

BLESSING SAME-SEX COUPLES – ASIAN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

Same-sex marriages and the blessing of same-sex couples are not the same issue. But it is not my intention here to differentiate the two. Instead, I discuss what it means to show intentional hospitality to homosexuals from Asian cultural perspectives. Due to the nature of this project, whenever I use the term “homosexuals,” “gays,” and “lesbians,” I have *Christian* gays and lesbians in mind.

Asians came to know Christianity through the works of European missionaries beginning in the medieval period; but the massive influx of missionaries occurred beginning from the mid-nineteenth century with the protections of the Unequal Treaties.¹ During this period, the presumed superiority of Western civilization and the exclusivist understanding of Christianity were blended together as one product introduced to Asia. Though not to disrespect the sacrifices missionaries made, the church must recognize that woven into their proclamation of the gospel were the colonial visions of Christianity where the Christian faith was preached as the only truth God ever intended for humanity. Since these missionaries taught Asians in a time when the exclusivist reading of the Bible was uncritically accepted, Asian Christians, whatever their denominational and doctrinal traditions, inherited a thoroughly colonial understanding of Christianity. Manifestations of this colonial lens include a literal (supersessionist) reading of scripture, rejection of other faith traditions, and maintaining the superiority of Christianity.² This colonial lens has not been purged among Asian churches. On the contrary, this colonial lens tends to become all the more significant among Asians in Diaspora.

As visible minorities, Asians’ skin colors are their “racial uniforms” in which they are easily recognized as “other.”³ The sense of vulnerability is high. Recently, a societal perception of Asians as the “model minority” has been gaining recognition.⁴ The term sounds affirming, yet it is a form of stereotyping where Asians are perceived as academic nerds who do not “rock the boat.” The problem with this stereotype is that it does not depart too far from the early years of Asians in North America where Asian workers were labelled as “human machines” or “steam engines.” Taking these social predicaments into consideration, we then have a glimpse of why many Asians find fundamentalist Evangelicalism attractive: Such a theological tradition pronounces *absoluteness* and *certainty* to a group of people that longs for security in foreign lands.⁵ From the perspectives of Asian immigrants, coming to North America means uprooting

and re-establishing. This journey of resettlement is usually tense and uncertain, thus “[producing] the intensification of the psychic basis of religious commitment.”⁶ Such social needs push new immigrants to appreciate anew Asian cultural values and at the same time to look for means to affirm those values in the new country.

Asian culture as shaped by Confucianism is characteristically patriarchal, hierarchical in terms of relationships, and obsessed with self-cultivation.⁷ One of the social implications is that communal right is “worshipped,” whereas individual right is secondary. Sacrificing oneself and one’s ideas for the sake of the common good and/or sometimes for those who are in authority is a virtue. The emphasis on collective well-being is plausible, but it also has its dangers. One of the challenges Asian Christians face is: “When do communal ethics lead one into social indifference and when does it lead one into social solidarity with other human beings who are suffering?”⁸ Because faith and culture have a precarious inter-relationship, faithful Christian living has to include questioning the status quo.

Asian sociologist Fenggang Yang discusses the sociological dimensions of Asian Christian churches. He argues that Asian churches in North America serve as social agents to preserve Asian cultures. By becoming members of Asian churches, Asian immigrants achieve “selective assimilation” whereby certain Asian cultures are preserved.⁹ Selective assimilation means taking control over the pace and aspects of assimilation.¹⁰ It gives Asian North Americans power over how they like to conduct their lives. For example, Asian communities by and large privilege men in most areas of social leadership. In terms of familial leadership, Asians’ practices are already patriarchal. Thus, they do not need missionaries to remind Asian women to be submissive. However, the exclusivist readings of Christianity provide an explicit *religious* reason for honouring the domination of men: conforming to God’s design. Selective elements of fundamentalist Evangelicalism speak to the Confucian mind.¹¹ In an overtly individualistic society where traditional family values are on the brink of collapse, Asian churches provide a firm religious foundation that presumes to be reliable, certain, and authoritative for rejuvenating Confucian ethics. Thus, Asian churches preserve Asian familial values and maintain ethnicity.¹² Through practicing the Christian faith, certain Confucian ideals are being fulfilled and carried on. As Yang argues, “The ethnic congregation contributes to ethnic attachment by increasing social interaction among co-ethnic members and by providing a social space for comfort, fellowship, and a sense of belonging.”¹³

From this point of view, it is not surprising that most Asian Christians would be uncomfortable with the idea of blessing same-sex couples and same-sex marriages. Homosexual practices, as seen by those Asian Christians who read the Bible through literal-patriarchal lenses, are considered against God’s will. Any affirmation of same-sex relationships is thus labelled as unbiblical.¹⁴ Asian Christians might conclude that any denomination that supports blessing same-sex couples must be heretical and unchristian. From their point of view, Christian unity means uniformity; conforming to their exclusivist position means following God’s will. Such mindsets cannot be explained solely by theological reasoning alone. It also requires exposing Asian cultural predispositions and the impact of colonialism.

For example, within Asian familial ethics, the ideal is to build an emotional closeness within the

family. As influenced by Confucian thought, the individual is a developing part of a continuing family lineage. It is a progressive continuity of a specific ancestry of one's family; each individual is part of an ethnic continuity and is defined within those relationships. Instead of creating room for children to think and act "outside the box," many Asian parents believe good children must develop their thinking and behaviours along traditional lines. Homosexuality thus upsets the traditional Asian familial expectations. In addition, even though all cultures have some concern for face-saving, it is extremely important to Asians who share the Confucian culture. Asians often speak of "no face," which means to be humiliated by being exposed as incompetent. Face in the Asian context is both an *internal* and an *external* matter. It is internal because face is considered the innermost core of the humanity, and to lose face is being close to losing one's self. The consequence is that it deeply hurts the inner core of the self.

It is a damaging condemnation to an Asian person's personal integrity and moral character to say "you have no face." Such an accusation is also an external matter since it pushes a person outside their society, where such a person will lose status and respect in the larger society.¹⁵ Therefore, Asians show a strong desire is to protect one's face. It leads them to become less assertive in terms of classroom discussions, human relationships and social justice. Furthermore, such fear of being rejected and hurt becomes the crucial medium for social control. It is commonly known that Asians are more sensitive to shame than to guilt.¹⁶ That is, shaming a person is a much more powerful medium of social control than to pronounce a person guilty. With this background in mind, it is not too difficult to understand that to have gay sons and/or lesbian daughters within Asian families mean inviting an unbearable amount of shame. Most Asian parents cannot live with that kind of shame in their communities. That is why if any positive affirmation of gays and lesbians is possible among Asian Christians, it presupposes cultural transformation and vigorous theological discourses.

The educational challenges Asian Christians face are numerous. In the following, I name just a few. First, Asian Christians need to critique the colonial reading of the Bible and to examine its affects on their faith. It implies that their reading of the Bible must include an uncovering of the context, the subtext and the pretext. A crucial part of the task include asking the following questions: Who is telling the story? Who benefited from this story? What other stories were silenced? Why were those stories silenced? These questions challenge any hermeneutical approach that regards the Bible as God's verbatim falling straight from heaven. Robert Daum, who teaches Jewish studies at the University of British Columbia, once said, "Not to read the contexts of sacred texts in any context, including one's own, is morally irresponsible."¹⁷ Asian churches in general display no interest in Jewish-Christian dialogue. This is a significant oversight. Without engaging themselves in the rich literature of Jewish-Christian relations, Asian churches have severely limited their resources to examine the emergence of Christianity and to fashion a renewed faith. I consider such short-sightedness suicidal for the Christian church if she wants to have any genuine chance to do justice and find reconciliation within God's creation. In addition, Asian Christians' reading of the Bible cannot be solely satisfied with what is *in* the text, since the essence of the Christian faith is never solely based on what is *in* the text. Instead, they should be diligent in studying *how* and *why* the church interprets what is in the text in light of growing knowledge of the socio-political world of the writings and the lived experience of each contemporary Christian community. The church needs to go beyond

just interpreting the Bible, but also to investigate how communities appropriate the Bible for their own communities. That is, the interpretation of the interpretation of the Bible. A post-colonial reading of the Bible rejects any uncritical acceptance of the canon as divinely ordained without probing the power dynamics of the formational process. Based on these considerations, I have to agree with Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, two prominent religious educators of our times, that to name the people whom Paul talks about in Roman 1:27 as “homosexuals,” as if he were addressing *exactly* the homosexuals in our times, is a misnomer.¹⁸

Second, Asian North Americans have experienced all sorts of discrimination based on their skin colors, countries of origin, their accented English, or their level of education. Such experiences of prejudice and rejection are mostly impersonal in character, that is, the larger society discriminates against them before knowing who they are. If Asian Christians search deeply, they possess “insider” knowledge of how it feels to be rejected based on some other people’s definitions of things. Asian Christians might reject gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ without really knowing who these individuals are. So often, the discussion of this issue is thoroughly abstract and faceless. A pastoral approach to this topic requires close encountering of gays and lesbians who are being marginalized.

Asian churches can learn a lot from the mistakes of the early Western missionaries: Unilateral pronouncements without properly acknowledging the stories of the others is an act of barbarism. Instead of appropriating their experiences of discrimination to welcome the oppressed others, Asian Christians tend to employ the same rationale as their social oppressors to argue against gays and lesbians. For example, Asians were denied voting rights in the early twentieth century because they were seen as undesirable citizens. Asian women were denied ordination into priesthood because church history showed no evidence that women were accepted. (What a circular argument!) When confronting the status quo, it is helpful to ask: Is this God’s will or irresponsibility on the part of humans? Transformation of any kind goes nowhere unless the freedom to think and act “outside the box” is in place. On the personal level, I have encountered numerous competent Christian theologians, lay leaders and individuals who are in committed same-sex relationships. I thoroughly enjoy their commitment to serving the church. Despite being discriminated against, their love for Jesus has not diminished. They truly live out the essence of the theology of the cross.

Finally, Christians, regardless of race and culture need to ponder what got Jesus into trouble: he mingled with the “wrong” crowd. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus often dined and shared hospitality with people whom his community rejected as “unclean,” ungodly, and outcasts. Christians who reject gays and lesbians would benefit greatly by exercising critical self-awareness in terms of recognizing their own self-righteous agenda, because it was certain *religious* leaders who condemned Jesus’ inclusive action as ungodly. The church can learn from the outrageous (courageous) deeds of Jesus and show intentional hospitality toward gays and lesbians. According to the gospel accounts, Jesus did not seem to equate conformity to the established social patterns with faithfulness. Human sexuality is a complex feature of being human. Human sexuality, as we understand today, is more than just certain acts; it is an expression of our very being. For Christians to reject committed gay and lesbian Christians who have searched for their human core is to push those individuals away from a community whose

calling is to announce the realm of God's mercy that is extended to all creation. From this point of view, it is contrary to the spirit of the gospel to say that God's blessing of matrimony is reserved for heterosexuals exclusively.

To conclude, I invite Asians and non-Asian Christians alike to pay a fundamental respect to the sovereignty of God as a condition for the very nature of the phenomenon of revelation. Through respecting the hiddenness of God, the church has a better chance to transform oppressive social norms and to live responsibly as God's agents of love, peace and justice.

Notes

¹ Depending on how one defines the term 'Asia,' mission activities might have reached Asia very early in history. See Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume I, *Beginning to 1500* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

² Supersessionism (Latin, *supersedere*, to sit upon or above, to preside over or be superior to) is a theological claim that Christians have replaced Jews as God's people. Imperialistic Christianity is regarded as having achieved special status as the "fulfillment" of Judaism. It is an interpretive lens colonial Christians use to "hang together" the two testaments as one canonical construal.

³ See Russell Moy, "American Racism: The Null Curriculum in Religious Education," *Religious Education* 95 (2000): 121-125. A person who internalizes the norm of a society but is still not recognized by the society as a genuine member is situated in a what Fumitaka Matsuoka calls "liminality." See Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995).

⁴ See Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002).

⁵ See Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ For a good discussion of Confucian cultures, see Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

⁸ A good book to know more about the tension between communal social ethics and individual responsibility is J. Barnett Victoria,, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity during the Holocaust* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999).

⁹ Not everything in Confucianism is desirable for preservation. For example, many Asian Christians internalize the missionary teaching that says ancestral worship is idolatry. They have no desire to preserve it.

¹⁰ Yang, 197.

¹¹ Another close match is fundamentalists' version of spiritual practices and Asian preoccupation with self-cultivation.

¹² For more information on this point, see Yang, 196ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴ For more discussion on whether homosexual practices are really against the teaching of the Bible, see Alan Ka Lun Lai, “A Christian Rereading of the Bible after the Holocaust: Implications for Understanding Same-Sex Marriages,” *Journal of Religion and Culture* 16 (2004): 79-93.

¹⁵ Ge Gao, “Self and Other: A Chinese Perspective on Interpersonal Relationships,” in William Gudykunst and Stella Ting-Tommey, eds., *Communication in Personal Relationships Across Cultures* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 95.

¹⁶ See Young Gwen You, “Shame and Guilt Mechanisms in East Asian Culture,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 51 (1997): 57-64.

¹⁷ This is a personal email exchange.

¹⁸ Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, “Homosexuality: A Word Not Written,” in Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Question of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73.