

Kwok Pui Lan, Episcopal Divinity School



Kwok Pui Lan is the William F. Cole Professor of Christian Theology and Spirituality at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An internationally known theologian, she received her doctorate from Harvard University and honorary doctorates from Kampen Theological University in the Netherlands and Uppsala University in Sweden. The author or editor of fifteen books in English and Chinese, Kwok's publications include Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Introducing Asian Feminist Theology (Pilgrim Press, 2000), Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World (Orbis Books, 1995), and Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860–1927 (Scholars Press, 1992). She is also an editor of the major reference work Women and Christianity (4 vols., Routledge, 2010). Kwok was the recipient of the Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2009 from the American Academy of Religion. A cofounder of the network Pacific, Asian, North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry, Kwok has directed teaching workshops for Asian and Asian North American faculty.

RSN: How did you become a student of theology?

Kwok: I was very active in my church in Hong Kong when I was a teenager. A university professor came to my church when I was in high school to deliver three lectures on theology. I was enthralled by them and thought there was much more about Christianity than what I had heard in my church. Deacon Jane Hwang Hsien-yuin, who served in my church, was a role model and gave me much encouragement. She became one of the first two women officially ordained in the Anglican Church in the fall of 1971 when I entered divinity school.

RSN: What was the book that influenced you most during your formative years?

Kwok: Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* was probably the most important work I read in my formative years. It was translated into English in 1973 and I studied it with my theology professor shortly afterward. In the late 1960s, students in Hong Kong took to the streets to demand Chinese be used as one of the official languages in addition to English. They also criticized the corruption of the British colonial government. I became very interested in the relation between politics and theology. Liberation theology's social awareness and its preferential option for the poor had great appeal to me.

RSN: How has the field of theology changed?

Kwok: It has become a pluralistic and multivocal discipline, with many new voices joining the theological chorus. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, the Dalits, and indigenous theologians in many parts of the world have articulated their own theology. Many new books on global theology have been published, for the context of doing theology can no longer be restricted to a single locale. Some scholars have begun to talk about a "global theological mind." Theologians have broadened their dialogues with many fields, such as social sciences, cultural studies, critical theory, postcolonial criticism, and more recently neuroscience. I hope to begin conversations with a group of theologians on how to teach theology in a global and transnational age.

RSN: What has led you to research and publish in Asian feminist theology and postcolonial theology?

Kwok: I participated in one of the first Asian women's theological conferences in the early 1980s and it had great impact on me. Asia was undergoing a lot of political and economic changes, and people in the Philippines and South Korea were fighting against dictatorial governments. Progressive Christian movements and religious communities took part in the struggles for democracy. We began to ask how could we develop feminist theology from such a context, which was radically different from that of Western feminist theologians?

My work in postcolonial theology did not begin until much later. Around the time when Britain was about to return Hong Kong to China in 1997, there were many speculations about the future of Hong Kong. In the mid-1990s, postcolonial criticism was introduced to biblical studies. My friends R. S. Sugirtharajah and Fernando F. Segovia were doing critical work in this area and invited me to contribute to different anthologies. I had few theologians to converse with about postcolonial studies during this time. Using the postcolonial optic, I began to rethink some of the questions that feminist theologians have raised. The result was *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*.

RSN: How has participation in the American Academy of Religion shaped your career?

Kwok: I attended an annual meeting of the AAR for the first time when I was a graduate student in 1985. I was so excited to meet some of the scholars that I had studied and brought my camera with me. I took pictures of Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ and I was delighted to hear Starhawk speak.

AAR has broadened my knowledge of what feminist scholars are doing in their respective areas. I was glad to learn how scholars in the Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, and other traditions have critiqued and reconstructed their traditions. Networking with scholars, especially with racial and ethnic minority scholars, has been vital in my scholarship and professional development. My academic life has been profoundly enriched by the conversations I have had in our professional guild.

RSN: You have served as the chair of the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession Committee. Can you tell us some of the issues these scholars face?

Kwok: Last year the Committee sponsored a Special Topics Forum at the Annual Meeting to talk about the past, present, and future of racial and ethnic minorities in the academy. Peter J. Paris, Anthony Pinn, Miguel A. De La Torre, and I — all past and current chairs of the Committee — were invited to speak. The papers were published in the online *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* earlier this year.

I said that in the past, racial and ethnic minorities had to fight to gain visibility, develop a

separate field, and push for greater representation in the academy. Today we face newer challenges. When I first attended the AAR, I met minority scholars as I attended different sessions, but that's now hard to do given how very many program units there now exist. In addition, many schools face severe budget cuts in recent years and the commitment to diversity might not be seen as priority. Unfortunately minority scholars continue to be seen as equipped only to teach courses related to their racial and ethnic backgrounds, while white colleagues are allegedly trained to teach a wider range of subjects.

I also spoke about the need to welcome newer voices that have not been heard and to support the next generation of scholars. If racial and ethnic minorities will become the majority in the United States around 2040, we have to think about what needs to be done in terms of teaching and learning to prepare for this transition.

RSN: Every year there are many international participants attending the Annual Meeting. Do you think the AAR is serving their needs?

Kwok: We have about 17 percent international members, mostly from Canada and Europe, as well as from many other countries. I participated in a panel on masculinity in Jewish and Christian traditions last year. Several male scholars from Europe said that they could not find venues in their own countries to have such a conversation. Our discussion was much enriched by the presence of European, Asian, and African colleagues in our midst. It is very important to bear in mind the global dimensions of the study of religion. We have an International Connections Committee and the AAR has become a member of the International Association for the History of Religions. Since many of the AAR committees are meeting virtually, international members can participate more actively in committees and task forces than before. I welcome suggestions by international members on how to serve them better.

RSN: You received the AAR Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2009. What is your greatest joy in teaching?

Kwok: The greatest joy is seeing that teaching is not a one-way street, for I have grown with my students. I am teaching a course on Spirituality of the Contemporary World. Some students have spent years in meditation and interfaith dialogue. I have learned much from them. Teaching courses in spirituality has also motivated me to learn more about the spiritual practices of religious communities. I have spent some time visiting Plum Village in southwest France to listen to the Dharma talk of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and meditate with the

monks and nuns. I also visited Taizé and worshipped with thousands of young people.

I consider teaching as an art. My daughter learned to play the piano when she was very young. Her gifted teacher would use many interesting metaphors to help her understand the piece she was playing and to produce the sound. "Here, imagine the dragonflies hopping on water," she would say. Music is very abstract; the challenge is how to make it concrete. Teaching religion is similar. How can we present abstract and intricate religious ideas in tangible ways, and in doing so, fire up the students' imaginations?

RSN: What are your goals as the Academy's President in 2011?

Kwok: I preside over a new Board of Directors, since the AAR's new governance structure took effect in January. Under this new structure, we have twelve Board of Directors and most of them will be democratically elected by the members. I want to thank past presidents Jeffrey Stout and Emilie Townes for chairing the Governance Task Force. Based on their report, we have revised the bylaws, which were approved last year. My immediate predecessors Mark Juergensmeyer and Ann Taves played critical roles in shepherding the change.

Much of my work this year will be facilitating a smooth transition to the new governance structure. I will also appoint a task force to make recommendations for self-evaluation of the various committees, juries, and task forces. The program units have undergone periodical reviews. The Board and the different committees will also do self-reviews to improve our work.

The Technology Task Force has suggested the creation of a standing technology committee. I think this is very necessary as technology can provide greater opportunities for scholars to network with one another. The AAR is improving its Web site and it will soon launch a new device linking scholars in religion, something like an academic Facebook.

In a tight job market, I am concerned about future academic jobs for graduate students and the training of doctoral students. Ann Taves has begun conversations in the academy on this subject with the help of the Job Placement Task Force. I hope to continue the work because this has critical implications for our field.