

Colonialism, *Han*, and the Transformative Spirit

Grace Ji-Sun Kim

New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013

Frank England
Stellenbosch University

Grace Ji-Sun Kim is a bold and eloquent writer. In this book, two issues disturb her: colonialism and its legacy, and an eco-system in crisis. Writing from an affluent North-American context, Kim derides a life-style of consumerism, which once through deliberate empire-building exploited the developing world, and now continues to manipulate it through economic means. The prevailing capitalist system, which structures the global political economy, homogenizes our world. A resentment is present both within those who are the victims of these imposed forms of labour, production, consumption, and exchange, and also within a burdened environment. This is *han*, a person in pain, the earth-soul wounded. Liberation from *han* is equity, sufficiency, harmony and an eradication of the exploitation of persons and nature.

The issues are timely and vital, and the crisis is real. How are the issues to be addressed and the crisis reversed? Here the boldness and eloquence of Kim comes to the fore. We are called, she tells us, ‘to repent, to change our hearts, our habits, our lives’. In order to do so, this ever so brief text asks: “How can we be motivated to live a sustainable life in a world filled with the toxins of empire, colonialism, consumption, and greed?” In answering this question, our mistakes must be scrutinized and future directions established, in order to sustain life. The power differentials in our global world require analysis and re-ordering.

In setting out her argument, Kim draws heavily upon Joerg Rieger’s *Globalization and Theology* (2010), and the work of Sallie McFague. For Kim, globalization is a reality, and Rieger’s globalization from the underside, rather than a dominantly imposed global order, is required. This involves rewriting the global compacts by establishing networks of allegiances and alliances from the traditions that have been marginalized and often violently excluded by the colonial, and later capitalist, orders. The imperative for such a covenant is established in the gospel message – in its option for the outcast. From this foundation, two trajectories arise: one that applauds shifting, optional, and hybrid identities over static and essentialist concepts of the self and the other, that invokes the Spirit, as the power of transformation. These trajectories are informed by the disturbing facts and figures about global consumption and waste, self-inflicted environmental disaster and ruin.

If these concerns are as desperately urgent as Kim argues, then the endeavour to address them satisfactorily is defeated by the brevity of this work. With regard to the first trajectory, to yoke postcolonialism to hybridity, as a liberating concept of the self, is to conflate a mode of research with a tactic of survival. Rather, hybridity evinces that the postcolony remains in bondage, a bondage both imposed and self-imposed – the latter of which Fanon and Biko were so acutely aware. Hybridity, as Bhabha (1994: 115; original emphasis) informs us, is a “replication”, which “terrorizes authority with its *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery”. It is a “display”, a performative strategy of negotiation in the colonial-postcolonial theatre. A hybrid identity, rather than being liberating, obturates those very obscured traditions, memories, and stories that postcolonial research, at its most exacting, and, indeed, with immense difficulty, quarries and attempts to re-voice. Moreover, the acute postcolonial scholar is merely a conduit, because that archaeological

task is undertaken less so simply to recount the partially documented, modified, and embellished ‘forgotten memories’, and more so to allow those muffled and muted sounds *themselves* to issue in their *own* words and, often at best, produce their own embedded and fractured construals of narrative meaning. The postcolonial scholar cannot summarily appropriate hybridity. Instead, this area of critical research primarily endeavours to remove the hybrid masks from the mimetic characters, and to re-materialize the actors, to locate them in their presents and their pasts, no longer as “such stuff as dreams are made on”. For, certainly, ‘dreams were not made’; rather, their nocturnal visitors were the nightmares of subjugation and their consequent morning tremors, which then required the “ruse” of hybridity and mimicry to be appropriated. But even if one were to concede to Kim’s proposal that hybridity, in fact, is liberating; then it still remains necessary to discover its source, the reason for its deployment, its strategic uses, and, of course, why its appropriation was required in the first place. Identity dispersal in the colonial-postcolonial transaction requires careful scrutiny before it is elided in the causes of globalization, whether that is imposed by an elite pact of capital and political leverage or recast as a form of widespread resistance from the underside.

The second trajectory concerns the manner in which the Spirit transforms and empowers lives in the cause of greater equity and climate security. Here the high-flown phraseology about the Spirit, who is “imminent, wilful, moving ... [and] ... so powerful that it can alter our lives and literally invert the way we see things”, leads Kim to invoke sexual passion and feminist eroticism, so that “[a] desire arises within us that wants to drive away any form of oppression and injustice”. Although this sounds attractive; nevertheless, in Kim’s “transformative Spirit”, there almost seems to be a reckless and unbridled extravagance. For surely it is the case that the identity and work of this Spirit only is known by its fidelity to the nature of the Godhead, which defines the Spirit, its activity, and how that activity is practised, identified, and understood? In a significant parenthetical reference and subsequent note in the introductory chapter, Kim – again dependent upon Rieger – momentarily considers that a perichoretic conception of the Spirit ought to replace an hierarchical one. Kim does not take up this suggestion, at least, not in the terms of the Trinitarian concept of God. Rather, she refers only to a single work by Moltmann, whereas she may have found a suitable propaedeutic upon which to ground the ‘character’ of the Spirit in Moltmann’s explorations of the relations of the imminent Trinity, which structure those of the economic Trinity, in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980; ET 1981). In this respect, the subject of Kim’s book may well have benefited from examining – possibly responding to – Moltmann’s Gifford Lectures (1985), entitled, *God in Creation: An ecological doctrine of God*.

But why is there a resistance to the latitude, possibly the licence, which Kim allows to the Spirit? It is because, too often, claims of grounding actions in the authority of ‘the wilful Spirit’ have disastrous consequences, and some manner of *testing* the ‘work of the Spirit’ is required. If one stands within the Christian tradition, then any decision or action taken at the command, or in the freedom, of the Spirit must leave a ‘paper trail’ that can be traced back to its source. The deposit of the Faith is given or handed over (*trado; traditio*), and although it is modified and transformed, those consequent changes are the products of an ongoing conversation and debate in the present with the past in the light of the projected future. The Trinitarian source of the Christian conception of the Spirit remains the touchstone of the Spirit’s nature and *opus*.

And why is there a reluctance both to accept hybridity as Kim does and also to authorize globalization, even if it be from the underside? It is because, by an almost

peremptory *fiat*, the statement that ‘we live in a globalized world’ is taken regularly as equivalent to the statement that ‘we live in a more integrated world, an arena in which communicative technology has advanced contact and improved understanding’. Such widespread convictions are asserted without interrogating whether or not this is the case; but, more particularly, without asking what ‘lies’, with its double entendre, behind the faces in the postcolony. The claim of an inescapable and integrative globalization, with the attendant homogenization of cultures, requires examining as to whether this is so, and if it is happening, why and according to whose agenda. If Kim is not hesitant to berate the West in its exploitation of the Rest, then it may not simply be the West’s global agenda that requires scrutiny, but globalization itself, whether from the top or from the bottom. With regard to the putative enhanced communication and understanding that globalization and its technology brings, it is salutary to note Bernard Williams’s (2002) observation that communication via Internet ‘chat rooms’ actually enables the like-minded to speak amongst themselves and only amongst themselves. And what of the rise of various forms of nationalism around the globe? For example, ask the Scots about globalization and its benefits, and the more integrated and understanding world they find themselves in: after all, they are about to vote for independence.

It is not that Kim is unaware of the primary challenges that confront Christian thought at present or of their seriousness. Rather, in a book which reaches just over 70 pages of argument (if the abstracts and references are excluded), a sustained essay, in Kim’s forthright style, on one aspect may have equipped us with better resources with which to confront an uncertain and complex future.