Peter Phan's Quest for "World Christianity"

Peter C. Phan's essay in *Horizons* in 2012 is a marker on his personal trajectory leading from his initial formation in his beloved Vietnam, where he was immersed both in Vietnamese family life and also in French language, culture, and thought patterns, through his sudden, unplanned migration to the United States, to his pioneering development of a more truly worldwide awareness of Christian identities.[1] This journey is both intimately personal and also of world-wide significance. Scrutinizing Catholic theologies, histories, and cultures with Asian and Asian American eyes, Phan invites all Christians to a broader horizon of awareness than many could previously imagine. One of the dangers of academic specialization is that we focus so particularly on our own concern that we neglect other angles of vision. The great benefit of Phan's migration and wide-ranging scholarship is that he has repeatedly found himself "betwixt and between," crossing many boundaries and relating many fields that otherwise might not be considered together, thereby making connections among areas that have often been studied separately.

Reading this essay a dozen years after its initial publication, I am struck by Phan's use of the singular "World Christianity" in the title. He had already edited a volume in 2011 with the plural title, *Christianities in Asia,* and contributed an introduction that pondered the oscillation between "Asian Christianity/Christianities."[2] In his 2012 essay for *Horizons*, he both employed and also undermined the use of the singular form of "Christianity," boldly proclaiming: "There is not, nor has there ever been, *one* Christianity; rather there exist Christianities (in the plural), all

[1] See Peter C. Phan, "World Christianity: Its Implications for History, Religious Studies, and Theology," *Horizons* 39, no. 2 (2012): 175.

[2] See Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1–6.

over the world and all the time."[3] In 2018, he abandoned the quest for a singular Christianity even in Asia alone, as he edited *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice,* where he introduced part two by reflecting on "Doing Theology in World Christianities: Old Tasks, New Ways."[4] Nonetheless, in 2023, he and José Casanova edited an important volume with the singular title: *Asian Pacific Catholicism and Globalization*.[5]

The oscillation between singular and plural is one of the most far-reaching indices of a shift in horizons and perspectives for both Phan and the broader theological community. To understand the shift from a singular Christianity to a world of multiple Christianities, it is important to appreciate the strongly autobiographical element in the theology of a man who calls himself an "accidental theologian."

A Personal Journey: Autobiographical Approach to World Christianity

There are many puzzles to the identity of the person whom most of the world knows as Peter C. Phan. He entered this world as Phan Dinh Cho, but for many years now he has been using an alias. The mysteries of his identity concern not only his change of name but also his date of birth. Many people speak about being born again, but Phan's family had documents that proved that he was born three years before he was born, or from a different perspective, that he was born when he was already three years old. His father somehow exercised the preternatural power of

[3] Phan, "World Christianity," 175; emphasis in the original.

[4] See Peter C. Phan, *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 99–123.

[5] See José Casanova and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Asian Pacific Catholicism and Globalization: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023).

making the young Phan Dinh Cho three years older than he was so he could sit for an important examination, but this meant that from a legal perspective his mother was pregnant with him before she was married, a source of later scandal for a candidate for the priesthood!

The young Phan Dinh Cho entered school at a time when Catholics confidently believed that there was a singular true and normative form of Christianity. His teachers highly valued the European heritage of Catholicism, ignored Asian contributions that might complicate matters, and did their best to form their young Vietnamese student accordingly. He studied in an elite French-speaking school in Vietnam that taught him all about French kings and queens, rivers and mountains, revolutions and republics, wines and cheeses, while teaching him nothing about his native Vietnamese culture.[6] In this Francophone milieu, he studied English as his "second" language and "learned" Vietnamese as an additional "foreign" language, demonstrating his expertise in the Vietnamese language in relation to French! However, in retrospect, it appears that there was an unintended irony of timing: Phan Dinh Cho was taught to be French just as the French Empire was collapsing and coming to an end! He later reflected on the tragic limitation in his early education: "I learned nothing of Vietnam's history and geography and literature and art. Ancestors that gave birth to our nation were nameless ghosts to me . . . I was betwixt and between two cultures and worlds, belonging to neither and yet somehow being part of both."[7] He lamented: "I remained as ignorant as ever of Vietnamese and other Asian cultural and religious traditions."[8]

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[6] See Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective,* ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 113–133.

[7] Phan, "Betwixt and Between," 116, 117.

[8] Phan, "Betwixt and Between," 119.

Moving to the British colony of Hong Kong as an adolescent, Phan plunged into studying and speaking in Latin as he immersed himself in neo-Scholastic philosophy, mastering the approved antidotes to modern European philosophical errors. Chinese and other Asian philosophies were not deemed worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. Again, there was a paradox of timing: with his formidable preparation for education in Latin, Phan next traveled to Italy where he found that they had just recently stopped teaching in Latin in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. He entered into Italian-language studies of theology, making a side trip to Dublin to improve his command of English.

All the while, Phan's instructors continually deepened his knowledge of the singular form of European Christianity while failing to offer any guidance regarding the distinctive characteristics of Asian Christianities. Throughout this period, discussion of "Global Christianity" generally meant that European missioners had gone everywhere across the globe, confident that they could evangelize and educate the world from their vantage point.[9] Nonetheless, during these years Phan quietly read the documents of Vatican II with careful attention, finding principles for renewing theology through inculturation, social and economic justice, and interreligious respect that would later shape his mature theology.

Phan returned from Italy to minister as a priest in Saigon, South Vietnam; for all he knew, he could well have remained there without further worries about the academic study of theology.

[9] See Peter C. Phan, "The Catholic Church and Globalization in Vietnam," in Casanova and Phan, eds., *Asian Pacific Catholicism and Globalization,* 115 (114–130). In his essay in *Horizons*, Phan notes the distinction made by Lamin Sanneh between "global Christianity," which is still dominated by European thought and culture, and "world Christianity," which is more pluralistic and indigenous to each culture (171, n.1).

However, as he was having a leisurely breakfast on one Sunday morning in 1975, his sister raced up and hurriedly informed him that the family was leaving on an airplane and wanted him to join them. Not knowing where they were going amid the collapse of the government of South Vietnam, he and his family boarded an American aircraft, landed in Guam, and eventually arrived in Dallas, Texas. Without resources in a strange land, Phan found initial employment as a collector of garbage, working for a boss nicknamed "Mr. Two-Ten," because Phan and his co-workers did not know the employer's name and he paid them the then-minimum wage $2.10 an hour. Phan knew firsthand the experience of fleeing his home country in time of turmoil, arriving in a strange, new land with few resources, and having to improvise to survive.

Little could Phan have imagined in 1975 that his theological contributions would one day be recognized and honored in two Festschrifts.[10] Indeed, I would like to suggest that in the entire history of Christian theology no collector of garbage has made as significant a contribution as Peter Phan. In the language of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the experiences of migration and collecting garbage gave Phan the hermeneutical privilege of seeing life from the margins and the underside, the vantage point of knowing first-hand the challenges and travails of refugees who migrate abruptly from their homeland with few possessions. Phan's ability to bring together the resources of traditional European Christian theology, the insights of a penniless migrant refugee, and his increasing knowledge of the diversity of Christianities around the world would eventually shape his theology of World Christianities. Unlike some who have harshly criticized, or rejected altogether, the European heritage of Christianity, Phan has always valued his early grounding in

[10] See Jonathan Y. Tan and Anh Q. Tran, eds., *World Christianity: Perspectives and Insights: Essays in Honor of Peter C. Phan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016); Leo D. Lefebure, ed., *Theology without Borders: Essays in Honor of Peter C. Phan* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022).

the traditional resources of European culture and Catholic theology, which positioned him to become a leader in the initial generation of Asian American theologians exploring how theology could develop from authentically Asian roots in the context of the United States.

Doing Theology Interreligiously in the Service of Liberation

In his article in *Horizons,* Phan sets for the hermeneutical principle that interpreters of World Christianity need to relate the Bible and Christian tradition to each local context and vice versa: "A new way of doing theology inevitably brings in its wake a reconsideration of the basic Christian beliefs, especially in the context of interreligious dialogue. This dialogue has become an urgent exigency in World Christianity, especially for Christians in the Global South."[11]

One of the most problematic aspects of the received tradition of European Christianity is the anti-Judaism that pervaded Christian faith and practice from the early church into the twentieth century and that has not vanished today. In the wake of the Second World War and the horrors of the Shoah, many European Christian theologians have criticized the long heritage of anti-Judaism, but many from the Global South have not attended to these issues, and some thought that anti-Judaism is not their problem. One of Phan's most important contributions is to insist that all Christian theologians, including those in parts of Asia where few Jews live, need to take seriously the reform of Christian theology to purge it of anti-Jewish attitudes. Phan emphasizes the importance of Jews and Judaism in relation to Asian and Asian American Christian theology, in particular the need for Asians and Asian Americans to take seriously the dialogue with Jews, the rejection of traditional anti-Judaism, and the imperative for revised ways of thinking and acting. Phan has critiqued various Asian Christian theologians who have neglected this issue and have

[11] Phan, "World Christianity," 183.

offered perspectives that, albeit at times unintentionally, perpetuate negative stereotypes about Jews and Judaism.[12]

Catholics and many other Christians today affirm God's covenant with the Jewish people continues unbroken; some Christian scholars in this dialogue develop this principle in order to ground all other peoples' relations to God in the covenant with Abraham. In one conference I heard a Christian scholar who specializes in Jewish-Christian dialogue comment that Christians can celebrate that Jews can initiate all others into the covenant with Abraham. I thought to myself that representatives of Indigenous religious traditions around the world will take offense at the thought that they need Jews to have a relation with God. Here I think Phan's essay on reading *Nostra Aetate* in reverse is helpful, indeed indispensable.[13] Phan proposes that we reject supersessionism, not only with respect to the covenants with the Jewish people through Abraham and Moses, but also with respect to the covenant with Noah, which according to the book of Genesis is made not only with all humans but with all life on earth and even the earth itself (Gen 9:8-17). This establishes a basis for Jews and Christians to respect the primordial relationship to God of Indigenous peoples around the world. I think this is of decisive importance because one of the greatest challenges for thinking Catholic interreligiously for the next generation is how we relate to the Indigenous traditions.

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[12] See Peter C. Phan, "Jews and Judaism in Asian Theology: Historical and Theological Perspectives," *Gregorianum* 86, no. 4 (2005): 806–836; Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 147–185.

[13] See Peter C. Phan, "Reading *Nostra Aetate* in Reverse: A Different Way of Looking at the Relationships Among Religions," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 10, no. 2 (2015).

Theology of Migration

Phan has been a leader in theological and interreligious reflection on migration and has waxed eloquent about reading the Bible from the perspective of migrants and proposed new theological claims: *Deus migrator est. Extra migratione nulla salus.*[14] Peter interprets God as the primordial migrant and celebrates migration as a necessary context for salvation. In many respects this makes good sense to me, but it also raises concerns that are difficult to resolve. Phan eloquently praises migration as a lens for viewing God, linking reflection on religious pluralism both to the biblical witness regarding migration and also to the contemporary experiences of migration. These insights and hermeneutical principles emerge from the personal experiences of Phan and his family through their migration from Vietnam during a time of upheaval. I appreciate these insights, but I would also like to express some concerns about the biblical witness to migration and its impact on the later tradition down to the present day with regard to the way violence intertwines with perspectives and themes of religious traditions.

Phan stresses the positive side of migration in the Bible, honoring Abraham as "the first voluntary migrant in human history."[15] While the positive aspect is indeed an important dimension of the experience, migration as presented in the Bible is profoundly ambiguous. After Abram migrates from Mesopotamia through Haran to Canaan, God promises Abram that his descendants will rule all the lands going back to where his journey started from, i.e., from the river of Egypt to

[14] See Peter C. Phan, "*Deus Migrator*—God the Migrant: Migration of Theology and Theology of Migration," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2016): 845–868.

[15] Peter C. Phan, "God, the Beginning and End of Migration: A Theology of God from the Experience and Perspective of Migrants," in Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christian Theology in the Age of Migration: Implications for World Christianity* (New York: Lexington Books, 2020), 106.

the great river Euphrates, i.e., between present-day Israel and Iraq; the descendants will rule over the Kenites, the Kenizites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites (Gen 15:18-21). In some circles in the western parts of Asia, this promise is still an issue. When I taught at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Doha, Qatar, my Arab Muslim students were very aware that the biblical promise of land to Abraham's descendants extended all to the way to the Euphrates River. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that for religious Zionists, "The religious vision of a Promised Land in the Bible has undetermined borders. It points Israel toward an expansionism not only toward the West Bank, which was the heart of the ancient Hebrew settlements, but also into the territories of the twelve tribes in the book of Joshua. This would include the east bank of the Jordan and southern Lebanon."[16]

Phan discusses the Exodus from Egypt and the leadership of Moses and Aaron as another classical biblical experience of migration, where the people are led ultimately by God, who is the primordial migrant: "Here, as in the Book of Genesis, this God shows Godself as the *Deus Migrator* accompanying God's people throughout their wanderings in the wilderness."[17] It is certainly true that the migratory experience of Moses and the Israelites, like that of Abram, is decisive for the later biblical tradition and for Christian history, but again the biblical narrative casts migration in an ambiguous light. According to the Book of Deuteronomy, when the Israelites are migrating to the Promised Land, Moses gives them orders in the name of God about how to treat the people they meet. When they are on the road, the Israelite migrants are directed to conquer

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[16] Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 229.

[17] Phan, "God, the Beginning and End," 110.

the people they encounter; if the people submit, the Israelites are to enslave them and take their goods (Deut 20:10-15). However, when the migrants reach the Promised Land, Moses insists in the name of God that they kill all the inhabitants, as well as their animals, lest the prior inhabitants tempt the Israelites to join their idolatrous religious practices: "You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God" (Deut 20:17-18). Here the biblical *Deus Migrator* is also the annihilator of other peoples.

The memory of the biblical command to migrate and conquer the Promised Land lived on in the later Christian tradition and is a point of debate among Jews today. At various times in later history, some Christians have identified with the biblical Israelite migrants and have engaged in violent conquests, such as the Pilgrims who migrated to New England in the seventeenth century "on an errand in the wilderness," and viewed the Indigenous peoples as the peoples in the land of Canaan who were to be dispossessed.[18] When they fought against the Pequot nation in Mystic, CT, in 1636, the Puritans set fire to a Pequot settlement and then killed the inhabitants, including mainly women and children, when they fled the flames. When the leader, John Underhill, was challenged about this later on, he insisted that they had authorization from the Word of God, referring to the biblical command to migrate to the Promised Land and eliminate the inhabitants.[19] Sacvan Bercovitch comments that in migrating, the Puritans "used the biblical myth of exodus and

[18] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 38–42.

[19] See Slotkin, *Regeneration throught Violence,* 76.

conquest to justify imperialism before the fact….migration as a function of prophecy, and prophecy as an unlimited license to expand."[20]

The biblical command to migrate to the Promised Land informs and shapes the difficult dilemma of migration and interreligious relations with regard to the disputed land of Israel/Palestine today. Now that Catholics and many other Christians have renounced supersessionism with regard to the Jewish people, some Jews insist that this means the covenantal promise of migration to inherit the land is still in effect. This is an existential challenge for many in the Holy Land today. Christians and Muslims whose families lived in the Holy Land for generations were expelled and are not allowed to migrate back to their ancestral homeland; Jews in the name of the biblical promises migrate to the modern state of Israel from around the world and have repeatedly displaced the previous inhabitants of the land. The upshot of this is that migration in the Bible and the Christian tradition can be all the wonderful things that Peter Phan describes, but migration, both theologically as well as historically and politically, is profoundly ambiguous and calls for further reflection and critical discernment. In light of the tragic history of migrants conquering and displacing other peoples in the name of biblical promises, Phan's celebratory tone seems to be somewhat misplaced.

Concluding Thoughts

Of course, these concerns do not detract from the marvelous contributions that Peter Phan has made to us and to our world. Throughout his career on various continents, Peter is always reaching out to build bridges across traditional chasms. In this he honors his namesake, the Apostle

[20] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations of the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 32, 33.

Peter, who received the posthumous title, *pontifex maximus,* literally, the greatest bridge-builder. I think we can honor Peter Phan as a *pontifex in pectore,* a leader who builds bridges in the heart, seeking connections wherever he travels. We build bridges because the earth that unites us lies deep below the surface, and we need a way to cross over. Peter's constant concern is to seek the common ground that unites us and to build bridges in the heart so we may cross over. This is at the heart of what Peter calls *missio inter gentes.*

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