

GRASSROOTS THEOLOGY IN THE PHILIPPINES AS A THIRD WAY BEYOND PENTECOSTAL AND LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to conduct a critical evaluation of the theological claims made in Simon Chan's book entitled *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (2014). Chan argues Asian liberation theologians became elitist because they failed to take seriously the ethnographic concerns (personal healing, freedom from debt, and deliverance from evil spirits) of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. In *Grassroots Asian Theology* Chan addresses the subject intensively and, in contrast to the Asian liberationists, proposes the notion of "ecclesial experience" as a concrete expression of grassroots Asian theology. Ecclesial experience, as Chan further argues, reflects and is derived from the lived experiences of the people of God. In other words, an authentic formulation of grassroots Asian theology requires cooperation between the lay person and the theologian. Firstly, this researcher attempts an exposition of several concepts that Chan repeatedly uses: grassroots Asian theology, ecclesial experience, and cultural experience. However, the difference between grassroots Asian theologies (Pentecostalism/Charismatic movements) and elite theologies (Asian liberation theologies) appears to be the central motif of Chan's book. In the end, the researcher critically evaluates the accuracy and relevance of Chan's concept of grassroots Asian theology.

Introduction

Most Filipinos consider religion a central part of their lives. For instance, the 2017 Social Weather Survey (first quarter) reports that 48 percent of Filipino adults attend religious services weekly and 85 percent say religion is important (Santos and Marchadesch 2017). Filipino theologians observe that religious Filipinos are incarnational in the way they express and practice their Christian faith, particularly in the public space. The Feast of the Black Nazarene, for example, shows how Filipinos are demonstratively religious, as the theologians attest (Mercado 1982, 3-17). The Black Nazarene statue of Quiapo Manila symbolizes the suffering and persistence of Jesus Christ under the persecution of the Roman Empire. Devotees of the Filipino Black Nazarene find ways to identify with the suffering and resilience of Christ in the hardship of their own lives. Although there have been disagreements among Filipino Roman Catholic priests and theologians, this religious feast still draws millions of Filipino devotees each year, including young Filipinos. According to the Catholic organizers, between 2011 and 2015 about 6 to 12 million people attended the January event, reflecting an annual growth rate of 20 percent (Umbao 2017). During the procession, millions of Filipinos pack the streets of Manila, trying to get close to and touch the black statue of Christ for healing, forgiveness, and blessing. For Filipino devotees, this is a unique



way of displaying their Christian faith in the public sphere. However, a young Filipino Christian writer and activist, Rei Lemuel Crizaldo, makes the following point: “We have to wake ourselves to the reality that we do not have doctrinal articulations for the most practical concerns of life and not even for the most fundamental aspects of our being a Filipino living in this corner of the world (Crizaldo 2016).” For Crizaldo, Filipino contextual theologies need to be informed by reality on the ground, specifically public issues in the context of this multi-religious-ethnic-linguistic society.

If we acknowledge this, the need for a grassroots theology becomes more crucial as religious Filipinos search for a truly Filipino faith-based understanding of Philippine political, psychological, and cultural/religious problems. Following the 2016 national election, the newly elected Philippine government made various promises of political and economic reforms. With high hopes for the new government, most Filipinos expect that Duterte’s administration will bring a new period of great change. Nevertheless, there will always be challenges. Certainly, political-economic changes will affect Filipino’s lives, particularly the poor and marginalized populations. It is thus imperative that the Philippine church interacts with the concrete life issues of poor and marginalized Filipinos.

Inculturation is an effective way of communicating the gospel to the culture that is addressed. However, inculturating or contextualizing the gospel is a slow and ongoing process in the Philippine context. Virginia Fabella, a Filipino feminist scholar and religious activist, reiterates that inculturation is slow among Filipino theologians, local faithful communities, and marginalized groups (Fabella 1999, 118-128). She nevertheless sees the move towards contextual Filipino theologies as an essential part of communicating the liberating gospel of Christ to the Filipino people, especially to marginalized youth and women. Simply put, Filipino professional theologians and lay people need to understand and interpret God’s acts, and help suffering Filipinos in their daily struggles to transform their dire situation in accordance with God’s vision for his kingdom.

Today, poverty is one of the most malign social problems in the Philippines. According to a National Statistics Office 2015 report, “More than 26 million Filipino remain poor with almost half, or a little more than 12 million, living in extreme poverty and lacking the means to feed themselves” (Yap 2016). In December 2, 2017, the Social Weather Station survey showed that the number of Filipino families who consider themselves poor has risen to 10.9M (Cepada 2017). In consequence, conditions of poverty and inequitable distribution of wealth in Philippine society remains a major concern of contemporary Filipino theologians. In response, liberation theology has become a popular theological approach for dealing with poverty and wealth distribution. Dominador Bombongan Jr., a Catholic Filipino theologian, argues, for example: “Responding to poverty related issues is usually the bread and butter of liberation theologians if not their *raison d’être*. Liberation theologians take the cause of the poor not because it is a fashionable thing to do but because it is what they are called to do as a source of engagement” (Bombongan 2008, 9-34).

For Bombongan, “the preferential option for the poor” is one of the central tenets ensuring liberation theology remains relevant today, particularly in the Philippine context. Furthermore, Filipino liberationists see their role as prophetic, denounce all forms of social injustice, and proclaim a vision of shalom (Tanganan 2007, 13-55). Yet it seems that this theological enterprise does not appeal to marginalized Filipinos. For some informed Filipinos, the politicization of Christian faith is disagreeable and raises too many questions. For instance, Filipino liberation theology appears to be a disguised ideology. Others express the suspicion and paranoia that the gospel of Christ (salvation history) will be reduced to political-economic liberation (Tanganan 2007, 23).

Alongside Filipino liberationist movements, the emergence of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements in the Philippines has had a marked effect on the Philippine theological landscape and established religious institutions (Pew Research Center 2006). From 1920 to 1929, Pentecostal/Charismatic movements transformed many Filipino local Christian communities, especially the mainline Protestant churches (Lumahan 2005, 331-344). According to Conrado Lumahan, “with the growth of Pentecostalism in the United States and Hawaii, baptized Filipino

Pentecostal returnees started their pioneering works in the Philippines” (Ibid.). Lumahan further states:

Although the Philippines AG (Assembly of God) was basically a religion started by the balikbayan (returnees from overseas), missionaries through the years have significantly contributed to the growth and expansion of the AG. They have been instrumental in organizing the PGCAG, establishing Bible schools, training and equipping nationals, supporting Bible school students, financing the planting of churches, church building, buying Bible colleges’ vehicles through the Speed the Light funds, the digging of wells, fishponds, piggery, poultry projects and others. Now from many countries, missionaries have also conducted indoor and outdoor crusades that have resulted in the establishment of many congregations. (Lumahan 2005, 344)

Lumahan suggests the proliferation of various Bible schools, and indoor and outdoor crusades become the major drivers behind the rapid expansion of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements in the Philippines. Likewise, Julie C. Ma and Wonsuk Ma, Korean Pentecostal missionaries in the Philippines for twelve years, contend, “The church has a dream of reaching people not only nationwide, but worldwide and establishing a global outreach...the first [step] is extensive Bible studies at home, offices, and communities” (Ma and Ma 2010, 135-137).

Putting the brief overview of Filipino liberation and Pentecostal movements side-by-side, it seems that Filipino liberationists have been preoccupied only with social and political change, while Pentecostal churches have been focused only on ethnographic concerns (personal healing, personal debt, and deliverance from evils spirit), numerical growth, and church planting in the Philippines. However, one of the most challenging recent theological discourses is the attempt to integrate these two theological systems. Simon Chan, for example, criticizes Asian liberationists for tending to ignore the reality on the ground. Chan argues that Asian liberationists should appreciate Asian Pentecostals for taking the ethnographic concerns of poor people seriously. Below I consider how Chan applies various descriptions, contrasts, and comparisons between these two most influential religious movements in his book, *Grassroots Asian Theology* (2014). However, I also evaluate and critique Chan’s sharp distinction between Asian liberationist and Pentecostal/Charismatic movements in light of relevant articles from Filipino theologians, namely, Edicio De La Torre, Karl Gaspar, Eleazar Fernandez, Doreen A. Benavidez, Joseph Suico, and Wonsuk Ma.

Simon Chan: Brief Biography and Works

Simon Chan is former Earnest Lau Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. He has recently gained widespread popularity among Southeast Asian scholars for his strong criticism of Asian liberation theologies. In 1986, he earned a doctoral degree with a specialisation in Historical Theology at the University of Cambridge, UK. Chan is an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God and has written several books: *Man and Sin* (1994), *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (1998), *Liturgy Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (2006), *Pentecostal Ecclesiology: An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (2011), and *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (2011). These works locate the emergence of Pentecostal spirituality as the focus of all the issues of liturgy and ecclesiology that preoccupy him. Many of the ideas about Pentecostal theology are advanced by Chan in *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (2014), in which he puts forward his main criticisms of Asian liberation theologies.

Chapter one of that work, entitled “Methodological Questions,” calls for a specific theological method. To begin, Chan outlines how a grassroots Asian theology can be undertaken, by examining, firstly, the preoccupation or angst of contemporary Asian theologians about the major differences between Eastern and Western ways of thinking (Chan 2014, 9-10); secondly, the dynamic interplay

between Church and tradition in the development of local theologies (11-15); thirdly, the nature of ecclesial experience (18-27); fourthly, ecclesial experience versus cultural experience (ibid.); and lastly, the organizing principles of theology in Asia (41-46).

In the first part, Chan's methodological quest raises some interesting concerns. Take for example Chan's strongly-worded proposal: "Perhaps it is time to get rid of the habit of describing different patterns of thought in terms of Eastern and Western ways of thinking." For Chan, contemporary Asian theologians should be able to move beyond the East-West debate. Nevertheless, Chan tries to overcome contrasting issues between the Eastern and Western approaches to contemporary Asian theology. He considers these two ways of thinking equally important and further suggests that "a more pertinent question we need to ask in order to develop a contextual or local theology in an Asian context is: what spiritual and intellectual resources of the Cartesian faith can we bring to bear on the Asian context such that an authentic Christian faith can effectively communicated and received?" Following Paul Hiebert, a proponent of the "common spiritual heritage" concept, Chan argues that contemporary Asian theologians should recognize the common spiritual heritage that binds them together, which includes Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Evangelicalism, and Pentecostalism.

Ecclesial Experience as a Way of Doing Grassroots Asian Theology

In chapter one, Chan introduces one of his most important concepts, namely, "ecclesial experience" (Chan 2014, 15-41), suggesting that ecclesial experience is an alternative to elitist forms of Asian liberation theologies. In the process, Chan demonstrates ecclesial experience derives from the lived experience of both lay-persons and theologians (17). Ecclesial experience, he contends, is a form of grassroots theology that requires cooperation between laity and theologians. According to Chan, elitist Asian theologians (Western-trained), carry the legacy of Enlightenment ways of thinking, impose their categories on locals (grassroots) and read their context selectively (27-28). For Chan, Christian theology appears to use presuppositions that ignore the lived experience of God's people. For example, he holds that most Asian liberation theologians discourage faith communities from participating in the process of constructing local theologies (17-18). Consequently, Christian theological discourse becomes a highly contentious elitist agenda or a specialized field, rather than a corporate endeavor between Christian theologians and lay people (26-27). Asian liberation theologies, in short, are constructed by elite theologians on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. As a result, these theologies become largely irrelevant outside of a tiny cloister of academic parthenogenesis, or they become objectified by Western-trained Asian liberation theologians. Chan contends: "Theologians therefore must endeavor with utmost seriousness to listen to what God by his Spirit is saying through the laity. If they speak, they must speak from within the church, as fellow worshippers with the whole people of God, before being able to speak to the church and for the church to the world" (Chan 2014, 18).

Because of what he sees as the betrayal of God's people by Asian liberation theologians, Chan stresses it is important to listen to what God by his Spirit is saying through God's people. In other words, theologians must take account of the importance of the participation of God's people or grassroots faith communities in the process of constructing local theologies.

Having set himself this vast task, Chan advances his notion of "ecclesial experience." He considers "ecclesial experience" a clear and concrete form of grassroots Asian theologies. First, Chan indicates the difference between ecclesial experience and cultural experience. Afterward, he seeks to elaborate the constituent elements of ecclesial and cultural experience. Ecclesial experience, he says, helps us avoid two major pitfalls that the present researcher mentions above: first, Christian theology should not be treated simply as propositional statements or objective facts (Chan 2014, 18). Second, individual or subjective experience is not the primary agent for doing

theology (13). To conceptualize the nature of “ecclesial experience,” Chan contends it is an ecclesial endeavour derived from God’s people and the theologians.

Ecclesial Experience Versus Cultural Experience

Chan advances his notion of grassroots Asian theology by expanding and elaborating upon the nature of ecclesial experience. He starts with the central argument that we must distinguish ecclesial experience from subjective or cultural experience. In his view cultural experience is problematic compared with his notion of ecclesial experience. The danger is if we base our theology solely on cultural experience it raises a lot of questions about our Christian teaching and practice. For instance, according to Chan, there are four problems with an approach based in cultural experience, namely: the fallenness of humanity, cultural bondage, a selective approach to culture, and lastly, elitist tendencies (Chan 2014, 26). At the same time, cultural experience does inform our theology. The problem is that cultural experience has ended up as the sole determining factor in constructing local theologies (Chan 2014, 18). He writes: “Cultural experience may provide an important context for theology by posing questions that theology must address. But cultural experiences cannot be the source of theology since they belong to the realm of fallen humanity rather than the humanity renewed by the Spirit in the church” (18).

While Chan sees cultural experience as useful in providing an important context when constructing local theologies, it cannot be the sole source for doing Asian theology. The problem with cultural experience, as Chan suggests, rests in several factors. According to Chan, “cultural experiences may provide an important context for theology by posing questions that theology must address.” He then points out, as mentioned above, that such experiences reflect fallen humanity rather than renewed humanity. He adds, “A theology constructed from such sources usually serves to reinforce what is culturally acceptable rather than challenges it” (2014, 18). As an example, he points to the way Asian feminist theologians reduce the relational nature of sin to a psychological condition (18).

Secondly, when it comes to cultural bondage, Chan argues that an emphasis on culture tends to privilege one aspect of culture and make it determinative for theology, which he sees as very problematic. This selection can produce a string of disastrous compromises with cultural bondage, culminating in an uncritical stand toward local cultures. Cultural bondage reduces everything to subjective experience and considers individuals the primary agents for doing theology. It also undermines the genuinely universal salvation history of Christianity (Chan 2014, 19). Chan believes Asian theologians need to be faithful to the core message of the Scriptures in spite of their cultural context, while at the same time they need to accept the mission to contextualize the gospel to a particular cultural experience in order that people will understand and embrace it. Contextual theologians must nevertheless be aware of the cultural accoutrements that they attach in the process of inculcating the gospel message.

Thirdly, in relation to the selective approach to cultural experience, Chan argues Asian contextual and liberation theologians move in opposite directions. He writes:

The third problem is that a theology of cultural experience is actually quite limited in scope and reductionistic. Often a multidimensional theological theme is reduced to a single referent. For instance, one gets the distinct impression from an Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) publication like *Asian Christian Spirituality: Reclaiming Traditions* that spirituality is nothing but the spirituality of social and political liberation This highly selective understanding of what constitutes Asian theology must be challenged, not only for its uncritical assimilation of Enlightenment epistemology and the resultant lack of theological discernment, but also for the way it totally ignores vast swathes of Christian movements in Asia: the

evangelical and Pentecostal movements in much of Asia and more specifically, the indigenous Christian movements in India, Japan and China. (Chan 2014, 23-24)

Chan believes Asian liberationist theologians have produced several highly academic concepts inspired by Enlightenment thinking. Christian spirituality, for example, is no longer directly related to individual sin. As a result, Christian spirituality has been reduced to socio-political liberation.

Lastly, concerning the elitist tendencies of a focus on cultural experience, Chan writes, “While its subject matter may be poor and marginalized—the Dalits and Minjung—seldom do we find views of the grassroots themselves being taken seriously; rather what we see is how the theologian views the grassroots and how they might fit in to the theologian’s grand scheme of things” (Chan 2014, 26). Asian liberation theology, he continues, “promotes the views of the intelligentsia and largely ignores the view of the ordinary people themselves, especially the ordinary members of the church” (27). Chan suggests that most Asian liberation and feminist theologians have attempted to articulate Christian theology from the perspective of highly academic enterprises, without the participation of ordinary church members. The result, according to Chan, is that “[e]lite theologians (Asian liberation and feminist theologians) may theologize about the poor and oppressed, but such a theology is not likely to find much traction among the poor themselves” (ibid.). He concludes, “The failure of such theologies is well summed up by one Latin American theologian who noted, ‘Liberation theology opted for the poor and the poor opted for Pentecostalism’” (ibid.).

Ecclesial Experience

After establishing problems with the cultural experience approach, Chan puts forward his own notion of “ecclesial experience” as an alternative method for grassroots Asian theology. As with the cultural experience approach, Chan also outlines two important aspects of ecclesial experience: ecclesial experience as ecumenical theology and ecclesial experience as social engagement (Chan 2014, 27-41).

Ecclesial Experience as Ecumenical Theology

According to Chan, “If ecclesial experience must be distinguished from cultural experience, it must also be distinguished from individual experience” (ibid.). He adds, “It is hazardous to base theology on the private experience of individuals no matter how important these experiences may be to the individuals themselves” (ibid.). For Chan, doing theology should not be defined solely by private individuals or by subjective experiences. Since we belong to a faith community (the body of Christ), doing Asian theology is not simply putting forward our own views, opinions, and feelings. Rather, ecclesial experience is the experience of the church, the whole people of God (28). Contemporary Asian theologians, Chan contends, ought always to apply principles and be willing to allow themselves to be challenged by the lived experience of God’s people.

Inspired by the “Report of the Moderator” of a WCC document, Chan contends that real ecumenical theology “should not be based merely on what elitist theologians are saying about the grassroots” (28). He further argues, “If real ecumenism is validated at the grassroots, then it is also at the grassroots level that our reflection on an ecumenical theology must begin.... In other words, the experience of ecumenism among the people of God constitutes primary ecumenical theology and should become the starting points for further theological reflection” (27-28). Chan concludes,

The task of the professional theologian is not to tell the church what is good for it but to listen carefully what the Spirit of truth who indwells the church is saying through the people of God. Elitist theologians who fail to recognize what God is doing among his people by his Spirit are no better (and are perhaps worse) at recognizing what God is doing in the world. (30)

Folk Christianity

In this short section, Chan emphasizes the significance of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. For Chan, Pentecostalism is a new form of a contemporary Christian mass movement, and he sees the rapid growth of Pentecostalism as the most successful contextualization of the gospel the world has ever seen (Chan 2014, 30-31). Also, he believes that “Pentecostalism is one of the most visible forms of folk Christianity” (31). He leads in to his criticism of elitist theologians by noting their premature judgment of folk Christianity: “Among elitist theologians, however, folk Christianity is often prematurely judged as syncretistic and so much superstition” (Chan 2014, 32). For example, in the Philippines, Jaime Bulatao, a Filipino Jesuit priest and theologian, has popularized a concept of “split-level Christianity” (Areulio 2018). Split-level Christianity, according to Bulatao, means that for Filipinos “faith is in one level and the other level is daily life, they do not jibe” (ibid.). In short, Bulatao observes that how Filipino Catholics live is inconsistent with what they believe. Thus many Filipino Catholics retain various superstitious beliefs even though they celebrate Catholic holidays. In response, Chan contends, “This is the problem with the theologically loaded phrase ‘split-level Christianity.’ It assumes that Christianity and primal religions are inherently incompatible, whereas, as we have noted in the studies of Harold Turner, they are in fact much closer to each other theologically” (Chan 2014, 49). For Chan, Bulatao’s notion of “split-level Christianity” is thus a concrete example of elitist Asian theology that ignores the real concerns of Asian folk Christianity.

Ecclesial Experience and Social Engagement

According to Chan, “The one-sided understanding of social engagement that dominates mainline Asian theology needs to be supplemented by more comprehensive understanding recognizing other theologies of social engagement” (Chan 2014, 36). Broadly speaking, for Chan, there are two dominant proponents of the theology of social engagement: Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. Tillich’s basic method of relating Christianity to the world at large is the “method of correlation” (36). For Tillich “the primary task of theology is to translate particular Christian symbols into philosophical terms of the larger culture” (36). Karl Barth’s methodological concern, on the other hand, is to bring both God’s revelation and the Scripture to the center of doing theology. Chan comments, “the global Pentecostal phenomenon and Asian Christianity in particular exemplify a more Barthian-Hauerwasian than Tillichian-Moltmannian approach to social engagement” (Chan 2014, 40). He concludes:

Thus the way grassroots Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, has impacted the larger society as noted by Miller and Yamamori and its creative adaptation in primal religious contexts as noted by Turner, Mullins and others makes it a significant point of reference for developing an Asian theology that takes seriously both sociopolitical and ethnographic contexts, integrates these two poles, and offers an alternative approach to social engagement. (Chan 2014, 61)

Chan argues that the challenge facing Asian theologians is not new, but requires an integration of Barthian-Hauerwasian and Tillichian-Moltmannian approaches when constructing local/contextual Asian theologies. Obviously, in proposing an integrated model, he takes this debate seriously. As a final note, Chan suggests: “This is the approach that we will take. We believe that such an approach will allow theology to go beyond the impasse currently seen in mainline Protestant and liberal Catholic theologies in Asia” (61).

For Chan, an integrated model holds both extremes together and, as mentioned above, helps negotiate in a more appropriate way the complex dynamic between the universality and particularity of Jesus Christ in the Asian context.

In his subsequent chapters and inspired by Saphir Athyal's proposal for an Asian contextual theological method (Chan 2014, 47-202), Chan suggests and elaborates upon the five organizing principles of theology in Asia. These are, God in Asian contexts (chapter 2); humanity and sin (chapter 3); Christ and salvation (chapter 4); the Holy Spirit and spirituality (chapter 5); and the church (chapter 6). In every chapter Chan demonstrates how Asian Catholic and Protestant liberation theologies became an elitist enterprise that deflects from their true purpose. However, it is worth noting that this work does not claim to be a systematic theology. Chan writes: "This is not a systematic theology. My main focus is on how theology ought to be done. This book is as much concerned with the processes as the content of theology. Only the content that has particular bearing on the Asian context is highlighted in each theological locus" (18).

Critical Evaluation of Simon Chan's Proposal

To begin a critical evaluation of Chan's proposal, this author believes it is necessary to ask the following questions: (a) What does Chan mean by "elitist Asian theologies?" (b) What does he mean by "grassroots Asian theology?" (c) Lastly, does Chan's notion of "grassroots Asian theology" provide a means to go beyond both Pentecostal and liberation theologies?

What Does Chan Mean by "Elitist Asian Theologies"?

Through his thorough and careful theological research, Chan tries to demonstrate how liberation theologians were deflected from their main task or went drastically wrong in Asia. For instance, he claims that Asian liberation theologians became "elitist" in the following ways: First of all, Chan contends elitist theologians seldom take the ethnographic concerns of grassroots Christianity seriously (such as healing bodies, freedom from the fear of evil spirits, and fatalism) (Chan 2014, 7). Subsequently, in chapter 2, Chan mentions the following Asian theologies and theologians: Dalit theologies, Minjung theologies, liberation theologies in the Philippines (including Jesuit priest and father of Philippine psychology, Jaime C. Bulatao), plus the individual theologians, Kazoh Kitamori, C. S. Song, Kosuke Koyama, M. M. Thomas, and Stanley Samartha (Chan 2014, 22-27).

Chan then identifies some problematic issues with elitist Asian theologies. He believes that elitist Asian theologies reduce the Christian faith to cultural experience, which then becomes the main source for doing Asian theology. Chan remarks that if our Christian theology is based solely on cultural or human experience, problems arise as follows: (a) while at first sight, cultural experience seems to offer a more comprehensive vision of reality compared to propositional theology; cultural experience is nevertheless the product of the fallenness of humanity; (b) privileging one aspect of culture results in cultural bondage; and (c) a selective approach is applied to culture (Chan 2014, 19-22). According to Chan, cultural bondage produces a string of disastrous compromises, culminating in an uncritical stand toward local cultures. Cultural bondage is the reduction of everything to subjective experience and incorporates a view of individuals as the primary agents of doing theology (ibid.). As Chan sees it, this bondage to culture also undermines and jeopardizes the genuine universal salvific history of Christianity. For Chan, Asians need to be faithful to the core message of the Scriptures in spite of their particular cultural context. At the same time, we have a mission to contextualize the gospel to our own particular cultural experience in order that people will understand and embrace it. Contextual theologians need to be aware of the cultural accoutrements that they attach in the process of inculturating the gospel message, however. Otherwise, as Chan observes, Asian liberationist theologians tend to reduce Christian theology into cultural forms and expressions, and fail to critically challenge these forms and expressions.

Chan's general description of Asian Christian theology cannot be validly applied to Filipino Pentecostal and liberation theologies, however. At the very least, we should avoid making hasty generalizations about the contemporary religious landscape in the Philippines. To talk about the

liberation theology movement in the Philippines, we need to be aware that liberation theologies are not uni-directional flows of ideas, motifs, and identities. Filipino liberation theology is not a monolithic discourse, but is divided on the basis of different realities, historical contexts, and local customs. Although Chan mentions several Asian liberationist scholars, theological models, and countries, to an extreme degree he tends to perceive all Asian liberation theologies as products of cultural or personal experience. For instance, Chan uses the singular term “Asian,” implying a serious charge against all Asian liberation theologians, including Filipino liberation theologians (Chan 2014, 23). Filipino liberation theologies cannot simply be dismissed on the basis of Chan’s limited encounters with Filipino theologians. It is misguided to describe Filipino liberation theologies as merely cultural and selective, privileging some aspects of Filipino culture over others. Filipino liberation theologies are in fact reactions against the social, economic, and political deprivation of the Filipino masses, as well as against colonisation (Harris 2006, 83-107). Both Catholic and Protestant Filipino theologians claim that it is the growing gap between poor and rich that has led to the rise of contemporary Filipino political theologies, particularly Filipino liberation theologies (Chan 2014, 23).

What Does Chan Mean by Grassroots Asian Theology”?

Chan seeks to critique and redefine contemporary Asian theologies, particularly Catholic and Protestant liberation theologies. In so doing, he uses the term “grassroots” for Asian Pentecostals, to indicate that Pentecostals are more “grassroots” than Asian liberation theology movements. For Chan, “grassroots” refers to popular Christologies that reflect the spiritual dimension of salvation and personal needs. This broad term receives no full consensus among Filipino scholars, however. For Chan, nonetheless, the term grassroots is very simple to define. In chapter 4 of his book, he argues strongly that grassroots Christianity or Asian Pentecostals tend to highlight the ethnographic dimensions of faith, such as healings, deliverance from demonic spirits, answered prayers, and special providence—i.e., lived experience. In addition, Chan argues that Asian Pentecostal/Charismatic movements are more fluid, i.e., against rigid religious structures. They appear better equipped to address the concerns of nonbaptized believers in Christ, more concerned with building vibrant-worshipping communities, and better able to adapt to the primal religious worldview or popular religiosity that elitist approaches have largely ignored (Chan 2014, 201). By contrast, Asian elitist theologies focus strongly on the socio-political context, while largely ignoring the ethnographic concerns of their followers—i.e., their lived experience. Thus Chan simply uses the term “grassroots” to mean the ethnic concerns of believers, such as healing of their bodies, freedom from the fear of evil spirits, and fatalism (Chan 2014, 127).

In the Philippine context, however, the term “grassroots” is often used as a rough synonym for non-government organizations working with poor, marginalized and oppressed communities (Özderdem and Podder 2012, 521-545). In addition, “grassroots” denotes a decentralization of power, social justice advocacy, community transformation, community-orientation rather than individualism, and the overcoming of an exclusivist culture among Filipinos. From a religious perspective, Emo Yango, a Filipino theologian and missionary, argues for example that Filipino theology, in order to be grassroots, should be informed and shaped by the everyday struggles of Filipinos. These everyday struggles connote the experience of political-economic and socio-cultural marginalization, not merely the physical and psychospiritual aspects (Yango 2005, 24-36). For Filipino theologians like Yango, the connotations of “grassroots” are not simply bodily healing, freedom from evil spirits, and fatalism as Chan understands the term.

Today, the term “grassroots” is used and defined in the context of various fields of academic study, for example, anthropology, political philosophy, community development, theology, etc., as well as diverse other Filipino contexts. Chan, however, uses a narrow meaning of the term “grassroots” for the Asian Pentecostal movement. In fact, Chan claims strongly that global or Asian Pentecostalism is more of a more grassroots movement than the liberation theology movement. Yet, in the Philippine context in particular, his statement sounds uninformed. For example, Allan

Anderson, a British Pentecostal historian and a scholar, argues that there is no uniform or monolithic Filipino Pentecostal movement (Anderson 2013, 10). Likewise, Giovanni Maltese and Sarah Eßel, both professors of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at Heidelberg University, Germany, conducted intensive research among Filipino Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, particularly in relation to how Filipino Pentecostals perceive themselves. As a result of their study, the term “Pentecostal” is seen as an ongoing construction of political identity among Filipino Pentecostals (Maltese and Eßel 2015, 225-279). Similarly, as with the Asian liberation theology movement, Pentecostalism is variegated on the bases of historical context and local customs. In short, both Filipino Pentecostal and liberation movements are complex, dynamic, and diverse religious movement in the Philippines.

Does Chan’s “Grassroots Theology” go Beyond Pentecostal and Liberation Theologies?

In Chan’s historical-critical analysis of contemporary Asian liberation and Pentecostal theologies, “ecclesial experience” as a concrete form of grassroots Asian theology takes centre stage. Firstly, Chan’s notion of ecclesial experience unmasks the weaknesses of some contemporary liberation theologies in Asia, specifically the left-wing Filipino liberation movement. This critical analysis is congruent with current critical evaluations by Filipino theologians (Mabalay, Pilario, De Mesa, and Tangunan). Chan clearly points out the tendency of some Filipino liberation theologies to be elitist, revealing an inability to incorporate grassroots logic or the ethnographic dimension (psycho-spiritual needs). However, Chan’s sharp distinction between grassroots (Pentecostal) and elitist Asian theology (liberation theology) is an inaccurate description of the Philippine theological landscape. Hence, Chan fails to recognize the diversity of Filipino liberation theology. Historically speaking, Filipino liberation theology arose from the grassroots and from socio-political conditions. As a matter of fact, in Chan’s own words, “the Pentecostal phenomenon in Asia cannot be properly understood without considering the larger religious context and in more recent years, the socio-economic context of Asia” (Chan 1994, 32).

Filipino liberation theology emerged from a self-interpreting and self-defining moment of a local community working together to surmount social and political challenges. This raises the question: why does liberation theology remain relevant today in the Philippines? The answer is simple. As Sobrino states, “The origin, thrust, and direction of theology of liberation is not in socialism, but in the experience of God in the poor, an experience of grace and exigency.” Equally, Filipino liberation theology arose from poor and marginalized Filipino communities. By contrast, Joseph Rommel Suico, a Filipino Pentecostal scholar, observes Pentecostals’ lack of engagement in socio-economic and political issues confronting the Philippines, especially poverty (Suico 2003, 192-208). Doreen Benavidez, a Pentecostal New Testament scholar, also clearly notes that most Filipino Pentecostals “are only concerned with saving souls,” rather than with social responsibility or social action. Simply put, Filipino Pentecostals have a tendency to withdraw from political-social activities (Benavidez 2016, 171-178).

Furthermore, ecclesial experience, as Chan argues, is always an endeavor that requires cooperation between laity and theologians. Thus Chan believes that true Christian theology comes from both lay people and theologians, and that without this cooperation theology is merely the imposition of the theologian’s own ideas as propositional truths. However, Chan fails to recognize that liberation theology also puts great emphasis on the dialectical connection between the subject and the object of Christian theology. Simply put, both liberation and Pentecostal theologies acknowledge the key role of the individual lived experience of the poor and destitute in doing theology. Combining the subject and object of Christian theology as theological sources will give us a more holistic approach to doing grassroots Asian theology. Therefore, Chan’s description of Asian liberation theology as elitist is inaccurate, especially in relation to the Philippine theological landscape.

Concluding Thoughts

It should be clear from Chan's descriptions that "Asian liberation theologies" and "Asian Pentecostalism" cannot be regarded as static, bounded and fixed categories. As has been noted by several Filipino and foreign scholars, both Asian liberation and Asian Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, particularly in the Philippines, have undergone significant transformation during recent decades. For instance, Edicio de la Torre, a former Filipino Catholic priest and activist during the Martial Law period, popularised the local version of Latin liberation theology in the Philippines, as a "theology of struggle" (de la Torre 1986, 1-9). Stirred by Luis Hechanova's challenging statement, "We shall call our theology a theology of struggle rather than a theology of liberation," de la Torre started by reflecting on Philippine conditions while searching for a Filipino theology (ibid.). During the period of Martial Law, de la Torre was the head of a Maoist-inspired and underground Christian movement known as Christians for National Liberation (CNL).

For de la Torre, liberation is still in the distant future. The focus of the theology of struggle is the present struggle, with liberation considered in the future tense. In the second section of his book, *Touching Ground, Taking Root: Theological and Political Reflections on the Philippine Struggle*, de la Torre starts to provide a political or ideological line to guide and inform Christians how to ground their political theology. This way of doing theology in the Philippine experience hence becomes more grassroots, pro-people, and anti-imperialist. De la Torre then introduces a Maoist analysis. He argues that the Maoist model is the appropriate form of analysis for the Philippine context. By using Maoist analysis, Filipino liberation theology will be able to start the struggle in large dominant sectors in Philippine society, he argues. Here he emphasizes topics such as farming, fishing, working conditions and illegal settlers as appropriate subjects for Filipino liberation theology. The Philippine Maoist movement makes a correct analysis of many of the problems in the Philippines in his view. De la Torre comments that "Maoism, or more concretely, the national democratic movement, presents itself as the most vocal, concrete programme (Maoist model, rural guerrilla strategists or moving from rural to urban insurrections, in contrast with Lenin), and ideology (Mao, Anti-Imperialism and US)" (Ibid.).

The theology of liberation or the theology of struggle is an unfinished and ongoing project among Filipino liberation theologians, however, and over the years, has developed into different forms and expressions, such that there is now no single definitive theology of struggle. The theologies vary in their goals, methodologies, strategies, affiliations, and contexts. Often they overlap, and some Filipino liberation theologians identify themselves with several branches of post-colonial theologies simultaneously (Whelchel 1995, 77). For instance, Danny Franklin Pilario and Catalino Arevalo, two leading contemporary Catholic theologians, classify contemporary theological efforts in the Philippines into three areas of interest (Pilario 2004, 5-39). The first is what Pilario calls mainstream theology, "which uses the discourse of the magisterium as its base for reflection" (Pilario 2004, 5-6). The second is culture: "Part of the conscious attempt to construct a distinctly 'Filipino' theology, this theological trend delves into the complexity of the Filipino traditional culture, its popular religions, its language and cultural structures, in order to discern the Good News already embedded in it" (ibid.). The third trend is an engagement with Marxist analysis and praxis in pursuit of the "the economic, political, social and cultural transformation of society" (ibid.).

"Being part of the Two-Third World," Pilario contends, "one of the most appealing fields for theological reflection is that of the liberationist thematic" (Pilario 2004, 7). Pilario also points out that this third—Marxist oriented—group is divided into several further groups. First, "Filipino theologian-members of the EATWOT and the Christians for National Liberation (CNL) whose social analyses are parallel to those of the left-wing political parties" (ibid.). Examples here would be Edicio de la Torre and Karl Gaspar. The second is a centrist group which "consciously and explicitly relies on the official ecclesial magisterium in the discernment of an appropriate Christian

praxis in our times” (ibid.). Lastly, in the third group, there is reflection “going on among grassroots communities (BECs) whose political position ranges from ‘far left’ to ‘left of center’” (ibid.). However, Pilario and Arevalo only enumerate Filipino Catholic liberation theologians. They fail to recognize the contribution of non-Catholic or Filipino Protestant liberation theologians, such as Eleazar Fernandez, Levi Oracion, Everett Mendoza, Melanio Aoanan, Oscar Suarez, and the Evangelical theologian David Lim, to name but a few. Furthermore, one thing is certain: Latin American liberation theology is an open door for the development of local theologies, such as womanist theologies, grassroots theologies, minjung theologies, queer theologies, and dalit theologies, including the Filipino theology of struggle (see e.g., Vigil 2007). Like the Filipino liberation theology movements, for their part Filipino Pentecostals have hardly remained static either. The complex Pentecostal theology, Pentecostal ministries, and the dialectic of Pentecostalism with colonial experience have shaped facets of the wider society, such as identity, class, gender roles, ministry, and public discourse (see e.g., Anderson 2013). Ignoring the inherent diversity of Filipino Pentecostalism fails to do justice to the complexity of the Pentecostal worldviews, theologies, and practices in the Philippines (Chong 2015, 1-9). In short, it would be naïve to think that either Philippine Pentecostalism or Philippine liberationist are uniform or monolithic movements.

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