

As I write this paper I am looking at the signup sheet for the Celebration for GTU Graduates of Color. It reminds me of Rev. Fumitaka Matsuoka's citation of Gary Okihiro's question, "Is Yellow Black or White?"¹ As a person whose ethnicities include Japanese and Scottish/Danish heritages, this becomes, "to what extent am I a person of color?", with the attendant opportunities to explore theological questions of identity, historical injury, narrative agency, humanity, God, salvation, grace, and eschatology. Through PSR, most notably through the opening of the windows of my heart, mind, and soul by Fumitaka Matsuoka, Joanne Doi, Archie Smith, PANA, and experiences as a Minister in Training at Sycamore Congregational Church, I have begun to find my voice as a practical theologian and pastor. I am a pastor who, despite my middle class life and mixed heritage, is increasingly compelled to say "Yes, I am a person of color". As I do so, I begin to shed uncertainty and breathe in the strength and courage I experienced while reading Rev. Paul M. Nagano's writings created over a 50 year time span.

Paul Nagano explored the implications of decisions about identity for his middle class congregation when he preached about Moses in the 1970s: "Either he could continue to be called the 'son of Pharaoh's daughter' or identify himself with the oppressed minority—the Hebrew People."² Over time, Nagano spoke more and more directly about the implications of such a choice. Additionally, his understanding of the complexity of Asian Americans and the forces shaping their theologies blossomed, in response to the contexts in which he served, lived, learned, and taught.

¹Matsuoka, Fumitaka: *Learning to Speak a New Tongue: Imagining a Way That Holds People Together*. Berkeley, CA: Pacific School of Religion, 2009. Available from <http://www.psr.edu/learning-speak-new-tongue-imagining-way-holds-people-together>. Accessed May 7, 2009.

² Nagano, Paul M. "Identity, Identification, and Initiative." *The Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples: A Reader*, ed. Roy Sano, Asian Center for Theology and Strategies, Pacific School of Religion, 1976:220.

Through the Manzanar Pilgrimage I took with Dr. Joanne Doi a couple years ago, my sense of historical injury has become both personal and transcending – transcending time, place, ethnicity, class, and faith traditions. The pilgrimage creates opportunities to reflect on theologies of the cross: the cross as political weapon, symbol of universal persecution, suffering and death; the empty but still implicitly bloody cross as symbol of the inevitability of hope for the ever in-breaking reign of God; and most of all, the cross as a reminder of the living presence of Jesus Christ. Over time, Nagano translated the particularity of his experience to look far beyond the Christian central focus on the cross and Christ, as he engaged with persons of all many faith traditions.

I was inspired to review the writings of Rev. Paul Nagano by a conversation I had with Fumitaka Matsuoka a few years ago. Paul is part of a generation whose formative years took place during World War II, along with Rev. Lloyd Wake, Rev. Roy Sano, and many others. While many of these Japanese American pastors, including my uncle, Rev. Frank Masahiro Omi³ have passed, Fumitaka and Joanne Doi, who is inheriting this project, feel a strong sense of urgency to capture some of their histories. A couple years ago I attended a meeting of the Council for Pacific Asian Theologies (CPAT), where Nagano and I reconnected. There I met John Malcomson, son of William L. Malcomson, former dean of the American Baptist School of the West. Paul credits Malcomson senior with the opportunity to think systematically about Asian American theology and ministry by offering a course on this subject. This formed the basis for a manuscript he completed in 1992 on the topic of the Asian American church and their affect on multicultural communities.⁴ This manuscript reflects the culmination of his education at three seminaries and fifty years of ministry as a national and local church leader.

³ Rev. Frank Masuhiro Omi was a Free Methodist pastor in both Bay Area and Los Angeles.

⁴ Nagano, Paul M. "Asian American Theology and Multi-Cultural Communities: Reflecting the ministries of the Church into the life of the community", 1992

This merely paper skims the tops of some of the waves of his writings. For a biography, I refer the reader to Jae Ryung Chung's thesis, *Paul M. Nagano and Asian American Baptist Caucus*. As a result of this project, I have a much more concrete understanding of the effort and complexity involved in researching a theologian. Nagano draws upon an immense body of theology from both the West and East. Jitsuo Morikawa, Malcomson, John Cobb, C.S. Song, and Roy Sano were key influences as was his internment experience as a Japanese American pastor in the American Baptist tradition.

Approach

In writing this paper, my approach was to find original material written by Nagano in 1943, 1972, 1982, and 1992. I attempt to discuss the development of his theology from the specificity of his beginnings as a Japanese American in the American Baptist tradition to ever-broadening understandings of the interconnectedness of God, all Creation, and community. I will also call on Paul and his wife, Florence, after completion of this paper and class.

I also weave into this paper reflections arising from taking Archie Smith's pastoral care and counseling class, *Angels Fear*. Archie taught us a systemic model of pastoral care, that includes events, emotions, beliefs, binds, unbounded desires, and metaphors. The model uses the lenses of first, second and third order theological reflection. It is particularly fascinating to see the way in which the focus of Nagano's writing shifts over time to third order reflections about issues of Western hegemony, economic and military power, ecological concerns, and other systems that slow the inevitable emergence of the realm of God.

World War II

As Jae Ryun Chung writes in his thesis⁵, “it was in the Poston Relocation Center in Arizona that Nagano’s ordained ministry began. He was ordained into the Christian Ministry in the American Baptist Denomination at the Arizona Tempe First Baptist Church.” Among the many pastors that shaped his life and ministry there were Jitsuo Morikawa⁶, Roy Sano, and Lloyd Wake. Poston’s⁷ conditions were unimaginably harsh, about which Kiyuji Aizumi, an Issei, wrote:

“Extreme heat that can melt iron. No trees, no flowers, no signing birds, not even the sound of an insect. All at once a strong wind began to blow, sandy dust whirled into the sky, completely taking the sunshine and light from us. That night a full moon shone in the wilderness.”⁸

The bus trip to Poston must have been miserable. Masami Honda, a Nisei, recalls:

“The bus trip to Poston III was long and dusty. So dusty that the sky was blotted out completely. At first we tried to keep the windows of the school bus that was transporting us closed, but it was so hot - over 110 degrees that people, especially the older people, and the kids, were getting sick. So we opened the windows. Immediately everyone was covered by dust. When Kiyo Ochi and her group got off the bus everyone was covered by this thick layer of dust. I know you won't believe this, but it's really true, friends couldn't recognize each other.”⁹

Nagano’s response to the grim conditions in which he found himself demonstrates his leadership style, which is to lift up the eyes and hearts of his people through a combination of faith in God’s providence, humor, and hope:

“Bus after bus emptied its passengers to the greatest welcome of their new home as wrinkle-faced adults, grin-faced youth, and wide-eyed youngsters fresh from the fertile valley of Central California excitedly wiped the perspiration and dust from their brows and signed the various forms presented to them by veteran evacuees from Unit 1.

⁵ Chung, Jae Ryung. “Paul M. Nagano and Asian American Baptist Caucus”. Thesis (M.A.)--Graduate Theological Union August 2005

⁶ Jitsuo Morikawa had an especially powerful influence on Nagano

⁷ There were three sections at Poston, I, II, and III. Nagano served as pastor at Poston III.

⁸ Reverend Kenji, Kikuchi, Aizumi Kiyuji, No Omoide [Memories of Kyuji Aizumi] trans. Donald H. Estes (Hollywood, California: By Reverend Kenji Kikuchi, 1967) as cited in *Hot Enough to Melt Iron: The San Diego Nikkei Experience 1942-1946*, by Matthew T. Estes and Donald H. Estes, <http://www.jahssd.org/?cmd=articles&id=donarticle2>

⁹ Masami Honda, interview by Donald H. Estes, Poston, Arizona, 23 April 1996, <http://www.jahssd.org/?cmd=articles&id=donarticle2>

It was then that the rumors of Poston, Toast-em, and Roast-em---the three camps' titles, went around in description of the ever-rising temperatures of the arid desert land. Attractive posters in regard to the Christian Church Service were already up before the first Sunday.

Newspapers as seats, an invisible pulpit, and off---key but joyous singing made the opening service unique and a never-to-be-forgotten one. Truly a picture of being content in whatsoever state God's providence led."¹⁰

The contrast between these portrayals of the arrival of the internees is startling and raises questions for me about the nature of pastoral care because his portrayal verges on denying the suffering and misery of his congregation. It raises many questions:

1. How did Nagano's verbal conversations with individuals, small groups, and his congregation differ, if at all, from what he wrote? Did he acknowledge their suffering in live conversations or would he solely have used a model of redemptive suffering?
2. Did he necessarily use a more upbeat and inspiring tone in his writing, knowing that the camp authorities would be scrutinizing it for anything that might be interpreted as subversive or disloyal?
3. Would he have been allowed, as a visible leader of an imprisoned people, to raise issues of racism, wartime hysteria, and systematic injustice? Presuming the answer is "no", then how did he respond to his congregation when they raised troubling issues such as these?

Another moving finding from the PACTS archives was a testimonial booklet from the Christian Endeavor Society in Poston III, written in 1943. The acknowledgement to *Streams in the Desert* include thanks to Nagano for obtaining the blue cardboard covers for the testimonials, which are bound with red yarn. The covers and binding cause me to wonder if the colors were selected, consciously or unconsciously, to reflect both the patriotic colors of red, white, and blue; and if those tying knots in the red yarn reflected on the binds they were experienced (e.g., what does it mean to be a patriotic American while imprisoned in a concentration camp?) The booklet is a series of inspiring Christian testimonials, written to give hope to the prisoners in the camp. It begins with an inspiring foreword by George Taoka that includes the following words:

¹⁰ Nagano, Paul M. *Sermonette: One Year Ago*, Poston Christian Church, August 8, 1943
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“Christians living in Poston today may be likened to streams in the desert. As the streams find their way through the desert to reach their ultimate home in the sea, God’s children in Poston are seeking their ways to their ultimate home in the Kingdom of God.

The physical streams in the desert, however, have a handicap in that they often run dry in poor seasons; for theirs is a physical source which is subject to the narrow limits of physical laws. But the abundant streams of joy, love, repose, and peace in which Christians abide, are evidences of the magnificent, never-drying fountain of the grace and love of Jesus, from which they are constantly drawing...”

After the *Foreword* comes an inspiring *Message from the Pastor* (Paul Nagano) from which I excerpt the following:

“With upraised hands and radiant faces, a group of fifty young people respond unanimously during the regular mid-week service to the question, ‘How many of you can truthfully say that the past year in the relocation center has been the most glorious in your life?’ This is followed by a reference to Romans 8:28: “*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*” (New King James Version)

“Today I want to say that if You and I belong to God, the sternly disciplining touch of pain and disappointment is an almost inescapable element of life. Life will not always run our way. But here is a great discovery, that these disappointments, instead of impoverishing, can enrich positively; that our self-denials and the frustrations we endure, can actually, thru God, put into our life something of tremendous value which was not there before- a deeper tone and a finer touch...thus this barren, desert waste land has been made a paradise by the touch of the Master’s hand. Where Christ is, ‘tis heaven.”

I was bowled over when I read this opening paragraph. As a Christian, I am metaphorically brought to my knees in awe and wonder at the power of Nagano’s faith and his ability to inspire a group of fifty(!) young people to respond in this way. I accept the veracity of his statement, recognize the almost cult-like¹¹ power he must have had, and am awed by the responsibility he shouldered to continue to harness this power for transforming acts of service and faith.

The testimonies themselves are intense, theologically conservative views of Jesus as personal Savior (in almost every case), who accepts his children, even though they are unworthy. Many of the testimonials include themes of repentance and sin and purifying, fiery furnaces – the

¹¹ I recognize there would have been elements of patriarchy, peer pressure, and wanting to please him as their pastor and teacher involved in this display...yet I also honor the power of God at work through Nagano’s ministry.
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latter being a particularly appropriate image for many internment camps! His children wish not to cause him shame, and thus commit themselves to His ways. They respond in gratitude and praise to the good shepherd who leads them through the challenges of life.

It may be obvious, but I am recognizing for the first time that one of the particular challenges the internment camp setting would have presented to the pastors is in assessing the *size* of the “theological tent” they offered to the internees. While individual camps may have contained about 10,000 persons, there were probably relatively few churches, thus limiting the range of worship styles and theologies available to persons. Effective pastors respond not only to their own theology but to those of their congregants. Nagano’s preaching and theology met people where they were, and then attempted to move them out to a wider, more inclusive place – even within the context of his understanding of American Baptist theology.

In reflecting about this passage, I wonder if God is being portrayed as being responsible for the internment, and if doing so was politically safer to do than it would be to hold the American government and U.S. history of racism accountable. God is portrayed as a stern (male) master that inflicts pain upon His people in order to strengthen their faith in God. Yet at the same time, God is a loving Father, who uses discipline to teach obedience and the right way of living. God provides for the internees, as he did for the Hebrews in the desert:

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:5-7)

My interpretation of Nagano’s understanding of the cross at this time is *Christus Victor*, about which Gustaf Aulen wrote: “The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the

powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil.”¹² Near the end of the above mentioned *Message from the Pastor*, Nagano writes: “To make Christ known is victory...In the midst of the desert, God’s leading hand, joy abounding, peace sublime, heeding Christ’s call to victory.”

Finally, the *Message from the Pastor* ends with a prayer that, when read 70 years after WWII, is again a shocking reframing of internment as a “joy-filled, challenging adventure” that helps me to view Nagano’s experience in Poston as taking place in *kairos* time. This could only have been possible as a result of a deep life of prayer and the love of a community held together by God.

“Our heavenly Father, through this testimonial booklet we are come unto thee in thanksgiving for our evacuation, and in praises for Thy abiding love, which has nurtured us and helped us to grow in our Christian experience. The blessing of Thy comforting presence, has made our interlude in the desert a joy-filled, challenging adventure; and here, in wartime, amidst uncertainties and trial, the fountain of Thy faith has succored us, given us patience and filled us with hope...”

Nagano also began to widen the lens of Christian love and solidarity during his time at Poston. In an article titled *The Creature Exceeds the Creation*, he writes: “The prevalent philosophy of the Christian thinkers today is that the present emphasis of the church is the reformation of society into a future utopia wherein all may live together as brothers....”¹³ In another article¹⁴ he opens with the quote: “*He that loveth not knoweth God; for God is love*” (1 John 4:6) and writes:

“Nisei, are you willing to place your arms around your worst enemy and to forgive and forget? Caucasian friend, are you willing to throw your arms around your negro friend and call him your brother? “

These questions are noteworthy, for they were written as he and others prepared to leave Poston. The object to whom he refers as “worst enemy” is deliberately open-ended, and could have referred to other prisoners, guards, the racist society from which the Japanese Americans were

¹² Gustav Aulén (transl. by A. G. Herber) *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Macmillan: New York, 1977) as found in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christus_Victor

¹³ Nagano, Paul M. “The Creature Exceeds the Creation”, *Poston Christian Church*, Vol. 2 No. 34, 1943

¹⁴ Nagano, Paul M. *Poston 3 Christian Church*, Sunday, April 15, 1943

extracted and now must return, or the powers and principalities that had collectively thrust them into the camps. “Forgive and forget” invokes our understanding of the Nisei as the generation who repressed their stories, the stoic ones that survived through an understanding of *gaman* and *shikata ga nai*. From the lens of pastoral care, they raise questions such as:

1. Who are all the parties involved in the web of these historical injuries?
2. What is an appropriate pastoral role in guiding a congregation towards forgiveness? How do pastors avoid coercing congregants into premature forgiveness?¹⁵
3. Can there be forgiveness, if there is no repentance? This raises questions for me about the role pastors played in the Redress Movement.
4. Victims of abuse and violence are the only ones who have the right to forgive. How can pastors both guide congregants on the road towards forgiveness, through the use of stories, reflections on shared memories, reframing, healing, and, ultimately, reconciliation? Stories and reflections create wonderful opportunities for cross-generational Christian Education.
5. “Forgetting” is a way of dealing with binds, binds being a psychological means of coping with irreconcilable emotions that hold a person in stasis. Binds both insulate and isolate the individual from the source of pain; yet they must also be cast off for true healing to occur. What would have been an appropriate pastoral response to the Nisei tendency towards “forgetting”?

The reference to Caucasians and Negroes would have been prophetic at the time, for the civil rights movement was still twenty years down the road. In both situations, Nagano is asking deep questions about the nature of humanity and the Kingdom of God. His questions give us a glimpse of how Nagano’s arms are widening beyond the particularity of the Japanese American ethnic experience. Like many Nisei, Nagano reframed his experience at Poston. He also both

¹⁵ Reference to Archie Smith - INCOMPLETE

acknowledged their fears for what lay waiting for them upon their return and pointed to the sustaining power of Christ. He closed his *Letter to Christian Young People* the following:

“When the lights of Poston faded into the distance and the fearful unknown brought itself more vividly before me, the only sustaining force was the wonderful face of our LORD JESUS CHRIST¹⁶, and the memory of words of encouragement that you gave to be previous to my departure.”

While Nagano wrote as a Christian pastor (and evangelist) to a Christian congregation, he was also close friends with a number of Buddhist priests. These leaders were the first to be rounded up by the U.S. military, as they were considered to be loyal to the Emperor of Japan. As I began to work on this paper, I shared the topic with Mushim Ikeda-Nash, a Buddhist priest I met at an APARRI event a few years ago. She shared an article, *Interment Camp Buddhism*, translated by one of her cousins and published in *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*.¹⁷ This article contains three vignettes from Rev. Koetsu Morita.

In the first, he describes priests and former branch managers of Japanese banks being forced into put up fences and being fed meals of pork, rice and beans while they were interred at Sand Island on Oahu. The priests create a vegetable garden, recognizing the health necessities of doing so, only to be forced to leave it behind after they are transferred to the Continental United States. In another vignette, the priests gather together wearing filthy clothes and chant the *Hannya Shingyo* (Heart Sutra). Like Nagano, the presiding priests lifts the hearts of those assembled with the words:

“Your participation in those filthy clothes can be likened to the Buddha’s teaching of the lotus blooming in the mud. Let us hold together, praying that peace arrives as soon as possible, and may we be guided by the Buddha’s teachings and life of peace.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Capital letters were used in the original article

¹⁷ “Interment Camp Buddhism: Memoirs of Rev. Koetsu Morita”, from *Senshin*, 1985, translated by Rev. Ryuji Tamiya and Mary Jiko Oshima Nakade, *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*, Fall 2000, 26

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 27

In the third vignette, a lay person, Mr. Takashima is so inspired by the silent twice-daily prayers of Rev. Koetsu that he fashions a Buddha out of scraps of steel and lumber. I share these vignettes because Nagano would have lived in regular communication with Buddhist colleagues at Poston. They would have shared stories of faith forged under the terrible conditions of the camp and by doing so, would have participated in the formation of what has evolved into interfaith ministry.

Early 1970s

Jumping ahead thirty years, Jae Ryun Chung notes that “1970 was a momentous year for Paul Nagano...at the age of 50, with 27 years of ordained ministry...”¹⁹ Nagano took time off to devote himself to studies, earning a Doctor of Religion degree at Claremont. He wrote a dissertation titled: *Japanese American Search for Identity, Ethnic Pluralism and the Basis for a Permanent Identity (1970)*. Since Chung summarizes this in his dissertation, I focused on a paper *Amerasian Experience and Christianity: The Japanese Experience*²⁰ he prepared for a workshop titled “Amerasian Churches: Problems and Contributions.” Nagano’s paper is replete with references to Luther, Tillich, Barth, Bultman and Moltman. He declares his approach as follows:

“The design of this paper is to share the Japanese experience in America from the Christian perspective. It takes the early beginnings of the Christian movement among the immigrants, the growth of the church, its fragmentation, the socio-psychological syndromes resulting from a history of oppression, the need for indigenous initiative, and the possible strategies for the future.”

The key phrase in this paper is “indigenous initiatives” which is a call to recognize the inherent value and contributions of ethnic churches. His use of the term “Amerasian” is an aspiration, for his examples are limited to Japanese Americans. The word “initiatives” is also a

¹⁹ Chung, 26

²⁰ Paul M. Nagano, *Amerasian Churches: Problems and Contributions*, February 18, 1974

subtle call for power for Asian Americans, in all settings, and particularly within denominations. It is being made in the early days of “Yellow Power” and is in reaction to decisions made by major denominations:

“At the close of World War II, with the return of the Japanese Americans from the internment camps and the East Coast to the West Coast, it was the policy of almost every major Protestant denomination to do away with the segregated Japanese ethnic church. Effort was made to assimilate the Japanese Americans into the existing Caucasian churches.”

He contrasts the major denominations with “indigenous Japanese conferences such as the Japanese Free Methodist Conference and the OMS Holiness Conference of America.” These retained their separate Japanese American congregations and therefore “evidenced a somewhat healthy continuity and clear direction...”

The most compelling part of this paper is his naming of a Japanese American Indigenous Theology which (in the 1970s) contained three elements:

1. Theology of the oppressed. This is an important development in his theology based not only on his personal experience but that also reflects the influence of liberation theology. While in his WWII writings he focused on Moses as liberator, the passage of time allows him to name the Japanese Americans as oppressed people in the 70's. This reflects his “belief that Yaweh identifies with people who are downtrodden and deprived. As God affirmed Israel, theology from the Japanese American experience affirms that God understand and identifies with the Japanese Americans. In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. God's word of righteousness to the oppressed is: I know the meaning of rejection because in Christ I was rejected; I know the meaning of physical pain and deprivation because I was crucified; I I know the meaning of death because I died; I know the meaning of loneliness because I was ‘despised and rejected of men.’

But my resurrection in Christ means I am present with you and that alien powers cannot keep you from the full meaning of life.”

I read into this cogent and cohesive statement a reflection of Nagano’s full identification and participation in the suffering of Japanese Americans (especially those of his congregants) and his commitment to empowering them to name it and seek justice, with the help of God. His studies at Claremont and mentoring by Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr. have now given him the systematic theological framework by which he has made sense of God and humanity.

2. Affirms the dignity of all men.²¹ This attribute is consistent with his WWII writings and is in response to the loss and rebuilding of dignity the Japanese Americans experienced, many, through his help.
3. Sovereignty of God. “It means to affirm what God has created is beautiful and to give God praise for all the natural endowments of life. It means that yellow is beautiful, as is black, brown, red and white. ..”

Nagano’s participation and leadership in the movements for racial and ethnic justice have opened his lens to include evolving (and, looking back from 2009, temporary) labels of “yellow, brown, and red.” He is declaring the broadness of not only his, but God’s heart, in this statement. As time passes, his understandings of the particularities, contextualities, historical injuries, and unique gifts of specific racial and ethnic groups will continue to become richer. The metaphor of a fractal comes to mind, wherein Nagano has begun to grasp the gestalt of the whole of humanity (as a reflection of God), is able to zoom into to the particularities of an ethnic sub-group, and recognize the interconnectedness of the parts of the whole.

²¹ Nagano’s earlier writings reflect the use of male language and approaches to theology. This begins to change in his later writings.

In summary, he states that “Japanese American theology is a theology of love which seeks to deal realistically with the evil and injustices in the world... and hopes for a new day to dawn for the Japanese Americans and for all people—a day when there will be no need for false identities and dehumanizing experience; a society in which people can affirm their true personhood and live together in solidarity within an enjoyable plurality...” He closes with the hope that “the Asian Center for Theology and Strategies is God’s instrument in this point of history to bring us together to fulfill this reconciling ministry. Amen.”

As Jae Ryun Chung describes²², by the 1970’s, Nagano has spent 20 years of his life balancing local parish ministry with developing, leading and bridge-building among coalitions such as the Japanese Evangelical Missionary Society (JEMS) , Asian American Christian Fellowship (AACF), Evangelism for Church Council of Hawaii, and the Asian American Baptist Caucus. The Asian Center for Theology and Strategies “began in 1972 as one of the earliest Pan-Asian organizations to pursue the development of Asian American theology and build and support church involvement in civil and human rights struggles. In 1974 the name was changed to Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies in 1977 to reflect inclusiveness of constituencies.”²³

In 1976 Nagano wrote a paper titled *Identity, Identification, and Initiative*²⁴ which speaks more directly to the choices that Japanese Americans were needing to make politically, economically, socially, and theologically. Drawing upon Hebrews 11:23-38, he called out Moses’ decision to identify himself with the oppressed minority—the Hebrew People. In this paper, he describes Japanese Americans as having distinctive facial appearances and refers to them as a “small and negligible” minority in United States. He is surprisingly negative, referring to Japanese

²² Chung, 26

²³ Pacific Asian Center for Theology and Strategies, <http://www.pactsnetwork.org/pacts.html>

²⁴ Nagano, Paul M. “Identity, Identification, and Initiative”. *he Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples: A Reader*, ed. Roy Sano, Asian Center for Theology and Strategies, Pacific School of Religion, 1976:220.

Americans as a docile “silent minority” that has a poor self image. By accepting a subordinate role, Japanese perpetuate the superior-inferior dichotomy.

The choice for a Japanese American is assimilation into the mainstream of American life or to “affirm one’s identity as a Japanese American with it accompanying discriminations”. Being assertive is costly, for it “invites the wrath of the majority.” On the other hand, asserting oneself brings the benefits of self-determination, self-esteem, and fulfillment of “God-given rights to be a real person”.²⁵

Nagano’s concern is also a response to systematic efforts after WW-II by “well-meaning sociologists and denominational leadership” who “were advocating doing away with Japanese ethnic churches.” The Asian American Baptist Caucus, which he helped create and led, affirmed Japanese American identity, which included the traits of *gaman* (enduring suffering without complaint) and *shikata ga nai* (can’t be helped, just accept it.)²⁶

Nagano lifts up three lessons from the Moses story that apply to Japanese Americans as an oppressed people and as Christians in the American Baptist context:

- 1) Refusal to forfeit identity, which is grounded in *Imago Dei*, human rights, and their rights as U.S. citizens
- 2) Standing with oppressed, while recognizing “to identify with the Japanese is to hinder their upward mobility—socially and economically

²⁵ Ibid 221

²⁶ In our class, we have moved to a different definition which states, “it can’t be helped now, but we will be able to change things in the future”.

3) Opposing the power structure: Nagano declares: “Without the Caucus there is no leverage, no voice that can be heard, no strategy for self determination and equitable balance of power.”²⁷ Power, in this context, refers to representation on various decision-making bodies of his denomination. He states the Asian American Baptist is motivated by faith in God and liberation.

He compares Caucasians that cast their lot with the Japanese Americans to the story of Ruth and Naomi. For Whites, this means to say: “White is beautiful, and Yellow is equally beautiful, and I cast my lot with the Yellow to make this equality a reality.”²⁸ I read into this a challenge to his Caucasian colleagues to demonstrate the depth of their own faith and commitment to equality by sharing power with Asian Americans.

1980s

Nagano continued to develop his understanding of Asian American theology as shown by a paper he completed in July 1982.²⁹ He states that his understanding reflects a Biblical basis and character; and particular contextual experiences and issues. These include culture, religious and racial background; “*practical*” (which I interpret as praxis), and service. He identifies the following context for Asian Americans:

- 1) Ethnic minority status, “with an identifiable physiognomy”
- 2) History of oppression
- 3) Stereotyped by the dominant majority
- 4) Lived experience of suffering and struggle
- 5) Indoctrination in a more conservative interpretation of the Bible and Western theology
- 6) On the whole, poor self-images
- 7) Retention much of their positive and ancestral cultural traits

He also identifies a number of positive Asian American cultural traits:

²⁷ Ibid, 224

²⁸ Ibid, 223

²⁹ Nagano, Paul M. *Asian American Theology*, July 1982

- 1) Strong corporate emphasis which can help to “curb the strong individualism and personal piety in Western theology and introduce anew the universal nature of the Christian Gospel as well as the proper corporate nature of the Bible.” By “corporate emphasis”, he is referring to strong family, clan, and provincial ties.
- 2) Appreciation of creation (nature) and a respect for the value of and practice of contemplation. The Asian American appreciation of creation also results valuing “being vs. doing” (e.g., a “ministry of presence” in a pastoral sense), searching-action mode (i.e., being open to see what opens up vs. needing to constantly initiate), and harmonizing-union (i.e., the ability to appreciate the interconnectedness of all and to seek peace).
- 3) Small is beautiful: This was a reaction to what he described as the “corrupting ethos of progress” and *growthmania*. These are expressed in the relentless drive for consumption, with attendant destruction to the environment and rise of military weapons needed to secure access to materials.

Notable new areas of emphasis in this paper are environmental and social distortions brought about by excessive consumption, naming historical Japanese American injuries as oppression, and a heightened call for power-sharing. He concludes this paper with the hope that Asian American Theology will “not to be divisive but catalytical. It seeks to make Christ indigenous.” I interpret the last statement to be a call for respect and power – for if Caucasian denominational leaders truly accept the presence and power of Christ within ethnic churches – then they have no choice but to lift up and honor Japanese American contributions.

1990s

To understand Nagano's theology in the 1990s, I turned to a paper he wrote in 1992 titled *Asian American Theology and Multi-cultural Communities*,³⁰ which asks the daunting question: "What is responsibility of the Asian American Church in shaping the future of our multi-cultural cities in America?" He declares three major influences on his theology: Jitsuo Morikawa, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Choan Seng Song. This paper draws heavily upon materials he prepared for a class he taught at the American Baptist Seminary of the West entitled "Asian American Perspectives on Theology and Ministry." In this paper, Nagano's understanding of Asian Americans explodes in complexity. He references 28 ethnicities within the umbrella of "Asian Americans", generational differences, differing degrees of acculturation and worldviews, intermarriages, and multiplicities of languages, customs, ideologies, religions and cuisines.³¹ He advocates theology that is pluralistic, contextual, and drawn from various ethnic and cultural perspectives. Metaphorically, this reminds me of the "salad bowl" view of Asian Americans, in which each component of the salad has its own integrity and makes its unique contribution. (Some of Fumitaka's contributions that extend beyond this model are hybridity and interstitiality, which address compound identities and the dynamic movement of the self among these identities.)

In this paper, he has moved from calling for power sharing for Asian Americans to declaring that "positive ethnic identity and ethnic and theological pluralism can make for authentic inter-personal and inter-racial relations leading to communities of respect, justice and human dignity."³² His motivation for this paper, which is the culmination of his 50 years of serving the Church of Jesus Christ "in the fellowship of God's people in love and celebration", is his deep concern for the

³⁰ Nagano, Paul M. *Asian American Theology and Multi-Cultural Communities: Redirecting the ministries of the church into the life of the community*, 1992

³¹ The inclusion of cuisine draws upon C.S. Song's understanding of the ways in which cuisine can help shape culture and thus theology

³² *Ibid*, 1

“desperate situation of U.S. cities”, destruction of creation, and the tendency for churches to become ingrown and preoccupied with their own survival.

In Chapter I, *Doing Theology*, he begins with the premise that the historical bias towards Western theology is inappropriate, in light of the emergence and contributions of Black Liberation, Third World, Feminist, Indigenous, and Contextual Theologies.³³ He lists several limitations of Western imperialistic approaches, which he describes as “inflexible, exclusive, dogmatic, and adamantly correct theology.” He sees a direction connection between Western logic and linear approaches to reality and those that “hold the Bible as the infallible and inerrant word of God as the only revelation from God as we seek the security and assurance of the absolute over the relative.”³⁴ This rigidity results in “hermeneutical captivity”, which results in the “unconscious effort to make theology conform to what we want reality to be.”³⁵ Robert J. Schreiter describes this as “theology as sure knowledge”, which he (and therefore, Nagano) deems inappropriate among the poor, uneducated, and rural. In these settings, Schreiter and Nagano place theology as knowledge alongside “wisdom theology, theology as praxis, and theology as occasional variations on sacred texts.”³⁶

This description of the “poor, uneducated, and rural” applies not only to the majority of humanity but particularly to the Issei, many of whom came to the United States as day laborers. Today, one in nine Asian Americans lives in poverty, which gives lie to the myth of the “model minority.” To enter into true dialogue with persons from a wide range of life experiences, cultures, and faith traditions requires “genuine humility in listening, appreciating, respecting and receiving”

³³ Ibid, 7

³⁴ Ibid, 6

³⁵ Ibid, 11

³⁶ Ibid, 15

these perspectives. This open appreciation ties directly back to Nagano's circa 1982 view of the Asian American embrace of the wholeness and intrinsic goodness of creation.

In Chapter II, *Local Theology and Pluralism*, he discusses the rise of third world, localized, and contextually informed theologies – concepts he began to study and write about in the 1970s. For the first time, he references the previously unheard voices of women in Christian theology. The bulk of the chapter is an application of Shreiter's three models of local theology (i.e., translation, adaption, and contextualization) to the Japanese American experience.

Nagano asks the question, "what enables localized and pluralistic theologies to relate and inform one another?" His answer is found in *Logos*: "the unity and unifying principle is found in the *Logos*—the everlasting Word of God which illumines everyone of all generations universally."³⁷ The *Cosmic Logos*, which is made human in Christ, extends from the subatomic level to the edges of the universe. Nagano speculates that this creative force awaits the reign of God being made present through genuine community, which is the focus of Chapter III, *Theology for Community*.

Nagano's God is one that seeks wholeness and harmony. God redeems humanity and seeks the "salvation of all creation." He draws upon quantum physicist David Bohm's call for "unbroken wholeness,"³⁸ for "the whole is enfolded in each part, so are all the other parts..." Nagano sees the creative power of God in the Asian tradition of yin/yang, whereby God both celebrates the distinct qualities of opposites and unites them. The role of the church is to stand as witness to the interrelatedness of all and strive to seek genuine community.

The remainder of this comprehensive work is a review and synthesis of several Asian American theologians: C. S. Song, Masatoshi Doi, Seiichi Yagi, Mikizo Matsuo, Kosuke Koyama, Samuel Rayan, S. J. Samartha, Jung Young Lee, Raymond Fung, Roy Sano, James Chuck, Jitsuo

³⁷ Ibid, 30

³⁸ Ibid, 35

Morikawa, Wesley Woo, Warren Lee, and David Ng. Nagano develops a comprehensive systematic theology that fully reflects the breadth and depth of his theological studies and reflections on the unique contributions of these and many Asian theologians. It is simply beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to summarize the remainder of this material.

Conclusion

It has been my honor and delight to trace the evolution of Rev. Paul M. Nagano's theology over a fifty year period. This short synopsis of a few works stops far short of a comprehensive review, particularly of his culminating opus: *Asian American Theology and Multi-cultural Communities*. It clearly demonstrates the value of theological education and theology as praxis. Reflecting on a meeting of the Council of Pacific Asian Theologians a couple years ago, I now recognize his hopes that this organization would serve as a logical extension of his systematic theology, which seeks above all else to foster the creation of genuine community. Nagano's theology exploded in complexity, richness of texture, and depth of its welcome over the years.

This paper has explored the growth in his vision from Japanese Americans to all Asian Americans to all of humanity, from neo-orthodox Christianity to Asian American Theology to Asian Theology to progressive interfaith theologies, and from the subatomic to the cosmic. Nagano never loses hold of his Christology, but he has learned to hold it loosely enough to allow genuine dialogue with persons of all ethnicities, cultures, and faith traditions. In doing so, he fosters the creation of genuine community, through which the realm of God draws ever closer.