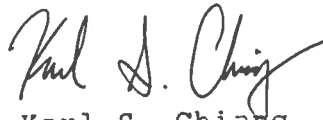


AN ASIAN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

A Paradigm Shift for Second Generational Relevance

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Karl S. Chiang". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Karl S. Chiang

I am a twenty-two year old second generation Taiwanese American male. I do not claim to be affiliated with any sect of the Christian tradition. I do not define myself to be either Christian or atheist. However, I am spiritual. Elements of life which religion ponders, I ponder as well. However claiming not to be religious, I do not ground my theological analysis within a "faith" in a god which is presupposed to exist. My interest in an Asian American liberation theology is an exercise into the greater question of what religion can mean to the Asian facet of American society. The problem of a relationship between culture and religion is not a new question but one which all of humanity must ask itself when faced with any theological question. I certainly do not claim to be universal in the questions which I shall ponder. However, I will be discussing the foundational context of an Asian American liberation theology and what considerations may need to be taken into account in its formulation.

You may wonder how I, an irreligious human being such as myself, can have any say in a theological question as important as a liberation theology. My interest in the topic came through my participation in a Taiwanese American Fellowship Presbyterian Church. Currently located in New Brunswick NJ, it is a church which my parents attend. It has a very active first generation congregation. First generation meaning the

generation to have immigrated to and lived within American society. Therefore, I am a second generation Taiwanese American. However, I have watched myself and the rest of the second generation eventually move apart from the church as we grew older. In my adulthood, I have found this church to hold little spiritual meaning for me. I attend European American churches and African American churches and felt as though I had come to a new spiritual understanding. Yet when I return to the Taiwanese American church, I found it to seem less meaningful and attendance at the church became a "dosage" of my Taiwanese roots. Yet, this dosage still has an aura of church as being my parents' activity rather than my own. In essence, a sense of community was lost for me. This church was more for my parents rather than a place that I or anyone else of the second generation of Taiwanese Americans could feel applied to them. I wondered how the church and its theology could become more pertinent to my generation. Indeed, the question remains open for my generation to decide and those who choose to adopt a "faith" in the Christian concept of god will be the ones to ultimately carry the Taiwanese American Church beyond the first generation's needs.

The question of an Asian American liberation theology encompasses a wide plethora of issues; generational, racial, historical, cultural, religious,

theological, and Asian diasporal. My exploration is an attempt at bringing together elements of the Taiwanese American experience into the larger debate of an Asian American liberation theology and of the contextualization of any religion. I do not presuppose the universality of the Christian tradition. Although this is the framework which I shall work in, my attempt is at the question of a religious humanism and the ongoing debate between culture and religion. One from my own experience as a Taiwanese American.

Being Taiwanese in ancestry, this differentiates my experience from other ethnic groups classified under the rough term "Asian". The term "Asian" covers a wide variety of cultures. Each has validity as a different experience. Liberation theologies emerging from different cultures within Asia are often lumped together as "Asian" but they are not carbon copies of each other. Each has a different cultural context from which it emerges. Within the context of American culture, our "Asian" experiences differ. Yet because of a common white racist attitude that all Asians look alike and are therefore undifferentiable, there is commonality of experience that brings Asian Americans together. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese American experience is unique but overall it contributes to the formulation of an Asian American liberation theology.

In my discussion of an Asian American liberation theology, I shall cover three main topics. First, the

relation between culture and religion as a model on which to base this discussion. Second, using this model within an Asian diasporal context, I will discuss the relation of Taiwanese culture and Christianity from the native Taiwanese context to the second generation American context. Finally, I shall attempt to illucidate some of the issues which surround the current Taiwanese American experience. In the formulation of an Asian American liberation theology, these issues should present to us a pertinence of the theology.

#### The Question of Culture and Reliqion

The success of any religion seems to depend upon its ability to give meaning to the people it relates to. When there is relevance, the religion is meaningful and useful. Gerald H. Anderson writes that theology is a living thing which must speak to actual questions people ask as they live life (p.1). It becomes a "living" religion which strikes cords of relation, understanding, criticism, and thought amongst the people it influences. When a religion becomes no longer pertinent, it loses its credibility, its loses its people and it loses its life. When Nietzsche wrote that God was dead, he argued that the role which God once had in the lives of humans no longer existed. Thus, God was dead. There is truth in what Nietzsche discusses as it relates to a second generation Asian American experience. For me, the Taiwanese American church is dying. Its relevance no

longer grounds me in its procedure of ritual and activity. Its issues interest me but they are not my issues. The question of culture and theology will be explored in this context in order to determine the legitimacy of my claim that the church is dying for second generation Taiwanese Americans.

Gordon D. Kaufmann in "Theology as Imaginative Construction" suggests a view of theology and human existence in which theology is the human attempt to understand our human life and our human condition (p.73). He suggests that it is an attempt to understand our human life in terms of an "ultimate foundation." That ultimate foundation is our notion and belief in the existence of a god. Therefore, if theology is a link between our notion of god and our worldly experience, Kaufmann argues that theology is impossible to do unless consideration is given to aspects of the human experience. If we use Kaufmann's model of theology being the link between a god and a variable human existence, the question of an Asian American liberation theology is one of a reorientation of theology to a changing Asian American human experience, one which reaches out to a new element within the Asian diaspora, the second generation Taiwanese American.

Yet to give validity to this correlation of god and human experience, a problem arises as to the nature of the god which we are trying to relate to. This question is not unique to Asian Americans but is

pondered by all attempting to redefine theology. Sharon D. Welch, a feminist theologian of liberation, states:

"liberal theologians also face the problem of discerning the types of truth claims appropriate to the object of theology, the divine-human relationship" (Welch, 1985, p.1).

She goes on to discuss that to assume as theologians in the past did that "faith" is an ultimacy which is definitely actual and present is no longer a certainty which theologians today can rely on. Welch raises the questions surrounding the activity of theology that questions not only the nature of our God-talk but also the reality of god (p.1-2). James H. Cone in God of the Oppressed sought to rectify this question as to the nature of god by saying that Jesus was black. Cone argues that Christ's blackness is literal and symbolic (p.133-137). Cone is able to resolve the question of the nature of god by saying that god is black. When the Christian god becomes black, god is able to establish a theological relation with the African American community. However, there are several assumptions which I shall raise but not explore too deeply. The assumption then is of a god who is benevolent and willing to meet humans on their terms. Not knowing the nature of god and assuming an existence of god, one has to wonder if god does not operate in the world independent of human activity. This concept is not new in theological thought. Yet as Welch points out, most



liberal theologians have not discovered a method of argument to establish the reality of god (p.3). For this analysis, I will use Kaufmann's concept of god as being "an ultimate object of devotion for human life" (p.75). God becomes a object in human reality to which the individual and the community can give unlimited devotion ~~to~~ (p.75).

If god is ultimate, Kaufmann ~~the~~ argues that god cannot be understood through any human concepts or images which will never apply literally to god but only come from our human experience in the world. Therefore, he states that our religious activity and theology belongs to a specific world-view and interpretation of human existence created to orient humans within a specific time frame of history (P.75-76). The task of an Asian American liberation theology which I seek to undertake is an attempt to bring to light to a specific time frame of second generation Taiwanese American human experience. It is in this sense that I as a person who does not claim a "referent" of faith and god can discuss such a topic. My discussion is one of a humanism rather than a discussion into the nature of god. However, I will make a leap of faith and say that if god exists, god must be able to reach all people of all cultures. Yet the problem of an Asian American liberation theology is the recognition of that culture. The dying church relates to a disillusionment <sup>which</sup> exists as to the nature of the human existence <sup>and</sup> with which the second generation

attempts to link theologically with a concept of god. The nature and history of this disillusionment within Christianity is what I will discuss in the next section.

Taiwanese History of Christianity Across the Asian  
Diaspora: Taiwan to the United States

James H. Cone in "Theologies of Liberation among U.S. Racial-Ethnic Minorities" writes that in order to understand liberation theology among the racial-ethnic groups of the United States, an understanding of the the peoples' history must be obtained. Cone states that theological thought has been both influenced by indigenous liberation theology as well as within the American experience. In essence, he states that these liberation theologies have been influenced by differing cultural histories both from our ancestry and our American experience (p.55). I would like to briefly trace the history of the Taiwanese experience with Christianity from Taiwan to the second generation. I hope to illucidate elements of the disillusionment of the human experience within this historical context which will indicate two main elements of its causation. The first being the intrinsic western cultural orientation of the Christian tradition. The other being the orientation of current church functions as being orientated to a first generation experience.

The island of Taiwan is located off the eastern coast of China. It experienced Christianity when Canadian and Scottish Presbyterians missionaries arrived

on the island during the Qing Dynasty around the mid-1800's. The existence of a Presbyterian Christian tradition has survived radical change in Taiwan from the Japanese occupation through the end of World War II to the Kuo Ming Tang Government's retreat to Taiwan from the mainland in 1949.

Within the Taiwanese cultural context, the Christian Tradition has long been considered a foreign religion by the Taiwanese, translated from Taiwanese as being the "Red-Haired Barbarian Religion" (Chiang, T.C., 1990). Although this view is ethnocentric, it seems to also indicate the clashing of cultures when the Christian tradition's indoctrination is attempted. Dr. Chiang, an elder at the New Brunswick Taiwanese American Presbyterian Church, noted the difficulty of becoming a Christian within the Taiwanese cultural context. One of the main cultural conflicts between Christianity and the Taiwanese people was ancestor worship. Dr. Chiang illucidated details of this conflict for me. Most family<sup>ies</sup>s in Taiwan have a box which contains the names of the ancestors. This box is worshipped on the birthdays of the ancestors in which food is placed out for them. Consistent with the Chinese concept of continuity of the family name, it is believed that the descendants must proliferate in order to continue feeding the ancestors on their birthdays. It is a bad fate for a soul to not have people feeding it after

death (Chiang, T.C., 1990). Whether these concepts can be proven as true or not, this culturally based practice was not allowed by the church for any Taiwanese claiming to be Christian. Dr. Chiang noted that since the responsibility of the box was placed on the eldest son, a family with one son would sometimes disown their son upon <sup>his</sup> becoming a Christian or take drastic measures as locking him in the house tied to a table on Sundays. The cultural clash that exists within the Taiwanese cultural context is relieved by immigration into American society. Dr. Chiang said that his conversion to Christianity was a lot easier because he did it in the United States. Because Dr. Chiang is now an American citizen, his mother relieved him of the responsibility for the ancestor box and it was burned at her death (Chiang, T.C., 1990). Although Dr. Chiang's attitude towards the notion of our ancestor's souls is one that views it as superstitious jargon, the practice is still observed today in Taiwan as part of the cultural norm. In some sense, Dr. Chiang's family culture has died for he no longer has an ancestor box. The point of this illustration is to show the cultural ignorance and biases which the cumulative Christian tradition shows towards other cultures because it is locked within a cultural western framework. I would suggest that some of this conflict is related to the Western ethnocentric cultural norms which exist within the Christian tradition which may have seen this as a

form of paganism instead of a cultural practice.

Several authors have noted the cultural conflict between the Western cultural normative notions which the Christian tradition adheres to and other cultural norms. Gerald H. Anderson in Asian Voices in Christian Theology has described the Christian tradition as the "potted plant" of Asia (p.5) in the sense that it has not been able to adapt culturally to Asian societies. Choan Seng Song notes as well that Christianity has not been able to adjust to and become part of the Chinese culture and ethos. Song writes that the tradition has remained conceived as a foreign religion that has never lost that image amongst the minds of the Taiwanese (p.147). The clash in the link between culture and religion can be seen in the ancestor box scenario. As Kaufmann suggests that theology reflects a specific world view, this may be a large basis for the source of conflict.

Regardless of the cultural conflict, Christianity has survived in Taiwan and some of the first generation Taiwanese adopted some form of the faith before coming to the United States to study. Some were attracted to the religion because it offered new concepts which were free of traditional oppressive Confucian values (Chiang, W.U., 1990).

Ironically as the Taiwanese diaspora moved into the American cultural context, the Christian church has become a source of Taiwanese culture for the first

tradition because as a lonely graduate student at the University of Minnesota, he heard that a group of other Taiwanese students on campus met regularly in Christian Fellowship. Attending the first meeting, he discovered that he had made new Taiwanese friends and continued attending which eventually led to his conversion (Chiang, T.C., 1990). Although his basis for accepting the tradition is based on more than Taiwanese American friendships, this attraction to the church still exists today. At the New Brunswick Taiwanese American Presbyterian Church, newly arrived immigrants from Taiwan and first generation Taiwanese Americans are often attracted to the church because it is a place where other Taiwanese congregate. It is a place which is familiar to new immigrants and the church sometimes serves as a transitional place helping them orient to a new culture (Chiang, W.U., 1990). It is the hope of the church that they will come to know the "faith" during this transition (Chiang, W.U., 1990). In this way, the church has become living in that it serves the pragmatic, human needs of the first generation in the sense that it provides them with a familiar Taiwanese community.

If we were isolated from the rest of American society, there would be no theological need for the creation of an Asian American liberation theology. The confusion of the Taiwanese American human experience is

that the current theology speaks only to part of the second generation's experience. For the first generation, it serves a meaningful function which relates to their human existence. Yet, it primarily serves an immigrant experience, ~~at~~ reaching back towards Taiwanese culture within America. Of course amongst the first generation, the degrees of acculturation differ and those who come to the United States may always need a church which can function in the ways the New Brunswick church does. I do not want to give the impression this is all that it serves. However, the issues which relate to a first generation experience do not take into account some of the second generation's.



A new paradigm needs to be sought out. Within the church, it needs to encompass an experience which many second generation Taiwanese Americans feel and live. This is not to the exclusion of the first generation but themes of relevance and liberation should be what gives a theology its grounding. To the second generation, the greater degree of acculturation to American society has made our human existence one which differs. Therefore, a disparity occurs between the current Asian American theology and a second generation human experience. This is the disillusionment in which the theology does not understand the human existence it relates to. This disillusionment has two main causes. Firstly, it is a

theology imported from a Western culture. Secondly, in reaction to a Western culture, the first generation Taiwanese Americans have shaped the tradition to conform solely to their needs. A new cultural orientation needs to occur if the relevance of theology is to be maintained for the second generation of which I shall discuss considerations for in the next section.

#### A Theological Paradigm Shift: The Second Generation

An East Asia Christian Conference Consultation in 1965 stated that theology could not be conceived in neatly defined static terms (Anderson, 1976). Sharon D. Welch in her formulation of a feminist theology of liberation writes that her theology must always remain "open to challenge and modification, trying to avoid any sort of moral imperialism or triumphalism" (Welch, 1985). Along similar lines, the attempt at my analysis here is to illuminate considerations for a second generation Taiwanese American liberation theology, not to lay down absolutes.

I conceive the paradigm shift to be two-fold. If the second generation is to continue its affiliation with first generation churches, a recognition of a difference of experience needs to occur. Possibly a co-existence of two separate congregations of first and second generation may have to occur. Autonomy and the ability to have dialogue with each other appears to be a productive proposal. An ethnic integrity can be maintained and within this framework the crossing of





generational and cultural lines may occur. In essence, both generations are Asian American but there are divergences and convergences in our experiences.

Within the experience of the second generation Taiwanese American, there is an appearance to have assimilated fairly well. Most of us speak English without any visible trace of an accent. Some of us can speak our native Taiwanese language. Some can speak some. Some speak none. Oftentimes, we can exist within the white power structure which constitutes American society. This ability to assimilate fairly well sometimes makes the quest for ethnic integrity even more difficult among the second generation. We often feel ourselves caught between two worlds in terms of our identity, one which is not fully Asian and one which cannot be part of the dominant American white culture. However, we are not the new and better "model minority" because of our degree of assimilation. Our experience of racial oppression within this country is a different one from the first generation. Although we may appear to move well within the white world, we are not white. By nature, we shall always be Asian and American society will always perceive us as such. Therefore if we are to survive in the United States with any cultural integrity, we must develop our own liberation theology. Like other people of color and women, we must undertake the task of developing our own relevant theology, one

which pertains to our experience and .. has meaning for us. An existence within white theology is a loss of our cultural identity and our selves.

A second generation Taiwanese American liberation theology must make efforts to <sup>identify</sup> ~~illuminate~~ forms of American white domination which detract from our ethnicity and from our self. Ultimately, we must liberate ourselves from dominant Eurocentric American cultural standards and oppression which thereby detract from the expression of a true self. Many "minorities" and traditionally oppressed groups within American society have begun a theological process which ultimately seeks a freedom from dominant white male norms and the stereotypes set by them. That is the ← element of American society which Asian Americans must seek freedom from in order to maintain a semblance of self and cultural integrity.

The argument of the existence of a white dominant culture is one that many thinkers in analyzing racism in America have noticed. James M. Jones in a work titled "Racism: A Cultural Analysis of the Problem" notes that British colonialism culturally established patterns of racist control and ingrained cultural attributes and values as the norm within the minds of the people they colonized (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). In many facets of American culture, the white skin ideal amongst other cultural standards are perpetrated. These are very similar to the cultural racism which Jones

discusses. For example, the mass media which constantly bombards all facets of American society with ideal images of white. White models exemplify normative notions of beauty. Any model who is of non-European decent <sup>and</sup> often has bodily features which help exemplify the norm are part of an accepted white ethnicity. An example of a accepted white ethnicity is the "China Doll". The "China Doll" syndrome makes it acceptable for white men to marry Asian women, but for an Asian male to marry a white woman is considered strange <sup>by</sup> these sets of standards.

Elements of racism such as this are not always visible. Keith Osajima in his work, "Internalized Racism and the Educational Experience of Asian American College Students" discusses a hidden element of racism which occurs in many Asian Americans raised in the United States. In using a model proposed by Marcuse, Osajima argues that the effects of racial oppression can be felt despite <sup>no</sup> discernable modes of discrimination (3). He argues that the effects of racism in the United States takes the form similar to that of racial oppression experienced by colonists when colonized by European countries. Using Paulo Friere's and Albert Memmi's insights, Osajima notes that oppression places the oppressed in a position where they define images of self in relation to preconceived notions and stereotypes from the dominant group. In the process, he concludes that

Asian American humanity and individuality is obscured.

The issues of racism are complex yet they represent for the Asian American oppression from which to liberate the self. In many ways, it is the

battle of the mind. As a second generation, our self is defined by a human development within the American

cultural context and this is what separates us from the first generation. <sup>Their</sup> Ideas of self, gender roles, and

concept which help define the self were mostly developed

in Taiwan. The second generation's were defined in a

white ideal cultural context. However, that does not

mean that the first generation will not understand our

experience. an immigrant <sup>who</sup> has lived here long enough

will understand mechanisms of Asian American oppression within this society. Nevertheless, there may

be intrinsic values which differ between the two

generations given the different social conditions in

which they grew up. The dehumanization as

illicit by Osajima and other forms <sup>are</sup> is what should be

recognized by this new paradigm of theology. Yet, both

generations can and should work <sup>on</sup> and its development.

Mary Daly in her work, "After the Death of God the Father," describes the creation of a new space within

which women can develop as full human beings free of patriarchal notions of constraint and stereotyping.

This development of the oppressed to have a theological<sup>1</sup>

ideal of a place where one is not oppressed may be the

basis for the concept of salvation within the Asian

American liberation theology. It is an ideal that both first and second generation Taiwanese Americans can hold, but the contextual meaning of salvation is what will differ.

Sharon D. Welch notes the way in which religion can both foster liberation and oppression (Welch, 1985). In the same way, an Asian American liberation theology should not detract from other modes of religious expression within the tradition and may serve as a means by which to critique cultural elements within the tradition which may be Western ethnocentric or oppressive.

The second part of the paradigm shift should in some ways align our theology with others' theologies of liberation. Our liberation is from the oppression of the racist dominant white culture of American society. Our struggle for freedom from oppression is similar to struggle against oppression anywhere else in the world.

As Cone quotes M.L. King, Jr;

"We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in the world, no one can be totally rich" (Boff & Elizondo, 1988).

Our struggle for liberation will add to and illuminate the web-like forms of oppression which seem to slither about in many nooks and crannies of life.

My treatment of the dynamics of a second

generation Taiwanese American experience is not complete. The issues are complex and ever-changing. My task here has been to attempt to lay a foundation of historical, cultural, and theological considerations in the formulation of a relevant theology for second generation Taiwanese Americans which may result in a fuller tradition for both first and second. The difficulties lie within generational, cultural, racial, and theological problems which are complex. However, I hope that this illucidates issues within other liberation theologies where people seek to free themselves from the multifarious faces of oppression in striving to be full human beings.

The task continues...

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