

Book Reviews

Reynaldo D. Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015. 280 pp.

Severe weather phenomena and disasters brought about by the ecological crisis all over the world have led scientists, politicians, ordinary citizens, and members of the Catholic Church to focus on uncovering the root causes of and developing solutions for urgent ecological issues. A number of scholars claim that Christianity's anthropocentric bias is responsible for the consequent subjection and domination of nature, thus, the Church should share responsibility for the existing ecological crisis. Filipino Catholic theologian Reynaldo D. Raluto, the author of *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context*, shares this point of view. In his book Raluto explores the reality of poverty and ecological crisis and diagnoses the root cause as oppression, which produces the interrelated problems of poverty and ecological crisis. Moreover, he reexamines the Christian tradition and explores ways to transform oppressive relationships by constructing a contextualized ecological theology of liberation in the Philippine context.

Following the see-judge-act schema of doing theology, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads* is divided into three parts. The first part of the book, which is comprised of four chapters, concerns the global context of human and ecological oppressions in the Philippines and gives an analysis of the oppressive relationship with nature from ecological perspectives. The second part, which forms three chapters, deals with the challenges of poverty and the ecological crisis to the Church magisterium and theologians, with a focus on the theological work of Leonardo Boff. The third part, making up two chapters, examines the praxis of transforming oppressive relationships, with examples from the Filipino culture of struggle in general and the struggle in the diocese of Malaybalay in particular. Under this framework, Raluto presents a well-organized and clearly argued work of contextual theology and ecological ethics through experience-analysis-action. He contends that actual experience helps us to appropriate a particular way of seeing, that is, the perspective from below, through which a deep sense of compassion and solidarity with the victims can be formed. After experience, the step of understanding the cause of poverty and ecological crisis through the sciences and the content of faith is important since subjective knowledge and emotion are inadequate. The final step is transformative action which links up theory and praxis.

Employing ecological perspectives to study the global crisis of poverty and the ecological problem, Raluto provides a useful lens to see the social realities. He highlights the finitude of natural ecosystems through the phenomenon of pursuing unlimited economic growth. He also stresses the intrinsic value of all creatures through the animal rights movement, and the philosophies of deep ecology and ecofeminism in contrast to the narrowness of anthropocentrism (Chapter 4). These analyses and theories are helpful and offer insightful perspectives for dialogue with theology,

especially about the domination of nature by humans. However, the author fails to point out that there may be disagreement among these various analytical tools, such as the ecofeminists' criticism of deep ecology. Ecofeminists argue that deep ecologists are not sufficiently radical for they have neglected the crucial role patriarchy has played in shaping the cultural categories responsible for Western humanity's domination. One needs to be careful and nuanced when appropriating these theories in theology.

In discussing the contributions and limitations of the magisterium to solve the issue of poverty and ecological crisis, Raluto makes a critical assessment of the church's teachings on ecology. He says, "If the magisterium is serious about the call for ecological conversion, it needs to be open to the emerging ecological worldview promoted by the new cosmological and ecosystem perspectives that deepen our understanding of the human and nature relationship" (109). He calls on the magisterium to embrace the analytical mediations of both social and ecological sciences as demanded by the complex reality of oppression, including class, culture, gender, and ecology. He also argues that the ecological theology of the Church magisterium, while recognizing both the integrity of creation and the dignity of human persons, maintains an anthropocentric perspective. This is indicated by its emphasis on the uniqueness of human dignity and its priority of the human interests in the task of safeguarding the sustainability and balance of nature (107–8).

This book was likely written before the publication of the recent social encyclical *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (2015) by Pope Francis. That is why the most updated analyses and viewpoints of the magisterium on ecological ethics as expressed in this encyclical were not included in this book. I think Raluto would be happy to see that in this new encyclical, the pope states explicitly

that he would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home (no. 3). Apart from recalling that other Churches and Christian communities, as well as other religions, have offered valuable reflections on the theme of ecology, Pope Francis acknowledges that the reflections of numerous scientists, philosophers, theologians, and civic groups have enriched the Church's thinking on these questions (no. 7). These reflections can be seen in the encyclical.

Moreover, the pope recognizes that Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, and he forcefully rejects the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. Instead, he suggests that together with the people's obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes (no. 69). We can see that Raluto and Pope Francis share similar concerns about the intertwined issues of poverty and the ecological crisis, especially on the root causes of the global crisis. As Raluto rightly reminds us, an ecological perspective will help us realize the intimate relationship between human beings and other created beings—God the Creator is the same source, ground, and destiny of all (109).

With Leonardo Boff, the pioneer in the field of ecological theology of liberation, Raluto proposes that an adequate theology of liberation has to include at least the aspects of class, culture, gender, and ecology in light of the Kingdom of God. It generates a utopia that sustains the visions of a new social order and the desire for the fullness of life. Such four-fold liberation very much resonates with the claims made by Asian ecofeminists and womanist theologians who emphasize that multi-axial oppression can be found everywhere. White, middle-class, male ecologists have neglected the intertwined nature of oppression. We need to be aware of our

multiple identities. We may be oppressed or marginalized as women or members of lower socioeconomic classes, but we may exploit nature too. There is always an Other within the Other, as postcolonial feminists suggest. Middle-class Christians have to be aware of their privileged position.

As a lay woman ethicist, I am especially concerned with the book's last part that dwells on the praxis of transforming oppressive relationships. I am impressed by the example of Filipinos' struggle, particularly the church-based ecological struggle together with the grassroots of San Fernando, as well as the vision of forming the ecological community with a non-anthropocentric relationship to nature. I also appreciate the emphasis on the agency of people, treating them as acting subjects rather than objects of change. This notion is compatible with the principle of participation and bottom-up approach which is often neglected by the Catholic social teachings.

However, I am also concerned about motivating middle-class Christians to be involved in the praxis of transforming oppressive relationships. Such Christians include those who have economic and political power and those who are not yet aware of the ecological crisis and the interconnectedness of poverty and the ecological issue. Instead, they may be those who support unlimited economic development and reinforce the patriarchal structure and hierarchal status of creatures. This entails ecological conversion. The renewed notion of stewardship that Raluto proposes should be promoted in more explicit ways such as through theological education, formation at the parish level, and work with other nongovernmental organizations, both Church-based and non-Church-based. Underlying these actions is the need to nurture a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, a lifestyle, and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the globalized logic that Pope Francis

calls a “technocratic paradigm.” It would help us overcome the self-centered culture of instant gratification.

Finally, it is interesting to note that both this book and *Laudato Si* end with the life and prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. Raluto employs the significant aspects of his life and his spirituality as an exemplar of an ecologist and liberationist for us to learn from, imitate, and follow. This points to an alternative understanding of the quality of life, as the pope suggests, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle which frees us from the obsession with consumption.

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