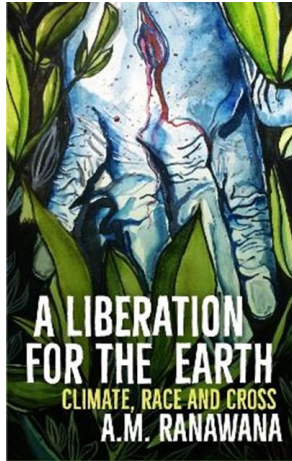


BOOK REVIEW

A Liberation for the Earth: Climate, Race and Cross

By A.M. Ranawana

Reviewed by Kuki Rokhum



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This provocative book by A.M. Ranawana, although just 135 pages long, is packed, not only with a detailed history of the climate activists from spaces that are usually “silent,” but also with an explanation of the connections between climate, race, and the cross. Drawing on her own background/identity as a woman from the formerly colonised and environmentally ravaged small island nation of Sri Lanka, Ranawana approaches the issue of climate change from the perspective of rage—a theology of rage that she believes will lead to a “place of collective repentance, to engaging robustly with the concept of ecological sin and through this to being able to build what Keri Day calls ‘beloved communities’” (4).

The book is laid out in five chapters. The introduction presents a detailed narrative of the author’s personal experiences and the present practices that have caused her grief and anger. The book results from Ranawana’s attempt to bring back the justice narrative of how Christians approach our shared humanity. As the author says, “What is written in this book is not my own original scholarship, but an attempt to bring together the work of activists, academics and theologians who are all endeavouring to argue for a project of multiple and complex justices” (3-4). Ranawana does this by pointing to the voices of liberation and “Third World” theologians and faith-based activists from the Global South and their insistent demands.¹

Her rage stems from the lived experience of people subjected to systemic injustice in both the past and present and who suffer today what we know of as “ecological violence.” She presents clear arguments that one cannot separate the history of injustice from the impact of the climate crisis and builds a case for the need to analyse broader social and political processes, including structural racism. She also critiques the short-sightedness of movements that do not understand the challenges faced by people from the Global South, for example when during the “Extinction Rebellion” they encouraged protestors to get arrested, while ignoring the risk people from the Global South would run of being deported (9-10).

In the first chapter, entitled “The Cry of the Earth: Understanding Ecological Sin and Ecological Conversion,” Ranawana states that “it is a critical time in our history on this earth, a time for radical reimagining, and is why this book attempts to sit within

¹ Ranawana uses the terms “Global North” and “Global South,” but also the “Third World.” I find it notable that many, especially from what we call the Global North are hesitant to use this term and replace it with perhaps a more politically correct way of using the terms Global North and South. This echoes the thought of another Sri Lankan, theologian R.S. Sugirtharajah, who says that “for my part, I feel the term Third World is still serviceable because it encapsulates a particular way of existence and experience. It is a suitable semantic metaphor which conveys a relationship, especially the unequal relationship that exists between the strong and the weak. It refers to people who have been left out and do not have the power to shape their future. It defines a relationship marked by power and mediated through old colonial ties, and currently through the economic and cultural presence of neocolonialism” (Sugirtharajah 2001).

the spaces of political theology and liberation theology, rather than eco-theology” (17). Tracing the contributions of different voices, Ranawana notes the importance of the concerns that have long been voiced, especially by those from the Global South. One highlight of this chapter is her drawing out the connections between Christian faith and a concern for the earth, which she achieves through an exploration of Catholic Social Thought, including the most recent encyclical by Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (2015). It is within this framework that she discusses ecological sinfulness and ecological conversion. She acknowledges that ecological conversion is not likely to be immediate, but rather a journey of transformation that must happen at all levels of society.

Chapter two, “All These Bleeding Wounds—Liberation Theologies and the Ecological Crisis,” brings together the work of many theologians, proponents of liberation theology, and of other “Third World” theologians. Ranawana narrates the history of how these theologies developed over time and tells of their crucial contributions. The title of the Chapter is drawn from Leonardo Boff’s call to pay attention to “two bleeding wounds;” first, poverty that breaks the social fabric of millions, and second, the systemic assault on the earth that breaks down the balance of the planet. Through the experiences and reflections of these theologians, Ranawana stresses the interconnectedness between the ecological crisis and other forms of injustice. She emphasises how faith requires us to look after both our neighbour and the earth.

“‘The Plantation is Always With Us’: The Histories and Presents of Extraction and Domination” is the interesting title of the third chapter. Ranawana argues that “It is the retelling of histories and presents that must trouble and affect our theologising and our existence as persons of faith” (66). She traces the relationship between power and knowledge, stating that the injustice we see today is not just a current event, but is steeped in our theologies, systems, and structures, an argument she links both to social scientists and liberation, Black, feminist, and Indigenous theologians.

She calls on us to recognise “... the enduring nature of colonial logics, and the fact that history of the disposable human and the disposable ecology are bound up in one another” (70). She points out too that it is not just about what the West did to the rest, but also how local upper class/elites have played a major role. With powerful stories and cases, she tells how the new goal of capital accumulation turned people and nature into little more than resources to be harnessed. She urges readers to engage in their own exploration of the links between ecological injustice, labour exploitation, and the crises we find ourselves in (83).

Chapter four, “A Rainbow Coalition: Faith-based Mobilisations in Northern and Southern Spaces,” focuses on faith-based movements, not only Christian, but others that have contributed to the overall movement. Through her own experience of working in such organisations, Ranawana notes that responding to the gospel implies responding as well as to the urgent demands of the communities that agencies partner with for development projects (96). Faith is often a key motivator in encouraging people to donate to environmental causes or to demonstrate for the environment.

Pointing to the need for environmental justice movements and policies to be mindful of the long arm of history and the need for reparative justice, she refers to “white myopia,” an indifference to historical extraction and exploitation as well as a reluctance to foreground the knowledge and struggles of “Southern” as well as Indigenous movements (100). Citing examples of movements in the Global North, she points out that these movement are concerned about the impact on “future generations,” which she believes dismisses the experiences of those who are already baking, drowning, and starving every day (101). Acknowledging the complexity of the climate crisis, Ranawana urges the formation of a revitalized “rainbow coalition.”

The book concludes with a brief final chapter, “A Theology of Rage.” Rage seems to have become a key element in justice movements. Ranawana makes a short and stark statement, “This dying world is angry” (118). While she sees grief as a valid response to the current crisis, she points also to the privilege of being able to grieve and how, for communities in the Global South and in Indigenous spaces, surviving is more urgent than grieving. Instead of grief that can easily turn inwards and into the self, the author suggests that we look at the history and present of the world and feel prophetic rage (122). Referring to “righteous anger” displayed by Jesus, she also uses the term “good anger.” “Such anger is important because it seeks to critique and reform, and also because it stands with those who are most oppressed” (123). For Ranawana, rage is key to think and act differently and to turn away from the colonial narrative.

Ranawana has managed to pack three key elements into this very small book:

- 1) To be Christ-like is to be in a right relationship with God, neighbour, and creation; climate activists most often start from a position of fear and try to elicit responses through that fear or focus on the need to do good. Ranawana argues that our response to the ecological crisis is not optional, but the very core of the Christian faith. She demonstrates this clearly with the powerful support

of the church leaders and theologians she cites. She is certainly right that to elicit a sustained response from people of faith we must return to this crucial aspect of the Christian faith. In my own experience, I have found that the most genuine responses come only when people are convinced that this is what God requires of them.

2) The importance of history, both past and present: Ranawana compiles the uncomfortable history of colonialism (both historical and present), the struggles of communities and Indigenous nations, and the extraction and exploitation of the past that continues to impact us to the present day. The horrific interconnectedness of all forms of injustice is a good reminder of the fact that we cannot deny or ignore history and how it is naïve simply to try and address the ecological crisis apart from all other injustices. This is an important reminder for anyone involved in projects and/or activities that address the climate crisis. Are we fully mindful of these histories that have had not only ecological impact, but have changed societies in so many other ways too? Could we be complicit in this neo-colonialism without even bothering to question it?

3) Who/what dictates climate activism: Ranawana refers to the “Whiteness” of many movements and the insensitivity of movements driven by Western narratives that completely ignore the challenges faced by those from the Global South who would participate in these movements. The basic reason for involvement can be starkly different for each group; in the North, a fear for the future, and, in the South, ongoing struggle steeped in several layers of injustice. This is one reason why she moves away from grief and guilt to rage. She talks of the “...needs of an anxious West that must yet be the problem solver, the saviour from the catastrophe” (104). I too have grappled with this issue, when major global movements seem driven by ideologies of the Global North and people from the Global South are “invited” to share their stories to boost the campaign. Perhaps it is time to re-look at what drives these movements and take on the challenge to make it a real “rainbow coalition” with multiple actors playing important roles.

Ranawana’s book must be read, by those from the Global North so they can grow in their understanding and perhaps even change the way movements are built and propelled, and by those in the Global South so they can understand systems better and can avoid becoming part of them. There is no denying the horrendous impact of colonialism, much of which is still felt today,

even if in different forms. Yet ecological movements are still based in the Global North, where the power still resides. But not everything from the Global North is evil, and it may help to mention some of their contributions. It might also be helpful to suggest what both halves of our world might do together to ensure the survival and flourishing of all.

Ranawana has indeed shown the nexus between climate, race, and the liberative potential of the cross and as she suggests may the making of rage central make people think and act differently.

References

- Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* [Encyclical].
- R. S. Sugirtharajah. 2001. *The Bible and the Third World: Postcolonial, Colonial and Precolonial Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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