



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**A Three-Part Sinfonia:
Queer Asian Reflections on the Trinity**

Patrick S. Cheng
pcheng@eds.edu

Part of
New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century
(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),
edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez

Growing up in a first-generation Chinese American immigrant household in the San Francisco Bay Area, I experienced many interesting cultural rituals, not the least of which were weekly piano lessons. My parents made sure that my piano teacher came to our house week after week, like clockwork, for well over a decade – from elementary school through high

school. While my classmates were playing after-school sports, going out on dates, or getting drunk at parties, I was sitting at home, dutifully practicing my Mozart or Chopin.

Although there were some aspects of piano lessons that I thoroughly disliked (for example, annual student recitals), there were other aspects that I did like, including playing J.S. Bach's inventions and sinfonias.¹ These two- and three-part contrapuntal compositions were originally keyboard exercises that Bach wrote for his students. I was fascinated from an early age by the intricate and distinct melody lines that sang out in different registers, yet all came together (surprisingly!) to form a single, unified piece.

Today, as an openly gay Asian American Christian, I can't help but think that my love for Bach's inventions and sinfonias during my teenage years was a subconscious attempt to weave together the various aspects of my identity, which included my sexuality, race, and spirituality. Like the individual melodies in a Bach three-part sinfonia, these three aspects of my identity were simultaneously present in different registers of my life. The challenge, however, was – and remains – bringing these three aspects of my life together into a unified whole, just as Bach did with his three-part sinfonias.

In this essay, I will reflect upon my experiences as an openly gay Asian American Christian. In particular, I will argue that classical Christian trinitarian theology – like a Bach three-part sinfonia – can help queer Asian American Christians to understand better the complex interplay among the distinct “melodies” of sexuality, race, and spirituality that exist in our lives. Specifically, I will argue that the three classical trinitarian concepts of (1) *vestigia trinitatis*

¹ J.S. Bach wrote a series of two-part inventions, BWV 772-786, and three-part sinfonias, BWV 787-801. These works are commonly known as Bach's two-part and three-part inventions.

(vestiges of the Trinity), (2) *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* (one substance, three persons), and (3) *perichoresis* (mutual interpenetration) are all ways in which queer Asian American Christians can better understand ourselves and our relationship to God.

Queer Asian Christians

During the last twenty years, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (“LGBT” or “queer”) Asian Americans have come out and written about living as double minorities – that is, individuals who are both queer and Asian – in North America.² One common theme in these writings is a strong sense of metaphorical homelessness. That is, queer Asian Americans are never quite “home” in either the LGBT community or the Asian American community. Although we may have one foot in each world, we are never fully part of either.

For example, queer Asian Americans never quite feel at home in the predominantly white, middle-class LGBT community because of our experiences of racism. This often takes the form of either being fetishized on the one hand or completely ignored on the other. Nor do queer Asian Americans ever feel quite at home in the predominantly straight Asian American community because of our experiences of homophobia. This is particularly true in East Asian cultures with Confucian roots that place a heavy emphasis on “family values” and the importance of preserving the ancestral lineage through reproduction.

² See, for example, Quang Bao and Hanya Yanagihara, eds., *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America* (New York: Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 2000); Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Sharon Lim-Hing, ed., *The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women* (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1994).

As Eric Wat, a gay Asian American writer, describes it, many queer Asian Americans are “run over at the intersection of racism and homophobia.” That is, we are “forever left in the middle of the road, unacceptable to those at either side of the street.”³ Like Jesus, who “has no place to lay his head,”⁴ queer Asian Americans (and also other queer people of color) often experience a profound sense of homelessness in terms of our identities. We are unable to lay our heads down in either the LGBT or the Asian American community.

This sense of metaphorical homelessness is magnified for queer Asian Americans who also happen to be Christians. For example, the experience of racism is intensified for queer Asian American Christians who worship in religious communities that are predominantly white. These communities are generally unaware and/or silent about the racism experienced by Asian Americans – who are still perceived as exotic foreigners and outsiders despite having been in the United States since the 1700s⁵ – on a daily basis. Similarly, the experience of homophobia is intensified for queer Asian Christians who worship in evangelical and fundamentalist religious communities that use the Bible and church teachings to condemn LGBT people and same-sex relationships.

Finally, in addition to the above experiences of racism and homophobia, there is a third dimension of metaphorical homelessness for queer Asian American Christians. This third dimension takes the form of extreme secularism that is overtly hostile to organized religion, often

³ Eric C. Wat, “Preserving the Paradox: Stories from a Gay-Loh,” in Leong, *Asian American Sexualities*, 79.

⁴ Luke 9:58 (NRSV).

⁵ See Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Detroit, Michigan: Twayne, 1991), 25.

seen in both the LGBT community and the Asian American community. In particular, there is frequently overt hostility expressed towards organized religion, particularly Christianity, within progressive and activist LGBT and Asian American circles.

In recent years, a number of queer Asian American Christians have written about their experiences of dealing with the three-pronged challenges of homophobia, racism, and extreme secularism. This includes individuals such as “Michael Kim,” Eric Law, Jeanette Lee, Leng Lim, and myself.⁶ Jeanette Lee, a self-identified biracial lesbian, writes that she is most alive when she is able to integrate her sexuality, race, and spirituality, which is a view that is shared by many queer Asian American Christians. According to Lee, her “most meaningful prayer/activism” occurs when she can “address the intersections of race and sexuality” and thus bring all three parts of her identity together.⁷

⁶ See, for example, Patrick S. Cheng, “Hybridity and the Decolonization of Asian American and Queer Theologies,” Postcolonial Theology Network, entry posted October 17, 2009, <http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=23694574926&topic=11026> (accessed September 30, 2010); Patrick S. Cheng, “Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 119-33; Patrick S. Cheng, “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience,” *Spiritus* 6/2 (2006): 234-40; “Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. Marvin Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 105-18; Patrick S. Cheng, “Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20/2 (2004): 103-07; Michael Kim, “Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World,” in *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices*, eds. Arar Han and John Hsu (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 139-48 (written under a pseudonym); Eric H.F. Law, “A Spirituality of Creative Marginality,” in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 343-36; Jeanette Mei Gim Lee, “Queerly a Good Friday,” in *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists*, ed. Kevin K. Kumashiro (Binghamton, New York: Harrington Park, 2004), 81-86; Leng Leroy Lim, “‘The Bible Tells Me to Hate Myself’: The Crisis in Asian American Spiritual Leadership,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 315-22; Leng Leroy Lim, “Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings,” in Eng and Hom, *Q&A*, 323-34.

⁷ See Lee, “Queerly a Good Friday,” 82. Other individual who have taken on leadership roles with respect to queer Asian ministries in recent years include Sharon Hwang Colligan, Jonipher Kwong, Debbie Lee, Elizabeth Leung, and Boon Lin Ngo.

There have also been a growing number of organizations across the United States that focus on issues relating to queer Asian American Christians, including Queer Asian Spirit in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the Network on Religion and Justice for API LGBT People in Berkeley, California (“NRJ”); as well as the Asian Pacific Islander Roundtable (“API Roundtable”) project of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (“CLGS”) at the Pacific School of Religion.⁸

Trinity and Asian Americans

As noted above, I believe that classical trinitarian theology can help queer Asian American Christians to understand better the complex interplay of sexuality, race, and spirituality in our lives. Before doing so, however, I want to explore how various Asian American theologians have written about the Trinity from their own particular social locations.

For example, Jung Young Lee, the late Korean-American theologian and professor at Drew University, wrote *The Trinity in Asian Perspective*, which explores the Trinity from an Asian American perspective. In the book, Lee proposes several creative models for understanding the Trinity. One such model is the “yin-yang” model of Asian cosmology based upon the Daoist circular symbol that contains both darkness and light. For Lee, this model consists of three parts: (1) *yin* (darkness), (2) *yang* (light), and (3) *in-ness* (i.e., the light within the darkness and the darkness within the light).

⁸ See, e.g., Queer Asian Spirit, <http://www.queerasianspirit.org> (accessed September 30, 2010); Network on Religion and Justice for API LGBT People, <http://www.netrj.org> (accessed September 30, 2010); Asian Pacific Islander Roundtable at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, http://www.clgs.org/programs/api_roundtable (accessed September 30, 2010).

Another model for the Trinity is what Lee calls interfaith “trilogue,” which consists of two religions that are in dialogue with each other, and also a third element of inclusivity that is defined as a mutual commitment by each of the interfaith dialogue partners to live authentically within both traditions.⁹ For Lee, these trinitarian models are important because they contain examples of “both-and” thinking, which transcends “either-or” thinking and is an important part of the Asian and Asian American experience.

Similarly, Peter Phan, a Vietnamese American theologian and Roman Catholic priest who is a professor at Georgetown University, has proposed a Vietnamese American trinitarian theology in *Christianity with an Asian Face*. Phan draws upon the Vietnamese “*triet ly tam tai*” world view, which is translated as the “three-element philosophy.” This philosophy consists of three components that are deeply connected with each other: (1) heaven, (2) humanity, and (3) earth.

According to Phan, these three components are trinitarian because they are distinct but also deeply interdependent. Phan draws upon classical trinitarian concepts, including *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling or interpenetration) and *koinonia* (community or fellowship). For Phan, the three components of heaven, humanity, and earth are “united in a *perichoresis* or *koinonia* of life and activities” and “inscribed in the structure of reality itself.”¹⁰

By contrast with Lee and Phan, Asian American feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock has criticized the use of classical trinitarian theology as inherently patriarchal. In *Journeys by Heart*, Brock argues that the “unholy trinity” of “father-son-holy ghost” must be

⁹ Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 212-19.

¹⁰ Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), 243-44.

liberated from patriarchy. This can only be done by a feminist christology that exposes “the brokenheartedness at the center of that trinity” and reinterprets Christian doctrine in “nonoppressive ways.” For Brock, the classical trinitarian formulas are reflections of “patriarchal family relationships” in which all members are “possessions and extensions of the reigning authority figure,” whereas true intimacy – whether inside or outside the Trinity – involves “interdependence” and not merely “fusion.”¹¹

Other Asian American feminist theologians, such as Kwok Pui-lan and Anne Joh, have reimagined classical trinitarian doctrines in light of their own social locations. Kwok, who is one of the strongest allies of LGBT Asian Christians in the theological academy, approvingly cites the work of Virginia Burrus, who argues that trinitarian doctrine should be used not so much to “find out truths about God,” but rather to “trace the cultural shift in the conception of masculinity in late antiquity.”¹²

Similarly, Joh argues that it might be possible to redeem the internal relationships of the Trinity from patriarchy if “the identity of the Father and the Son are almost completely fused.” For Joh, this fusion would result in a radical way of understanding God. That is, God represents

¹¹ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), xii-xiii.

¹² See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 11. Some of Kwok’s work relating to the intersections of sexuality and race include Kwok, “Asian and Asian American Churches,” in *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2007), 59-62; Kwok, “Body and Pleasure in Postcoloniality,” in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London: SCM, 2010), 31-43; Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 100-21; and Kwok, “Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus,” in Ellison and Douglas, *Sexuality and the Sacred*, 119-34.

“radical inclusivity” insofar as God the Father has incorporated God the Son – as the “stranger/ Other” or the “abject” one on the cross – into God’s very own being.¹³

In the end, all of these Asian American theologians – as well as others¹⁴ – draw upon their specific social locations to construct contextual trinitarian theologies that speak powerfully to their communities. As an openly gay Asian American systematic theologian, my writings have focused on reclaiming classical Christian doctrines in light of the LGBT and Asian American experience. I have found this focus to be especially important for LGBT Christians – whether or not Asian American – who have felt excluded by Christian theological discourse but who still wish to remain squarely within the Christian tradition. For example, I have written about rethinking the doctrines of sin and grace for LGBT people while still preserving classical notions of original sin.¹⁵ Similarly, I have taken initial steps towards constructing a comprehensive systematic theology from the lens of LGBT experience and queer theory.¹⁶

While I am grateful for – and have benefitted greatly from – the insights of feminist and other Asian American theologians with respect to their critique of the Trinity, my own project here is to reclaim classical Christian trinitarian discourse so that those of us who are queer and Asian American can reclaim our rightful place within the larger Body of Christ. As such, I

¹³ Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 89.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of trinitarian theology in the Asian and Asian American contexts with a focus on Jung Young Lee and Raimundo Panikkar, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 307-45.

¹⁵ See Cheng, “Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today.”

¹⁶ See Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011).

believe that queer Asian American Christians can use trinitarian theology as a helpful resource for our own theological reflection, and it is to this task that I now turn.

Trinity and Queer Asian Christians

Like the Bach three-part sinfonia, classical trinitarian theology can help queer Asian American Christians reflect more deeply about ourselves and our relationship to God. In particular, three classical trinitarian concepts are especially helpful for this theological reflection: (1) *vestigia trinitatis* (vestiges of the Trinity), (2) *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* (one substance, three persons), and (3) *perichoresis* (mutual interpenetration).

First, the concept of *vestigia trinitatis* – that is, vestiges or “footprints” of the Trinity are imprinted upon the human soul – can help queer Asian American Christians develop a better sense of self-love by affirming that we are in fact made in the image and likeness of God. Second, the concept of *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* – that is, the Trinity is simultaneously one being in three persons – can help queer Asian American Christians embrace our wholeness and feel less fragmented in terms of our sexuality, race, and spirituality. Third, the concept of *perichoresis* – that is, the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity – can help queer Asian American Christians to affirm the fluidity of our sexual, racial, and spiritual identities and also give us hope that something new and wonderful is constantly emerging from the interplay of these categories.

1. **Self-Love and *Vestigia Trinitatis***

One issue for many queer Asian American Christians is the lack of self-love. This is not surprising because it is difficult to love oneself when one is told repeatedly that she or he is not created in the image and likeness of God. This is particularly the case for many queer Asian American Christians who were raised in conservative ethnic religious communities. In my experience pastoring to the queer Asian American Christian community during the last decade, each Asian American ethnic group has a dominant religious community that is often the source of great pain for its LGBT members and their families: Presbyterian for Korean Americans, Baptist for Chinese Americans, Roman Catholic for Filipino and Vietnamese Americans, and Methodist for Japanese Americans.

Indeed, many Asian American churches were involved with the passage in November 2008 of California Proposition 8, the notorious amendment to the California state constitution that eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry under civil law. In fact, one of the official sponsors of Proposition 8 was Hak-Shing William Tam, the secretary of a Chinese American evangelical Christian group, who claimed in a 2008 letter to supporters of Proposition 8 that same-sex marriages would lead to prostitution and pedophilia, even though such claims were not supported by empirical data or scientific evidence.¹⁷

It is not surprising that many queer Asian American Christians suffer from self-hate and self-loathing as a result of the lies about us that are spread by homophobic Asian American religious communities. Indeed, many of us have a hard time coming out to our families and

¹⁷ See Gerry Shih, "Same-Sex Marriage Case: Arguments at Court," *New York Times* (January 14, 2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/us/15sfbriefs.html> (accessed September 30, 2010).

friends because we fear that we will be labeled as heretics and expelled from our faith communities. According to “Michael Kim,” a closeted gay Korean American Christian, coming out to the Korean American Christian community would be “quite literally, the ultimate failure – moral, social, and personal all at once.”¹⁸ Often times we voluntarily exclude ourselves from these communities because we do not believe that we are truly loved and made in the image and likeness of God.

I believe that the classical trinitarian concept of the *vestigia trinitatis* can help to counter the feelings of self-hate and self-loathing that many queer Asian American Christians experience and foster a greater sense of self-love. According to this concept, vestiges or “footprints” of the triune God are imprinted upon the human soul. This is because, according to the Book of Genesis, the human being is created in the image and likeness of God.¹⁹ Indeed, the only reason the soul desires to return to God is because an image of its creator – here, the trinitarian God – has been imprinted upon it.

Augustine of Hippo explains the concept of the *vestigia trinitatis* in his great work on the Trinity, *De trinitate*. Specifically, Augustine argues that the three-fold nature of the Trinity is imprinted upon the tripartite structure of the human mind, which consists of one’s own (1) memory (*memoria sui*), (2) understanding (*intelligentia sui*), and (3) will (*voluntas sui*). However, these functions of the mind are not three separate or distinct substances, but rather one unified substance of the mind. In other words, each function is integrated with itself and the two other functions: (1) the mind *remembers* that it has memory, understanding, and will; (2) the

¹⁸ Kim, “Out and About,” 147.

¹⁹ See Gen. 1:27 (NRSV).

mind *understands* that it has memory, understanding, and will; and (3) the mind *wills* memory, understanding, and will.²⁰

For queer Asian American Christians, the *vestigia trinitatis* is also imprinted upon our souls in a similar way. Specifically, vestiges or “footprints” of the Trinity can be found within our tripartite identities of being queer, Asian American, and Christian. Although each of these identities serves its own individual purpose, ultimately these sexual, racial, and spiritual identities are part of a single human being or soul. As such, like the Trinity, we are simultaneously one and three. Thus, we are called to love ourselves because we are truly made in the image and likeness of the one triune God.

In recent years, a number of unique spaces have emerged that allow queer Asian American Christians to love ourselves and recognize that we are indeed made in the image and likeness of God. One such space is the Queer Asian Spirit listserv, which is an email discussion group of queer people of Asian descent from all around the world who are interested in issues of spirituality and religion.²¹ This listserv, which was started in January of 2000, has been a place where queer Asian American Christians – as well as our friends and allies from around the world – have been able to network and create a virtual community or fellowship.

Another space that allows queer Asian Christians to love ourselves is the Emerging Queer API Religion Scholars (EQARS) group, a monthly gathering of queer API religion and theology

²⁰ See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 93-96.

²¹ See the Queer Asian Spirit listserv, <http://groups.google.com/group/queerasianspirit> (accessed on September 30, 2010), and the Queer Asian Spirit website, <http://www.queerasianspirit.org> (accessed on September 30, 2010). With the advent of social networking, the Queer Asian Spirit group also has a presence on Facebook. See Queer Asian Spirit Facebook group, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=110085042819> (accessed on September 30, 2010).

graduate students and scholars around the world that meets virtually by Skype to discuss our own writings and other matters of interest. The EQARS group – as well as the API Roundtable project of CLGS – is coordinated by Elizabeth Leung, who has been a leading voice and organizer of queer Asian Christians in recent years.

Groups like Queer Asian Spirit and EQARS have allowed many queer Asian American Christians to minister to each other, notwithstanding the physical and geographical distances that separate us. In the process of so doing, we help each other to recognize that the vestiges or “footprints” of the triune God – the *vestigia trinitatis* – have indeed been imprinted upon each of us with respect to the three-fold gifts of our sexuality, race, and spirituality.

2. Wholeness and *Mia Ousia, Treis Hypostaseis*

Another issue for many queer Asian American Christians is a profound sense of fragmentation with respect to our sexuality, race, and spirituality. In other words, queer Asian American Christians often feel the need to compartmentalize one or more of our identities, in response to the particular social context in which we find ourselves at any given moment.

For example, when queer Asian American Christians are with the larger LGBT community, many of us are forced to downplay the Asian American and Christian aspects of ourselves. This is because we often experience the twin challenges of racism and extreme secularism within the LGBT community. With respect to racism, we are often ignored or fetishized as Asian Americans within the predominantly white LGBT community. With respect to extreme secularism, we often experience a great deal of hostility against organized religion and, in particular, Christianity within the LGBT community.

Similarly, when queer Asian American Christians are with the larger Asian American community, many of us are forced to downplay the queer and Christian aspects of ourselves. This is because we often experience the twin challenges of homophobia and extreme secularism within the Asian American community. On the one hand, many Asian American communities, especially those with strong religious ties, are virulently homophobic. On the other hand, many Asian American communities that are often the most accepting of LGBT people – for example, Asian American progressive or activist groups – can be quite hostile to organized religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Finally, when queer Asian American Christians are with Christian communities, many of us are forced to downplay the queer and Asian American aspects of ourselves. This is because we often experience the twin challenges of homophobia and racism within Christian communities. With respect to homophobia, it is no great surprise that many Christian communities are hostile towards LGBT people. However, many of these communities are also unaware of their racism and the specific cultural or pastoral care needs of Asian Americans.²² For example, Zondervan, the large evangelical Christian publishing house, published a Christian comic book in 2009 called “Deadly Viper” that perpetuated a number of offensive stereotypes about Asian Americans. Zondervan apologized and withdrew the publication, but only after many Asian American Christians had complained about it.²³

²² For a discussion of issues relating to Asian Americans in the context of LGBT pastoral care, see David J. Kundtz and Bernard S. Schlager, *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 74-75. See also William Ming Liu, Derek Kenji Iwamoto, and Mark H. Chae, eds., *Culturally Responsive Counseling with Asian American Men* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

²³ See Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Zondervan Issues Apology for Publishing ‘Deadly Viper,’” *Christianity Today* (November 20, 2009), http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2009/11/zondervan_issue.html (accessed on September 30, 2010).

Time and time again, I have been told by my queer Asian American Christian sisters and brothers that, at most, “two out of three” of their identities can be affirmed, but rarely all three. For example, one can be queer and Asian American at gatherings of queer Asian Americans (such as Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York or Q-Wave) but generally not Christian. One can be Asian American and Christian at gatherings of our Asian American churches,²⁴ but generally not queer. And one can be queer and Christian at gatherings of queer Christians (such as the Metropolitan Community Churches), but generally not Asian American.²⁵ As a result, many queer Asian American Christians experience a profound sense of fragmentation.²⁶

I believe that the classical trinitarian concept of *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* (μία ουσία, τρεις υποστάσεις in the Greek, or *una substantia, tres personae* in the Latin) – that is, “one substance, three persons” – can help to counter the experience of fragmentation in many queer Asian American Christians and foster a greater sense of wholeness. This concept, also known as the Cappadocian formula, was coined in the fourth-century C.E. by the great Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Macrina the Younger.

²⁴ See Viji Nakka-Cammauf and Timothy Tseng, eds., *Asian American Christianity Reader* (Castro Valley: Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity, 2009); Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

²⁵ There are exceptions, of course, to the general rule. For example, around a dozen queer Asians and allies met during the 2010 General Conference of the Metropolitan Community Churches in Acapulco, Mexico, and discussed our ministries to queer Asian Pacific Islanders in the United States and around the world.

²⁶ For a discussion of the experience of fragmentation for queer Asian Americans, see generally Cheng, “Multiplicity and Judges 19,” 119-33. For the relationship between grace and wholeness in the lives of queer Asian American Christians, see Patrick S. Cheng, “Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today,” in Ellison and Douglas, *Sexuality and the Sacred*, 105-18.

According to the Cappadocian formula, God is both one and three. That is, the three persons of the trinitarian Godhead -- the Unbegotten (Father), the Begotten (Son), and the Procession (Holy Spirit) -- all share the same substance or common nature (*ousia*) and thus are *one* being. However, these three persons also have distinct identifying characteristics with respect to their origins and thus are also *three* persons (*hypostaseis*). This formula was adopted as the official position of the Christian Church with respect to describing the Trinity. Thus, the triune God is *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis*, or “one substance, three persons.”²⁷

Like the triune God, those of us who are queer Asian American Christians are also three and one. We are *three* because each of us brings her or his unique perspective with respect to sexuality, race, and spirituality. However, we are also *one* because each of us can relate to the shared experience of being a whole queer Asian American Christian person. This classical trinitarian understanding of ourselves based upon the Cappadocian formula of *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* can help to counter feelings of fragmentation when we are isolated from other queer Asian American Christians.

In recent years, queer Asian American Christians have been able to gather together in a number of different spaces. These spaces are valuable from a pastoral perspective because they allow us to acknowledge the complexities of ourselves in threeness and oneness. For example, in January of 2010, NRJ and APIRT sponsored a West Coast weekend retreat, “Queer Spirit, API Roots,” in Burlingame, California. Similarly, in April of 2010, Queer Asian Spirit and APIRT sponsored a day-long East Coast retreat, “Being in Wholeness,” in New York City Chinatown.

²⁷ See LaCugna, *God for Us*, 66-68.

Both events, which were well attended with around twenty participants each, allowed queer Asian American Christians – as well as queer Asian Americans from other spiritual traditions – to see ourselves as whole beings with respect to our sexualities, races, and spiritualities.

Also, a number of LGBT Asian American organizations have created spaces in recent years that allow religion or spirituality to be discussed in a “safe” manner. For example, in August of 2009, the National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Association (NQAPIA) provided a space for an interfaith meditation session at its national meeting in Seattle, Washington. Other safe spiritual spaces include a workshop on queer Asian spirituality in December 2009 at the Asian Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (APICHA) in New York City, and a panel on queer Asian spirituality in April 2010 at Q-Wave, the lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Asian American Women's group in New York City. These spaces have been valuable for queer Asian American Christians because they have allowed us to see ourselves in terms of the trinitarian formula of *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* or “one substance, three persons,” and they have helped to heal the fragmentation that so many of us have experienced.

3. Fluidity and *Perichoresis*

A final issue for many queer Asian American Christians is the misconception that our dreams and destinies are sharply defined – and limited – by our sexual, racial, and spiritual identities. In other words, many of us feel that we are held hostage by these identities, and that we are forever trapped by our three-fold marginalized status as Asian Americans, as LGBT people, and (in many secular contexts) as Christians. This can lead to a sense of despair, hopelessness, and depression.

I believe that the classical trinitarian concept of *perichoresis* (περιχωρησις in the Greek or *circumincessio* in the Latin) can help to remind queer Asian American Christians of the ultimate fluidity of our sexual, racial, and spiritual identities. *Perichoresis* – defined as the mutual indwelling and mutual interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity – was a term coined in the eighth century C.E. by the theologian John Damascene to express the intimate relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. In particular, *perichoresis* expresses the notion that each person of the Trinity is never an isolated entity to itself, but rather is always dependent upon the other two persons for its meaning.²⁸

Perichoresis also suggests that the three persons of the Trinity are engaged in a joyful, intertwined dance, since the word is derived from the Greek root word for dancing. As such, the term evokes a wonderful image of an eternal and ecstatic dance of love between the three persons of the Trinity. Just like the Bach three-part sinfonia, the dance between these persons is an intimate weaving together of three distinct strands of the Trinity that ultimately cannot be separated.

The ancient concept of *perichoresis* is remarkably consistent with the work of twentieth-century queer theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. These theorists have challenged fixed, static, or essentialist notions of sexuality, gender, and other identity categories.²⁹ Similarly, *perichoresis* challenges a fixed, static, or essentialist notion of each person of the Trinity. In other words, *perichoresis* is fundamentally queer, because it describes how the

²⁸ See LaCugna, *God for Us*, 270-78.

²⁹ See, for example, James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette, eds., *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004); Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, eds., *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

boundaries of each triune person are in a continual state of flux, constantly being interpenetrated by the other two persons.³⁰

By extension, the concept of *perichoresis* also challenges any fixed or essentialist understandings of sexual, racial, and spiritual identities for queer Asian American Christians. That is, I cannot understand what it means to be queer outside of the context of being Asian American and Christian. Neither can I understand what it means to be Asian American outside of the context of being queer and Christian. Nor can I understand what it means to be Christian outside of the context of being queer and Asian American. For me, the blurred relationship among the three persons of the Trinity—as well as my sexual, racial, and spiritual identities – are similar to notions of intersectionality in critical race theory or hybridity in postcolonial theory.³¹

Thus, I believe that *perichoresis* can help queer Asian American Christians resist the notion that we are hopelessly trapped by our marginalized identities. Rather than feeling like we are inevitably limited by these identities, *perichoresis* allows us to appreciate the fact that our beautiful inner life is always evolving and changing. Indeed, as an openly gay Asian American Christian, I can map each of my distinct identities upon each of the three persons of the Trinity, and see how these identities constantly interact in a mutually interpenetrating dance.

³⁰ For example, according to Foucault, prior to the late nineteenth century, there was no such thing as a fixed or essentialist category of the “homosexual.” There were, of course, people throughout history who had sexual relations with persons of the same sex. However, there were no universal, pre-existing labels (for example, “homosexual” or “heterosexual”) that *classified* a person primarily in terms of the sex of her or his preferred sexual partner(s). Rather, people were classified historically by what they did; that is, whether they played a penetrating (active) or penetrated (passive) role. See Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* (Los Angeles: Alyson, 2004), 54-57.

³¹ See generally Cheng, “Hybridity and the Decolonization of Asian American and Queer Theologies.” For an introduction to intersectionality, see Emily Grabham et al., eds., *Intersectionality and Beyond: Law, Power and the Politics of Location* (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2009). On hybridity, see Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009).

For example, my racial identity as an Asian American corresponds to the first person of the Trinity (that is, God the Unbegotten, or the “Father”). As an Asian American, I feel connected to the racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage of my ancestors from East Asia. Although I grew up in the United States, I was raised in a first-generation immigrant household, and I will always feel connected to my Chinese American parents, my grandparents, and their ancestors.

My sexual identity as an openly gay person corresponds to the second person of the Trinity (that is, God the Begotten, or the “Son”). As a queer person, I am acutely aware of being an embodied and incarnational person, particularly with respect to my own sexuality and gender identity. For me, my queerness is an affirmation of the goodness of the incarnation, that is, the Word that became flesh.³² As such, I feel deeply connected to other queer folk around the world.

Finally, my spiritual identity as a Christian corresponds to the third person of the Trinity (that is, God the Procession or the “Holy Spirit”). As a Christian, my religious identity allows me to be a living witness to the radical hope, faith, and love that will overcome death as well as all bodily – indeed, all humanly-constructed – categories at the eschatological horizon. This is what connects me to other people of faith around the world.

Most importantly, however, *perichoresis* affirms that each of these three identities is intertwined with the other two identities in a unique way. Indeed, each queer Asian American Christian person brings a unique perspective based upon her or his three-fold mix of sexuality or gender identity (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex), race (East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander), and spirituality (Metropolitan

³² See John 1:17 (NRSV).

Community Churches, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist). And yet each person can also relate to the common, shared experience of being a queer Asian American Christian.

The interplay of these three identities is a reflection of the joyful dance of *perichoresis*, not only within myself, but also within other queer Asian American Christians, and even all of creation. In February of 2010, a large number of LGBT Asian Americans in New York City participated as the first openly queer contingent ever to march in the annual Chinatown Lunar New Year Parade. For me, the march was an amazing experience of *perichoresis*. I could feel all of my identities as a queer Asian American Christian— my ancestral roots, my embodied self, and my spirituality—come together and joyfully interact in ways that I had never experienced before.³³

Conclusion

In sum, I believe that the classical doctrine of the Trinity— like Bach’s three-part sinfonias — is a powerful way for understanding how God can heal the suffering and pain that often arises out of the queer Asian American Christian experience. The three classical trinitarian concepts of (1) *vestigia trinitatis* (vestiges of the Trinity), (2) *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* (one substance, three persons), and (3) *perichoresis* (mutual interpenetration) can help queer Asian American Christians to achieve greater self-love, wholeness, and fluidity with respect to our sexual, racial, and spiritual identities.

³³ See the Lunar New Year for All website, <http://asianprideproject.org/lunarnewyear/> (accessed on September 30, 2010).

Looking back on my childhood, I am glad that my parents made me take piano lessons for so many years. Although I no longer play the piano on a daily basis, I am grateful that I grew up with an appreciation for how the distinct voices of a Bach three-part sinfonia are woven together and come together as a single piece. That appreciation has given me the language to come “out of silence” and to talk about my own identity as a queer Asian American Christian.³⁴ It has also given me a deeper understanding of how classical trinitarian theology can be highly relevant to queer Asian American Christians today.

³⁴ See generally Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995).