

CONSULTATION ON ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

Convener: Linh Hoang O.F.M., Siena College
Moderator: Karen Enriquez, Xavier University
Presenter: Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, Australian Catholic University
Presenter: Hoon Choi, Bellarmine University
Respondent: Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, Seattle University

How are stories used in theology? What is the power of storytelling? Giving attention to the convention's theme, *Sensus Fidelium*, the presenters examined how stories and storytelling are central to understanding people's faith and theology. For the people of Asia as well as Asians living in different parts of the world, stories and storytelling keep them connected. Thus, faith expressions through storytelling reveal the varieties of Asian cultures as well as the complexities of Asians living in America. Some would say storytelling is a simple method for theology but not simplistic because it veils a much more complex reality of perspectives, interpretations, and nuances. This is also a trait of narrative theology which incorporates stories and storytelling to express the experiences of God. But narrative theology's reception and development within the broader theological community is not firmly situated. The presenters did not address this concern directly but the discussion following their presentation revealed the uneasy place of narrative theology.

Edmund Chia examined the work of Choan-Seng Song to discuss the current state of narrative theology. He explained three themes that Song stressed in his narrative theology: Western-centered, political, and interfaith. To illustrate each of these themes, Chia told a short story for each. For the Western-centered theme, he described how skipping places in a queue can be interpreted differently from a Western and an Eastern perspective. Sometimes rushing to the front is necessary rather than being seen as rude. The political story focused on the Tears of Lady Ming, which is a traditional Chinese story with elements of death and resurrection. The final story described a Buddhist monk lying in a hospital and was visited by an evangelical preacher. Who was witnessing to whom? was the ultimate question. It was a story of conversion conveyed in a different light.

The act of telling these stories provided vivid examples of how stories told and then analyzed can be an effective means of connecting fcultural differences with theological implications. The stories revealed also the ambiguities in situations, especially for those hearing the stories for the first time, the conclusions were never what was expected. Once an interpretation is given the stories take on a new perspective providing for a completely different and at times unexpected outcome.

Chia concluded with a brief discussion of narrative theology. He did not dwell on the technical history of it but rather provided the evidence that it needs to be an important part of Asian theology. The rich stories of everyday life. The stories from tradition and the stories of political and cultural engagement are central to human life and these are the stories that narrative theology can expound.

Following Chia's discussion of narrative theology, Hoon Choi employed Korean and Korean-American stories to illustrate how the *sensus fidelium* is passed from generation to generation as well as employed in the construction of new local places. He did not address directly narrative theology but instead showed how storytelling

now is an integral part of theologizing. He began by stating that the Holy Spirit motivates the faithful people. It is this connection that structures how stories are told and re-told in order to experience faith as influential to the establishment and maintenance of a community.

For Choi, there are three themes of these Korean and Korean American stories: sacrifice (stories of martyrs), resilience (migration), and patience (forming new communities). The stories that many of the immigrant Koreans carried with them were heroic stories of martyrs of Korea. These stories of faith not only connect them to a homeland but also the wider history of the Catholic faith. Thus, stories of martyrs testify to a faith that transcends cultures and peoples. They can be brought along and retold. In each of these themes, there are weaving together Christian elements along with Korean cultural characteristics which can be familiar. For example in the first theme, the obedience and submission to God is equated with the filial loyalty that Koreans are raised to practice.

To support the last two themes of migration and forming new communities, Choi focused on a local community in Louisville, Kentucky which happens to be the place where he is now currently located. At Fort Knox, several Korean military wives in 1982 formed a Catholic group as they started to realize a need to bring together the many Korean women who now lived in or near the military base. In the meantime, other Koreans were moving to nearby Louisville and were participating in local parishes. They began to also search for other Korean Catholics. Thus, these two communities about 50 miles apart began to gather and share stories of their crossing over and entering new lands. In 2012, the area of Louisville/Fort Knox formed a Korea Catholic Community giving visibility to the presence of Korean Catholics in a rather remote area. These new stories of migration and forming new communities are now added to the stories of the martyrs of Korea to maintain the faith of the Korean Catholics but also they will help bridge the next generation of Korean Americans who will have to maneuver through a completely new landscape of American Catholicism.

Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos responded with a question: what is the state of narrative theology now? Punsalan-Manlimos asked in light of how the *sensus fidelium* has championed the importance of storytelling for understanding God. The presentations invoked the centrality of story in theology. But questions still remain: how are stories used? How are stories dealt with in narrative theology? She stressed that for Chia stories are the source for narrative theology and for Choi story is the method of theology. The source of stories is important to remember because they bring together cultural elements that help to create identity. Here identity is about homeland, culture and Catholic faith. She stated that for Asian and Asian Americans it is important to know our stories because these stories not only connect the past to the present but also help enhance and strengthen identity.

The session was well attended and the audience actively participated in a great exchange of ideas and concerns. The main discussion focused on the current place of story within theology, especially the question of where narrative theology stands now. Some raised the issue that story has been considered not serious academic theology because its methodology is not clearly defined. Narrative theology is welcomed but seems to sit on the periphery of academic theology. Nevertheless, participants agreed that storytelling is an important if not the most important part of doing theology, especially since the greatest story ever told was handed down in the

Bible. Many echoed the fact that stories are a natural part of being human and integral to expressing the human experience of God.

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