

Ecology and Christology

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About three hundred years ago, several hundred members of the Bishnoi community in Rasjasthan, led by a woman, Amrita Devi, attempted to save their sacred Khejri trees by clinging to them. Thus began the Chipko movement, a women's grassroots movement in India to save the forests for food and fuel for their poor communities.¹ The word 'chipko' means to hug or to embrace. Today, the situation of poor women is even worse than three hundred years ago. The world's population has since multiplied several times, and the forests of the world are vanishing at a rate of twenty million hectares a year. Some scientists estimate that about 12 per cent of the Amazonian forests have already been destroyed. In India and in other parts of the world, deforestation, desertification, acid rain, climate change, and the pollution of oceans and water resources have led to the breaking down of sustenance economies of local communities.

The present ecological crisis takes place within the larger social and political transformation in the 1990s: the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War era, the struggle of Eastern European countries, the war in Bosnia, the unsettled Palestinian question, the fast economic development of Asia and the Pacific Rim, and racial and ethnic strifes in many parts of the world. The globalization of market economy will mean a 'new world order' dictated by market logic without either accountability to the democratic process or significant participation of the people. The global community has to face together the critical issues posed by the environmental crisis, the migration of peoples, the pressure of population growth, and

1. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 67.

the widening gap between the rich and the poor in the North and the South.

Our concern for ecology does not focus on the natural environment alone, as Latin American theologian Leonardo Boff has said: 'Ecology encompasses not only nature (natural ecology) but culture and society (human ecology, social ecology, and so on)'.² In the past decade a significant theological agenda has evolved around 'the struggle toward "one earth community" characterized by ecological sustainability and socio-economic justice'.³ Concern for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation has become an important thrust in the ecumenical movement and is at the heart of an ecumenical vision for the next millennium.

The World Convocation on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation, held in Seoul in March 1990, affirmed the creation as beloved of God and denounced all forms of racial, gender, and class oppression and violations of human rights. Its message to the churches says: 'Now is the time for the ecumenical movement to articulate its vision of all people living on earth and caring for creation as a family where each member has the same right to wholeness of life'.⁴

For the first time in an assembly of the World Council of Churches, a subtheme on creation was chosen for the seventh assembly held at Canberra in 1991. The section report on 'Giver of Life—Sustain Your Creation' ends with imploring the churches to be a life-giving, healing, and sustaining community and to enter into covenanting for the life of all creation.⁵ At the ecumenical conference held during the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, the need for the recycling of Christianity and responsible actions of the churches to struggle for eco-justice was discussed. A letter to the churches was sent by the conference during the Pentecostal season in 1992. With clarity and poignancy, it states:

2. Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 9.

3. David C. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 5.

4. *Now is the Time: Final Documents and Other Texts* (World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; Seoul, 1990), back cover.

5. Michael Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), p. 67.

Dear sisters and brothers, we write with a sense of urgency. The earth is in peril. Our only home is in plain jeopardy. We are at the precipice of self-destruction...UNCED is meeting twenty years after the Stockholm Conference on the Environment and not one single major trend of environmental degradation has been reversed...

Our churches themselves must be places where we learn anew what it means that God's covenant extends to all creatures, by discovering the eco-centric dimension of the Bible. This means a modest material life-style that loves and treats the earth gently, as God does. At the same time, we should include the material elements in our celebrations and praise the cosmic symphony the Spirit continually composes. As we do so, we should cultivate a penitential attitude for the sins committed against nature and nurture compassion for the beings we harm.⁶

As an Asian feminist theologian who has presented Bible studies and theological reflections in these ecumenical gatherings, I have been pondering how the issue of ecology has affected my own understanding of theology and spirituality. In the past several years, feminist theologians in Europe and America have written on the relationship between ecology and our discourse of God. *Gaia and God* by Rosemary Radford Ruether, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* by Anne Primavesi, and *The Body of God* by Sallie McFague are notable examples. Elizabeth A. Johnson's *She Who Is* also displays an acute sensitivity to ecological issues.⁷ A variety of books focusing on the relationship of women's spirituality to the body, nature, and sexuality have also been published.⁸ Of the several books published on christology,

6. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation* (Geneva: WCC, 1992), pp. 70, 71, 73.

7. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992); Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism, and Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

8. For example, Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Carol J. Adams (ed.), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum,

including Kelly Brown Douglas's *The Black Christ* and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Jesus: Miriam's Child and Sophia's Prophet*, ecology is not a central concern.⁹

The symbol of Christ is the most important symbol in the Christian tradition. To address the ecological crisis, it is critical for theologians to explore the intersection between ecology and christology and to draw from the discussion insights on spirituality for our increasingly interconnected world. I focus on christology not because I am Christocentric, but because I feel the need to respond to the challenge of people of other faiths that the Christian understanding of Christ is too anthropocentric. As a feminist theologian from a Chinese background, I approach the christological discussion from a postcolonial, multicultural and multireligious perspective. Our different social location influences the questions we bring to the christological debate; our world views, shaped by our culture and religion, often condition our christological imagination.

Several years ago, I visited the renowned Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I passed through the Western Arts section to get to the Asian wing. As I strolled through galleries of Renaissance paintings with their huge, glorious human figures to reach the landscape paintings of the East, I realized that a greater contrast of world-views than those depicted in these paintings could not be imagined.

The experience prompted me to investigate the development of nature paintings in the East and the West. I found out nature did not feature prominently in Western paintings and art forms for a long time because of Hellenistic influences and Christian teachings.¹⁰ Earlier paintings portrayed nature allegorically as a symbol of religious themes or as a background to human activi-

1993); Carol P. Christ, *Odyssey with the Goddess: A Spiritual Quest in Crete* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

9. Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child and Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

10. See Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), pp. 1-2; Bo Jeffares, *Landscape Painting* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), pp. 5-6.

ties, such as hunting and agriculture. The colour used was dull and the light dim. It was as if nature was cursed by God to play a secondary role in creation. During the Enlightenment, nature paintings assumed some significance and different schools such as the Classical, the Naturalist, and the Realist emerged. The Impressionists in the nineteenth century were instrumental in showing Western people the beauty and wonder of nature through their ingenious use of light and breathtaking shades of colour. Some French Impressionists, notably Claude Monet, were influenced by Japanese prints introduced to Europe at that time. This Eastern art form introduced a new way of appreciating the glory and splendour of nature to the West.

Landscape paintings have played an extremely important part in the history of art in East Asia. The vastness of the cosmos, the dynamic interaction between the mountains and the streams, the serenity of the pine trees, and the grace of blossoming flowers have been captured by the brushes of the artists not so much as representations of nature, but as images of the mind.¹¹ These paintings depicted an organic, holistic, and transformational understanding of the universe shared by many East Asian religious traditions.

As theologians, we have seldom examined how our assumptions about nature have shaped the way we look at Jesus. The majority of Asian people find it difficult to accept a saviour in human form because of their cosmological sensibility. Taking into consideration insights from Asian traditions, I would like to present three critiques of traditional formulation of christology from a cross-cultural perspective.

Anthropocentrism

Although there is a plurality of images and titles of Jesus in the New Testament, the dominant ones used by the churches are predominantly anthropocentric. Traditional Christology maintains that Jesus, the Son of God, came down from heaven to save us from our sin. New Testament scholar James Dunn has

11. See James Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977); Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979).

pointed out that the two most important images of Jesus in the early church were the Son of God and Logos.¹² The church fathers debated endlessly how the whole created order was related to the human Jesus.

To counteract the Gnostic challenge, the Nicene Creed emphasized that the Son is begotten, not made, and not secondary to the Father. The Chalcedonian formula stipulated that Jesus is fully God and fully human, one substance but two natures. These credal formulae were compromises of multicultural world-views and products of highly sophisticated 'syncretism'.

That the church has spent centuries debating how Jesus could be fully human and fully divine is an inscrutable puzzle for many Asians. The Chinese language, for example, has no word to denote existence or to convey the concept of being or essence.¹³ Thus, the lengthy debate on *homoousia* and *homoiousia* is quite irrelevant to the average Chinese. Furthermore, the Buddhists have spoken about the world as transient and impermanent, without using the philosophical language of being and non-being. From a cross-cultural perspective, the christological debate in the first several centuries was the product of its own time. The use of a philosophical language of substance to characterize Jesus was cultural specific and should not be taken to be the only 'orthodox' tradition. Yet, the church worldwide is still much under the yoke of the Chalcedonian captivity and Eurocentric theological formulations based on Western heritages.

Christology and Imperialism

Christianity emerged within the Roman Empire and many of its metaphors and concepts were influenced by the social institutions and ethos of the Empire. Gordon Kaufman has observed that much traditional Christology has been influenced by personalistic and political imagery of God, such as the lord and the

12. James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 6-7.

13. Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 241.

divine king.¹⁴ Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God and *basileia* was clearly a highly-charged political term. Jesus' notion of the kingdom of God, meant originally to challenge the kingdom of Caesar, was co-opted by the imperial power once Christianity became the official religion of the state. Within the framework of Christendom, the images of Christ assumed a militaristic, triumphant, and crusading character. Under the banner of *Christus Victor*, the crusades were fought not so much for a noble religious cause but for political and economic benefits. During the Reformation, there was no unified empire in Europe, but the militaristic tradition continued in popular piety.¹⁵

During the period of the expansion of the West, Christianity was brought to different parts of the world. The christological images that missionaries fervently preached about were first those of crusader and conqueror, of 'pagans' and 'heathens', and later of a 'promoter of Western capitalism, and a transmitter of Western civilization'.¹⁶ Today, in our postcolonial world, we have to exorcize from our minds all lingering vestiges of imperialism and their many connections to our construction of Christology.

The Particularity of the Jesus Event

Several years ago, one of the world's leading Confucian scholars was invited to attend a peace conference in Jerusalem. Upon his return, he told his students that he was amazed to find that everywhere in the Holy Land, there were holy sites commemorating the events in Jesus' life. He wondered how people from different parts of the world could be expected to believe in Jesus as saviour for all when so much importance was attached to the particularity of Jesus as an historical person. The relationship between the particularity of Jesus and the universality of Christ

14. Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 53.

15. For a discussion of the image of the Christian as a faithful soldier, see Harriet Crabtree, *The Christian Life: Traditional Metaphors and Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 87-117.

16. Kim Yong Bock, 'The Mission of God in the Context of the Suffering and Struggling Peoples of Asia', in *Peoples of Asia, People of God: A Report of the Asia Mission Conference, 1989* (Osaka: Christian Conference of Asia, 1990), p. 14.

has been a perennial question for theologians.

The concept of a conquering Christ necessarily entails that Jesus is particular, unique, and above all others. Raimundo Panikkar, a religious thinker who is comfortable both in the Hindu and Christian worlds, has summed up the self-understanding of Christians in relation to other religions in the West in the five historical periods. In the first centuries, the prevalent Christian self-consciousness can be characterized as witnessing. In the next period which extends to the Middle Ages, conversion was the dominant mode, when people converted to Christ, responded to the monastic call, and lived a Christian style of life. Then came the period of crusades when religious intolerance, together with other causes, resulted in bloody warfare for centuries. The dominant feature of the next period was mission, when missionaries were sent to save souls while warships were commissioned to colonize the peoples. It was only when the colonial empires declined in power that 'dialogue' became the catchword.¹⁷

Contrarily, the self-understandings of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism are quite different and these traditions have not initiated militant missionary efforts around the world. Throughout the centuries, Asian peoples have lived in a multireligious world. These different traditions were able to co-exist side by side with one another, sometimes learning and adapting from one another as well.

The notion that Christianity is superior to all religions can be analyzed in the larger cultural framework of nineteenth-century Europe. After Charles Darwin proposed an evolutionary scheme in the biological sphere, Herbert Spencer elaborated it in the social sphere. In the field of religion, scholars then classified religions into 'primitive' and 'higher' religions, and Christianity was considered the highest development of all. Today we must debunk and demystify the evolutionary theory in religion in order to find new ways to live together in a multireligious world.

What are some of the possible ways that we can recon-

17. Raimundo Panikkar, 'The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges', in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 93-95.

ceptualize the Christ symbol for our contemporary world? I would like to suggest three approaches based on my own cultural context, and I hope they will have cross-cultural relevance for others struggling to find new languages to speak about Christ.

Toward an Organic Model for Christ

In the Gospels, there are ample resources for us to construct Christologies using an organic model. Jesus spoke of himself as the vine and the disciples as branches (Jn 15.5). Jesus also used the metaphor of a hen protecting her brood to describe his passion and anguish for Jerusalem (Mt. 23.37). The nourishment provided by table fellowships and meals he shared with disciples and other people offered insights for an organic paradigm. Yet, theologians have consistently relegated these organic images to the periphery.¹⁸

Coming from a peasant background, Jesus repeatedly used everyday occurrences in nature in his parables and teachings. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg observes that Jesus' nature sayings stress the universal love of God.¹⁹ For example, the sun shines on both good and bad people. God takes care of the swallows and lilies in the field. An organic understanding of Christology does not romanticize nature nor simply emphasize Jesus' dependence on the natural world for his survival. It pays attention to Jesus' understanding of eco-justice when he challenged the exploitation of the urban class over the rural sector and his vision that salvation came not to human beings alone but also to the whole creation.

A spirituality emerging from an organic model of Christ underscores the interrelatedness of the human and the natural realms. Based on an essentialist viewpoint, Western feminists have often argued that women are closer to nature, without taking into consideration that women have diverse experiences.

18. For example, Harriet Crabtree has observed that the image of the vine has not been extensively used, see *The Christian Life*, pp. 79-80.

19. Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1994), p. 83.

Others have pointed out that women and nature are both subjugated in the patriarchal and dualistic system. A spirituality that takes into consideration the whole household of life must begin with the relationship of women and nature, not in terms of essentialist or metaphysical debates, but in terms of political struggles for justice. Vandana Shiva, a noted Indian eco-feminist, states: 'The new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*'.²⁰ Her involvement in the Chipko movement motivated her to write *Staying Alive*, which testifies to the creative and productive roles women played as managers of forests, food chain, water resources, and the whole household.

Jesus the Wisdom of God

The works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Elizabeth A. Johnson have popularized the concept of Jesus as Sophia-God. Christian women have rediscovered the powerful personification of wisdom in feminine form. I would like to draw several implications for Asians.

First, Asian traditions stress the passing along of wisdom from generation to generation. Asian cultures and religions have strong wisdom traditions that can be compared and contrasted with the wisdom traditions in the Bible. Furthermore, some of the Asian sages use natural symbols, such as the plant and the gardener, the seasonal cycles, the stream and the water, in their teachings about human nature and moral wisdom.²¹ It is worthwhile to compare these to Jesus' nature sayings in the Gospels.

Secondly, Japanese-American feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock has pointed out that women who are multiply oppressed have to seek wisdom from multiple traditions. There is no single narrative that can address the issue of their multiple identities. In a recent article on Christology, she argues that the virtues of obedience and innocence, so valued in Christian piety,

20. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, p. 47.

21. Donald J. Munro, *Images of Human Nature: A Song Portrait* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

are not helpful for oppressed women.²² She says: 'Doctrines about the sinless purity of Jesus and the image of him as an innocent lamb taken to slaughter reinforce the idea that victims ought to be innocent and virtuous or else pain and suffering are deserved, even though the Gospels tend to depict a more ambiguous and politically savvy Jesus'.²³ She urges women to move beyond innocence to learning to be wise. The rejection of innocence means 'finding ways to be ethical agents of our survival and taking responsibility for the complex voices we carry within us'.²⁴ A Christology of wisdom will imply a spirituality of critical discernment, courageous action, and solidarity.²⁵

Jesus the Epiphany of God

To counteract the myth that Christ appears once and for all, some Asian theologians have put forward the notion of the epiphanic Christ. Jesus was but one manifestation or revelation of the divine. This position does not negate the importance of the revelation of God in Jesus, yet it asserts that we can encounter Christ in many ways. The Buddhist tradition asserts that there is not one Buddha, but many Buddhas, and that everyone has the potential to attain Buddhahood. If we get away from the framework defined by a language of substance, we will not be fixated on a one-time incarnation. If we follow a non-dualistic logic, we can embrace the concept that Christ is one and many.

Jesus can be considered a prototype for us to identify signs or qualities of life that can affirm that God is with us—Emmanuel. There are three ways I offer to identify christic presence among us.

1. *In acts of compassion and solidarity.* There were many

22. Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Losing your Innocence but not your Hope', in Maryanne Stevens (ed.), *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), pp. 35-43.

23. Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures. I. A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 66.

24. Brock, 'Dusting the Bible', p. 71.

25. Brock, 'Losing your Innocence', pp. 47-51.

incidences in Jesus' life where we can discern his love, empathy, and concern for the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. He refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery, dined with sinners and tax collectors, touched a man with leprosy, and dialogued with the gentile Samaritan woman at the well. The passion story reveals the mystery of the love of God, who is in solidarity with the struggling peoples in the world.

2. *In movements of people who are the bearers of hope.* Jesus could not disclose who God was without participating in a reform movement for renewal of society. Instead of focusing on the incarnation of God in human form, we should emphasize the movement Jesus initiated. In the past several years, two outstanding Third World women have received the Nobel prize for peace. Aung Sang Suu Kyi of Burma was honoured because of her movement for democracy. Rigoberta Menchu, an indigenous woman from Guatemala, was recognized for her struggle against the genocide of her people and culture. These movements are contemporary manifestations that God is with us and that the divine has not forsaken the world. They have salvific quality because they are the beacons of hope, justice, and non-violent action.

3. *In rituals that celebrate life and evoke the power of the divine.* As an Anglican, liturgy has been an important part of my spirituality. We feel the presence of God in rituals and liturgies that touch us and help us feel we are interconnected with one another and with the earth. One such ritual was the Pentecostal vigil at Rio de Janeiro during the Earth Summit. For several days, we discussed the ecological crisis, the plight of millions of street children in Brazil, and other tragedies around the globe. We felt quite downtrodden and depressed. At the Pentecostal vigil, we sang, danced, and listened to a powerful sermon by Leonardo Boff.

I was reminded that as the disciples of Jesus gathered at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, a sound came from heaven like a rush of mighty wind, and tongues of fire rested on each of them. The spirit-filled disciples began to speak in tongues, breaking the barriers created by language and culture. At the same time, the strange phenomena also suggested breaking through the dichotomous distinction between nature and human

beings. The same spirit that moves the wind and fire has come to dwell within us.

At this critical time of ours, to perform acts of compassion and solidarity, to remain hopeful in spite of all adversities, and to continue to evoke the presence of God—Emmanuel—is to affirm life over death and to practice a spirituality that is for the whole planet earth.