Intercultural Threads of Hybridity and Theological/Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

This collaborative paper seeks to explore the complex issues of hybridity as something to be recognized, celebrated, and further engaged in public theological discourses and pedagogical practices. Beginning with the autobiographical narrative of the discovery of their hybrid identity, the two different theological educators (Korean-Canadian and Japanese-American) identify the dominant hegemony of dualism and homogeneous purity as stumbling blocks to hybrid theology and religious education, which often lead to racial, religious and cultural stereotyping, preventing us from forming just and diverse communities. The authors, then, shed light upon the theological glimpses of hybridity that are found in the very identity of Jesus Christ as hybrid and articulated as well in various religious traditions, the hybrid nature of Yin and Yang in Daoism and Ardhanarishvans, one of the Hindu Gods. Finally, the authors propose a hybrid space for threshold religious education as a faithful way to embrace the changing and fluid contexts of today’s world where people all over the world move, migrate, cross their geographical, cultural and national boundaries, hybridizing in creative ways along the way, the Way of Jesus as Christian.

1. Introduction- Autobiographical Narratives

I (Hye Ran) grew up in South Korea and came to Toronto, Canada, in 1995 as an exchange student to Emmanuel College. I hadn’t fully grasped what was going to be involved in crossing the Pacific Ocean. I don’t think that I had much clue of how such a transgressing act would change my life. While in Toronto I met my future spouse David and my life-long teacher, Rev. Dr. Wenh-In Ng, our past president of APRRE/REA. They have provided a window from which I can see the world in much more open and intertwined ways, a world full of different ethnicities, races, languages, and cultures. As my doctoral study began, so did my inter-racial marriage in 1998. During the following years, I also gave birth to two hybrid children. In 2005, upon completing my TH. D., my husband and children joined me in crossing the Pacific Ocean again. It was a going-back home for me and a process of finding home for my kids and David. We were sent by the United Church of Canada as “overseas mission personnel” to the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK).

Unfortunately, this journey was far from a journey of returning home sweet home for me. I found myself in an experience of “being the Other” in my own motherland. I was orientalized as “the Other,” someone who looks the same and speaks the same language, yet is somehow foreign and unfamiliar. The other factor that contributed to this otherness was the inability for the Korean people to view me as a “missionary” sent from a Western Church. I discerned this inability as the internalized orientalism at work among the Korean people I served. It was much easier for them to serve and give authority to white males than non-white females. With the colonial mindset that Western missionaries ought to be better and higher than the missionized, it
became extremely difficult for them to accept that I, a non-white Korean breed, am their “missionary,” a term still in use in Korea. This at least is how I interpreted my experience. During these precious 3 years, living in Korea, I discovered that I had become a hybrid person. I learned deeply what it means to live as a multiply mixed person, meaning that I could no longer choose only one identity. That is why I was treated as “the Other” in Korea and perhaps it is also the way I am treated here in North America. It is a mixed blessing to be hybrid. In a way, hybridity is not about mixing two cultures or about being bi-racial, for I cannot identify myself in fixed categories such as race or culture.

When I (Joanne) first set foot and eye upon the altiplano (highplains) of southern Peru back in 1984, I had expected a barren, wind-blown desert for it was the worst drought in 20 years. I had heard vivid stories of Aymara campesinos replacing their weak and underfed oxen, pulling the simple wooden yokes and plows themselves through the dry caked earth at 12,000 feet above sea level to plant the native potato and seed grains. How could anything hope to grow? A land of stark contrasts, their faith in what was not yet, revealed a tenacious hope in small stirrings the size of a seed that enabled life to enter the apparent barrenness. Only a month of new rains had since turned the dusty landscape into a lush palette of colors for the eyes, food for body and soul, as the plants sprouted across the plains.

As a 3rd generation Japanese American woman from urban Los Angeles, I had also expected a barrenness of tremendous difference as my greatest challenge in entering this unknown world for me of the Aymara people. Yet I encountered an unexpected verdancy of mutual and transformative relationship across our differences which gave birth to a new depth and resonance as my small stirrings of faith the size of a seed were received in friendship. As I traversed across the altiplano with her dramatic cloud-filled, blue skies breaking open in sunlight like the great smiles that would glisten across the sun-burnt faces of the Aymara people, I immediately fell in love with this land and her people. That I didn’t know or understand exactly why was perhaps her greatest promise.

The poem, “An Open Invitation” may sum up my narrative:

Growing up in Los Angeles
a part of me masters the technique of living above ground.
With freeway speed I skim the surface
in my apparent efficiency and assimilation.
But a deeper part of me knows that I, we
must do this only for survival,
not for meaning.
My "bachan" (grandma) teaches me at age five
how to fold an origami crane
which my hands have never forgotten.

She speaks her melodic Meiji-age Japanese to me
as she tightens my obi-sash
as my tummy and lungs complain with a big breath.
She adjusts my tiny brightly colored kimono
as I prepare for a special event at school.

"Jichan" (grandpa) hardly seems to talk
yet I always see him sumi-e brush painting
or hear his shakuhachi flute playing
filling our eyes and years
with ancient stories beyond words:

Of the land of our ancestors
the long journey crossing watery borders,
the sadness at leaving one's land and family,
the harshness of the unwelcome upon arrival,
the imprisonment when racist fears took over.¹

Always at New Year's
my large extended family gathers at their house.
Smells of bachan's cooking,
tastes of o-mochi good luck rice cakes
and other special Japanese foods for this day
enhance our happiness as we are together.
Jichan laughs as the grown-ups greet the New Year
with hot sake.

¹ During WWII, 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, the majority U.S. citizens, were detained in concentration camps, bound by barbed wire and guard towers. My parents and grandparents were in these camps for 3-4 years. See
All the children laugh and play

up and down grandma's long hallway and big closets.

The pressure of assimilation into shallow roots
tells you to cut yourself off from wisdom, land and one's people.

The messages come from the media
on how we are supposed to dress for success,
how to have a certain "look" but not really see,
how to pose but not how to ground one's self.

Assimilation into consumerism
where we simply find ourselves
consumed and eaten alive
access to nowhere fast.

Ground of struggle, of restaurants and home cooking,
of a small tailoring business and a barber shop,
of a people, of a community trying to make it in the U.S.
tapping deep into ancient wellsprings
of strength and perseverance,
so as not to have spirit break
in the process of trying to make it,

trying to live, that's all

trying to create a space for children and oba-a-sans, oji-i-sans.

These memories of deep roots of struggle and hope
grow faint with success and comfort
where suffering is left in the lobby
for our ancestors to wrestle with alone.

Yet it is in the fibers of my body,
in my hands, my lungs and tummy, my eyes and ears,
my nose and taste buds.
When my mind’s memory is faint
my body where my soul dwells, remembers.

It is another border crossing
that awakens these memories into life.

High in the Andes mountains at 12,000 feet
I hear the same melodies of my grandfather
played on chaqalladas instead of the shakuhachi\(^2\)
resonating a familiar story
of a people who have know suffering
yet continually transform it into life.

Music sings the defiant hope of the Aymara people.
Their eyes speak the wisdom of centuries
that births a great capacity to celebrate life.
Knowing that oppression does not have the last word
they dance their Dreaming,
grounded in the Pachamama\(^3\)
creating, re-creating and co-creating life.

They kick up the dust of their spirits
and bless their living.

The Aymara invite me to dance during Carnavales
when the fields are blessed and in full bloom,
an invitation to their ways of knowing.

I see a new face of God
feel the gaze of tenderness
born out of suffering and compassion,
feel the breeze of reconciliation.

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\(^2\) Chaqalladas are a reed instrument made out of bamboo, similar to the shakuhachi, a Japanese instrument. The tonal scale is also similar.

\(^3\) Pachamama is the Aymara word for Mother Earth. It is a reference to the sacred.
The wings of my soul are carried
to a familiar place that I see again for the first time
the suffering and beauty of my own people.
In the dancing I know I have been here before
as deep memories carried in my body
since before I was born
are awakened.

Border crossings again
now return me to the place of before.
The new life, the new way of seeing,
new depths of the sacred
suddenly feel dissonant
as grief rises to the surface.

How to be authentically Two Way?¹
New knowings are not remedies
but new strength and love to walk the journey
no longer alone
connected to the earth and earth dwellers
East and West, North and South.
The dissonance becomes the melodies of stories sung into being.

Suffering becomes Dreaming becomes Knowing
for the future
Hope in the present.

For I am already Three Way
learning Many Way
Walking becomes Dancing

¹“Dreaming” (vision and imagination) and “Two Way” (bicultural) are borrowed terms from the Australian aboriginal imagination.
as the movements of Many Way vibrate with life

like atoms vibrating with energy

creating, re-creating, co-creating

dancing in original New Ways,

an Open Invitation.

2. Stumbling Blocks Towards a Journey to Hybridity

There are at least two stumbling blocks: one is dualism. Dualism is the tool of imperialism which “depends for its legitimization on the production of a series of opposites: the metropolitan subject/native, civilized/savage, developed/undeveloped, and so on”\(^5\) whereby the discrimination and domination of the former over the latter is justified. However, monocultural identity only exists by “self-deception.”\(^6\) It is a social construct which deceptively hides a reality that is by nature, nothing but mixed, hybrid, confusing and changing. Ironically, however, heterogeneity emerges out of this dualistic deceiving reality, despite the hegemonic power of policing and controlling. Hybridity as the product of domination counter-produces heterogeneity that cannot be grasped by either-or binary division or both-neither totality but simply exists in the process of the “intervention of the Third Space of enunciation” in which a homogenizing unifying force is disrupted by a contradictory and ambivalent hybrid reality.\(^7\) Our experience of home as “unhomely” is closely linked with diasporic hybrid experience of being “the-world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the-world” where borders and binary lines become blurred.\(^8\) The other barrier to hybridity lies in the notions of purity that are prevalent in the dominant White Anglo North American contexts. The injustice resulting from racism, sexism and homophobia is sanctioned by purity and homogeneity, in which heterosexual White pure blood becomes the norm as the desirable human being. Heterosexuality works within the binary construction of gender as much as it operates within colonial discourse and religious purity codes.\(^9\) For example, the biblical references opposing homosexuality and interracial marriage need to be seen in the development of a Judeo-Christianity that seeks to exercise the hegemony of homogeneous ethnocentrism and religious purity and supremacy.

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\(^7\) Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 54.


What we, thus, need to ask is: How do we create a threshold space for transformative learning that moves beyond such purity and homogeneity? We argue that it requires a contemplative process of learning that brings a constant invitation to grow, to become more than you have been, to transform loss into presence, to allow what is false to fall away and usher us toward the grace we need. To cross the threshold is to be intentionally in-between, which includes being beyond, as a space and not a negation. Here the Japanese aesthetic concept of mā may be helpful. It carries relational meaning as it refers to the interval between, regarded as a positive element rather than the absence of sound or image. It is the silent empty space between things and people pointing to the human existence where both longing and connection can be experienced, key to compassion. It is an opening through which light shines. The function of mā is precisely to let the light shine through, as conveyed in its Chinese character with a gate and sun, 門.

3. Theological Insights Leading to Hybridity

Kwok Pui-lan contends that the most obvious example of hybrid theology is found in the concept of Jesus as Christ. Jesus in his own quest of “Who do you say that I am?” refuses any fixed notion of him. The multiple voices of Jesus in the New Testament successfully demonstrate the ambiguities and complexities of his identity. The space, mā, between Jesus and Christ is “the ‘contact zone’ or ‘borderland’ between the human and the divine, …the Jewish and the Hellenistic, the prophetic and the sacramental, the God of conquerors and the God of the meek.” She further examines the quest for the historical Jesus, which culminated in 19th century Europe, the peak of colonial expansion, as evidence of the European Christians’ searching for their self-identity which was challenged by the encounter with the colonized. The identification of Jesus as Aryan against Jews or the French bourgeois or Anglo-Saxon Christ based upon Darwinism reveals European ethnocentrism, yet, it demonstrates the very nature of cultural hybridization as “a problematic of colonial representation” as a result of the “denied knowledge” that shines through the dominant discourse. Other religions may provide insights on the understanding of the Triune God. In Taoism, Tao (道) depends upon its dynamic movement of Chung(精), Qi (氣), Shin (神). These three movements are so inter-dependent and hybrid that we cannot distinguish one from the other in Taoism. A Hindu God Ardhanarishvara, the half male and the half female God, composed of two distinctively different entities, exists in such hybrid nature. A gendered and genderless God in Hinduism and a Trinitarian concept in Taoism help us let the light shine through beyond the notion of God as a

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12 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 114.
13 Chung(精), meaning focus/refined, possibly be identified as Jesus Christ. Qi (気), meaning the energy, has clear connects to Spirit. Shin (神), meaning the Deity may stand for God.
singular pure entity or an unchanging being.

Hybrid theological approaches are embedded in our neighbors’ religious traditions as much as in our own traditions. How can we, then, enhance such wisdom in our teaching ministry towards transformation?

4. Conclusion- Towards a Journey of Hybrid Religious Education and Threshold Learning

“To be born human is to be born angled toward an other and others,” Gayatri Spivak asserts. The state of being a pregnant mother demonstrates her assertion. Anne Joh explores this mother-child relationship to engage in Christology, reading Julia Kristeva’s concept of “herethics,” a love that does not rely on separation but mutuality. The mother carrying the child is a distinctive subject and yet her identity is attached to the other, the baby, without whom she is not fully herself. A journey of hybrid religious education is advanced when we intentionally bring forth this reality of inter-connectedness and inter-dependence, while denouncing and disrupting the notions of dualism, purity, and homogeneity.

The interdependent relationship with the Aymara people unexpectedly gave my life a new context with the freedom and challenge to explore and own my own unknown world, my history and identity as a 3rd generation Japanese American woman. Being Japanese-American up until then meant being neither Japanese nor American, a lost negation of the hybrid. The Aymara Peruvians began to mirror for me a potential wholeness in spite of dissonance and ambivalence, even amidst intense struggle through centuries of colonialism and marginalization. This deep experience of sharing in their life of struggle and defiant hope has given me new eyes and new courage to reconnect to the memory of suffering and hope that was lived in the lives of my parents and grandparents from immigration through internment during World War II, our hidden history and our historicity. My “otherness” was recognized and embraced as “an-other.” Rather than a globalized heart that seeks to homogenize people into sameness, a global heart dwells in the transformative love that comes alive precisely amidst the beauty of our distinctive particularities. This educational model of mutual relationship would become a paradigm for internal interculturality as well, as the dissonant aspects of ourselves that result from our transglobal paths befriend each other.

While it was painful and difficult to face hybrid realities, I think I grew deeper in faith that affirms it as a gift to be recognized and celebrated rather than dismissed or ignored. We should and could remind our community that hybrid identities are a building block and not a stumbling block in building up intercultural faith communities. We need to re-member our

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16 “Is it then so far-fetched to imagine this pregnancy and birth in the dynamism of Jesus’ birth as the Semiotic/Spirit/Sophia incarnate? The Word becoming flesh that dwelt among us?” Anne Wonhee Joh, Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology (Louisville: WJK, 2006), p. 149, #104.
experiences of living in between and beyond places and cultures, as the theme of this year’s REA/APRRE annual meeting rightly articulated. It is our conviction that hybrid and hyphenated multiple identities need to be affirmed in our discourse of religious education and pedagogy as an active response to and responsibility of our vocation as teachers. Perhaps, then, would we be able to see God’s presence shining through our hybridity, as Virgilio Elizondo has reinterpreted *mestizaje* as a new synthesis and new phylum of humanity. It is a new consciousness that finds a deep sense of home between and beyond homes. It regains the sense of cosmos as home, that all may be one, not in universal sameness but to love universally from within the new being. We would then be able to shine upon God’s creation, the rainforest, where the interchange of energies carried and shared within the highest diversity of species guarantees its well-being.

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