

SANACS

SOCIETY OF ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN CHRISTIAN STUDIES

JOURNAL #4 (2012-2013)

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THE SOCIETY OF ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN CHRISTIAN STUDIES JOURNAL

An inter-disciplinary, scholarly exploration of Asian North American Christianity

SANACS is a program of the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity (ISAAC)

Membership Subscriptions, address changes, advertising and business correspondence should be sent to:
Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity (ISAAC)
826 Orange Grove Place, South Pasadena CA 91030
(626) 676-5010.

Postmaster send address changes to:
SANACS Journal (ISAAC)
826 Orange Grove Place, South Pasadena CA 91030

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ISBN: 978-1-304-12786-0

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Cover and interior layout by Daniel Chou

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in order that evangelicalism itself can be renewed and invigorated for the sake of the gospel and in anticipation of the coming kingdom.⁴⁰

⁴⁰This paper was originally written in response to the invitation by Young Lee Hertig to participate at the Second Asian American Equipping Symposium co-sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity and Fuller Theological Seminary, held at Fuller on 7-8 February 2011. I am grateful to Young Lee for her the opportunity and to various of the Symposium participants for their encouraging feedback. Thanks also to my GA Tim Lim Teck Ngern for his proofreading this essay, and to Jonathan Tan for comments on an earlier draft. Errors of fact and of interpretation remain my own responsibility, of course.

Forgiving From Liminal Space: Locating Asian American Theologies of Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts abound in Asian American churches between different groups, be it intergenerational, inter-ethnic, or even family conflicts involving a child's future career choices. This study articulates a theological location of forgiveness that speaks generally to those conflicts. In particular, it situates forgiveness in the liminal space between what Homi K. Bhabha describes as "domains of difference" that define different generational or ethnic groups within Asian American churches. Yet, the possibility of forgiveness is enacted only when both sides of a conflict are willing to move from those domains into liminal space. This study argues that Mark Lewis Taylor's articulation of "dialogical questioning" is a useful mechanism that makes this movement possible.

... forgiveness is not the exclusive property of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Sometimes, digging deeper into one's own tradition helps us find a reservoir of fresh water for recovery and renewal.¹

Asian American churches are not particularly associated with being forgiving.² Many, including myself, who are members of Asian American churches perhaps recall acrimonious conflicts during congregational meetings between factions

¹Anri Morimoto, "The Theology of Forgiveness in a Comparative Perspective," (The Surjit Singh Lecture in Comparative Religious Thought and Culture, Graduate Theological Union, April 13, 2010).

²In this paper, by "Asian" I am predominately referring to Far East Asian cultures, namely, the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures. Of course, other Asian cultures (e.g. Southeast Asian or even South Asian) may have parallels to Far East Asian cultures, but due to my relative non-familiarity with them, I do not wish to assert that the cultures are somehow the same by including them wholesale into the discussion. Of course, some of the claims this study makes may apply to varying extents to other Asian cultures (e.g. Burmese, Thai, Vietnamese, etc.) due to cultural similarities, and I invite the reader to make those connections.

divided over various contentious church issues, or leaders who were chastised for displaying any spiritual, leadership, or other "weaknesses." Chinese churches with two ethnic-Chinese denominations (usually Cantonese and Mandarin) often share animosity, however subdued, with each other. Korean churches have suffered schism, many between an immigrant congregation with members who were born in Korea and a younger, English-speaking congregation whose members were born in the United States. Asian parents enjoy a dubious reputation for being "Tiger parents" who expect and push their Asian American children to attain high levels of scholastic achievement and pursue careers in medicine, law, or engineering, while downplaying or even opposing career choices in the arts or callings to ministry. Such situations result in conflicts between parent and child, especially if the latter perceives a calling to ministry (or other fields).³

Part of the reason is the honor/shame cultural construct that typifies Asian cultures, one that allocates honor (or shame) to the wider family or community based on the honor-bringing (or shame-inducing) actions of its members. Consequently, members are constantly under tremendous pressure to achieve or to live up to the wider collective's often lofty expectations in order to avoid the crushing burden of shame that violators of those expectations would suffer. Examples include situations where, as pastors Nancy Sugikawa and Steve Wong describe,

A Korean senior pastor rebukes a younger pastor for missing morning prayer twice one week, challenging his devotion to God. He upholds as a better example of faithfulness another leader who works long hours and does everything he is told. A Chinese church elder scolds a pastor for not being spiritual enough because he has expressed his fear of failure or asked for a raise. A Japanese pastor has been having serious marital conflicts but urges his wife never to reveal their problems to anyone in the church.⁴

The type of conflicts addressed in this study poses a question on the role of forgiveness within Asian American churches. For forgiveness to happen, there

³This is addressed in greater detail in Jeanette Yep, Peter Cha, et. al., *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). The book, it should be noted, is dated but the stories told are quite representative of some of the struggles discussed in this study.

⁴Nancy Sugikawa and Steve Wong, "Grace-Filled Households," in Peter Cha, Steve Kang, and Helen Lee, ed., *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23.

must be an offender who committed an error or wrongdoing that led to the conflict, and there must be a victim who suffered as a result of that error. But often-times, the nature of the offense may differ depending on how people "read" the conflict from their cultural vantage points. We may, in Sugikawa and Wong's example above, sympathize with the Chinese pastor and criticize the elder for being unreasonably overbearing, but others (likely from a different cultural worldview) may just as easily side with the elder and blame the pastor for being less than faithful when he should have been an example of faithfulness in the church.⁵

The presence, even pervasiveness, of these conflicts in Asian American churches makes a theology of forgiveness necessary, particularly one that makes possible an avenue for forgiveness in the midst of cultural differences. But because Asian America is not monolithic – there is great diversity within "Asia" – it is not possible to construct an Asian American theology of forgiveness that speaks specifically to all Asian American ethnicities. Nonetheless, the contribution this study makes is to articulate a theological location of forgiveness that speaks generally to the intergenerational and inter-ethnic conflicts that were mentioned above, conflicts that exist in many Asian American churches.

This study begins first with a discussion on how philosophies and practices of forgiveness are culturally-laden, and that sometimes, two different approaches may not agree with each other. This sets up the question of how forgiveness can happen with the confluence of differing approaches, a problem that relates directly to the conflicts in Asian American churches. The study then moves to answer that question by situating forgiveness in the liminal space between the "domains of difference," to use Homi K. Bhabha's terminology, that define those differing forgiveness approaches. Yet, the possibility of forgiveness is enacted only when both sides of a conflict express willingness to move themselves from their respective cultural domains into this liminal space. How this movement may be achieved constitutes the final question that this study addresses. In particular, the claim is made that Mark Lewis Taylor's approach towards "dialogical questioning" serves as a useful resource for enabling both sides of a conflict to journey towards liminal space such that forgiveness may be made possible.⁶

⁵In this study, the term "forgiveness" will always address this specific instance unless otherwise specified.

⁶For clarification, this study makes no claims on the act of forgiveness (or, how forgiveness is enacted). Again, the focus is on the construction of a cultural space that makes forgiveness and reconciliation possible between conflicts that have cultural underpinnings.

FORGIVENESS PHILOSOPHIES AND CULTURE

Forgiveness is, to put it in anthropological terminology, a cultural artifact. As anthropologists Steven Sandage and Ian Williamson write, it "is a construct that can be traced and studied in connection with diverse streams of literature from cultures around the globe."⁷ Thus, forgiveness philosophies and practices are quite diverse; as sociologist Robert Wuthnow's empirical study on forgiveness suggests, understandings of forgiveness have "fuzzy edges," suggesting that how forgiveness is defined and practiced is not uniform.⁸ That forgiveness is so culturally-drenched suggests that anthropological insights into social relations may shed light, however broadly, on certain patterns of forgiveness philosophies and practices. The model of forgiveness articulated by the philosopher Charles L. Griswold, for example, where the offender ideally initiates the process is an example of one means of practicing forgiveness, one that is rooted in, as we shall see, an individualistic construction of social relations.

Sandage and Williamson describe two broad anthropological constructions of the individual that potentially affects such practice.⁹ The individualistic construction, which is typical of the West and is represented by Griswold's model, emphasizes the autonomy and independence of the individual. This does not deny the sociality of the individual, nor should it suggest that communities are marginal in this conception of social arrangement. Indeed, as Griswold suggests, the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and new approaches to the practice of forgiveness on varying scales testify to the importance of forgiveness in ordinary life on an individual and social level.¹⁰

The focus on individual autonomy emphasizes contractuality in social relations. Thus, both sides of a conflict require a direct accounting of the conflict in question. Griswold's articulation of forgiveness highlights this contractuality. He broadly defines forgiveness as a dialectic between the offender (who seeks forgiveness) and the victim (who grants or withholds forgiveness), where only

⁷ Steven J. Sandage and Ian Williamson, "Forgiveness in Cultural Context," in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, ed. Everett L. Worthington, Jr. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 41.

⁸ Robert Wuthnow, "How Religious Groups Promote Forgiving: A National Study," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 39 (2000), 126.

⁹ Sandage and Williamson, 43.

¹⁰ Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiii.

offenders and victims possess the power to negotiate forgiveness.¹¹ As part of the process, an accurate accounting of one's involvement in the conflict must be provided, the absence of which derails the process. Consequently, third-party forgiveness would not be considered genuine. Of course, this is not problematic since, as Sandage and Williamson note, the main objective of forgiveness in the individualistic construction is the well-being of the persons (perhaps groups) directly involved in the conflict.¹² Only after the well-being of the victim is established can forgiveness be granted to the offender. Whether this practice can be broadened to include apologies of a national nature, such as a government apologizing for certain atrocities, is a matter of discussion that we will not venture into in this study.¹³

For illustrative purposes, let us briefly return to Sugikawa and Wong's anecdote at the beginning of the study of a Korean senior pastor who rebukes a junior pastor for being absent at morning prayer, following that by lifting up another staff member who works long hours and was unquestioningly obedient. From an individualistic articulation of social relations, the wrongdoer seems to be the senior pastor. We may be tempted to suggest that some emergency may require the junior pastor to skip morning prayer, and to assert that it may not be good that the staff member was working long hours in the first place!

There is, however, a second anthropological construction – the collectivist – that conceives of the individual as an interdependent agent operating within a rigidly-defined social framework. Individual identity, to be clear, is not sacrificed to that of the community; the individual's subjectivity is not eliminated. Rather, individual identity is shaped by collective identity, providing some leeway for individual expression. Such an ordering of social relations emphasizes social harmony. Not surprisingly, then, such a worldview regards forgiveness and reconciliation as inseparable, with the goal of ensuring the well-being of the collective.¹⁴ To return to Sugikawa and Wong's anecdote, we could imagine the senior pastor arguing that the junior pastor was in the wrong for disrupting social harmony by deviating from socially-accepted norms. Invoking the hardworking leader allows

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² Sandage and Williamson, 45.

¹³ Griswold makes a distinction between political forgiveness and apology. As he notes, national governments or organizations cannot convey its sentiments. A spokesperson usually does not, for instance, feel the sentiments that her apology is crafted to convey. (Griswold, 141-142)

¹⁴ Sandage and Williamson, 45.

the senior pastor to provide the junior pastor with an example of an individual working under those norms. In such a model, then, third-party forgiveness, for example, may be possible, although its occurrence may be premised on the presence of a community elder or through established cultural traditions. As a result, forgiveness may be granted without the well-being of the victim being ensured; the victim may forgive, for example, on the basis of the respect he or she may have for the community elder, or on the account of cultural traditions.

One can understand how forgiveness is made difficult when both sides of a conflict identify with different conceptions of social relations. But diversity exists in forgiveness practices even within the same social-relational worldviews, which are very broadly defined, how forgiveness is exactly practiced may differ. Indeed, in some cultural approaches to forgiveness, it may not be easy to situate one approach comfortably in one particular social-relational worldview. Consider the Japanese approach to forgiveness, as articulated by philosopher and theologian Anri Morimoto in a lecture at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.¹⁵ Morimoto drew on Japanese folk narratives in theorizing a uniquely Japanese approach to forgiveness. Even though Japan is a collective-oriented culture, the onus for forgiveness still rests on the individuals involved in the conflict. Contrary to common practices where the offender usually initiates the process of forgiveness by requesting it from the victim, the Japanese approach to forgiveness requires the victim to initiate the process by first granting forgiveness and then allowing the offender to realize on his own the gravity of their wrongdoing and undergo a period of "internal remorse." Forgiveness, then, is achieved when the latter visibly changes his or her actions, perhaps even offering recompense or reparation, as a result of having gone through that self-reflection. In other words, the process results in the offender's "repentance" from his or her wrongdoing.

The individual and the collective worldviews do not always coexist happily. Allowing for the possibility of political apologies, this difficulty could be seen in the apology issued by the Japanese government for its role in addressing the issue of "comfort women."¹⁶ In 1994, the Japanese government under the ad-

¹⁵Morimoto, "The Theology of Forgiveness"

¹⁶"Comfort women" were young women, largely from Korea, China, Japan, and the Philippines, who were abducted by the Imperial Japanese Army and forced to serve as sex slaves for soldiers.

ministration of Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama adopted an official statement of apology, drafted by foreign minister Yohei Kono, which read in part that

The government of Japan would like... to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.¹⁷

On top of the official apology, reparations were issued to the victims via the government-established non-profit Asian Women's Fund, a policy that was continued under successive administrations.

What the Japanese government did not understand, according to Morimoto, was that they were unwittingly issuing an apology from a Japanese understanding of forgiveness, and were assuming that the rest of the world understood it. What constituted their "apology" was their admission that they have undergone the process of self-examination and remorse, which implicatively suggested they have regretted and repudiated their complicity in the matter. But this was not an accounting of their actions, merely expressing instead the regret that something terrible happened to the women. This lack of an accounting was unimpressive, to say the least, to the Korean and Chinese governments. Protests erupted in those countries whenever the issue flared up again. On July 30, 2007, the United States Congress even adopted a resolution calling on the Japanese government to apologize to the victims!

So we return to our original question: how, in the presence of different and sometimes incompatible cultural worldviews, can forgiveness occur? The argument this study makes is that such forgiveness should be located in the interstitial space in between those two worldviews. It is a space where one worldview does not dominate the other. To rephrase, it is located in "decolonized" space. In making our claim, we draw on a decolonial reading of the famous Parable of the Prodigal Son in Lk. 15:11-31.

LOCATING FORGIVENESS IN LIMINAL SPACE

A cultural location of forgiveness requires sustained reflection on the cultural location of Asian America. Summarizing the literature on this subject is, as was the case with forgiveness, no small feat and worth a separate study.¹⁸ For our

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Overviews can be found in Gary Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princ-

purposes, an appropriate entry to the discussion of locating forgiveness in cultural space is Homi K. Bhabha where he writes in *The Location of Culture* that

What is theoretically innovative ... is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.¹⁹

What Bhabha refers to as "domains of difference" can well be denominated in terms of ethnicities, religion, gender, geographic location, etc. These domains constitute singularities or, as Bhabha notes, "originary and initial subjectivities" within which individuals feel "at home" or in their element, so to speak.²⁰ Within these domains, negotiations of cultural values are unnecessary due to existing social structures and expectations, with its defined values, customs, and other identitarian markers distinguishing one domain from another. The interstices comprise the space existing between these domains. Individuals located in interstitiality do not identify entirely with either domain on both sides of the interstitial space.²¹ Thus, identity must be "negotiated" within this space.

Interstitiality and liminality are often conflated, but there is a key difference between the two. Bhabha describes liminality by utilizing Renée Green's architectural metaphor, writing that

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designation of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that con-

eton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1-27; and Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979 [2001]), 213-289. Frank Wu's *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: NY: Basic Books, 2002) is an excellent book-length treatment on the Asian American experience and pertinent issues.

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ That is to say, such negotiations of cultural values are not necessary because those cultural values are already made known and are expected within each domain of difference. The interstitial find themselves outside of these domains because, for a variety of reasons, they simply do not belong.

structs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The *hither and thither* of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.²²

Green's metaphor illuminates liminality's transitory element, as evidenced by the "hither and thither" movement inherent within the liminal stairwell. Indeed, unlike the interstitial, the liminal individual intends to arrive at some "final destination," a different domain she intends to occupy after emerging from liminality. This movement is best articulated in the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner where, in his study on rituals the liminal individual is theorized to enter liminality by first separating herself from her existing domain of difference before enduring a period of marginalization as a result of the separation from that initial domain. The marginalization is only temporary; it is followed by an aggregation into the new domain of difference.²³

How liminality and interstitiality fits into our location of an Asian American theology of forgiveness is best understood from a reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-31) for "decolonization." In reading the parable from this perspective, the primary question that arises is not whether the prodigal son has committed a wrongdoing – he clearly has – but whether he should be regarded as the offender and, therefore, shoulder responsibility for the wrongdoing. Many readers may initially identify the primary offender to be the prodigal son, an identification possibly pre-empted by the common title of the story. Such a conclusion, however, does not necessarily hold for all readings of the parable. In Far East Asian cultures (among others), a reader may consider the father to be the primary offender, particularly since the story suggests a failure of parenting on his part. How was it possible, it may be legitimately asked, that the son had the gumption to ask his father for his share of the inheritance unless the son was poorly parented?

²² Ibid., 5. Italics mine.

²³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1965 [1995]), 97-102. Turner appropriates the concept of liminality in describing the Ndembu inauguration ritual for a new chieftain. The incoming chieftain enters the ritual (i.e. liminality), thereby leaving his former life as an ordinary tribesman behind. He undergoes a period of marginalization, which involved the rest of the tribe pouring insult after insult on him, before he encounters aggregation as a village elder gives a speech on the chieftainship. The ritual concludes, and the candidate emerges as the new chieftain of the village.

A decolonial reading of the parable seeks to incorporate insights from post-colonial theory in better understanding the historical and social contexts of the parable and incorporating them into its exegesis. This methodology opens new avenues in the interpretation of the text. In his excellent essay, New Testament scholar Rohun Park observes presciently that within the social context of the Parable, parenting from the paternal side was done through the exercising of *paterfamilias* over his household.²⁴ This often involves exercising “paternal severity” in order to instill discipline among his children, as attested to by ancient Greek and Roman literature.²⁵ While this may sound quite alien to modern readers, the prevailing worldview at the time regards the *oikos*, or household, as the fundamental social unit. The entire Roman Empire, in fact, was seen as an *oikos* writ large, with the Emperor as *paterfamilias*. Paternal severity, much like public punishments such as crucifixion, were instituted to ensure security and unity in the empire.

Thus, the father in the Parable can be argued to have visibly deviated from social expectations of fatherhood when he ran to embrace his prodigal son near the end of the parable, going so far as to throw a banquet in honor of his return. Missing from the parable, perhaps surprisingly for Jesus’ listeners at the time, are accounts of paternal severity, or the father displacing the full weight of *paterfamilias* on the shameful, prodigal son. By stepping outside of his domain of difference – the social expectations of the father as head of the *oikos* – the father enters liminality. His displacement thrusts the prodigal son into liminality as well. The son journeys homeward with an apology in mind that would locate him in the interstices of the household as a shameful son who is not worthy of the rights and privileges of sonship. The “shameful son” is the domain of difference that the prodigal son occupies on his way home. But his father’s presence on the road home displaces him from this domain. Indeed, to use Sang Hyun Lee’s appropriation of Korean culture in understanding the honor/shame dynamics of Jesus’ time, the prodigal son in theory should apologize to every other member of the family before finally approaching his usually stern and stoic father, who would then be expected to respond by unleashing paternal severity.²⁶

²⁴Rohun Park, “Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke’s Reconfiguration of Oikos in 15:11-32,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009), 512.

²⁵Ibid., 514.

²⁶Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 166.

But, having entered liminality, the son could only attempt an apology as the “standard operating procedure” for requesting forgiveness dissolves with the father’s embrace. And even after beginning his attempt to request forgiveness, the father interrupts him, almost seemingly not listening to the apology being given, and orders his servants to quickly bring to him the symbols of sonship. The father and son walk home, both of them re-aggregating themselves back into the household. The father emerges from liminality with his son, who was “lost but now is found”; and his son emerges not as an interstitial being, but as a son enjoying all the privileges of sonship. This is made possible because forgiveness and reconciliation occurred in the liminal space that was shared by the father and the son.

Lee does not explore the role of interstitiality in the Parable. In my reading, this is most clear when the elder son – the supposedly “obedient” son – enters the story at the end. The reader will recall that with the prodigal son the father, by leaving his home, running to his son, and embracing him, entered liminality. We assume that when the father left the house to plead with his elder son, he likewise was entering liminality because he hoped to return home reconciled with him, just as it was with the prodigal son. The elder son, however, gives two responses that make such reconciliation impossible, at least according to the narrative the reader is given in Luke 15. He asserted his position within his domain of difference – a son operating within the social constructs of the time – by indirectly accusing his father of leaving traditional expectations of fatherhood, angrily noting how he killed the fattened calf for a shameful son, but never did so for him, a faithful son. (v. 29) Indeed, he accentuated his location in his domain by seemingly disconnecting himself with his younger brother (“When this son of yours...”). The older son clearly occupied a different space than his brother. The question the elder son posed to his father, then, was how he shares in the same space as the shameful brother. Had he forgotten how to be a father?

Because the elder son maintained his position within his domain of difference, the father remained “stuck” in liminality. It is, for that reason, unsurprising that the parable ends without any resolution to the conflict between the elder son and his father. Without both individuals occupying the same liminal space, the father’s position quickly lost its liminality, for the elder son has left his father dangling in interstitial space. The possibility of forgiveness diminishes in the absence of both father and son in that liminal space. This is key to our location of Asian American theologies of forgiveness in liminal, not interstitial, space. Such theo-

gies must be liminal, because individuals in conflictual situations enter liminality seeking to arrive at a point of forgiveness and, subsequently, reconciliation.

This location has practical implications. For Asian American Christians to be forgiving communities requires everybody to be willing to enter liminal space. This is not to suggest that they should abandon their domains of difference for the sake of forgiveness, but to call for the temporary laying-aside of the cultural conventions and assumptions so that forgiveness can be made possible. This, of course, is much easier said than done. Indeed, Turner's initial step in liminality, separation, is itself unsettling for the liminal being. Thus, the question that must be addressed is how the journey towards liminality can be made possible. What theological resources, in other words, may be available as a resource to encourage such a move? The proposal that arises comes from Mark Lewis Taylor's notion of "dialogical questioning."

DIALOGICAL QUESTIONING

Taylor agrees with Sang Hyun Lee in asserting that liminality is useful within Christian theology because Christ himself embodied liminality. He makes much more explicit, however, that to follow a liminal Christ is to live "for the culturally other and for the oppressed other."²⁷ This requires Christians to pursue a "pluralist affirmation of the other" which in turn, he argues, requires the employment of a dialogical community. To put it differently, in a culturally pluralistic world one's articulation of "truth" should not be exclusionary of the marginalized and oppressed Other. Instead, truth appears from within the midst of an inclusive and genuine dialogue occurring between various voices and positions.²⁸ The marginalized and oppressed Other, while certainly applicable to the socially and economically oppressed Asian Americans, applies too to Asian Americans who are silenced thanks to the "weight" of social or cultural structures. This includes the wife of the Japanese pastor (see Sugikawa and Wong's quote at the beginning of this study) who was asked to maintain silence on their marriage difficulties, or

²⁷ Mark Kline Taylor, "In Praise of Shaky Ground: the Liminal Christ and Cultural Pluralism," in *Theology Today* Vol. 43, No. 1 (April 1986), 47-48. The reader should keep in mind that the usage of the term "Other" should not suggest a sublation of the oppressed into some generic categorization. In other words, care must be taken that the term is not used to deny the subjectivity and particularity of the Other by associating him or her with that generic category.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-49. Taylor's appreciation of the role of dialogue in the search for truth is not unique to him, but was inspired by David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination* which itself was built on the foundations of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. What was innovative about Taylor's approach was its emphasis on the inclusion of multiple voices and the accentuation on the marginalized.

the Korean junior pastor who was expected to live up to the social expectations of a pastor.

But what is the content of the dialogue between the interlocutors that makes it "work"? Taylor introduces the notion of "dialogical questioning," and argues that this constitutes the heart of a Christian pluralistic dialogue. He writes that such questioning

... is a dialectical process of systematic questioning. As dialectical, questioning in this liminal world is aimed to reveal the valuable biases of the questioner and the questioned. Dialectical questioning in fieldwork breaks the barriers of the questioner's world by highlighting the particularity of each party in the dialogue.²⁹

In other words, dialogical questioning unhinges its participants from their respective domains where homogeneity is preferred. Taylor raises four advantages to a dialogical approach in understanding how theology can address cultural pluralism.³⁰ First, the approach affirms the subjectivity of the culturally Other, thereby allowing her to critique all dialogical partners on equal standing. Second, the approach allows for the Self to ally with the Other in affirming their subjectivity instead of letting the Other be sublated into some generic "oppressed" or "subaltern" category. This – thirdly – allows for an investigation into the how culture is entwined in the matrix of oppression. Lastly, the approach interrogates the relationship between the cultures of the Self and Other. How, Taylor asks for example, could Gustavo Gutiérrez assert that the liberation of the oppressed also liberates the oppressor?³¹

The reader may already have noticed how dialogical questioning applies to our present study on forgiveness based on the four advantages. Indeed, the strength of the approach lies in the emphasis on ensuring that the Other enjoys her own subjectivity; she is, in other words, her own Person. Likewise, in the conflictual situations we are analyzing in this study, the key to navigating conflicts that involve cultural differences is for both sides of the conflict to acknowledge each other not as lesser beings, but as dialogical equals. When I participate in the dialogue, I inadvertently enter the rhetorical space occupied by the convers-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

ing Other and concurrently value their uniqueness and affirm their particularity. By asking "why?" or by desiring for clarification on why the Other has done what she did, I am not merely trying to understand the nature of the conflict from her perspective. I am trying to affirm her subjectivity, allowing her to speak in her unique voice, one that was pre-empted by me. Quite oppositely, if I desired conformity, I would not adopt such a dialogical method, for opening myself to conversation avails the Other to criticize me. I may issue statements backed up by the authority vested in me by cultural, social, or economic structures in order to persuade the Other to conform to me. I may even invoke a transcendent authority to bolster my case (e.g. "God wills it so!"). In doing so, I foreclose my entry into liminality, consequently sabotaging the opportunity for forgiveness to occur.

Ensuring the subjectivities of all dialogical parties, particularly within a conflict, prevents the conflict from being simplified. David Tracy writes in his landmark *The Analogical Imagination* that

The interpreter of texts should attempt... to note that the wide spectrum of a more particular focus for these all-pervasive ultimate questions (finitude, mortality, forgiveness, trust, anxiety, oppression, alienation, loyalty, etc.) suggests a complex understanding of the self of the interpreter: a self who is a free and responsible individual, who recognizes the intrinsic relations of that event of individuality to a particular tradition and society, to other selves (interpersonal), to the *structural* realities of society, culture, politics and history; a self whose very selfhood is concretely actual only by the partial determination by, partial freedom from, these encompassing structures...³²

The truth that is being sought in the context of forgiveness, however, is not a narrow search for a whodunit. When placed within a dialogical framework, the dialogical partners open themselves to an investigation into the cultural, economic, social, and even political factors that make the wrongdoing possible in the first place (or, at least, easier to commit). The question of "who did the wrongdoing" changes into one of "what did the wrongdoing?"

Thus, for both sides of a conflict to enter liminality, an Asian American theol-

³²David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1981), 258. Tracy's method, as noted earlier, is built on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical method in which "truth" arises within the intercourse between a "text" and its interpreter; the "text" in Tracy's case being broadly defined as a classic.

ogy of forgiveness must interrogate the "what" behind the wrongdoing. In other words, the dialogical method resists a simplification of matters surrounding the conflict. In my view, this requires an exegesis of "Asian America." It beckons the dialogical partners to question, in Jacques Derrida's terms, the specters that haunt the Asian American existence.³³ To illustrate, consider the following anecdote as told by Greg Jao:

A bright, articulate and successful finance major at a private Midwestern university, Chris described her parents' reaction to her decision to teach in the inner city after graduation instead of working in business. "Mom seemed so disappointed, and Dad just got angry. He kept telling me that I could support inner-city schools better if I were a successful businesswoman, that this is just a phase, and that I shouldn't be such a fanatic about my faith."

She looked up suddenly and added, "I mean, my parents are Christians. They don't just understand. I worked for an inner-city mission this summer. I know that God wants me to be a teacher. And I know that it would kill my parents if I didn't go into business. After all, what would my aunties say?"³⁴

In this situation, identifying who's truly at fault is a futile exercise – both have clear justifications from both biblical and cultural sources. If we suppose that Chris and her parents adopt dialogical questioning in order to resolve their conflict, to draw both herself and her parents into liminality, the process will necessarily pull the dialogical partners away from trying to identify the one at fault. Dialogical questioning requires Chris and her parents to reflect intentionally and intensely on social and cultural factors that led to this hostile disagreement. Instead of subsuming Chris' evangelistic zeal into a generic "fanaticism," her father should interrogate, perhaps, what experiences Chris may have experienced that would beckon her to feel a call to teach in the inner city. Chris seems to understand the honor/shame dynamic ("After all, what would my aunties say?") but this is an opportunity for her to question the extent to which the aunties enter the discussion. But note further that in the course of this mutual questioning, the dialogical process may involve interrogating the idea of the honor/shame con-

³³See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006). Of course, Asia is not monolithic; even within China, the diversity of ethnicities is astounding. Thus, it would be irresponsible and contrary to the dialogical method to assume that all Asians are alike and, therefore, to assume that one "Asian American approach" is sufficient.

³⁴Greg Jao, "Honor and Obey," in *Following God Without Dishonoring Your Parents*, ed. Jeanette Yep (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 43.

struct as being normative in collective decision-making and how it relates to the parents' Asian American experience. It may likewise involve calling into question the nature of Chris' evangelistic zeal – is her intention to teach inner city youth motivated by pity, or is it out of a conviction to be a part in the youths' subject formation?

No doubt this complicates the picture surrounding any conflictual situation in Asian American churches and communities. Yet, this does not necessarily render forgiveness less likely. On the contrary, it may help clarify the positions each side of the conflict may take. Chris' response would likely be less hostile if her father, instead of claiming that she'd be a better supporter of inner city schools by being a wealthy businessperson, complicated the social and economic problem of inner city schools, for example. Far from making forgiveness less possible, dialogical questioning provides a fuller picture as to the nature of the conflict. The process allows all dialogical partners to be affirmed in their identities and enter liminal space where forgiveness may be made possible in the dialogue on the nature of the interlocutors' disagreements or conflicts.

WHITHER ASIAN AMERICAN THEOLOGIES OF FORGIVENESS?

Let us review the terrain we have traversed. The conflictual situation this study seeks to address is one in which the identity of the wrongdoer or the precise nature of the wrongdoing is uncertain for cultural reasons. As a result, an unbridgeable impasse forms between parties involved in that conflict. In the context of Asian American (and non-Asian American) churches, it has led to painful divisions, if not outright schisms. This study locates Asian American theologies of forgiveness in liminal space. For forgiveness to be made possible amidst cultural differences, both sides of the conflict must enter liminality, temporarily setting aside their social and cultural rubrics, along with the social and cultural expectations that might constitute their domains of difference. If only one dialogical partner enters liminality – that is, the other partner has refused to exit his domain of difference – the lone liminal individual is left "dangling" and prolonged liminality evolves into interstitiality, within which forgiveness, much less reconciliation, is made impossible. To encourage the dual encounter of both dialogical partners in liminal space, Mark Lewis Taylor's articulation of dialogical questioning is proposed. Dialogical questioning affirms the subjectivity of both dialogical partners and complicates the conflictual situation as it seeks to investigate the roots of the

conflict, allowing for greater understanding of it and allowing for the venture into liminality possible for both partners.

This study does not propose any conclusive solution to the problem given its exceedingly contextual nature. I am not proposing an Asian American definition of forgiveness, nor am I suggesting that there is an "Asian American way" of practicing forgiveness. Indeed, I do not think it is possible considering that I cannot speak for "Asian" America. Therefore I do not intend for this study to be the "final word" on the subject – indeed, it should not be. Because "Asian American" is so diverse, the next step to the theological reflection on the subject is to draw on individual Asian American ethnicities and traditions in articulating and theologically reflecting on what forgiveness is and how liminality and interstitiality is exemplified in situations unique to those communities. More specifically, there should be Chinese American, Korean American, Japanese American, Vietnamese American, etc., theologies of forgiveness. These theologies currently have not been constructed yet and, again, it is not within the scope of this present study to construct them, especially since I identify with only one of the various Asian American ethnicities. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this discussion is only one of many attempts to address a perennial problem that is characteristic of many churches. The objectives of this study would be largely realized if it indeed ignites a conversation on such a matter.

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