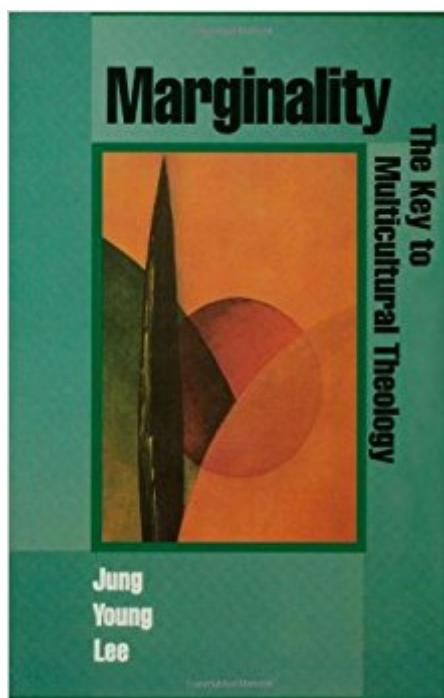


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# Marginality: The Key To Multicultural Theology



## **Synopsis**

"To transcend or to live in-beyond does not mean to be free of the two different worlds in which one exists but to live in both of them without being bound by either of them." - Jung Young Lee In this work Jung Young Lee proposes a framework that justifies and undergirds development of contextual theologies without becoming itself dominating. Lee aims to address the dilemmas of contextual theology not by moving one or another group from the margin to the center, but by redefining marginality itself as central. Marginality, he contends, is not only the experience of being outside the dominant group or in-between groups, but also "in-beyond"-a holistic, process-oriented definition that highlights the catalytic, transformative potential of living at the creative nexus of worlds. Lee's insight into marginality leads him directly into a new model for contextual theologies that focuses not on historical experience but on creative potential. His chapters work out concretely what such a notion can mean culturally, methodologically, and doctrinally to a movement that professes to follow the very paradigm of creative marginality, Jesus Christ.

## **Book Information**

Paperback: 218 pages

Publisher: Fortress Press; 1st edition (July 11, 1995)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0800628101

ISBN-13: 978-0800628109

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #460,543 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #98 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Fundamentalism #124 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Fundamentalism #10429 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Theology

## **Customer Reviews**

This is one of those books where, as a reader, you probably will need much time to digest what the author has presented. Unlike many theological books, Jung Young Lee's emotional passions are included, revealing to the reader the foundations of his perspective. He knows firsthand the joys and sorrows of being marginalized.

Jung Young Lee is a genius. He was a man before his time. His words will ring true even more so

now, than it did in his day, as the world he endured was of greater marginalization for ethnic minorities, especially asian-americans. The book is rich in many points, but to summarize poorly The world is stuck in seeking to be the center. Individuals seek to be the center, to be dominant. Christ broke that apart and lived at the margin, became marginal and sought for the marginalized. We are called to live at the margin, become marginal, seeking for the marginalized. It's a theology of servant-hood and community. Centrality only corrupts and creates pain for its holders and its victims. When all seek to serve and become marginal, the center will collapse, and all will be made equal, and all will be as one. It is a beautiful vision, whether seen as practical or impractical.

There have not been much materials of "Theological reflection" about being Korean-Americans. I assume that it is because of the short immigrant history in the North America. Therefore, the famous Korean American theologians I remember are handful: Sanghyun Lee is a professor at Princeton, Jung Young Lee was a professor at Drew University and passed away, and Andrew Sung Park is a professor at United Theological Seminary. Among them, Jung Young Lee's book which contains theological reflections about his marginalized life in the United States is very insightful and helpful for me who is on the same boat. Through his book, Marginality, Lee is seeking the answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life as an ethnic minority in America?" Therefore, this book is his faithful and theological reflection regarding the issue of 'living' in the North America as a marginalized person. As another Korean Christian immigrant, I really enjoyed reading this book from chapter by chapter because it is like my own story and all of his issues are what I have been struggling with as a Christian leader. Through this book, most of all, I realized that I'm not alone in this struggle with existential and theological questionings. I also expanded my narrow perspective of Korean-Canadian to Asian-American/Canadian, and I affirmed that my own theologizing has been on right track: finding out creativity of marginal situation, interpreting our situation as liminality with communitas, and considering identity discovery as the first step of creative transformation. In his book, Lee takes 'authobiographical method' for his theological method, saying, "Theology is certainly autobiographical, because I alone can tell my faith story ... if theology is contextual, it must certainly be at root autobiographical" (Lee 1995:7). Therefore, he uses freely several forms from his life for his doing theology such as parable, narrative, and poetry. He starts his theologizing from his context, the margin of the North America. He introduces and soon refuses the classical definition of marginality that emphasizes only the negative side of marginality such as alienation, rejection, and struggles, and so forth. According to him, this is a product of centrality, which has to be overcome ultimately. The central groups view this marginality as "In-between" paradigm. However, it has to be

overcome by the new definition of marginality, which is brought from his new marginal perspective. The new one is related to 'both/and' and 'In-beyond' approach, but it is totally new and creative because it is very 'holistic.' He explains, "Just as 'in-between' and 'in-both' are one 'in-beyond,' the margin and creative core are inseparable in new marginality" (61). Therefore, the norm of new marginality is the harmony of difference, and through this paradigm, he can be both an American and well as an Asian. "The new marginal person can be a reconciler and a wounded healer to the two-category system" (63). Through it, he refuses the paradigm of 'either or' and 'neither nor.' Instead, he combines both in a creative way, introducing his oriental philosophy, 'ying/yang' paradigm. What he believes is that only through this new perspective, the marginal people can overcome the old paradigm, which has concentrated on only 'centrality.' He does not stop there. Instead, he goes further to reinterpret the main themes of traditional (the Western dominant) theology such as God, Jesus, Creation, the Fall, People of God, and the Church. All of these themes are dealt with in this book through his new marginality paradigm. The most impressive point for me is his last chapter regarding 'creative transformation,' which emphasizes "overcoming Marginality through Marginality." His main point is that overcoming all structural and personal marginal experiences comes from love and patience as Jesus overcame his through these. This way, to shake the traditional norm through the marginal strategy, then, stimulates and challenges the people of center to move down or toward the margin. Through it, his final vision is making 'Garden' where all different plants grow together in harmony. He insists: "When centralist people understand that the center they seek is not real, they will be liberated from centrality and seek the creative center. When this transformation happens, centrality changes to marginality, and marginality changes to new marginality, and all people become marginal. Marginality is overcome through marginality, and all are marginal to God manifest in Jesus-Christ. When all of us are marginal, love becomes the norm of our lives, and service becomes the highest aspiration of our creativity. We then become servants to one another in love" (170). I believe that Lee's theology is very practical for his Asian-American Christian community. It is a powerful theology because it provides his people clear 'self-identity,' which is strongly needed today. What I believe is that the most severe struggle of immigrants is whether they have the meaning of life or not in a foreign land. Here, Lee's comment is insightful, "The ethnic minority churches, especially Korean-American churches, must rediscover or create their own identity as communities of marginalized people" (144). Another valuable point of his theology is its stimulating role toward the traditional theology. Lee's work is a new paradigm and new perspective, reflecting the main theological themes through the perspective of marginality, which is seldom for the white-dominant theology. Actually, it insists

that both traditional/white-dominant theology and ethnic minority-dominant theology are seeking the center and privilege today. He cries out that all Christians - both in center and in margin - should get the idea, not seeking the center but seeking the margin, moving from above to down and going out from the center to the margin, following what Jesus Christ did. Moreover, his view gives me a new vision of harmony, which I believe is the ultimate form of the Kingdom of God. This is the prototype form of the church (Acts 2) and form of heavenly end time (Rev 7:9). God intended the Gospel for all race and nations when he created the world, and He gave us the variety of cultures to be used for His glory. Therefore, the context of the North America, as multi-cultural/ethnic situation is a wonderful chance to manifest this harmony. Lee's book also lets me see what others - especially the dominant group - cannot see. His holistic view of 'in-both' and 'in-beyond' cannot be formed through the typical western cognitive style (dualistic, either/or). As an Asian, he clearly uses the integrative way of 'ying/yang' in his theology. That is why his theology is unique and powerful. Another example of this that he can see what others cannot see as he points out the creative potential of marginality. According to him, "when people become the new marginality, they became the subject of salvation history" (152). This is the place of victimized immigrants' transformation. When the marginality gets the proper self-identity, their liminal stage can be the place of creative minority, who can become catalysts to transform the world (152-153). It is a very insightful discovery. Meanwhile, I feel that his theology is somewhat radical. It is because there is a clear possibility to shake off all past theological paradigms through his new approach. For example, he asks people and church to follow his marginal perspective for doing theology, giving up the centrality and taking the marginality. His opinion sounds as if all traditional theology and church have been wrong and need to be corrected. Nevertheless, I believe that this book is very unique which contains wonderful theological reflections. His perspective toward the issue of marginality is much needed and well developed. In fact, he is humble enough to admit that he is just a cornerstone and expect other's adding different stones toward the fuller expression of this theology (172). Personally, this book helps me a lot regarding the question, "What does it mean to be a marginalized person as an immigrant?" His reflection actually helps me to build up my 'self-identity.' This can be a good starting point for my project which is from 'who we are' to 'where we are' and 'for what we are.'

In this book, Dr. Lee tries to write a theology based on his experiences of being marginalized as an Asian-American in the United States. This book is definitely in the stream of Liberation theology and is an interesting read for all people interested in how theology is formulated by those who are outside of mainstreams of power. Brutally honest in emotion, this book weaves theology and

experience together in order to create a new perspective that both understands the center of theology but also is faithful to his roots. The only problem I had is with some of his recommendations for change. In some, I did not fully understand how he came to his conclusions from what he wrote. However, even with this bit of confusion, this book is still a good book for those who are interested in liberation ethics.

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