

Voices of Asian American Faith Freedom

In May 2021, BJC hosted Voices of Asian American Faith Freedom – a series of live conversations broadcast on Facebook. Each discussion sought to share a unique perspective, exploring the thinking of three Asian American leaders about culture, religion, race and freedom. All of the conversations with BJC Director of Education Charles Watson Jr. are available at [Facebook.com/ReligiousLiberty](https://www.facebook.com/ReligiousLiberty) and on [BJC's YouTube Channel](#).

These questions are to guide further personal reflection or group discussion after watching each conversation.

CONVERSATION PARTICIPANTS



Rev. Lauren L. Ng
Director of Leadership Empowerment
at American Baptist Home Mission
Societies



Dr. Khyati Joshi
Professor of Education at Fairleigh
Dickinson University
and author of *White Christian Privilege:
The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*



Tahil Sharma
Regional Coordinator for North America at
the United Religions Initiative;
Hindu-Sikh Interfaith Activist



Charles Watson Jr.
BJC Director of Education
and discussion moderator

“How does my identity inform my theology?”

REV. LAUREN L. NG

Director of Leadership Empowerment at American Baptist Home Mission Societies

1. What impacted you about Rev. Ng’s family’s story and their connection with the First Baptist Church in Boston? How can churches follow the example of First Baptist Church in Boston and be aware of and respond to the cultural needs of people in their communities?
2. Rev. Ng discusses her awareness of the importance of cultural identity in studying theology and ecclesiology, and she discusses her frustration as an Asian American with not being invited fully into the white-dominated conversation. In what ways can people of color be marginalized in the study of theology? Why is it important for all learners, especially seminary students, to study different cultural approaches to theology? What theological voices of color are generally overlooked or not represented well as people study theology? Why is it important to continuously examine and re-examine the connection between our cultural identity and how it informs our theology?
3. What are the consequences for the church of centering whiteness and white perspectives? How can people profess a God who affirms all racial identities? What are some ways society asks racial minorities to leave their experiences behind and conform to a white “norm”? How can we ensure that there is not an erasure or domination of racial identity?
4. How did you react to the example of Rev. Ng’s Chinese church choir being invited to wear their “ethnic clothing” to participate in another church’s gathering? How do we ensure that those in power are not diminishing and objectifying others’ expressions of faith?
5. Rev. Ng reflects on what religious liberty means in a pluralistic society and points positively to BJC’s “golden rule” of religious liberty: Do not ask government to promote your religion if you don’t want government to promote somebody else’s religion; and do not permit government to hinder somebody else’s religion if you don’t want government to hinder your own religion. How does this golden rule of religious liberty safeguard faith freedom for all?
6. Rev. Ng tells the story about the perception of her long hair in ministry and makes the point that this type of “othering” infers “she cannot be fully Asian American and fully called as a minister of the Christian Gospel at the same time.” What did you learn from this story? Talk about other examples of “othering” that you have seen or experienced in your community.
7. What is a major point you are taking away from this conversation with Rev. Ng and what is an action step you can take? What specifically did you learn about stereotyping or embedding racial narratives on others?

“How do minority religions gain equality in the face of Christian privilege?”

DR. KHYATI JOSHI

Professor of Education at Fairleigh Dickinson University

and author of *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*

1. Dr. Joshi said that at a young age she experienced harassment and bullying because of her religious affiliation. How do preconceptions about religious beliefs and practices create racial stereotypes and biases? How do ethnic identities and religious identities often become merged in racial stereotypes? How can educational institutions help children learn not to bully others due to race or ethnicity?
2. According to Dr. Joshi, articles in *National Geographic* magazine were sources of information by which readers received biased or incorrect information about other cultures, religions and ethnicities. Can you think of other examples when media has negatively shaped perceptions of cultures and religions? How does one become more mindful of biases when media outlets — whether intentionally or unintentionally — reinforce negative cultural stereotypes?
3. Dr. Joshi asserts that “privilege is often invisible to those who already have it.” How does this statement strike you? Who in your community has privilege? How is that privilege manifested while being hidden or unseen by those who hold it? How do we help ourselves and others “recognize” privilege?
4. In describing “white Christian privilege,” Dr. Joshi says that “religious oppression is a system of advantages and disadvantages based on religion.” Where in society have you seen Christians receiving advantages and other religions experiencing disadvantages? How is the potential for racism amplified when “white” and “Christian” privileges are merged? How can the concept of “Christian privilege” broaden your understanding of racism?
5. Dr. Joshi says that simply because a variety of religions exist side by side in the U.S. does not mean that all people have religious liberty. Do you agree or disagree with her statement? How do attacks on various religious people or their houses of worship demonstrate a lack of religious liberty? What would true religious liberty for all look like in a pluralistic democracy?
6. Dr. Joshi discusses how Christian nationalism rests on the foundation of Christian normativity. The term “Christian normativity” is one that describes the way Christian practices become a part of American life to the point where what is Christian and what is American often overlap. In what ways do you see this intersection? How does our society fail when it comes to non-Christians freely expressing their faiths? How can America work to achieve a religiously diverse nation?
7. What is a major point you are taking away from this conversation with Dr. Joshi and what is an action step you can take? What specifically did you learn about Christian normativity in this presentation?

“What can America learn about religious diversity from Asian Americans?”

TAHIL SHARMA

Regional Coordinator for North America at the
United Religions Initiative; Hindu-Sikh Interfaith Activist

1. Mr. Sharma speaks of growing up with an “appreciative knowledge” of the religious diversity in his Los Angeles community, and he shares how that led him to better understand pluralism and justice. In the context of religious diversity, what does “appreciative knowledge” mean for you? How does this “appreciative knowledge” lead to greater awareness and advocacy for justice? How can a lack of “appreciative knowledge” hinder justice and religious liberty? How did your own early childhood or adolescent experiences expand or diminish your knowledge of religious pluralism?
2. In discussion of his own religious convictions, Mr. Sharma suggests that his religious identity and cultural identity intersect and are significantly intertwined. He states that there are “so many different identities that make me who I am.” What is your response to this idea? Reflecting on your religious and cultural identities, do you agree or disagree that these identities intrinsically intersect? If so, how do they intersect in your own life and experiences?
3. Mr. Sharma described the 2012 shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, as a watershed moment that caused him to re-examine his work in peace and justice movements. He said, “Rather than approaching things with the audacity of white supremacy, I want to be able to approach it with the courage and the revolutionary love necessary to make sure that I am fighting for others at all times with all costs.” What experiences or situations in your life have helped transform your understanding of justice? In the context of desiring justice for others, how can you demonstrate more courage and revolutionary love?
4. Mr. Sharma talks about the difference between restorative (or rehabilitative) justice and preventative justice. The former is a reaction to a past injustice, while the latter seeks to address future injustices from occurring. What is the value of restorative justice? What is the value of preventative justice? Why are both essential? Do you agree that preventative justice is under-appreciated in our current context? What steps or practices could be taken to create stronger movements of preventative justice?
5. In addressing what Americans can learn about religious diversity from the Asian American community, Mr. Sharma encourages others to understand that the Asian American community is not a monolith — it is a large group that has many different ethnicities, religions and cultures within it. How does this concept help you better understand and appreciate Asian Americans? How does this help you reframe your understanding of both justice and religious freedom for Asian Americans? What are the dangers of seeing the Asian American community through a monolithic lens?

6. Seeking to inspire younger religious liberty advocates, Mr. Sharma calls this audience to four actions: 1) lead now; 2) learn — both by learning and unlearning; 3) do not limit activism to social media; 4) tap into what is happening locally. How do you react to these calls to action? Are there actions or practices that can be added to this list?

7. What is a major point you are taking away from this conversation with Mr. Sharma and what is an action step you can take? What specifically did you learn about advocating for justice and faith freedom for all?