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# Meditations on Asian Christian Spiritualities: A Multidisciplinary Response<sup>1</sup>

**Lester Edwin J. RUIZ**

**Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada**

## **Abstract**

This essay addresses the question, “Under what conditions is it possible to think about how one might address the challenges confronting the diverse descriptions, explanations, and understandings, as well as practices of Asian Christian spiritualities?” In seven intentionally unsystematic but related “meditations,” and with the Asian Christian diaspora as its normative discursive horizon, the essay (1) addresses the multiple personal, political, historical, and religious contexts, locations, perspectives, and commitments of the author, (2) identifies some dilemmas, challenges, and perspectives in which the discourses of spirituality in Asia are embedded, (3) provides a diasporic perspective of “the body” as a metaphor for thinking through the notion of an Asian Christian spirituality, (4) explores the importance of social totalities, subjectivities, and practices for such discourses, (5) offers methodological and dispositional rituals to inform, orient, and emblemize practices for the reflective process (deliberation, embodying the *res publica*, and commitment to truthfulness), (6) explicates a materialist understanding of spirituality, and (7) proposes a detached transgressive spirituality with specific attention given to concerns about histories (time), geographies (space), and contextualities (place) of Asia-in-the-world. While not explicitly stated, the purpose of the essay is unabashedly partial: to reflect on the transformative significance of transcultural discourses for Asian Christian spiritualities, where transformation is understood as “the creation of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better.”

## **Keywords**

Asian spirituality, critical philosophy, deconstruction, detachment, diaspora, hauntology, materialism, transcendence, transformation

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**Corresponding author**

Lester Edwin J. RUIZ: [ruiz@ats.edu](mailto:ruiz@ats.edu)

A seeker of Truth looks beyond the apparent  
 And contemplates the hidden.  
 What the senses perceive is only a distortion.  
 We all look for something that is not yet in existence,  
 Beggars look for coins, shopkeepers for profit,  
 Farmers for harvest, pupils for knowledge,  
 And seekers for enlightenment.  
 Non-existence is the treasure house of God  
 In the process of becoming manifest.<sup>2</sup>

Philippine indigenous communities recognize a woman (or man) as a Babaylan, someone who has the ability to mediate with the spirit world, has her own spirit guides, and is given gifts of healing, foretelling, and insight. She may also have knowledge of healing therapies such as *hilot*, *arbularyo*. She is a ritualist, a chanter, diviner. She has the gift of traveling to the spirit world or non-ordinary states of reality in order to mediate with the spirits. Babaylans are called by other names in the other languages of Philippine indigenous communities: *Mombaki*, *Dawac*, *Balyan* or *Balian*, *Katalonan*, *Ma-Aram*, *Mangngallag*, *Mumbaki*, *Mambunong*.<sup>3</sup>

### FIRST MEDITATION: A CONTEXTUAL, LOCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Christian discipleship has three essential spiritual disciplines: *solitude*, *community*, and care [*ministry*].<sup>4</sup>

Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away. God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.<sup>5</sup>

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- 2 Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, *The Mathnawi Ma'navi of Rumi, Book-1: The Mysteries of Attainment to the Truth and Certainty*, ed. Hamid Eslamian, trans. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Dallas, TX: Persian Learning Center, 2021):1360-1367.
  - 3 Center for Babaylan Studies, <https://www.centerforbabaylanstudies.org/history> (accessed April 1, 2024).
  - 4 Henry Nouwen, "Finding Our Sacred Center," <https://youtu.be/mn-UOjzwcBs?si=YufMbWPYna7TmAq2> (accessed April 1, 2024).
  - 5 St. Teresa of Avila, *Let Nothing Disturb You*, ed. John Kirvan (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008).

Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher best known for the movement known as deconstruction, in his *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, writes of the specter, the revenant, and hence, the “haunting”:

Could one address oneself in general if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. They give us to rethink the “there” as soon as we open our mouths.<sup>6</sup>

Allow me to make three general observations about the essays in this special issue of the *Asia Journal of Theology*,<sup>7</sup> intentionally from my multiple personal, political, historical, and religious contexts, locations, and perspectives. First, one might say there are many ghosts in these texts: (1) the human beings whose bodies, experiences, and stories inhabit the text(s) but who are both “matter and spirit,” (2) the structure of the text(s) themselves, particularly their different styles, multiple genres, different methodologies, that *are simultaneously* more *and* less than adequate (re) presentations of their author’s intentions, (3) the range of issues they address that return again and again like apparitions of past, present, and future; (4) the erudition demonstrated in knowledge, learning, and scholarship that the text(s) presuppose and to which they aspire, but that are sometimes masked by the opacity of the disciplinary languages of their writing or the contradictions of the linguistic strategies they deploy; and (5) the limits of both conversation and understanding required to engage fully the text(s) by an individual reader and, perhaps, by those who participate in the wider “*transcultural, transAsian* fields of discourse,” including discourses on spirituality. These texts have the methodological and metaphoric textures and sensibilities of a hauntology.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx, The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 221ff.

7 *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, n. 2 (2023) and 38, n. 1 (2024).

Second, one of the claims demonstrated in these texts is that they are always and already conversations that *witness* to the (re)incarnations of Asian Christian spiritualities. The texts are a witness that is a haunting *because* in their formation and style, they required talking with ghosts—or giving them back their speech.<sup>8</sup> It is a witness of and to the broken pieces of our frail *bodies* (“born of the earth”), our individual and collective “being unto death” (temporalities), and the *untidiness* of life in its personal, political, historical, spiritual, and sacred complexities (locatedness).<sup>9</sup> To take hauntology or spectrality seriously is to accept not only the fundamental if uneven contingencies of human dwelling, but also their insufficiency to mediate divine indwelling; and therefore, to understand that spirituality demands unconditional faith—arising from a recognition of the qualitative distinction between immanence and transcendence—mysteries that refuse the binary and the hierarchical (dare we also admit both the possibility of their incommensurability and the necessity of their belonging?), and that remind us of our contingency and fallibility that therefore demand both humility and a commitment to Others. Spiritualities, not unlike theologies or politics, are modalities of critical reflection and action—practices of discernment, creativity, and imagination that are at once *informative*, *performative*, and *transformative*.

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8 B.J. Zorinthara, “Forging a Third Space for Spirituality and Social Justice: The Dynamics of Mizo Revival Spirituality in Interweaving Christianity and Primal Religious Ethos,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, n. 2 (2023): 165-185, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v37i2.72>; J. Berinai, “Exploring Indigenous Spirituality: The Religio-Cultural Background of the Indigenous Peoples of Sabah,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, n. 1 (2024): 33-48, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.131>; S. C. Haryono, “Authentic Being: The Path of Spirituality of Ki Ageng Suryomentaram’s Kawruh Jiwa and Bernard Lonergan’s Conversion,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, n. 1 (2024): 65-80, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.75>.

9 See, for example, V. Aguilan, “Spirituality of Struggle: Resistance, Repentance, Solidarity, and Renewal,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, n. 1 (2024): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.89>.

**SECOND MEDITATION:  
SOME DILEMMAS, CHALLENGES, AND  
PERSPECTIVES**

... where the [eternal] Word remains within there the soul should be an adverb and work one work with God in order to receive its happiness in the same inwardly hovering knowledge where God is happy.<sup>10</sup>

“The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.”<sup>11</sup>

Both the realities and aspirations of Asian Christian spiritualities embodied by the essays in these volumes raise at least three challenges that need to be identified and acknowledged.

First, there are definitional and substantive challenges, including, for example: how terms generally used in or appealed to in discourses of spirituality (such as “consciousness,” “personhood,” “spirituality,” “interspirituality,” “world,” “politics,” “humanity,” “meaning-making,” “authentic being,” “theology,” “mind,” “body,” “struggle,” “interethnic communion”—even the very notion of “Asian Christian spirituality”) and their embeddedness in both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices, as well as the solutions that are offered to address the problems arising out of their deployment as both definitional and normative grounds, are to be understood and linked.<sup>12</sup>

Second, there are educational, pedagogical, methodological, even administrative challenges, including: (1) the continued preference for, if not exclusionary legitimacy of, English (or French, German, Spanish, and Italian) as the *lingua franca* in terms of (academic) learning, teaching, research, and writing/publishing; (2) the very real differences between and among cultures leading to different understandings of history, politics, economics, and pedagogy—for example, the differences between oral

10 See Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, vol. 1, ed. J. Quint and G. Steer (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936), 158.

11 Meister Eckhart, Sermon 57, in *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O’C. Walshe, 3 vols. (Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Press, Ltd., 1987), 87.

12 F.J.S. Samdao, “Spirituality and Personhood: *Homo Liturgicus* and *Pagkatao* in Conversation,” *Asia Journal of Theology*, 37, n. 2 (2023): 147–164, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v37i2.103>; C. M. Chong and S. F. Chong, “Politics of Spirituality: Reflections of Public Theology on Interethnic Communion in Malaysia,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, n. 1 (2024): 49–64, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.81>.

and reading/writing cultures, of rote and constructivist education, and of egalitarian and authoritarian pedagogies;<sup>13</sup> (3) the growth of new delivery systems and models of education (including distance/online, extension education, and hybrid) that are based on infrastructural asymmetries in technology and resources; (4) the dominance of certain academic and curricular structures and cultures, including their accompanying methodological preferences and procedures in the intellectual work of understanding human realities and their multiple forms of spirituality, as well as their dissemination and translation apparatuses, which tend to privilege the so-called global north at the expense of the so-called global south.

Third, there are political, institutional, and ideological challenges as well, including: (1) overgeneralizations, mine included, of such notions as “the West,” “Christian,” “Asian,” (2) the tyrannies if not temptations of the “conceptual” or its brother, the tyrannies of “practice,” the tyrannies of the “local,” and its uncle, the tyrannies of the “universal,” (3) the continued privileging of the clearly demonstrated, even misleading assumptions of North Atlantic, state-centric if not statist assumptions and strategies that discipline understandings of “self,” “individual,” “community,” “interethnic communion,” “public theology”—the primary building blocks of “spirituality”—even Asian *Christian* spiritualities—and that govern description, analysis, and prescription of what Hannah Arendt called “the life of the mind,” (4) the exceptionalist accountability (or lack thereof) of those with power and privilege (both state and non-state) vis-à-vis those elsewhere in the world who lack power and privilege, and 5) the historic and immediate anomalies of poverty, conflict, violence, even trauma that are part of the realities of Asia, and the rest of the world, for example, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine in which European countries are implicated, the US-China conflict being played out in the Asia-Pacific and involving Asian states including the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea—even some of the NATO countries—and the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli war which some have argued has genocidal resonances in the Middle East.

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13 V.J.D. Davidson, “The Effect of Cultural Patron-Client Relationship Perspectives on Asian Christian Spirituality in Relation to Spiritual Growth and Missions Outreach,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, n. 2 (2023): 234–248, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v37i2.74>.

The articles in these volumes, in fact, may be read as historical interrogations of the myths of origin that continue to discipline thought and action, including theologies and spiritualities today, at the same time that these myths of origin reveal traces of unrepentant, not to mention infectious, dominating logocentric idealisms. For example, the dominant accounts of *modern* international/global/world order that scaffold cultures, politics, and spiritualities today, tend to locate their origins in 1648 and the treaties of Westphalia even as they mark the effective beginnings of capitalism, imperialism, modernization, industrialization, and colonialism. Such scaffolding includes specific assumptions about space, time, and place (that is, territory—the state; history—ancient, medieval, modern; and community—human species, individual, citizen), within ontologies of hierarchy (such as “the Great Chain of Being”) or heterarchy (such as the French trinity of *égalité, fraternité, liberté*), and agency (for example, sovereignty, the epistemic subject, the possessive individual), and the continuing reliance on notions of nationalisms within the Asian context that are still wedded to Western-oriented modernity.<sup>14</sup> The problem is at least twofold: the 1648 Westphalian foundation myth, privileged by Anglo-American political and religious thought and disseminated globally, has not only sought to marginalize and even erase other foundation myths, other histories and geographies, other subjectivities (including European/Western/modern, (post)colonial/non-Western, Islamic, Chinese, Indian), but also provided the ground for orchestrating the basic foundations by which the array of modern academic disciplines, and popular knowledge, have become authorized. Many of the articles in these volumes, mine included, even those that seek to discover or recover “local” cultures, are not immune to these desires for authorization.

That said, in fact, the importance of the articles presented here, taken as a whole, is that its authors are passionately, if not persuasively, arguing that these terms and their practices have arisen not only out of different (not just plural), if asymmetrical, historical, political, institutional, even sacred (re)sources, priorities, preferences, commitments, and aspirations; but that they are doing so in the context of legacies (either for or against)

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14 Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Nationalisms in Southeast Asia: Cartographies of Struggle,” in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, ed. Alexander Motyl (New York: Academic Press, 2000), 757-768. Cf. R.B.J. Walker, *Out of Line: Essays on the Politics of Boundaries and the Limits of Modern Politics* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015).

of “the modern” and its assumptions and prescriptions. I want to suggest further that some of the articles in these volumes, by their interrogation of the dominant discourses of the field that one might generally call “studies in spirituality,” challenge, if not undermine, the legacies of 1648 (some in the name of other civilizations such as China, India, and Islam—but which I know less about, hence can only mark them here as critical) by deploying counterintuitive if not alternative conceptions or narratives of “humanity,” “community,” “the political,” “the spiritual,” “the self,” through the lenses of mysticism, “green Spirit,” “public theology,” cultural studies—even geopolitics, erotospirituality, and theopoetic spirituality. As they do, they either identify these dominant assumptions and practices now circulating through structures and processes of dominant spiritualities and theologies, or at least foreground the critical importance of articulating more fully these assumptions—both the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic—and how they are related to our descriptive, analytical, critical, and norm-bearing tasks within the respective areas of thinking, feeling, and acting represented in these articles, including the aspirations for Asian Christian spiritualities.<sup>15</sup>

### THIRD MEDITATION: A DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE OF “THE BODY”

Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit.<sup>16</sup>

My own way of thinking about how one might deconstruct, construct, and/or reconstruct the notion of Asian Christian spiritualities is by deploying the metaphor of the “body” with specific attention given to the histories (time), geographies (space), and contextualities (place) of Asia—the expansive reach of which includes not only the peoples inhabiting the areas from the so-called Pacific Rim and the inner reaches of the Southern

15 See, for example, M.M. Nyunt, “Journey to the Light: Vipassana Meditation and Hesychastic Prayer,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, n. 2 (2023): 214–233, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v37i2.86>. See also D. Johnson, “Pentecostal Spirituality and Traditional Religious Practices in the Philippines,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, n. 2 (2023): 186–199. <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v37i2.108>.

16 Paul Tillich, *Theology and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 6-7.



Ocean to the shores of the Caspian Sea, from the southern reaches of the Indian Ocean to the northern regions of Mongolia, but also, equally important, the peoples previously inhabiting these lands and oceans, but who now live in diaspora.

I have long argued that the “body politic” is constituted by several intersecting but contingent conditions. This “body politic” is: (1) dispersed, displaced, and dislocated, linked, for example, to the realities of migrations, immigrations, and forced migrations; 2) racialized and ethnicized, linked, for example, to colonial and neocolonial practices based on white mythologies; (3) (trans)gendered and sexualized, linked, for example, to male-centric power and privilege; (4) commodified and securitized, linked, for example, to such structures as incarceration, national security, and corporate protectionism; and (5) technologized, linked, for example, to the disciplinary powers of machine and digital technologies, “big data,” or even Artificial Intelligence.<sup>17</sup> I have also argued that the transformative possibilities of these intersecting conditions are severely compromised by the fact that significant numbers of the “body politic” have been disembodied—that is, expunged from that very body, dismembered, incarcerated, disabled, pathologized, traumatized, or forgotten—not only by modern politics, but also by institutions of the “body politic” itself, including by government, the so-called military-industrial complex, the university, religious institutions, and health and big pharmaceutical corporations.

These conditions form part of the warp-and-woof of what I understand spiritualities to be. Simply put, the discourses of Asian Christian spiritualities are fundamentally about “the body”—all kinds of bodies: what they are, who they are, what is happening to them, how they are constituted, constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. My reference to the body in these texts and elsewhere is decidedly empirical. I deploy the term to signify, quite literally, material, concrete, sensuous *human* bodies to ground and orient my understanding of Asian Christian spiritualities. At the same time, I also deploy the term philosophically and metaphorically to signify a much deeper, more complex direction that I am taking both in politics

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17 Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “I believe in the resurrection of the body—Meditations and Explorations on ‘The Religious,’ ‘The Public,’ and the *Asian* Diaspora: A Research Framework and Agenda,” *Asian Christian Review* (Summer 2013), 63-111.

and spirituality, following, albeit critically but appreciatively, what Michel Foucault and those who have followed his lead have thematically developed around the notions of biopolitics, biopower, and governmentality.<sup>18</sup>

#### FOURTH MEDITATION: INTERROGATING SOCIAL TOTALITIES, SUBJECTIVITIES, AND PRACTICES

Who could ever express the deep affection [Francis] bore  
for all things that belong to God?  
Or who would be able to tell  
of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed  
while contemplating in creatures  
the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator?  
From this reflection  
he often overflowed  
with amazing, unspeakable joy  
as he looked at the sun,  
gazed at the moon, or observed the stars in the sky.<sup>19</sup>

What might a sustained attention to the intersections of dispersed, displaced, dislocated, racialized, gendered, sexualized, commodified, and securitized, even pathologized bodies—as well as the notions of biopolitics,

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18 Instructive here are Rachel Adams's observations in her article in *Critical Legal Thinking*, "Michel Foucault: Biopolitics and Power," <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2017/05/10/michel-foucault-biopolitics-biopower/> (accessed April 1, 2024) that "Foucault does not discuss the relationship between biopolitics, biopower and governmentality. Instead, the link is implicitly made in his lecture courses, particularly [in] *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978-79*, trans. G. Burchell, 2008): 21-22... [and in] a 1982 essay, 'The Subject and Power,' [in which] Foucault defines 'governmentality' as... the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed—the government of children, of souls, of communities, of the sick... [covering] not only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action...that were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people.... M. Foucault "The Subject and Power" (1982), in M. Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 3*, trans. R. Hurley (2000): 341."

19 *Thomas of Celano*, "St. Francis' Love for All Creatures," *The Life of St. Francis*, [https://digitalcollections.franciscantradition.org/document/bx4700-f6f722-1999-d031/the\\_life\\_of\\_saint\\_francis\\_by\\_thomas\\_of\\_celano\\_12281229/1228-00-00](https://digitalcollections.franciscantradition.org/document/bx4700-f6f722-1999-d031/the_life_of_saint_francis_by_thomas_of_celano_12281229/1228-00-00) (accessed April 1, 2024).

biopower, and governmentality—mean for the future(s) of Asian Christian spiritualities?

Following Avta Brah and Ann Phoenix in their 2004 essay entitled “Ain’t I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality,”<sup>20</sup> I want to suggest that intersectionality, as philosophy, method, and spirituality, offers some assistance in the challenges faced by our aspirations toward Asian Christian spiritualities. Intersectionality directs our gaze to at least four important religio-moral questions directly related to the discussion in which these articles in this journal are engaged: the nature of the social totality, the character of subjectivity, the necessary locatedness of human agency, and the challenge of practice. But why are these important for Asian Christian spiritualities?

First, it raises a critical question about the nature of the social totality, which is constitutive and regulative of such notions as “Asian,” “Christian,” and “the spiritual.” The experience of racialized, gendered, sexualized, commodified, and securitized migration, for example, not only forces the negotiation and renegotiation of political, epistemological, religious, and academic/disciplinary boundaries especially in terms of their long-held correspondence among nation, culture, identity and place, but also in the rearticulation and reconceptualization of the notions of time, space, and place that emerge as a result of dispersal, displacement, and dislocation; it has also enabled us to uncover their racialized, gendered, sexualized, commodified, and securitized character. Many of the articles in these volumes remind us, using the language of Foucault, that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms are in the plural)—from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat...passing via economic and political installations.”<sup>21</sup> In short, the nature of the social totality is not merely the aggregate of its elements, nor their intersections, but also their spatial and temporal connections and distinctions—and the power that circulates through them. Spiritualities are implicated in these social totalities.

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20 Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, “Ain’t I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004): 75-86, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss3/8> (accessed April 1, 2024).

21 Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 146-149.

Second, the experiences of racialized, gendered, sexualized, commodified, and securitized bodies also raise a question not only about subjecthood, but also about subjectivity—also constitutive and regulative dimensions of “the spiritual.” This is the question of “the Subject”: not only who the subject is, but also what being a subject entails and how it is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed or constituted and regulated by the discourses in which it is embedded. Both the plurality and contingency of subjects, subjectivities, and subject positions presupposed by different bodies fundamentally challenge all ahistorical, essentialist, and nonrelational construals of “the Subject” and direct us not only to the question “What is to be done?” but also to the questions of who we are, what we hope for, and where we go. And while the questions of the subject and of subjectivities remind us of the importance of *agency* and human action, as well as of identity and community, they can now be (re)set, or “reinstalled” within a much deeper, broader, and wider intersectional, ecological, and relational performative whole.<sup>22</sup> My insistence on situating “the Subject” in these ways is an attempt to side-step the long and destructive shadow cast by the anthropocentric, auto-referential, philosophical, epistemic, acquisitive, and political Sovereign of that part of Euro-American life associated with “modernity” or “the Enlightenment”—including its effects on our understanding and practice of specific spiritualities, variously defined in these volumes.

Third, the experiences of racialized, gendered, sexualized, commodified, and securitized bodies provide an organizing metaphor for situating the practices of Asian Christian spiritualities at the intersections of self, other, and world. Of no small methodological significance, locating these practices within the interstices of a people’s cultural spaces and practices (one might even say “spiritualities”)—defined broadly as those concrete, sensuous realities embodied in rhetorical forms, gestures, procedures, modes, shapes, genres of everyday life: discursive formations and/or strategies, if you will, which are radically contingent arenas of imagination, strategy, and creative maneuver—not only challenges both the narrow confines of

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22 See O.N. Harefa, “Hoho: From the Meaning-Making Tradition of Niasan People Towards Theopoetic Spirituality,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, n. 2 (2023): 200–213, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v37i2.82>. See also Samdao, “Spirituality and Personhood,” note 12; Zorinthara, “Forging a Third Space for Spirituality and Social Justice,” note 8; and Nyunt, “Journey to the Light,” note 15.

conventional understandings of “the theological,” and of similarly narrow notions of “the spiritual”; it also locates and positions concrete human beings within a people’s pluralistic and, therefore, always, and already contradictory, antagonistic, and agonistic histories, allowing thereby for an appreciation of their stories, songs, poetry, liturgies, arts; their personal and political struggles; and their economic and cultural institutions—not only as embodiments of facticity but also as practices of care and belonging, even with the spiritualities of “drawing near to God.”

Fourth, the aspiration towards Asian Christian spiritualities is methodologically and existentially interrupted by what I have called the ecological question posed by the experience not only of Otherness within an ecological whole but also of its spatial, temporal, and locational limits, that is, of life and death, even premature, untimely death.<sup>23</sup> And while such aspirations must refuse the temptations of both the ecocentric and anthropocentric, Asian Christian spiritualities cannot be extricated from human subjectivity even as such an ecologically situated subjectivity still rests with human beings and the communities to which they belong and that includes the responsibility for the Other and others. In this sense, Asian Christian spiritualities are returned to their originary home, namely, human agency, which is not necessarily their point of origin or exclusive destination but a way of being-in-the-world. Spiritual practices turn out to be less of a set of strategies, tactics, or ideological forms that an individual implements “to reach God,” and the human being turns out to be less a voluntarist, possessive/acquisitive individual *citizen* and more an entanglement of agency, practice, spirituality, and ecology. In this context, Asian Christian spiritualities turn out to be fundamental *structured* relationships, among subjects and subjectivities—ecologically situated—that have to do not only with the individual capacities to decide, but, perhaps, equally important, with the mutual and reciprocal creation and (re)creation of the ecological conditions under which peoples and communities are able to decide and be responsible for their multistranded pasts, their contingent presents, their open futures, and their relationship to the Transcendent in their lives.

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23 E. Fernandez, “Disciples of the Green Spirit: Eco-Justice Spirituality in the Critical Asian Context,” *Asia Journal Theology*, 38, n. 1 (2024): 17–32, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.126>.

More than the *multiplicity* of subjects and subject positions are at stake here, however; their *specificity* is equally important. For one's time, space, and place are of fundamental significance to the question, not only of theologies, but also of spiritualities—and their transformation, that is, the creation and nurture of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better. Performatively, this could mean that Asian Christian spiritualities may have to be unequivocally engaged in ensuring, for example, that diasporic communities are (re)presented at the table where their lives are being discussed. This is not mere research strategy either. Exploring the connections and distinctions, as well as linking these diverse practices of communities located *both in Asia and in the Asian diaspora*, is a fundamental critique of the logics, assumptions, legacies, and practices of 1648 that continue to privilege and legitimize modern state-centric apparatuses as the primary expression of community, thereby obscuring, if not (mis)representing, not to mention compromising the modalities, the explanatory powers, and the necessary applicability—in other words, the relevance and truthfulness—of spiritualities and the realities they encompass, and that they cannot contain.

#### FIFTH MEDITATION: TRAJECTORIES AND ORIENTING RITUALS

We are naturally driven by self-interest; it's necessary to survive. But we need wise self-interest that is generous and cooperative, taking others' interests into account. Cooperation comes from friendship, friendship comes from trust, and trust comes from kindheartedness. Once you have a genuine sense of concern for others, there's no room for cheating, bullying, or exploitation; instead, you can be honest, truthful, and transparent in your conduct. Be compassionate.<sup>24</sup>

... when you look for God, God is in the look of your eyes.<sup>25</sup>

What do these meditations require of us and our vocations as theological educators of Asian/Asian descent/adoption for the purpose of repairing our profoundly fractured world? Let me suggest three

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24 The Dalai Lama, "Why Leaders Should Be Mindful, Selfless, and Compassionate," *The Harvard Business Review*, February 20, 2019.

25 Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, in *Rumi: The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks with John Moyne (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 13.

possible commitments that are necessary conditions for Asian Christian spiritualities.

First, the practice of and commitment to rituals of deliberation. More than mere speech, deliberation encompasses the whole range of participatory practices that recognize and affirm not only the diversity but often the inequality of ecclesial and religious institutions, including faith-based organizations, celebrating and challenging difference as constitutive of community, but also of meaningful and direct participation in and responsibility for political, economic, cultural, and spiritual change. The stories of both Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar are illustrative.<sup>26</sup> Deliberation is a dialogical practice, including listening, speaking, eating together; and dialogue, which is more than a conversation, often involves not only continuity and change, conflict and collaboration, and the creation of justice or “right relationships,” but also silence, withdrawal, releasement, even a journeying through the “dark night of the soul” into what Martin Heidegger called “clearing.”<sup>27</sup> Such dialogue presupposes the normative methodological and dispositional necessity of translation.

Second, the practice of and commitment to creating, nurturing, defending, and embodying rituals of “the common,” that is, the *res publica*—the “public thing.” The “common” is the space for (contextual) difference carved out by deliberating communities as they seek shared understanding while recognizing their shared contexts, their profound diversities and differences, and their human specie identity. “Community” is not only about the aggregation of groups based exclusively on racial/ethnic, gender, class, sexual orientation or ecclesial identities or solidarities; but it is also about *sites of engagement* where human beings recognize and affirm their mutual obligations and relationships while simultaneously accepting not only the norms of tolerance, decency, hospitality, but also

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26 Susan Hayward, “Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: Don’t Ignore the Religious Dimensions,” <https://www.justsecurity.org/75953/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-dont-ignore-the-religious-dimensions/> (accessed April 1, 2024); “Conflict in Myanmar: Buddhism Case Study, Violence and Peace,” <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/religion-context/case-studies/violence-peace/conflict-myanmar> (accessed April 1, 2024).

27 “In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting....Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are.” Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 53.

of radical, principled inclusion—that accepts the error, if not sin, of exceptionalism that many expressions of Christianity are guilty of, though not exclusively so.

Third, the practice of and commitment to rituals of truthfulness, truth-seeking, and truth-saying. More than data or demonstrated factual/counterfactual correspondence or coherence to some a priori ideology, logic, or logos, truth is about careful, caring disclosure—of bringing into presence and understanding of the worlds we inhabit, which is a *project* of differentiation, formation, and translation that “maintains a crucial reference to the world’s horizon as a space of human relations...of meaning held in common...of signification or possible signification,” not only of meaning-making, but of embodied meaning.<sup>28</sup>

Truthfulness, even speaking truth to power, cannot be extricated from utopian thinking that is not just about hope, but about what St. Augustine in his *Tractates on the First Letter of John* calls “the exercise of holy desire” for that which is “not yet.”<sup>29</sup> This is not an apocalyptic trope describing the future; rather, it is an *orientation* in the present, a point of entry, a departure, but not a final destination. This kind of thinking illustrates not only both political and epistemic transcendence but also underscores the importance of combining critical consciousness, creative imagination, and disciplined “detachment” (*Abgeschiedenheit*) reflected in the work of Meister Eckhart,<sup>30</sup> which is not about renouncing the world, but engaging it in its fullness without being imprisoned or captivated by it.

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28 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2007), 33–55.

29 “The entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that when he comes you may see and be utterly satisfied... this is how God deals with us. Simply by making us wait he increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given to us. So, my brethren, let us continue to desire, for we shall be filled.” *Saint Augustine (On John 4, 6), St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, 112-124; Tractates on the First Epistle of John: Fathers of the Church a New Translation*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

30 Meister Eckhart, “On Detachment,” in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, with Foreword by Bernard McGinn, trans. Maurice O’C. Walsche (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 567-576.



**SIXTH MEDITATION:  
TOWARD A MATERIALIST UNDERSTANDING  
OF SPIRITUALITY**

Spirituality in Islam (*Ruhhaniyyat*) is characterized by a deep connection with Allah that influences an individual's sense of self-worth, meaning, and interconnectedness with others.<sup>31</sup>

You will walk hand in hand with all the Ancestral Teachers ... the hair of your eyebrows entangled with theirs, seeing with the same eyes.<sup>32</sup>

In the Third and Fourth Meditations of this essay, I suggested that one way of thinking through the notion of Asian Christian spiritualities is by deploying the metaphor of the “body” with specific attention given to the histories (time), geographies (space), and contextualities (place) of Asia. In the Sixth and Seventh Meditations, I want to explore the significance of “real bodies” for Asian Christian spiritualities given its uniqueness as both “finite” and “infinite,” around which there appears to be agreement in all the articles in these volumes, mine included, but which, ironically, sometimes wanders into the binaries of matter and spirit, resulting in either a Docetism or a Manichaeism that historic Christianity has already repudiated.

It is well to be reminded that arguments for relationality (and therefore embodiment), transcendence (and therefore spirituality), and difference (and therefore incommensurability), particularly as they are deployed in this essay and those in these volumes under conditions of diaspora, are not new. The religious traditions of the world have contributed their own share of counter traditions that sought a more “integrated” understanding of human beings: Christianity had its mystics, Islam had its Sufis, Judaism had its *kabbalists*, and the religions of indigenous peoples had their shamans. These traditions addressed the inextricable connections between work,

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31 Khalid Hussain, *Essential of Islamic Studies* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2020), 469-490.

32 Wu-men Hui-k'ai, *The Book of Mu: Essential Writings on Zen's Most Important Koan*, ed. James Ishmael Ford and Melissa Myozen Blacker (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2011), 19.

love, and politics—as questions of the “religious” and the “spiritual.”<sup>33</sup> As well, the argument of difference is not simply about what is not “the same,” but rather about what is “incommensurable,” “Wholly Other,” “impossible,” “apocalyptic”—in other words, that which is “yet to come.”<sup>34</sup>

In fact, the realities of the past twenty-five years: from the return of “culture to international relations,” to the religious wars of the post–World War II era (those conflicts waged in the name of supposedly eternal, transhistorical values, such as between India and Pakistan, Israel and its Arab neighbors, and “the West and the Rest”), to the failures of US public policy, not only in Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia, but now again on the Palestinian question, but also in Rwanda, as well as in the US (in relation to peoples of color, for example, on immigration, even homeland “security” and racial profiling)—indeed, even to the prognostications of a Samuel Huntington concerning the future fault lines of international and civilizational conflict or the almost religious optimism of a Francis Fukuyama—all may be read as “a return of religion”—what Derrida calls the process of “globalatinization”<sup>35</sup>—the refusal of *homo religiosus* to go away, even if they may be explained—misleadingly, I must add—as traces of an earlier, if primitive, world. The assertion, which is not terribly original, to be sure, is this: modernity failed to take seriously the reality of *homo religiosus*, and therefore failed in its own (religious) obsession to

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33 Here I am intrigued by Derrida’s notion of “the gift of life and death” as an opening to “the religious.” See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a compelling work that draws these traditions together, see Manfred Halpern, “Choosing between Ways of Life and Death and Between Forms of Democracy: An Archetypal Analysis,” *Alternatives: Global Local Political* 12, no. 1 (1987): 5-35.

34 John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 69ff.

35 Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1-78; *Derrida Today*, Special Issue: “The Deconstruction of Christianity” 6, no. 1 (2013).

enthroned humanity. If we follow its example, we will, without a doubt, do so at our own peril.<sup>36</sup>

What has this to do with “real bodies” and Asian Christian spiritualities? Perhaps nothing; maybe everything. However, several things might be said. First, under the sign of modernity, both the “body” and the “religious” were banished, at least, to the margins of mainstream discourse. Second, religious communities have continued, if not increased, to be at the forefront of change in the last half of this century, and religions, ethnicities, and cultures have become increasingly prominent in the political, economic, and military life of individuals, peoples, and states. Third, “the religious”—whether as “belief” or as “faith,” to borrow Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s nomenclature,<sup>37</sup> or of spiritualities as demonstrated in these volumes—is located, if not rooted, in the actual bodies of people—and that, often, those who have been excluded from the benefits of modernity or have been pathologized have often found meaning and hope, even courage, in their beliefs or their faiths: for example, the *comunidades eclesiales de base*, millenarian movements, as well as, and unfortunately, cults and paramilitary groups (with their spiritualities of violence).

Thus, one might say that the (re)turn to the “body”—including the political, institutional, and religious body—is nothing less than a *turning* to the rediscovery of the excluded, if not overlooked, dimensions of human experience—to grasp, as it were, the root of the matter—“man [*sic*] himself,” as Karl Marx would have put it.<sup>38</sup> The radicality of this assertion, unfortunately, has been lost to many, not least to those who proclaim their indebtedness to Marx. In fact, to grasp “the root of the matter” is

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36 This is what makes the Twin Towers (2001), and Gaza (2024), for example, so existentially illustrative, not to mention extremely challenging. It is clear that religion plays a decisive role in the self-understanding of the protagonists. Indeed, any adequate understanding of these events must take into account the place of religion, not only in terms of the self-understanding of the so-called terrorists, but equally important, of the self-understanding of those who have sought to go to war against these so-called terrorists (Israeli flags and all!).

37 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Religion: From Place to Placelessness*, photographer, Martha T. Strawn (Chicago: Center for American Places, 2010).

38 Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” *DeutschFranzösische Jahrbücher* (1844), in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> (accessed April 1, 2024).

to understand human beings as unavoidably and inextricably immersed in specific contexts (“thrown into,” if you will—*geworfen*, *Geworfenheit*), including their spiritualities—their concrete and sensuous *experience* of self, other, and world. To “grasp the root of the matter” also means to cultivate that sensibility of attentiveness to *unrepresentability* in public life (“the religious” in my language) that arises not by extricating oneself from “the root of the matter,” but rather, and precisely, as one moves even more fully and deeply into it. To put the matter aphoristically, turning to the body eventuates in the recovery of the spirit; and discovering the spirit leads to the recovery of the body.<sup>39</sup>

Here, Marx’s critique of materialism, alongside his fundamental affirmation of the human being’s *Gattungswesen*, is worth revisiting in the context of the question of Asian spiritualities, not only because it illustrates the relationship between the religious and the political, but also because it provides a credible, if *ad hominem*, method for understanding and rearticulating the relationship between the two, clearing, as it were, a pathway for encounters with that which transcends us.<sup>40</sup> Conventional wisdom turns to Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” particularly the Eleventh

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39 Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (New York: Image Books, 1980); Matthew Fox, *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh: Lessons for Transforming Evil in Soul and Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1999).

40 Gayne Nerney, “On the Philosophical Use of *Ad Hominem* Argument in Nietzsche, Marx, and Dewey,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27, n. 2 ((June 1987): 151-159. My interest in Marx for these meditations on Asian spiritualities is threefold: one, his philosophy of internal relations (a social ontology); two, his method of abstraction (dialectics); and three, his materialist understanding of the human whose *Gattungswesen*—“species being”—is a dialectical articulation of human creativity, work (labor), and transformation tied fundamentally to actual human bodies. When shorn of traces of their Hegelian idealism, they provide both a basis for the articulation of “the political” as inextricably related to concrete, sensuous human production, reproduction, and representation, and a recognition of “transcendence” or alterity at the heart of these materialities. See Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988); see also Carol Gould, *Marx’s Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx’s Theory of Social Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Thesis,<sup>41</sup> to ground its argument for the primacy of action, and therefore, it is asserted, for the return of “the body” into the *res publica*. This, in fact, is a misleading, if seductive, interpretation of Marx, not least because the argument for the primacy of action *vis-à-vis* thought already accepts the dichotomy between action and thought, theory and practice. Such an argument also uncritically equates “action” with the “body.” In fact, it is the question of materialism, posed by Marx in his “Theses on Feuerbach,” particularly the First Thesis, that provides the fundamental opening, not only for the (re)turn to “the body” but also for the return of “the religious.” He writes,

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active side* was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.

Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. Hence, in “Das Wesen des Christenthums,” he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical manifestation. Hence, he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary,” of “practical-critical” activity.<sup>42</sup>

Surely, Marx faults Feuerbach for failing to grasp the significance of “revolutionary,” “practical-critical activity.” I want to suggest, however, that this failure is not, in the first instance, about accepting the primacy of the “ideal” over the “real,” the “material” over the “spiritual.” Rather, the failure is in the articulation of a materialism that *separates* “objectivity” from “subjectivity” or of “theory” from “practice,” that is, the misrecognition of “revolutionary,” “practical-critical” activity. Marx’s “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” written at the end of 1843–January

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41 “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”

42 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, trans. W. Lough (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13-15.

1844 and published in the *DeutschFranzösische Jahrbücher* makes this even more clear. He writes,

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but *theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses*. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man [*sic*] the root is man [*sic*] himself.... As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy.... The only practically possible liberation...is liberation that proceeds from the standpoint of the theory which proclaims man [*sic*] to be the highest being for man [*sic*].<sup>43</sup>  
[Emphasis mine]

This revolutionary, critical practice, particularly the human-human interaction as *a material force* to which Marx alludes in the struggle of the proletariat, is what this essay has been calling “the political.” In contrast, the *locations* where and how these struggles occur—the aggregation, disaggregation, and reaggregation of the “masses” into the proletariat, as a material force after having been gripped by theory—are what this essay understands “the public” to include. In this context, Marx does not specify but only demonstrates *ad hominem*:<sup>44</sup> i) *when* the masses are turned into the proletariat [from *Klasse an sich* to *Klasse für sich*], that is, when they become “radical,” or ii) *how* theory becomes a material force or in what ways it “grasps the masses,” or iii) *what* the relationships are between the weapon of criticism and the criticism by weapons. It is interesting to note that what these events have in common is an underlying *unrepresentability*, which in this essay I call “transcendence” or where I locate the “religious moment.” In fact, the significance of the “religious” is not only in its being a moment of unrepresentability that is encountered when one is brought face-to-face with the “root of the matter,” but also in the fact that by this very unrepresentability it becomes a condition for all criticism—criticism that aspires to the transformative.

43 Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” note 38. See also Fox, *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh*, note 39.

44 Nerney, “On the Philosophical Use of *Ad Hominem* Argument in Nietzsche, Marx, and Dewey,” note 40.

Hence, the authors in these volumes are correct in encouraging, through their work, attention to the factual reality of religions and *Asian* spiritual life in the development of Asian Christian spiritualities. However, even as these meditations affirm this important claim and admit that it is necessary to carefully attend to the substantive, methodological, metatheoretical and political/institutional dimensions of what “factual reality” means and its significance for Asian Christian spiritualities, they also insist that such a maneuver is fundamentally flawed, not to mention insufficient, if it uncritically allows factual reality exclusively to dictate political action or spiritual practice. For the task is not only to report on the factual, but also to articulate the conditions under which the factual becomes possible—hence the insistence in these meditations on giving explicit and focused attention to those regions of discourse in which “the religious” is believed to reside or, at least, out of which it arises. To put the matter in Christian terms, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, RSV).

### SEVENTH MEDITATION: TOWARD A DETACHED TRANSGRESSIVE SPIRITUALITY?

Transformation is the creation of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better.<sup>45</sup>

You cannot see the seer of seeing; you cannot hear the hearer of hearing; you cannot think of the thinker of thinking; you cannot know the knower of knowing. This is your self that is within everything. What is other than this is suffering.<sup>46</sup>

In this Seventh and final Meditation, I want to offer some concluding reflections on what I want to call a detached transgressive spirituality, which, understood as philosophy, method, and practice, might offer a pathway to address some of the challenges with which the authors in these volumes appear to be demonstrably concerned.

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45 Manfred Halpern, *Transforming the Personal, Political, Historical, and Sacred in Theory and Practice*, ed. David Abalos (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2009).

46 *The Upaniṣads*, trans. and ed. Valerie J. Roebuck (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 46.

One of the shared markers of spirituality in most religions that the authors in these volumes engage with is the notion of transcendence, whether temporal, spatial, or locational. What is interesting about these notions of transcendence is that while they point to Otherness in its many forms, they also function as a reminder of the finiteness of human beings in the face of the infinite—even of infinity. In effect, even as the many forms of spirituality herald openness, possibility, and expansiveness—even hope or happiness—beyond one’s location, it also serves as an assertion of fallibility, a “limit situation,” radically expressed in what I have called elsewhere a *structural unrepresentability*.<sup>47</sup> Such a paradox, which may also be an *aporia*—this unavoidable, if necessary, limitation could be transformed, as it has been, into everyday practical critiques embodied in, for example, the many prophetic faith-based voices, including women’s, indigenous people’s, and LGBTQIA movements throughout Asia that make transgressions possible, making it *imaginable* to undermine, subvert, put into question those dominative practices—particularly of pseudo-universals and false dichotomies that discipline present-day experience, even of our most prized notions of spirituality (hence as noted earlier, human/divine, matter/spirit, immanence/transcendence, and so forth).<sup>48</sup> Limitations can be transformed not only into sites of human imagination, but also of located, *material spiritualities* that decenter logocentric idealisms that plague modern thought and practice.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, such a limitation—finitude, if you will, by the very fact of the infinity that embraces it—transcendence, if you will, marks a certain kind of discontinuity, a qualitative difference, that in its “detachment,” that is, the process of “detachment” carries with it the possibility of transformation, that is, “the creation of the fundamentally

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47 Another way to think about this “moment of unrepresentability” is as a question of the relationship between immanence and transcendence which marks a detachment—a discontinuity, if you will—between the two. See, for example, *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

48 Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

49 Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology, Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 476.



new that is also qualitatively better,” to paraphrase Manfred Halpern, and to which all religions seem to aspire.<sup>50</sup>

Transgression is not only a creature of the *via negativa* but of the *via positiva* as well: the former emphasizing the limits of human thought and action not only about God or in relation to God, but also of the “human condition”; the latter acknowledging that the self-same human thought and action bears some truth, albeit incomplete, about God and the “human condition.”

The possibility of transgression rests, largely, on a critical consciousness and a creative imagination that are not imprisoned by the logic of modernity nor bound to conventional wisdom. This is not an absolute rejection of tradition, for indeed, the imagination requires that it be at home with memory; nor is this a flight into a critical consciousness that is a disembodied emancipatory interest. As I tried to suggest earlier, tradition and emancipation reside in the real bodies of human beings—bodies that are born, live, and die—or what the Third Meditation calls “diasporic bodies.” One of the lessons we have learned from spirituality, particularly from the feminist/womanist movements, is the impossibility of dissociating mind and body, reason and passion, thought and action.<sup>51</sup> Attentiveness to both deconstruction and reconstruction, to embodied, that is, materialist critique and creativity are necessary if one is to avoid not only the idealism that infects the worlds of modernity—even postmodernity—but also the illusions that the simple reversal of the modernist logic or the rejection of modernist practices inoculate us from their destructive effects or guarantees their transformation.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, one of the lessons of the mystics, Sufis, and *Kabbalists*, as well as of the shamans of indigenous religions, is that all thought and action, if it aspires to the transformative—what Marx referred to as concrete sensuous reality as the foundation for revolutionary (read “transformative”) practice noted previously—are always and already

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50 Halpern, *Transforming the Personal, Political, Historical and Sacred in Theory and Practice*, note 45.

51 Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-Lan, Seung Ai Yang, eds., *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

52 For a different view of transformation, see Kees Waaijman, “Transformation: A Key Word in Spirituality,” <https://repository.uhn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/222553/222553.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed April 1, 2024).

horizoned by transcendence, by a structural unrepresentability, that keeps the possibility of thought and action, including spiritual practices, open to our multiple pasts, presents, and futures.

That said, while transcendence is a necessary condition for a transgressive spirituality described above, it is an insufficient condition, in part because by its very nature it is beyond representation, hence the *via negativa*. How, then, can a spirituality, especially a transgressive spirituality, orient itself within it for the purposes for which it is called forth? Here, Meister Eckhart's notion of "detachment" offers some insight. First, detachment as "self-emptying" provides a pathway for travelling through "distractive" transcendence that could free us from that which imprisons thought and action; second, it requires dispositions, including human "receptivity," that allow God to work "where He finds readiness or creates it"; third, it offers the possibility of a face-to-face encounter through "the infusion of grace" with the God-beyond-God who, theologically put, is at the heart of the life of the Spirit, and with whom the human spirit seeks not only intimacy, but union.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, this transgressive spirituality is fundamentally transformed by a "detachment" that requires self-emptying, human receptivity, and intimacy with the Godhead (Eckhart's term) as its spiritual core or, in the language

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53 Eckhart, "On Detachment," note 30. "Now I ask, 'What is the object of pure detachment?' My answer is that the object of pure detachment is neither this nor that. It rests on absolutely nothing, and I will tell you why: pure detachment rests on the highest, and he is at his highest, in whom God can work all His will. But God cannot work all His will in all hearts, for, although God is almighty, He can only work where He finds readiness or creates it. I say 'creates it' on account of St. Paul, because in him God found no readiness, but made him ready by infusion of grace. And so I say God works according as He finds us ready. His working is different in a man and in a stone. Here is an example from nature. If you heat a baker's oven and put in it dough of oats, barley, rye, and wheat, there is only one heat in the oven, but it does not have the same effect on the different kinds of dough, for one turns into fine bread, the second coarser, and the third coarser still. And that is not the fault of the heat, it is due to the materials which are unlike. In the same way God does not work alike in all our hearts: He works as He finds readiness and receptivity. Now in whatever heart there is this or that, there may be something in 'this' or 'that' which God cannot bring to the highest peak. And so, if the heart is to be ready to receive the highest, it must rest on absolutely nothing, and in that lies the greatest potentiality which can exist. For when the detached heart rests on the highest, that can only be on nothing, since that has the greatest receptivity," 572-573.

of Eckhart, the “detached heart.” Here lies the possibility of a detached transgressive spirituality from which we can all learn.

**About author**

Lester Edwin J. RUIZ (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is the director of accreditation and global engagement, Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada.