
Roots of the Empire and the Resistance of the Uprooted: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

Introduction

This paper attempts to demonstrate that the ideology of Empire is prevalent in the Christian tradition and in Western civilization and colonialization. By tackling Empire in this light, it can be argued that religion, especially Western Christianity, should not be considered as an unrelated entity but examined for its connection to the global economic order, ecological degradation, militarism, and sexism, all of which are encompassed within the interests of Empire.

First, I would like to draw the biblical and historical connections between Empire, the Christian tradition and the oppression of women and nature. After an analytical reflection on Empire, I hope to propose ways to untangle these threads of connection while sharing the stories of the women as agents in movements to resist Empire. Before beginning our discussion two working definitions need to be stated: empire and feminism. Empire is understood as “the gathered power of pervasive economic and political forces throughout the globe that reinforce the division between the rich and the poor.”¹ Feminism is “a term that connotes awareness of and sensitivity to contextual realities where women, their perspectives, their labour, and their bodies are often devalued and exploited by the patriarchal ideology of domination and control.”²

1. Roots of Empire in Judeo-Christian Tradition

Judeo-Christian traditions have been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy that points to the anthropocentric view of the world. In Aristotle’s *Politics*, men’s domination over nature is manifested in a threefold dichotomy: master/slave, man/woman, human/animals. In this dualist value, slaves, women, and animals are regarded as belonging to the realm of nature and, therefore, ought to be subordinated.³ It contributed to sustaining and reinforcing the hierarchy (classism), patriarchy (sexism), and human-driven domination of the natural world. The passage of Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,” has been interpreted to strengthen this Greek anthropocentric and androcentric view and has frequently been used to justify slavery, the oppression of women, and the exploitation of nature in the histories of western Christianization.

Both Hebrew and Greek Scriptures were written and canonized in the context of Empire. The formation of the canon of the Hebrew Scripture is not free from the impact of the Persian Empire, while Greek Scripture came into existence from under the shadow of the Roman Empire. The need for such canonization was a part of the response to the controversy of heresy and propelled by the establishment of a church hierarchy which emerged from and reflected upon the Empire at that time. The exclusion of the Gospel of Mary as canon is a good example of how women’s leadership was condemned as heresy (dangerous) by the 3rd century male elites who collaborated to exercise colonial power in the context of Christianity becoming the Roman Empire state religion in the 4th century. The exclusion of women from the circles of power is pivotal in understanding the imperial context and colonial presence in the process of making the biblical canon. The collaboration of Christianity with Empire has, in this light, been seen as closely connected to the perpetuation of patriarchy and the church hierarchy as well.

¹ WARC 24th General Council Proceedings, Letter from Accra, p. 216.

² Exploring the Reality and Theological Challenges of Ecology, Economy, and Empire from Feminist Perspectives: Statement from the Feminist Discourse on Economy, Ecology, and Empire (Bangalore, India, 12-17 August, 2008), p 2.

³ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 46.

While it is fair to assert that the process of canonization is connected to the influence of Empire there are numerous references that indicate an ambivalent attitude to imperial powers in the Bible.⁴ The Exodus story, for example, has challenged the Egyptian Empire as God of Hebrew slaves brought them freedom. It has been, however, oppressive for those whose land was occupied during colonization (e.g., Aboriginal Indigenous people and Palestinians). The conquest mentality was justified and reinforced by this story as the western colonizers or settlers took the land from those who were already there.⁵ There are many more texts revealing the violent and harmful reality of Empire in the New Testament. With regard to the life of Jesus, the forces of Empire were strongly present. From his birth (Mat. 2:13-23; Luke 2:1) to his death his life was also under the power of Empire (Luke 20:20).⁶ As Richard Horsley argues that to read of Jesus' words and actions without knowing the context of the Roman Empire is like trying to understand Martin Luther King's speeches and activism without knowing the context of slavery and segregation of African Americans in the USA.⁷

Western Christendom expanded its territory and gained power over cultures with the blessing of the Roman Empire since the 4th century. It should be noted that the power of Christendom was strengthened by military means long before the first Crusade in 1095. Pope Gregory VII, for instance, claimed that he had authority over the sword and power to endorse the use of arms for the service of the church.⁸ However, with the threat of Islam, the imperial conquest propaganda clearly became a tool of the Church. Church fathers, bishops, and all ecclesiastic leadership were busy preaching about Christ the Warrior and likening (male) Christians as soldiers of Christ.⁹ Here we may use a postcolonial insight to see that Islam, in the ideology of the Crusade, was portrayed as 'the Other,' a conceptualization that became part of the western colonial construction of Orientalism.¹⁰ Islam must be conquered, so the logic went, because it is unknown, uncivilized, unfamiliar, and (therefore) dangerous and inferior to Western Christianity. The Crusade, the seemingly innocent and holy attempt to gain back control of the Holy Land should, thus, be understood as a highly motivated and politically engaged European Christian imperial effort. And such orientalist view continues in today's world.

Kwok Pui-Lan, Chinese American postcolonial feminist theologian, makes an interesting historical link between the Crusades and sexuality: "[T]he physical journey to recover the Holy Land was tied to the spiritual journey to reform in order to prepare for the eternal journey from earth to heaven. The First Lateran Council (1139) declared that any marriage of the ordained was invalid."¹¹ In the midst of this militarily, politically, and religiously motivated Crusade, sexuality was undercut. The case that sexual relationships with women (and men) were

⁴ Although some distinguish Empire from imperial, reserving the latter to territorial or economic expansion in the context of conflicts among nations, I use both terms interchangeably in this paper.

⁵ Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender & Empire-Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 102-117. She uses the Exodus story to illustrate both colonialist and anticolonialist characteristics as she introduces the writing of Zora Neale Hurston, who prophetically observed that America's nationalism and ethnocentrism was rooted in the Exodus story.

⁶ I imagined and retold the story of Jesus' family in light of war refugee and migration experiences in HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Eun Young Choi, *Multicultural Stories found in the Bible* (DaeJeon: Dae JangGan Publisher, forthcoming 2013).

⁷ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), p.13.

⁸ Kwok, Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: John Knox/Westminster Press, 2005), p. 12.

⁹ Tomaz Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and the Western Political Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 96. The rhetoric of the US Bush administration, 'the War on Terrorism' towards the Iraq, the Islam world, is clearly reminiscent of the propaganda of the Crusade in Europe a hundred decade ago.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

¹¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, p.13.

undesirable and sinful was made while underscoring the superiority of male celibate clergy over married laity. The idea of sexuality as unnatural and unredeemable for any male soldier must have been quite effective when combined with the naïve belief that this journey would lead him to the eternal salvation of paradise. At the same time, the position of women and the lives of ordinary marriage were devalued as profane and sinful.

The Crusade brought no victory to Christendom but introduced the European Christians to a bigger world. The interest in the world beyond Europe began to grow as the twilight of Medieval Christianity set in. The quest for the new world was the beginning of the modern era of colonization which we will explore in the following section.

2. Roots of Empire in light of the Enlightenment and the Era of Modern Colonization

There are various ways to trace the roots of Empire, its origins and its current nature. The presence and the dominance of Empire is not a new reality. However, its current manifestation is different in its relationship to any particular government, nationality, or culture. Empire is becoming the master in control of everything and there is no escaping it, as Heather Eaton argues.¹² In a way, the current form of Empire is so powerful that “no human power is capable of totally achieving this...that is our hope.”¹³

It is difficult to fully describe, let alone totally articulate, the nature of the 21st century Empire in this regard. However, it can be argued that the current form of Empire can be traced back to the development of science and the Enlightenment in the 17th century. As mentioned in introduction earlier, the geo-political domination of Empire intersects with gender justice and ecological justice which are inseparably connected to economic justice and peace.

Among the figures who laid out the foundation of the Western colonization, Francis Bacon can be named as one of the key philosophers since his work clearly linked the domination of nature and women in the name of scientific civilization and Enlightenment. For Bacon, reason, the noble and autonomous virtue that humans seek to achieve, only belongs to men. Men, he said, must unlock the secret of nature and gain control over it in order to attain the goal of becoming a ‘Man of Reason.’ The rationale behind such control is that the Man of Reason is strong, forceful, potent, and masculine as God intended him to be and therefore cannot be subordinated to nature, which is supposed to be weak, docile, impotent, and feminine. The justification of exploiting nature is endorsed by God, the omnipotent and omnipresent (male) ruler of all. Bacon writes:

For you [European noble men] have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterward to the same place again...Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object.¹⁴

British feminist theologian Mary Grey makes a point that in the quote above, the language for discovering nature’s secret is similar to the religious language used during the inquisitions of witch hunts.¹⁵ His emotionally and physically charged words evoke and haunt the contemporary readers’ memories and experiences of femicide (killing of women). Not only were

¹² Heather Eaton, “Ecofeminism and Globalisation,” *Feminist Theology* 24 (2000): 21-43.

¹³ Néstor O Míguez, “Jesus and Empire,” in *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire: Report to the 39th General Council 2006* (Toronto, United Church Publishing, 2007), p. 49.

¹⁴ Francis Bacon, “De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum,” in James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Devon Heath, eds., *Works* (London: Longmans Green 1870), Vol. 4, p. 296.

¹⁵ Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 14-15.

nature and women linked but also vocal and visual images of the inquisition were put into use exploiting nature and oppressing women. Violence (even torture) was encouraged in the name of discovering nature's secret and saving people from the wicked witches. Subordination of anything weak and feminine is also justified for the sake of attaining to the status of Man of Reason.

It is not surprising to find out that sexual metaphors have been often used to describe the colonized and their land. The colonizer Amerigo Vespucci "discovered" the land (today's America) which was named after him, as "Ameriga," except that it is feminized. True to form and conquer, the land has to be feminine. Christopher Columbus in his "discovery" of the East fantasized that the world is not simply round but shaped like a woman's breast with a nipple.¹⁶ Many other postcolonial feminist scholars make a similar point that colonial expansion in the name of discovery of new worlds was defined by the desire of male conquistadors' eroticized encounter with the land that they considered feminine and with the indigenous women there.¹⁷

Such western anthropocentric and androcentric ways of thinking further developed and reached their peak in the 19th century's efforts in colonization. The language of penetrating the holes and the visual image of discovering the nature's secret were actualized and literally practiced in the extractive economy of drilling oil and mining. It is no coincidence that the world's biggest oil corporations including Esso (1870), Exxon (1882), Shell (1890), and Mobil (1882) were all established in the late 19th century, the era when the sun never set on the British Empire.¹⁸

3. Resistance against Empire: Stories of the Uprooted Women of the World

Thus far, we have demonstrated that the roots of Empire are deep from the ancient Judeo-Christian traditions throughout the modern Western world. The current forms of Empire were expanded in the development of modern science and in the process of the "discovery" of the "new world." Patriarchy, the systematic structure and practice of oppressing women, is closely tied to the exploitation of nature, both of which contributed to sustaining and strengthening the control of Empire. Therefore, steps towards resisting and dismantling Empire must be taken in solidarity with those who both seek gender justice and ecological justice. Feminist perspectives must be integral to identifying and clarifying the problems posed by Empire. Sharing the stories of women who are struggling in the midst of Empire is the first step in resisting Empire because so often their stories have been veiled under the discourse of colonialization and disguised by male-driven Empire studies in the academy. In the case of the Canadian Aboriginal women's story below, it is obvious that women, especially racialized (meaning non-White non-European descents) women, do not get fair attention, let alone fair treatment in society. In the evaluations of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women of the World Council of Churches and the following event called Daring Hope in Canada, the voices of the critique were raised to point out that the agenda of the Decade and Daring Hope was somewhat irrelevant since racial minority women's voices were missing.¹⁹ Any fruitful analysis of and reflection upon Empire must, therefore, begin with naming the realities of those who are most vulnerable and often obscured in the dominant Empire discourse and resistance

¹⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, p.14, 70.

¹⁷ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 22; Andrea Smith, "Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide," in *Remembering Conquest: Feminist/Womanist Perspectives on Religion, Colonization, and Sexual Violence*, ed. Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1999), pp. 31-52.

¹⁸ Grey, *Sacred Longings*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Kim Uyede-Kai, "Hearing the Missing Voices: Racial Minorities," *Ground Swell* (Spring 1994), p.16.

movements. Of course, these stories of women below only serve to point to a fragment of much more complicated postcolonial realities in which we live. However, it is my hope to take a cue from these stories to point us in the direction we should be going.

A Story from Women in India²⁰

The garment industry in Bangalore employs a large percentage of women, pays low wages and offers harsh and unfair working conditions. Specializing in export-markets, the industry dumps/sells its rejects on the local market. Bangalore has become a very attractive location for outsourcing companies of the West. In rural areas, shifts in agriculture from subsistence production to cash crop commercial farming have led to increased tensions in households and communities. The commodification of persons and the shift to a consumer culture have had severe consequences for women. Violence against women has significantly increased both in numbers and in brutality. In Bangalore three women die each day from dowry violence at the Burns Ward of Victoria Hospital. India's Green Revolution has adversely affected the lives of people who are poor, especially women. While it promised profit, the reality is further impoverishment, crop failures, the inability of farmers to repay government loans, which often results in suicides. The Green Revolution devalues women's wisdom and discounts their sustainable ways of farming and agriculture.

A Story from Women in Guatemala²¹

Violence against women and children, together with the increase of youth gangs linked to organized crime, as the results of family disintegration and youth alienation in civil society....In this context, murders of women have grown substantially....Violent deaths of women in Guatemala are another form of social discrimination and intimidation....An important element to note is that...most of the murdered women are described as *mestiza* (mixed Indigenous and European ancestry).... Various groups of women and social movements call these murders "femicide"—the misogynist murder of women...Femicide, together with rape, torture, and other violence, is carried out largely because the victim is a woman; violence is a demonstration of power and domination.

A Story from Women in Korea²²

For the three years from 2005 to 2008, **Kiryung Electronics Company** women workers have been on strike against the company, which assembles Sirius Satellite radios and GPS devices. Kiryung workers occupied the factory for 55 days until they were driven violently from the plant. Since then, a small group has lived in a tent and a container outside the plant. The chair of the Kiryung union, Kim So-Yeon, is recovering from a recently-ended 94-day hunger strike. In August, 2008 more than 1,000 people joined the

²⁰ Statement from the Feminist Discourse, p. 2.

²¹ Nora Coloma, "Empire and Patriarchy: Violence against Women in Guatemala," in *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire: Report to the 39th General Council 2006* (United Church Publishing, 2007), p. 37.

²² This story is taken from the report of the PROK-UCC Empire Joint Study in December 2008. A comprehensive report of the situation (prepared by the U.S. National Labor Committee) can be found at:

<http://www.nlcnet.org/admin/media/document/korea/081020%20Kiryung%20Electronics%20Factory%20report%20text.pdf>

hunger strike for a single day as a sign of solidarity. Clearly, the long struggle has carried a high personal cost for the women: beatings, arrests and loss of family connections. These women leaders provided insight into the profound globalization, Empire-building problems faced by so-called “irregular workers” – mostly women who work from one short contract to the next so that benefits are never paid and their contracts not renewed if they become pregnant. “This happens so often that you don’t even feel it. People accept this as reality,” said one of the workers. There are an estimated 10 million irregular workers and its number is on the rise as we speak; South Korea’s total population is 49 million. “Ten years ago (1998), we did not have this system.” (This is what corporations seek when they appeal for “labour flexibility.”) Such companies usually “outsource” or “sub-contract” their production as a way to avoid taking any responsibility for labour conditions.

A Story from Aboriginal Women in Canada²³

In 2003, the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), disturbed by the lack of media and public attention to so many Aboriginal women’s disappearances and unsolved murders, began to lobby for concrete action. Could it be that the blasé attitude of authorities and police stemmed from the victims being Aboriginal women?... By looking a little deeper, we find that the value placed by mainstream (non-Aboriginal) Canadians on Aboriginal people, particularly women, tends to be low.... For example, early settlers (Colonizers) brought ideals of what constituted proper hierarchical structures within the home. One of these was that wives were the property of their husbands, as were children. One can imagine the “culture shock” of Europeans when they encountered the relatively egalitarian Aboriginal societies in what they called the “New World,” some of which were governed by women! Rather than adapt to their hosts’ ways, however, the newcomers sought to prove that their own ways were “right” (therefore the Aboriginal ways were “wrong”)....The new society...proceeded to marginalize the First Nations. It is no wonder, then, that contemporary male-dominant European centred Canadian society is steeped in pejorative attitudes toward Aboriginal people....”How does all this relate to the missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada today?” You might ask. The foundations of Canada as a country have relegated Aboriginal women into invisibility in today’s society....In 2005, the Status of Women Canada made an agreement with NWAC for the “Sisters in Spirit” initiative.... “Sisters in Spirit” strives to eliminate the objectification and disrespect that an entire group has had to face since European contact.

However different these stories are, they speak out the common experience: “violence against women.” As Gail Allan notes, “common threads in the stories are led to the naming of systemic sources of oppression and the identification of desired changes.”²⁴ We hear the voices of women who are tortured, raped, and killed, and hear the voiceless cries of those disappeared throughout the continents. Such causes of violence can be the result of the direct and indirect domination of Empire on a global scale. The women of the grassroots in local communities are heavily affected by the imperial force that drives their community and family towards destruction and deconstruction. The Empire-building structure only allows the life of ordinary people to be

²³ Anita Harper, “Sisters in Spirit: A Campaign for Human Rights,” in *Challenging Empire: Stories and Activities to Transform Your Community* (United Church Publishing, 2007), pp. 49-50.

²⁴ Gail Allan, “Alliance, Difference and Transformation: Learning from the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women,” the paper presented in *Exploring the Reality and Theological Challenges of Ecology, Economy, and Empire from Feminist Perspectives* (Bangalore, India, 12-17 August, 2008), p. 2.

reconstructed as profit-centred, individualized, and commercialized. In this oppressive force, tensions within families, communities and the society in general are rising, leading to violence. Those who are vulnerable and who are not in power including women and young people fall victim to this violence. Racial discrimination and misogynistic views thrive upon the system of domination and control which Empire seeks to sustain. In sum, the stories of these women across the continents around the globe successfully demonstrate that “these hierarchies are driven by, and express, and reinforce the gender ideology, as well as the racist ideology of global white power and the class ideology of the transnational corporate elite. Manifested in all spheres of life, these ideologies converge and become especially visible in the global market and the geopolitics of the global empire.”²⁵ With these insights in mind, the following section as a conclusion will seek to find alternative ways to overcome Empire.

4. Conclusion: Dismantling Empire Toward Turning to God

The process of dismantling Empire by cutting off its roots is undoubtedly a long journey but it is a hopeful journey because we as Christian know that God promises life for all and God we believe in is the God of life-giving and not of life-destroying. Many biblical references affirm that God’s vision is an economy based upon just relations for all (Isaiah 5:11-10; 65:17-25; Amos 5:11-12; 8:4-6). God’s economy is “a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place [but] for the household of all creation,” as confessed in the WARC’s 24th General Council 2004. These biblical visions spoken as prophetic witnesses further urge us to respond to sustain this household of life as we, the people of God, take a faithful responsibility with one another for those who are oppressed and disempowered.

A group of feminist theologians around the world took a bold step to action in India, August 2008. They rejected “the polarizations, reductionism, and hierarchical dualisms that have characterized theologies. They have served to legitimate the dichotomies of public/private, spirit/matter, us/them that underlie the relations of domination and subordination enacted in the interlocking structures of empire.”²⁶ Their claim is of pivotal importance because it pushes all of us doing theology as Christians to look at our ways of doing theology, while urging a fundamental change to create theologies that articulate the nexus of economy, ecology, and empire. How much are we still swimming in the Western colonizing theological pool? How complicit are we in addressing Empire? How faithful are we in putting the puzzles of faith into that of action? These questions must be raised again and again in whatever we do as Christians. Adele Halliday argues that if empire is a system of domination and we as church want to dismantle this system then we need a radical and fundamental change from how we gather together to how we welcome each other. Our prayers, worship, meetings, decision-making, and all these most basic practices as Christian must change.²⁷

In light of theological education, it is critical to create curricula on the topic of the intersections of economy, ecology, sexism, and empire for seminary and undergraduate courses in consultation of academics and grassroots theologians, reflecting local contexts. It would also be fruitful to develop a network of feminist discourse on economy, ecology and empire around the globe, while promoting exchange programmes within the network beyond local contexts.²⁸

²⁵ WARC, An Ecumenical Faith Stance Against Global Empire For A Liberated Earth Community, July 2006.

²⁶ Statement from the Feminist Discourse, p.7.

²⁷ Adele Halliday, “A Challenge to Empire through Intercultural Ministries,” *Seeing Ourselves Ethnic Ministries in the United Church of Canada*, Spring/Summer 2007.

²⁸ Statement from the Feminist Discourse, pp. 7-8.

As a pastoral theologian, committed to teach worship and Christian education, I would like to propose an extensive examination of the way we worship and teach from the perspectives of Empire. Such questions need to be posed in this examination: what kind of theological curriculum do we have? Is it explicitly inclusive of the contemporary and critical social analysis on global capitalism? Are the courses able to make connections between gender, race, class, and colonialism with Christian traditions? Are we still heavily dependent of European male theologians and their work? Or are we embracing and nurturing our own indigenous theologies? Are we still only teaching our children in Sunday school that Jesus as suffering servant without also teaching him as the one faced injustice and resisted Empire?

How are we in the church worshipping together? Are we still singing hymns that are militant and triumphant with the zeal of converting the heathens? Are we dedicated to offering prayers that seriously and critically reflect upon our 21st century world of Empire? Or do we feel more comfortable asking prayers of blessing, comfort and even prosperity by only attending to our own individualistically inclined needs? In what ways do we share liturgical leadership? Are there no more contested issues around feminist leadership because there are more female students entering seminary? What kinds of liturgical symbols and spaces are we equipped in our church sanctuaries? How many pictures of Jesus portraying him with a blue-eye-white-skin man do we still have in our church? How much are we aware of and ready to invite different expressions and liturgical symbols that celebrate diversity and challenge Western uniformity?

I believe that a self-critical study of theological education, as we faithfully and thorough engage in these questions, will bear a theologically sound and healthy fruit for our church as it seeks to challenge and dismantle Empire.

The direction of becoming an intercultural church which the United Church of Canada has taken since 2006 can be viewed as one small but a concrete example that may offer ways of how to live in right relationship, by recognizing differences and power dynamics. As long as we can diligently and vigilantly engage our Empire study from a postcolonial feminist perspective, we will be able to find ways to rescue our sinking ship, our household of the world that is unbalanced and widening between the poor and the rich into a new vision of the world as a web of life, where interdependent coexistence is the only way forward. For this perspective forces us not to separate one reality from the others but to link with one another. Furthermore, only if can we see our life that is so closely inter-dependent with the life of our neighbours, we will be able to truly repent our wrongs, to humbly respect others and to ceaselessly resist Empire. Only then will our direction of becoming an intercultural church leads to turn to God that can surely contribute to dismantling Empire. Only if so, will our faith communities and other communities in society be able to turn to God, the life-giving Source as we as Christians are called to accompany God's saving work to make the world as a household of honouring and celebrating life.