Can We Feel Safe Anywhere?: A Pastoral Reflection on the Surge of Anti-Asian Racism in the Age of COVID-19

Eunil David Cho
Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, TX

Introduction

Asian American individuals and communities are still trying to make sense of what happened in Georgia on March 16, 2021. Eight people, six of whom were Asian women, were mercilessly killed by a white gunman on his "really bad day." What's more disturbing is that this massacre was not the end. Incidents of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia have escalated since then. Just during the month of March 2021, the number of hate incidents increased dramatically from 3,795 to 6,630.[1] The uptick of racism and violence amid this global pandemic is alarming; however, for generations of Asian American individuals and communities, being associated with disease, and enduring racism and violence are not new. In this short essay, I engage in pastoral theological reflection on the ongoing surge of racially motivated violence against Asian American individuals and communities in the age of COVID-19. By looking through the lens of trauma studies to analyze the lived experience of Asian Americans in their historical struggle to find a sense of safety and belonging, I offer three practical ways in which Asian American faith leaders in partnership with non-Asian allies can begin the process of recovery and healing.

Yellow Peril and Model Minority Myth

"Yellow Peril," the fear that Asian immigrants are "a threat to America and Western culture," has persisted in the U.S. history since the 1890s. This fear was a "part of larger Western anxieties about demographic and political changes occurring" in America as Asian Americans grew in number.[2] Recently, with the outbreak of COVID-19, we have seen how US society has slipped back into its worst pattern. On March 14, 2020, a man brutally stabbed a Burmese American man and his 6-year-old son inside Sam's Club in Midland, Texas because he thought "the family was Chinese, and infecting people with the coronavirus."[3] One year later, on March 30, 2021, a 65-year-old Filipino American woman was viciously attacked in Manhattan by a homeless man who stomped on the elderly woman and yelled, "You don't belong here!"[4] The same "Yellow Peril" myth, language, and rhetoric have been back again in public discourse, media coverage, and words of people, accusing Asian Americans of being infested with virus, therefore deserve to be dehumanized, assaulted, and even killed.

Seemingly in opposition to Yellow Peril, the "Model Minority" myth is another pervasive racial stereotype that Asian immigrants are "quiet, uncomplaining, and hard-working people"

[1] Russell Jeong, Aggie J. Yellow Horse, and Charlene Cayanen, "National Report," *Stop AAPI Hate*, May 6, 2022, https://stopaapihate.org/national-report-through-march-2021/.
[2] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 130.
[3] Maina Chen, "Texas Sam's Club Stabbing of Burmese Man and Son Confirmed by FBI as Hate Crime," NextShark, March 31, 2020, https://nextshark.com/sams-club-hate-crime-texas-stabbing/.
[4] Nicole Hong, Juliana Kim, and Ashley Southall, "Brutal Attack on Filipino Woman Sparks Outrage: 'Everybody is on Edge,' *New York Times*

who achieve academic and economic success "without depending on the government."[5] This myth is based on the dangerous assumption that Asian Americans are monolithic and it overlooks the wide range of inequalities and disparities that exist in the larger Asian American communities. While the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths continues to rise in areas with higher racial and ethnic minority groups, the underserved Asian American subgroups, especially the elderly and women, have been destructively affected by the pandemic and anti-Asian xenophobia and racism.[6] In other words, in the age of COVID-19, Asian Americans have been represented, stigmatized, and degraded both as the "Yellow Peril," and "model minority" at the same time. What happens then to the psychosocial well-being of Asian Americans when they are forced to internalize these equally injurious, and perpetual racist stereotypes?

A Constant Struggle to Find a Sense of Belonging

In my own ministry as well as research with Korean American Christian youths and young adults, I have found that many of them often willingly embrace the model minority stereotype mainly because they have experienced "racial self-hatred." Racial self-hatred is an internalization of "the conscious and unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy where whites are consistently ranked above People of Color."[7] It means they see themselves through the eyes of White supremacists and continue to struggle with a sense of inadequacy, invisibility, and lack of belonging, which only reinforces in them the false notion that Anglo White Americans are physically and morally superior.

Now in 2021, Asian Americans are afraid of leaving their homes to go about their normal routines because of the fear of being spat at, verbally abused, physically attacked, or even shot. Because a large number of these hate incidents have been directed at women and elders, we immediately think about our mothers, aunties, and grandmothers with fear and anxiety at the thought that any one of them can be the next victim. Unfortunately, this is not new for our parents, grandparents, and ancestors who lived through the pain of Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the internment of Japanese Americans (1942-1945), the L.A. Riots (1992), and the post-9/11 period. Today, we as Asian Americans are mentally, emotionally, and somatically experiencing the effects of collective trauma.

Collective Trauma That Remains

Known as "the suffering that remains," trauma damages the social systems of care, safety, protection, and meaning that support and maintain human life.[8] One of the leading experts on trauma, Judith Herman, claims that the core experience of psychological trauma is one

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[5] Stacey J. Lee, *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth* (New York, NY: Teachers College Columbia University, 2009), 7.

[6] Over the past year, the number of anti-Asian hate incidents is greater than previously reported. And a disproportionate number of attacks have been directed at women. See Kimmy Yam, "There were 3,800 anti-Asian racist incidents, mostly against women, in past year," *NBC News*, March 16, 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/there-were-3-800-anti-asian-racist-incidents-mostly-against-n1261257?fbclid=IwAR1IQZ-oKDUwx-AOpKKvGI4YwPiO75rwtnYFXqfmvB8F83ERrCw-l4HH4s8.

[7] Lindsay Perez Huber, Robin N. Johnson, and Rita Kohli, "Naming Racism: A Conceptual Look at Internalized Racism in U.S. Schools," *Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review* 26, no. 1 (2006): 183.

[8] Shelly Rambo, "Introduction," in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, eds. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

individual's "disempowerment and disconnection from others."[9] But beyond individual levels, trauma can be also experienced collectively due to "the impact of adversity on relationships in families, communities and societies at large."[10] Because trauma is contagious, many fellow Asian Americans experience, "to a lesser degree, the same terror, rage, and despair," when we witness a tragic event like the Atlanta spa shooting.[11] For over two centuries, Asian Americans have struggled to find a sense of full belonging in the U.S. as they have had to contend with labels like Yellow Peril, model minority, and even perpetual foreigners. In the midst of countless incidents of systemic racism and xenophobia, we continue to experience "the betrayal of social trust," feeling that trust, safety, and decency are no longer present in these places we call "home."[12]

As a Korean American scholar-minister, I believe the challenge of recovery and healing falls upon faith communities. For centuries, the church has been a place of faith, hope, and love in times of loss, grief, and violence. Particularly in immigrant churches, the church has been a place of refuge that provides protection and safety for generations of Asian American Christians who have been subjected to sociocultural marginalization and discrimination.[13] But, this work of recovery cannot be accomplished if the work is done only by Asian American faith leaders, especially because we still lack political representation and denominational leadership. We need non-Asian communities of faith to join us in condemning and denouncing the ongoing anti-Asian hate crimes and help us restore a sense of social trust, particularly in the aftermath of new traumas. How then can Asian American faith communities and their allies stand in solidarity and take faithful steps toward recovery and healing *together*?

Three Faithful Steps Toward Recovery and Healing

Herman explains that the recovery process can be conceptualized in three steps: (1) establishing safety, (2) retelling the story of the traumatic event, and (3) reconnecting with others. First, we must establish safety. In the ministry of pastoral care, this task is fundamental because no other therapeutic work can possibly be done if safety has not been fully secured. Recently, there have been many statements and slogans around "breaking the silence" to suggest that Asian Americans have been silent on important social issues because of the pervasiveness of the model minority myth. While "breaking the silence" is helpful in the effort to consider the importance of raising our voices for greater representation and awareness, trauma experts say that silence means much more than "not speaking." Elie Weisel, a holocaust survivor who has influenced many Christian theologians, writes, "sometimes when no words are possible then silence becomes an alternative language. It is possible to have a language of silence"[14] Asian Americans have been silent because they feel it is *unsafe* to speak the unspeakable in their

[9] Judith L. Herman, "Recovery from Psychological Trauma," *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52, (1998): S145.
[10] Jack Soul, *Collective Trauma and Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 3.
[11] Herman, S145. This phenomenon is often known as "vicarious traumatization."
[12] Soul, 4.
[13] Sociologists claim that religious communities have multiple sociocultural functions in immigrant communities in the United States. See Charles Hirschman, "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States" in *International Migration Review* 38 (Fall 2004): 1206-33.
[14] Elie Wiesel and Timothy K. Beal, "Matters of Survival: A Conversation," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust*, ed. Tod Linafelt (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 35.

families, schools, churches, and other public settings. Thus, establishing safety begins by honoring the silence first. We then can gradually turn to creating a safe environment for traumatized people to have their actions, thoughts, and emotions in control. Pastoral caregivers including pastors, faith-based activists, chaplains, and health care professionals as members of a therapeutic alliance must build and secure a safe environment where Asian American individuals and communities can be protected from their present unsafe, oppressive, and dehumanizing environments.

Second, Herman argues that when safety is established, survivors can begin to tell and retell their stories of the trauma in depth and detail.[15] The stories of Asian Americans have for generations been under the shadow of the harmful, racist, and pervasive stereotypes of Yellow Peril, model minority, and perpetual foreigners. These stories have failed to capture and honor the authentic lived experiences of Asian Americans, their psychological resilience, cultural diversity, and transnational heritage. Asian Americans need new stories to tell. They need to revisit, revise, and retell their past experiences in order to make new meanings for their present and to envision their hopeful future. Furthermore, the stories of Asian Americans are seldom heard from the pulpits of faith communities and in the classrooms of theological education. We need non-Asian faith leaders and communities to play the role of witnesses and allies in creating venues in which our stories can be richly told and brought into greater public awareness. Empowering marginalized persons and groups to retell their stories is the liberative and prophetic practice of pastoral theology and care.[16]

Third, by the third stage of recovery, survivors have gained some capacity for social trust, beginning to feel that their stories are fully heard and honored.[17] When the sense of trust is gained, it allows for connection with others. This work of reconnection can begin and deepen when Asian Americans stand in solidarity with other minoritized individuals and communities who have also been in the darkness of systemic and social discrimination, particularly Black, Brown and Indigenous communities in America. According to Herman, in the process of recovery, survivors begin to understand "a political or religious dimension" in their traumatic experiences and discern that "they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action."[18] While there is no way to fully compensate for numerous traumatic experiences, Asian Americans can engage in faith-based activism and community organizing to pursue justice, compassion, and safety for all other marginalized persons and groups in cooperation with allies who have a shared purpose, especially in the issue around systemic racism in this age of COVID-19. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes a valuable source of social change for restoring love and justice in and beyond our communities.

Conclusion

The recovery process is primarily based upon empowerment of survivors and restoration of relationships.[19] As we learn to cope with fear and uncertainty in the pandemic era, all faith leaders must empower Asian American individuals and communities by establishing safety and

[15] Herman, S147.
[16] Mary C. Moschella, "Practice Matters: New Directions in Ethnography and Qualitative Research," in *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practice*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 20-22.
[17] Herman, S149.
[18] Herman, S149.
[19] Herman, S145.

honoring their silence and struggles, so that they can begin developing their own voices to retell their stories of hope, resilience, and redemption. In the end, my sincere hope is to invite and encourage all non-Asian faith leaders and communities to join us and stand in solidarity because recovery can take place only within the context of therapeutic alliance; it can never happen in isolation.