from Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s proposals for a “minor literature” as a deterritorialized, political, and collective discourse embedded within every literature, and critically appropriating the insights of Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd on “minority discourse” (as opposed to “ethnic discourse”), Segovia proposes an intercultural theology both as a “minor literature” and as “a Christian minority discourse.”

By “deterritorialized” JanMohamed and Lloyd refer to the paradoxical fact that minority literature writers often feel the need to write (impossibility of not writing) and that they must write in a language not their own, but in those of their colonizers (impossibility of writing). “Political” refers to the fact that minority literature writers’ individual interests are inextricably linked with politics: the personal is indeed the political. “Collective” connotes the fact that minority literature writers, lacking abundant talent, do not write in their own names but in those of the ethnic groups to which they belong.

It is not difficult to recognize that Asian and Latino/a theologies bear all the marks of a minor literature. Asian and Latino/a theologians often have to write in English, Spanish, or French, languages of the erstwhile conquerors of their countries, with all the difficulties and disadvantages of this process. They are constantly frustrated by the impossibility to transport into these languages the morphology and grammar, idiomatic expressions and proverbs, metaphors and images, cadences and rhythms of their mother tongues. Yet, they must write in these foreign languages, for otherwise not only their own understanding of Christian beliefs and practices cannot be expressed but also the dominant Western Christianity will not be made conscious of its oppressive policies and practices. Furthermore, the canons of scholarly excellence of the academy within which they work belittle modes of expression peculiar to Asian and Hispanic cultures such as story-telling, oracular pronouncement, and dramatic representation. In addition, most Asian and Latino/a theologians are self-consciously political, taking as the starting point of their theologies the suffering and oppression of their people and seeking as their goal the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. They are also collective in so far as they endeavor to be in solidarity with the victims of oppression, to lend voice to the voiceless, and to reflect theologically together with them as a deliberate part of their method.

Helpful as Deleuze’s and Guattari’s explication of minor literature is, it is, as Segovia has pointed out, deficient in its binary opposition between major and minor literature, its attribution of the collective character of minor literature to the lack of talent among minorities, and especially its lack of the sense of the whole range of political options besides the two options available to minor literature writers, which they propose, namely, either to enrich or to impoverish the language of the dominant majority. Here the reflections of JanMohamed and Lloyd on minority discourse are useful. For these two postcolonialist thinkers, all minority groups share a common experience of domination and exclusion by the majority. To subvert this socio-political and cultural

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26 See his insightful and challenging essay, “Introduction: Minority Studies and Christian Studies,” in A Dream Unfinished, 1–33. I am indebted to Segovia for his discussion of minor literature and minority discourse.

27 Segovia analyzes Deleuze’s and Guattari’s works such as Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (New York: Viking, 1977); and What Is Philosophy? (London: Verso, 1994).


29 Segovia calls this field of study “multipolar and multilingual, cacophonous and conflicted” (A Dream Unfinished, 30).

30 I have often heard comments from graduate American students to the effect that they find writings by such Asian theologians as Choon-Seng Song and Koseki Koyama “disconcerting” because they do not always follow linear logic. On the other hand, Korean-American theologian Jung Young Lee recalls that his dissertation director found that his writing style was “different” and said that he had had to read his text three times to understand what it meant. See Jung Young Lee, Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 3.

31 This is true of almost all younger Asian theologians, including Asian feminist theologians. Among the latter, two deserve notice for their writings in English: Chung Hyun Kyun (Korean) and Kwok Pui-lan (Chinese).

32 This approach is particularly clear in Latino/a theology, which is self-consciously done en conjunto.

33 See A Dream Unfinished, 15–6.
oppression, they propose that a minority discourse engage in a threefold task: (1) critique of practices of domination and marginalization by the dominant majority, (2) retrieval of suppressed works by minorities, and (3) constructive articulation of the counter-positions of the minorities as alternatives to the ideologies of the dominant culture.

Lloyd goes further in arguing for a distinction between ethnic discourse and minority discourse: whereas the former faces inward, focusing on its internal issues and problems, the latter faces outward to the dominant culture, functioning as an oppositional discourse. With regard to culture, over against the traditional, Marxist, and anthropological conceptions, minority discourse emphasizes the antagonism between ethnic cultures and the dominant culture emphasizes the inseparability between culture and its material conditions, and maintains the differentiation of spheres in culture (i.e., its political, economic, cultural, and religious dimensions). With regard to ethnicity, minority discourse rejects the dominant culture’s stereotyping of ethnic cultures as homogeneous and generic and its project of assimilation. Rather it highlights the heterodoxy of ethnic cultures and their inassimilability into the “mainstream” culture.

Again, it is not difficult to see that both Asian and Latino/a theologies are minority discourses. The threefold project of minority discourse—critique of ideologies, retrieval of suppressed materials, and constructive proposal of alternative visions and practices—is also that of Asian and Latino/a theologies. Furthermore, these two theologies maintain the inseparability between culture and its material conditions, take into account the different dimensions of culture, and highlight the agonistic aspect of the relationship between minority groups and the dominant majority.

With reference to the first challenge of postmodernism as outlined above, obviously both Latino/a and Asian theologies, in so far as they are Christian minor literature and minority discourse, regard themselves as local theologies and the dominant theology itself as another kind of local theology as well. They are confessedly local narratives, or more precisely, people’s narratives of particular Christian communities of discourse. They do not pretend to have any a priori universal validity, inherent in an alleged universal rationality and to be imposed, by force if necessary, on other Christian communities. If they can be credited with any universality at all, it cannot be understood as uniformity of thought and expression based on pure reason and enforceable by means of power. Rather it accrues to them a posteriori, slowly and incrementally, as the result of the fact that other Christian communities of discourse recognize them deep resonances of their own experiences and theological articulations harmonious with the Christian faith in spite of (or rather because of) the diversity in thought forms and linguistic expressions. Hence, the catholicity of the Christian Church, in Asian and Latino/a theologies, goes beyond temporal, geographical and numerical universality—the traditional semper, ubique, et ab omnibus. Rather than being denied, the universality of the Christian faith is further enriched and refers to the intrinsic pluralism and inexhaustible richness of the Christian faith that only a diversity of theological traditions can represent with relative adequacy.

Method and Hermeneutics

The nature and scope of Asian and Latino/a theologies as minority discourse will emerge more clearly as we move to consider their method and hermeneutical approaches. As mentioned above, both Asian and Latino/a theologians are indebted to Latin American liberation theology for their method. For them, in order to accomplish the threefold task of critique, retrieval, and construction, theology must proceed in three steps or “mediations”: analytical, hermeneutical, and practical. The purpose of the first mediation (i.e., analytical) is to obtain as accurate an understanding as possible of the causes of the people’s poverty and oppression. Here use is often made of the social sciences, especially of the Marxist and dialectical types, to highlight the fact poverty is not simply the outcome of personal faults or the effects of economic cycles.

Robert Schreiter suggests that a new understanding of catholicity contains three elements: inclusion, fullness, and intercultural exchange and communication: “A new catholicity, then, is marked by a wholeness of inclusion and fullness of faith in a pattern of intercultural exchange and communication. To the extent that this catholicity can be realized, it may provide a paradigm for what a universal theology might look like today, able to encompass both sameness and difference, rooted in an orthopraxis, providing felo i for a globalized society” (The New Catholicity, 132–3). For the FABC’s understanding of catholicity as a new way of being church, see For All Peoples (1997) 217–28 and Communion and Solidarity: A New Way of Being Church in Asia, FABC Papers, no. 83 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1997).


but also of a systematic exploitation by the rich and the powerful in all areas of life. The intent of the second mediation (i.e., hermeneutical) is to read the “signs of the times” discerned in the first mediation in the light of the Scripture. It aims at articulating the correspondence (not identity) between the relationship of the biblical text to its context on the one hand and the relationship of ourselves to our context on the other. Such a reading will avoid biblicism, fundamentalism, and eisegesis. The third mediation (i.e., practical) tests the validity (not logical consistency and theological truth) of the interpretation arrived at in the second mediation for social transformation, through concrete, socio-political and economic activities.

As far as hermeneutical approaches are concerned, Asian and Latino/a theologians undertake the three tasks that are prescribed of minority discourse, namely, critique, retrieval, and construction.39 Performing the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” they unmask the asymmetrical relation between the dominant and minority cultures and the dynamics of power that postmodernism and postcolonialism have shown to be covertly at work in such a relation, e.g., racism, classism, sexism, militarism, cultural marginalization, and other forms of cultural oppression.40 The next task, which is the “hermeneutics of retrieval,” goes in search of the “underside of history”—the history of opposition, prejudice, discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization—in particular, written texts and oral stories long forgotten or forcibly suppressed that tell of the struggle of the poor and the oppressed for their own liberation. This archival “archeology” also digs into the minority groups’ ethical, religious, and ritualistic traditions and customs, their language and myths, often marginalized and ridiculed by the dominant culture for their quaint, pre-modern appearance. But this archeology is not undertaken out of a romantic nostalgia for the bygone past, nor out of a purely historical and academic interest. Rather, its goal is to re-discover the abiding and liberative truths and values inherent in minority cultures capable of sustaining their members in their struggle for full humanity. Consequently, these minority cultures are subjected to the same critical scrutiny and evaluation, as stringent and rigorous as the one applied to the dominant culture. Finally, the “hermeneutics of reconstruction” aims at shaping, out of the spade-work of critique and retrieval, a new theology that brings together the worthwhile insights from both the dominant culture and the minority cultures.

In light of the above it is clear that both Asian and Latino/a theologies have tried to meet the second and third challenges of postmodernism head on. Born out of the pains of colonial exploitation and cultural marginalization, both theologies are deeply sensitive to the dynamics of power at work in the relationship between minority and dominant cultures.41 Nevertheless, they have not allowed this oppositional attitude to be frozen into a sterile isolation, a kind of apartheid in reverse. Rather, Asian and Latino/a theologians have reached across the cultural divide and carried out a fruitful dialogue with both the dominant culture, in particular the academy (as is abundantly demonstrated by their scholarly publications), and the teaching authority in the Church.42 In the case of the Asian Catholic Church in particular, a mutually beneficial collaboration has taken place between the theologians and the hierarchy in the context of the FABC, which is indeed a unique phenomenon in the Church today.

Mestizaje and Dialogue with Non-Christian Religions

While adopting the method and hermeneutical strategies of Latin American liberation theology, Asian and Latino/a theologians have also expanded them by including elements that are peculiar to their social locations and in this way answer the fourth challenge of postmodernism mentioned above. In the footsteps of Virgilio Elizondo, Latino/a theologians have privileged the condition of mestizaje of U.S. Latino population, especially the Mexican Americans, as the context for their theological reflections.43

On their part Asian theologians have highlighted the pervasive religiousness of Asian peoples as well as religious pluralism as a sociological fact in Asia. In this connection, Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan liberation theologian, while recognizing the indebtedness of Asian theologians to their Latin American colleagues, has pointed out that for “liberation-theopraxis” in Asia that uses only the Marxist tools of social analysis will remain un-Asian and ineffective. It must integrate the psychological tools of introspection that our sages have discovered.”44


40 For a powerful Asian critique of ideologies, see Kosuke Koyama, Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idolol (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

41 For a sharp critique of Western theology, see Tissa Balasuriya, Planetary Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 2–10.

42 For an example of a theology that attempts to reconcile racial conflicts, see Andrew Sung Park, Racial Conflict & Healing: An Asian-American Theological Perspective (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996).


The reason for the necessity of this additional tool is the fact that, as Pieris has argued, in Asia besides “imposed poverty” there is also “voluntary poverty” which has been freely assumed, mainly by monks, to liberate others from imposed poverty and about which Marxist social analysis has nothing to say. This “introspection” not only serves as a bracing corrective to Karl Marx’s thesis that religions are the opium for the people but also highlights the potential that religions have for social transformation.

Furthermore, this methodology has forged a new link between liberation and interreligious dialogue. Since Latin America and the U.S. are predominantly Christian, interreligious dialogue has not been an urgent issue for most of their theologians nor has it served as a method for theological reflection.4 This is not however the case with Asia which is the birthplace of most world religions and where Christians are but a tiny minority and therefore must collaborate with adherents of other religions in order to achieve their agenda for social transformation. By interreligious dialogue as a theological method is meant not only theological discussions among church representatives and academics, but also “dialogue of life,” “dialogue of action,” and “dialogue of religious experience.” It is from these four forms of interreligious dialogue that a theology of liberation must be constructed whose genuine wellspring must be spirituality and not secular ideologies.4

On the other hand, thanks to its new link with liberation, the very nature of interreligious dialogue has been transformed. It can no longer be carried out as a leisurely form of inculturation in which various elements are borrowed from other religions and grafted onto one’s own—a kind of “theological vandalism,” to use Pieris’s expression. Rather it should be practiced as part of the task of liberation, since inculturation, as Pieris puts it, is nothing but announcing “the good news in our own tongues to our people (that is, the content of inculturation)—namely, that Jesus is the new covenant or the defense pact that God and the poor have made against mammon, their common enemy (that is, the content of liberation). For liberation and inculturation are not two things anymore in Asia.”

We Drink from Our Own Wells: Lo cotidiano and People’s Stories
Besides inheriting from Latin American liberation theology, Latino/a and Asian theologies have also drawn upon sources and resources that are their own and still preserve their peculiar ethnic flavor in spite of the homogenizing onslaught of globalization (the fifth challenge of postmodernity). Among Latino/a theologians much interest has been shown in lo cotidiano, the daily life of Latino/a women, men and children with all its inexhaustible variety and richness. Included in the lo cotidiano are not only the daily rounds of work and celebrations (fiestas) but also the symbols, rituals, and languages of Latino/a popular Catholicism.

Asian theologians too have made people’s stories, especially those of the poor and oppressed, a main source of their theologies. Perhaps the most well-known and prolific among Asian theologians who makes story-telling a fundamental feature of his method is the Presbyterian Taiwanese Chao-Seng Song. For Song, these stories must be correlated with the master story, namely, the story of Jesus that is revealed in his message about the reign of God. From this story of the reign of God revealed in Jesus’ life and ministry Song moves backward to the stories of the reign of God in the Hebrew Scripture and forward to the stories of the people outside the Christian Church. In such a correlation Song does not operate on the model of promise and fulfillment but rather he sees an identity between Jesus and the poor and oppressed people.

Hence, the baffling title of one of his books: Jesus, the Crucified People.

4 Aloysius Pieris, An Asian Theology of Liberation, 58.
5 On Latino/a popular Catholicism, see the works of Orlando Espín, especially his The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).
6 Among Song’s many works, the following are pertinent to our theme: Chao-Seng Song: Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), revised edition 1990; The Compassionate God (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982); Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984); Theology from the Womb of Asia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986); Jesus, the Crucified People (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Jesus & the Reign of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Jesus in the Power of the Spirit (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).
This identification between Jesus and the poor and oppressed people is also made in the Korean theology known as minjung theology. Minjung—literally, people—is the mass that is politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially alienated, religiously marginalized, and culturally kept uneducated by the dominant group of the society, and it is this mass of people that is the embodiment of the Messiah.52 Similarly, such an identification is found in the Indian theologies called Dalit and Tribal theologies, which reject Hinduism as the religious marker of all Indians and see in the sufferings of the untouchables and the marginalization of the tribals the face of Jesus.50

**Toward an Asian-Latino/a International Theology**

Given methodological and hermeneutical convergences between Asian and Latino/a theologies, the question arises as to whether there are ways in which the two theologies can collaborate together as partners in the postmodern age to produce (together with Black Theology) a U.S. intercultural theology. Of course, they can and should continue to learn from each other’s methods and hermeneutics, but they should also move toward constructing together, using each other’s sources and resources, an intercultural theology on substantive issues. Postmodernism’s sixth challenge referred to above mentions at least three areas that need to be attended to: God, Christ, and Church. Other theological themes should be added, such as the Holy Spirit, sacraments, ethics, and pastoral theology. Such a constructive task, enormous and daunting, remains largely to be done. Only brief suggestions will be given below with regard to the three themes of God, Christ and Church from the perspective of Vietnamese culture.46


**GOD-HUMANITY-EARTH**

Basic to the Vietnamese worldview is what is called the “three-element philosophy” (tri êt lam tai). The three elements are Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, (thien, dia, nhan or troi, dat, nguoi), forming the three ultimates constituting the whole reality. “Heaven” refers to the firmament above humans (as opposed to the earth), to the law of nature, and to the Creator, endowed with intellect and will. The firmament is the place where the Creator dwells; the law of nature is the Creator’s will and dispositions; and the Creator is the supreme being who is transcendent, omnipotent, and eternal. “Earth” refers to the material reality lying beneath humans (as opposed to heaven above), to that which gives rise to entities composed of the five constituents (ngu hanh) of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth; and to matter in general which is essentially directed upward to Heaven. “Humanity” refers to human beings “whose heads carry Heaven and whose feet trample upon Earth” (dau doi troi, chan dan dat), that is, humans as the link or union between Heaven and Earth. Humans express the power of Heaven and Earth by being “the sage inside and the king outside” (not thanh ngoai vuong), that is, by orienting upward to Heaven (tri tri) through knowing Heaven, trusting in Heaven, and acting out the will of Heaven on the one hand, and by orienting downward to Earth (each vat) through the use of material things for the benefit of all. As the center connecting Heaven and Earth, humans as the microcosm unite the male and the female, the positive and negative, light and darkness, spirit and matter (yen and yang), and the characteristics of the five constituents: sublity (water), strength (fire), vitality (wood), constancy (metal), and generosity (earth). In this way humans practice the “human heart” (nhan tam) and the “human way” (nhan dao).

The most important principle of the tam tai philosophy is that all the three constitutive elements of reality are intrinsically connected with one another and mutually dependent. Heaven without Earth and Humanity cannot produce or express anything. Earth without Heaven and Humanity would be an empty desert. Humanity without Heaven would be directionless, and without Earth it would have nowhere to exist and to act. Each of the three elements has a function of its own to perform: Heaven gives birth; Earth nurtures; and Humanity harmonizes (Thien sinh, dia duong, nhan hoa). Consequently, human action must be governed by three principles: it must be carried out in accord with Heaven (thien tho), with the propitious favor of Earth (dia loi), and for the harmony of Humanity (nhan hoa).55

55This philosophy is claimed to be represented on the upper surface of the bronze drum, especially the one discovered at Ngoc Lu in 1901 and now preserved at the
It is clear that a Vietnamese-American theology can and should make use of this tam tai philosophy not only to construct a theology of the Trinity but also an integral anthropology. First, with regard to the Trinity, it is possible to correlate God the Father with Heaven, God the Son to Humanity, and God the Spirit to Earth and elaborate their roles in the history of salvation in the light of those of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. The Father’s role is to “give birth” through “creation”; the Son’s is to “harmonize” through redemption; and the Spirit’s is to “nurture” through sanctifying grace. These roles are truly distinct from one another (hence Trinitarian and not modalistic) but intimately linked with one another (hence one and not subordinationist or tritheistic). Like Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, the three divine Persons are united in a perichoresis or koinonia of life and activities. In this Trinitarian theology God’s transcendence and immanence are intrinsically related with each other. God, though transcendent, is conceived as internally connected with and dependent on Humanity and Earth to carry his activities in history. Indeed, the Trinity is conceived as inscribed in the structure of reality itself.

Secondly, a Christian anthropology constructed in light of the tam tai philosophy will offer an integral understanding of human existence. In this anthropology there is no opposition between theocentrism and anthropocentrism, nor between theocentrism and geocentrism, nor between geocentrism and anthropocentrism. Indeed, tam tai philosophy is opposed to any ism that is exclusive of any other perspective. The human is understood neither as subject nor object but as intrinsically related to the divine and the ecological, just as the divine is intrinsically related to the ecological and the human, and the ecological is intrinsically related to the divine and the human. This anthropology will be an important corrective to the American culture which tends to view, under the influence of modernity, God and humanity as competitors and humans as unrelated to their ecology.

CHRIST AS THE IMMIGRANT, THE ANCESTOR AND THE ELDEST BROTHER

Any Christian theology must of course reflect on Christ as both divine and human. In Vietnamese-American theology, I would highlight two aspects of Christ. First, Jesus can be regarded as the Immigrant par excellence, the Marginalized One living in the both-and and beyond situation. This in-between, on-the-margin status is foundational to the Incarnation as well as to Jesus’ entire ministry, including his death and resurrection. But Jesus’ being on the margin creates a new circle with a new center, not of power but of love, joining and reconciling the two worlds, human and divine. Vietnamese Americans can readily relate to this figure of Christ the Immigrant from their experiences, sometimes painful, of living as marginalized immigrants in the United States. But like Jesus, they are called to create a new circle, made up of both Americans and Vietnamese, with a new center, not in order to exclude anyone but to help both Americans and Vietnamese to move beyond their ethnic identities and create a new reality of both Vietnamese and American.

Secondly, from the Vietnamese religious perspective, Jesus can be regarded as the Eldest Brother and the paradigmatic Ancestor. As is well known, the veneration of ancestors is one of the most sacred duties for Vietnamese. It is also common knowledge that this religious practice constituted one of the serious problems for missionary work in Asia. A Christology that presents Jesus as the Eldest Brother and the Ancestor has much to recommend it not only for missionary purposes but also for fostering Vietnamese ethics, especially familial, at the center of which lies filial piety. This latter aspect is all the more urgent for Vietnamese Americans who are encountering tremendous difficulties in preserving the rite of ancestor veneration, especially at weddings and funerals.

CHURCH AS SERVANT OF THE REIGN OF GOD

The theology of the church in Asia, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, has been for a long time characterized by an excessive focus on the image of a Church that possesses and safeguards Christ. For an elaboration of Jesus as the Immigrant par excellence, see Jung Young Lee, Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) and Peter C. Phan, “Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face,” Theological Studies 57 (1996) 399–430.


on the church’s institutional aspects, in particular the hierarchy and its power. Asian ecclesiology, in other words, has been ecclesiocentric. In recent years, thanks to the work of the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences, theological attention has been turned away from intra-ecclesial issues to the mission of the church toward the world, especially the world of Asian peoples. Ecclesiology is now focused on the reign of God as its goal: the church exists for the sake of the kingdom of God. The church’s evangelizing mission is now understood in terms of the threefold task of inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and liberation.

Such a kingdom-centered ecclesiology is called for in Vietnamese-American theology. As Min has correctly pointed out, Asian immigrants cannot be oblivious to the fact that politically and economically, they, immigrants though they are, belong to the only surviving superpower exercising an enormous influence and not infrequently an unjust and oppressive control over the rest of the world through the process of globalization. The task of socio-political and economic liberation, which is a constitutive dimension of evangelization, becomes all the more urgent for Vietnamese Americans. Furthermore, because Vietnamese Americans are religiously diverse, the need for interreligious dialogue is no less pressing in the United States than in Asia. Finally, for Vietnamese Americans the inculturation of the Christian faith is no doubt a much more challenging and complex task in America since they are confronted with not only one but at least two very diverse cultures. Of course, these tasks of inculturation, interreligious dialogue and liberation cannot be separated from the other aspects of evangelization such as proclamation, personal witness, and worship.

It would be highly illuminating if through a dialogue between Asian (as well as Asian-American) and Latino/a theologians convergences and similarities can be found to construct an intercultural theology in which each theology is enriched by the other, while maintaining its distinctiveness.

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11 See For All the Peoples (1992) 71–3; 135–8; 143–4; 152–4; 284–7 and For All the Peoples of Asia (1997) 193–214.