Chapter 10: From
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The Environment

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My mother was the matriarch not only of her human family but also of all other organic and inorganic members of our household. She ingrained in me how to be friendly to our surroundings by investing her time and physical energy for and with them. She gathered the last cycle of the laundry water to clean the bathroom. She carefully unwrapped the gifts she had received from others to reuse the wrapping paper. She taught me to finish my food so as not to create too much waste, and put the food scraps in her compost to make nutritious fertilizer for her vegetable garden. She befriended not only our birds and dogs but also the rocks, plants, and soil. Although confined in her last days to a high-rise condominium complex due to the socioeconomic environment of South Korea, my mother lived then as she always had with the deepest concern for her surroundings to which her life was deeply indebted. While her life was and continues to be one of the most invaluable texts in my search for an Asian American Christian environmental ethic, her individual story can be broadened through shared experiences among other Asians and Asian Americans. For example, the eulogy given by Taiwanese American ethicist Grace Yia-Hei Kao on the occasion of her Taiwanese grandmother's funeral vividly recollects her memories of her grandmother meticulously salvaging grains of rice from a dust pan after sweeping the kitchen floor, cleaning them, and storing them for later use.[1]

Now I have come to believe that my mother and Kao's grandmother were living in accordance with sound eco-theological principles in their embrace of the ethical values espoused by nature, their cultures, Christianity, and their own spirituality. No matter how fearful the signs of global ecological destruction, they continued to salvage grains of rice and scrub the bathtub with laundry water. Although Kao and I live

an ocean away from our foremothers, our relationships as well as our Asian American Christian environmental ethics, to a certain recognizable degree, continue to bear a resemblance to their eco-theological life principles. Yet, following Kwok Pui-lan's suggested methodology for doing postcolonial feminist theology, I will begin by reviewing how the Christian tradition has traditionally responded to the environment before elaborating on its significance for shaping Asian and Asian American Christian environmental ethics.[2] Then I will find an intersection where Christian theology can converge with Asian and Asian American understandings and experiences of the environment.

Canvassing the Range of Christian Responses to the Environment

What have we heard so far from ecological theologians and Christian environmental ethicists within the contexts of Europe, North America, and their colonies? After centuries of globalized industrialization, human residents of this planet increasingly became concerned with environmental deterioration during the latter half of the twentieth century. In particular, two indictments alarmed Westernized Christianity, prompting serious responses from churches and theologians. In 1967, in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Professor of History Lynn White Jr. argued that Christianity was responsible for "our ecologic crisis," highlighting the fact that since the late Middle Ages, many Christians had become negligent in their concern for this world as a result of Western Christianity's "implicit faith in perpetual progress," disenchantment of nature, anthropocentrism, and unbalanced emphasis upon the afterlife.[3] In 1974 Australian philosopher John Passmore made a similar claim that Christian belief that the next world is more important than this one renders Christians less obligated to this world, even to the extent that otherworldly piety fosters in them "a hostility toward nature."[4]

While we can bracket for the purposes of this essay the legitimacy of White's and Passmore's arguments,[5] it is important to underscore the ways in which the Christian tradition within European and North American contexts have responded defensively to these criticisms. In admitting that historical Christianity and Westernized Christianity are complicitous in the deterioration of the environment, Christian scholars have begun to reinterpret biblical passages to formulate a theory of Christian stewardship to illuminate humans' place on earth in

relationship to God and to see how our responsibilities extend not only to humanity as a whole but also to all of creation. They have also anticipated with hope the future development of ecological theologies and Christian environmental ethics based upon the ways in which Christian theo-ethical reflection has historically been responsive to contemporary issues and concerns.[6] According to Roman Catholic process theologian John F. Haught, ecological theology in the Christian tradition can be categorized into one of three types: the tradition-centered (or "apologetic") approach, the sacramental approach, and the cosmic promise (or the "cosmological-eschatological") approach.[7]

The first of these approaches, the tradition-centered approach, recognizes that Christianity has neglected "the wealth of ecologically relevant material in the Bible and Christian tradition," and thus directs its theological focus on retrieving "this lost wisdom" within the Christian tradition to address current environmental issues.[8] The most common biblical bases for responsible Christian stewardship include, but are not limited to, the creation story recounted in Genesis and the lived presence of Jesus himself depicted in the gospel as demonstrating a compassionate relationship to all of creation. Christian churches and theologians within the scope of the tradition-centered approach most likely begin their advocacy for Christian stewardship with Genesis 1–2 where God creates not only humans but also the whole world and then puts humans in charge of the garden of Eden. Despite its creative interpretations of the Scriptures and Christian theologies, the tradition-centered approach can be faulted for falling short of making a profound impact on the current human manipulation of the earth for a few reasons.

First, more often than not, it is those authors with more conservative leanings who employ this approach in calling for responsible Christian stewardship. Their discussions generally take place within European and North American countries and are framed implicitly by viewing the rest of the world from the perspective of their own colonial interests and histories.[9] The upshot is that this approach does not adequately address the culture of hyperconsumption in the economic north that demands heavier resource extraction and causes heavier pollution in the economic south. Put simply, their discussions remain more focused on the interpersonal level of environmental ethics per se, without undertaking other related social issues. Second, it is also difficult, or impossible, for these scholars to engage in dialogue with others whose perspectives and life situations differ from those of European and North American

Christians. Third, when addressing current environmental crises, the authors who employ the tradition-centered approach often utilize an anthropocentric binary framework that consists of the dominating and the dominated, the oppressor and the oppressed, humanity and nature. While its call for responsible Christian stewardship highlights agential responsibility of humans, it fails to revere the agential power that the rest of creation has upon us.

Despite the contribution this tradition-centered approach makes to an interpretation of Scripture and theology, Haught claims that this approach alone is not enough and must be supplemented by two other approaches, namely the sacramental and the cosmic promise approaches.[10] The second of Haught's three approaches, the sacramental approach, views nature as a place where the divine is revealed and where all forms of life are interrelated with one another and with the divine. When nature is seen as such, the natural world can no longer be manipulated solely for human purposes. Within this approach the traditional Christian understanding of sin and redemption is broadened to include humanity's relationship to nature, without which we lose "an impression of the divine" or "a symbolic disclosure of God" revealed in nature.[11] Although this sacramental theology reunites humans with the rest of long-estranged nature, and, therefore, allows us to attend to the ecological crisis, Haught asserts that this approach alone, which is deficient in its biblical foundation for eschatological fulfillment, cannot serve as "a distinctively Christian ecological theology."[12]

John Hart's *Sacramental Commons* fits into Haught's sacramental approach. In *Sacramental Commons*, Hart criticizes the anthropocentric stewardship model and underlines the sacredness of all places and of nature. From an arguably more solid Christian standpoint, Hart ascribes sacramental meanings to all of God's creation by developing a "creatiocentric consciousness" that emphasizes the interrelatedness and interdependence of all creation.[13] In order to present an ecocentric ethic of relation, he investigates how the nature of interrelatedness among all creation is voiced in other times and traditions by reflecting on St. Francis of Assisi; two Native American leaders, Black Elk and Phillip Deere; and secular naturalist John Muir. Hart's articulation of the sacramental approach is invaluable in affirming the interrelatedness and sacredness (sacramentality) of all of creation, especially for those whose traditions are grounded in the sacraments. Yet I suggest that his ecological theology, as expressed in Haught's analysis of the sacramental approach in

general, is not well-grounded in Christian eschatological promise and fulfillment.

Complementary to both the tradition-centered and the sacramental approaches is the cosmic promise approach, the last of Haught's three-part typology. This approach broadens the scope of eschatological promise once made to Israel and to the church, now toward "the entire universe," by arguing that "the divine promise . . . pertains not only to the 'people of God' but also . . . to the 'whole of creation.' "[14] Thus, subduing and taking dominion over the earth is not only "a violation of nature's sacramentality" but also a denial of God's eschatological promise for all of the creation.[15] As such, Haught himself places a heavier emphasis upon the cosmological-eschatological approach whose complementary synthesis of the first two will surely strengthen future Christian ecological theologies.

Christian theologians Willis Jenkins, Jürgen Moltmann, and Sallie McFague provide concrete examples of the tradition-centered and the sacramental approaches, finding their complement in an environmental ethics of cosmic promise. In *Ecologies of Grace*, Jenkins embraces the cosmological-eschatological approach by integrating narratives of salvation for Christian environmental ethics by means of three ecologies of grace: eco-justice theologies (sanctification), stewardship theologies (redemption), and ecological spiritualities (deification).[16] In *The Source of Life*, Moltmann modifies a sacramental approach embedded in the cosmological-eschatological approach. While affirming the sacredness of all creation as an indwelling place of God that is sustained by God's spirit, Moltmann also finds hope for "the rebirth of the whole cosmos" through the resurrection of Christ to eternal life.[17] Similar to Moltmann's work, yet more nuanced with a feminist perspective, Sallie McFague synthesizes Haught's three approaches in *The Body of God*. With an emphasis on the significance of embodiment, she rectifies the issues imposed on historical Christianity by White by arguing that the universe, as the body of God, is the locus of redemption within the common creation story, thus providing a rich rationale for Christian environmental ethics. While her ecological theology still rests in Haught's third category, her cosmological-eschatological approach alludes to a new possibility for a dialogue with other cultural traditions, and thus is open to a fourth categorization of ecological theology. Therefore, McFague's *The Body of God* holds particular importance for Asian American Christian ethicists

in regard to the manner of Christian faith and environmental ethical practice within Asian American Christian communities.

McFague highlights the significance of body by retrieving early Christianity's emphasis on embodiment concealed in the Westernized interpretation of the Bible. By recognizing the world as "our meeting place with God," where God's transcendence is physically expressed and immanently embodied, McFague restores its sacred meaning by reclaiming all the physical aspects of life in the universe, which she calls "the body of God."[18] McFague's ecological theology is among the most interesting ecofeminist approaches to environmental problems today. Her use of an organic model of cosmology can inspire Asian American theologians and ethicists to look into other organic models of cosmology abundant in the lived experiences of many Asians and Asian Americans. Her eco-theology, therefore, can function as a point of engagement with Asian and Asian American feminists and theologians, while her application of this reclaimed importance of the physical aspects of life remains pertinent to deconstructing the traditional theology and to underlining postcolonial Asian American Christian theologies. McFague's organic model of cosmology, revised anthropology, Christology, and eschatology can be particularly useful for Asian Americans for the reasons I will further explore in the next section. My analytical retrieval of her work will be worked out in the third section with greater complexity as a point of departure for my own construction of Asian American Christian environmental ethics.

How Are Asian Americans Specifically Invested in This Topic? And Why?

Many Asian American Christian communities have been disproportionately focused on the transcendental God who alone is in complete charge of his creation (independently of humans), on salvation that is available only for humans (exclusive of the rest of creation), and on the divine immanence (too spiritualized) that does not fully encompass the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and physical aspects of all life. In order to rectify this unbalanced emphasis on this anthropocentric, otherworldly salvation prevalent in the majority of Asian American Christian communities, many Asian and Asian American Christian theologians have emerged among progressive Christian voices over the past few decades. Theologians and biblical scholars including C. S. Song, Peter C. Phan, Sang Hyun Lee, Andrew S. Park, Kwok Pui-lan, Gale

Yee, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, among others, have made tremendous contributions to Asian American Christian theology and biblical interpretation with respect to Asian American identity, spirituality, racism, sexism, sexuality, classism, poverty, immigration, democratization, war and peace, economic globalization, and postcolonial critique of imperialism. They are also now nurturing the next generation of Asian American Christian scholars.

While making explicit impact on the socioeconomic, political, and cultural aspects of the lives of Asian Americans, the challenges that Asian American theological and biblical scholarship has proposed to Asian American environmental ethics remain implicitly focused on human issues with few exceptions.[19] To these Asian American Christian communities whose theo-ethical interests are more devoted to human issues, McFague's ecological theology can speak more deliberately to our Asian American Christian understanding of God, Christ, and salvation in our relationship to the environment as well as invite Asian American Christians to be more invested in the environment. Through a critical engagement with McFague's ecological theology, progressive Asian American Christian theologians and ethicists will surely give birth to a unique Asian American Christian environmental ethic that may speak to the heart of many Asian American Christians.

The relevance of McFague's ecological theology in constructing an Asian American Christian environmental ethic includes her organic model of cosmology, anthropology, Christology, and eschatology. Initially intended to correct the traditional model, McFague's organic model of cosmology nevertheless disrupts many Asian American Christians' unexamined adaptation of the traditional, anthropocentric, and hierarchical binary human/nature relation, and, subsequently, our justification for unilateral dominion over the rest of creation. After criticizing the traditional model of spiritualized, Christian, anthropocentric, homogeneous, and hierarchical cosmology for its failure to recognize differences and diversities of life, McFague offers an organic model of cosmology, in which diverse forms of life are radically interdependent and interconnected.[20] Once diversities and differences are fully recognized, a theology of nature gives rise to a new meaning of salvation closely linked to creation, available to all aspects of its diverse forms, directing us toward acknowledging the unity of its "infinite differences and diversity."[21] With its compatibility with other organic models of

cosmology, her ecological theology also inspires Asian Americans to look into other cultural models of organic cosmology.

McFague's revised anthropology is informative to Asian American Christians in the sense that it offers an insight into how Christian faith can be reconciled with postmodern science to embody the common creation story within the context of a long evolutionary process. Whereas postmodern science assigns the evolutionary process on this planet Earth to billions of years, the common creation story recounts it over only thousands of years. When she introduces five features of the common creation story to suggest humans' place in the scheme of things, humans' place is radically diminished, especially because the human species is placed not only as one among many other organic and inorganic inhabitants and existents but also in relation to the fifteen-billion-year evolutionary history of the universe.[22] Hence, it is clear that humans cannot be portrayed as masters of the world.

With respect to Christology and eschatology, which are relevant to Asian American Christians' move toward an ecological theology, the universe for McFague as the body of God is also "the place of salvation." That is, God's transcendence can only be revealed to us immanently in the cosmic Christ whose liberating, salvific, compassionate, empowering, and all-inclusive love is expressed immanently in creation as the physical body of God and is extended to all creatures. McFague's Christology directs us toward welcoming this extended meaning of salvation that is available not only to the human species but also to all other forms of life. Salvation is no longer exclusively available to humans. Nor does it point us to otherworldly salvation alone, apart from our own and others' physical bodies. Rather, salvation can be realized on earth in "the healthy functioning of all inhabitants and systems of the planet" through "our solidarity with other life-forms."[23] Closely related to this revised Christology, McFague further suggests a new eschatology, one that does not look forward to the otherworld, but envisions a hope for a new creation here and now.[24] Accordingly, this eschatology obliges humans to live as the body of God by transforming our current ways of life and taking responsibility for this eschatological vision in the continuing creation narrative.[25]

Delineated as such, McFague's Christology and eschatology can collaborate with the emerging progressive Asian American Christian theologians to undercut the conservative theological beliefs of Asian American Christians commonly found in many immigrant churches,

and help these Asian American Christians find God's redemptive power through the cosmic Christ whose radical expressions of love are immanently embodied in all forms of life in the universe. This new meaning of salvation, made available to all forms of life, now invites Asian American Christians to join other ecological theologians and Christian environmental ethicists to participate in the continuing creation, the cosmic Christ's redemptive love for all other life, and an ongoing journey toward salvation here and now.

Once Asian American Christians are fully aware of our interdependence and interrelatedness in the physical body of God, there is no way for Asian Americans not to be invested in the environmental ethics both locally and globally. Let me offer a tangible example. Asian and/or Asian American ways of eating, especially feasting, requires a critical theological and ethical reflection on our food culture and on our patterns of consumption, which directly result in the degradation of environment both around the corner and around the globe. Feasting, sometimes extravagant feasting, is integral to the cultural lives of many Asians, Asian Americans, and other people of the Asian diaspora, from routine gatherings of family and friends on cultural holidays and anniversaries of the death of loved ones, to celebrations of major milestones in life, such as the first birthday, the wedding, the sixtieth or the seventieth birthdays, the funeral, and the like. These feastings fuel the ever-increasing material and food consumption among many Asians and Asian Americans.[26] Added to these are the weekly church meals provided at many immigrant religious communities, especially in Korean American churches.

These Asian and Asian American cultural practices generate a further destruction of the ecosystem; specifically, the excessive use of disposable dinnerware (e.g., Styrofoam cups, plates, containers, and disposable chopsticks) further aggravates the natural environment. Although feasting is a part of nearly all cultures, this excessive use of disposable tableware during communal meals becomes a special environmental concern for many Asian Americans.[27] Asian American consumption patterns parallel, perhaps exceed, the patterns of food consumption in the economic north, which has negatively influenced the agriculture in the economic south by destroying "the cultural diversity of food and the biological diversity of crops," thus impairing the local environment.[28] The excessive consumption of seafood and fish of many in the Asian American feasting culture, along with the demands made by other

racial/ethnic groups in the economic north, may have a direct impact on fishery farming in Southwest Asia, causing reduced food security for local Asians and ecological destruction in Asia.[29] These environmental issues resulting from current food consumption patterns in the economic north cannot be confined to exploited Asian countries; in reality it is a critical condition that we are experiencing together around the globe and thus must face together.

As one of many Asian American ethicists who have inherited eco-theological life principles from our forebearers, our living today in an overconsuming culture without deep ethical reflection makes me increasingly uneasy. As mentioned earlier, Asian American environmental concerns are not as explicitly and fully theologized as other social ethical issues have been. Yet environmental awareness has not been completely absent from the lives of Asian Americans and their Christian communities. On a practical level, for example, for the sake of animal welfare and the health of marine ecology, many Chinese and Taiwanese Americans, including Taiwanese American film director Ang Lee, join their counterparts in various parts of Asia in standing against shark finning and boycotting the consumption of shark fin soup (a delicacy commonly served in high-end weddings, state banquets, or other formal events).[30] Some Asian American Christian congregations also make a fervent effort to reduce the material consumption and food waste in their weekly church meals.

On a theological level, Chinese American theologian Kwok Pui-lan addresses the impact of environmental degradation on "the lives of marginalized women."[31] Even though environmental ethics per se is not her primary research area, she is nonetheless deeply invested in how colonialism and the concept of empire have made an impact on the socioeconomic, political, and environmental lives of the colonized. Kwok also offers an invaluable tool for those who wish to develop Asian American Christian environmental ethics; her methodology of postcolonial imagination allows Asian and Asian American ethicists to weave Christian themes through particular experiences of one's community to reconstruct postcolonial Christian theologies and environmental ethics.[32] Despite her efforts, the problem continues unabated because of Asian American Christians' lack of attention to her postcolonial theological articulation.

Korean ecofeminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung exemplifies such a postcolonial imagination of Buddhist-Christian eco-theology, as

she concludes *The Letter from the Future: Goddess-spell According to Hyun Kyung* with a salimist manifesto. In this volume she subversively uses the Korean noun *salim*, meaning "making things alive," which has been often imposed on women in the household, and identifies herself as a "salimist" or a Korean ecofeminist. According to Chung, a salimist whose gift is "making things alive" also takes good care of the earth; salimists strive to make things alive by "creating peace, health, and abundant living for the family (the very large extended family of all forms of life) and a beautiful living environment."[33] Salimists touch everything and recycle whenever possible, they are peace activists, and they love women, nature, earth, and goddess.[34] Chung's interfaith, transnational, and postcolonial imagination candidly captures the lives of my mother, Kao's grandmother, and many other Asian women whose lifelong dedication to a respectful relationship with the environment is truly genuine. This will certainly shed light on those who are losing their cultural wisdom of being salimists in this globalized hyperconsumption culture. Stated as such, Asian and Asian American concerns for the environment are not only local but also global. Their concerns are expressed in their daily practices as well as in their theological articulation.

The export-oriented food production in Southwest Asia has a direct environmental impact on the consumers in the economic north as well as on the residents of the Asian region. The Chinese food culture expressed in shark fin soup and the Korean celebration of life expressed in milestone birthdays raise environmental concerns not only for Asian Americans but also for all global citizens whose lives are both directly and indirectly involved in the well-being of the ecosystems of our shared planet. Consequently, an Asian and Asian American approach to the environment voiced in this chapter cannot help but be a transnational approach. At the same time, as diverse as are the environmental concerns around Asian and Asian American food cultures, this transnational Asian and Asian American approach to the environment must embrace diverse perspectives. While constructing a transnational Asian Christian approach to the environment in this chapter, I will not attempt to provide "the" Asian and/or Asian American Christian approach to the environment, as if there could be only one valid approach. Instead, the Asian American Christian environmental ethic that I offer will be firmly grounded in my social, cultural, and religious location—a first-generation Korean immigrant Protestant Christian living in the United States—in the hope that other Asian American Christians will offer

their distinctive wisdom on our shared mission of constructing Asian American Christian environmental ethics.

Developing an Asian American Christian Ethics Approach to the Environment from a Korean American Christian Perspective

In constructing an Asian American Christian approach to the environment, let me begin by stating the following: *humans cannot survive even a day without the animals, the plants, and all other inorganic and organic existents on earth, while others can all flourish without humans.* This statement may sound parallel to, if not identical with, McFague's statement: "[t]he full truth is that we cannot live without the plants and animals and the ecosystem that supports us all" and "the plants do very nicely without us, . . . but we would quickly perish without them."[35] Yet there is a significant difference in our further elaborations of this dependent relationship. In this section I will briefly explore the shortcomings of McFague's ecological theology—her unconscious inclusion of anthropocentric, hierarchical, action-oriented and binary elements—and suggest my own construction of an Asian American Christian environmental ethic. This construction will be grounded in the lived experiences and the cultural traditions of Asian and Asian Americans while addressing issues about Christian ecological theologies and environmental ethics that developed within European or North American cultures and their colonial contexts.

We Are Utterly Indebted within Multifariously and Unequally Inter/dependent Relations in a Flux of Time

While acutely aware that the higher and more complex levels of existence have a more serious dependency on and vulnerability in regard to the lower levels of entities or events, McFague nonetheless defines the relationship among them as merely interrelated and interdependent. To deepen her understanding of interdependent relationships among all forms of life, I argue that if one is more dependent on and more vulnerable to others for sustenance or for survival, one's relationship to others is not merely interdependent but unequally dependent and, thus, radically indebted. That means humans are more radically dependent on the rest of the universe.

While her sentiment of radical dependency is well encapsulated in McFague's statement quoted above, her ecological theology does not fully reflect the unequally indebted relations when she places humans

at the top of the hierarchical order in the multileveled universe, reinforcing an anthropocentric binary on an epistemological ground.[36] By positioning the epistemological agency of humans above the ontological agency of others, she unintentionally tempers the import of other kinds of agential capacities that the other, larger parts of the sacred body of God have upon humans.[37] She thus falls into the trap of the stewardship model when appealing to the use of human capacity for self-conscious reflexivity to eradicate the bodily oppression imposed on the rest of creation by urging capable humans to be planetary guardians and caretakers and more active partners in the continuing creation.[38] Although in fact we humans are physically more vulnerable and dependent upon all other forms of life for our bodily survival, we have rationalized ourselves into believing we have been placed in a higher position within this anthropocentric hierarchical scheme; humans are charged with the higher call, or the deeper sense of responsibility, on the basis that we have been created in the image of God. With this agential capacity, humans, who take the upper hand in this epistemological human-other relation, choose to conserve, preserve, and consume other living and nonliving materials more responsibly.

Does this anthropocentric, action-oriented, Christian environmental ethic ring true to Asian and Asian American Christians who do not consider themselves to be charged with the higher call, but still live with sound eco-theological life principles? Answers to this question can be traced in the lived experiences of many Asians and Asian Americans I have mentioned earlier in this chapter: my mother, Grace's grandmother, Taiwanese and Chinese Americans who stand against shark finning, Chung's Korean Buddhist-Christian ecofeminist theology, and some Asian American Christian communities. Although many of them may identify themselves as Christians, their inherited religious and cultural traditions are much more complex than their European and North American Christian counterpart. As I look into their ethical values espoused by nature, cultures, Christianity, and their own spirituality, the common thread that binds them together is not exclusively Christian faith but partly a Confucian model of organic cosmology; embedded in their eco-theological life principles is the Confucian idea of "the unity of Heaven and Humanity" that many of us also believe encompasses the earth as well.[39]

Similarly to McFague's organic model of cosmology, Confucian cosmology in its variety of breeds is an organic one that emphasizes the unity

of heaven and earth—the interrelatedness and interdependence among all parts of the universe as well as the unity with heaven. Let me take a Confucian metaphor of the holy rite (禮: *li*: ritual) as an image for the universe.[40] Imbedded in this metaphor is an interrelated and interdependent nature among all participants whose participation with equal dignity in the ritual constitutes the holy rite. Yet this Confucian cosmology goes deeper than McFague's by prioritizing the existential value over the functional significance of each participant.[41] Let us recall McFague's emphasis upon the self-conscious reflexive function of humans as a basis for her anthropocentric action-oriented ecological theology. In contrast Confucius highlights the existential significance of each part over the functional value. By being a part of the holy rite, one is contributing to the life of others and vice versa. When this existential value of all parts is well recognized, their relations cannot be ordered by a hierarchical scheme of things based on the differing capacities of each participant but must be mutually indebted to each other's presence for constituting the whole. Thus, a sense of mutual indebtedness can arise among all parts of the universe for sustaining the whole.[42] From this cosmology arises a sense of indebtedness among the intricately intertwined parts of the whole.

Thus, I claim that a sense of "indebtedness" must be highlighted in all relationships, especially from the human side to the planetary relationships that sustain and support human life.[43] With the notion of indebtedness, I would press McFague's interrelated and interdependent nature of all life-forms a little further, while adopting her understanding of the universe as the body of God and of the cosmic Christ. All parts of this universe—living and nonliving, organic and inorganic—are not only interconnected and interrelated but also indebted to the whole within a vast range of shared communities, whether their relationships are intentional or unintentional, direct or indirect, and observable or unobservable. If we humans cannot survive "without the plants and animals and the ecosystem that supports us all," we are more radically indebted to their presence in this world.

There are two inseparable yet distinctive aspects of indebtedness: the existential—or ontological in Jane Bennett's term—and functional levels. The indebted relation understood existentially concerns one's indebtedness to the presence of others for one's existence, while the indebted relation understood functionally captures the instrumental contributions that others make for one's well-being.[44] The former precedes one's indebtedness to others' functional contributions. One may say that we

can be functionally indebted to others without realizing it, and that the functional relationship holds even if one is unaware of the existential connection. Yes, that is true. But the functionally indebted relation to others without realizing it also requires the existence of others. Although this indebtedness is germane to all existents, let me first conceptualize it from a human perspective. For example, I am existentially indebted to the photosynthetic nature of trees, air, water, sunlight, and microorganism for the air I breathe, although I may not be fully aware of my functional indebtedness to the trees around me. Yet unless trees exist, I cannot be functionally indebted to them. Humans must recognize that we are, first and foremost, existentially indebted to others whose mere presence among others organically constitutes our planetary community, prior to discussing how plants, animals, and the ecosystem functionally support human life. Without their vital presence, the human species would not exist, and, therefore, we would not be in a position to conceive of interdependent functional relationships. Without them our existence would be impossible because our survival utterly depends on, and is inherently and profoundly indebted to, their presence.

This realization of existential indebtedness, then, is followed by our functional indebtedness to others whose "performative differences" in an ongoing and constantly changing environment sustain and enrich not only human life but also the lives of each existing other as well as the existence of the whole.[45] Functional indebtedness exists within the symbiotic system of nature that is mutually interdependent and mutually beneficial. However, the functionally indebted relationships among persons and plants, animals and other aspects of the ecosystem are unspecified, multilateral, and utterly unequal. Situated in a flux of time, the nature of our functionally indebted relationships is not mutually equal or reciprocal but always unequal, multilateral, multidimensional, multidirectional, and multicentric, adding more fluid complexities to the intricate web of life.[46] These complexities of indebted relations intertwined with diversities and differences of all life-forms disrupt an anthropocentric binary relation and dismantle any hierarchical ordering of beings by a singular standard such as "subjectivity or the ability to experience and feel."[47]

To illustrate this complexity of indebted relations in a concrete way, let me give a lengthy example. My mother raised many Asian orchids in her condominium, some wild and others cultivated that were potted individually and given to her as gifts. For twenty years or more, my mother collected and took great care of them until she died of cancer.

During my mother's last few months, my daughter and I flew out to Korea to stay with her, taking care of her physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, and any other needs she might have, and also receiving care from others along the way. We soon began to argue: I complained that caring for her and her household was too much work, while my mother scolded me for not taking care of everything in the house precisely as she would, including nurturing dozens of orchids. Even though they were cultured, they were nonetheless delicate natural existents. Already too busy to take care of a dying mother and a toddler and with my own work to contend with, I was exhausted and simply could not remember to spray water on the pebbles in the orchid pots once a week or to bathe them once a month. In addition to meeting her personal needs, all I could remember to do was to feed our family and to keep the thermostat at twenty-six degrees Celsius at nighttime, which was higher than usual, but I had noticed my mother covering herself at home in December in Korea because she would usually turn the thermostat off during the day. During the weeks my mother was in and out of the hospital, I remained at her bedside twenty-four hours a day during the week until my brother came to share the shift with me on weekends. Simply too busy and preoccupied with other things, I did not think to turn the heater off during the day, nor to pay attention to those delicate orchid pots. When she came out of the hospital to celebrate Korean New Year's Day at home one last time, we were surprised and delighted to see that one of the orchids had blossomed into a flower in late January after weeks without water. When we opened the sliding glass doors to the windowed veranda to smell the flowers, we discovered that the veranda was quite damp and the pebbles in the pots were moist, apparently from a combination of natural forces: the humidity of the snow in the air outside the building seeped in through the ventilation of the outer window and combined with the heat rising from the heated floor in the living room that was adjacent to the veranda with only a sliding door in between. That, along with sunlight during the day and colder temperatures at night, had coaxed her orchid into flower at just the right time. My mother told me that the orchid usually blossoms only once a year in late May. She was very happy to see this unusual, special treat from this Asian orchid. During this holiday, as the rest of our family was busy preparing to host our relatives, she was left alone on a couch, dozing off most of the day, but talking to this blossomed orchid when she was awake, quietly smiling and tearing up.

Although I cannot speak for the blossomed orchid or the pebbles, the existents in the story possess, to different degrees, passive, inactive, receptive, and objective aspects as well as generative, active, and subjective aspects in their individual modes of existence that are beyond the scope of this touching story. But surely all aspects of these days, whether included, omitted, forgotten, or excluded in the above story, better capture the complexities of mutually and multifariously indebted relations than I am able to identify. The complex relationships that exist within and among all existents, whether human, cultivated plants, or materials living or nonliving would not have been possible without their mutual existential support. This story reminds us of functional indebtedness among diverse indebted existents whose presence constitutes the whole. This is true not only at the level of the body of God but also in the household of my mother, signifying the reality of functional indebtedness that involves the whole of creation. This mutual indebtedness is universal and ongoing, whether it be unarticulated or articulated, indefinite or determined, infinitely existential or functional. It occurs between my mother, the orchid, and the collective pebbles. It is also to be found among all others, however variously gifted or limited, fulfilled or deprived of opportunity, but in all cases indebted existents, deeply involved in their own stories.

In retrospect my mother was wrong—there was not just one way to keep the orchids alive; it was actually an act of "negligence" on my part, or "nonaction" (*wu-wei*) in Taoist thought, that brought about the chain of events that led to the miraculous bloom.[48] So the lesson here is that we humans may try to control nature to get it to do what we want, but sometimes it is our very activity and inactivity that leads nature to do things we would not have expected. This lesson leads us to move beyond McFague's emphasis upon the moral responsibility of humans by entrusting ourselves to the agential influence that collective planetary life has upon us.

My goal is to inspire us to be respectful of all our surroundings, and, subsequently, to act accordingly, broadening ways of acknowledging and responding to that indebtedness beyond a binary, anthropocentric, and action-oriented scope of interrelatedness and interdependence. Greater awareness of human indebtedness to the environment in both natural and cultural senses must, if we are wise, move us beyond the limited utilitarian calculation that has thus far shaped our relationship to our

planet. We must reduce the risk of anthropocentric self-centeredness concealed in binary interdependent relations.

Respectful Grace and Graceful Respect: An Asian American Christian Environmental Ethic

My Asian American Christian environmental ethic goes deeper into the heart than does McFague's ecological theology of liberating, healing, and caring by drawing from the respectful adaptation of nonhuman existents to their surroundings and also from the graceful sharing of their indebted life.[49] When plants encounter changes in the environment, whether it be a sudden change of weather for a day, an external invasion inflicted upon them, or a long-term climate change, they respond to such changes respectfully by dying or modifying their life to accommodate the changes primarily in order to ensure their existential continuation, and, then, secondly to maintain their functional indebted relationships to all other existents within the surrounding environment. As I attempted to articulate their adaptive ways of being, I could not find any better way to translate their response into human language than to refer to them as "respectful" responses. In these planetary existents, the best way to describe their ways of encountering and adapting to changes/ challenges is to say in the way they live, they are deeply respectful.

When the interrelated and interdependent life among all planetary existents is viewed as indebted, their interactions cannot be evaluated simply on the basis of whether their actions are just or caring; at a deeper level they must be perceived as the "graceful" sharing of their indebted selves with those to whom they are unequally indebted. Humans, more gifted in the self-conscious reflexive, active, and subjective way of being, but deficient in other aspects, must be able to see the support we receive from the nonhuman existents as graceful "liquidation of debt," rather than approaching this complex indebtedness merely as a justice issue, as if we were dealing with economic transactions and fair trade.[50] Humans can also experiment to expand an ethics of radical hospitality to other forms of life in the universe by reducing our subjective roles that give us an upper hand in a hierarchical ordering of agential capacities.

Our moral responsibilities should not be unilaterally aimed at taking care of the earth, but must become respectful and graceful responses to our radically and multifariously indebted relations. Then we may be able to find grace there, in the complexities of our indebted relations. When humans learn to embody the passive, receptive, or objective aspects,

or *wu-wei* in Taoist terms, that reflect the true status of our radically indebted relations to other forms of life, we may learn to appreciate and embody their ways of being graceful and respectful.

Therefore, I would like to expand the sentence I wrote at the beginning of this section: *Humans cannot survive even a day without the animals, the plants, and all other inorganic and organic existents on earth, while they can all flourish without humans. Accordingly, the life of the human species is not merely interdependent with, but utterly indebted to, all the other existents on earth, rendering humans more vulnerable than any others.* Humans are more indebted to the plants, the animals, and all other parts of nature on earth in a highly complex manner in both existential and functional senses than the rest of nature is, in fact, indebted to humans. Once we recognize our existential indebtedness that leads to a secondary, functional indebtedness, we may be able to discover how indebted we humans are to their presence in this intricate web of life. All other parts of nature—simply by being present among us—exercise more profound agency than we have acknowledged in the manner in which we have impacted our environment.

McFague's and others' action-oriented approach to the environment is limited to the active, rational, and subjective aspects of the universe. Thus, to Asian Americans, her language of Christian environmental ethics remains, to an important degree, only partially true to Asian Americans, as well as to other planetary forms of existence. I have noted earlier that many Asian and Asian American theologians and biblical scholars have not been very explicit in articulating Christian environmental ethics. Similarly, organized environmental activism holds only marginal interest among Asian and Asian American Christian communities compared to our sound ecological ethic ingrained in us implicitly (nonverbally, nonsubjectively and nonactively).

There are a few reasons for this implicit disposition of Asian American Christian environmental ethics. First and foremost, as a Korean American Christian ethicist, I find my mother's and our forebearers' lives as the most relevant texts in my search for an Asian American Christian environmental ethic. Their ways of living with the deepest concern for their surroundings have taught us well. It was not their theoretical articulation or intentional actions but their ways of being indebted to their surroundings that have sustained this planet; my mother or Grace's grandmother would hardly rationalize themselves as acting justly or caringly, yet they still lived with utmost respect for

their natural environment. So my environmental ethic of being respectfully graceful and gracefully respectful as a derivative of the concept of indebtedness developed partly from reflecting on the lived experiences of our forebearers.

Closely related to the first, my Asian forebearers' implicit ecological ethic is grounded in Asian cultural roots that ultimately influenced me to retrieve and reappropriate some Confucian and Taoist sources. These cultural sources run deep within me and my fellow Asian American Christians—often deeper than the words we confess on Sundays—immersing us in a deeper appreciation of implicit ways of being related to other existents on this planet. If we conceive of our world as a ritual, or the holy rite as imagined by Confucius, we cannot help but live wholeheartedly to be in harmony with other parts of the universe. If Asian and Asian Americans embrace any environmental ethics or eco-theological life principles, paraphrasing Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yang-ming's words, "it is not because we deliberately want to do so, but because it is natural for us to live that way."[51] Laozi nurtures us in his wisdom that if we could center ourselves in the Tao, "the whole world would be transformed by itself, in its natural rhythms."[52] All these cultural teachings did not equip many Asian and Asian Americans to articulate and rationalize our relationship to the other existents, yet nurtured us to seek the depths rather than the surface in our relationship to other existents on this planet.[53]

Last but not least, the deepest sense of indebtedness and being respectfully graceful and gracefully respectful comes from the respectful adaptation of nonhuman existents to their surroundings and also from the graceful sharing of their indebted life, as I sketched out at the beginning of this section. The stream water does not intend to nurture lives around it, yet it continuously sustains life. Trees do not plan to provide the air we breathe, yet they are the reason that humans and animals can breathe. By ourselves, humans, because we are more vulnerable and more radically indebted, lack the capacity to take care of the earth. From that unalterable fact, we must become more gracefully respectful and respectfully graceful to each and all members of the constituency of the environment to which we are deeply and irretrievably indebted. Asian American Christian environmental ethics should not be limited to actions that are outwardly just and caring but must foster an inner transformation especially of humans whose radical indebtedness to others challenges us, first and foremost, to be more respectfully graceful and

gracefully respectful for any genuine Christian liberation, healing, and caring of the earth.

Epilogue

I hope this essay is helpful to readers who are interested in constructing their own particular environmental ethics or in transforming their environmental awareness. I invite them to find the intersection of their Christian faith within their own distinctive cultures and to journey with me to find ways of relating to the environment in graceful and respectful ways. This approach to indebted planetary existence, although in its infant stage, may also suggest a new direction for others who are interested in broadening and deepening their ways of doing environmental ethics or ecological theology. With all due respect, I can only hope that each of us can learn to imagine our own ways to address the environmental issues near and far, mindful of being grounded in the natural and cultural environment that surrounds us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the distinctive characteristics of this particular Asian American Christian environmental ethics that speak most poignantly or persuasively to you?
2. Can you articulate why you embrace—or reject—the sense of indebtedness introduced in this chapter?
3. Are there changes you might recommend in Christian communities as a result of this construction of Asian American Christian environmental ethics? Speaking from your own cultural and religious position, can you construct your own Christian and/or religious environmental ethics?
4. What does your tradition say about your relationship to the environment?