
Reviewed by Kevin Considine
Calumet College of St. Joseph, Whiting, IN

Grace Ji-Sun Kim is making an impact in the world of Protestant intercultural theology. Her previous works included creative contributions such as re-envisioning the Holy Spirit through the East Asian concept of Ch'i and exploring a liberating Christology for North American Korean women through engagement with the biblical Sophia tradition.

Dr. Kim continues her project of constructing intercultural theologies in this small volume. She attempts to build upon the broad spectrum of feminist eco-theologies that call attention to the role Christianity plays in ecological destruction. Kim’s guiding question is this: “how can we be motivated to live a sustainable life in a world filled with the toxins of empire, colonialism, consumption, and greed?” (2). In light of this question, her purpose here is to “...examine ways of rethinking our errors so that we can work toward a safer, reimagined, sustainable planet” (5).

Kim is a contextual theologian and moves from an analysis of the current situation (a postcolonial, consumerist globalization ruled by the insatiable overconsumption of the wealthy West) to a way of understanding the consequence of ecological degradation (the Korean understanding of han, here interpreted as festering ecological wounds inflicted by humankind) to a theological response to bring about personal, social, and ecological transformation (an understanding of the Holy Spirit rooted in her previous work on Ch'i, the ruach tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures, and crystallized in an understanding of the Spirit as the creative life energy called eros).

This book has many merits. Not least among them is her overview of two defining characteristics of our world—postcolonialism and consumerism—that are the foci of chapters one and two. Many contemporary theologians are slow in engaging with these “signs of the times” but Kim provides a clear overview and clearly situates her work within this context. In addition, chapter four is illuminating as she envisions a renewed, intercultural, and transformative doctrine of the Holy Spirit whose work and presence are the motivation and sustenance for action for ecological justice. Chapter three, in which she engages the Korean concept of han and its importance for describing human violence against nature, is adequate but is not fully integrated into her entire vision. The importance of han in understanding ecological wounds quickly disappears as she moves on to her section on pneumatology.

I would like to offer one small observation that may be of interest to a Catholic audience. Although Kim is not a confessional theologian per se, her work is clearly written by a Protestant thinker for an audience saturated in the language, concerns, and theological imagination of this tradition. Catholics have much to gain from engaging this work; however, with her goal in mind of “motivating” Christians for action in the world, it is important to point out that her theological sensibilities may not fully communicate across this confessional line.
For example, she provides a useful insight when speculating that the Protestant work ethic, described by sociologist Max Weber, may be an important idea to retrieve in order to counter the sin of overconsumption in the wealthy West (35, 37-38). This same ethic, however, cannot be accepted uncritically because it once had functioned as a discourse of discrimination against a number of immigrants to and residents of the United States who were not of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant backgrounds.

Moreover, her understanding of Christianity tends to be oversimplified at times, such as when she indicts Christianity for the mistake of valuing transcendence over immanence (66). Her critique is directed at “Euro-theology” and has merit. But, it is important to point out that the thrust of Catholic theology and ritual tends to emphasize divine immanence more so than divine transcendence. These criticisms are minor and do not compromise her vision.

Dr. Kim has opened the door to a topic rich in possibilities for authentic Christian praxis. It is clear that she wants her readers to act in the world rather than just read about it and pontificate. In this regard, this is a timely and useful contribution to intercultural theologies. It is a bit pricey for personal purchase, but I would recommend this work to a broad audience interested in ecology and intercultural theology. We all can learn from Kim’s creative vision.