

Postcolonial Politics
and Theology

*Unraveling Empire
for a Global World*

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Introduction

Postcolonial Reflection on the Political and the Theological

To make vulnerable the political and the theological through engagement of text and context is the intellectual labor of political theology. Critique and defense are the tools of the polemicist and the demagogue. The vocation of the academic, by contrast, is to expose what is taken for granted, to make vulnerable.

Vincent W. Lloyd¹

In 2019, the protests against an anti-extradition bill in Hong Kong captured the world's attention as millions took to the streets in the former British colony, and many people took part in rallies in cities around the globe to support their struggle. Toward the end of that year, a mysterious disease broke out in the city of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in the People's Republic of China. Soon, the novel coronavirus began to spread in Europe, the U.S., and other parts of the world, with many people ending up in intensive care units and dying from the disease. In early spring of 2020, President Donald Trump tried to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic. Later, he used the term "Chinese virus" to refer to the coronavirus, despite calls from global health officials to avoid labels associating the disease with a particular nation or group of people. Trump's references to the coronavirus as "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu" intensified the tensions that already existed between China and the U.S. as a result of a trade war and other competition between them.

As I looked for theological resources to help make sense of the changing geopolitical situations in Asia Pacific and to address rising concerns about the stigmatization of Asian Americans, I found a dearth of material. The majority of books on politics and theology focus on Europe, the U.S., or the North Atlantic,

and there are few resources on Asia Pacific, though the twenty-first century has been dubbed the Pacific Century.² While China loomed large in presidential politics and foreign policy debates, many theologians acted as if they were living in a time capsule, sealed off from the changing world politics around them. When I looked at recent publications in the field of political theology, I found that most remained steeped in a Eurocentric mindset and had not caught up with the current moment.

In order to address this gap in the literature, I gathered and revised several of my articles published over more than a decade to form the foundation of this volume. This book employs postcolonial theory to challenge the Eurocentric preoccupation of political theology, proposing instead a postcolonial and comparative approach that addresses the realities of the majority world. It points to the ongoing need to use a postcolonial lens to critique the alignment of the study of religion and theology with empire and to reimagine political theology more broadly from a global perspective. Challenging a Eurocentric genealogy of political theology that often begins with Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*,³ I argue for uncovering the diverse origins and multicultural genealogies of the discipline. A contrapuntal and comparative reading of different political theologies opens possibilities to explore overlapping political struggles in the past and present—for example, between the Hong Kong protests and the Irish struggle for independence.⁴

A special focus of the book will be on the changing sociopolitical realities of American Empire and Sino-American competition. The tensions between China and the U.S. are encapsulated in Donald Trump's slogan of "Make America Great Again" and Xi Jinping's hope for a "China Dream." The shifting of U.S. and Asian relationships provides an exemplary case through which to look at political theology globally. First, it shifts attention from the Atlantic to the Pacific; this change in context provokes new questions and issues for political theology. Second, the U.S. has been a key player in Asian politics and has fought a number of wars in Asia since the late nineteenth century, a longstanding involvement that demonstrates how political theology can benefit from using a transpacific lens. Third, many Asian countries, like the rest of the majority world, have experienced the trial and tribulation of postcolonial nation building. Eurocentric political theology, based largely on the experiences of liberal democracy, cannot address the kinds of issues arising in the postcolonial world. Fourth, Asia, with more than half of the world's population, is multicultural, multilingual, multi-racial, and multireligious. In the past several decades, the religious landscape in the U.S. has become increasingly more diverse and pluralistic as well.⁵ Political theology in both the Asia Pacific and U.S. context cannot privilege Christianity and must adopt a comparative approach and include discussion of religious plurality and diversity.

In my own work, the political has impinged on the theological ever since I began to study theology in Hong Kong in the early 1970s, during the heyday of worldwide student protests. I had the privilege of participating in Asian

contextual theology and Asian feminist theology when these theological currents emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Later, I became one of the pioneers exploring the implications of postcolonial theory for biblical studies and theology. The Hong Kong protests in 2019 brought my memory back to my college years, when I first pondered what Christian theology had to say to the Hong Kong and Chinese people. In order to show how the political and the theological have transversed and intersected in my theological thinking in the past five decades, I want to chart and share my intellectual trajectory. This recollection is necessarily selective, for as Edward Said writes, “any autobiographical document . . . is not only a chronicle of states of mind, but also an attempt to render the individual energy of one’s life.”⁶ But I believe my experience helps demonstrate the need to reconceive political theology as it intersects with global, postcolonial contexts, where this scholarly work is, in fact, already happening.

I was born in the former British colony of Hong Kong and began to study theology in 1971, as a college student at Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of ferment and protest around the world. In Hong Kong, students took to the streets to fight against corruption and to demand that the Chinese language be used as a second official language. For, even though 98 percent of the people in Hong Kong were Chinese, English was the only official language until 1971. Many people came to Hong Kong from south China as refugees and spoke no English. They had to rely on others to explain to them government notices and help them fill out official forms. While in college, I had the privilege of joining a small travel seminar organized by the Student Christian Movement, which brought us to the Philippines, Korea, and Japan. I remember talking with progressive students at the University of the Philippines who told us that they took turns going to prison to fight against the Marcos dictatorship. In Seoul, the Park Chung Hee government was so repressive that we had to change the place we met for fear that the room was bugged. Surrounded by the serene and beautiful shrines of Kyoto, we heard about the peace movement Japanese Christians had initiated and their vow to never forget the crimes perpetrated by their government during World War II. These Asian Christian leaders were involved in the struggle for democracy, human rights, demilitarization, and economic justice. During the trip, my heart felt very heavy when I saw the suffering and struggles of Asian people, but I also glimpsed what Bonhoeffer had said about the cost of discipleship and the grace of God.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

I was taught theology in Hong Kong mostly by missionaries from Canada, the U.S., Germany, and Australia, and we read works by Tillich, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the Niebuhr brothers. But it was Latin American liberation theology, particularly Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*, that captured my attention.⁷

This book helped me fathom the vocation of a theologian, even though the colonial situation in Hong Kong was very different from that of Gutiérrez's native country Peru or the wider Latin American society. For Gutiérrez, theology is a critical reflection of praxis, and he suggests that theology without action is dead. Gutiérrez emphasized God's preferential option for the poor, the structural dimensions of sin, and people as the subjects of history. His book integrates theology with a political reading of the people's social and economic history and summons the church to listen to the cries of the people.

While Latin American theologians developed liberation theology, using insights and tools from Marxism, Asian theologians engaged in contextualization so that their theological reflections could speak to their Asian social and political realities. It was Shoki Coe, a Taiwanese theological educator, who coined the term "contextualizing theology" in the early 1970s. For him, contextualization "responds to the Gospel itself as well as to the urgent issues in the historic realities, particularly those of the Third World."⁸ After the 1960s, most Asian countries had regained political independence, but the continent suffered from poverty, military dictatorship, government corruption, and serious violations of human rights. Asian theologians had to address the issues of democratic participation, economic justice, cultural autonomy, and human dignity. *Minjung* (meaning the people or masses) theology was developed in Korea, Homeland Theology in Taiwan, and Theology of Struggle in the Philippines. I was inspired when theologians from these areas visited Hong Kong and described their participation in the fight for democracy. I was particularly impressed by a few *minjung* theologians who lost their positions as university professors and were detained by the police or put in jail for daring to speak out against Park's dictatorship in Korea.

Two Asian theologians, who challenged Eurocentric dominance in theology, helped in the process of decolonizing of my mind—Choan-seng Song from Taiwan and Aloysius Pieris from Sri Lanka. Song argues that the theological journey from Israel to Asia must be undertaken all over again. In the past, the trip was predetermined in the West and had to make too many intermediary stopovers, with too many attractions and interruptions. The travelers spent too much time visiting Gothic churches and cathedrals and consulting with learned scholars of Western Christianity, to an extent that they have come dangerously close to "disowning [their] own cultural heritage as having no useful meaning in the design of God's salvation."⁹ To remedy this, Song insists that the journey must make fewer stops and allow changes of itinerary or rerouting when occasions demand. Song also insists the travelers must work out the itinerary themselves, instead of relying on others.

Song uses the term "transposition" to describe this journey from Israel to Asia. Transposition means a shift of time and space. For him, Christian faith was transposed from Palestine to the Greco-Roman world, and eventually to the West. Although it has been transposed to Asia and other parts of the Global South by the missionary movement, it has not taken root because Christianity

has not “become flesh” in the native cultures. Transposition is not simply a translation into another language, style, or expression, but requires “theological discussion to shift to different subjects, to face new questions, and to discover alternative approaches.”¹⁰ Song’s theological hybrids use stories from many Asian societies, ancient and modern, to illuminate and uncover the meaning of the biblical tradition.

Through his writings and his leadership role in the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia, Song has inspired generations of Asian theologians to recover their own cultural and spiritual resources for doing living theologies in Asia. His work has facilitated the development of story theology in Asia, cross-textual hermeneutics, and creative indigenous approaches to theology. It supports and guides Asian Christians in the border passage of rediscovering their cultural roots after a long period of colonialism. Influenced by Song’s work, I published one of my first essays on Asian feminist theology, “God Weeps with Our Pain,” using women’s stories as resources.¹¹ Yet Song’s approach is not without drawbacks. First, coming from a Reformed tradition, Song’s theology is very Bible-centered. His biblical interpretation is rather traditional, drawing primarily from mainline male scholars and paying little attention to newer methods. He is more reluctant than other Asian theologians, especially the feminists among them, in critiquing the biblical texts. Second, though Song has very open and inclusive attitudes toward people’s cultures and stories, his theology remains Christocentric. Third, scholars have questioned whether Song has created too sharp a binary between Asia and the West and whether such bifurcation is still useful today.¹²

If Song’s theology accents on symbols, stories, and people’s movements, Aloysius Pieris highlights Asian religiosities and spiritualities. As a Jesuit, Pieris argues that the Western models of inculturation are not suitable for Asia. The Latin model of “incarnation in a non-Christian *culture*,” and the Greek model of “assimilation of a non-Christian *philosophy*” cannot be easily adapted to contemporary Asia. Instead, he advocates the monastic model, which is the “participation in a non-Christian *spirituality*.”¹³ For too long, he argues, Christianity has adopted the attitude of “Christ-against-religions.” The inculturists have advocated “Christ-of-religions,” but have often separated religion from liberation struggles.¹⁴ A Third World theology of religions, for Pieris, must link spirituality with the liberation of people from poverty.

Pieris has been criticized for generalizing religion and poverty as the two distinct characteristics of the Asian continent and flattening many differences among the peoples and cultures in the continent. He tends to make very broad generalizations for his theological schema and typologies, which can be misleading at times. For example, his differentiation of Asian religiousness as cosmic and metacosmic may not do justice to the vast varieties and nuances of Asian traditions and practices. His broad generalization that Western religiosity is agapeic and Eastern religiosity is gnostic,¹⁵ though helpful in a certain sense, does not pay sufficient attention to the differences within Asian traditions, say between Confucianism and Buddhism, and the enormous diversities within each of the

traditions. His opting for a monastic paradigm may also reinforce the colonial stereotypes of the mythic, passive, religious “East” versus a progressive, active, and secular “West.”¹⁶ Despite these criticisms, the works of Song and Pieris prompted me to explore a different style of doing theology using Asian resources and to search for my own theological voice in the midst of a changing political situation in Hong Kong.

As a student and later a junior faculty, I had the benefit of attending different ecumenical gatherings, as Hong Kong was and continues to be Asia’s primary traffic hub. There were vibrant exchanges of ideas and debates about the church’s mission in the rapid sociopolitical changes taking place in Asia. In the climate of developing contextual theologies that met the challenges of the time, theologians in Hong Kong began to reflect on their social and political situation. In the early 1980s, when Britain and China started the negotiation about the future of Hong Kong, I edited the book *1997 and Hong Kong Theology*, the first book on the subject, which discussed the history and role of Hong Kong and the identity of the people of Hong Kong. It offered biblical and theological reflections and recommendations for local churches and Christian schools to prepare for the political transition when Hong Kong would be returned to China.¹⁷

Although Asian male theologians have made important contributions to the contextualization of theology in Asia, women’s issues were not their primary concern. Some of them, like Song,¹⁸ have written on women’s oppression, but gender analysis was largely missing in their theologies or were rendered secondary. The Asian feminist theological movement began in the early 1980s in response to Asian women’s struggle for dignity and full humanity, and I have had the privilege of participating in it since the beginning.

ASIAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

I was fortunate when I was a teenager to have a woman as the vicar of my Anglican church in Hong Kong. Deacon Hwang Hsien-yuin was ordained as one of the first female priests in the worldwide Anglican Communion in 1971, when I began to study theology. She used to lead a short meditation before our choir practice each Sunday, and I heard from her the important message that women and men share equal responsibility in leadership and ministry. She offered me much encouragement when I decided to study theology and helped me secure a scholarship. During my college years as a theological student, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was raging in China. Mao Zedong had advocated that women hold up half the sky, and the Red Guards smashed feudalistic and bourgeois values in society. Women and men wore the same muted blue, green, or grey Mao suit, or clothes that were serviceable and sexless. While women’s movements in the West were advocating for women’s liberation and individual freedom, women in China had to sacrifice their individuality in order to fit into the collectivity and the revolutionary fervor for a classless society.

Although I did not have a single female professor in my theological training in Hong Kong, I was exposed to feminist theologies and the works of Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether by my professor Raymond Whitehead. I was interested in their works because the Cultural Revolution had brought into sharp relief the patriarchy entrenched in Chinese society. I participated in one of the first conferences devoted to Asian feminist theology held in Sukabumi, Indonesia, in 1981. The conference was organized by Elizabeth Tapia, who worked for the Women's Desk of the Christian Conference of Asia at the time. Mary John Mananzan from the Philippines left a strong impression on me as she astutely analyzed the sociopolitical causes of women's oppression in Asian societies.

Asian women theologians were keenly aware of the ways that social and economic changes had affected women's lives. Although industrialization had enabled an increasing number of women to work outside the home, their jobs were often insecure and their working conditions were poor. The economic take-off of countries around the Asian Pacific Rim accorded women more educational opportunities and participation in the public and corporate sectors. However, these advances did not significantly change stereotypical gender roles, and women still had limited power in both the domestic and public spheres. The Vietnam War had brought unspeakable suffering and a devastating impact to Southeast Asian countries. War, militarism, guerilla fighting, and violence affected women and children disproportionately. Prostitution around the American military bases and the development of insidious forms of sex tourism in the Philippines, Thailand, and neighboring countries exploited women's sexual labor. Mananzan was one of the pioneers to write about sexual exploitation of women and violence against women in Asia.¹⁹

For Asian feminist theologians, attempts at contextualization were inadequate if they failed to take into serious consideration the intersection of patriarchy with poverty, militarism, gender violence, and political discrimination. They criticized male contextual theologians when they overlooked the androcentric elements in both the Bible and Asian cultures. I have pointed out the limitations of contextualization: "First, it takes the content of the Bible and the Gospel for granted, without seriously challenging the androcentric biases both in the biblical texts and in the core symbolism of Christianity. Secondly, it identifies with Asian culture too readily, often failing to see that many Asian traditions are overtly patriarchal."²⁰ Thus, Asian feminist theologians had to engage in a double critique and reconstruction. While they criticized the patriarchal teachings and practices in the Buddhist, Confucian, Shinto, and Hindu traditions, they also wanted to recover their liberating potentials. For example, some feminist theologians have recovered feminine images and metaphors of the divine in both the Asian and biblical traditions. They pointed out that many Asian religious traditions emphasize the interplay between the feminine and the masculine, yin and yang, heaven and earth, and challenged the predominant usage of male metaphors and images in liturgy, theology, and preaching in Asian churches.

As several pioneers in Asian feminist theology were active in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), they adopted EATWOT's theological methodology. This methodology could be conceived as a spiral process that included the following steps: critical analyses of the social, cultural, and political contexts; questioning biblical and theological traditions from the perspectives of the oppressed; reformulation of theological doctrines and traditions; and concrete action and social praxis to change social systems and promote justice. But Asian feminist theologians took care to adapt this methodology specifically to the Asian situation. Virginia Fabella from the Philippines surmised that Asian feminist theologians had to take into consideration both their Asianness and their womanness. She writes: "By 'womanness' is not meant a mere conglomerate of biological and psychological factors but an awareness of what it means to be a woman in the Asian context today. . . . Women's experience is basic to our theology."²¹

Since the Bible occupies a pivotal place in church life, the interpretation of the Bible from women's perspectives is crucial for theology. Many Asian women emphasize the liberating heritage of the Bible by lifting up women such as Ruth and Naomi, Hannah, Miriam, Deborah, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Jesus as role models. Others have reclaimed the tradition of oral interpretation of Scriptures in Asian cultures to retell, dramatize, and perform stories of biblical women, thereby giving them voice and subjectivity. Reading the Bible through the lenses of sociopolitical analyses and cultural anthropology, Asian women theologians demonstrate the commonalities of struggle shared by biblical and Asian women. My participation in women's Bible studies and conversations about the impact of the Bible in Asian churches led to my sustained interest in biblical interpretation and later the publication of my book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*.²²

After teaching for a few years as a junior faculty member in Hong Kong and introducing feminist theology to my students, I embarked on my doctoral studies at Harvard Divinity School in 1984. I had the privilege of studying with Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Sharon D. Welch. Although I later criticized Daly's work, I have great respect for her scholarship and admiration for her righteous anger against gender discrimination.²³ Schüssler Fiorenza had recently published *In Memory of Her* at the time, and I learned from her methodologies about constructing women's history and critical feminist hermeneutics.²⁴ Welch broadened my knowledge in critical theory, especially the work of Michel Foucault. I also took courses with Gordon Kaufman on theological methods and with Harvey Cox on liberation theology. During my doctoral studies at Harvard, I had the opportunity to read and reflect on Chinese culture and history, and the lectures and seminars at Harvard's Fairbank Center provided much intellectual stimulation. Living for the first time abroad and learning from Benjamin Schwartz, Paul A. Cohen, and Tu Weiming gave me new insights to look at China and Asia from a much broader perspective than before. Instead of taking many regular courses, I took several independent studies and spent my

time going to lectures and brown-bag luncheon discussions at the university. My lifelong intellectual curiosity was nurtured at Harvard because I had followed a self-directed education, and I was able to pursue my own questions and interests.

The year before I went to the U.S., I met Letty Russell when she was invited to deliver a few lectures on feminist theology in South Korea. In the fall of 1984, Russell gathered a group of Asian and Asian American students and ministers who were studying and working in the Northeastern U.S. to meet in her house. Together we formed the group called Asian Women Theologians and held our first conference in 1985. As the group expanded to include a plethora of women from different nationalities and backgrounds, the name was changed several times. The current name is Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM).²⁵ The gatherings of PANAAWTM make me keenly aware that Asian and Asian American women have very different life experiences, which affect our theological interests and outlooks. Asian women are concerned about their national history and want to connect with their Asian cultures and histories, which have been downplayed because of colonialism or their Western theological training. Asian American women are concerned about racism and their hyphenated identity in a white dominant society.²⁶ PANAAWTM provides an invaluable community of discourse to discuss feminist politics from a transpacific lens. Over the years, the group has published pioneering works and made significant contributions to the development of Asian and Asian American feminist scholarship in theology, religion, and leadership.²⁷

The mid-1980s was an exciting period to study feminist theology in the U.S. because different racial and ethnic minority groups of women began to articulate their theology and ethics by taking into consideration the multiple oppressions of race, gender, and class. Katie Geneva Cannon, a pioneering womanist ethicist, received her doctoral degree in 1983 and began teaching in Boston. For several years, she gathered a small group of women of color who were students and church workers involved with different ministries to discuss our work and the issues we faced in both the church and the academy. Womanist scholars formed a Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society group at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in 1985 and began publishing womanist works.²⁸ Hispanic and Latina women and Native women also began to develop their theologies and religious scholarship. Conversations with women from other racial and ethnic minority groups helped me look at American politics and women's oppression through the inflections of race and class.

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST THEOLOGY

My foray into postcolonial theory began in the 1990s, when intellectuals and theologians in Hong Kong began to talk about preparing for the imminent changes in the postcolonial period. Even though I had begun teaching in the

U.S. at the time, the return of Hong Kong was a significant moment in my personal life and in the history of the Chinese people. *Postcolonial* is a contentious term, and the meaning of the prefix “post” has been vigorously debated. Some find the prefix problematic, since it might suggest that the colonial situation is over, and we have entered a postcolonial period. They point out that the colonial legacy remains strong in many countries, while neocolonialism continues to dominate the world. But the prefix “post” denotes not only a temporal period or a political transition of power but also reading strategies, practices, and actions that challenge colonialism and its legacy. I have defined postcolonial imagination as “a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises.”²⁹ Engaging the postcolonial means to participate in a community of discourse and in actions of resistance. This engagement can be traced to the anticolonial period and continues into the present. Postcolonial theory began initially with the study of literary texts and history by pioneers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha and has since been applied to many different fields in the humanities and social sciences. Postcolonial theory has raised our consciousness in the politics and rhetoric of empire in the Bible and theological tradition, in Eurocentrism and colonialist assumptions, in hidden and submerged voices, and in the plurality and diversity within Christian traditions.

Postcolonial theory entered theological fields through biblical studies in the mid-1990s. R. S. Sugirtharajah writes, “What postcolonial biblical studies does is to focus on the whole issue of expansion, domination, and imperialism as central forces in defining both the biblical narratives and biblical interpretation.”³⁰ The Hebrew people and early Christians lived under the shadows of Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman empires. The Bible lends itself to postcolonial and intercultural studies because it deals with the themes of travel, space and spatial construction, movement, boundaries, borderland, border-crossing, crossroad, indigenized women and populations, ethnic formation, diasporic communities, displacement, transplantation, international power relations, and globalization processes.³¹

My first attempt to apply postcolonial theory to biblical studies was a reading of the Syrophenician woman (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30) using insights provided by Spivak. In this piece published in 1995, I discussed the representation of a gentile woman in the Gospels, the intersection of anti-Judaism, sexism, and colonialism, and the politics of reconstructing women as subjects of history.³² I also contributed a chapter questioning the preoccupation of the historical quest for Jesus in one of the early texts in postcolonial criticism, *The Postcolonial Bible*.³³ As more scholars began to show interest in postcolonial criticism, several of us organized a New Testament Studies and Postcolonial Studies Consultation at the Society of Biblical Literature in 2000. Some of the papers presented with additional contributions were published in an anthology exploring the intersections between postcolonial biblical interpretation and feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and racial and ethnic theories.³⁴ During this time, I was also

interested in the use of postcolonial theory by scholars who studied different religious traditions. With Laura E. Donaldson, I coedited a pathfinding volume: *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, published in 2002.³⁵

Though I was interested in the use of postcolonial theory in the study of the Bible and religious traditions, I had little awareness of how to do postcolonial theology, since the field was uncharted. In 2003, I attended a transdisciplinary theological colloquium with the theme “Com/Promised Lands: The Colonial, the Postcolonial, and the Theological” at Drew University. There were only a few theologians as presenters because the discussion was so new in the field.³⁶ On the surface, the intersection between the postcolonial and the theological appears to be tenuous. After all, most postcolonial theorists harbor negative attitudes toward religion in general and Christianity in particular. For Edward Said, it was Christian Europe that constructed an inferior and negative image of the “East” for the sake of control and domination. As a humanist and a champion for secular criticism, Said insisted that critical consciousness can only flourish and criticism can only be conducted freely without the imposition of political and religious dogmas. Postcolonial theorists influenced by Derrida, such as Spivak, are allergic to anything that smacks of ontotheology.

But I have contended, then and now, that if Christianity has played such an important enabling role in colonialism and empire building, the study of the postcolonial will not be complete without engaging the theological. The theological also needs the critique and contribution of the postcolonial because the theological enterprise has been laden with imperial assumptions and motives ever since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Postcolonial theology is not an exercise in nostalgia, of trying to recuperate a pristine Christianity that has not colluded with empire. As theologian Catherine Keller has reminded us, there is no “pre-colonial Christianity”: “When [Christianity] opened its young mouth to speak, it spoke in the many tongues of empire—nations and languages colonized by Rome, and before that Greece, and before that Babylon, which has first dispersed the Jews into imperial space.”³⁷ It is delusive to find a particular moment or an Archimedean point in the Christian tradition that was not enmeshed in the power dynamics of the time. Precisely because of the prolonged imbrication of Christianity with empire, postcolonial critique is not only necessary but also indispensable in the reconceptualization of the theological discipline and the articulation of an alternative politic.

Postcolonial theory remains attractive to me because it offers a critical lens to look at the world and inculcate a habit of thought that takes the colonial legacy seriously. As globalization has built on the colonial legacy and enables rapid movements of capital, labor, and resources, the former binary conceptualizations of the world, such as colonizer/colonized, First World/Third World, and “the West and the rest” are no longer adequate to describe the new global relations. Postcolonial theory emerged in the late 1970s and provided a new theoretical impetus to examine culture and economy different from the Marxist approach. With the phenomenal economic development in China, India, and

other countries in the Asia Pacific, Asia increasingly occupies a key geopolitical position in the global political economy. The postcolonial approach illuminates our current political and theological realities, and this book intends to demonstrate the ongoing insidiousness of empire, as exemplified in the Asia Pacific, and also within the U.S., context.

As I read more in postcolonial theory, I began to see the limitations of the liberationist paradigm, though I continue to appreciate its commitment to economic justice. One important critique of liberation theology is that it has been done primarily by male theologians and is very androcentric. The focus has been on the preferential option of the poor, without adequate gender analysis. I am glad to see that works by feminist liberation theologians and by second-generation liberation theologians have increased. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that Jesus has come to bring political liberation, the liberation of human beings throughout history, the liberation from sin and communion with God. Other versions of Christ as the liberator can be seen in various Black theologies and feminist theologies. The image of Christ as the liberator dispels the myth of a gentle and meek Jesus often preached in the middle-class churches. But postcolonial and queer theory has led me to question this masculinist portrayal of the savior who intervenes in human history, because very often a concomitant critique of such a patriarchal and heterosexist image of Christ is missing.

In 2003–2004 when I collected and revised my essays to be published as *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005),³⁸ I recognized that I had been slowly doing postcolonial feminist theology all along. It is only in hindsight that I became aware that I have used postcolonial insights to interrogate some of the categories and assumptions of (white) feminist theology: women's experience, the gender of divinity, the question of whether a male savior can save women, and the relation between women and nature. While many white women insist that feminist theology begins with women's experience to contest androcentrism in traditional theology, they have often forgotten that they are not only victims of patriarchy but also imperial subjects who benefit from colonialism and its legacy. The intersection of gender and imperialism has not been theologized, even though many white women are now more conscious of their racial privilege than before. The attention given to inclusive language and the gender of divinity overlooks the fact that in other languages, masculine pronouns for God may not be a problem. In Chinese, for example, there is a separate pronoun for God, different from he and she. The question of whether a male savior can save women is an important one, but many cultures have both male and female saviors, and the emphasis of Jesus as male overlooks the fact that many cultures have come up with different expressions of the hybrid Christ: Christ as the Corn Mother in Native American culture, Christ as the feminine Shakti in India, and the Bi/Christ in queer cultures. Many Western feminist theologians argue that women are subordinate to men as nature is to culture. But in Asian traditions, nature is not subordinate but glorified in poetry, paintings, and other artifacts. I have argued that feminist theology cannot be defined by one culture

but must be global and intercultural because “different cultures are not isolated but intertwined with one another as a result of colonialism, slavery, and cultural hegemony of the West.”³⁹

After the book was published, I was delighted to see the publication of a growing number of books on postcolonial theology and that some younger scholars and doctoral students are interested in the discourse. A highlight was meeting and conversing with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 2007 at the “Planetary Loves: Postcoloniality, Gender, and Theology” colloquium at Drew University. Clad in a light blue sari, she engaged theologians and scholars in a spirited discussion on the development of her thought and its possible intersection with religion and theology.⁴⁰ When Donaldson and I coedited our book *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* in the early 2000s, we had a hard time recruiting contributors who engaged postcolonial theory in religious studies. Today it would be much easier to find potential contributors. There is a group called “Religion, Colonialism, and Postcolonialism” at the AAR. A cursory reading of the programs of the AAR in the past few years shows that scholars across different religious traditions have shown far more interest in colonial and postcolonial issues than before. Given that colonialism has shaped so much of modern experience and left an indelible impact in the study of religion, this critical engagement is welcome and long overdue.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

Some might wonder if postcolonial theory is outdated because globalization and neoliberalism have exacerbated the neocolonial control of the world. Even Spivak has criticized postcolonial theory for focusing too much on colonial domination in the past, often using the history of South India as a model.⁴¹ The old model, she notes, was basically “Asia’ plus the Sartrian ‘Fanon,’” and it would not be sufficient to deal with the heterogeneity of imperialism on a different and much larger scale.⁴² This might be true if we only concentrate on the works of Spivak, Bhabha, and Subaltern Studies in India. But if we cast the net wider, we will see that many scholars have discussed and contributed to postcolonial theory out of French, Belgian, Japanese, Chinese, and American colonial experiences. Continuing the work of the pioneers, scholars have brought postcolonial inquiry to bear on globalization, neoliberalism, science and technology, queer theory, cinema, and a whole range of other topics.⁴³

In this book, I want to explore the connections between postcolonial politics and theology as I bring postcolonial theory to bear on the current critical issues faced by human beings and our planet. From within the theological discipline, postcolonial theory helps to illuminate the colonial imaginary⁴⁴ employed in theology and the collusion of theology with empires of different periods. Following Edward Said’s advice to pay attention to the “worldliness” of the text,⁴⁵ postcolonial theology examines the sociopolitical context from which theology

emerges and to which it responds. It discusses how theologians in different periods have colluded with, lent support to, or resisted and subverted empire.⁴⁶ The late postcolonial queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid uses the term “unveiling” to describe the process of exposing colonial and heteronormative underpinnings of traditional Christian theology.⁴⁷ In so doing, she issues a clarion call to us to unravel other imperial logics that have sustained theology and given it legitimacy.

From without, the theological has returned with a vengeance and many disciplines, such as philosophy, political science, literature, history, critical theory, and psychoanalysis, have felt the impact of its return. Creston Davis attributes this return to the collapse of Communism and the advent of capitalist nihilism, with the consumerist mentality infiltrating so much of modern life. Some have found religion an ally to discuss the deeper meaning of life and to find ways to resist individual will-to-power.⁴⁸ Scholars as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Julia Kristeva, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou, among others, have engaged theological ideas to discuss justice, religion and politics, subjectivity, psychic life, religious moral imperative, and universalism. These discussions are timely and helpful to broaden the scope and subject matter of theology and to push its boundaries. Given this resurgence of the theological in critical theory, it is now more crucial than ever to examine how postcolonial theory continues to challenge some of these theoretical discourses.

This book presents my theological reflection on postcolonial politics understood in a broad sense, which goes beyond the usual juridical-institutional understanding. This is important because the emphasis on the juridical-institutional sense of politics usually focuses on male leadership and actors, while leaving out the voices and participation of women, subalterns, and other marginalized people because they do not have equal access to power. The discussion of postcolonial politics needs to take into consideration the ways race, class, gender, sexuality, culture, and religion intersect with political narratives, structures, institutions, and movements. The postcolonial turn in political theology enlarges our moral and political imagination by articulating the hopes and desires of the majority of the world’s people, who have been impacted by colonialism and continue to struggle for freedom. The political horizons of this book are shaped by theorists who have reflected on colonialism from the underside: Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Arjun Appadurai, Rey Chow, Lisa Lowe, Chen Kuan-hsing, Stuart Hall, Achille Mbembe, Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and María Lugones.

This work also reflects my increasing engagement with practical theology, as I have been invited to speak to theological fieldwork educators, practical theologians, and homileticians since the early 2010s. The growing interest in postcolonial studies in practical theology reflects a collective consciousness of the limitations of ecclesial practices and ministry shaped by colonial Christianity.⁴⁹ For even though the Christian demographic has shifted to the Global South,

Christian practices, especially in mainline denominations, are still much shaped by European or Euro-American theological underpinnings and cultural experiences. If postcolonial theology is going to have a future, it must be embodied in new religious and social practices in our heterogeneous and richly textured social worlds, in which the local intersects with the global. These practices are counter-hegemonic, creative, and subversive, poised to produce new forms of beings and institutions in our church, community, and society.

This book is divided into three parts. Part 1, "Contesting Empire," argues for a political theology of postcoloniality that is decolonial and comparative, with a focus on the social and political realities of the majority world. It contests the ways "religion" has been conjured and studied to further colonial interests; explores the relation between race, sexuality, and empire; and elucidates Christianity's complex relations with the American Empire. Part 2, "Political Theologies from Asia Pacific," discusses the colonial backgrounds of the formation of "Asia Pacific," the long involvements of the U.S. in Asian politics, and the rise of China and changing geopolitical relations in the region. Using the case study of Asia Pacific, I want to show that the circumstances specific to this region and current developments can serve as a live example to shed light on how postcolonial theology can make an intervention in imperialist politics and theology in and beyond the Asia Pacific context. This part highlights the development of postcolonial theology from East Asia, the emergence of Asian and Asian American transnational feminist theology, and the difficulties of constructing postcolonial subjectivity in the intersection of the local, the national, and the global in the protests in Hong Kong. Part 3, "Practices," suggests how postcolonial theory can be brought to bear on teaching and religious practices in faith communities. While postcolonial theory has been introduced to the fields of biblical studies and theology for some time, it has also impacted practical theology, though this has been far less studied thus far. These chapters explore teaching global theology for the education of global leaders, preaching in intercultural contexts, religious solidarity and peacebuilding, and the need to reimagine Christian mission and planetary politics in the age of the Anthropocene.

This book argues that postcolonial theology functions as a training of the imagination and an attempt to construct a religious worldview that promotes justice, radical plurality, democratic practices, and planetary solidarity. In his much-quoted essay on globalization, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai speaks of the role of imagination as a positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics in the globalized world. By imagination, he is not so much concerned about the work of an individual genius or a dimension of aesthetics. Rather, he is interested in imagination that is popular and social, the faculty "through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs of social life emerge."⁵⁰ Spivak similarly invites us to consider the profoundly democratic possibilities of imagination and the critical roles that art, the humanities, and literary studies can play in cultivating profound feeling and engendering critical thinking that go beyond the logic of capital.⁵¹ The study of theology through the wider lens

of postcolonial theory will hopefully safeguard us from the tyranny of common sense and nurture habits of thought that challenge dominant religious imaginaries and imperialist social and political orders. In doing so, theology can contribute to the process of collectively imagining a different world in which justice and freedom prevail.