

Kwok Pui Lan, Episcopal Divinity School



Kwok Pui Lan is William F. Cole Professor of Christian Theology and Spirituality at Episcopal Divinity School. Her publications include Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology (Westminster John Knox), Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World (Orbis), and Introducing Asian Feminist Theology (Pilgrim). She is co-editing two forthcoming volumes, Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology (Westminster John Knox) and Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians (Fortress).

If Tan Dun (2002) can use ancient shamanistic rituals, video footage, and his classical musical training to compose a symphony, and Yo-Yo Ma can play his cello accompanied by Persian bamboo flute and other musical instruments along the Silk Road, what is not possible these days?

“The problem is that we are not making music,” you might say. And this is precisely the problem in our field of religion. Our thinking and our identity politics have boxed us in. It is time to give ourselves a break!

No wonder one of the leading intellectuals of our time, the late Edward W. Said, was an avid music lover. Think about contrapuntal in music, which has two or more independent but related melodic parts sounding together. If we can cultivate this capacity to hear more than one sound in a single time frame, we will learn to interpret history differently.

Toni Morrison, too, loves music, and she likes jazz.

The study and writing of religion should be lively because that is the aspect of culture which makes people “sing.” Yet, we have created boxes, paradigms, and subdisciplines to make sure that our work is boring enough to be considered academic and “objective.” It is funny that, for a long time, behind the mask of objectivity stood a white man sticking his nose into other people’s religion and fitting things into his scheme.

It is equally hilarious to think that we can speak or write only from the perspective of our race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other finer details within our ensemble of identities. It would be absurd to restrict Yo-Yo Ma, who was born in Paris and grew up in New York, to playing only “Chinese” music. Mind you, I was invited to fill the slot of “Asian Christianity” in this *Spotlight* issue. Fortunately the invitation also says “or as she sees fit,” which prompted me to write about the Trans....I need to tell the readers that one of the most invigorating conversations I have had in recent years was talking about Schleiermacher’s Affekt Theology with Thandeka.

I first attended the AAR Annual Meeting as a graduate student in 1985. All the new things that my women colleagues were doing fascinated me. The womanist group was just forming. Carol P. Christ was talking about her initiation into the Goddess. The Asian and Asian-American feminist doctoral students were finding each other. The sense of exploration and excitement was palpable in the air. What was charming was that we were not afraid to take risks and make mistakes, because we knew that we were probably saying something that had not been said before.

Now I must say that the annual meetings and the production of knowledge in the field of feminist and womanist studies in religion are less enticing. Often they are too predictable or repetitive. Some of this predictability has to do with the fact that the works of a selected few pioneers have been “canonized” or “codified” to the extent that we must begin with them or go through them — either expanding or critiquing their ideas. How many times do we need to read about Alice Walker’s four-part definition of “Womanist”? How tedious to read repeatedly that white women have universalized their experience when doing theology? It would save a lot of ink if they simply call their theology white women’s theology, to avoid false advertising.

There is also the persistent inertia in religious studies that results in a time lag between theories produced in other fields and their applications in our field. Poststructuralist theory had lost its critical edge and was on the wane when religious scholars began to catch on. A quarter of a

century lapsed between the publication of *Orientalism* and the first books on postcolonial theology. No wonder our colleagues in the university would think that we are the curators of the Buddha, or Jesus, or Mohammad, or whatever — most useful for the occasional exhibit such as the box with the inscription of James, brother of Jesus. But for most of the time, our quaint wares can be best left where they are — in museum display boxes.

Religion, derived from *religio*, means to bind together. And in our world of fragmentation, strife, and a widespread sense of homelessness, the study of something that binds or is loosening its binds should be very appealing. Religion has direct bearings on war, violence, immigration, civil society, transnationalism, diaspora, flexible citizenship, and even clean water for all. We should be fascinated by how religion is being reconfigured, reimagined, and lived out when peoples and cultures collide, coexist, and commingle. Yet when bright young students want to do such kind of research work, they bump against a very out-of-date departmental ethos and disciplinary structure in our graduate programs. Or they are simply told not to be too daring if they want to get a job.

Can our religion departments or divinity schools serve the needs of the twenty-first century? I often wonder. Recently I was asked to speak to the Asian students' society of a divinity school on the East Coast and I asked them if their courses or curriculum pay any attention to the issues in Asia-Pacific. I am befuddled that this geopolitical area featured so prominently in the discourses on "the Pacific century," "the clash of civilizations," "the world is flat," and even "the axis of evil," receives so little attention in our divinity schools. In the weekend section of *Financial Times*

last April was a feature article on "A Tale of Two Cities" — and it was about Hong Kong and Shanghai. Has anybody found the "fast forward" button yet for revamping our curriculum?

We would hope that new things will emerge because of sheer luck. Pasteur's assistant went on holiday, and the culture was spoiled and did not kill the chickens. A light bulb blinked in Pasteur's mind, and he discovered immunization. In the field of humanities, creativity is a much slower process and is often the result of cross-fertilization of ideas and the meeting of unlike minds. We will need to cultivate a reading habit outside our field to catch up with the world, since the study of religion is so backward looking. I would not have written this piece if I had not accidentally picked up *Telling True Stories on Narrative Journalism* at the Harvard Coop.

If our scholarship is to have some intellectual appeal, broadening our scope and updating our subject matter is crucial. The articulation and the embodying of the new must also be refreshing. Here I want to say something about the writing of new knowledge. In her recent book, Emilie Townes is not satisfied with the objective description of evil in society, and turns to narratives,

especially those written by African-American writers, to probe “the deep interior material life of evil and its manifestations” (2006, 5). Townes has been experimenting with writing disjointed lines that suggest poetry, and she includes this genre in her book. She uses this device when she asks us to imagine what happens when Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* speaks. Her poetic words become subjective and intimate, opening a window to the interior life she is trying to convey in the book.

Catherine Keller writes about theo-poetics. Her work *Face of the Deep* exemplifies a new genre, which may be called postmodern theo-poetics. She selects a great idea, chaos, and runs with it, sprawling the Bible, theology, literature, science, and spinning along the way. This is not a tourist guidebook with maps and easy markers to help you find your way. If you have not been jolted by the work or if you could summarize it in four or five axioms, the work would have completely defeated its purpose. The book’s theo-poetical form embodies the ideas of chaos and *creatio ex profundis*.

You think Anne Lamott is funny and honest? Luckily we have a serious theologian who can moonlight as a comedian — Marcella Althaus-Reid. Only she can write “When God Is a Rich White Woman Who Does Not Walk” or “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland” and get away with it (2004). Ever since she put “Indecent Theology” on the map, those of us doing vanilla or decent theology are so frightened to have our theological skirts lifted. One can disagree with her, but one can’t wait to see what she will do next in poking fun at our theological voyeurism. Similar to Gayatri Spivak, she can write Derrida, Marxism, and feminism within one sentence. But thank God (literally), she is so queer.

These days I appreciate more and more what Barbara Christian has said that theory by people of color is “in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (1990, 38).

But I am also drawn to the silences or what has not been said. In the preface of *Journeys by Heart*, Rita Nakashima Brock writes, “My Asian sensibilities lie under the surface of the book like ancient stones overgrown with weeds and new grass” (1988, xvi). It’s only when I had a chance to learn about “articulate silence” in Asian-American literature (Cheung 1993) that I began to hear the sound coming between the ancient stones and the new grass. What is not fully said allows readers to imagine words of their own.

The *Los Angeles Times* reports, "With Ma, the cello found its accessible hero, an artist possessing tremendous technical brilliance and musicality." If we are not satisfied to be technicians of the sacred, we had better make sure that our works "sing," too. Think outside the box, color outside the lines, and say it well, with guts!

Bibliography

Althaus-Reid, Marcella. *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*. London: SCM Press, 2004.

Cheung, King-kok. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." In *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, edited by Abdul R. Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Keller, Catherine. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Kramer, Mark, and Wendy Call, eds. *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. New York: Plume Books, 2007.

Nakashima Brock, Rita. *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988.

Tan, Dun. "The Map" DVD. Deutsche Grammophon, 2004. The work was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and premiered in Boston in 2002.

Townes, Emilie M. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

