

Towards an Ecumenical Missiology

Biehl/Hopp/Jahnel/Kisskalt
Stahl/Vellguth (Eds.)

Witnessing Christ

Contextual and Interconfessional
Perspectives on Christology



Kohlhammer

Michel Biehl/Traugott Hopp/Claudia Jahnelt/
Michael Kisskalt/Hanna Stahl/Klaus Vellguth (Eds.)

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The Theopoetics of the Cross

Trauma and Poetic Witnessing from an Asian Feminist Perspective

Septemmy E. Lakawa

This presentation revisits Asian approaches to Christology by highlighting the centrality of the cross and the urgency of finding proper Christological forms in response to the changing contours of global (Asian) Christianity marked by the trauma of violence, war, and terror. Instead of describing the Asian Christological landscape in detail, I offer a brief sketch by highlighting the centrality of the cross, contextual hermeneutics, and art in Asian Christological approaches. This essay looks at Asian approaches to Christology from a feminist missiological perspective by connecting the concepts of witnessing and trauma.

Using Rebecca S. Chopp's concept of the "poetics of testimony"¹ and also Shelly Rambo's concept of the "theopoetics of trauma"², I complexify the notion of the cross by offering a perspective on the *theopoetics of the cross* - a theological aesthetic view of the cross as a site of ongoing and unsayable suffering - and a rethinking of Christian witnessing as *poetic witnessing* that centers on the role of the arts. I emphasize the questions of "truth" and the "othering of wounded voices" as crucial in reimagining the centrality of the cross in Asian Christological approach. The interconnection of the cross, witnessing trauma, and art in this essay points toward an aesthetic turn in Asian ecumenical missiology.

A Sketch of Asian Approaches to Christology

This part of my presentation sketches Asian christological approaches by outlining three themes: *theologia crucis*, contextual hermeneutics, and Asian Christian art.

¹ Chopp, Rebecca S., "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony", in: *Criterion* 3 (1998), 6.

² Rambo, Shelly, "Theopoetics of Trauma," in: Boynton, Eric/Capretto, Peter (ed.), *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory*, New York 2018, 223.

Theologia Crucis

Andreas A. Yewangoe, identified the cross as a potent symbol of Asian contextual theology, with multireligiosity and poverty seen as the standard identifiers of Asian contexts.³ Christ the suffering servant has been a central metaphor in Asian churches' responses to socio-economic and political injustice. The image of the suffering servant is expressed in multiple narratives, e. g., *the pain of God* (Kazoh Kitamori), *the three-mile-an-hour God* (Kosuke Koyama), *the compassionate God* (Choan Seng Song), and *Asian theology of liberation* (Aloysius Pieris). Furthermore, the image manifests in collective narratives of marginalization and resistance for justice, e. g., the Minjung Christ (Korea) and the Dalit Christ (India).

A cross-oriented Christology, however, overlooks Asian women's experiences of suffering and struggle. The early phase of Asian feminist theology is marked by the publication by Indonesian theologian Marianne Katoppo's *Compassionate and Free* in 1978 and of the first Asian feminist theological journal, *In God's Image*, that claim that Asian women's experiences and struggles for justice are authentic theological sources. Asian feminist theologians have critically problematized the centrality of the cross – and of other Christian symbols – by unveiling and questioning the influence of patriarchal thinking on Asian theology. They complexify the two previous Asian theology markers – multireligiosity and poverty – by adding “women” and “spirituality” to the earlier Asian contextual theology landscape. As a result, Asian Christological approaches have become more complex. Asian feminist theologians and Roman Catholic theologians also reclaim the relevance of Mary, as a symbol of courage, resistance, and the spirituality of liberation as well as contextual worship and liturgy in the Asian theological landscape. The works of Mary John Mananzan, Virginia Fabella, Chung Hyun Kyung, Aruna Gnanadason, Kwok Pui-lan, and the next generation of Asian theologians have added to this complexity by highlighting significant nuances in Asian Christologies, namely, creation-centered mission, feminist pneumatology, eco-feminist theology, postcolonial theology and mission and ecumenism.

Although this recent development of Asian Christologies unveils complex theological themes and methodologies, the social justice-oriented approach maintains the Christ-oriented mission. Evangelism and social justice remain interlinked.

³ Yewangoe, Andreas A., *Theologia Crucis in Asia*, Amsterdam 1987.

Contextual Hermeneutics

In the late 1980s until early 2000, the Christian Conference of Asia ran a program titled *Reading the Bible with New Eyes*. Its contextual Christological hermeneutics brought the Asian narratives of injustice, poverty, religiosities, and spiritualities into dialogue with the Bible, highlighting the image of Christ as the “fellow sufferer.” The rereading of the Bible from the perspectives of the poor and the marginalized maintained the centrality of the cross.

This process identified two contested Christological problems – syncretism and religious pluralism. Chung Hyun Kyung, in her book *Struggle to Be the Sun Again* (1991), responded to these interconnected problems by redefining syncretism as a necessary dimension in Asian contextual theology and by offering a model of liberating spirituality. Asian theologians have also identified the problem of Christ-centered mission in the context of Asian multiculturalism; for example, C. S. Song’s creation-centered mission responds to the challenges of Asian multireligiosity and Peter Phan’s concept of *being religious as being interreligious* highlights the embeddedness of Asian Christianity in Asian religiosities. Asian women’s interreligious cooperation has also inspired the construction of Asian feminist theological reflections that rethink Christ as an inclusive symbol.

Asian Christian Art

Art plays an essential part in Asian Christology. In 1993, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia published a collection of paintings by Indonesian Christian artists entitled *Many Faces of Christian Art in Indonesia*. It predominantly consists of pictures related to crucifixion narratives.

The works of Asian Christian painters such as Soichi Watanabe (Japan), Nalini Jayasuriya (Sri Lanka), He Qi (Taiwan), Hanna Varghese (Malaysia), Emmanuel Garibay (the Philippines), and Wisnu Sasongko (Indonesia) reflect the complex dimensions of Asian imaginations of the crucifixion. Their works depict aesthetic dimensions of the cross while focusing on the questions of suffering, injustice, and hope. Garibay stated this interconnection powerfully: “It is the richness of the poor that I am drawn to and which I am a part of, that I want to impart.”⁴ These Asian artists offer valuable insights on the importance of art in the Asian Christological landscape.

⁴ As quoted in “2010–2011 Artist: Emmanuel Garibay,” Overseas Ministry Study Center, <https://www.omsc.org/artistgaribay> (20.07.2020).

A Narrative of Rupture

The Asian aesthetic turn in missiology requires looking again at the definition of suffering that is embedded in Asian Christologies, as sketched above. As a theological category, suffering is often taken for granted as something obvious, quantifiable, and measurable. Theology has multiple definitions of suffering and by implication claims the sufficiency of theology as a grammar of suffering. Susan J. Brison's narrative of the aftermath of violence, however, ruptures such a claim, especially regarding the failure of philosophy to provide a relevant grammar for naming her traumatic memory.

Ten years ago, a few months after I had survived a nearly fatal sexual assault and attempted murder in the south of France, I sat down at my computer to write about it for the first time and all I could come up with was a list of paradoxes ... I turned to philosophy for meaning and consolation and could find neither. I couldn't explain what had happened to me ... As a philosopher, I was used to taking something apparently obvious and familiar – the nature of time, say, or the relation between words and things – and making it into something quite puzzling and strange. But now, when I was confronted with the utterly strange and paradoxical, philosophy was of no use in making me feel at home in the world ... At the time I did not yet know how trauma not only haunts the conscious and unconscious mind but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event. I didn't know that the worst – the unimaginably painful aftermath of violence – was yet to come.⁵

Brison's story – what I call a narrative of rupture – shakes the certainty of theology in the face of trauma. Trauma unveils the unfamiliar dimension of human suffering that has been neglected in theology. Trauma further points towards the emergence of layers of unheard voices of suffering that rupture the primacy of words in theology because trauma requires a different grammar – a grammar of wounded voices. In the face of trauma, language falter. As I stated in a previous work,

Trauma ruptures a theology that defines Christian witnessing as a practice of claiming the truth. It challenges the primacy of word, of verbal communication, in the Christian witnessing practice. Trauma reveals a different language of witnessing – the unsayable, the language of silence, the language of the wound. This is the language that has been abandoned in the mission and evangelism discourse ... Our understanding of mission and evangelism has often been shaped by our one-sided emphasis on the sayability, the translatability of the Christian message.⁶

⁵ Brison, Susan J., *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2002, ix–x.

⁶ Lakawa, Septemmy E., "Teaching Trauma and Theology Inspires Lives of Witnessing Discipleship: Theological Education as Missional Formation," in: *International Review of Mission* 107 (2018), 338.

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound.”⁷ She states, “Trauma [...] is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language”⁸.

Trauma contests any theological claims of truth as containable, intelligible, and comprehensible. As a result, it challenges the claim of the translatability of the Christian message. When the function of theology is to witness to the belatedness of truth, to the unavailability of the truth that yearns to be communicated, then theology must embrace different forms in testifying to the truth. Gesturing towards the experience of loss, Judith Butler alludes to the difficulty of witnessing to the truth that is not available yet continues to rupture our theology. She states, “Somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it [...] a loss that cannot be recovered or recuperated but that leaves its enigmatic traces. And then there is something else that one cannot ‘get over’, one cannot ‘work through’, which is the deliberate act of violence against collectivity, humans who have been rendered anonymous for violence and whose death recapitulates anonymity for memory”⁹.

Shelly Rambo defines trauma as “suffering that does not go away.”¹⁰ Her definition reveals the theological character of trauma that reorients the Christian discourse on suffering and its implications for Christian witness. Witnessing to trauma—which Rambo also defines as “the suffering that remains”¹¹ – implies that Christian witness will bear the traces of the suffering that does not go away. Furthermore, Caruth’s definition of trauma requires a different theological response to a belated truth. In the face of trauma, Rambo, drawing on Mark Jordan, insists that theology must exercise a different gesture towards truth – to point towards truth rather than to claim to contain it.¹²

Narratives of rupture – stories of trauma that are embedded in the experiences of survivors, in histories of violence, and in the complex intertwining of individual and collective traumas – challenge the Asian Christological imagination. Reimagining Christology from the site of trauma requires attentiveness to the inarticulation of human “suffering that remains” amidst our daily life. Relooking at the cross as the site of trauma entails the

⁷ Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore 1996, 2–3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ Butler, Judith, “Afterword: After Loss, What Then?” in: Eng, David L./Kazanjian, David (eds.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley 2003, 467–468.

¹⁰ Rambo, Shelly, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Louisville 2010, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Rambo, Shelly, “Theopoetics of Trauma,” *op. cit.* 228.

reimagination of the cross as a symbol of broken healing. Serene Jones offers three “crucified imaginings” – the alluring cross, the mirrored cross, the unending cross¹³ – that are embedded in the traumatic experiences of women survivors of violence. Her depiction allows a trauma-based perspective to complexify the redemptive notion of the cross by allowing the voice of the wound to be heard without exalting violence. She asks, “How do we make theological sense of what happened on the cross in a way that speaks to the experience of traumatized victims without glorifying violence?”¹⁴ Narratives of trauma survivors rupture the redemptive notion of the cross without minimizing the embodied horror of violence. Asking from a different angle, Brison’s question challenges our theological claim and confidence in responding to the reality of trauma in our everyday life. She asks, “How can we speak about the unspeakable without attempting to render it intelligible and sayable?”¹⁵

The Wounded Cross: The Voice, the Breath, and the Body

The theo-poetics of the cross is a dimension of the search for language that is relevant for our traumatic world of today. It is embedded in a mission metaphor of breath-event¹⁶ that reiterates the failure of words to narrate humans’ experience of trauma and emphasizes how trauma affects the human capacity to witness – *to give words* – to the possibility of life and love in the aftermath of violence, war, disaster, and terror. Trauma reveals the human capacity to witness – *to give breath* – to the possibility of life when words fail to grasp the enormity of a trauma and when humans lose the ability to live and to love. The following stories mirror the theo-poetics of the cross and its challenges to Christian witnessing.

Rev. Meis Mahura is a female minister with the Protestant Evangelical Church in Halmahera.¹⁷ She is a survivor of the Muslim-Christian communal violence that took place from December 1999 to June 2000 in her region. Her story began one afternoon at Tanjung Barnabas (Barnabas Cape) when Muslim and Christian groups were preparing for a close-range attack. She heard about it and decided, despite fearing for her own life, to go to the battlefield. There she stood, wearing her ministerial robe, and she drew a line between the two

¹³ Jones, Serene, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Louisville, KY, 2009, 69-98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵ Brison, Susan J., *Aftermath*, op. cit. xi.

¹⁶ In my dissertation, I discussed the image of “mission as breathing,” introduced by Dana L. Robert during our discussion of my draft, as breathing in and breathing out in conversation with John 20:22. Lakawa, Septemmy E., *Risky Hospitality: Mission in the Aftermath of Religious Communal Violence in Indonesia* (Th.D diss.), Boston 2011, 471.

¹⁷ The full version of her story may be found in *ibid.*, 186-188.

forces and shouted: “Whoever dares to cross this line will die.” She was inspired by the gospel story where Jesus drew something on the ground. Although she did not stop the brief but deadly conflict in her region, she successfully prevented the violence between these two religious forces. After the battle in June 2000, she stored her robe in her cupboard. The bullet hole in her gown reminds her of the Barnabas Cape event and the trauma that she carries with her. She said that she will not wear her robe again until the day of her passing.

In July 2017 I met two young women, Dortia and Yuli Benu, during a workshop where I presented a topic titled “Writing Trauma, Witnessing Trauma” in Kupang, the capital of East Nusa Tenggara, the Indonesian province with the highest rate of migration and human trafficking, particularly to Malaysia. When asked to express their experiences, the two women wrote and then shared their poems.

Dortia, a migrant worker, had survived the brutality of her master in Malaysia. Her body embodies the unspeakability of her traumatic experience, which is mirrored in a line of her poem – “To live without justice, to die without justice.”¹⁸ Her poem poignantly reminds me of the failure of theology in listening to the voice of the wound that redefines justice in regard not only to the dignity of life but also the need for a dignified death – to die justly.

Yuli Benu, a bachelor of theology graduate, wrote a poem as a testimony to her advocacy work for survivors of human trafficking in her region and her trauma as a witness to the tragic social reality.¹⁹

We are just corpses
Without a clear identity
Without clear address
Without clear home
Where will we go?

We are just corpses
Wasted from this land
Being questioned about our status
Legal or illegal?
Should we answer?

¹⁸ I translated and included her poem in my paper “Journeying Together: Mission as Embodying the Spirituality of the Cross,” in: Chunakara, Mathews George (ed.), *Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia: Asia Mission Conference 2017 Report*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2018, 85.

¹⁹ I translated and included her poem in my paper “Journeying Together,” *ibid.*, 86

We are just corpses
 That resist every form of oppression
 But what power do we have?
 We scream out loud, "Help!"
 But why aren't our lips moving?

Friends, let me whisper in the silence
 There are still many sisters and brothers like us
 In the neighboring countries, the lands said to be prosperous
 But, they are filled with tears and sorrow
 We are just corpses [...]

These stories reflect the intersectionality of voice, breath, and body as the dimensions of the theo-poetics of the cross as it is embedded in the narratives of trauma. They reflect the layers of uncontainable truths and the othering of wounded voices in many Christological discourses today. They signal the importance of rethinking Christian witnessing as a practice of listening, embracing, breathing, holding, releasing, and pointing towards the truth that rejects the Christian (and many other religions') claim of containing the truth.

Poetic Witnessing

An *aesthetic turn* characterizes the theo-poetics of the cross. Edward Farley states that "a theological aesthetics seeks to understand the place of the arts in the religious community."²⁰ The late Eka Darmaputera, a leading Indonesian contextual theologian, states, "Art not only enables us to see what we see, with precision but also enables us to participate in what we see. Through art we see the unseeable. The transcendent becomes immanent. Or, to be more precise, that which is immanent has a transcendental dimension. It is at this point that art and religion merge. Theology becomes an artistic experience, and art becomes a theological expression."²¹

Poetic witnessing is an appropriate theological form that relies on the capacity of art to communicate the unsayable. Rebecca S. Chopp, a pioneer in developing a constructive theological response to trauma, offered the concept of a "poetics of testimony" - discourses that speak to the unsayability of trauma and the voices of the marginalized who have not been authorized to speak.²² She ascribes these discourses to art, poetry, novels—to forms that reclaim the

²⁰ Farley, Edward, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetics*, New York 2001, 117.

²¹ Darmaputera, Eka, "Works of Art as Theological Expression," in: *Many Faces of Christian Art in Indonesia*, Jakarta 1993, 5.

²² Chopp, Rebecca S., "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony", op. cit. 6.

voices of the witnesses to the unspeakable that had previously been considered insignificant.

Peter Levine argues that “trauma is not, will not, and can never be fully healed until we also address the essential role played by the body.”²³ Levine emphasizes the very basic notion of using trauma as a theological lens because it reminds us of the importance of the human body in Christian theology. Trauma studies challenges any theology that relegates the body into a secondary realm as insignificant. The theopoetics of the cross reclaims the body as a site of trauma that speaks the unsayable and requires a different theological form.

In my previous work, I used Chopp’s poetics of testimony to identify “a language and a form of Christian witness in the aftermath of religious communal violence.”²⁴ Naming “experiences of trauma” as “the heart of theological matters,” Shelly Rambo unravels the urgency of “attending to form in theology,” which she calls a “theopoetics of trauma,”²⁵ as a relevant theological form that responds to the complexity of trauma.²⁶ Rambo further asserts that finding a “corresponding form that counts as theology” is crucial.²⁷ Reclaiming testimony as an appropriate theological form in the context of trauma requires a reorientation of testimony as an individual and collective, personal and public, and complex form of Christian witnessing

Using Rambo’s concept of the *middle space*, the place in between the crucifixion and the resurrection, the site of the witnessing Spirit, I refer to poetic witnessing as a practice and discourse of belatedness, a gap, a space in between “a radical end and a mysterious beginning.”²⁸ It is a witnessing to “Spirit, to a love that survives and remains not in victory but in weariness.”²⁹ Poetic witnessing becomes an authoritative theological form of Christian witnessing, one that takes unfamiliar form. The questions become, what happens to the Christian understanding and practice of witnessing in the face of trauma when the human capacity for speaking, for narrating the wounds, has disappeared? It is crucial to find an alternative way to narrate wounds while recognizing the limits, even the failure, of words to describe how trauma affects the human capacity to speak. Trauma poses challenges not only to the centrality of spoken testimony in the Christian understanding of proclamation but also to the dominance of word, of logic, of rationality in theological discourse.

²³ Peter A. Levine, *Waking the Tiger-Healing Trauma*, Berkeley, CA, 1997, 3.

²⁴ Lakawa, Septemmy, *Risky Hospitality*, op. cit. 357.

²⁵ Rambo, Shelly, “Theopoetics of Trauma,” op. cit. 225.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁸ Rambo, Shelly, *Spirit and Trauma*, op. cit. 74.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

Poetic witnessing complexifies the centrality of the cross in Asian Christologies. It reclaims the place of art in testifying to the emergence of new language, a “language of the unsayable”³⁰ that comes through the wounds, through the body that remembers the trauma of war, violence, and terror; it is the language of the breath that is given to the disciples in the aftermath of the cross (John 20:22). Poetic witnessing complexifies the centrality of the cross in Asian Christologies by reimagining the cross as a symbol of “the suffering that remains” - the remaining that calls forth a different posture of witnessing. It is a posture of embracing while releasing, bending down while refusing to give up, listening to the unsayable that comes from the body that remembers the violence, of holding the gap in between the breathing in and then breathing out, of holding life in the aftermath. This is the posture of a community of dancers - an image of poetic witnessing. This is reflected in the painting below by my former student at Jakarta Theological Seminary, Lukas Eko Budiono.



Figure 1. Painting of a circle dance of healing by Lukas Eko Budiono (used with permission).³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Budiono, Lukas Eko, “A Community of Dancers—An Image of Poetic Witnessing.” Ink Drawing, Lampung, Indonesia 2019.

Budiono's painting is of a circle dance of healing, a *perichoretic dance*, that imagines a journey of witnessing the possibility of healing as an open, fluid, creative, improvised, and humble process. It is a Christological imagination that is embedded in the image of *missio Dei*, a Trinitarian perspective of mission as God's mission. The painting mirrors the empty circle space and the space in between each dancer that connects them without violating their own space where they express beauty, wounds, uncertainty, vulnerability, and resilience for life amidst death. The circle represents the witnessing Spirit that embraces "the remaining suffering" that is woven into the persistence of love and life in a bond of mystery, in a movement that encircles, embraces, releases, fulfills, and empties in silence and in words and in visibility and in invisibility.

This dance of poetic witnessing offers a theological imagination that responds to the questions of "truth claiming" and "the othering of wounded voices," which shape not only the global reality today but also the discourse and practice of ecumenism. The movement is about not only the journey but also the circle, the fellowship, of witnesses that challenges the power struggles over truth-claiming and the marginalization of the most vulnerable of God's creation. It is a journey of "the accompanying of another ... [to] listen and care ... [and become] compassionate witnesses to others, in the hopes that in doing so we help hate [ignorance, injustice, and fear] go."³² It is a journey of wounded voices that signal the different understanding of truth – a journey of healing wounds. This imagination points to the hope for life in the aftermath. This image may be viewed as a pilgrimage of broken healing.

³² Weingarten, Kaethe, *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Every Day: How We Are Harmed, How We Can Heal*, New York 2004, 156.