

# Hope Abundant

Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology

Kwok Pui-lan, *editor*



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Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology

*Edited by Kwok Pui-lan*

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# HOPE ABUNDANT

To  
*Virginia Fabella, M.M.*  
and  
*Mercy Amba Oduyoye*

## Acknowledgments

In 1988, Virginia Fabella from the Philippines and Mercy Amba Oduyoye from Ghana co-edited *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, based on the work of the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. The book has been widely used as an important resource for understanding women's liberation theologies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America emerging out of women's struggles for justice in church and society. More than twenty years have passed and it is time to bring out a new collection of essays to signal newer developments and to include emerging voices. I would like to thank Susan Perry, senior editor at Orbis Books, for her support and encouragement for the project from the beginning. The editorial and production teams at Orbis Books provided guidance and assistance during the many stages of the process.

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## Introduction

*Kwok Pui-lan (Hong Kong/USA)*

In December 1986, twenty-six women from Africa, Asia, and Latin America gathered in the city of Oaxtepec, Mexico, for the Intercontinental Conference of Women Theologians of the Third World, a conference sponsored by the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The outcome of this groundbreaking meeting was the book *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, co-edited by Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye and published in 1988.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Third World women theologians have met in other ecumenical gatherings, and they have made significant contributions to broadening the theological discourse. Many newer voices have joined this multicultural and multilingual theological chorus, bringing theology into dialogue with contemporary issues.

The past twenty-five years have seen dramatic changes in the world: the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the transformation in Eastern Europe, the war on terrorism, the rise of China and India as economic powers, the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the current global financial crisis. With the end of the Cold War era, many have questioned whether the term "Third World" still makes sense, since it was originally used to designate the non-aligned countries, in contrast to the capitalist First World and the socialist Second World. In place of the term "Third World," other names have been suggested, such as the "developing world," "global South," "Two-Thirds World," and "majority world," but these terms are not without problems.

This book still uses the term "Third World" because it connotes not simply a geographical area but the tremendous power imbalance between the powerful and the disenfranchised. As Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah note:

It describes a relationship marked, in the past, by power and mediated through old colonial ties and, currently, through the cultural and economic presence of neocolonialism. Such iniquitous relationships exist both globally and locally. In this sense, there is already a Third World in the First World, just as there is a First World in the Third World—the world of economic and political

elite who are in collusion with the world powers. Ultimately, what is important is not the nomenclature but the idea it conveys and the analysis it provides.<sup>2</sup>

In the theological context, “Third World” theologies develop out of the struggles against social and political oppression, cultural alienation, and injustice as a result of sexism, racism, classism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. Theologians of EATWOT have advocated for the liberation of the poor, the integrity of creation, gender justice, racial and ethnic equality, and interfaith dialogue. The term “Third World” can also be used metaphorically to convey a “Third Space,” a space that is not bound by a binary mindset or dualistic and hierarchal constructions. Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space” the in-between space, which questions established categorizations of culture and identity and opens up the possibilities of renegotiating power and creating new cultural meanings.<sup>3</sup> Since the term “Third World” has such a rich trajectory of meanings in the field of theology, I continue to use it in this volume instead of following other newer nomenclature.

This book is concerned not only with women in the Third World, the majority of whom have experienced external colonization, but also with the plight of indigenous women whose lands have been taken by the settlers in a form of internal colonialism. The indigenous peoples argue that their issues are quite different from those of the Third World, and some of them call themselves the “Fourth World.” The “Fourth World” denotes “nations without a sovereign state, emphasizing the non-recognition and exclusion of ethnically- and religiously-defined peoples from the politico-economic world system.”<sup>4</sup> The voices of indigenous women have been least heard in the theological discourse. The inclusion of their critical contributions to the global voices of Christian women struggling for justice, liberation, and peace is long overdue.

### **Globalization and Its Impacts**

The end of the Cold War has ushered in not a period of peace but the escalation of militarism and warfare, ethnic and religious strife, and violence in many parts of the world. Globalization and the neoliberal economy, because they have changed the distribution of resources and roles of nation states, have created greater disparity between the rich and poor. Global warming, deforestation, and the breakdown of ecological systems have especially threatened the survival and subsistence of poor families, indigenous communities, and endangered species. While these affect both women and men, women and children bear the brunt of the problem. Theologians in the Third World are keenly aware of the need

to develop social and theological analyses that address the socio-political issues caused by globalization.<sup>5</sup>

The current phase of globalization characterized by a free-market economy is gendered and biased against women. Mexican scholar María Arcelia Gonzáles Butron, who specializes in economics and Latin American studies, points to the sexual division of labor and its implications for women's lives:

Given the permanence of division of labour as a result of the sexual differentiation of work, women are still found mainly in certain types of employment, usually less qualified and so less well paid. Globalization processes have not changed this tendency. With industrialization aimed at overseas markets, there has been a growth in the presence of transnational "brand" manufacturing companies and an increase in agribusiness units, in both of which women workers predominate.<sup>6</sup>

Although women have been absorbed in the global labor market, for many of them, working conditions continue to be precarious. Citing countries in the Latin American region as examples, the author notes that working conditions include provisional contracts, regimentation of work, lack of social security or benefits, and, in many places, prohibitions against forming labor unions. Women who work part-time or provide paid domestic services find that job security is even less protected as well as being contingent upon changes in the economy.

Writing from the South African context, Puleng LenkaBula argues that the consequences of globalization in Africa have been detrimental to the poor and vulnerable, women, and the working class, since millions are excluded from any meaningful participation in the economy. In addition, the "market logic" of globalization requires the opening up of national boundaries, structural adjustments of societies, and non-intervention from the state. Privatization of state-owned enterprises leads to outsourcing of services to private companies, and in South Africa, for example, provision of basic goods and services such as water, pensions, and healthcare is contracted to the business sector. Deregulation has reduced the role of the state in bringing businesses under the authority of the law and in setting price controls. While trade and financial liberalization both attract foreign investors that poorer countries desperately need, they also allow profits to easily move out of the country across borders.<sup>7</sup>

In Asia, economic growth in the Pacific Rim region has improved the livelihood of women, especially in the newly industrialized countries. Cheap female labor has supported the growth of labor-intensive industries, such as the manufacture of garments, toys, and electronics. But outside the export processing zones and industrialized regions, many women

still live in abject poverty, with no share in the "Asian economic miracle." The financial crisis of 1997 further showed how the Asian economies were subject to the vicissitudes of the rapid movement of foreign capital and the control of international financial agencies. South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand were the countries most affected. Kyungmi Park of South Korea wrote in the aftermath of the financial crisis:

The globalization of capitalism would be more concerned inevitably with the interest of advanced capital, in that its process is controlled by the economics of western Europe and the U.S. capital. Who would rule the world market now? They would be none other than those transnational entrepreneurs who hold control over the world market, transcending their nationality and acting outside of the control of their national governments.<sup>8</sup>

The outsourcing of industries in the "race to the bottom" affects the volume, scale, and nature of migration of labor. Gemma Tulud Cruz notes that "today, migration in the Asian region is marked not only by its velocity and multidirectionality but also by its increasing feminisation and significant shift in destination, that is, from the Atlantic to the Pacific."<sup>9</sup> The Philippines is the global labor exporter *par excellence*, with almost 10 percent of its population of 84 million working outside the country. Millions of Filipinas toil as domestic helpers and in service-oriented jobs in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, and as far away as Africa, Australia, Russia, and the Middle East. Cruz has written on the exploitation of female migrant workers and horizontal violence between women of "developed" countries and of "developing" countries.

Women's sexual labor has also been exploited to bolster the economy. The sex industries in Southeast Asia were developed during the Vietnam War for the "rest and recreation" of the American service personnel. Today, sex tourism is highly institutionalized and globalized, with the tacit cooperation of local law enforcement agencies, national governments, travel agencies, and the international business community. Many women and girls are illegally trafficked to Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, Japan, and Australia. Young African girls, for example, are exported to Europe through an international ring of criminals to serve as prostitutes in the lucrative sex industry. Sex trafficking of women and children is on the rise, causing unspeakable suffering to the victims and their families.<sup>10</sup> In the United States alone, the government estimates that there are as many as fifty thousand women and children trafficked into the country each year, primarily from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia for commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Because of the fear of HIV/AIDS, some customers prefer to have sex with very young girls.

The grossly unjust world order, which benefits the elites but leaves 2.7 billion people of the world to survive on two American dollars per day or less, contributes to social unrest, rebellions, and, in some cases, prolonged civil wars. To maintain its global hegemony, the United States has resorted to the threat and use of military force, which enables it to reign supreme in the world. The preemptive strike against Iraq was a prime example. In the Third World, there is also the craze to build up military arsenals, draining valuable resources from education, health-care, and other social services. Between 1960 and 1988, military expenditures of the "least developed countries" quintupled in real terms.<sup>12</sup> Following the end of the Cold War, world military expenditures decreased during the 1990s, but rose again in the late 1990s. In 2008, they reached \$1.46 trillion, representing a 45 percent increase over the ten-year period since 1999. While the military expenditures of the United States account for 41.4 percent of the total, the expenditures of poorer countries, such as Algeria, Azerbaijan, Chile, and Peru have also increased.<sup>13</sup> But military expenditures have not been an effective deterrent to rebellions in developing countries, and have had an adverse effect on economic growth.<sup>14</sup>

War and civil conflicts result in violence, bloodshed, instabilities, mass migration, and refugees across country borders. Women trapped in war situations "become easy prey to rape, sexual slavery, torture, genocide, and other forms of gender-specific violence," says Marlene Perera of Sri Lanka, whose country suffers because of a prolonged civil war.<sup>15</sup> For example, during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, women were the victims of immense sexual violence and trauma, while the powerful nations stood by and did nothing to stop the genocide. Another example that, once it became known, caused public outcry was the systematic raping of Kosovar Albanian women by Serbian forces in Kosovo in the late 1990s.

Globalization has prompted much debate on the future of liberation theology, especially the adequacy of its social and economic analyses.<sup>16</sup> For example, some have questioned whether Latin American liberation theology with its Marxist analyses is outdated, since the world economy has changed so drastically. Others have pointed out that such criticism often originates in the North and is voiced by people who have not followed the latest developments. Latin American scholars, in particular the economist-theologian Franz J. Hinkelammert, have provided perceptive insights for analyzing the world economic order and suggested alternatives to the tyranny of capital.<sup>17</sup> Argentinean theologian Enrique Dussel has used a world-system approach in his analysis of the development of Latin American theology. He insists that liberation theology, with a commitment to the poor of the South, who are excluded from the globalization modernization process, is still highly relevant because it aims "toward an alternative of greater justice for the people at the periphery."<sup>18</sup>



Feminist liberation theologians have also charged that Marxist analysis has not paid sufficient attention to gender, sexuality, and women's reproductive issues, and the Latin American male theologians are often blinded by their *machismo*. One of the sharpest critics is the late Argentinean theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, who charges that liberation theology must be demythologized and demystified. In particular, she argues that we need to "denounce the attempts to harmonize in a hegemonic and authoritarian way the positive and revolutionary elements of difference and dissent in our communities, in order to be able to continue the *caminata* [the walk] of theology."<sup>19</sup> By focusing primarily on class, male liberation theologians have failed to integrate the issues of gender and sexuality in their liberation project. Althaus-Reid concludes: "To keep unveiling the political and sexual masks and to keep rediscovering the true face of God in Latin America is a daring and risky project which still has not finished."<sup>20</sup> The same can be said for other contexts, and feminist liberation theologians must continue to articulate their vision that a more inclusive and alternative world is possible.

### Cultural Criticism

Globalization not only restructures economics and alters the roles of the state but also affects people's worldviews, behavior, and cultural and religious identities. The mass media, the information highway, and social websites have created a kind of global mass culture, and it both absorbs and threatens local cultures. As a response to the pervasiveness of the forces of globalization, religious fundamentalisms of various kinds have emerged, often in the name of protecting "traditional" values and identities. The tensions between tradition and modernization are not new, since modernization usually means Westernization, though there are different ways of conceiving modernity. But the scope, scale, and pace of globalization have exacerbated some of these tensions. Women have often been caught in the "culture wars," whether in the West or in so-called traditional societies, because women are often seen as the symbols and guardians of tradition. Religious fundamentalisms in general treat women as subordinate to men and prescribe strict codes of female conduct and acceptable behavior.

In the past, there has been a perception that Latin American theologians are preoccupied with the socio-economic dimensions of liberation, while the Asian and African theologians focus on the religio-cultural aspects. In the age of globalization, these two aspects are so closely connected that one cannot be separated from the other. CNN and Hollywood movies are both cultural productions and transnational businesses. The same macro-level economic and cultural forces are shaping the

world, though their impact and the responses they trigger may vary in local contexts. When I reviewed recent theological writings by Third World and indigenous women, I found that they are concerned both with the economic and the cultural aspects of oppression and liberation, though the emphases may be different because of the particular issues within the writers' contexts.

In the past two decades, Third World and indigenous women theologians have deepened their cultural criticism, especially with regard to the impact of colonialism on their culture, multiplicity and hybridity, and the role of popular religion in shaping women's lives. Some have turned to cultural studies, postcolonial criticism, poststructuralist theory, as well as studies on women, gender, and sexuality for theoretical insights for their work. In 1994, Kenyan theologian Musimbi Kanyoro saw the importance of the inclusion of cultural analysis in doing theology. She used the term "cultural hermeneutics" to describe the analysis of cultural ideologies regarding gender roles and power, cultural violence against women, and women as victims and perpetrators.<sup>21</sup> She now prefers to call this method "engendering cultural hermeneutics" to signal clearly that African women bring a gender and feminist perspective to a theology of inculturation (see chapter 1).

African women theologians are concerned about the impact of colonization and globalization on the rich diversity of local cultures and their in-built structures of human relationships. Teresa Okure, a Nigerian Catholic religious sister and biblical scholar, reminds us that Africa contains more than fifty-five countries, each with many languages and cultures. She says, "The globalization and Westernization of Africa started with the slave trade by Europeans and Arabs. It intensified through colonialism and continues through neo-colonialism and modern globalization."<sup>22</sup> The aggressive slave trades resulted in the destabilization and destruction of the social and political fabrics of the people. Cultural imperialism in the colonial era engendered a loss of faith of people in themselves and in the cultural heritage passed down over generations. The current culture of consumerism, individualism, and exploitative capitalism has wreaked havoc on African communal life.

Some Third World theologians have used postcolonial theory in analyzing colonial discourse and the impact of colonialism on biblical interpretation and theology. Postcolonial studies began in the late 1970s and have exerted considerable impact on the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. In biblical studies, Musa W. Dube of Botswana has authored the pioneering text *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*.<sup>23</sup> It has received critical acclaim in the scholarly world. In theology and cultural studies, Wong Wai Ching Angela from Hong Kong has used postcolonial theology to scrutinize Asian theology, including Asian feminist theology.<sup>24</sup> Sharon A. Bong from Malaysia has



discussed the Bible and ethics through the lense provided by postcolonialism, while several Asian diasporic scholars, including myself, have also used postcolonial theory in our works.<sup>25</sup>

Native and indigenous scholars have chastised genocide and cultural theft by the settlers, particularly the misappropriation of cultural and spiritual traditions. Andrea Smith, a Cherokee scholar, has studied the abuses of missionary schools and whitewashing of Native American children's minds. She also points out that sexual violence against Native women was a critical strategy of conquest.<sup>26</sup> Laura E. Donaldson, also of Cherokee heritage, has applied postcolonial theory to scrutinize the collusion with colonialism in white feminists' works. In *Decolonizing Feminisms*, Donaldson challenges the woman=colonized, man=colonizer homology because it fails to note that gender is a contested field and that white, middle-class women occupy the contradictory social positioning as "both colonized patriarchal objects and colonizing race-privileged subjects."<sup>27</sup> Using the theoretical tools provided by Mary Louise Pratt, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and other postcolonial theorists, Donaldson has presented influential readings of the Bible from Native American perspective (chapter 8).

In Latin America, feminist theologians have paid more attention to cultural analysis and theories of gender since the 1990s. Elsa Tamez, a well-known Mexican biblical scholar, was among the first to write on cultural abuse against women with reference to the multiple layers of culture in Latin America: aborigine, black, *mestizo*, and white. While the patriarchal occidental society was imposed by colonialism, Tamez also notes the intercultural violence perpetrated by people of the *mestizo*-white culture against aborigines and black people. She proposes an intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect and recognition.<sup>28</sup> In recent years, Latina feminist theologians and social scientists from Latin America and the United States have met to develop a feminist intercultural theology.<sup>29</sup> An intercultural theology moves beyond mere recognition of differences toward creating common spaces and new forms of living together (*convivencia*). María Pilar Aquino, who plays a key role in developing this intercultural theology, argues that an intercultural approach recognizes the values of all cultures, relativizes our own ways of thinking, and debunks hegemonic monocultural and Eurocentric claims. As such, an intercultural framework provides theoretical tools for feminist theologians to develop "an alternative ethical-political project for advancing toward a new world of justice."<sup>30</sup>

Latin American feminist theologians have paid increasing attention to popular culture and religion, such as the devotion to Mary of Guadalupe and other religious practices of women. An important development is the analysis of hybridity between Christianity and African traditions and indigenous traditions. Several theologians have discussed Christian symbols, such as Jesus and Mary, as they interact with the rich