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Rage against the Port City: Southern theologies mobilising for climate justice

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Abstract

In the years following the physical end to the civil war in Sri Lanka, the island was beset with a series of infrastructure projects. One of these was the 'Port City', a project funded by the Government of China. The project has raised significant environmental concerns, from the detrimental impact of rock extraction on biodiversity and marine life, to the effect on the livelihoods of the fishing community due to the depletion of fish as a result of the mining of sand from the sea bottom. Visibly present in the protest action against this are religious actors, especially habited Roman Catholic nuns. This article, as part of an ongoing project that looks at environmentalism in faith-based communities, examines the impetus that drives such visibly religious persons to take part in direct action. The article does this to note how theologies that are 'on and of the ground', that is anti-colonial theological framings are central to the political theologies driving concerns regarding environmental justice. In doing this, the article is also arguing for a more central place for International Relations and Politics to be studying and engaging with anti-colonial theological voices, what I call theologies of 'rage'.

Keywords

ecological justice, global south, religion, theology

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The world is dying. The almost-corpse watches us, haunts us, and ravages us without pity. In Kerala, severe flash floods and landslides have taken innumerable lives. In Fiji, cyclones have torn through the northern islands displacing thousands. In Beijing, a sandstorm turned the sky orange as dust. A drought in Madagascar in 2020 triggered a large-scale humanitarian crisis. Sophia Chirongoma (2020), reflecting on the impact of Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani, asks the question, how did water, that was once the source of life, now become the source of death? The death began in the Global South, and it is also in the Global South that for many years, different voices have argued against the

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'death-creating' structures of unfettered capitalism that takes without mercy. Among these voices are the activities and thinking of theologians from the Global South who focus their work on the question 'what is there to eat?', meaning that the search for the next meal is the constant and existential query for those whose lives are lived precariously. It is this continued activity that this essay seeks to highlight. It does so for a variety of reasons. The first is to discuss how such movements centre the justice narrative in the fight for ecological justice, and, by doing so, are part of the work that continues the demand for the recognition of the racist and imperialist structures within which the global economy yet operates. The second is to add to the growing literature on the importance of Southern religious voices as part of the rainbow coalition that is attempting to build new strategies and non-traditional forms of organising as communities mobilise for environmental and racial justice. The third is to insist on the importance of the theology of grassroots communities to building radical, intersectional and anti-imperial solidarity to the development projects that often cause ecological degradation. The final reason is to draw attention to the theologies of the Third World that have long called for a moral awakening, not only regarding the struggle for environmental justice but also to address racial and colonial injustices. It is this Third World theology that bolsters much of the mobilising that is presented in the 'case' of this article. Perhaps another reason is to do justice to the dedication of many of the religious women I have met, quite a few who are now in their later years, who have tirelessly named the death-creating structures of the West and struggled to not only imagine but also build another world. This article is about those who are trying to change the difficult present and how they organise to do so. It is about how and why they find ways to express their rage. How else but through organised rage are we to confront a political economy that refuses to recognise the morality of radical justice?

A controversial Port City

To begin this story, we must first travel to a small strip of green facing out onto the Indian Ocean. It is called Galle Face Green, and it is a half-kilometre-long promenade on the beach front in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It stands between the Presidential Secretariat and a colonial style hotel fittingly called Galle Face Hotel. The Green is part of the island's colonial legacy, having been built by a former British governor to Sri Lanka, Sir Henry Ward. The Green was inaugurated in 1859, following a project in which Sir Henry turned what was once marshland into a long strip of tame green grass, extending onwards from coastal fortifications that had been erected by the Dutch during their time on the island (Bajpai, 2019; Herath, 2004).

From the Green, one can see another reclamation project, the Port City. This project, funded by the Government of China, has been controversial since it was first announced (Revi, 2021). The Port City has been a significant site of mobilisation since the deal to build the city was signed between the then Rajapaksa administration and a Chinese state-owned firm in 2013. The project was immediately seen as having ecologically adverse impacts on fisher persons and land ownership, particularly due to planned granite extraction and land reclamation. Indeed, in Colombo, where the Port City is being built, one can already feel the visceral heat in the area caused by the rapid reclamation of the sea and beach areas. The Port City is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is aimed at building $1 trillion of infrastructure in order to support increased trade and economic ties and further China's interests around the globe (Shang, 2019; Wignaraja et al., 2020). During the first Rajapaksa-led regime, particularly in the years following the end of the

civil war, economic relations between Sri Lanka and China solidified. The international community was critical of the Rajapaksa government for human rights violations; however, China was a standout, willingly providing financial assistance for the infrastructure projects the government wishes to take ahead. In few years that the Rajapaksas were out of power, known as the *yahapalayana* (good governance) period, not much changed. Although relations with the international community improved under the Wickremasinghe-Sirisena administration, Sri Lanka was still in significant debt to China, and attached to the long term – in some cases spanning 99 years – contracts that the Rajapaksas had signed. Sultana (2016) also notes that China continued to be energetically invested in maintaining its influence in the economic domain.

China has, in recent years, become part of a set of emerging donors in the global economy, joining Venezuela, India, and Saudi Arabia in providing foreign aid programmes that are providing a kind of alternative to the ‘traditional’ Western aid institutions. There are several critiques of these emerging donors, especially their willingness to lend to what are known as ‘rogue states’ (Naim, 2009). However, as Woods (2008) has argued, there is also evidence that countries with intensified trade links with China because of aid-related loans have also enjoyed higher growth rates and better terms of trade. Woods also notes that in 2006 the then Chinese President urged, as part of the aid relationship with Sudan, that the government work with the UN and other envoys to end the fighting, and in 2007 appointed a special envoy on Darfur. Gu et al. (2014) and Xue (2014) argue that Chinese development cooperation has a broader remit than that of the traditional development focus of poverty reduction, social welfare, and institutional reform. China also focusses on economic relationships framed as ‘horizontal and equal partnerships for common development’ (Gu et al., 2014: 2). Liu (2022) linking China’s aid engagement with the Global South to the Bandung Conference argues that China is invested in building an alternative modernity to that of the West. Gilpin (2021), in a similar vein, discusses how Sino-African aid relationships pose a challenge to the monopoly of Western aid and their needs to shape developing nations in their own image. It is not in the remit of this article to discuss the advantages, disadvantages, and moralities of Chinese-led international development. However, it must be said that the picture is a complex one. As Dreher and Fuchs (2012) conclude, China is in fact no more self-serving than most Western donors in its approach to international development, and is certainly more inclined as noted above, to lend to certain governments than Western donors.

It is a Chinese-funded Port City that is the site of controversy in this article, and its contentious existence is connected to both the aims of the Belt and Road Initiative in how it sees infrastructure development, but more so because of way in which the development is also envisioned by the elite political class in Sri Lanka. The Port City, and its particular location in Sri Lanka, has great allure for a plan like the Belt and Road Initiative in its aim to build land and maritime networks with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth (Shepard, 2016). The environmental concerns surrounding the Port City are significant since the project is reclaiming land from the Indian Ocean in order to build the city. These concerns range from disruptions to marine habitats, to damage to coral reefs as well as coastal erosion caused by sand dredging. The former issue has roused the concern of the fishing industry who have reported a 20% drop in catches (Chamikara, 2015). A Bloomberg report on the Port City quoted a fisherman who described the Port City as a mythical sea monster, incessantly and carelessly sucking at the seabed (Prasso, 2018). Fr Sarath Iddamalgoda (2021), a Roman Catholic priest who is a prominent opponent of the Port City, estimates that the

life and livelihood of 15,000 fisher people are endangered by the Port City project. Environmental authorities have also noted the fact that it is not only the marine environment that is impacted but also the water table due to the need to quarry rock from the interior of the island (De Silva et al., 2015; Wignaraja et al., 2020).

It is not only environmental concerns that make the Port City a *cause célèbre.* Researchers studying the impact of the Port City have also argued that the kinds of urban transformation created by such infrastructure exacerbate spatial fragmentation as well as social segregation. In summary, such heavy infrastructure investment is part of a war against low-income communities. As Apostolopoulou (2021) notes, the Port City project extended the plans of the Rajapaksa government's Megapolis and Beautification programme to use the military to evict the poor from the urban centre to allow for large development projects like the building of boutique hotels and luxury apartments. As part of this Megapolis project was also forceful slum clearance that displaced low-income, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious urban communities (Abeyasekera et al., 2020; Perera, 2016a; Ruwanpura et al., 2018, 2020; Van Dort, 2016). Nagaraj (2016) in his study of the politics of urban transformation notes that there is no place for slums in world-class aesthetics, and that because of this, the Urban Development Authority of Sri Lanka's main problem was 'relocate' these working-class poor. These clearances displaced the many food and other itinerant sellers who are often found at places like Galle Face Green. They are now too far displaced from the spaces in which they made their livelihood. An excellent ethnographic discussion of this dispossession is found in Radicati's (2020) research on the port city, and, as the focus of this article is not the process of dispossession, I point the reader to this study for further details. As Ruwanpura et al. (2020) argue, the Port City is a project designed by the political elite wherein a colonial vision of the world has been incorporated into securing the patterns of middle-class living. They link this to Amitav Ghosh's (2017) reflection of the connection between the colonial vision of the mastery of land and water for power and security. In order to ensure mastery for both the funder and the national government, the Port City dispossesses and destroys water, land, and the human. It is this easy disposability of all forms of life that forces us to return to the immorality within a political economy that has no obstructions to destruction if it is done in the name of growth. It is this that informs the rage within the struggle of the religious actors I focus on in this article.

A rainbow coalition

The concept of struggle marks out the activities taken up by various groups in the Global South – as in this case South Asia in the struggle for ecological justice. One of the key aspects of this has been in building broad, regional coalitions such as the South Asian People's Action on Climate Crisis (SAPACC), the South Asia Conference on Environmental Justice, various interreligious networks across the subcontinent, South Asia Peasant's coalition, Jubilee South, and the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE). What is important in many of these initiatives is that we see, coming together, farmer's organisations, trade union federations, indigenous people's organisations, fisher groups, community groups working on gender issues, as well as socialist or generally left leaning political parties. In Sri Lanka, for example, you may find an ecological justice coalition that brings together a radical Buddhist movement like the Sarvodaya movement, a national fisheries alliance and the Catholic Sisters of Charity. The People's Movement against the Port City is a typical example of such a rainbow

coalition, bringing together fishing communities, religious leaders, and civil society groups. There is an understanding here that a radical break from traditional organising and a turn to alliance politics is urgent and necessary. Activists involved have argued that, for the ecological justice struggle in South Asia to succeed, there must be a recognition that the climate crisis is a complex problem that requires a 'rainbow coalition' and new forms of strategising (Adve, 2019). Many advocates from South Asia also argue for the importance of broad coalitions against technocracy and market centric agriculture that work instead to strengthen peasant agriculture across the region. Others agree with the need for such broad coalitions and point to the link between feminist struggles and ecological justice as it is often women who manage the local environment. These coalitions, often centring the activities and voices of peasant communities, indigenous communities, fisher people, and farmers, have often been characterised as an environmentalism of the poor (Anguelovski and Martínez-Alier, 2014; Basu, 2018; Martínez-Alier, 2012). This certainly is because it is in forests, in the pollution of water bodies, in chemical agriculture, and in coastal areas that the most significant impacts of environmental degradation are felt. Others, such as those cited above, have written and continue to write brilliantly on these movements, so without further elaboration, I will move to discussing the particular empirical case. However, it is important to note here, that, those religious women that I highlight choose to accompany these ecological justice struggles because of their theological understanding of a politics of struggle and of the moral charge they feel to fighting the oppressions imposed on peasant communities, indigenous, fisherpeople, and farmers.

Religious actors, especially habited Catholic nuns, have been a very visible part of the movements against the Port City. In January 2016, the People's Movement held the public hearing regarding the Environmental Impact Report (EIA) at the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) (Perera, 2016b). Founded by the radical priest Tissa Balasuriya, the work of the centre is to bring together like-minded people to fight social injustice and is a kind of pilgrimage point for 'liberationist' Catholics.

Since December 2017, activists from the local Catholic Church joined in the opposition being voiced by the local community and brought together a variety of social groups into the People's Movement against the Port City. Early on in the formation of this protest movement, members of the Catholic Church organised a hunger strike asking for an end to the dredging near the shoreline. Staging sit-ins, silent protests, and even enacting a *Via Crucis* through the streets of the capital, this group speaks of the death of the land, the sea, the fish, and the community's livelihood, against those projects that, in the name of development, destroy Creation. Thinking with the bleeding wounds of both environmental devastation and the impact on local communities, these groups speak of the loss of biodiversity and the loss of drinking water as crucial and moral issues. The lending of the voices of religious leadership and visibly habited nuns has helped to make these frontline struggles stronger and also make very explicit the rage against environmental destruction. Coverage of these protests is picked up in global Catholic publications from UCA news to the National Catholic Register. There is something very striking about seeing a wall of habited nuns standing as a kind of defiant wall against armed riot police. The images are more striking because alongside the white, grey, and beige of the nuns' habits, we also see the saffron and red of their Buddhist counterparts.

Involvement in the struggle has always been at the forefront for a significant portion of Sri Lanka's Christian community, especially its nuns and priests, to the extent that there is an entire section on Sri Lankan liberation theologians and Christian activists in

South Asia Open Archive's catalogue of dissidents and activists of Sri Lanka. I draw my reflections for this empirical case from the past 4 years of archival study of the liberation theology and Christian Marxist movements in Sri Lanka, as well as 2 years between 2017 and 2019 spent observing the activities of Christian social justice activists in Sri Lanka.[1] I must admit here that my first purpose in this observation was not the ecological justice movement exclusively, but a broader engagement with the anti-colonial and anti-imperial politics of feminist religious thought. I found a continuation of the political theologies of the 1960s and the 1970s in the ecological justice mobilisations of the present. I was also struck of how important it was to these religious activists to engage in a vision of not a world *that is to come*, but the criticality of ensuring a just world in the present. There is a refusal of the eschatological. I quote from a conversation with a religious leader who declared, 'The government is persecuting people here. We have to help here. That is the calling [sic]'.

I engaged in these discussions while participating in protest action, while attending seminars or talks given by these activists, or in long conversations while travelling to sites of protests. I also listened to YouTube video presentations given by these activists on the Facebook page for the People's Movement, as well as hosted on the CSR website. I also read newspaper reports, monitored social media accounts, and listened to radio discussions regarding these movements. Due to my own limitations with the Tamil language, the primarily languages of engagement were Sinhala and English. Sometimes what I observed was silent, as there were many silent protests. However, standing or walking in the blazing heat I could feel a sense of deep emotion within the crowd. It should be noted that not all of these protests were directly related to the Port City either, in fact, one of these conversations occurred while engaging in action to protect Ahmaddiya refugees in Sri Lanka who were at the receiving end of Islamophobic attacks following the Easter 2019 bombings in Sri Lanka. I have anonymised or paraphrased into the texts many of these reflections as requested. They are also written as long narrations in ethnographic diaries I kept while in Sri Lanka during this period.

In my experience of living in South Asia, the nuns I encountered were often politically engaged, lending their voices to gender justice movements, against sexual violence in their own churches, in encouraging political reform, and increasingly, environmental justice. A visual aid I often use when teaching Asian Feminist Theology is of a nun at a feminist rights march in Delhi, India. She holds a placard saying, 'Trying to change the world, sorry if it's inconvenient'. These are sites of immense creativity, and this spills over into the theology that arises from these moments of struggle and creativity.

That the nuns were involved in both protests against Islamophobia and the Port City is not a strange thing. The Catholic Sisters of Charity and the Nuns of the Holy Family, in particular, have maintained decades-long associations with organisations such as the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), or organisations working to secure rights for garment workers. Many of the priests and nuns who have headlined the Protest Movement have also been involved in the everyday needs and wants of fisher and low-income areas for decades. An example is the *Shramabhimani Kendraya* group that has been active since 1994 working with the poor of Negombo and Gampaha to ensure rights related to health, labour, and also the environment. Priests and nuns are also active in socialist parties like the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and have provided their energy and their voices to movements against land grabs, against war, against militarisation, and in seeking justice for the murdered and disappeared. The association with NAFSO has been a key part of the environmental justice work, as these are organisations that seek to

protect the livelihoods of fishing communities. NAFSO, for example, is signed up to the Common Charter of the SCR – a key focus of which is a shared critique of the dominant economic system. Nuns of the Holy Family who maintain a strong relationship with the women's federation of NAFSO draw directly on the ideas presented in Asian feminist liberational thinking to speak of their motivations for this activity, calling particular attention to the unique difficulties and persecutions that women face. One sister, a stalwart of the movement, and someone who had been active in the struggles of the 1970s and the 1980s noted that:

> It is the women who drive the household, and some also go out to fish. They are the backbone of the family and of maintaining it's dignity. They are also in [sic] the frontlines of the protest and as religious women we must be in solidarity with them. Women are the most vulnerable and the most strong.

A key point of contestation for these nuns in most recent times has been the agitations to protect the country's wetlands as well as to resist the Port City development project. Responding as to why the Church engages in such struggles, one activist noted to a reporter that 'the political authorities will sell the wetland for money but the Church raises its voice with the people, or we will not have an environment to live in the future' (Herald Malaysia, 2021). Female activists I spoke to, both lay and habited, draw direct links to the integral vision of the ecology embraced in the Papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* as well as the analytical understandings of Third World theologies when asked for the motivations for their activity. They see themselves in opposition to the lives lived by the elite of the world who, they say, will be the only persons to profit from such a project. They see a prophetic role in speaking out against what they see as injustice and have no difficulty in linking the local to a global system of profit. They argue that 'land is sacred, a gift from God', and a situation where only a few are allowed to consume creates a situation that rips away, they say, the dignity of both the land and the people. One senior nun noted that she saw her activism as part of the contract she held with her Creator, noting that since God created and protected humanity, what humanity must do in return is to protect the ecosystems that God also created. The argument then is that it is time for the international community to take on a specific kind of poverty, a humbling and a material lessening and embrace the fact that the time has come to accept decreased growth. Nuns who had long-term associations with fishing communities also expressed their concern over the effect to the dignity of human life. I quote from one conversation which occurred while having a cup of tea after a seminar at the CSR, 'What occurs when someone loses their livelihood? They cannot live a proper life. The government must protect people's dignity. But it is not interested in that [sic]'. There was a palpable anger to this statement.

Repeatedly, in the conversations that I heard or engaged in, I noted the use of the word 'sin' or 'sinful'. This can seem shocking to a more secular audience, but in religious parlance, the word sin has deep meaning. It links also quite directly to the discussion of ecological sin that is found in the encyclical *Laudato Si'.* This framing of sin links the systematic assault on the Earth, which breaks down the balance of the planet, which is seen as under threat from the plundering of development as practised by contemporary global societies (Boff, 1995). This is then connected to a reflection of the 'cry' of the poor for life, and freedom and beauty and of the Earth crying out against oppression. One nun I spoke to, who is also a feminist academic, underlined this by arguing that the Port City, built with only the dominant model of development in mind, sees no immorality in unlimited production and the exploitation of natural resources is the certain opposite of this.

Her argument was that for persons of faith, unlimited growth and exploitation of the Created world could only be viewed as a sinful occurrence. Her critique linked the Port City model directly to what she termed the twin sins of ‘kyriarchy and coloniality’. The critique here, then, is of a Port City project that is able to *be* because of the ‘normalisation of a global model, that marginalises poor people . . . what does this model do but pollute the air, the water, the soil and the people’s lives’.

‘A third something’

Since the 1960s and now in their conjoining of their voices to ecological justice movements, these activists are part of a long history of Asian religious voices pointing out a need for a moral conversion, a radical break from unfettered growth which they mark out over and over again as Mammon, as what is evil, as Mammon as representative of an imperialism that must be destroyed. As Milinda Banerjee (2018) has noted, such political theology is part of the diverse cast of characters than come together to aspire for sovereignty, for the radical break asked for during independence struggles, as well as in the continuation of anti-colonial and anti-imperial thinking at Bandung and onwards. It is best expressed in the words of the Indian philosopher Amaladoss who notes that where these theologies are and how they are created is in the site of struggle, in rage that develops in struggle that is connected to people’s everyday lives:

> The theology of struggle is not about struggle but ‘of’ and ‘in’ struggle. It is the reflection of the people who are actually struggling . . . and those who have chosen to struggle with them (Amaladoss, 2010: 14).

The formidable Sri Lankan nun I referred to earlier, who was also an active member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), often referred to the importance of decolonial movements of the 1960s and 1970s for building her theological framing. She remarked once that these theologians were trying to tell a different story, a world imagined from the South. Theology in the Global South, and in this case in Asia, is always on the frontlines of struggle, and it is developed and articulated in these moments of struggle. Asian political theology is often referred to as being theology that originates and then culminates in the political option (Pieris, 1988). That is, it forms a biblically inspired response to conflict or social need, and it is also a socially inspired response to the bible.

I have never met a priest, nun, or religious activist in Sri Lanka who did not exhibit a tremendous anger at the status quo, both at the institutional Church or at the government and global system of capital. In 2018, while observing a meeting of Sri Lankan EATWOT theologians, I was struck by a long sermon given by an older, habited, Catholic nun who detailed for us the importance of the label of the Third World, and her sadness and her anger that the term was now a pejorative. As Paul Casperz (1989: 291) wrote when reflecting on the role of the Christian Church in Sri Lanka, there was a conscious decision taken towards working for qualitatively new orientation in society, as the alternative would be stagnation and death, noting that any slight gain of the poor in Sri Lanka was often destroyed by price and production distortions. Scattered throughout the history of Christians in Sri Lanka is the activism of priests like Tissa Balasuriya, Michael Rodrigo (who was assassinated by the government), and organisations like the Christian Workers Fellowship and the Christian Solidarity Movement.

Throughout Sri Lanka's post-independence history, Christian activists not only joined popular movements, but were also prolific in writing and publishing pamphlets, journals and newsletters on liberation, justice, and human rights. Much of this, certainly, is connected to the Christian community's status as a marginal population in Sri Lanka, but there is also significant influence here of the imagination that took hold in the time of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The understanding of the deep-rooted sinfulness of capitalism and plunder is underscored in the political theology that we find in Asia, particularly Asian theology that allies itself to Third World liberational thinking. This is political theology that emerged from the struggle for political independence after the Second World War as well as the critiques of colonialism and development. Since Bandung, and then more formally in the 1970s, Southern theologians have decried the theological hegemony of Europe and North America and reclaimed the right to speak about God as subjects of their own destiny. As Joseph (2015: 26) notes, the conference at Bandung was essentially an intellectual kick-starter for the gathering of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), noting the 'radical emotions' that Bandung wrought in the leaders and thinkers of Africa and Asia. Theologians wished to respond to this movement and to accompany it spiritually:

> Bandung had a profound influence on theological thinking around the world. As an acknowledgment of this influence, EATWOT was described as a 'Bandung of theology' by European theologian M. D. Chenu (Joseph, 2015: 5).

As such, from this Bandung moment, and through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s we see the terms 'third world' and 'liberation' begin to be recognised as cognate concepts in theology. The idea of a 'third' world was not understood primarily as the number three in the numerical sense, following the first world of the capitalist countries and the second world of the socialist bloc. Rather, in accordance with its original French usage, it indicated a third something – a 'tiers monde', it connotes an alternative world to which the decolonised nations of the 1950s and 1960s aspired: a world different from either of the other two, something between the capitalist and communist systems (Küster, 2010). The Non-Aligned Movement was the most expressive political symbol of this new awareness. The Christians of the Third World who appropriated this political consciousness increasingly rejected the development model of the 1960s and supported the liberation agenda of Third World leaders for whom the two 'developed' worlds were centres of domination (Lee, 2010). Historians of the EATWOT note that there were three key drivers for such theologising. The first was the need to seek solidarity that was informed by a search for subjectivity among those who are historically marginalised. The second was to reject European epistemology – including Western theology and Western church institutions – in both economic and political logic. The final driver was to work towards greater ecumenism and interreligiosity. Abraham and Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians General Assembly (2004) in their editorial notes argue that this was a taking up of a liberational praxis. Drawing attention to the Charter Identity of EATWOT drawn up in 1976, she notes that the radical break here is epistemology that politically commits itself to action and which engages in critical reflection on the Third World (Abraham and Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians General Assembly, 2004: 181). As Joseph (2015) and Aguilar (2009, 2021) both note, that reflection on praxis is the first act of doing liberative theology. Such a liberational praxis also underscores why these Third World Christians did not hesitate in dialoguing with radical Marxist movements in their

country contexts. Indeed, historians of the EATWOT note how, in 1987, due to the recognition of socialism as a passion for many EATWOT theologians, that there were even organised dialogues between theological groups and countries that were undertaking socialist models (Fabella, 1980; Fabella and Torres, 1983). In Asia, in particular, this was important for building a broad coalition of all religions together who would explore and share their 'liberative elements' and work together to overthrow oppressive systems, especially due to the fact that through the 1970s and into the 1990s as well many Asian nations were going through particular turmoil. As the EATWOT's first president R Chandran proclaimed, Third World theology was the 'bitter fruit' of oppression, it 'comes alive in the totality of an oppressed people to be fully human' (Fabella and Torres, 1983: xv). Joseph (2015) quotes the scholar Mveng's observations on these dialogues as well where he notes that what binds these movements together is the fact that:

> The liberation context requires constant mobilization against the forces of oppression and exploitation that trample down the weak, poor and the oppressed people, the post-liberation context inaugurates a dialogue between the gospel and Marxist socialism, in the form of religious freedom which is contextualized (Joseph, 2015: 160).

While engagement with Marxist movements was important, Third World theologians like Pieris (1988) also cautioned against using Marx in his dogmatic form, noting that Marx was a European of his time, who did not understand the seriousness of the religio-cultural realities that existed outside Europe (Anderson, 1976). Drawing from Pieris, as well as Cornel West's keynote to the EATWOT, Chikane (2005) argues that Third World theology must blend Marxist tools of analysis with religio-cultural tools of analysis and commit to a radical transformation of society. However, the tools for doing so are developed in the course of the struggle, they are 'tested in the praxis of struggle' (Chikane, 2005: 179). This underscores the importance of taking on a posture of question, investigation, encounter, and mobilisation, elements that we do see in the ecological justice movements that form the empirical case of this article. These are the elements of such a struggle because of the importance of being affected by lived experience.

For Asian liberation theologians of the Third World, the fundamental starting point is the lived experience. Asian theologians of EATWOT identified that the primary agents of oppression in Asia were monopoly capitalism, landlordism, and the imperialism that was, by then, represented by multinational corporations (Fabella, 1980; Fernando, 2021; Pieris, 1988; Sugirtharajah, 1994). Asian theologians were and are insistent that this oppression occurred through foreign aid, loans, imported technology, and military alliances (Anderson, 1976; Orevillo-Montenegro, 2010). Important, then, was that such theological work is both part of political struggles, of movements, and which also works to create or argue for alternative economic relationships (Amaladoss et al., 1981).

Therefore, as Pieris elaborates in his seminal text *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988), there are tools of introspection or self-analysis proper to Asian religions which inculcate liberation from personal greed (acquisitive instinct), as well as the tools of social analysis or class analysis which exposes the mechanism of institutionalised greed (unbridled capitalism) are both employed in conjunction with each other as a strategy for a liberative praxis, which, according to this theological space, is also the first formulation of a liberative theory. For Kwan (2017 [2014]), this provides the fundamental of how resistance is understood in Asian theology, as a discourse that seeks to resist colonialism that has been constituted in socio-economic and socio-political exploitation, *as well as*

the theological consequences of Western universalism. Indeed, Kwan (2017 [2014]: 60–64), working with Hall's notions of identity and Bhabha's work on hybridity, sees a clear importance in what he calls the resistive identity of Asian theology which, via praxis, is anti-colonial without being binary, and is able to keep revisiting and reshaping the boundaries of this identity. It is resistive because it also refuses.

Rage

What do we see in the collective voice of these Christian activists, and in the arguments of the EATWOT that influence them, that mark out the logic of the colonial, of the West and insist on a new way of living? It is, very much, a political theology of rage, a generative rage that binds these historical moments, as well as the different groups involved in the struggle together. Theologically, it requires dwelling on the moral imperative for transformative justice. This is especially underlined when we approach the Earth as the 'new poor'. We can ask ourselves, what does it mean to understand the environment as a 'new poor' without silencing the voices of the 'poor' that are extant, and without the histories of colonial extraction? How do we think with anger and with grief? For theological thinking and for faith-based persons to continue to agitate on these matters is important, especially to call attention to how coloniality is intersected by socio-cultural, political, economic, gendered, and sexual systems of hierarchy, domination, power, and exclusion. In this present time, we are also witnessing the emergence of possibilities for epistemological and ontological shift and renewal that can disrupt and push back against nationalist geopolitics, homicidal territorial boundary-policing, and divisive categorisations of patriarchal, colonial, neocolonial, and nativist politics. Alongside the politics of exclusion and ressentiment, we also glimpse possibilities and stagings of resistance, allyship, solidarity, and conviviality such as the broad coalitions I have described above, a politics that are at the heart of documents such as *Laudato Si'* that call for the building of a collective conscience. Not all theologies are liberative, of course. This is true, but only if they do not think in an international manner, only if they do not think for, of, and with the global collective, to remember the 'multiplicity of belonging' that arises out of 'an awareness and living of a larger humanity' (Aguilar, 2021). Where, then, there is anger, there must be repentance and reparation so that there can be healing. These reparations can only occur in intersectional ways that understand the conjoined nature of the climate struggle to anti-racist and anti-imperial projects, projects that have been in existence for several years, but whose voices are still so rarely heard or given seats at the negotiating table.

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