

Reading Ambiguous Signs and Sharing Ambitious Hopes: Future of Asian/North American Theological Education

—Tat-siong Benny Liew

Being neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, I have no particular insight into the future of Asian/North American theological education. Had I been able to predict the future, I would not have accepted this invitation to speak about the future, since I would have known the difficulty that this topic would present to me when Nantawan Lewis contacted me several months ago.

Let me nevertheless start by suggesting that what one says about the future of Asian/North American theological education depends on what one means by Asian/North American theological education. If that phrase is read demographically—that is, it is about people who are of Asian descent being present in and contributing to theological education—there seem to be rather encouraging signs about its future on this side of the Pacific. People of Asian heritage have been making up a larger and larger percentage of both the total faculty population and the total student body of accredited theological schools in the USA and Canada. Unlike the time when I started teaching fulltime, many more theological schools now have at least one faculty member who is of Asian ancestry, and the Luce-funded Asian Theological Summer Institute has been able to gather close to twenty doctoral students of Asian descent in theological education every year for almost a decade, largely by word of mouth and without doing much advertising. Presumably, at least some of these participants would join the faculty rank of some theological schools as they complete their studies and further increase our presence in the coming years. In addition, those of Asian heritage are beginning to crack the glass ceiling and assume positions as theological school deans and presidents. There are also encouraging signs in Asia. Many of the theological schools across the Pacific are showing strong enrollment numbers, and most are now able to have a faculty that is no longer dependent on foreign missionary teachers or administrators.

Another encouraging sign for the future is how Asian/North American theological educators seem to understand and value the importance of networks and collaboration. This is evident in the formation of AANATE and this conference, but we can see this also in organizations like ATESEA or FTE Southeast Asia. While we are all limited in resources like time, energy, and money, so no one can say “yes” to everything that comes our way, most of us seem to know that the journey of theological education is not to be walked alone; we need partners and collaborators along the way as well as across oceans and national boundaries for support if we are going to make headway and positive changes.

Alongside these encouraging phenomena, however, there are also discouraging signs. Too many theological schools in North America are still operating by the “one-is-enough” principle, so most of our Asian North American colleagues continue to work in isolation, unless they come to a gathering like this. Colleagues



heading up academic programs or entire institutions are often given this responsibility only in burdensome situations: they are often given the hard task to save or restore a financially struggling institution with fewer faculty members, students, and other kinds of resources. Of course, institutions become more willing to take a risk when they are desperate; sadly, if our pioneering colleagues, because of overwhelmingly difficult situations that they inherit from others, are unable to turn things around, those of the dominant culture might be more than ready to make a pronouncement—“See, they cannot do the job. We should have known”—and reestablish the glass ceiling that keeps people like us from running or “ruining” their schools. Talking about money, those of us in North America are all aware of the financial crisis that theological education in general is facing at the moment. As we know, people in cash strapped seminaries can do some rather crazy things. This crisis will inevitably imply challenges for the future of Asian/North Americans in this business. After all, what James Clifford says about his discipline of anthropology is applicable to not only theological disciplines but also theological schools and theological education; they are all “systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them.”¹ Just as an illustration from my own discipline, people of Asian descent are completely absent in a national survey and then a national conference recently funded by Lilly on the Bible and American Life.² We have remained invisible for many who hold power within and over theological education.

Likewise, worrisome signs are there across the Pacific. Faculty are, first of all, difficult to retain and hard to replace if they decide to go, especially since they are more likely to be tapped in Asia for denominational offices outside of the academy. Even harder to replace are heads of theological schools in Asia. Many of us could tell stories of a colleague who was, or still is, unable to retire as the head of a school in Asia because, for whatever reason, search committees were not finding suitable successors to lead their institutions. I have argued elsewhere for the need to invent and establish a tradition of Asian American biblical hermeneutics;³ if we look at Asian/North American theological education as a, for now, demographic tradition, that tradition looks strong at times but rather fragile at others.

The future looks even murkier for me if we read Asian/North American theological education in terms of not only demographic but also disciplinary and curricular difference. In other words, the adjective “Asian/North American” may refer to a different paradigm or practice for theological education, so we are not only talking about people of Asian ancestry doing and pursuing the same theological education alongside people of other ancestries in the same way, but an Asian/North American way of doing and pursuing theological education, whatever that means. There is a difference between talking about Asian/North Americans in theological education and what is Asian/North American about theological education. I have not been in touch with C. S. Song for a while, but when I was suffering as an academic dean at the Pacific School of Religion, Song, though retired from PSR by then but was—and, I think, is—still active in theological education in Taiwan, told me a couple of times of his wish to get a think tank of scholars on both sides of the Pacific to really think and talk about a different paradigm for doing theology and theological education, since he thought theological education among Asians and Asian North Americans had largely been operating under a single white, western paradigm. He was also rather adamant, though these are my words rather than his, that contextualization at times meant only white-sanctioned attempts to repackage white theological understanding and practice in a different cultural garb and not really rethinking theology and theological education from different cultures.

1 James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

2 See http://www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible_in_American_Life_Report_March_6_2014.pdf

3 Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

Let me be clear here. I frankly do not know enough about Asian/North American theological education overall to make any kind of meaningful evaluation of Song's views. I am also not suggesting that things must be completely different from, let's say, theological education in historically white dominant theological schools, or that there should be one uniform way for theological education to be worthy of the moniker, Asian/North American. Nor am I trying to devalue the efforts of Asian/North American colleagues who have done much in and contributed much to theological education, especially since I know their presence and persistent work have helped pave the way for many to enter into theological education, including myself, first as an interested if not exactly informed teenage theological reader in Asia and then as both a student and a faculty member in North America. I do, however, think that it is important for us to think about if there are ways and if there should be ways that would mark theological education as Asian/North American. I do not have answers; I only know that (1) we will never have any answers if we do not ask the question; and (2) the future of Asian/North American theological education will be shaped differently by whether we have the courage and commitment to ask and address this question.

I may be wrong about this, but my hunch is that with all the talks and works for contextualization and indigenization within various theological disciplines in the last few decades, Song's warning notwithstanding, many if not most of us would think that the same should be happening on a broader curricular and a deeper paradigm level. I also think many would agree that offering a single course or even several courses on contextual studies is not enough to transform the underlying paradigm and practice of theological education.

While I cannot predict the future, I do want to share at least some of my own hopes for Asian/North American theological education. First, I hope that Asian/North American theological education in both demographic and disciplinary terms would not be only about Asians and Asian North Americans. Put differently, I hope Asian/North American theological education will contribute to everyone's and every way of doing theological education. Let me point to one potential example. In North America, many theological schools, especially after 9/11, have become concerned with moving theological education from being ecumenical to being multi-religious. This is true of not only schools on the west coast, like Claremont and the GTU, but also those on the east coast, like Hartford. Asia has long been known as a continent of religious diversity. While we cannot claim that we, as a people, have overcome all religious prejudices and conflicts, our history and experience might provide resources for how religious pluralism might be practiced on the ground that goes beyond offering and requiring courses on various religions.

Since I do not want to ghettoize Asian/North American theological education and I alone am not able to answer the question about what makes theological education Asian/North American, my next two hopes are really applicable to theological education in general. I mentioned earlier that theological education is also a system of economy, power, and history. Both Asia and North America at this moment in history are economically stratified and full of conflicts. Education, we must not forget, is supposed to contribute to the common good, but what constitutes the common good is debatable. Asian/North American theological education, I hope, will not shy away from wrestling with the question about whose and what interests this education is actually serving. Samuel Rayan, the Indian Jesuit theologian says it well, when he asks, "Have not entire theological systems emerged in the past, in the context of capitalism, colonialism and slave-trade, without Christian thinkers [and I would add, educators] feeling the need to call their practice, principles and pre-suppositions into question?"⁴ In fact, wrestling with this interesting question about interest is not only necessary but also advantageous. It will help us clarify in this time of internet and information oversaturation that education

4 Cited in Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: Indian Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2008), 284.



is really not only about the gathering and acquiring of information but also about making connections and bringing about transformation. The question of whose and what interest may also connect theological educators and students with various people or political movements, which often have a way to refresh academic pursuits and keep those pursuits from becoming set and stale.

Finally, I hope Asian/North American theological education will become accessible and understandable to all people, so what we do is not only for those who are interested in so-called fulltime ministry. Since religious pluralism also exists in most societies alongside secular humanism and the question of interest engages larger social issues that are not confinable to a narrowly defined realm people like to call “religious,” I hope Asian/North American theological education will help us think and know our religious traditions so well that we can translate and discuss our convictions and understandings not only across academic disciplines but also in secular terms. This is not a plea to give up on religions to convert to other fields or to secularism, but a realistic realization that people of all faiths can no longer speak only in terms of their respective religious language if they want to communicate and be heard. The issue here is not conversion but communication. Doing so is also a deeper push to live out one age-old explanation of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” As the book *Is Critique Secular?* shows, many scholars who are not a part of theological education would welcome this, as they are ready to dispute “the premise that critique is always secular and secularism is always critical.”⁵ Similarly, we must not insist that theology is only theology and secular is merely secular.



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⁵ Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, “Preface,” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, eds. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

