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Seeds, Cross, and a Paradox of Life from Death: A Postcolonial Eco-Christology (@theTable: Planetary Solidarity)



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By Jea Sophia Oh.

In order to live, one must die. The principle of life is that it comes from death. Jesus compared his death of the cross to a seed that falls to the ground and dies. A seed has a potential to bear a lot of fruit because there is life in a seed. All the living organisms have fecundity that is not limited to a few species of (female) mammals only. The secret of life is in its hybrid process of disintegration and proliferation as numerous grains come after a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies. Nonetheless, if it remains only a single seed, it eventually loses its life. This process of life out of

death can be found in all living organisms. Death is not the opposite to life but an inevitable process of life that is not even avoidable to Jesus on the cross. In *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006) John Caputo writes that the genuine divinity of Jesus is revealed in his helplessness, his cry of abandonment, and in the words of forgiveness he utters. Paradoxically, Caputo sees the weakness and helplessness of the cross as the power that reveals Jesus' divinity. What Caputo calls "the weak force of God" is indeed the power of life that cannot be knocked out by the colonial sovereign power. This intertwined power of weakness and the processes of life from death are given to all the living organisms. Humans have changed the weather on this planet, which in turn has changed everything, especially how we grow food.

The secret of life in a seed is now genetically modified by human colonization of nature. However, power also comes from the bottom of the structure which has been deemed to be the subaltern. I recognize the crucified Jesus as a postcolonial subject. I find resonances between Jesus' powerlessness and the subjugation of nature by human colonization. The power of vulnerability is not merely powerless but a different kind of power which is similar to Michel Foucault's biopower.

Drawing on Foucault I suggest biopower as an alternative power: the power of vulnerability. This is a power we meet in seeds and in the Cross as the power that resists colonial power and brings forth the multiplicity of life. The worldly sovereign power of the colonizer exercises destructive activities such as killing, marginalization, oppression, exploitation, coercion, contamination of the environment, and the destruction of the ecosystem. The Korean word *jugim* means killing while *salim* means enlivening. *Jugim* is not death because death is a part of life and always exists as a necessary aspect of the process of life. The Korean term *jugim* refers to such activities of colonization while the Korean term *salim* means making things alive, restoring, and enlivening. Is the cross only a sign of *jugim*? Or can the cross become a sign of *salim*?

Caputo has coined the term "weak theology," and argues that the crucified Jesus signals the power of vulnerability, the weakness of God (43). Thus, power cannot be the possession of the colonizer only because where there is sovereign power there is resistance. The ethic of the cross then is an ethic of vulnerability expressed in and through compassion for the most vulnerable, those that we deem to be subaltern, powerless and marginalized, humans and more than humans-soil, air, water, trees, and seeds which have suffered the most from climate change. Climate change and GMOs are interrelated processes because climate change is projected to have significant impacts on agricultural conditions, food security, and food supply. GMOs have been developed to solve the problem of food supply by using biotechnology. GMO seeds are a product of Biotechnology that genetically manipulates

microorganisms. Among the myriad subalterns, seeds are also the subalterns which need to be decolonized. Among the myriad subalterns, seeds are also the subalterns which need to be decolonized.

Our planet is a macrocosmic body of delicate sense organs and, hence, is sacred nature. This entangled planetary body as a whole is the incarnation of Christ which Catherine Keller calls “intercarnation” that we still repeatedly crucify (*Cloud of the Impossible, Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, 2014, 169). Keller boldly argues that the becoming of any creature reverberates in a universe readable as God’s body. By ruining seeds and the earth, we crucify God’s body. Nature’s returning is the power of hybridity, becoming together. Every seed contains the potential to save the world. Thus, the vulnerable nature cannot be utterly ruined by any destructive powers (*jugim*). If there is the original sin, there must be the original salvation that is *salim* (enlivening), restoration, reconciliation, rehabilitation, recycling, reversal, reunion, and resurrection. Life always returns through the dead.

Dr. Jea Sophia Oh is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on Asian Philosophy, Comparative Theology, Religion and Ecology, and Postcolonial Studies. Her research is highly interdisciplinary and cross-cultural, intersecting Western philosophy/theology, and Asian philosophy/spirituality, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Donghak [東學, Eastern Learning]. Her book, A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West (2011), is the first approach to bridge postcolonialism and ecological theology with the use of Asian spirituality as the philosophical underpinning for the argument that all forms of life are sacred. She is the editor and author of Nature’s Transcendence and Immanence: A Comparative Interdisciplinary Ecstatic Naturalism (2017). She is the Section Chair of ‘Comparative Religion and Ecology’ and ‘Religion, Gender, and Sexuality’ at the MAR/AAR and a member of the Leadership Team of Women’s Caucus of the AAR/SBL.