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God as Change: Toward a Poetic Ecotheology Through Minjung and New Materialism

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Abstract

This article reconstructs ecological theology in terms of energy transformation and proposes a theological ontology in which God is redefined as Change. Here the conception of energy is influenced by New Materialist philosophies of dynamic matter, including newer understandings of physics, thermodynamics and biology. This eco-theology is linked to Korean Minjung theology, where the idea of Minjung as a crowd or mass of people is extended beyond human beings. The article advocates an ontological eco-poetic theology informed by the tradition of American Radical Theology that risks our inherited conceptions of God and works to transform and reconstruct them both poetically and ontologically.

Keywords: energy; ecotheology; New Materialism; Minjung theology; Báyò Akómoláfé; Catherine Keller

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes You.
The only lasting truth
is Change.
God
is Change.
—Octavia E. Butler, Parable of the Sower

1. Introduction

The planet is both figuratively and literally on fire. How can theology respond to the numerous ecological crises we currently face, headlined by the acceleration of the effects of global warming? Due to the crises we are facing, such as climate change, global warming, the ecological crisis, crises of energy, and wars, traditional theology either collapses because it is no longer viable, or it mutates into a virulent and reactionary fundamentalism. This article suggests that we need a more substantial eco-theology that reconceptualizes reality as energy transformation and God as Change. This proposal addresses a critical research gap in the field of ecotheology specifically and theology in general, because too much of the existing literature continues to focus on stewardship, creation care, and environmental ethics. While these perspectives are valuable, they generally approach the ecological crisis as an ethical problem concerning our human responsibility towards nature. This article draws on the tradition of radical theology along with scientific research and philosophical

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New Materialism to assert our ontological entanglement with nonhuman and even nonliving beings. Here every being is a result of the process of dynamic energy transformation, and God is understood as the reason for any and every transformation, which is ultimately a form of Change.

Our world, which is always contested, is becoming more and more precarious in ecological terms. And the task of theological thinking is to engage with the world in significant ways from the standpoint of what ultimately matters. In this century, many scholars are using the word Anthropocene to name the current ecological and geological era, because we are confronting a changed planet due to the activities of human beings. The Anthropocene was proposed as a formal geological designation to the International Union of Geological Sciences, but it was rejected as an official new geological epoch in 2024; instead, the Anthropocene has been officially classified as a "geological event."

Despite the fact that it has not been formally adopted, the name remains in widespread use to designate the fact that the planet is undergoing anthropogenic climate change, and we have witnessed the hottest years in recorded history over the last decade, with the promise of higher temperatures and more extreme weather events to come. During the summer of 2026, we are seeing waves of heat domes and enormous wildfires spreading across North America and Europe. In addition, there is an incredibly strong El Niño forming in the Pacific ocean during the summer of 2026, which will lead to even hotter conditions over the next couple years on top of already record-breaking temperatures. Finally, in the wake of the US war with Iran and the resultant choking off of the flow of oil in the Strait of Hormuz, there is even more of an urgent need to develop and implement solar, wind, and other forms of renewable energy, despite the United States' efforts to deny global warming and double down on fossil fuels.[1]

A large part of our theological challenge is to be responsive to the times and to draw upon a much broader historical, philosophical and even cosmological understanding. For the 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich, theology is more about posing questions than it is about having answers, and he defines theology in terms of ultimate concern. What ultimately concerns us? What affects our existence and our lives together across continents and times and cultures and worlds?

How can we think theologically together given our disparate backgrounds and experiences? There exists a nondogmatic radical theology in the United States and elsewhere that risks inherited answers and questions any orthodox creeds to engage with what is happening anew, despite the fact that our lives and work never occur in a vacuum. These varieties of radical theology, including insights of death of God theologies, process theologies, and liberation theologies, help us reconsider and reconstruct an ontological ecotheology. One of these traditions of liberation theology is Korean Minjung theology. According to Jin Kwan-kwon, a retired professor from Anglican University in Seoul and a scholar of Minjung theology, "theology begins in the lives of suffering people." (Jin 2026). If we live and experience ourselves in the world with and against others, we inevitably suffer. And this suffering provokes profound questions that are ultimately theological questions.

The planet is suffering from our civilization, and so are we, as we come up against physical limits to growth in ecological terms. It is not just human beings who are suffering, but all planetary beings, and our theological thinking needs to open itself up to incorporate this understanding. And the best way to understand what's happening is to think about it in terms of energy. We need to think deeply about energy and energy transformation as a way to think about and across a number of disciplines and realms of how we think about our existence in the world. This understanding of energy is influenced by thermodynamics and quantum mechanics, by recent work in biology, including a focus on microbes and on metabolism, by work in cybernetics and systems theory, and by work in political theology,

political economy, and political ecology. I understand being, or existence, in terms of dynamic energy transformation, where mass or matter is convertible with energy at the square of the speed of light in the wake of Einstein. Energy is never static, even if it appears to be so; it is always changing. And instead of a personal God who consciously creates the world and sets up laws for us to follow, I understand God as the locus of change, as Octavia E. Butler suggests in *The Parable of the Sower*, that is the ultimate reality.

My argument is that our response to the ecological crises we face requires not simply a renewed environmental ethics but a new theological ontology where being is energy transformation and God is understood as Change. Energy is always in transformation, and we need to find new ways to think and talk about energy, as well as new ways to use energy, if we are going to survive the next few centuries as a civilization. Our world is the product of cheap energy, due to our extraction and exploitation of stored reserves of energy in the form of fossil fuels that set off the Industrial Revolution and continue to shape and reshape our world in physical, political, and economic ways. Enormous energy reserves are what allows for modern human civilization, but the emissions created from burning this coal, oil, and gas are what have profoundly altered our climate.

We need to think about energy beyond extraction—as Terra Schwerin Rowe argues in her book *Of Modern Extraction*—as something other than resources to exploit, beyond the reserves of energy stored in fossilized carbon that can be burned to fuel our material existence (Rowe 2022). Energy is extremely vital and incredibly complex, and it works across multiple thresholds of existence from physics to biology to politics and to spirit. For me, energy is not simply material OR spiritual, but both at the same time. Energy is what is really real, and energy is always energy exchange, because energy cannot exist in a state of stasis.

The philosophy that modern Europe inherited from Greek metaphysics presumes that reality is composed of substances, and we use our minds to comprehend them, which creates a problematic dualism. In theological terms, that means that God is the ultimate reality as well as the ultimate person, but the fundamental presupposition is that God is eternal and does not change. Things that change are less valuable than things that do not, according to Plato and Aristotle, and modern theology posits God as the Supreme Being who does not Change. That is problematic, and many non-modern and non-European traditions—including East Asian philosophies—argue that everything changes and nothing is permanent. As humans who are made in the image of God, we are given dominion over the Earth and its vast material resources, which are themselves only valuable insofar as they are useful to us.

The New Materialist philosophy that emerges in this century, however, understands matter as dynamic and transformational rather than static and inert. This New Materialism contrasts with a more traditional Materialism that developed in Europe in the early modern period. Traditional materialism is part of European modernity, and it challenges the splitting of existence into a spiritual realm and a material-physical one. This materialism is the inheritance of Greek dualism, as noted above, and this dualism has strongly influenced Christianity. In opposition to an otherworldly spiritual realm, much of modern European philosophy opposes the idea of locating a transcendent plane outside of existence, because that denies and diminishes the reality of our material world. Modern thinkers emphasize the significance of this physical material world over against a spiritual world that exists somewhere else. At the same time, this traditional materialism in its challenge of religious and political authoritarianism becomes more and more secular and atheistic in its foreclosure of any sort of spiritual reality. Finally, this materialism is reductionistic because it reduces complex realities to the smallest building blocks, what eventually are understood as atoms, a Greek word meaning uncuttable.

However, we now know that atoms are not the smallest bits of reality, even if the standard model of particle physics tries to continue this reductionism taken to its tiniest experimental foundations. And the revolutions in 20th-century physics—relativity and quantum mechanics—have complicated traditional materialism in ways that have not been fully understood. The philosophy of New Materialism tries to account for many of these developments, and it is also influenced by Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy, French poststructuralist philosophies, including that of Gilles Deleuze, and biological and phenomenological work on the body, including that of feminist philosophies.

New Materialism is focused on the intrinsic dynamism of matter, and it also engages with energy, but most New Materialist philosophers have not explicitly focused on energy. In *Energy and Change: A New Materialist Cosmotheology*, I draw on New Materialist philosophy and at the same time shift its focus to directly engage with energy (Crockett 2022). I define being as energy transformation, and I argue that we do not need to accept a dualistic opposition between matter and spirit, because energy can be both physical and spiritual at the same time. In theological terms, the tradition of American Radical Theology from the 1960s and Death of God theology to varieties of Process Theology and Liberation Theology provides resources to help redefine theology around energy and change, using many of the insights of New Materialism.

2. New Materialism and Energy Transformation

New Materialism emerges in the 21st century as a philosophy that attends to the *agency* of non-human and even non-living entities. New Materialist philosophers, or theorists whose work has been associated with New Materialism, include Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Karen Barad, Catherine Malabou, Diana Coole, and Samantha Frost. New Materialism focuses on the dynamic elements of material reality and their dynamic agency that lies beyond anthropomorphic projection and control. New Materialism emphasizes change and transformation in ontological terms and draws on contemporary scientific developments like systems theory, chaos theory, and complexity theory to help explain how dynamic matter works.

New Materialism gives us theoretical tools to help comprehend the environment and our entanglement within it and with all other living beings more productively. New Materialism helps us think about dynamic energy transformation in more complex ways, and it helps us grapple with the fact that our reality and our world are constantly changing. Energy is not a substance; it is a way to name how and what is always changing all around us and how we are changing as well in every encounter with every other entity. Energy is how scientists measure change. Energy is the way we talk about change, but the quantity of energy itself does not change. According to the First Law of Thermodynamics, energy cannot be created or destroyed. We have to posit an infinity of potential energy that never increases or diminishes in order to make sense of any event. I do not think that God is literally energy, but I think that God is the *locus* of energy in New Materialist theological terms, the reason or essence or 'source' of energy, why there is energy in the first place. Since energy is always in transformation, constantly changing everything that happens, we have to say that energy is infinite. But we do not really know where it comes from or why it exists.

The Second Law of Thermodynamics focuses directly on the process of change in energy transformation. The First Law of thermodynamics allows us to focus on and measure useful energy for us, which is the ability to do work, like in an engine or a turbine. The Second Law gives us the limit of the First Law, because there is always something lost *for us* in this working of energy and energetic exchange. We call this loss of useful energy entropy, which names the fact that we cannot simply do the same thing over and over and

get the same amount of productive energy to do work. Part of the useful energy dissipates, usually as heat. And it is the heat given off by our thermodynamic engines that is heating up the planet. Usually we consider entropy in negative terms, as dissipation, the loss of order or structure, or as the culmination of a kind of "heat death." But this order or disorder is partly due to our particular perspective of it. Entropy gives us an arrow of time; it only goes one way, from less to more entropy. And that directional process produces a situation that we then characterize as disorder or chaos. However, the energetic transformation of entropy also creates structures and patterns that persist as long as energy flows through any system.

Consider a 'storm in a bottle.' If you fill a liter bottle with water and turn it upside down, the water will fall out due to gravity. However, if you give it a twist, you can create a vortex, a pattern that is produced and that remains as long as there is water in the bottle. The reason a vortex is created and maintained is because that is the most efficient way to empty the bottle. That is the most effective way to reduce the gradient between the water in the bottle and the force of gravity drawing it out, which is what entropy is all about. In certain circumstances, the increase in entropy generates organization and allows for the evolution of stars, galaxies, solar systems, and planets.

One of the most important concepts of New Materialist philosophy is entanglement, based on the entanglement of quantum particles as well as many other forms of living and nonliving entities. When two quantum particles are entangled, whatever property is measured for one of the particles (such as its charge or its spin) determines the state of the other, even if these states are indeterminate prior to their observation. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad draws on work in quantum physics and philosophy to propose an Agential Realism where everything in the universe expresses agency in some way (see Barad 2007). For Barad, matter and meaning are entangled to such an extent that we are unable to pull them apart. Entanglement refers not only to subatomic particles but to everything in the universe, because everything is entangled with everything else, and we cannot measure or observe or act upon anything without changing not only it but also us and ultimately everything else.

In biology we are witnessing a new, "Postmodern Synthesis," that replaces the 20th-century synthesis of Darwinian evolution and genetics. "In the Postmodern Synthesis," according to scientists like Margaret McFall-Ngai, "organisms are not individuals, and Mendelian modes of evolution are moved to the margins." (McFall-Ngai 2017, pp. M51–M69, quote p. M55). Here biology follows the pioneering work of Lynn Margulis and her discovery of symbiogenesis, where new species can arise from the merger of two or more organisms. This finding reorients the study of organic life towards complex multi-species assemblages where single-celled microbes like bacteria are the primary living entities that develop respiration, sexual reproduction, and photosynthesis. The first living organisms with a nucleus come about by partially absorbing another kind of living cell, and that process creates mitochondria inside the cell that then generate metabolic energy.

In addition to microbes, we can learn groundbreaking insights into other forms of life, including plants and fungi. Some of these fungi form entangled, symbiotic networks with the roots of plants that have been called a "wood wide web." At the end of his book *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Future*, Merlin Sheldrake says that fungi are creatures that decompose, and his interest in decomposers leads him to the study of fungi. "Composers make; decomposers unmake. And unless decomposers unmake, there is not anything that the composers can make *with*." (Sheldrake 2021, p. 224). Sheldrake articulates an idea of decomposition that is not opposed to recomposition, and we can see this philosophy of decomposition developed more fully in the work of Tatsushi Fujihara and Iljoon Park (see Fujihara 2019 and Park 2026). There

is a process, a yin and yang—life and death, composition and decomposition—that is inextricably entangled throughout our material-spiritual and organic-inorganic existence.

3. Minjung Theology and Its Crowd

There are profound energies expressed in human resistance—and at the same time, they are always more than human. In South Korea, a new form of liberation theology emerges in the 1970s called *minjung* theology, even if the term minjung as a word for the people has earlier roots in Korean history. Minjung theology is largely associated with the theology of Ahn Byung-mu, a New Testament scholar at Hanguk Theological Seminary and then Hanshin University. Minjung theology results in large part from the aspirations of the Korean people, including students and activists, for freedom and democracy in opposition to the military dictatorships of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan.

In 1970 Jeon Tae-il, a 22-year-old sewing worker and activist, died by suicide by setting himself on fire to protest the unjust labor practices of South Korean factories under the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee. This event sparked protests and vigils, spurring political and economic reforms. It also provoked Ahn Byung-mu to write an article and then other works expressing the concept of minjung in theological terms. Ahn proposes minjung as a translation of the Greek word *ochlos* in the Gospel of Mark (Kim and Kim 2013, p. 19). According to Ahn, ochlos means masses or crowds, and it refers to the uneducated people who followed Jesus, including the poor and sick, weak and oppressed, women and children. Minjung means a mass or crowd (*jung*) of people (*min*), and according to Ahn, minjung should be distinguished from people whose primary affiliation is with the Nation (*minjok* in Korean) or the Church (including its leaders—pastors, priests, and bishops).

The minjung are relatively anonymous people—and they often, although not exclusively, designate women, like the women who appeared first at the empty tomb after Jesus's resurrection—who stand on the margins of historical and contemporary systems of power. Minjung theology draws upon Christian liberation theology, Korean indigenous practices as expressed in the Donghak peasant revolution of 1894–95, and the protests against Japanese occupation in the March First Movement of 1919, and later against military dictatorships in South Korea between the 1960s and the 1980s. It speaks to the hunger for democracy and equality of ordinary people who are oppressed under authoritarian structures, and it affirms the crowds of relatively marginalized peoples who are excluded from power in post-war South Korea, as well as the economic prosperity that followed its democratization.

One issue with the notion of a crowd is that it can suggest an undifferentiated mass of humanity. Human masses can appear indiscriminate from the perspective of those in power and privilege, which is why Ahn holds them up as an example in both the New Testament and late 20th-century South Korea. I would want to distinguish, both for and from the perspective of minjung theology, an essentially differentiated from an undifferentiated mass. Every crowd and every mass is intrinsically differentiated, even if it appears undifferentiated from the external standpoint of an ordered society. In New Materialist terms, as discussed above, we can also appreciate how physical masses are not simply static lumps but are teeming with energetic vitality. With Einstein, we should appreciate how mass is not an inert property but a fundamentally energetic one, because mass is convertible with energy at the square of the speed of light in his famous equation $E = mc^2$.

Another founder of minjung theology is Suh Nam-dong, who develops the concept of *han*. Han is often translated into English as resentment. For Suh, han is "the sound of depression which appeals to the heavens, the sound of the nameless and the helpless." (Kim and Kim 2013, p. 203). Han has been linked with the Christian notion of sin, although it is more about the affective resistance of people who have been designated as individually sinful and wrong from the perspective of the political, economic, and theological elites.

According to Kim Jin-Ho, "han is the phenomenon of disability (psychological and physical) of those who suffer exclusion and discrimination and cannot express their sadness properly." (Kim and Kim 2013, p. 203). Their native language has been stolen from them, so they are forced to adopt other languages of the body and mind, including nonverbal ones, to express their suffering.

I want to expand upon this understanding of minjung theology, including its concepts of crowd/jung and han. By reinscribing minjung into a broader ecological context, we risk losing some of the specificity of its origination in the history of South Korea and its protest against military dictatorship. However, I believe that this is a risk that is worth taking, because we are always more than we are, and our crowd is not merely a human crowd, and our neighbor is not just someone who looks like us, and other species, other ecosystems, and other assemblages can express something like han to protest the injustice of how they are mistreated, including by anthropocentric, capitalist, and extractive societies.

One danger of expanding our creative imagination to incorporate others—other people, other animals, other beings—is the worry that broadening a category of suffering diminishes the singularity of the particular source of that suffering. By moving from minjung theology, as it expresses the desire for democracy in late 20th-century South Korea to a planetary eco-theology that enlarges the crowd beyond human actors, do we downplay or widen the importance of that particular event? By shifting our focus from human feelings of resentment and acts of resistance against oppressive forces to non-human organisms or even non-living agents, do we water down the significance of this human idea or its political practice? I do not know, but *I do not think that we are or exist apart from our entanglement with all the others, including our non-human others*, whose voices we ignore at our peril lest we reify our dominant humanist position as custodial elites.

In addition, we have already enlarged a specific context by shifting from one particular person's labor protest and immolation (Jeon Tae-il) to a wider Christian minjung theology that considers this link to how Jesus preached and acted as evidenced in the New Testament, as relevant to the situation of South Korea and other political contexts. So I want to open up minjung and its crowd as a dynamic and differentiated and indeterminate mass beyond its exclusive identification with human actors, even if this generalization risks losing some of the specificity of its situation. Furthermore, I want to note the scientific meaning of the word singularity, which does not mean something that has no relation to other entities but refers to a *change* or a difference that makes a significant difference. There are temperature increases that do not alter the phase state of hydrogen dioxide, and there are those that do, for instance, the transformation from solid ice to liquid water at 0 degrees Celsius or 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Similarly, there are protests and acts of resistance occurring all the time, but this singular one by Jeon Tae-il had more of an effect compared to many others. We could compare this act to that of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, who immolated himself in 2010 to protest the corruption of Tunisian authorities, that ignited the Tunisian Revolution and forced the dictator Zine El Abidine to flee the country and sparked what was called the Arab Spring in other countries.

What if one singular act of protest is not just the autonomous voluntary decision of a free human being but always occurs in and with a crowd? And what if the anonymous crowd of suffering beings includes the animals that are confined in zoos, raised in cages for food, and driven to extinction by our activities that burst the bounds of planetary sustainability? In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground outside your father's care" (Matthew 10:29). What if things like bacteria and rocks and stars and subatomic particles express agency, affect existence, and matter in vibrant ways that are all cared for in ultimate divine

terms? Is our capacity for empathy really so diminished that it could not be extended to others who do not resemble us anthropomorphically?

We are learning so much more about how entangled we are with every other form of existence, and we are learning this even as we accelerate towards the disasters of resource depletion and global warming. We need new languages for the expression of "irreparable sorrow" that characterizes our humanity in the face of inhumanity. We also need to better articulate and affirm the ways we can love and lose ourselves in solidarity with every event no matter how enormous or minute.

4. Báyò Akómoláfé and a Poetic Language of the Cosmos Beyond the Human

Koohan Paik-Mander, a journalist and activist who grew up in South Korea and now lives in Hawai'i, defines han as an irreparable sorrow that lies "at the heart of the Korean spirit." However, she insists that it is not merely felt; it must be expressed "through storytelling, song, poetry, prayer." It is not just the feelings of unresolved resentment, of being wronged unjustly, but it entails "the *poeticization* of these profound feelings of grief and loss." (Koohan 2022). This poeticization of shared experiences of grief and loss creates solidarity, not only with other humans, but with every single existent in the universe, if we are able to open ourselves up to it.

We experience so much grief and loss upon a seething, tumultuous planet where wealth and power are being concentrated more and more by authoritarian political and economic elites. We may experience crushing poverty or political oppression, along with racism and prejudice against people who are singled out as different and less worthy of care. We are riven by waves of uncertainty and dread that create stress, anxiety, and depression. We are mourning lives and species lost during what is being called "the Sixth Great Extinction," where species are going extinct at more than one hundred times the ordinary (pre-historical) background rate. We know that we and every other living thing will die, and at times we want to preserve our individual self or soul at the expense of anyone and everyone else. But this is wrong in moral, realistic, and, I would argue, theological terms. Our expectations of an afterlife based on our faith can cut us off from others—other people and other beings—who make us what we are and who sustain us as us. Just as we are always changing while we are alive, to such an extent that we are not the same person we were years or months or days ago, we will not be the same person even if we are resurrected beyond the grave. God is Change, and we change as we interact with God, and God is always changing (in) us.

In his book *Selah*, Báyò Akómoláfé, a Nigerian philosopher who has also been associated with New Materialism, poetically calls for a new cosmology based on a profound understanding of loss. He says that everything is poetry, or rather, "everything is poetic." The poetic element in the cosmos refers to any "experience that is humble in the face of what can be known or what is impossible. It is mystery, wonder—tactile, sensuous, and carnal." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 156). We come up against interruptions of what we generally expect, and we experience irruptions of the unexpected and what appears impossible given our normal understanding of the world. These experiences include unbearable instances of grief and loss, they bring us up short, and they are quintessentially poetic. We make poetry to try to give expression to these experiences.

In an instructive example, Akómoláfé says that an enormous amount of the energy of the universe has contributed over billions of years to result in "the exquisite production" of "the papery skin of a seed coat." This coating—"the hard-won victory of galvanizing unwieldy forces to produce something so ethereal," is then "in an instant, imploded and

cracked open in the depths of the earth." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 19). The entire universe contributes to the creation of a thin coating that breaks apart in an instant.

We often think of loss as an aberration to be put right or restored and grief as an affect that should be overcome. And in monotheistic terms this grief and this loss would be overcome with and by the help of a transcendent God who makes everything whole. But Akómoláfé invites us to view this loss as primary, and what if this is a more helpful way to conceive of han? Here is an acceptance of loss that refuses to relinquish its sorrow but also lets go of any expectation that this loss can be put right. If we orient ourselves with the expectation of an identical replacement, including the replacement of ourselves after we die, then every absence is a literal void that must be filled.

In this cosmology, Akómoláfé writes, "regeneration fits into an economy of named things, of saved things, accommodated without our systems, proper only to the extent that it serves 'us.'" (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 21). Akómoláfé gives us new ways to think about loss, salvation, the cosmos, things, and language. He reminds us that there is a strange joy inscribed in the heart of loss and that "there are stowaway worlds tucked into the dense folds of the ordinary. Hidden lives, secret celebrations." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 22). *We do not liberate anything, and neither does God, understood as an intentional autonomous being*. We attend to the unexpected liberations that occur all around us, that are never a wiping away but rather an uncanny embrace of this exuberant loss, which is no less brutal in its shining beauty. Maybe the minjung masses or crowds are all the things that shine in their exquisite loss, including us, and han is how we attend to suffering that which is all around us as the world burns and our systems collapse. We want our grief to be productive and our loss to be assuaged or converted into gain. However, we should allow grief to intensify into lamentation, where it cannot be contained. "Lamentation," Akómoláfé says, "is grief emancipated from its productivity." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 100). Lamentations are central to the experience of the ancient Israelites and are included in both the Jewish and the Christian Bible.

After drawing our attention to the seed coat, Akómoláfé directs us to the leaf, following the generation and growth of the tree. Here is "a dry, browning, withering leaf still attached to the stem." He tells us that "'marcescence' names arboreal practices in which fading leaves no longer draw nourishment from their trees," but they stubbornly cling to them, refusing to fall down. Marcescence is analogous to senescence, which is when we can no longer nourish our bodies and minds as they fall apart and we become more and more disabled. Marcesence here gives us a way to think about how so many of us are desperately trying to maintain relationships that have decayed into senescence. We seek to maintain organizations and institutions that have failed or are failing, including the Nation-State, and even the Church. According to Akómoláfé, in our striving for justice and righteousness, we may seek "greater freedoms, greater expressibility, greater access, or greater representations within relations that no longer nourish. Within epistemologies that incarcerate futures." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 23). Perhaps the only way to live is to die; the only way to flourish is to fall.

A leaf. Fallen. At the end of his essay "The Person Attacked by the Robbers is Christ," the chapter that concludes a volume of writings by and about Ahn Byung-Mu, Hwang Yong-yeon, a scholar of minjung theology, says that radical activists in South Korea in the 1960s liked to quote a poem by Bertolt Brecht called "To Posterity." In this poem Brecht laments: "Ah, what an age it is/when to speak of trees is almost a crime/for it is a kind of silence about injustice!" (Kim and Kim 2013, p. 230). Hwang says that this poem indicates a will to name and expose injustice and that this desire animates minjung theology. We need to be able to point to and to point out what is happening in our world that hurts people and provokes han.

However, Hwang continues, there is another poem by Paul Celan, that serves as a rejoinder to Brecht. Celan's poem is called "A Leaf, treeless—for Bertold Brecht." According to Hwang, Celan's poem "implies that the crime is to make things too explicit, rather than not saying anything about them." (Kim and Kim 2013, p. 230). If we make things too explicit and too particular, if we give in to the temptation to nail things down, we lose sight of something absolutely vital and transformative. Our suffering can shut us down unless we find new leaves to track and trace, to see how they flutter and fall. In this case, we are able to name and talk about democracy and dictatorship, global capitalism and ecological destruction, and all of its countless sufferings, so much so that it stifles our ability to think and to poeticize something new, beyond the scene of the crime. We want to focus on and name the tree, but then we risk overlooking the leaf. We also need to consider the leaf apart from the tree, or the singular entity apart from the economy within which it is normally inscribed. According to Akómoláfé, "the monstrosity of a fallen leaf, torn away from its tree, is a prophecy of forests yet to come." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 23).

In Haitian Vodou, a leaf (*Fèy* in Kreyol) indicates the magical-medicinal use of plants by the priest—the mambo or houngan practitioner. Leaves can be used as part of a ritual, but they can also be understood as extensions of the spirits (the *lwa*) themselves. There are different meanings and uses for fresh, dried, and cooked leaves or herbs. Here the leaf, torn from the branch, becomes part of a sacred economy. In Vodou, leaves carry forces, and the priest "is handling presence—living, responsive, and accountable. In Vodou, to hold a plant is to hold a fragment of sovereign power." (Bo Oungan 2026).

In the mid-1990s, there was a popular song called *Fèy*, by the racine (or roots) music Haitian group RAM. The lyrics include the lines: "I'm a leaf/Look at me on my branch/A terrible storm came and knocked me off/The day you see me fall is not the day I die."[2] This song was sung for a mass audience, a crowd of people who were struggling against the effects of slavery, colonialism, military dictatorship and foreign intervention. These people were known as Lavalas, or the Flood, and a flood is another name for a mass or a crowd, the *jung* that makes up the minjung. The masses of Haitian people in the 1990s supported the popular liberation theologian Jean-Baptiste Aristide, who was removed by both the Clinton and the Bush administrations. Aristide, although a Christian, legalized Vodou in Haiti in the early 1990s. And his legacy remains significant in Haiti today despite devastating violence, poverty, earthquakes, and assassinations.

And here is a leaf, torn from the branch of one tradition and offered up for others, crossing epochs and eons and continents, poets and philosophers and theologians to settle here for a moment with us. The crowds, the people, the minjung, the ochlos, the spirits, the animals, the rocks, and the leaves are all entangled; they swirl, and they rise and they fall. They fall under the crushing weight of poverty and guns, bulldozers and chemicals, violence and discrimination. They fall from their branches, but they resurrect again and again, and they open up new materialist-spiritual poetic worlds beyond our dying global capitalist Empire.

5. Conclusions

What kind of God generates a seed coat destined to crack open, a leaf that must wither and fall, or a vulnerable human who is nurtured by communal love and then torn apart by systems of oppression? We experience change and loss, and we rage with sorrow at its perceived injustice. Many people desire both an affective God who is open to transformation *and* an unchanging God who is unaffected by transformation. My radical theology directly posits God as Change and suggests that there is nothing that does not change.

Energy is the agent of transformation, and energy is how we talk about what Georges Bataille calls a general or an unrestricted economy in his book *The Accursed Share* (see

Bataille 1991). Within a general economy, energy is infinite; it can neither be created nor destroyed, which is the First Law of Thermodynamics. However, from the standpoint of a restricted or particular economy, energy always manifests as entropy, as a loss of order or usefulness. If we think about God as a restricted economy, then God, like every other entity in the universe, is subject to entropy as dissolution or decay. However, if we think of God as a way to name the general economy, then God is the infinite name for everything that changes in the universe. Everything changes, and everything affects God, because God is Change.

According to Catherine Keller, a contemporary ecotheologian, "the mutual immanence of God and world thus reflects, indeed *exemplifies*—is not an *exception* to—the interconnectivity that characterizes all actualities as relations between multiple becomings, and only so as materializations." (Keller 2024, p. 115). Here Keller's theology resonates with the New Materialism that I affirm and that I sketched at the beginning of my talk. Nothing is, strictly speaking, an exception here because everything is exceptional in its immanent materialization out of the teeming void. The void is not devoid of energy; it is the matrix of all matter that becomes from its energetic excess. We are the product of an excessive energy that makes us and lets us be as ourselves. I do not want to identify God with the void, or with energy, per se. What I mean by God is how we designate anything as the agent of change in and of everything.

God is not the void as the source of energy, because there is no reserve, no place to store energy. Energy is always in entropic transformation, within the void and beyond it, in and as us. God is not a resource to be extracted and exploited, any more than anything truly is, even though sometimes we try to make everything into a resource for us. God is why everything changes, because things can change only because they are never themselves all in all. God is Change. God is the element of Change in everything that Changes.

God is the relation, the entanglement, the between, or the interstice of everything that makes everything what it is because it is also not what it fully is. The fact that everything is never totally itself is the excessive openness that allows for change, that expresses the change that is, that God is. The world is an "interpenetration and mingling that defies easy categorization," where "all creatures are in fact composite organisms." According to Akómoláfé, everything exists in a state of "brilliant betweenness that defeats everything, corrodes every boundary, spills through every marked territory, and crosses out every confident line." (Akómoláfé 2018, quoted in Schlanger 2024, p. 255). God is the 'brilliant betweenness' that defeats every boundary, spills through every marked territory, and crosses out every confident line." God 'is' this brilliant betweenness that marks everything that exists insofar as it possesses the capacity for Change.

The word that titles Akómoláfé's newest book is *Selah*. Selah is a Hebrew word used mainly in the Book of Psalms, and it indicates a pause or a break. Eden Pearlstein, the editor of *Selah*, translates it as an "ecstatic interruption." Akómoláfé claims that selah is an ecumenical notation of sorts and that "selah's striking ambivalence seems fitting to the appearance of something 'greater,' something that derails convenient continuity." (Akómoláfé 2026, p. 10). Selah is something that notes a break, a pause, an interruption that opens up everything to the brilliant betweenness that marks divinity. This selah is a breath, a sigh, but it is also liberating, because it means that nothing is finished. Everything is liberated from the limitation of being just what it is. This liberation is the liberation of any entity from its simply being this or that entity, even if it is nothing and nowhere else besides that entity. Selah is the being's deep pause that shows up within the heart of the mass, the crowd, or the people.

I want to trace one final transition, from selah to *salim*. The Korean word *salim* is generally translated into English as *enlivening*, referring to ordinary acts of giving and

sustaining life. It generally refers to domestic acts of ordinary life, often ones that are feminized or mainly associated with women's roles. Salim has also been associated with minjung theology, because it affirms the unheralded and often anonymous work of the poor people, including the women who followed Jesus in the New Testament. According to Wonchul Shin, salim is the daily practice of moral and theological virtue on the part of oppressed people that fuels democratic acts of resistance (Shin 2026). However, the concept of salim can be opened up beyond its humanistic resonance to give it a more ecological significance. According to Jea Sophia Oh, a scholar of feminist theology, eco-theology, and minjung theology who is the author of *A Postcolonial Theology of Life*, "*Salim* can be transformed into a tremendously powerful healing energy of *Life* when we all-together participate in the holistic eco-caring activities and could create genuinely therapeutic communities of symbiosis" with non-human entities (Oh 2022, p. 135).Oh intentionally and provocatively opens up salim beyond its implicit anthropocentric meaning to enliven all of our shared planetary existence. Salim here refers not merely to domestic or even human acts; it characterizes something essential about the vitality of energy that enlivens all of us at every moment.

Here at the end of this article I am suggesting that there is a significant resonance between Salim and Selah beyond mere alliteration, because both can be contextualized and recontextualized in terms of life, an enlivening process that is not restricted to human beings or even living organisms but extends to all things and to all events. This Salim manifests with every Selah, or in other words Selah occurs along with any and every Salim, as the pause, breath or interruption that makes it enlivening. This energetic enlivening pause of divinity 'saves' every being from being merely itself, because it is what allows for change, which is what divinity really means. Here I will stop, or rather pause, to acknowledge and affirm your enlivening reading of this article that is offered as a gift.

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Notes

[1] For a recent book that treats some of the positive effects that are taking place in regard to renewable energy, see McKibben (2025).
[2] See RAM (1996). The English translation is from Shacochis (1999, p. 47).

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