Book Review: Gaia and God - An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing

Chienyu (Jade) Yi

Book Review


This book, Gaia and God, brings a new way of thinking and reflecting towards the earth to which we are intimately and inextricably connected to in living and in consuming from it. Ruether offers us her feminist view and her evaluation toward the heritage of Western Christian culture and of the American World, and takes us from creation story to destruction reality and from domination to the possibility of a healing quest. This healing quest for the earth is rooted in deep ecology (2) which examines the symbolic, psychological, and ethical patterns of destructive relationships of not only humans with nature, but also men and women, classes and nations. This leads to the issue of eco-justice which involves both socially and earthly dominations. This ecological healing is a theological and psychic-spiritual process. She invites us to participate in the *metanoia* which requires a new consciousness if the biosphere is to survive much beyond 2030.

In the beginning of the first two chapters focus on the information and interpretation of three classical creation stories, namely, the Babylonian story, the Hebrew story, and the Greek (Platonic) story which are well nuanced. The three stories have shaped the biblical and Christian tradition into a patriarchal and domination culture. In the story of Babylonian (the 2nd millennium B.C.E.), it starts as a matriarchal and hierarchical world. The ownership and control of possession are developed which connotes the slavery system. The second story is Hebrew story (the 6th or 5th century B.C.E.) which enshrines in sacred law. The relationship of humans with God is about servanthood of royalty rather than of slaves. Even though humans are created last, but it is an anthropocentric, patriarchal, and exploitative oriented culture. The last one is Platonic story (4th B.C.E.) which emphasizes the dualism – the invisible thought (mind) and visible body and earth in which the divine nature is shared. To this point as readers, we can quickly understand why we believe that humans have rational soul which is higher than animal and vegetable which has lower souls. This brings us to re-exam the ecological ethics of Christians and to reshape the concept of “nature” that is governed by the finite limits of the interdependence of all life in the living system that should be guided under two laws: the law of consciousness and kindness which causes us to strain beyond what “is”, and the laws of Gaia which regulate what kinds of changes in “nature” are sustainable in the life system of which we
are inextricable part. (31)

As science gives us a new creation story, the Christian creation story starts breaking down. It is a major split between science which deals with facts and religious faith which focus on values. The earth-centered world is replaced by the heliocentric universe. And moreover, human’s consciousness separating us from animals is more affirmed. However, it is showed that the scientific reductionism is incapable of satisfying the longings of the human spirit. Humans can not avoid ethical responsibility, and need to start learning how to live as a sustaining member of biotic communities, like reducing our excessive meat eating, developing co-industries that breakdown or recycle technological wastes, and controlling the escalating human population, etc. Cooperation and interdependency are the primary principles of ecosystem. The author suggests that we need to learn to tell the cosmic story in a new way and that we need scientist-poets who can retell the story in a way that can call us wonder, to reverence for life. (58)

Ruether then explores the religious narratives of world destruction which has to do with how we perceive God’s judgment that shaped our relationships to other people and to the earth and cosmos. From the story of Noah in the Hebrew world, God promises that there is no more destroy the earth and makes covenant with humans and animals. However from the time of Ezekiel, God’s punishment would be to all. And to the time and Isaiah, fewer people would be left. As we can see, the Hebrew version of world conveys that redemption is becoming less universal. From the book of Daniel, the new apocalyptic thought is introduced – Messiah is the only one who is given the dominion of all. The last book in the Bible, Revelation, tells death will be no more. I appreciate that Ruether touches the most important topic, apocalypticism, which is based on the fantasy of escape from mortality, the body, earth, and evil. She points out that Good and Evil need to be seen as different kinds of relationships rather than different kinds of “beings” not as the way Fundamentalists see that good and evil are opposite substances. The author suggests that if we are to prevent recourse to these despairing “shortcuts” to salvation, we must acknowledge the deep fears and desperate hopes on which they are based. (84) She responds to the question she raised, “How can we speak of the urgency of global crises (the interrelated contemporary crises of ecological devastation, poverty, and militarism) without inducing either passivity and hopelessness or unrealistic escapism?” The author suggests that our task is to continue the struggle to reconcile justice in human relations with a sustainable life community on earth not to indulge in apocalyptic despair. (111)
The author spends the following three chapters to talk about our sin and our fallenness. She revisits three traditions once again to convince readers that the classical heritage of Jewish, Greek, and Christian understanding of evil have misnamed evil which reinforces dominating relations to women and the earth. Cultic concepts of evil are deeply entwined with the dualism of purity and pollution in the Hebrew view of evil which is more ethical. Platonic and Gnostic views of evil are metaphysical that means evils resides in the physical body and the material world. Christian concept of the fall is influenced by Paul (two opposite types of existence) and Augustine (male alone possesses the image of God) which is the fusion of both Hebrew’s and Platonic. Ruether points out that the Hebrew view (pre-apocalyptic) is a more authentic ethics for ecological living. It believes that mortality is our natural condition, which we share with all other earth beings, and that redemption is the fullness of life within these finite limits. (139) The author emphasizes that finitude is not our fault, nor is there escape from it within our capacities. Mature spirituality frees us from ego-clinging. The Christian definition of sin has served to promote this cycle of violence. (141) We need not only compassionate with those who are most victimized, but also have realistic acknowledgment of how are have benefited from such injustice. (142)

Ruether names some of feminists who also involve this kind of work she is doing. She points out that Mary Daly (male is negated) offer no really hope of resolving the male-female conflict in society. Carol Christ, Marija Gimbutas, Riane Eisler seek egalitarian society but fail to recognize the problems for male adult identity when the male remains only the “son of the Great Mother” and a responsible adult male is absent. Christian asceticism was also deeply ambivalent toward women. It is believed that women can overcome the “curse of Eve” by adopting celibacy and be restored in Christ to equality with man. Male ascetics spoke of the virginal woman as having become “spiritually male” since femaleness was inherently inferior. The author suggests a new pattern of mutual parenting must balance maternal primacy in reproduction and structure new forms of gender parity. I truly agree with Ruether’s suggestion that men and women must share fully the parenting of children from birth and domestic work associated with daily life. This implies a reconstruction of the relation of the domestic core of society to the larger society. (171)

The author assumes that there is no ready-made-ecological spirituality and ethic in the past Christian tradition. The Christian tradition is one of those communities, like Native American, African, and Pacific indigenous traditions, that have profoundly valuable themes for ecological spirituality and practice. In the last part of this book, the author suggests her readers to explore two Christian traditions. The first one is the covenantal tradition from Hebraic roots. Since the modern European dualism has distorted the biblical perspective (nature was understood as subhuman), Christians should reclaim the Hebraic understanding of the God and of Israel who didn’t set history against nature, and experienced God as Lord of heaven and earth, whose power filled all aspects of their lives. One of the major fruits of this Hebraic understanding of the covenantal relationship between justice and prosperity in the land is found in sabbatical legislation, (211) especially the tradition of the Jubilee year. Jubilee vision does not promise a
“once-for-all” destruction of evil. It believes that the future time will bring a final fulfillment of the covenant of creation, restoring peace between people and healing nature’s enmity. (Isaiah 65:17-22, 24-25)

How about the covenant in Christian tradition? Jesus’ teaching also reflects strong elements of the Jubilee vision of renewal in Matthew 6:9-13 (Lord’s Prayer). The author suggests that the debts should be probably understood in the Jubilee tradition of liquidation of debts, and not simply spiritualized as “sins” (in Christian sense.) In N.T. the concern is only for inter-human justice, but no longer from the perspective of farmers and their relation to animals and to land, for instance, in Luke 4:18-19, good news for poor, for blind, and the oppressed. Therefore, the author invites us to redefine the covenant and the rights of nature. Each species of plant or animal is a distinct evolutionary form of life. We must assert a role of explicit guardianship over endangered species with a more profoundly ethic meaning. It is the human species that is accountable to the God of life to care for and protect the vast panoply of life forms produced by millennia of earth’s creativity. (222-27) The consumer-consumed relation is an inevitable part of the biotic condition, therefore, the author doesn’t agree with that the expression of redeemed life is vegetarianism. (225-25) She suggests that we as affluent nations should adopt a near-vegetarian diet for the sake of the rights of both animals and other humans.

The next tradition for healing the world is the Sacramental Tradition which leads us to experience the divine body in the cosmos and to beckon us into communion. Christ is seen as the power of the new creation and through him, humans are renewed and reconciled with God, and that is the final union with the Being of God. I agree with the author’s view that goodness is fundamentally relational and evil is the denial of that interconnection. (241) Humans have been privileged axis of evolution for the last 100,000 years, and the age of animals is over. Ruether believes that the evolution is to take place socially rather than organically. That is why humans need to have the consciousness to the earth as sustainers rather than destroyers of it as author says, “Human consciousness… is where this dance of energy organizes itself in increasingly unified ways,…must be where we recognize our kinship with all other beings…our kinship with all earth creatures is global, linking us to the whole living Gaia today.” (250-52)

Ruether suggests that there are two voices we can hear from these two traditions covenantal and sacramental. One is the voice of power and law; another one is from the intimate heart of matter. We should claim them as our own voices, the voice of God and of Gaia in the sense of what is “out there” rather than “nothing” is out there. Ruether envisions a healed society with a principle of equity in the sense of non-dominating relations between human begins in interrelation with the rest of nature. I like that she points out that this equity is not only between generations of living things, but also between the needs of those who are to come. (258) She suggests that humans should move from the patterns of production, consumption, producing waste and destroy the earth, to ecologically sustainable ones. And this can’t be done through
the level of technological fixes but through base communities of spirituality and resistance.

The concept of “metanoia” is mentioned several times. (86, 269) Ruether says that we must start by recognizing metanoia which means changing of consciousness, and which has to be initiated by us. (269) Toward the end, she believes that we need to amend the famous slogan of Rene Dubos to “We need to think both locally and globally and act both locally and globally” instead of “think globally and act locally”. (272) What we need to reach the goal is to have “committed love” not just for us but also for our children. (273-4)

I would like to talk more about the word, “metanoid.” It is very helpful for me to understand our connectedness with the nature through changing one’s mind in the sense of embracing thoughts that is beyond its present limitations. This word appears in Romans 2:4 in which it means the conversion of our spirit and culture, and is normally translated as “repentance.” I think that it is really important to redefine what “sin” is as we talked about in class. For me, “sin” is a broken relationship with God and with the creation God gives to us. We are required to repent for what we have done wrongly and non-properly toward God and Gaia to maintain the rightful and healthy relationship.

Since I started reading this book, I have recommended this book to many of my friends. Speaking from my own social context, I personally believe that both females and males have equal responsibility and need to be accountable to this world. We females nowadays can not keep looking back the history to victimize others, but looking forward to a day at a time and reflect on how much we have bring to this world including both to other humans and to natures. I think that Ruether and I share the same position. I am convinced that we have been reading the biblical texts selectively and teaching them subjectively at churches; or we take the texts out of contexts without caution. Revisiting the past as the author did, it helps us to understand how our theologies and ethics are formed.

I like the title of this book; however, I wish that she could articulate more about the role of Gaia as our mother and how this mother role fits into our theology of creation. It might be my own lack of understanding, but I understood that there are three major characters, God, Gaia, and humans, who are intimately interrelated. I wish that she can just tell more about the theory behind the term she used in her book, Gaia, as a theologian. The last thing I wish that Ruether can articulate more about the relationship between Gaia and Christ relating to the passage in John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God; 3 all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” [RSV] I do believe that we don't have a disposable earth, but a renewable one which is made possible
through Christ by God