

Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng

Green is Better than Blue

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Chinese-Canadian Professor Emerita of Religious Education, the Rev. Dr. Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, is a critical innovator in Christian religious education and a passionate leader in feminist and anti-racist initiatives within the church and theological academy. Ng taught at both Vancouver School of Theology and Emmanuel College in Toronto, primarily in Christian education. She has also served in various capacities within the United Church of Canada as an educator and minister at the church's local, regional and national levels (Ng, personal communication, February 23, 2021). She is currently the only Asian North American woman featured in the "Christian Educators of the 20th Century" database published by Biola University's Talbot School of Theology. The database is a peer-reviewed resource covering approximately 215 of the century's most influential Christian educators. Ng serves in many notable leader-

ship roles in both the church and academy, including on the steering committee of the Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network and as the co-chair of the Committee on Asian/North American Asian Theologies at Emmanuel College (Ng, pers. comm., February 23, 2021).

Ng served as a senior faculty advisor and co-coordinator of Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAATM). In this capacity, she has mentored and supported many generations of women as scholars of theology and ministry practitioners (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). Ng (2018) writes about this commitment also in the framework of resisting tokenism and expanding opportunities for other racialized women, stating,

One of the realities of being the sole (or one of only a few) Asian women in an institution or organization is that one frequently gets called on to give leadership, serve on a committee, or simply show up. While fully aware of the danger of tokenism, one is nevertheless reluctant to leave a group one cares about without representation. It took me some time to come up with a compromise. I learned to counter invitations by suggesting instead names of younger women—often students but also leaders in local churches.

Ng is truly a scholar-practitioner, modeling the praxis-based approach deeply rooted in her feminist and justice-oriented values. Her denominational and ecumenical service reflects her commitment to church leadership. As a church leader, she contributed to several anti-racism programs of the United Church of Canada and developed an “anti-racist spirituality” (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). Interdisciplinarity, justice, and liberation are key to her work and scholarship, as she draws together work in critical race theory, educational theory, cultural anthropology, theology, and beyond. Her background in literature also contributes a keen attention to language, narrative, and symbolism. Ng has written extensively for church and theological contexts. Her publications span a wide variety of topics and formats, including Christian education curricula, worship, and liturgical resources, anti-racism, intercultural dialogue, and gender justice in theological and educational contexts. Her philosophical orientation on the formation of future generations works as a noteworthy methodological approach that provides a praxis-oriented way of addressing racism and sexism in the church and in the academy. The saying “green is better than blue”—a metaphor that has influenced Ng’s work—exemplifies her humility in that

it expresses that future generations will surpass the old. This underscores her strong support for younger scholars and the mentoring of next generations.

I first met Dr. Ng in 2010 when I was an MDiv student at Emmanuel College in Toronto. She had returned from retirement to teach several courses and was teaching my seminary Christian Education class. I knew her name from numerous church resources and publications she had edited and authored and was excited to take her class. I remember the course being anything but ordinary. Ng introduced concepts and connections to the class using Chinese characters and terms and drew from her tremendous store of diverse ministerial experiences. A few years later, I took a course on interculturalism that she co-taught with Dr. Marilyn Legge. This was one of my first experiences in a class explicitly addressing race and culture. Dr. Ng and I later crossed paths again when I served from 2013–16 as the minister to children and youth at Fairlawn Avenue United Church in Toronto—the United Church congregation attended by Dr. Ng. I was intimidated to serve as a minister for Christian education in front of such a giant in the field. However, Dr. Ng was nothing but supportive and encouraging, always looking for ways to offer expertise and resources, often in the form of the gift of books from her collection! It is this early experience with Dr. Ng as a mentor and supporter of my own work as a Christian educator that motivates my interest in sharing her story.

Dr. Ng introduced me to the Chinese proverb that states, “green comes out of blue, but is/can be better than/superior to blue (*qing qu yu lan, er sheng yu lan* 青出於藍, 而勝於藍)” during an interview I conducted with her in the fall of 2020. She also uses this expression in her 2018 article entitled “My Religious Education Sangha and Dharma: Learning-Teaching as an Asian in the North American Diaspora” to describe her commitment to mentoring the next generation, especially scholars and practitioners of Asian descent (Ng 2018). This expression, which originated with the Chinese philosopher Xunzi, encapsulates Dr. Ng’s career and commitments. The saying relates that young (green) indigo plants will eventually produce a great deal of indigo (blue), more than the originating plant. It is a proverb that is often used in reference to education, meaning that students often exceed and go beyond their teachers. Dr. Ng certainly built upon what she received from her teachers and educational experiences. Her strong commitment to mentoring means that she prepares the next generation to go beyond what she has done.

I propose that the metaphor also resonates in another way with Ng's career (although not an original interpretation of the proverb). Green is a secondary color, composed of two primary colors; yellow and blue. Much of Ng's work has involved crossing boundaries and bringing together two or more elements to create innovative insights and coalitions. This boundary-crossing has included bringing together different cultures, religions, genders, academic disciplines, age groups, and generations. Ng is a bridge builder and interpreter, using her diverse experiences to form innovative connections and coalitions. This chapter will begin with an overview of Ng's life and career and then will consider her key theoretical ideas and approaches and finally, her specific academic and professional contributions and scholarly publications. I make the case for her notability by leaning into interviews with Ng conducted in the winter of 2020–21. Using these interviews, an extended interview conducted by Mai-Anh Tran in 2004, and other primary sources, I illustrate how her notable contributions to the academy were driven by her passion for a future generation who would do better than their predecessors as builders of a more just church and world.

Early Life and Education

Ng was born in Hong Kong in 1936, during the period when it was under British colonial rule, to parents who identified as non-religious and supported humanism and rationality. However, they were also steeped in Confucian and Taoist worldviews and orientations. Ng grew up as the second daughter in her middle-class family of eight children. Her father, Ng Yan Yee, was a businessperson and her mother, Wong Shuc Kee, was a homemaker, although she had completed high school, which was considered progressive for the time. They both were committed to education and strongly encouraged Ng in her studies. Ng also recalls her father giving her stamps from different countries. This piqued her interest in the world and global affairs and also encouraged her interest in writing and poetry from a young age. She also remembers her parents' support of her participation in a children's journalism initiative and poetry competitions (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021).

Ng locates the beginning of her feminist consciousness to the birth of her younger brother, who immediately had a higher status

because he was a boy. This patriarchal favoritism irked Ng and disturbed her sense of justice. While growing up, the family moved several times due to the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Although this was a difficult experience, it also helped Ng to be comfortable adapting to new contexts and situations. This exposure contributed to her interests in language, translation, narrative, and cultural diversity. Her childhood included time spent in Vietnam and Macau before returning to Hong Kong to begin high school. She recalls reflecting, for instance, on the status of women in different contexts and cultures and realizing this varied in different places (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021).

Ng encountered Christianity first through her schooling. She attended a Baptist mission school and Sunday school, and then a Catholic church during her high school years. During her childhood, Ng's family did celebrate various festivals such as the New Year. However, her parents considered religion to be riddled with superstition and not for educated people like them. There were also Taoist influences in her home, which she only identified later in life. In her home, she remembers art depicting nature in a way that emphasized the smallness of humanity in relation to the vastness and greatness of the natural world. She also recalls attention paid to a sense of balance through the properties in various foods (Tran 2004). Ng describes her education and upbringing within colonial systems as another formative influence. She notes that her teachers spoke negatively about ancestor worship and the necessity for Christians to reject common practices such as making food offerings to ancestors. Ng found a middle ground, not observing all of the traditional rituals fully. For example, she recalls standing respectfully in front of her family's ancestral tablets but not bowing to them like her great-grandmother (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021).

After high school, Ng went on to study English for her Bachelor of Arts degree, earned with honors, at the University of Hong Kong, graduating in 1958, and then earned a Master of Arts degree in English literature in 1960 (Ng, pers. comm., February 23, 2021). She took these studies under the direction of English poet Edmund Blunden. Ng recalls that Blunden was sensitive and often engaged themes related to nature in his writing. As a mentor, he encouraged his students, including Ng, to enter poetry competitions, invited students to his home to share his latest poems, and "stimulated students both intellectually and relationally" (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021). During her university years, Ng met various types of Christians, both Catho-

lic and Protestant, all jockeying for her allegiance. Despite her familiarity and experience with Catholicism in her high school education, Ng chose to become Protestant, specifically Congregationalist. She made this choice based on the church's stances on social and theological issues. She was also attracted to the Congregationalist emphasis on unmediated access to God, not requiring a priest (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

In 1960, the same year she received her master's degree, Ng began her doctoral studies at Columbia University in New York City. In 1964, she took a leave of absence from her studies to begin her teaching career in Singapore at Trinity Theological College, teaching alongside her husband, Kam-Yan Ng. English language, religious literature, and spirituality were among the courses she taught. The couple's first son was born during this time. Ng was one of the first women to teach with the same "status" as her husband, unlike most other women at the college married to male faculty members who taught for free and without faculty status (Tran 2004). During this time, Ng's theological understanding became more complex as she encountered the possibility of diverse interpretations of Biblical stories. These interpretations resonated with her and moved her away from literalist and singular interpretations toward those offered by sources such as postcolonial Biblical scholars (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021).

Ng's theological views continued to develop with her introduction to feminist Biblical interpretation and analysis of social location and power through figures like Paulo Freire. This shift emphasized critical subjectivity and active ownership of one's faith which resonated with her earlier choice of Protestantism (Tran 2004). However, Ng's introduction to critical and feminist theology primarily arose through a process of self-study and conversation with colleagues rather than her formal theological education (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021). She notes in her 2018 article in *Religious Education* that Rachel Conrad Wahlberg's 1975 *Jesus According to a Woman* and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's 1977 *Women, Men and the Bible* were especially foundational texts for her scholarly formation.

Early Career

From 1966–67, Ng and her husband lived in Toronto, Canada, on sabbatical. Kam-Yan was a visiting scholar at Emmanuel College, part of

Victoria University within the University of Toronto, where Ng would return to work throughout her career. In 1967, Ng and her husband returned to New York City. Ng completed her PhD in 1969 with a thesis entitled “The Figure of the Child in Victorian Novels of Protest.” During this period, the young family attended the vibrant and multicultural Riverside Church where Ng taught in the Sunday School program, directed by the dynamic educator Josephine Bliss. Bliss was educated at Union Theological Seminary and served Riverside’s children’s ministry from 1955–76 (*New York Times* 1988). However, it was primarily circumstances that provoked Ng to teach in the program. Ng recounts using the excuse of being the teacher for a different class to convince her young son that he could be left in his own class. The experience of a holistic and meaningful Christian education program sparked her interest in the field as she participated in Riverside’s practice of teachers developing their own curricula each week. Ng recalls that Bliss was a gifted educator and offered a great deal of weekly professional development for the teachers, introducing them to child development theories and encouraging them to use narrative and stories in their classes (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021).

In 1970, after their second son’s birth, Ng and her family moved back to Toronto. At that time, Ng’s husband began a ministry role at Toronto Chinese United Church. Although her husband’s career instigated the move, Ng certainly took advantage of the opportunities it presented (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021). She resisted being cast as a minister’s wife. Instead, she became increasingly involved with denominational initiatives, especially those related to education, within the United Church of Canada. She began with a role as the liaison between her husband’s congregation and the Presbytery—the United Church congregations’ regional organization. This opportunity launched her into many other projects and initiatives. For example, from 1975 to 1980, Ng served as writer-in-residence for mission education and curriculum development for the denomination’s Division of Communication and Division of Mission (Ng, pers. comm., February 23, 2021). Again, circumstances led her toward Christian education: having young children and her love of writing and resource development (Tran 2004).

In 1978, Ng returned to Emmanuel College to begin her Master of Divinity degree (Victoria University Archives. n.d.). She completed her MDiv in 1980. From 1980–81, she served as a Ministerial Associate for St. James-Bond United Church in Toronto, overseeing education and outreach. From 1981–86, she served the United Church’s

Hamilton Conference as its Christian development officer (Victoria University Archives. n.d.). Ng was ordained in the United Church of Canada in 1986 (Ng, pers. comm., February 23, 2021). The decision to be ordained was largely due to her commitment to equity and the fact that, in Asian communities, ordination is necessary for credibility, particularly for women. Without ordination, Ng was treated as inferior to her husband, so ordination was required to live into the couple's commitment to minister together as equals (Tran 2004).

Theological Teaching Career

Ng began her theological teaching career serving as the assistant professor of educational ministries at Vancouver School of Theology (VST) in 1986. She also served as its director of lay education from 1986–89 (Ng, pers. comm., February 23, 2021). During this time, she began working with Indigenous communities, designing the curriculum for their Native Ministries' MDiv-by-Extension program (Religious Education Association. n.d.). Her commitment to cultural specificity contributed to developing a program that honored Indigenous pedagogy and traditions (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

Ng encountered feminist theology first through White feminists but later realized that her experience as an Asian, and specifically a married Asian woman, was unique (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). A vital community for her in that realization was the organization Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM, formed in 1984), where she met prominent theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Kwok Pui-Lan. The PANAAWTM website states that the organization is composed of "Asian and North American Asian female students, faculty, ministers, and community activists who are committed to bringing women's voices and concerns to the faith communities and society." Their website notes that they publish on topics related to feminist studies in theology and religion, host conferences, and mentor the upcoming generations of leaders from these constituencies. Kwok offers,

Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng is a beloved mentor and wise elder for sisters in Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry. She has made sure that we include Canadian women in our theologizing and networking. She contributed to developing teach-

ing materials and strategies in teaching Asian and North American women's theology. As a pioneer in her field, she calls attention to solidarity between North American Asian women and Aboriginal women. (Kwok, email message to author, February 23, 2021)

Through the experience of connecting with PANAAWTM, Ng re-claimed and began to use her Chinese name, Wenh-In, whereas previously she went by Anne or Greer Anne. Ng's involvement in PANAAWTM extended well beyond participation and mentoring to include roles such as conceptualizing the organization itself and securing funding. A central project of Ng's with PANAAWTM was a research report entitled "Developing Teaching Materials and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women's Theologies in North America," published in 1999 (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

Another critical organizational involvement of Ng's is REA:APPRRE, the Religious Education Association: An Association of Professors, Practitioners, and Researchers in Religious Education. Their website describes that the organization works to "advance substantive research, probing scholarship and practical approaches to religious education" and publishes the journal *Religious Education* (Religious Education Association n.d.). Ng was one of the early, if not the first, Asian woman to have participated in the organization, and her work has been published extensively through that journal. Ng served as president of APPRRE, before its merger with REA, from 2001–02. REA and APPRRE have been important academic "homes" for Ng, since her work is primarily situated within the field of religious education (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

Ng left VST and returned a third time to Emmanuel College in 1995 to serve on the faculty as associate professor of Christian education and to coordinate the Centre for Asian Theology, which she helped found (Tran 2004). Ng retired in 2002 but has remained involved in educational and ministerial leadership, particularly in the area of racial justice. This has included work for the United Church of Canada to develop "anti-racist spirituality." This work is featured in a 2004 resource that she edited entitled *That All May Be One: A Resource for Educating toward Racial Justice* (Ng 2004a). In 2010, the Senate of Victoria University, affiliated with Emmanuel College, granted her an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree to recognize her many contributions (Victoria University n.d.).

Reflecting on her sense of calling, Ng identifies her work in religious education and teaching as her primary ministry. However, she has also felt called to and has enjoyed other aspects of ministerial leadership. Her pragmatism emerges in her reflections. Ng notes that she did not intend to spend her career in this area, but because she had certain experiences and competencies, it is where she was well-situated to contribute. She also believes it is an area of great importance (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). Empowerment of the next generation is another common theme throughout her life and work, including her mentorship of women in the academy. Religious education of children, the seminary education of ministers, and her mentoring work through organizations such as PANAAWTM all share the element of empowering those who are developing in their identity and vocation. Long-time colleague and PANAAWTM collaborator Kwok Pui-Lan attests, “as one of the senior scholars in her field, [Ng] has unceasingly nurtured the younger scholars” (Tran 2004).

Key Ideas and Approaches

Cultural Diversity

Multiculturalism, interculturalism, and contextual specificity have been key themes in Ng’s life and work. Each of these relates to bringing together two or more elements to create something that is innovative, responsive to context, honors diverse heritages, and crosses boundaries and conventional limitations. Ng also describes how she used aspects of Euro-American theologies and theories of education to gain legitimacy in contexts where her identity caused her to be viewed with skepticism or denied authority. These include her work with predominantly White congregations and academic spaces (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). However, she has found that many of these theories do not resonate with non-White communities or with her own lived experience. For example, in Ng’s work with the Vancouver School of Theology’s Native Ministries program, she proposed that the basic competencies of ministry might be achieved differently by different communities, in ways that were appropriate to their diverse contexts and experiences (Tran 2004). This esteem

for diversity also relates to theological concepts. Ng proposes that the Indigenous orientation toward the four directions might be more culturally appropriate for some than that of the Trinity. Ng outlines this approach to Indigenous contexts and theologies in her 2020 article entitled “Complexities in Religious Education with Asian/Asian Canadians and Indigenous Realities: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report on Residential Schools” (Ng 2020a).

Ng’s sensitivity toward cultural diversity resonates with her Canadian location, where multiculturalism has been an official policy since 1971 under Pierre Elliott Trudeau. These policies were initially conceived as a combination of biculturalism and bilingualism in English and French communities. The idea of multiculturalism expanded this orientation to recognize the increasing number of non-European migrants to Canada since the 1960s. Ng’s husband was involved in a specific initiative for publicly-funded Chinese language schools related to this policy (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). However, over time, Ng has become increasingly aware that multiculturalism is insufficient to address the structural inequality between various cultural groups. She notes that, too often, multiculturalism focuses on non-White ethnic groups maintaining their language, food, and customs and not on equity, for example, in employment and access to services. She considers this topic in many of her publications, including her 2003 chapter entitled “Land of Maple and Lands of Bamboo” (Ng 2003).

This awareness of multiculturalism’s shortcomings led Ng to integrate postcolonial analysis into her thinking (Ng 2005). This analysis is rooted in her own experience of growing up in colonial Hong Kong, understanding England as her homeland due to that colonial relationship. Nevertheless, Ng is also careful to say that she values some of what she received from colonialism, such as her experience in the British educational system. She has a great deal of appreciation for hybridity, complexity, and nuance (Ng, pers. comm, March 4, 2021). This appreciation extends to her current analysis of the Canadian-US relationship, focusing on the particularity of Canadians’ experiences as distinct from that of their US neighbors. These distinctions include differences between Asian-American and Asian-Canadian social locations and experiences. Ng is also very attentive to the diversity of Asian and Asian-North American experiences and the ways that, over time, these identities can themselves evolve, particularly over journeys of migration and establishment in new lands (Ng 2003). She describes the many diversities within migration expe-

riences, ranging from one's specific originating country and culture, period of time when the migration occurred, circumstances leading to one's migration, age when a person or their parents migrated, and so forth. These diverse experiences are often homogenized within the overall category of "migrant."

Context and Contextualization

Context and contextualization are commitments that are deeply connected to cultural diversity and colonial legacies and realities. In addition to raising her own cultural context, Ng also profoundly values the complexities of the moment and the community she is situated in and responds to in her work. She gives the example of changing family structures as something that she has been attentive to in her educational curricula and teaching and church-based work. Specifically, in her 1997 article entitled "Contextualization of Religious Education in an Age of Disbelief," she shares an example of receiving feedback from an editor about the references she made to families in children's religious education curricula she wrote. The editor introduced her to the need to ensure that diverse family structures were exemplified in fictional stories for children.

Theologically, Ng understands contextualization to be a matter of justice. She challenges the unspoken 'norm' of the privileged enforced in relation to race, culture, gender, and sexual orientation. Ng identifies that these privileged perspectives are particular but too often taken to be normal, natural, universal, and superior. By analyzing dynamics such as power, privilege, and intersectional difference, one can see how all perspectives arise out of particular contexts. Due to power differences, some receive a great deal of attention and are given legitimacy, while others do not and are not. In her 1997 article on contextualization of religious education, she calls upon her colleagues to engage in contextualizing praxis, asserting,

we need to learn how to do theology and interpret the Bible contextually. We need to learn how to make it possible for those hitherto excluded from theological conversation by reason of age (children, youth, seniors), sex (women and girls), sexual orientation (gay and lesbian individuals and families), ability (the physically or mentally challenged), social class (single parent families or the poor on welfare), and racial/ethnic origin (the so-called non-white minorities and

their congregations), to join in asking faith questions and to participate in the search for understanding. (Ng 1997)

Ng's interest in Biblical interpretation is informed by her scholarly commitments to feminism, postcolonialism, contextualization, and liberation. In turn, her analysis of and fresh perspectives on Biblical stories carry over to her research, writing, seminary teaching, and curriculum development. As a religious educator in seminary settings, she is committed to ensuring that clergy take their role as congregational Bible study leaders seriously and that they engage with these stories from critical perspectives. Members of the clergy have an important role to play in ensuring that critical scholarship about the Bible does not remain solely in the theological academy. By the work of the clergy, biblical scholarship should inform the perspectives of congregations and laypeople. For Ng, the role of clergy in Confirmation classes is vital. This can be one of the few congregational educational initiatives where clergy are sure to have an active role. In this formative interaction, they influence the faith of the young people they serve (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

Practice, Experience, Diversity, and Pragmatism

Religious education is a practice-based field, so it is not surprising that practice and experience are central to Ng's work. She understands the importance of her rooted location within the church. From this perspective, theologies and theories are valid insofar as they are connected to and rooted in lived experience. This commitment speaks to the divide that Ng identifies, which can emerge between doctrine and practice in church settings when ministries do not attend to both. Ng notes that being a seminary educator in Christian education is an important bridge-building role. In that academic role, she helps clergy understand the importance of Christian education as a bridge between theoretical doctrine and practice for their future congregations (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

Ng is truly a scholar-practitioner whose work spans a variety of genres and fields in both the church and the academy. She has developed liturgical resources, educational curricula, and bible study programs, written hymns, and designed new spiritual practices. Her work not only spans various forms but also takes an ecumenical and interfaith perspective. Her work as a researcher and author crosses

denominational boundaries. It is published in explicitly ecumenical spaces, including PANAAWTM and other societies and organizations related to Christian education, Asian and Asian North American theology and practice, feminism, and more. Her publications are varied, including coverage in the United Church's *Mission and Mandate* magazine introducing the denomination to the work of Paulo Freire (1979–82) (Tran 2004), a resource for creating children's messages for worship services published in *Word and Witness* (Ng 1993–96), a theological teaching guide (Ng and Kwok 1999), and a prayer of thanksgiving from a multicultural perspective for a prayer resource book (Ng 1998), contributions to the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* and *Harper's Encyclopedia of Religious Education*, Advent devotional reflections (Ng and Uyede-Kai 1997), and a resource book for interracial marriage (Ng 1993).

Strategic pragmatism is also emblematic of Ng's approach to education for justice in the academy. She describes strategies she has employed, such as co-teaching anti-racism sessions with a White co-leader of equal seniority, working with allies, knowing her audience, and setting realistic expectations for a session's results. For example, while all participants may not be totally changed after a session, if one person leaves with a fresh understanding of the effects of racism, that is an accomplishment. She also describes the strategic approach she takes at times of co-leading a session with a person of the dominant race or gender. This ensures that challenging messages will be received (and not immediately dismissed) and allows her co-leader to model respectful engagement, listening, and learning from and with her (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

In relationship to religious formation, Ng describes herself as rooted in a Taoist cosmology and commitment to the notion that one can only love God through loving one's neighbor—a justice-oriented commitment found in many faith traditions, including Christianity. She is a strong advocate for integrating one's cultural heritage and orientations, which she models in her own life, work, and religious practice. Ng speaks of the value of the more Euro-Christian practices of prayer, scripture reading, and critical interpretation combined with Chinese calligraphy and Taoist nature walks. As a bridge-builder, she notes that this approach has been useful in connecting with people of Indigenous heritage and other cultural groups, as they bring together various elements in their own practices. Ng's audience and community of accountability is in no way limited to Asians or Asian North Americans or even other culturally marginalized

groups. With all types of audiences, she articulates the possible contributions of traditions, histories, and values from Asian and Asian North American communities to the diverse and global Christian community. Her concern for broad engagement manifests in her diverse and varied publications, speaking engagements, worship, and educational leadership (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020).

Power Analysis, Critical Methodology, and Interdisciplinarity

Another critical theme in Ng's work is power, particularly in relationship to margins and centers. As she has moved between margins and centers of power in her own life and has had access to positions of more or less power in various contexts and settings, Ng reflects on power from her own diverse experiences. Ng asserts that even social justice agendas must not be imposed upon groups, particularly without attention to cultural particularity (Ng, pers. comm., November 11, 2020). She takes a holistic and intersectional approach to power analysis, looking carefully at the interplay of various aspects of social identity and location as they are manifest across multiple contexts. For example, she considers the teacher's position with respect to power. Informed by her experience, she does not assume the teacher will always have greater social power than her students, given the complexities of different situations. Ng argues that "for racial-ethnic minority teachers, who already have diminished social power in the presence of 'majority' colleagues or students, to 'give our power away' too drastically in the seminary classroom is to further erode our hard-earned credibility" (Ng 2000, 317–18). In this way, she challenges some of the general trends within feminist and critical pedagogy towards students' empowerment, reminding us that not all teachers or students have the same access to power.

One key methodological approach for Ng is that of the hermeneutic circle or spiral. She describes this methodology as a process that begins with present experience and context, which is analyzed using a variety of interpretive and theoretical tools. Using these tools, she reflects on, analyzes, and evaluates findings through the lens of justice-seeking and cultural difference. Ng seeks to apply her findings on multiple levels, from the most local level to the global. This circle and spiral approach can be seen in her research as she moves from experience to culturally and academically rooted analysis to various applications for the church and community's life. Ng wrote about a

formative experience in her work for the United Church of Canada when she was tasked with introducing the work of Freire in an accessible way to a lay audience. She notes,

That early challenge to present the ideas of Paulo Freire in an accessible manner deepened into a lifelong commitment to liberative pedagogy for all sorts and conditions of people in academy, church, and society. Engaging in such education for justice pointed me in the direction of education for anti-racism/racial justice. (Ng 2018)

Ng's methodology is also interdisciplinary. With her varied background in Asian philosophical traditions and English literature, she brings fields such as sociology, cultural anthropology, critical race theory, educational theories, and literary studies into conversation with theological and biblical disciplines. For example, in her 2004 article entitled "Beyond Bible Stories: The Role of Culture-Specific Myths/Stories in the Identity Formation of Nondominant Immigrant Children," she explores both the possibilities of engaging prominent cultural and literary narratives in religious education (Ng 2004a). Ng is comfortable working in multiple arenas simultaneously in ways that bring together the theories or sources most fitting to the issue at hand. Her motivation for this type of cross-pollination often arises from the real world and lived experience. Throughout her writing, she names specific experiences and draws upon her own life story. This is illustrated by the way she connects her analysis of postcolonialism to the story of claiming her Chinese name.

The fact is, born and growing up in the former British colony of Hong Kong, my siblings and myself were all given English names as well as names in Chinese at birth. . . . For most of my school and university days, plus the first part of my professional life, therefore, my name in Chinese remained silenced and hidden. It was not until the early 1990s when, through a process of conscientization and being encouraged by the examples of Asian feminist theologians such as Kwok Pui Lan and Chung Hyung Kyung that, I dared to 'come out' by reclaiming 'Wenh-In' in a large church gathering as a public, anti-colonial action. Naming as an integral part of uncovering our hidden histories and present realities applies not only to persons, but just as significantly, to organizations and movements. (Ng 2018)

Publications

Ng has published or co-published over fifty book chapters, journal articles, edited volumes, educational curriculum resources, liturgical resources, and other publications. This section will provide a sense of how Ng employs the key themes and ideas that I have noted previously in specific works. Most of her academic publications have related to explorations of race, culture, gender, and power in the specific context of religious education. She often employs specific case studies, personal experiences, and poetry in her writing, making theory quite accessible and tangible for the reader. Finally, most of her works include practical calls to action and specific examples of how her arguments manifest in new practices, particularly in church settings.

“Contextualization of Religious Education in an Age of Disbelief”

In her article “Contextualization of Religious Education in an Age of Disbelief,” published in *Religious Education* in 1997, Ng notes that contextualization is a process that “consciously situates any groups’ theologizing and mission in the historical, social, political, and economic conditions in which it finds itself” (Ng 1997, 193). Contextualization involves critiquing the forces that may have “shaped or warped” a theology or belief system, such as missionaries coming from abroad. Ng asserts that in order to contextualize the field and endeavor of religious education undertaken by many churches in the present age, the theology informing that endeavor must also be contextualized. This contextual analysis takes place from a rooted, self-critical perspective that is aware of all of the factors shaping the educator. Factors shaping the present context of “so-called disbelief” must also be thoroughly considered. Drawing on the work of contextual theologians such as South African Albert Nolan, Ng helps us to see that it matters who has access to the “doing” of theology, it matters who is in a position to educate, and it matters where this all takes place (194). She shares examples of how religious educators have worked to diversify their ranks and to attend to the specific nuances of their locations and communities (195). However, she also tells us that there are many aspects of context that remain to be considered by religious

educators, including, for example, materialism, capitalism, violence against women, and racism.

“From Confucian Master Teacher to Freirean Mutual Learner”

Ng’s article “From Confucian Master Teacher to Freirean Mutual Learner: Challenges in Pedagogical Practice and Religious Education,” published in 2000 in *Religious Education*, is informed by deep reflection on her early context and formation. She considers the dilemma that feminist, liberative pedagogy presents to those formed by Confucian educational ethos. Ng identifies a layer of complexity that emerges when also trying to honor her Christian formation and her early formative traditions and context, which have their own justice-rooted pedagogy (Ng 2000, 308). Ng considers the elements of Confucian teaching, including valuing community over the individual, hierarchy over egalitarianism, deference to authority, and distinct gender roles, that tend to be found in churches comprised of people with Confucian cultural heritage (309). While retaining elements of Confucianism can represent a form of contextualization of Christianity, it also presents challenges to those attempting to utilize liberative pedagogies, as these emphasize individual agency, the value of challenging authority, and egalitarianism. However, employing a careful analysis of Confucian Master Kongzi, Ng suggests that there may be more commonality with Freirean approaches than is often thought, including respect for equal access to learning, diversity in understanding, and use of “field trips” and embodied pedagogy (Ng 2000, 312). Ng asserts that it may have been later teachers and philosophical influences that established what we think of as Confucian hierarchical values and pedagogies (315–16). Additionally, Ng suggests that liberative pedagogy may, in fact, benefit from some aspects of Confucian approaches. Although Confucian pedagogy is often understood as a more hierarchical form of education, it respects the teacher’s unique gifts. This sense of respect for expertise and teachers can be essential when the teacher possesses less power than her students—a situation Ng often encounters as an Asian-Canadian female (318).

"Land of Maple and Lands of Bamboo"

Ng published "Land of Maple and Lands of Bamboo" in 2003. She begins with a poem she wrote that explores bamboo as a metaphor for a certain kind of theology: representing ideas such as flexibility, resilience, and growth in community (Ng 2003, 99). In the poem's conclusion, she questions the relationship of bamboo, representing women of Asian descent and their theological beliefs, to the larger and taller tree species that are native to North America. She suggests this metaphor represents Asian women's struggle for racial justice amidst unequal relationships with people and institutions of European descent. This poem both introduces and encapsulates Ng's argument beautifully. She locates her analysis in her own experience and story, noting the colonial forces within mindsets that she and many racially nondominant persons must address (101).

Many of Ng's articles include original poems. Ng reflects that poetry is deeply tied to her life and identity: her father wrote poetry, she wrote poetry as a child and then studied and wrote it at university, she has continued to write poetry throughout her life, and part of her name, Wenh, means to recite poetry or to sing. Asked about her use of poetry, Ng shared, "when my whole person is involved in something . . . it is much easier to express things first in poetic form than in prose. I can then look back at the poetry and do the analysis in prose form." She shares that she finds poetry more expressive and universal (Ng, pers. comm., March 4, 2021).

In this article, Ng also raises critical linguistic and cultural preservation and reclamation tasks within immigrant communities and churches (Ng 2003, 102). Ng shares her creative experiments toward "cultural recovery" of Asian practices in church contexts; however, she also cautions against dangers including Orientalism, romanticism, and misappropriation of cultural practices, which even well-meaning persons of Asian descent can engage in (103–4). Still, she concludes that, despite these pitfalls, there must be space made for creativity, flexibility, bridge-building, and hybridization (104).

In "Land of Maple and Lands of Bamboo," Ng employs this posture of openness to her use of biblical hermeneutics. She embraces culturally and racially minoritized peoples' perspectives. She finds value in their sometimes transgressive interpretation of Biblical narratives. Ng finds that, when they share their understanding of Bible stories, they often find commonality with those from other margin-

alized groups across categories like culture, gender, and sexual orientation. Ng asserts a need for solidarity among people of non-dominant identities who share perspectives such as orientations toward the communal over the individual. However, she is cautious because there can also be significant power differences between various racialized persons and groups (109). Ng sees that denominations often use polity to create bonds between persons and congregations with the same ethnic background. However, she also identifies that polity connects people or congregations across multiple non-dominant ethnic backgrounds. Her consideration of the tension between unity and diversity present within these different arrangements suggests the presence of internal hierarchies and power differences that must be addressed (110–11).

Post-Colonial Theology

Ng takes up her postcolonial concerns in a 2005 article entitled “Reading through New Eyes: Post-Colonial Theology,” published by both the *Catholic New Times* and *Making Waves*, the magazine of the Women’s Interchurch Council of Canada. She skillfully introduces her readers to the need for postcolonial biblical interpretation as a first step in addressing the oppression of colonialism since the Bible is so central in all of Christian life. She argues that a “‘post-colonial’ reading advocates an oppositional stance, one that intentionally adopts a position of resistance in approaching familiar stories ‘from the other side,’ the losing side, the voices that were not heard, the incidents that were never recorded” (Ng 2005). Ng explores the story of Rahab, a Canaanite woman who plays a role in the biblical story of the Israelites’ capture of Jericho. Through this exploration, she considers how these stories are often told from dominant perspectives. However, other interpretations emerge when paying attention to those who have been colonized and oppressed, especially those further marginalized by gender and status (Ng 2005). Ng concludes by noting how the Bible has been used as a tool to support imperialism and racism but, through a hermeneutic of suspicion, might be of service to struggles for justice and a rejection of colonial powers (Ng 2005).

“My Religious Education Sangha and Dharma”

Ng continues to publish on a variety of topics and remains active in societies such as the Religious Education Association (REA). In 2018, Ng published an article entitled “My Religious Education Sangha and Dharma: Learning-Teaching as an Asian in the North American Diaspora.” In this article, Ng reflects on her experiences within REA and her career as a scholar and popular educator. From the perspective of her life’s work in the academy and the Church, she explores the intersections of theological education and church-based education (Ng 2018). Ng reflects on her career and influences, describing how she strived to bring lenses such as liberative pedagogy, feminist theology, and postcolonial analysis into both church and academic contexts. She also notes how she, with others, has worked to honor racially minoritized voices and perspectives within mainstream organizations. At the same time, she has worked to create distinct and separate spaces for these minoritized communities to nurture their own analysis and honor their specific experiences outside of mainstream organizations. She concludes by sharing her own need for ongoing education and learning, including her desire to learn more about Indigenous communities’ experiences in Canada (Ng 2018).

“Complexities in Religious Education with Asian/Asian Canadians and Indigenous Realities”

In 2020, the society’s journal, *Religious Education*, published her paper presented at the 2019 REA conference in Toronto entitled “Complexities in Religious Education with Asian/Asian Canadians and Indigenous Realities: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report on Residential Schools.” This paper continues her long commitment to Asian-Canadian relationships and solidarity with Indigenous communities (Ng 2020a). While noting some connections between Indigenous and Asian-Canadian experiences of racial minoritization, she is careful to note the benefits of European colonization that she has received by living in Canada.

Ng offers her characteristically nuanced analysis of the situation of Asian and Indigenous communities in Canada. She notes their internal diversity, particularly for Asian communities and their histories, which are commonly erased in Canadian society where all are

marked as “visible minorities” (Ng 2020). Asian and Indigenous peoples share this status and several cultural features, such as a greater communitarian orientation and regard for holism over dualism. They also share experiences of profound exclusion and marginalization by Euro-Canadian society. At the same time, Ng emphasizes the different realities of Indigenous communities. As the original inhabitants of the land, they have unique experiences of colonial land exploitation and theft. She details the Indian Residential Schools system’s atrocities supported by mainline churches and the resulting calls to action emerging from Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established to address this legacy.

One crucial aspect of this work is her call for education about Indigenous realities. Ng specifically addresses the importance of having “newcomer” immigrant communities, including Asian immigrants, participate in learning about the painful history of the land they now inhabit. She also notes the importance of religious education that addresses colonialism and the painful impacts of missionaries’ work with Indigenous people and more broadly. Ng also describes the need for anti-racism education for clergy and lay leaders and an anti-racist approach to religious education. Raising her commitment to liberative education, she also asserts that this education must be connected to work for justice and must encourage the church to engage actively with contemporary Indigenous movements struggling for justice.

“Let (Racial) Justice Roll Down Like Waters”

In 2020, Ng published an article entitled “Let (Racial) Justice Roll Down Like Waters” in the United Church of Canada’s *Touchstone* academic journal. In this piece, she draws upon anti-racist thought within biblical interpretation and theology to call for renewed efforts toward anti-racist practices in the church—specifically the United Church of Canada. She cautions that it is the impact, not the intent, of anti-racist actions that matters most and notes that, too often, actions are token gestures and do not fundamentally question hierarchies of racial privilege and power (Ng 2020b, 28). Ng bolsters her call to action toward racial justice for the United Church by appealing to its legacy and identity as a justice-oriented denomination and its past work on interculturalism and related endeavors (Ng 2020b, 28–9). Further, she points to the momentum she observes toward deeper

racial justice engagement in the denomination as it moves from “tolerance” of diversity to “valuing such differences as assets” (Ng 2020b, 30). This appeal to the positive history of the denomination and anticipation and celebration of the transformation already underway speaks to Ng’s prophetically challenging and profoundly optimistic and hopeful orientations.

In this section, I have focused primarily on Ng’s academic publications. However, she has written, edited, and created a wide variety of materials, including curriculum resources for both children and adults, liturgical resources, and various other media. This demonstrates Ng’s comfort with a variety of formats and her skill writing for both academic and lay audiences.¹ Ng’s academic background and pedagogical expertise bring pressing theological critique to scholars and ordinary churchgoers alike. Her vast array of acclaimed publications over the years has raised her to a high level of prominence within the field of religious education, but also more broadly. Her work has relevance far beyond religious education and has made her an important theological leader and innovator in the larger realm of justice-oriented Christian advocacy.

Conclusion

The proverb about how green can be better than blue and its implication that students may surpass their teachers evokes a strong sense of humility. Humility is a primary characteristic of Ng, her career, and her scholarship. Although she is a celebrated theological educator and professor, she is still very willing to serve and teach in local congregations, guide and mentor students and ministers, and be challenged in her analysis and integrate new perspectives. Additionally, she is continually making connections and bringing together “blue” and “yellow”—Asian and Indigenous cultures and worldviews, Christianity and other religious and spiritual traditions, perspectives from people of different generations, genders, Indigenous, settler, and immigrant experiences, or otherwise. Ng’s background in literature served her well. It supported her ability to imagine beyond present realities into the realm of future possibilities. It also enabled her to relish meaningful stories and diverse personal narratives wherever they were found. Contextual considerations continue to be a driving force for her. This analytical lens allows her to engage deeply with contemporary

phenomena such as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Conscious of her context, she considers her own particular positionality and that of other first-generation racialized immigrants.

Although Ng has been officially retired since 2002, her scholarship, publishing, teaching, and leadership continue. Her ongoing relevance as a mentor comes from her commitment to remaining current and engaged in contemporary issues, often through her mentees and students. In many ways, she has been and continues to be that "green" spoken about in the proverb. She has built on what has come before across her remarkable life and works in academia and beyond. Upon those foundations, she has created new insights and practices. Ng's legacy is her scholarship and her practice, not as two separate areas but as a seamless contribution where each is very much a part of the other. This dual legacy is fitting because teaching is both about what is taught and how it is taught. Ng would likely add many other considerations, including who is taught, who is teaching, when and under what conditions it is taking place, and for what purpose and toward what goals. Many generations of children and laypeople have benefited from her curricula and ministry, seminary students guided by her scholarship and teaching, mentees and collaborators in organizations supporting women, people of Asian descent, and religious educators. Together, they build upon her significant contributions to the academy and church she has shaped and brightened.

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Endnotes

- 1 For a comprehensive list of publications in a wide variety of categories, see the list of publications that is included in Mai-Anh Tran's 2004 biography of Dr. Ng found on the Biola University database at <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/wenh-in-ng>.

