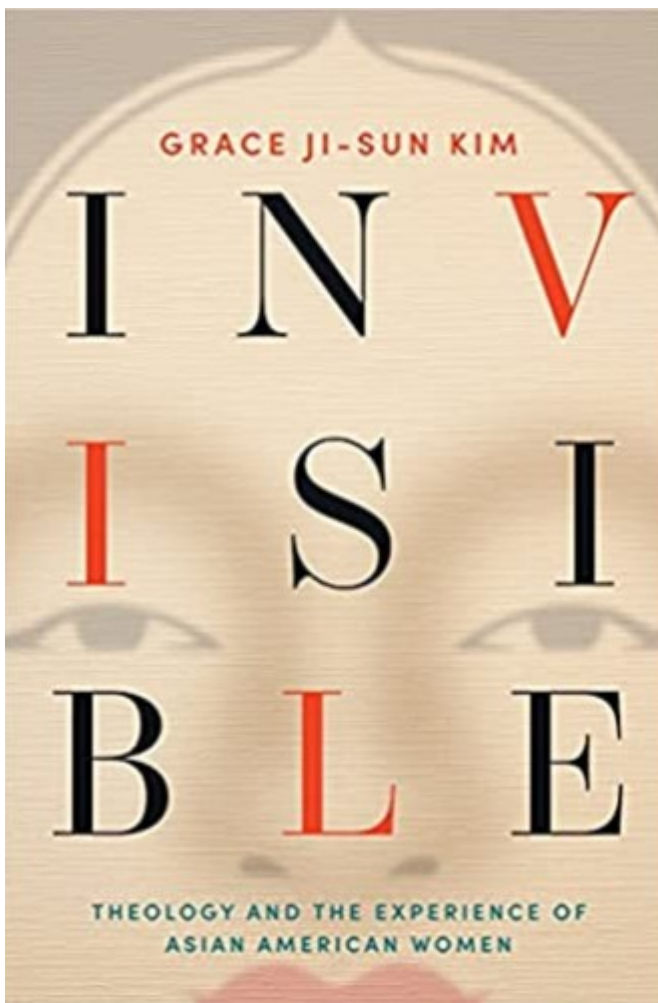


Grace Ji-Sun Kim's theology of visibility

When Asian American women are rendered invisible, the whole church is diminished.

by [Susan Willhauck](#) in the [March 9, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Invisible

Theology and the Experience of Asian American Women

By Grace Ji-Sun Kim

Fortress Press

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In some theological circles, to write about one's personal life in academic discourse is to rank experience above doctrinal authority, the perceived fallacy of liberal experiential expressivism. Prolific author and podcaster Grace Ji-Sun Kim has long resisted this perspective, joining the likes of Paul, Augustine, and Teresa of Ávila in the esteemed practice of theological autobiography.

In *Invisible*, Kim also joins the likes of Christine Downing, Mary Daly, and bell hooks in the feminist practice of viewing women's experiences of oppression, racism, and xenophobia as intersectional. Kim's provocative contribution to this conversation documents how invisibility has profoundly marked the social history of Asian Americans, especially Asian American women. For individuals, this invisibility manifests in the everyday experiences of not being recognized, being dismissed, or being stereotyped as meek and submissive. At a larger level, it manifests in the reality that discussions about racism mainly focus on Black and White people, leaving Asian Americans out of the discourse.

Kim addresses invisibility as a theological construct present in the biblical narratives of "foreign" or "no-name" women and lepers. She weaves in her own story of the racism she experienced when her family emigrated from Korea to Canada. As a child she was taunted, called menacing racist names, and excluded. The lingering shame, anger, and sadness fuel her passionate work.

Invisible aims to raise the consciousness of readers with insights into the Korean cultural history of World War II "comfort women" and indentured labor. Kim's history of immigration is especially revealing. She relates how White supremacy is ingrained in North American societies because of the legacy of European domination over other communities. Anti-immigration rhetoric has a long history, with spiteful talk about Asian immigrants "taking jobs." At the same time, Asians were recruited as cheap labor to do the dangerous work nobody else would do. They were not allowed to become citizens of the United States because the Naturalization Act of 1790 reserved this privilege for White people. Some of the laws passed in the United States and Canada to keep Asians from entering were not repealed until the mid-20th century.

In 1965, the immigration ban in the United States was lifted for Asians—but only select professionals such as doctors, engineers, and scientists could get visas. This may have given rise to the “model minority” myth, which portrays Asians as smart, high-tech, hardworking, successful achievers. This myth bears a racism that minimizes Asian Americans’ plight, along with positioning them in conflict with other minority populations. It has also kept some Asians from speaking out against racism.

Asian women are invisible not only in the public sphere, Kim explains, but in their own communities, which traditionally confine women’s roles to tending the home and supporting men. Thus Korean women immigrants typically feel pressure to submit, to be pushed to the margins, to be invisible in order to adapt to expectations. To straddle the Eastern and Western worlds is to be what Kim calls “doubly alienated.” These feelings of in-betweenness generate insecure self-identities.

Kim also expounds upon the hypersexualization of Asian American women in a culture that evaluates the worth of women through Western ideals of beauty. Asian Americans are perceived as perpetual foreigners even if they were born in the United States. “Do you speak English?” is often the first question they are asked. Kim documents as well the amplification of racist attacks on Asian Americans during the pandemic.

Her faith journey comes to the forefront as she describes her family’s participation in a Korean church in London, Ontario. Looking back on her experience in the church, she sees that it perpetuated patriarchy by way of, among other things, restricted gender roles. At the same time, the church helped her preserve her suppressed heritage, gave her a love of God, and shaped her call as a theologian.

Kim explicates a theological anthropology based on what it does to the human spirit to be rendered invisible. Her astute question is, “What do we lose as a society when we erase a group of people?” Her theological case for visibility in relation to the mystery of a hidden and invisible God resides in the notion of the *imago Dei*. God made people in God’s own image, and visibility is part of the goodness, dignity, and worth of creation. A visible God is approachable, someone we can reference, a presence that takes over our lives and makes us visible, too.

This argument is compelling, but it comes late in the book. I suspect that I’m not the only reader who wanted Kim to get to the heart of these theological questions

earlier, or to clarify up front how she was going to proceed in her task.

Kim directly challenges White progressive Christians to examine the ways we have “invisibilized” Asian American women. Eurocentric theology disregards Asian culture and identity, deeming it irrelevant for the majority of White Christians. This view is destructive to Christian practice. Kim calls White readers to “open theology’s door” to allow the “rich beauty of global voices to enter the theological house.”

Especially helpful are four Korean concepts Kim offers to illuminate how to advocate for visibility. *Ou-ri* is the idea that community overrides individualism. *Han*—literally a wound in the heart—is the unjust suffering that contributes to reimagining invisibility by reminding the world of the need for liberation from oppression. *Jeong* is the “sticky love” that keeps people connected and recognizes their worth. *Chi*, energy or spirit, can deepen our understanding of the Holy Spirit, joining matter and Spirit to promote the visibility of bodies. Asian American theologians expand these concepts to develop a theology of visibility that places a “clarifying lens over our eyes, allowing us to finally see and uplift those we have not seen in society.”

Even as Kim recounts the pain of being invisible, she writes about how liminal spaces of marginality can be places where an alternative reality is enacted. For her, this new reality is a place of power to advocate for Asian American women’s voices in the task of constructing a liberative theology of visibility.