

Report of
ASIAN FORUM FOR THEOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS (AFTM) CONFERENCE
Theme: *Theology from the Margins: Towards Methodological Inquiries*
October 21-26, 2024

Venue: St Andrew's Theological Seminary (SATS), Quezon City, Philippines

Partners: FTEAP and EMW

Type: Refresher Course for Theological Faculty in Asia

Place: Audio-Visual Room (AVR) of SATS

Moderator: Ms Sunshine (SATS)

Rapporteur: Dr Eyingbeni Humtsoe-Nienu (Nagaland, India)



Participants of AFTM workshop on “Theology from Margins: Towards a Methodological Inquiries” at St. Andrew Theological Seminary, October 21-28, 2024.

DAY ONE, OCTOBER 22, 2024 (TUESDAY)

1. Inaugural Act

The AFTM Refresher Course began with thirty-three registered delegates on the morning of Tuesday, October 22, 2024 with an opening service by members of the SATS community based on the text Isaiah 58: 6-12. It was accompanied by meaningful music, prayers, reading of the Scripture, and quiet reflection.

It was followed by the SATS' President and Academic Dean, The Very Rev Dr Gloria Lita Mapangdol, introducing The Most Rev Brent Harry Alawas, the Prime Bishop of the Episcopal

Church of the Philippines, who graciously delivered the welcome address and a challenging exhortation to the members. He highlighted some crucial issues in Asia, particularly the erosion of Asian culture, and called the participants to become effective ministers engaged in the restoration of Asian cultural heritages.

2. Introductory Notes

Dr Huang Po Ho, the AFTM Chair, gave an introductory note on the AFTM. He recalled that AFTM was initiated by Dr Wati Longchar, Dr MP Joseph, and him. A Founding Committee was formed with three of them as members along with Dr Yangkahao Vashum (India) and Dr Gloria Mapangdol (Philippines) as members. Significantly, he pointed out that the Quezon City AFTM Conference 2024 is the first Conference after the introductory meeting in Serampore, West Bengal, India in 2019. He mentioned that AFTM is primarily aimed at helping the subaltern communities, engaged in both formal and informal enterprises, to meaningfully respond to the issue and reality of marginalization in Asia. This first workshop is organized to articulate distinctive Asian theological methodology from the experience of marginalized people.

3. Technical Sessions

(i) Dr Sonny Africa

Dr Africa (Philippines) delivered a lecture on the topic, *Objectified Earth and Objectified People: Towards an Economic, Political and Gender Analysis*. He argued that the objectification of people and nature has materialistic roots. He critiqued capitalism for exploiting both entities for generating profit, thus, reducing them to sources of profit-making. To overcome objectification, he proposes the following cultural shifts: collective means of production and ownership, empowering educational system, ethical regulations of consumerism, democratic system that endows power to the people.

Conversations: The paper generated deep conversations around the possibility of freedom from fear of expression, moneyless economy, post-patriarchy, and the affirmation of the marginals as majority. The discussion emphasized the need to continue finding alternatives.

(ii) Dr Huang Po Ho

After lunch break, the members returned to engage with Dr Po Ho (Taiwan) on the subject, "Mapping Paradigm Shifts in Theology." He highlighted the historical paradigms of Christianity from the first century to the present, as categorized by Hans Küng. Following that schema, he identified four major trends in theology: orthodox, enlightenment, liberal, and contextual. Within these broad strokes, he also noted the various dynamics and variables. Most distinctively, he argued that theology is "not a set of knowledge" but a "process of critical reflection and commitment to living faiths." He emphasized the "doing" aspect centered on asking the question, "Who am I?" This self-identification within Asian culture was, he argued, the key to biblical hermeneutics and theological construction.

Conversations: The dialogue that ensued from his presentation revolved around the dialectical questions of the Bible and culture, Asian theological resources and self-identity, contextual theology, and the local church.

(iii) Panel Talk

The final session of the day was a four-member panel talk and sharing on these topics -

1. “Christian Theological Values in the Mussuru’ Ritual based on Hebrew 9: 11-10:10” (Dr. Karnia Randan, Indonesia)
2. Commentary on the Gospel according to Mark in Kachin language (Dr Maru Brang, Myanmar)
3. Research and publication prospects in Asia (Dr Francis Samdao, Philippines)
4. “Hybridity and Hope: Theological Voices of Filipino Episcopalians in a Postcolonial World” (Ms Sunshine, Philippines)

Conversation: The importance of tapping oral traditions by documenting them in written form and writing biblical and theological resources in their native language/s was collectively reiterated.

DAY TWO, OCTOBER 23, 2024 (WEDNESDAY)

(iv) Dr Limatula Longkumer

The second-day morning was greeted with an online presentation by Dr Limatula Longkumer (India) on the topic, “Mapping the Development of Womanist/Feminist Theologies in Asia.” She outlined the historical development of Asian Feminist Theology (AFT) from its inception in the 1970’s till the present time. The argument that diversity marks AFT was seen throughout the paper, although the common realities pinned on patriarchy and its manifestations in various forms, were also pointed out. In the final analysis, she admitted that the challenge of AFT continues to be making theology holistic, inclusive, and transformative.

Conversation: The comments that arose from the paper were on addressing sexual harassment in the church, the need for easy accessibility of classic publications, and the feminine language of the church contra the reality of exclusively male leadership. She responded that the Church needs to be a church for all.

(v) Dr Yangkahao Vashum

The paper on the topic, *Struggle for Subjectivity: Struggles of Indigenous Communities with Mother Earth* by Dr Yangkahao (India) contained a descriptive picture of the indigenous people (IPs) of Northeast India (NEI). He described the IPs as people who maintain distinct identities and proximity with their native cultures and traditions; the “original/first” inhabitants who constitute the fourth world. He identified two unique features of the IPs in the NEI: first, they are majority Christians, and second, the region is endowed with a rich biodiversity landscape. However, he argued that the land is increasingly becoming an ecological hotspot. Thereby, he proposes the following measures:

- a. Resistance and networking to oppose any destructive activity.

- b. Partnership with other faiths is needed to tackle the issue collectively.
- c. Undertaking research work on ecological preservation as part of the church's missional task.

Conversations: A pertinent question was put forth regarding the adverse impact of foreign colonization on ecology. Inputs from the participants included the concern about indigenous land becoming a refuge for illegal migrants/immigrants. The issue of commoditizing native land was also seen as a major concern. Based on precedence, a participant highlighted the success of a "Service of Lament" on a contested land as a peaceful Christian protest to stop a construction project that would have harmed the environment and the people.

(vi) Dr Atola Longkumer

The online talk by Dr Atola (India) on "Women and Earth: An Indigenous Peoples' Perspective" claimed that IPs are people of the land, which are geographically located in the borderland and highlands and outside of the frame of world religions. What marks them apart? She pointed out heterogeneity in language and culture. She asserted that the common experience of 50% of the indigenous people, the women, is the triple discrimination by patriarchy within, Asian society, and the global economy. However, the paper also mentions that women are keepers of collective wisdom, practitioners of old ways in matters of cuisine, art/weaving etc.

Conversations: There were questions raised on the issues around church's resistance to indigenous cultures and the cultural influence on biblical hermeneutics. She reiterated the importance of literary documentation of the minutest resource and of reading the Bible *to* the context.

(vii) Dr Lizette Tapia Raquel

Continuing from the previous subject on *Women and Earth* Dr Lizette (Philippines) focused on the topic, *Of Women, Water, and Well: An Ecofeminist and Postcolonial Reading of John 4: 6-24*. She reminded that Jesus does a major crossing over to talk and hear the woman's voice at the well. The distinctiveness of the Jesus of Christendom and the Jesus of the Movement was made clear. Taking on a pre-colonial journey to Filipino context, she maintains that women were viewed with equal worth and power by the natives. The colonizers dismissed women's wisdom (v 24) and divine giftings as demonic, witchcraft, and paganistic, she argued. Likewise, the culture of women's hospitality was termed as 'prostitution' and sexual freedom was replaced by the glorification of virginity. The mutual relationality between men and women was turned into male superiority and female subjugation, she pointed out.

Conversations: Some of the questions raised and affirmed by the Presenter were on honoring the wisdom of Indigenous women, particularly in relation to earth care, working with traditional farmers to protect their land and enable them till it respectfully, redeeming liberative narratives, self-determining and not mimicking imperialist culture, and harnessing on traditional knowledge for environmental preservation.

(viii) Group Discussion

The members were divided into four groups according to discipline by training or interest. The guiding question was, “What are the unique features of Asian theological methodology?” The findings of each group were as follows.

- a. *Church Music*: The group held that music expresses more than words. They observed that Western theology is largely reflected in church music by the use of Western compositions. There should be persistent attempts to develop ethnocentric music and liturgy, they said.
- b. *Women*: Some features listed were – women’s experiences and stories, pre-colonial identity of women, postcolonial empowering voices, positive outcome between an egalitarian society and earth-care, reclaiming feminine symbols of power and life, critical thinking to challenge absolute patriarchal narratives.
- c. *Bible*: The team pointed out three elements in Asian reading of the Bible: diversity, culture, and dialogue.
- d. *Theology*: The group held that Asian theology was not about finding unique methodology because Asia is already pluralistic in nature and each context is unique. But they identified the following common features: holistic, communal, experiential, coloniality and centrality of land.

Conversations: The members, in general, asked how copyrighted materials can be made more accessible. There was a prophetic imagination of doing away with the copyright system so that knowledge can be freely shared and accessed even by and to the poor without it becoming the property of the rich nations and elite class. They also emphasized the importance of indigenous languages to change consciousness. Lastly, it was noted that Asian theology is practical and orthopathic (feeling oriented).

DAY THREE, OCTOBER 24, 2024 (THURSDAY)

(ix) *Dr Jin Kwan Kwon*

Bringing a different perspective to the event, Dr Jin Kwan (South Korea) gave an online presentation on *Doing Theology with the Margins: The Case of Minjung Theology (MT)*. The change in times has resulted in the change in the approach of MT, which is in its third generation, he opines. Taking on a subject-oriented reading, he argued for making MT dialogical and dialectical, including engaging with the struggles of the people today. He claimed that the three parts of Korean society are State (Political)-Capital (Economic)-Labor (People). Herein, the subjects are the laborers. He advocated for a symptomatic reading of the subjects, which deals with the *han* of the poor, the marginalized, and the exploited. *Han* must be overcome in the workplace itself. Transformation begins in and from the sites of the subjects, he asserted.

Conversations: Picking on statements like “Minjung churches are not active anymore,” the members sought for MT to be proactive so that real transformation can take place for the Korean people. The issue of Korean industries creating minjung in poor countries was discussed with much concern, and Korean minjung theologians must address minjung issues outside of Korea.

(x) *Dr Robin Dagle and Dr Raphael Yabut*

Dr. Dagle and Dr. Yabut (Philippines) together discussed the topic, “Theology with LGBTQAI+.” Dr Yabut dwelt on the theological methods of Queer Theology (QT) and described it as making spaces for the experiences of LGBTQAI+ in theology, transgressing boundaries, and decolonizing Asian QT. The crucial question in QT was on being a queer and a person of faith at the same time, he said. Dr Dagle approached the topic from social sciences for queer theologizing and proposed three ways of liberating queer people.

- a. Personal experiences – paying attention to the “obvious contradictions” and immense identity crises.
- b. Prayer and aspirations – involving them in community faith life and ministry, which positively impacts their lives.
- c. Pressing needs – providing supportive, accessible, and equitable healthcare for the wellbeing of the queer community.

Conversations: The subject of interest revolved around grappling with heteronormative creation narratives in the Bible and the extent of making spaces for the queer community. The appeal was to consider the performative and the expansive dimension around the question of gender and sexuality and not the ontological aspect.

(xi) *Dr Wati Longchar*

The final presentation of the day by Dr Wati (FTEAP) on *Doing Theology with the Margins: Persons with Disabilities* started by asking, “Can the dry bones (marginals) come back to life?” Yes, if we go and build solidarity with them, he argued. Taking a Christological clue, he portrayed Jesus as a marginal, born in the margins, and whose nativity message was announced to the marginals. He asserted that the Good News (Luke 2: 10) starts from the margin, and God continues to take sides with the marginalized disabled, who form 12-15% of the world’s population. Citing Charles Kammer and James Cone, he agreed that all systems must be judged by the effect on the marginalized and victims of power. The conclusions can be summed up into three.

- a. All people reflect the image of God,
- b. Disabled people are sanctified by God,
- c. In Jesus’ order the margin is made the center.

Conversations: Taking the conversation in a general direction, the theme of *imago dei* evoked the question of how an ontological value can also result in totalitarian powers that oppress people. Further, AI’s ability to process information autonomously was discussed as a reality that challenges long-held ideas about human creation in the divine image. Circling back to the subject of disability, the point was made that disabled people have much to contribute to theology through their experiences and faith-articulations.

DAY FOUR, OCTOBER 25, 2024

(xii) *Dr Revelation Velunta*

The presentation of Dr Velunta (Philippines), “Reading the Bible with the 70%: Reading the Bible from the Margins” dwelt on the margin-centered reading of the parable of the talents in Matthew

25: 14ff. He argued that parables are “subversive speech” and that Jesus’ parables disclosed structures of empire, evil and greed of his time. He maintained that the third slave was the “whistle blower” who said ‘No’ to the oppressive system. He asserted that God’s reign breaks through via the struggles of the oppressed and marginalized.

Conversations: One of the queries of interest was, “How to view the two slaves who made multiple-fold profit for the master?” The response was to recognize that there are many ways of interpreting the same text but that the need to do so from the margins was necessary. Thus, the third slave should not be demonized. The master is not a symbol of God. They are what they are. The slaves are who they are. Those were his paraphrased statements.

(xiii) Ms Myra Patrocenio

In the paper, “Who were you when I established the Foundations of the Earth? Analyzing the Ecological Dimension of Job 38-42 in the light of Genesis 2:15,” Patrocenio (Philippines) critiqued the anthropocentric view of ecology that places humans at the pedestal of dominion and control over nature. She asserts that the appearance of God Job is not calm or peaceful. God is sovereign, and the presence of the living Spirit in all life forms is to be acknowledged, as evident in the text.

Conversations: The practical measures for environmental care, like garbage disposal, waste segregation, and use of disposables, were largely discussed. An important point was to ask if doing theology from the margins is translated or applied to the margins – including nature. The word of caution was not to become an ‘empire’ ourselves.

(xiv) Dr Francis Samdao

The paper of Dr Samdao (Philippines) titled, “Reconstructing some Christian Beliefs from the Perspective of the Margins: A Reflection on Bontoc Ato Traditions,” interrogated biblical ideas alongside indigenous sources and heritages. He pointed out that the *Ato* (boys’ dormitory) is a religious and political center of education. It is characterized by a rich tradition that includes learning rituals and traditional ways of thinking and practicing, which have great relevance for Christians today.

Conversations: The question about the inclusion of women in such male-exclusive institutions that perpetuate patriarchy was raised as a concern. The response was that women constitute a layer of marginality. In the *Ato* today, female elders are given access to inspect the dorm, but it remains largely a male domain.

(xv) Panel Presentations

A panel from among the delegates delivered talks on the following areas –

- a. Mr Franz and Mr Klein (Philippines) spoke on the “Development and Struggles of Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Philippine Independent Church)” which was founded in 1902, after breaking away from the Catholic Church. Mr Klein listed a couple of original songs by Rev Fr Samuel Galubra that reflect a theology of freedom and nationalism of the mass.

- b. Ms Seng Tawng (Myanmar) highlighted the present realities of uncertainty, constant surveillance by the military junta and its agents, marginalization due to ethnic identities, and the challenge to do theology from the margins of Myanmar.
- c. Mr Ismail Ringgi (Indonesia) spoke on “Reinterpreting the *Tongkonan* as Mother”. *Tongkonan* refers to the family bond symbolized by a traditional house. As a mother, it is the source of life, providing for the needs of the people, teaching morality and folk values, and guiding in matters of faith. The role and status of both genders in the “house” is egalitarian and there must also be equal access to opportunities and freedom of choice, he added.

Conversations: The members expressed that gender equality in Toraja tradition involving the *Tongkonan* is important to affirm because structural inequalities are barriers to gender equality.

4. Evaluation of the Conference

The event evaluation session was guided by the Founding Trio: Dr Huang Po, Dr MP Joseph, and Dr Wati Longchar. They had these remarks to make.

- i. Being a Movement the AFTM offers –
 - Possibility to critically analyze the issues and to ask how theology can be done for those who are suffering.
 - Advocate for critical space for dialogue even with the issues related to the denominational churches.
- ii. We can be enslaved by the theological resources of those who control us. There is a need to identify resources/sources from Asia so that struggling people will find meaningful expression in our theologies.
- iii. The cultures and religions of the people ought to become an integral part of Asian theologizing.
- iv. Theology must “move” and dynamically engage with the context to go forward.
- v. Seminary education should not be confined to imparting a system of knowledge, but we must participate in “doing,” which includes preaching and teaching, so that the Christian message can become relevant and the reign of God can be realized in our midst.
- vi. Several theological movements in Asia have either lost their vigor or changed their organizational structure to become an institutionalized body. AFTM is called to be an alternative voice of the people representing the marginalized.

What next for AFTM? These were the pointers –

- i. Continue the same topic of conversation emphasizing the reconstruction of Christian faith from the margins.
- ii. Give an open call for papers.
- iii. Have a strong theological document that reflects the distinct theological voices from the margins.
- iv. Create a presence in the digital spaces.
- v. Possibly hold two conferences next year in two locations for wider reach.

Topics of concern? The participants raised some important areas of inquiry for future consideration

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- i. Where is the church in doing theology from the margins?
- ii. How can the pastors/priests and church leaders be brought into the conversation since they are the ones who attend and nurture the grassroots people in their care?
- iii. Can the global experiences of the people who are not from or in Asia but are equally marginalized, like those in the diaspora or immigrants/migrants, be integrated into the conversation?
- iv. Since the issue of climate change aggravates the reality of marginalization, it needs greater attention.

5. Acknowledgements

The participants expressed their gratitude to –

- i. The Founding Trio for the initiative in bringing Asian theological teachers together for a meaningful interaction, insightful plan of engagements, and purposeful fellowship among fellow colleagues. They admitted that their theologies from the seminary days have been “refreshed” and are moved to know and do more about theologies done in the church, especially focused on the margins.
- ii. Saint Andrew’s Theological Seminary for organizing and hosting the Conference with generosity and attention to detail.
- iii. FTEAP and EMW whose bountiful giving made the conference possible. Their commitment to supporting the empowering process of the margins was appreciated.

6. Closing Act

The closing service was led by SATS, which included indigenous music, prayers, the lighting of candles, and the reading of transformative texts. The delegates were all awarded certificates of participation. With that, the first conference of AFTM ended with thankfulness to God.

7. Cultural Program

An evening of cultural performances was staged by the SATS students much to the delight of the delegates. The participants appreciated the gesture of warmth and Filipino hospitality.
