

ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY—CONSULTATION

Topic: Asian American Hybridity and Ecology
Convener: Carolyn Chau, King's University College
Moderator: Joseph Cheah, University of Saint Joseph, West Hartford, CT
Presenter: Julius-Kei Kato, King's University College
Respondent: Anh Tran, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University

Using the concept of hybridity as a hermeneutical lens, described extensively in his 2016 book *Religious Language and Asian American Hybridity*, Julius-Kei Kato, Associate Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at King's University College, grapples with an essentialist distinction between humans and nature in his theological discussion on the topic of ecology. While he wholeheartedly approved of an “integral” approach to ecology in *Laudato Si'* as “seeking a balanced, harmonious, and just relationship between organisms and their environment,” he argues that anthropocentrism inherent within the Judeo-Christian tradition has contributed to the present ecological crisis in the world. Kato supports this by conducting a brief exegetical analysis of Gen 1:28. The translation of this verse in the New American Bible reads, “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth’” (Gen 1:28). Kato asserts that the use of the verb *radah* or “to subdue” has the connotation of “to beat down, i.e., conquer another and by implication oppress them” (J. Swanson) or “to bring forcefully under control” (R.J. Clifford). Consequently, it seems clear to Kato that God’s creation of “humans as *Imago Dei* is a claim for privileged status that, in effect, distinguishes humans from the rest of creation.”

Such an essentialization of humans and the rest of creation presents for Kato a radical duality that standard Christian theology may not overcome. Indeed, he asserts that this radical binarity may be a central contributing factor to the ecological crises. In this sense, Kato agrees with Lynn White, an American interpreter of the history of science and technology, that the Judeo-Christian tradition was the root cause of the current ecological crisis in the Western world. As a possible solution, Kato offers an ecocentric perspective of Mahayana Buddhism that does not privilege humans over nature. Rather, it is a non-dualistic worldview that espouses a “radical unity among all entities in the universe” or one that recognizes that humans and nature are not only interdependent but an interrelated whole.

In his response to Kato’s presentation, Anh Tran, Assistant Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, noted that humans were not created apart from the rest of creation; they were part and parcel of the creation of the cosmos. Moreover, the word *radah* or “dominion must be understood as stewardship, taking care of God’s creation, rather than subdue or control it by force.” These ideas are more clearly brought out in the second creation story in Genesis. In the Yahwist account, humans are created not in *Imago Dei* but from the dust of the earth. God created humans not to subdue the earth by force but to work in partnership with God in caring for creation. In terms of hybridity from an integral theological perspective, Tran points out that the book of Genesis seems to debunk essentialist distinction between “human versus the rest of creation” and endorses a both-and approach of non-essentialized integration of “human and other living beings.”

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While Tran agrees with Kato that non-dualistic worldview of Asian religions might be helpful in dealing with the ecological crisis confronting us, he maintains that there is no need to reject the anthropocentrism of Judeo-Christian tradition. The problem is not that we are created in *Imago Dei* but that our interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28 have enabled many of us to claim superiority over the rest of God’s creation. The real problem confronting both anthropocentrism of Judeo-Christian tradition and ecocentrism of Asian religious traditions is the influence of consumerist economy in contemporary societies with its attendant consequence of exploiting nature for our own selfish needs. One only needs to see the exploitation of nature for economic gains in contemporary China and Japan to realize the negligible impact ecocentrism of Asian religions has upon their adherents in the face of modernity. However, as Tran concludes, “all religions including Christianity have the potential to provide corrective resources against human exploitation, if their messages are taken seriously.”

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