

PREFACE

When I was young, I used to think that one did theology in order to solve some difficult theoretical problem. I do theology in this book, however, not to deal with some theoretical issue but, rather, to find some meaning to my and my fellow Asian Americans' lives in the United States. Is there any meaning or purpose in living one's entire life caught up between two worlds, belonging somewhat to both but, at the same time, not belonging wholly to either—Asia or America? What theological meaning does a life have that is spent entirely at the periphery and not at the center of a society and culture?

In this book, I propose one possible Christian theological perspective on the above questions. In order to develop such a perspective, I must search the Scriptures. But everyone reads the Scriptures from a particular context whether he or she acknowledges it or not, and the context may affect his or her reading. So I begin this book by analyzing in chapter 1 the context from which I search the Scriptures and do theology.

The Asian American experience has often been characterized as “marginality.” Marginality that is the result of marginalization is also said to have two aspects: the negative aspect of being excluded by the dominant group, and the positive aspect of being a potentially creative

condition. For the purpose for clarity, I use the term *marginality* for the negative situation of being excluded, and refer to the potentially creative aspect of marginality with a different term, *liminality*. Liminality is the situation of being in between two or more worlds, and includes the meaning of being located at the periphery or edge of a society.

Liminality, according to the anthropologist Victor Turner, is a transitional time in which persons are freed from social-structure hierarchy and role playing and, therefore, may be more open to what is new, experience a close communion with other persons (*communitas*), and become capable of prophetic critique of the existing social order. The creative potentials of Asian Americans' liminality, I argue, are in a frustrated and suppressed state because of the demoralizing and dehumanizing effects of marginalization.

When one approaches the biblical text from the perspective of a particular contextual background, certain matters stand out in ways that someone else with a different contextual background might not notice. Reading the Gospels with marginality and liminality in mind, I particularly noticed the fact that Jesus was a Jewish Galilean and that he conducted his public ministry primarily among Galileans. Then I also learned from historical studies that Galileans were very much a liminal and marginalized people.

Jesus' Galilean identity leads us to other theological affirmations:

1. God became incarnate as a Galilean.
2. Jesus' initial approach to Galileans in his ministry would seem to imply that it was strategic for God to do so because of Galileans' liminality and their openness to what is new. Galileans were a people with sin just as any other people. But their social location of liminality made it likely that at least some of them would be open to the radically new message of Jesus (chap. 2).
3. If God in Jesus Christ assumed a liminal situation in time and history, and if what God does in history is not capricious but rooted in God's own being, then we must posit liminality in

God. Indeed, we can see the Father's and the Son's experience of liminality in their mutual giving of themselves to the other. Jesus' assumption of a liminal situation in time is a repetition or reiteration of the Father's and Son's liminal experience within the Trinity (chap. 3). In this chapter I also outline the overall theological framework of the theology of the colonial American theologian Jonathan Edwards, which I believe can be the theological backbone of an Asian American theology.

Jesus was unlike other Galileans in that he was the incarnate Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Unlike other Galileans, Jesus, in spite of the demoralizing effects of his marginalization, was able to exercise all of the three creative potentials of his liminality (openness to the new, *communitas*, prophetic knowledge and action) for the realization and personal embodiment of the reign of God. Chapter 4 traces the ways Jesus utilized his liminality to be open to God the Father, to build a new community, and to resist prophetically against the marginalizing forces of his day. As the new human being or a second Adam, Jesus embodied the way Asian Americans, and all other human beings, should live in their own liminal situation.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the climax of Jesus' public ministry, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. Jesus' expression of the radical love of God that knows no boundaries, and his critique of the oppressive policies of the political and religious authorities led him to his death on the cross. As Jesus was dying on the cross, feeling abandoned even by his heavenly Father, he entered an infinite space of liminality out of which the infinite forgiving grace of God emerged in the form of the redeeming *communitas*. Those believers who with their own liminality join Jesus in this infinite liminality can experience the transforming *communitas* with God and enter into an everlasting communion with that God and a new life on earth.

Asian Americans' experience of the redeeming *communitas* with God in Jesus is an experience of being accepted as God's children in

spite of their sinfulness, and also an experience of belonging to God's family as equal members of that family with everyone else. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus confirms the truth and reality of God's forgiving and accepting love.

Chapter 6 discusses the relationship between the Asian American Christians' faith in the God of redeeming love and their identity as Asian Americans. Identity is thought of in a nonessentialist fashion as what happens through speech, action, and relationships. An Asian American identity, therefore, is constantly constructed and dissolved and then reconstructed. Identity emerges in a liminal space. Christian faith's primary function in this identity construction is to enable Asian Americans to face up to the task of constructing their identity in the bewildering space of liminality. The unity and *telos* or goal of identity are provided by an individual's story or narrative of his or her life. In the case of a Christian, the individual's narrative is a personal appropriation of the narrative of God, or the story of the end for which God created the world.

Chapter 7 explores what Asian American churches should be in light of all that has been said up to this point. The church is a liminal space where Asian Americans can feel "safe" to be explicitly conscious of their liminal situation. The church should provide an appropriate liminal time so that the members can enter into the infinite liminality of Jesus on the cross and experience again the redeeming *communitas* with God. This chapter also outlines how the three creative potentials of liminality can be exercised by the Asian American church community for the proclamation of God's reign in today's society. The chapter ends with a reinterpretation of the Nicene Creed's four "notes" of the church from an Asian American theology's point of view.

Chapter 8 discusses some of the aspects of the Christian "style" of life for Asian Americans. Again, I present the idea of the three creative potentials of liminality appropriated in conceptualizing the nature of Christian discipleship from Asian American theology's point of view.

Chapter 9 suggests that liminality may have a crucial role to play in fulfilling the Christian responsibility of racial reconciliation.

Chapter 10 outlines briefly what the fulfilled state of God's creation would be like. This discussion could be placed at any point in a systematic theology, although here it is placed at the end. The New Heaven and the New Earth do not end history as such because the process of God's repeating of God's internal being in time and history must go on for an everlasting time.

The upshot of all this is that all Christian churches that aspire to be the churches of Jesus Christ the Galilean must situate themselves at the periphery, not at the center, of their society. Since Asian Americans are already at the periphery and in-between, it is their churches' special and particular vocation to be in-between and at the periphery. Peripherality in the sense of liminality should not lead to sectarianism, because liminality is always in a dialectical relationship with structure and, therefore, with society. Liminality's energies are inherently directed to being incorporated into society and toward an enhancement of that society.

The challenge that the perspective outlined in this book poses to the leadership in the Asian American churches is a weighty responsibility indeed. Many Asian Americans, including Christians, live the materialistically interpreted American dream as the story that governs their lives. An awareness of their liminal condition usually remains submerged under their obsessive drive for success in achieving that dream. Can the leaders of Asian American churches present their people a vision greater than that dream and convert them to love the end for which God created the world? How can church leaders arouse in their people the painful but liberating awareness of their liminality in American society? Can Asian American Christians follow the example of Christ in exercising the creative powers of their liminal situation and thereby achieve happiness in knowing the authentic meaningfulness of their existence as strangers in American society?