

## COLONIALISM, HAN & ECO-THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Today, nations exhibit imperial behaviour but not like the ancient agriculture driven landed empires or the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century mercantile empires. The land and trade divisions are not as clearly segregated as in the earlier ones, but Imperial nations do exist and do control other nations. Imperialism and colonialism have devastating effects on our world. It has nurtured self-worth through the accumulation of worldly goods for the purposes of serving their own interests and exploiting others for the sole purpose of self-gain. This is devastating not only to human beings but to the whole ecology of the planet. Consumerism drives trade, but consumer buying is now like an unchained beast with tooth and claw causing han for the exploited as well as the resources of the planet. Eco-theologians and feminist theologians examine the devastating effects to help ensure that we are seriously determined to preserve the planet. We will examine ways of rethinking and reimagining our errors and how we can work towards the right direction for a safer, sustainable planet.*

**Key Words:** Nature; Eco-Theology; Empire; Consumerism; Globalization

Today's nations can be characterized by imperialism, empire building, colonialism and consumerism. "Empire, then, is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social or cultural dependence" (Doyle 86:45). An ancient example of empire in this sense is the overlaying of Greek culture on Egypt, followed by a similar overlay of Roman, Arabic, Ottoman, and British cultures. A modern example is the overlay of Soviet Russian political systems on the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The most durable imperial culture may be that of China, which lords over Tibet today, as it did during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1378 CE) and the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 CE). "Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing, maintaining, and enlarging an empire" (Doyle 86:45).

Today, empires exist in different forms than earlier times. The land assignment and divisions are not as clearly segregated as in the earlier ones, but empires do exist and do control other nations. The Roman Empire, with provinces controlled by the Emperor, provinces controlled by the Senate, and 'client states' with independent governments pledging fealty to Rome, may be an instructive demonstration of different imperial relations. The control is not as overt as it has been; the usual symbols of past empires may have faded, but empires do control and take over other nation's resources, economy, and people.

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Imperialism and colonialism have had devastating effects on our world, both on the poor and on the earth/nature, since their premise is to exploit land and the aboriginal population and move on when resources have been exhausted, leaving the aboriginal or indigenous people untrained and poorer than they were before. They have nurtured self-worth through the accumulation of worldly goods for the purposes of serving their own interests and exploiting others for the sole purpose of self-gain. This is devastating not only to human beings but to the whole ecology of the planet. Imperialism and colonialism have in many ways exploited others and the planet for selfish, easy, and immediate gains. This has caused much strain on the earth and in communities of people who are suffering from exploitation. Economic colonialism has two faces. The first is the desire for markets, as when England needed buyers for its textiles and machinery. The second is consumerism, the desire for foreign products and cheap goods, such as Chinese tea, Indonesian spices, and Malayan rubber.

Consumerism drives trade, but it is now out of control. Too much taking raw materials without replacing with renewable resources is making the earth suffer as well as everything living on it. This kind of suffering is *han*. This outrage needs to be deconstructed and stopped if we are to take the preservation of the life on our planet seriously. Eco-theologians and feminist theologians publicize the devastating effects in their studies to help ensure that the preservation of the planet is understood and initiated. Ways of rethinking and re-imagining our wrong actions and how we are to work towards the right direction for a safer and a greener planet will be examined in this article.

## **Colonial Context**

Imperialism is an ideology of expansion that takes diverse forms and methods at different times, seeking to impose language, trade, religion, political doctrine, aesthetics, economic systems and suzerain-like pledges of allegiance on foreign lands such as the relation between the Tibet Autonomous Region and Mongolia to China today. The victims of imperialism are the colonized, that is, those whose lands, minds, cultures, economies and political institutions have been rearranged according to the interests and values of the imperializing powers. It is about controlling foreign geographical spaces, its resources, and their inhabitants. Imperialism is about maintaining the center and the periphery as those in power try to maintain its control of those along the periphery. Today's imperialism is not as evident as in the past when the colonizer took over a physical piece of land, but imperialism still exists in our current climate and gives way to how one relates to the world and to one another (Dube 2001:37).

Many formerly colonized nations are undergoing new forms of imperialism, called neo-colonialism or globalization. Globalization may be defined as the creation of a single, international financial system which has left most of the Two-Thirds world buried under debts which may be worse than in the era of 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonialism (Dube 2001:40). "The term globalization was first used in the late 1960's or early 70s to refer to 'rapidly expanding political and economic interdependence'" (Brubaker 2001:9). Post-colonialism is another name for the globalization of economies, cultures and histories. Post-colonialism pursues a reading of the colonial encounter by ignoring national identity and pride. The focus is on the global amalgam of cultures and identities consolidated by imperialism (Gandhi 1998:129). Colonialism has contributed to another factor which is destroying the earth. This problem is the desire for cheap products to create demands in the

First World for new products which are unnecessary for a productive life beyond one's needs. Perhaps one may even see this as a victory for lust, gluttony, greed, and pride.<sup>2</sup>

### **Consumerism and Overconsumption**

The supremacy of the contemporary economic worldview has led some to state that greed has become a religion. *Consumerism* is the civic religion that many share, an obligation to feed our national GDP thereby attaining a healthy growth rate. Other faith commitments are less important. Joerg Rieger states that "After the collapse of consumerism, the *market* has become a world religion, the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous value system in human history" (Rieger 1998:7). The new religion is attracting far more people than anticipated. People are paying their tithes to this new religion by buying more than they can afford. They have become very good stewards of this new religion and blind to its consequences. They give of their time, money and energy into buying, hoarding, consuming, and buying more than before.

For many, our consumer culture is not considered to be one possible way to live, but the only way to live. For more of the world's people, consumerism is the unquestioned way to live (McFague 2001:83). We take too much from the earth without giving it back or replenishing it. Now, the earth does not have enough time to replenish itself. The biosphere needs time to repair itself from the damage that we do; damage, which leads to extinctions can never be recovered.

North Americans' standard of living has skyrocketed during this past century. Sallie McFague states that for all the earth's people to enjoy a Western middle-class lifestyle, four more planets the size of the earth would be necessary as the resource base. As we try to maintain our comfortable lifestyle, we take so much away from the earth without giving anything in return. We live in a consumer society, and we get so caught up in it that we cannot seem to pull ourselves out of this descending spiral of consumerism.

Happiness and consumption do not go hand in hand. Money has little marginal effect on the happiness of people who live comfortably. It has a dramatic marginal effect on the quality of life for poor people (McFague 2001:85) which is causing stress on the world as well as injustice among the people. Consuming too much of the world's resources – more than our share – creates an imbalance in the system. If we are to work towards good stewardship, we need to eliminate the clutter of stuff with little value in our lives. But how do we do this?

The rich tend to exploit the poor in order to gain. Most of us do not set out to make other people poor but those of us who live in North America benefit from the accident of birth and the good fortune of immigration. In the growing global divide between the rich and the poor, most of us end up on the plus side. The United States is politically and economically dominant in this game through its investments, loans, military aid and cultural exports, for our benefit. Americans are impressively charitable when natural disasters hit anywhere in the world, but the largest number of deaths worldwide are not from disasters. They come simply by being too poor to survive within the present global economic structures (McFague 2001:73). Due to our own economic greed, we have put tremendous stress on the rest of the world so that they can no longer survive from one day to the next. The price we pay for this is anger and violence over our self-

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<sup>2</sup> Four of the seven deadly sins.

indulgent lives which in the eyes of the two-thirds world, is a sign of tolerating a disrespect for other cultures.

Most of us know firsthand the temptation to exploit the vulnerability of other people, of the animal world and of the land. We have been either the exploiter or the exploited. Often we are both. We have had to confront our exploitation of the inanimate inhabitants of the earth. The earth's silence makes it vulnerable. The ground that feeds us lies quiet. We exploit nature's silent vulnerability (Roop 1991:41). If we continue to exploit the vulnerable, it will lead us to self-destruction. We need to be aware of the path we are taking and re-examine our personal and social lives.

### ***Han***

When we have too much, we are sinning against others by keeping resources we do not need from those who need them to survive. Christians talk about sin and that we are sinners in need of redemption. We can concentrate on the vertical relationship too much, sometimes, at the expense of our horizontal relationship. As we neglect the horizontal relationship, it results in harmful acts against our neighbours and nature. An Asian concept which is helpful to remind us of our horizontal relationship to each other is the concept of *han*.

Our relationship with others and with nature is extremely important. We cannot neglect the relationship as God commanded all of us that we need to love our God with all our heart, soul and mind and also love our neighbours as ourselves. One way to emphasize the horizontal relationship is to recognize the *han* we are causing other people as we act out of gluttony, greed, and lust, oblivious to the injustice it creates within our global economy. *Han* is a Korean term which is very difficult to translate. *Han* is the wrong deed committed against another person and the pain that ensues from it. It means unjust suffering and also being sinned against. We in Western society are sinning against others as we live a bountiful, but greedy life. When the rest of the world looks at us, they see themselves as victims of sin.

*Han* is the rupture of the soul caused by abuse, exploitation, injustice and violence. When the soul is hurt so much, it bursts symbolically: it aches, it is not amenable to reason and even resists the consolations of faith. "When the aching soul is wounded again by external violence, the victim suffers yet a deeper ache. The wound produced by such repeated abuse and injustice is *han* in the depths of the soul" (Park 2004:11,12). *Han* is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered (Chung 1990:42). As we examine the world around us and the grave number of injustices that occur on a daily basis due to consumerism, globalization and greed, there is much suffering and much *han*.

We in Western society are sinning against others as we fail to preserve and renew the world's resources, but live a wasteful, opulent and greedy life. We consume more than necessary and fail to say 'enough is enough'. Just as the unfaithful steward in Jesus' parable sought to protect what he had been given by burying it in the ground (Matthew 25:14-30), this urge of self-protection seems to be a common problem as many spend an enormous amount of money and energy to protect their way of life.

Western society's unjust political systems, greediness, desire for convenience, etc. have caused *han*, to many inhabitants around the globe. The gap between the rich and the poor keeps widening, and the Western world thinks that it is our right to be rich. While we cannot expect to completely eradicate *han*, we also do not have to resign ourselves to it

without a struggle. The Western world needs to understand that if we are the source of *han*, we need to address globalization and the challenges it presents to democratic government. We need to eliminate *han* and work towards a life of eco-sufficiency. We need to think of our world in terms of interconnectedness, recognizing that all of us are dependent on one another. We do not understand who we are until we understand our interrelatedness with others.

### **New Perspective**

Colonialism and globalization have dangerous effects on society and the planet. It seeks self-aggrandisement and does not take into consideration the preservation of humanity or the planet. We need to take these things into serious consideration and work towards a model of the world which will be salvific and not destructive. More contemplation, imagination, re-imagination and re-envisioning is needed to move towards a holistic understanding of the planet.

Just as some Israelites misconstrued their chosenness as God's special favour, we also may mistake the image of God for God's special love for humanity at the cost of all of creation. Just as the chosen meant that the Israelites were first elected to spread God's mercy and love, the image of God denotes that humanity has been selected to do God's work in sustaining the order of creation and work for justice. The New Testament testifies to Christ as the image of God (Col 1:15, II Cor 4:4). "The image of God that Christ disclosed to us is not the image of a tyrannical and exploitative God, but a God of self-giving, care, mercy, compassion and self-transcendence. As we grow in the image of God, we become more caring, cherishing and loving of the whole creation. To fulfill God's purpose in creation, we must envision a global wholeness in which all of God's creations live in respect, harmony and love, rejoicing in one another's company" (Park 1993:170). We cannot resign ourselves to giving up, but we need to take action to change the way we are destroying the earth.

The question is, how do we live in the household called Earth? We can study economics and see if economics provides some insight on how we can live sustainably on this planet. Economics is all about how resources are allocated in a competitive market. We need a healthy view of economics to maintain a healthy planet. The Greek word for 'house' (*oikos*) comes from the root words of 'economics', 'ecology' and 'ecumenicity'. Therefore, along this theme of economics and ecology, the planet earth must obey good rules for it to sustain itself and flourish. The rules must bear in mind that ecology is important and that there needs to be an equal distribution of resources among the people (McFague 2001:72). We must find alternative ways of ecological living if we are to take care of the planet and ourselves. If we do not re-examine or change our course of living in this household of earth, we will lead ourselves onto the path of self-destruction.

### **The Spirit of God and the Reverence for Life**

As we work towards a more eco-friendly world with less greed and consumerism, we need to be mindful of three fundamental relationships. One is between human and nonhuman world. Two is between human being and God, and three is among humans. We need to see that the way in which human beings are described in one of these relationships affects all the others. No one or two of these relationships will be transformed without the transformation of all three (Daly 1994:313). Our actions have lasting effects on this earth

and on each other. We are not living as isolated beings or groups. Our actions will affect everything. We sometimes forget to put God into the picture, but we need to understand how God figures into this picture of living harmoniously with nature, with each other and among each other. The understanding of God as the Spirit may help us work towards a better eco-theology which will sustain all of us living on this earth.

God is the creator of all things and everything which exists depends on the Spirit of God as clearly articulated by the Psalmist: “when you take away their breath, they die and return to dust. When you send forth your breath, they are created and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:29 f). Things need to be achieved so that our planet doesn’t become destroyed. As we work towards preservation, God too will secure God’s creation. God is participating and active in preserving what God has created, and the creator reiterates God’s primal yes to God’s creation. As Moltmann discusses, there are two ideas on how the earth can be saved. One understanding is the concept of the world’s preservation (*conservation mundi*) the second is the understanding of continuous creation (*creation continua*). As God continues to participate in the continuous creation, God the Spirit suffers with creation. This suffering of God gives us hope and assurance that God’s creation has not been neglected by their creator (Moltmann 1997:118,119). God did not just create and leave creation. God is within the world that God has created. God is in our midst and God’s presence in our daily lives should assure us of our need to preserve and be good stewards of all created things. As we participate in the work of preservation, we are participating in God’s mission and understanding of the world.

The life giving spirit *ruach*<sup>3</sup> moves from physical life to life in its fullness including justice. The Old Testament reveals the the Spirit of God as the one who creates, sustains, and renews life (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6; 104:29-30; Job 33:4, 34:14-15). The Spirit of God is alive and transformative. The Spirit changes us into a new people of God. The Spirit is so powerful that it can change a ‘heart of stone’ into a ‘heart of flesh’ and move one to become faithful to the new covenant (Ezek. 11:19-20, 36:26-28; Ps. 51:10-12; Isa. 59:21). Moreover, the Spirit will empower the Messiah to begin a reign of justice and bring forth a community of liberation and peace (Isa. 11, 32, 61) (Min 2004:95). The powerful Spirit of God is present in our lives to make changes of justice and goodness. This is essential to the well-being of the oppressed and marginalized. Oftentimes, the rich and the powerful tend to think the Spirit is there to enrich their selfish lives and they fail to recognize the Spirit’s power of condemning those who misuse power. The Spirit is not just any spirit but a lifegiving Spirit of God.

The prophet Ezekiel was carried out by the Spirit of the Lord to a plain that was full of bones. He proclaimed that God will bring them together and instill life-giving *ruach* in them. Then the scattered bones assembled into skeletons, and the skeletons into cadavers with sinews, flesh, and skin, like the warriors who grew from the ground from the dragon’s teeth sown by Jason or Cadmus – but there was no *ruach* in them. Then Ezekiel was asked to summon the life-giving *ruach* from the four *ruach* (winds) to give life, and as he did so the *ruach* came into them, and they lived. Ultimately it is *ruach* that gives life and gives it abundantly. Without *ruach* there is no life (Kim 2011:44).

The life-giving Spirit is God and is the ultimate source of life. As we examine some of the Old Testament texts, it is clear that *ruach* is the life-force of individuals (Judg. 15:19) and of groups (Num. 16:22). It is only God who gives the life-force (Isa. 42:5) and also

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrew for ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’.

protects it (Ps. 31:5) (Karkkainen 2002:26) as God faithfully does. God is the ultimate source of life. God will sustain life. Some of the Old Testament passages indicate that God is the well of life (Psalm 36:9), and in the New Testament, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the water he provides will give eternal life (John 4:14). This powerful image of life-giving water that provides life to all things illustrates the power and work of the Spirit. Just as the water of life gives new life to those who are dying or withering away, the Spirit will also give forth new life (Moltmann 2009:12). This is the power of the Spirit which needs to be remembered and retold. Essentially, the Spirit is the giver of life and it will bring back to life that which is dying. The Spirit is powerful enough to make changes and restore life. The Spirit continues to give life to us today.

All of creation comes forth by the act of the Spirit. The Creator God takes care of creation and conserves creation by allowing *ruach* to preside in creation. "When you send your Spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:30). The Spirit preserves the souls of all living things and the lives of all people (Job 12:10). Life is terminated when the Spirit of God withdraws itself (Job 34:13-15; Ps. 104:29). It is through the Spirit that God has created the world and has breathed life into it. To breathe is to live by God's gift and grace. Life is dependent upon breath. God breathes the breath of life and brings things to life. God as Spirit thus conveys the insight that God provides life, and has the power to give life to the dead (McGrath, 1997:163). The power of the Spirit illustrates the difference between us and the Creator who is the master of the world. Human creativity participates in a fundamental and intimate way in Divine creativity. This by no means equates the creation with the divine, but in a mysterious way, we are brought into the realm of the Spirit's power. In this way, we are drawn into the inner life of the Spirit's power, and consequently into the Trinity itself (Moltmann 1981:113). As humanity recognizes that God is in all things, then perhaps we will have a stronger initiative to take care of the earth and all the things in it. This understanding will prompt us to revere care for it. We are commanded to do no less.

We believe in a God who dwells within all of creation. For Luther, the creatures of God are not limited only to human beings but include everything that is alive in the depths of the sea, air and on land. God does not dwell just among human beings but in all created and living things. Luther believed that God is present in all of creation. Humanity becomes a place where Christ who was crucified resides. Christ provides life and his love cannot be bound or limited (Moe-Lobeda 2002:84). The mystery of creation tries to show the indwelling of God in all of God's creation. Humanity becomes a home to the Creator who works through us to heal, bring justice, reconcile and restore relationships so that there is life (Moe-Lobeda 2002:133). It is not just life, but abundant, liberating and flourishing life that the Spirit of God provides to all.

God and God's Spirit is always within us. It is what has given us life and sustains us throughout our life. We are the holy temples of God and this knowledge should make all the difference in how we treat ourselves, others and nature. It is evidently clear that once we recognize that God is within us, we will treat ourselves, others and nature with respect, love and compassion. As we live in this growing society of multi-national corporations, imperialism, and colonialism, we need to take a deep breath and recognize these dangers and work towards justice and peace. This is crucial to us as we try to live on this planet and to save it for the later generations.

It is this Spirit which will exorcise the *han*. *Han* needs to be released from the dominated poor and also from the subjugated earth. The poor and the earth are crying out

and it is the Spirit which will release the *han* and renew the earth. The Spirit will restore the brokenness that has come on the human being and the earth.

Humanity needs to work towards the well-being of the planet and justice for all people, especially by lifting the yokes from oppressed people. We can work towards releasing our *han* and the *han* of others and the earth as we strive to live a simpler life. As we begin to live out this new life, we can work towards the elimination of suffering inflicted by our indifference or greed. The elimination of *han* from one's life and others, is a liberating and powerful experience which will change us and the world.

We need to re-envision a world that strives for sustainability and not consumerism. We need to re-envision a society where the community makes positive decisions which will be the best choice for the good of many. Today's current economic decisions and patterns benefit the corporate good and not the individual or the many who are not part of the corporate world. All forms of capital must be reexamined and studied and this will include 'nature's capital.' The good and flourishing life must not ignore nature and how we sustain this planet (McFague 2001:107). Does the good life mean treating ecology with reverence? Is it good for all of us and for the planet earth? For a good life, there are ecological models which clearly illustrate how we can live a good life which keeps our planet safe and flourishing. The three simple rules as mentioned by McFague states that human beings take only our share, clean up after ourselves, and must maintain the planet in good repair for future generations to come (McFague, 2001:122). We must resist the tendency to see nature as existing only for our use and our occupation. We do not want to create a system in which a rock is valued only if people think it is pretty or if it contains a mineral we need (Roop 1991:23). A tree may be more valuable than the wealth which lies beneath it. We must move away from an anthropocentric life and away from greed, to a life which embraces all of God's creation and puts God's mandate to be good stewards at the forefront of our lives. If we do not take this call to stewardship seriously, the consequences may not be repairable.

## **Conclusion**

As we live in this postcolonial world bloated with consumption, we need to have a new perspective on our lives, our planet and our God. The road that we are taking is leading us to destruction. We are raping the earth, the soil and the water. We are causing tremendous *han* on the earth and on its inhabitants. Our selfish consumerism lifestyle creates *han* on the rest of those in our world who are hungry, naked, unsheltered, and sick. We need to recognize this terrible path that we are on, so that we can prevent ourselves from wasting the wealth of our planet, leaving a barren desert for our posterity.

As we reflect theologically on this problem that we have created and find ourselves so deeply immersed in selfishness, we need to rethink our understanding of God, creation and each other. Human beings need to learn to value each other, the planet and understand who God is as a creator. As Martin Buber says, being concerned with the self is the very nature of being without God. "The one is the spiritual form of natural detachment, the other the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection" (Buber 1937:944). God is of the Spirit who has breathed life into all of us. As God gives us life, we need to understand how present in us and in all of creation the Creator is. Our own recognition of God's presence will help us to work towards restoration and reconciliation with each other and the earth. It is the Spirit of God who gives abundant life.



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