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Asian American Christian Theology<sup>1</sup>  
Final Paper

Asian American Christian theology is a theology of liberation distinct from other theologies constructed around race and ethnicity. It is also a theology distinct from the Christian theologies being constructed in Asia because it speaks specifically to the experiences of people of Asian ancestry living in America. Asian American theology has grown out of a need in the Asian American community for a theology that speaks to and addresses the lived experiences of Asian Americans. This theology draws on the theologies of other racial-ethnic minorities, especially those coming out of the African American and Hispanic American communities. Asian American theology, while still in its infancy has much to contribute to the discussion, adding perhaps another layer to the complex, multidimensional body of Christian theologies.

Asian Americans, or Asian Pacific Islanders (API), include people that are of Asian ancestry. This vast group includes people from West Asian countries such as Afghanistan and India, East Asian countries such as Japan and China, Southeast Asian countries such as Laos and Cambodia and the Pacific Islands such as Tonga and Samoa. In this paper, what I call an Asian American theology refers to a predominantly East Asian (Japanese, Chinese and Korean) Christian theology. As a fourth-generation Japanese-American much of my experience stems from growing up on the west coast and in Hawaii. It includes the past collective memories

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot hope to address the magnitude information that should be incorporated into this thesis on the subject of Asian American theology. I only hope to do some justice to presenting the areas of this theology that is being discussed, offer my own constructions from my fourth generation Japanese American context and hope that dialogue around an Asian American theology will begin to emerge.

which were told to me in the form of stories from the older generations of my parents and grandparents. Although I think that an Asian American theology should encompass all that is falls into the broad category of API, it is a task that is virtually impossible. So, while the diversity found within the API community is appreciated, I cannot hope to be nearly as inclusive as I would like to be.

Central to the discussion of Asian American theology is that it is a theology has roots within an Asian and American context, yet does not exclusively belong to one. Asian American theology is one that is born from the small overlap between these two spheres, yet is one that can engage in both to a limited degree. Having roots in Asian theology, Asian American theology encompasses the diversity that is found within Asia. At the same time, it is also a theology that includes colonization and globalization both as people who were colonized and as those who were part of a country that colonized Asia. It is a theology that remembers the history of Asia yet includes the newly forming histories of the diaspora. It is a theology of intersection. While still trying to honor the shared history and countries of origin, it also is a theology that is American. It is a theology of a people in a country that has been the economic superpower for the better part of the last century. It is a theology of people who live in a country where one is able to travel more freely and bear the name of the United States on their passport. It the theology of a people who inhabit a country that has hurt and controlled other people in the country of their ancestors, has engaged in unfair wars and who continues to believe that people of color are not Americans in the fullest sense.

Asian American theology, as a developing theology, draws on the writing and influence of other racial-ethnic communities, such as African and Hispanic Americans, who done good work in the past and continue to engage in this dialogue. The relatively large number of voices coming out of the African American and Hispanic communities is in stark contrast to the relatively few voices coming out of Asian American communities. This is slowly beginning to change as the desire and need for an Asian American theology begins to grow. Many Asian Americans are beginning to question how one can engage in religious studies or theology as an Asian American, in a theology that both acknowledges and honors both an Asian and American history and lived experience. The history of Asian Americans is one that participates in the wider, Euro-American view of history, yet also includes the history of a particular people in a country that has not wanted their presence throughout most of its history. Many Asian Americans have been silent in the past and are only now beginning to combine their autobiographical stories and construct a theology suitable to their own experiences. Their voices are joining that of African Americans and Hispanic Americans yet are beginning to form a voice separate and distinct.

The theologies that have come before the creation of an Asian American theology have helped to shape its current direction. There are many strengths of Black and Hispanic theologies. Black theology, such as that of James Cone has helped to give African Americans voice and a righteous anger for those being oppressed. James Cone sees anger as a choice rather than as a reaction. He sees righteous anger for those who are facing injustice as the only proper response. Cone sees God as one who is for the oppressed and facing injustices, for if a Christian theology is not a theology of liberation for the oppressed, it is not Christian theology at all. He writes that

“[b]lack theology is a theology of survival because it seeks to interpret the theological significance of the being of a community whose existence is threatened by the power of nonbeing.”<sup>2</sup> While much of the language that Cone uses is offensive to some, his intention is to create a strong African American community in response to the much larger Euro-American community that feels threatening and is more powerful than their own.

Hispanic theology such as the Mujerista theology of Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz speaks to the subject of hybridity and to existing on the periphery of society. There is a fluidity and multiplicity of identity as people move around in this world. Like many other racial-ethnic minorities, Hispanic Americans inhabit the borders of two communities – one American and the other their native ancestry. Isasi-Díaz writes with frankness in her *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* when she says, “I am caught between two worlds, neither of which is fully mine, both of which are partially mine.”<sup>3</sup> This is the experience of many immigrants as people begin traversing the increasingly global and interconnected world. The ability to move around results in a type of hybridity and a reconstruction of one’s identity. It is precisely this idea of hybridity, of liminality that is central to Asian American theology.

Asian American theology within the past decade has begun to define itself within the context of North American Christian theologies. While no one theologian has formulated a single Asian American theology, various parts of this theology has begun to emerge in the writing and theologies of those beginning to construct one. There are four themes central to the

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<sup>2</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Reader, 279

construction of an Asian American theology.<sup>4</sup> Many of these themes have been borrowed from already existing liberation-focused theologies and have been slightly modified to fit an Asian American community. These themes are centered around the idea of liminality, of a forced hybridity, of the model minority myth, the desire to assimilate and pass in a seemingly Euro-American society and the idea of diversity, both within the Asian American community and also in a global sense.

The idea of liminality is similar to the idea of hybridity that exists within Mujerista theology. Liminality is the act of existing in two spheres yet never completely belonging to one. It is the space of the intersecting spheres that Asian Americans and other marginalized groups are forced to dwell in.<sup>5</sup> Many of these ethnically and racially marginalized groups are often times not considered to be fully American because of their physical non-European appearance, dress and/or accent. Asian Americans are no different. Many Euro-Americans believe Asian Americans to be sojourners, to be simply passing through America, never intending to settle permanently. People journeying from Asia often feel welcomed when arriving in the United States, as one would feel if they were an honored guest in another's home. However, when one decides to settle, there is a feeling of being unwelcome, of feeling like an unwanted stranger in a foreign land. Frequently Asian Americans, while speaking flawless English are asked questions from their fellow Americans such as "Where are you *really* from?" or "Why are you able to speak English so well?" or "When are you going back to your country?" Regardless of how many generations one's family has been in the United States, the color of one's skin and

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<sup>4</sup> These themes are discussed by more than one theologian in their discussion of an Asian American experience and in constructing an Asian American theology.

<sup>5</sup> This is not just the case for racial and ethnic minorities. This is also true for communities of people marginalized because of disability, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

subsequent assumptions about another cause many Asian Americans to feel as if they will never be allowed to fully engage and integrate into American culture, to never be seen as American. Yet, at the same time, after immigrating to the United States many immigrants feel as though they can never exist fully in the country of their origin again. There is a feeling of disconnectedness from the country of origin and from the community one was once an active part of. As one's family spends more and more time in the United States, a balancing act ensues in which one tries to exist in two worlds and hold onto the cultures and traditions of both. Since one cannot exist in two separate spheres, many find that they are forced to live on the margins, to occupy a space which has the ability to bridge two different spheres and cultures, but ultimately is a space that one never feels fully at home in.

Within the past fifty years, the view of Asian Americans has dramatically changed. Asian Americans have gone from being labeled as the “yellow peril” to being considered the “model minority.” The model minority myth was created in the mid-1950s to describe the successes Asian Americans are believed to have achieved despite existing on the periphery of American society.<sup>6</sup> It was a myth created to demonstrate to others that despite setbacks, minorities were able to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps” if they worked hard enough. This false idea and sense of success often alienates Asian American groups from other minority groups<sup>7</sup> with which there should be collaboration to bring about the social justice change so necessary in our world today.

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<sup>6</sup> Takaki, 472-491.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to any minority group, not just racial-ethnic minorities. If all groups who are disadvantaged and marginalized work together, the potential for radical change might be possible one day.

Asian Americans are often considered minorities when it is convenient for statistical purposes.<sup>8</sup> Asian Americans as a group are often perceived as being granted too many special privileges because of affirmative action and the misconceived notion that Asian Americans as a whole are succeeding academically.<sup>9</sup> While this myth seems to congratulate Asian Americans on their achievements it is also seeking to use Asian Americans as a model for the rest of the minorities in the United States of how *they* can succeed. It is a myth that does not take into account the Asian Americans who are unable to succeed because of economic and socio-political reasons nor does it take into account all of the other minorities who have “made it.” It is a myth that causes feelings of hostility and discord between Asian Americans, other minority groups and Euro-Americans. It is a myth that further pushes Asian Americans to the periphery rather than including them into the center. The model minority myth points out the perceived differences of Asian Americans and their perceived abilities to succeed in a country that seems surprised by that perception.

The primary difference between people immigrating to the United States from Asia and those emigrating from Europe is the ability to pass in the United States. People immigrate to the United States for many reasons. Many immigrate with the prospect of securing a better future for their families. Others hope for success, to be able to live out the American dream where their families are well provided for and that their children are able to succeed in a world that they as parents were unable to do. Regardless of the potential material success that these immigrants

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<sup>8</sup> For example, when one looks at admissions to universities or medical schools, Asian Americans are no longer considered minorities or disadvantaged because of the large number and relative percentage that are in higher education.

<sup>9</sup> This misconception does not take into consideration the many Asian grocers who work 15 hour days in order to provide for their family. Many of these grocers work to send their children to college at the expense of their health and economic well being.

encounter, the inability of some immigrants to blend in, to assimilate into the Euro-American melting pot creates feelings of marginality and of not being accepted. Perhaps this is the single most important difference between immigrants from Europe and immigrants from a “different shore” as Ronald Takaki argues in *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. This inability to completely assimilate into the culture because of physical appearance is what causes Asian Americans (and other minority groups who do not look like they are of European ancestry) to exist in this liminal space. As one’s family spends more time in the United States, as generations pass, accents fade, clothing styles change, yet people’s physical appearances do not change nearly as quickly. Consequentially because of an inability to completely assimilate, many Asian Americans are beginning to hold onto their Asian heritage more strongly. This othering of Asian Americans has caused them to hold onto their collective shared history and create a need to define themselves in relation to the dominant Euro-American culture, to create a theology more fitting than the one that does not take Asian Americans into context.

As an Asian American Christian theology is being created, many are trying to reappropriate a Euro-American centric Christology and make it into one that Asian Americans can relate to. The challenge in creating an Asian American theology is the vastness of what the category of Asian American or Asian Pacific Islander encompasses. Yet this challenge of the inclusion of multitude of different voices and experiences is one of the greatest strengths of an Asian American theology. Unlike many other theologies, at its core this theology celebrates inclusivity and diversity. It focuses on the diversity of religions, cultures and ancestries that make up the Asian American community while still focusing on creating a Christian theology

with Asian roots. Simply by virtue of recognizing this diversity, it allows for the inclusion and active participation of many people. It allows for the potential for dialogue since other groups falling outside of the category of Asian American can participate in this discussion and be recognized as equal. It is a theology that recognizes the diversity yet a collective memory specific to certain groups of people that fall within the category of Asian Americans.

One of the most powerful collective shared memories of Asian Americans, specifically Japanese Americans, is the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The bombing of Pearl Harbor had many lasting consequences on the American people. It signaled the United States entry into the Second World War. It also signaled the naming of those of Japanese ancestry, regardless of their citizenship status, as the enemy. The betrayal of the United States government and American people was constantly and consistently felt throughout and after the end of the United States involvement in the war.<sup>10</sup> On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, an order which eventually led to the evacuation of Japanese/Japanese Americans<sup>11</sup> from their homes and placed them in war relocation centers.<sup>12</sup> This order did not specify Japanese/Japanese Americans as those to be interned but it was understood by the military that the internment of the Japanese/Japanese Americans was the intention of the order. It was not an order seeking to systematically intern others who they were at war with, such as Germans or Italians. Between 110,000 and 120,000 Japanese/Japanese

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<sup>10</sup> Many Americans of Korean and Chinese ancestry because of their long and often bloody history with Japan did not want to be considered Japanese even though East Asians were often confused with each other.

<sup>11</sup> There were some Americans of Italian and German descent that were arrested and interned but number of Americans of Japanese descent who were interned was significantly higher.

<sup>12</sup> There is a semantic argument over whether Japanese/Japanese Americans were placed in war relocation centers, internment camps or concentration camps. The United States government has chosen to call the places of their relocation as war relocation centers and is the term that I will use. However, I feel that the internment camps better captures where Japanese/Japanese Americans were kept because they were interned against their will.

Americans were interned from the California, Arizona, Oregon and Washington State, with approximately two-thirds of those interned being native-born United States citizens.<sup>13</sup> The ten war relocation centers were placed in out of the way, middle of nowhere sites, and those interned, if they were not fighting in the United States military were kept there for over three years.

About a year after Executive Order 9066 was issued, on February 1, 1943, President Roosevelt gave Japanese Americans permission to enlist in the United States military and fight for their country, even though just a year prior they had all of their rights stripped away without due process. The President declared that no citizen should be denied the right to fight for their country.<sup>14</sup> Many Japanese signed up to fight on the side of the United States military despite being treated like foreigners and the enemy by their fellow Americans. Many Japanese fought for the United States in an effort to prove their loyalties to the United States and to show such a fervent American patriotism so as not to be ever doubted again. Many Japanese fought to ensure a better future not only for their family and friends, but for all those of Japanese ancestry. One Japanese American soldier writes,

My friends and my family – they mean everything to me. They are the most important reason why I am giving up my education and my happiness to fight in a war that we never asked for. But our Country is involved in it. Not only that. By virtue of the Japanese attack on our nation, we as American citizens of Japanese ancestry have been mercilessly flogged with criticism and accusations. But I'm not going to take it sitting down! I may not be able to come back. But that matters little. My family and friends – they are the ones who will be able to back their arguments with facts. They are the ones who will be proud. In fact, it is better that we are sent to the front and that a few of us do not return, for the testimony will be stronger in favor of the folks back home.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Matsuoka, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Takaki, 397.

<sup>15</sup> Takaki, 402.

While the fear of dying on the battlefield and of not returning home was an ever present reality, the desire of the soldiers to restore the honor of their people and prove to the America that had interned them, that they were citizens of the United States and that their loyalty was not to another country, was worth more than their own lives. They wanted to be able to show the world through their actions what side they stood for, even if that side chose to reject them solely based on their race and ethnicity. Many of the second generation Japanese Americans (Niseis) fought in the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion<sup>16</sup> and the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team<sup>17</sup> on the European front. The 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion/442<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was one of the most decorated groups in all of United States military history. They sacrificed their lives for their country that had declared them the enemy to restore the honor of their family, friends and community.

In attempting to construct a theology that is uniquely Asian American, the collective memory of their experiences and their autobiographical narratives is central to this formation. More recently, an Asian American theology is being developed with a distinctly Asian characteristics and cultural elements. For example, many Asian and Asian American theologians are beginning to envision Jesus as the eldest son and as the esteemed ancestor. Much of this re-appropriation of Jesus from a Eurocentric theology is coming directly out of Asia and out of a desire more cultural appropriation and manifestation of Christianity.

Another and perhaps distinctly Asian American Christology has been suggested by Sharon Thorton, an Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care at Andover Newton

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<sup>16</sup> The 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion was comprised mostly of Japanese Americans hailing from the territory of Hawaii. Those Japanese Americans in Hawaii were not interned during the war because of martial law imposed on the island by the federal government. It is important to keep in mind that Hawaii did not attain its statehood until August 21, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> The 442<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was comprised mainly of Nisei from Hawaii and also from those interned on the mainland.

Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. As the pastor of a Japanese American congregation, Thorton has come face to face with the very painful memory the Second World War. She has seen within her congregation the effect of with the American government's internment of the Japanese Americans and the participation of Japanese Americans soldiers into an arena of war, to represent their country who thought them the enemy, in a battle they did not want. These young soldiers willingly sacrificed their livelihood, their education, their connections to their families to fight, in order that their family and friends would benefit. These young Nisei soldiers fought with the motto "go for broke," to fight with absolutely no reservations, to fight as if their lives and the lives of their family and friends back home depended on it.

Throughout the course of the war, thirty three thousand Japanese American soldiers gave their lives so that their community at home would be able to live. They sacrificed their lives so that the future generations of Japanese Americans might be able to build their lives on the integrity and sacrifice of the many of these soldiers that fought for a country labeled them as the dangerous other that labeled them as the enemy. Thorton compares the sacrifice of these soldiers to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Both sacrificed their lives for the future generations with the hope that they would be able to experience life abundant and life to the full. Both understood the weight of their sacrifice and the impact their sacrifice would have. Both understood the painful grace that accompanies one's sacrifice and the tragedy that is so visible.

The act of sacrifice of Jesus as embodied in the Japanese American soldiers that fought in the Second World War is central to the creation of an Asian American theology. While this symbolic parallel lies at the center of an Asian American theology, it is important not to forget

the aspects that are found in the everyday lived experiences of Asian Americans that are embodied and transferred into a Christian theology. We need to keep in mind how liminality and hybridity, the model minority myth, the desire to assimilate and pass in an American society and the diversity that exists within the category of Asian Pacific Islander affect how an Asian American theology is constructed and the ways in which this theology will affect the very real, lived experiences of Asian Americans living in the United States.

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