Review of Ecomartyrdom in the Americas: Living and Dying for Our Common Home

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Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo’s new publication, *Ecomartyrdom in the Americas*, is an important contribution on the problem of extractives, a topic that is of dramatically growing importance. Natural resource extraction, and the “extractivist” model of economic development that typically drives it, is increasingly responsible for displacement, human rights violations, pollution and environmental contamination, deforestation and desertification, and worsened climate change vulnerability for communities that are already highly vulnerable. It is also frequently complicit in violent conflict and is very often a context for corruption. It also invites grave questions of equity and justice as these effects are usually occurring in the global South and/or among marginalized communities to feed consumption in the global North. Gandolfo’s critiques are needed ones in this contemporary context, and the stories that she lifts up are ones that need attention. Readers, however, should know what to expect from Gandolfo’s approach and understand what she is trying to do and not do.

“Extractives” is a broad category that can encompass oil and gas, metal and mineral mining, logging, agriculture, fishing, or hydroelectricity. All of these types of extraction bring unique sets of challenges ethically, environmentally, legally, economically, and politically. To do a thorough and nuanced treatment of all those dimensions for all types of extraction at once would be a near-impossible task. And that is not Gandolfo’s aim. The book is not meant to dig deep into policy solutions or find workable compromises with specific extractive industries. Rather, Gandolfo’s aims are more prophetic and narrative, and focused on the broad, common features that cut across the different types of extractive enterprises in today’s capitalist, globalized, and post-colonial reality. She focuses on “extractivism,” which she defines as a “sinful, anti-ecological, anti-social” imaginary that animates the structural realities controlling extractive industries as well as the consumer demands behind them. The book is holding up the stories of ecomartyrs—specific ones whose stories she relays, as well as the numerous unnamed ones who have been victims of the violence of extractivism—as counter narratives to prophetically assert an alternative social and ecological imaginary that upholds justice, equity, sustainability, and liberation. With a carefully crafted theological scaffold to support the weight of the ecomartyrs’ narratives, an engaging style, including references to popular culture and arts, to breathe life into those stories, and a well-maintained clarity of focus throughout the book, Gandolfo succeeds in achieving that goal.

The book proceeds in three sections. The first three chapters provide background on the problems and nature of extractivism and the efforts of environmental defenders to resist it. This includes explanation of the ways that environmental defenders have become targets of violence, intimidation, criminalization, and assassination. Gandolfo calls chapter 4 the heart of the book. It is comprised of extended narratives of noted environmental defenders in Central and South America who have been assassinated because of their resistance to extractivism. This includes:
Josimo Morais Tavares of Brazil, Francisco Alves Medes Filho of Brazil, Alcides Jiménez Chicangana of Colombia, Dorothy Mae Stang from the US but killed in Brazil, Gustavo Marcelo Rivera Moreno of El Salvador, and Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores of Honduras. Each person’s story is crafted with obvious care and clear demonstration of how their work echoes the principles of integral ecology. The final two chapters reflect on the witness of these six ecomartyrs as well as the hundreds of others who have been victims of extractivism. First, Gandolfo analyzes the diverse worldviews, value systems, and spiritualities that informed and sustained them and empowered their prophetic stances in the face of imminent threats. For example, Gandolfo finds traces in many of the stories of decolonial feminism in how the defenders committed to intersectional understandings of oppressive social and economic systems. She also highlights ways in which Indigenous cosmovisions, African Diaspora religions, and post-Vatican II Catholicism have interwoven to inspire environmental defenders in the Americas. The final chapter delves into the meaning of ecomartyrdom for Christian theology. Gandolfo draws heavily on Jon Sobrino to argue that ecomartyrdom should serve as a font for theology. Using Sobrino’s idea that theology becomes too bourgeois when it is too distanced from the martyrdom of Jesus, she argues, “[I]nsofar as the comforts of bourgeois existence depend on extractivist industries and the violence they perpetrate, a bourgeois theology lacking in Jesus-like specificity is dangerously complicit in the crucifixion of the poor and the planet alike” (p. 202).

The impression that Ecomartyrdom in the Americas leaves is that all extractive activity is irrevocably wound up in the evils of extractivism. The book’s aim is to critique the social and ecological imaginary of extractivism and pose an alternative through the witness of ecomartyrs, and for that purpose the anti-mining tenor makes sense. It does, however, take slightly away from the conclusions of the book that offer remedies and suggestions for standing in solidarity with ecomartyrs and responding to the call for conversion that they represent. For example, Gandolfo affirms expanding clean energy alternatives, while also recommending that people make wiser “personal decisions about consumer purchases that avoid undue reliance on metallic mining to produce endlessly replaceable electronic devices” (p. 218). To be sure, the planned obsolescence practices of the consumer electronics industry is an insidious driver of demand for extractive products; however, Gandolfo’s recommendations fail to interrogate the fact that clean energy cannot exist without mining for metals and minerals necessary for the technology that enables it. Those sorts of thornier practical issues that would broach questions about policy, such as the need to include cobalt in legislation governing conflict minerals, or how to appeal for industry-side changes in practice, are not in the book’s purview. Yet, without the ecological and cultural conversion for which Gandolfo lays groundwork in this book, it is hard to imagine those more practical issues getting addressed in meaningful ways. For that reason, Ecomartyrdom in the Americas makes an important contribution to ecological theology, and also to the broader social project for untangling the intractable problems of extractivism.