

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health's Essential Conversations

GRACE JI-SUN KIM

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health* magazine, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is *Essential Conversations*. Our guests today, Rev. Dr. Grace Ji-Sun Kim is professor of Theology at Earlham School of Religion and the author of 20 books, including *The Grace of Sophia*, and *Intersectional Theology: Introductory Guide*. Her latest book published in 2020 is *Hope In Disarray: Piercing Our Lives Together*. She's also a contributing editor at *Spirituality & Health* magazine, where you can read her latest essay, *Body Prayer for Every Day*, on our digital platform, spiritualityhealth.com. Grace Ji-Sun Kim, welcome to *Essential Conversations*.

Rev. Dr. Grace Ji-Sun Kim: Thank you so much, Rabbi, for having me. It's so exciting to be on this platform. I've written several pieces for *Spirituality & Health*. It's great to be on this podcast with you today.

Rabbi Rami: Well, I'm looking forward, too. We're both contributing editors at the magazine and we both have, I know you work there, I was going to say a love for Earlham College. I don't work there. Maybe if you do work there, it's not what I'm imagining it to be, but I've been there at conferences and the fact that you can get a Master's in Theology with an emphasis on writing as ministry. That is just, if I could talk myself into a third master's degree, I would do that.

Grace: It's a very exciting program, and it's growing and growing every year. We're drawing students from all walks of life, and everyone has a desire to write a book one day and maybe that desire or just to write better, but we are drawing students from all walks of life.

Rabbi Rami: Well, you've written 20, which is not bad. I've written 36, so you've got a ways to go, but still.

Grace: Oh, wow. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: Let me start with something you wrote in your book, *Intersectional Theology*. This is a quote from the book, "For most of Christian history, straight white male theologians have spoken for everyone else, as if their theologies do not reflect the bias of their own social positions in power. This has meant that our theologies have been partial, a reflection of only a very small slice of the whole of human experience."

That's clearly true, accurate, and I would say what's true if Christianity is true of all religions. Mostly their theologies are written by men, and they are all just presenting a slice of the whole of human experience. Then I would say that limiting theology to the boundaries of a given religion, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, whatever it is, limiting a theology to a specific faith also limits us to a very small slice of the whole of human experience. Is there a way to step outside all of these

boundaries, all of these labeled theologies, and glimpse what may be universally true rather than merely religiously sacred?

Grace: Wow, that's a very deep question. Just to backtrack, I think within different religions, as you mentioned, it is mostly men, so it could be non-white if it's a Hindu religion or so forth, but it is written by men. What happens is after it's written and shared within the religious faith system, it's presented as the truth, as if no other voices, or no one else's experiences can help interpret the divine, or our understanding of the divine in our whole world.

In that way, from my writing as a Christian theologian, for the last 2,000 years, it's been written by mostly white, heteronormative, male theologians from Europe. They have presented it to the rest of the world or to the rest of Christianity all over the world as if that is the only way to understand God or God's presence in our life. Anything else, if a Black woman speaks, or a South American man speaks, or an Asian woman speaks, they kind of pushed us aside and say, "Oh, maybe, maybe not."

We're kind of pushed to the margins rather than accepting it as a different, or a newer, or a re-imagining way of understanding theology, a Christian theology. I would say that what happen to all kinds of religions. If we allow women to speak, or people of color to speak, or Africans or South Americans or Asians to speak, I think it will enrich our dialogue about how we understand God and God's presence in the world. Because in most of the major religions in the world, God is viewed as the infinite, the Creator, the one that put everything into the universe, right? This infinite being and we, human beings are this finite human being. Our minds are too small to understand the fullness of the divine.

If we get as many people around the table to help us understand and understanding that every individual is intersectional, or our understanding of ourselves is intersectional in the fact that I'm not just a woman. I'm not just a Korean woman, but also I am an able woman, I'm a middle-class woman, I'm an educated woman, Christian woman, all those identities intersect.

In some cases, there are powers that marginalize us from our own identities. We are very complex beings. You Rabbi, you're complex, I'm complex, every person, we have multiple identities. If we welcome everyone at the table, and that's why it's so important to have interfaith dialogue, too, inter-religious dialogue. Because we need everyone at the table to help us understand the notion of the divine in our life, and our experiences in this journey of life.

Rabbi Rami: I appreciate that, but I still have the same question in a sense. That I understand that bringing as many voices to the table as possible is going to expand and give us a more nuanced understanding of what God is, what reality is, but do you think there's a way to experience the divine that isn't labeled? That steps out of all of those things that in that experience, I'm thinking like a mystical experience of the divine, where you're not a Christian anymore, you're not a woman, you're not Korean, you're not American, you're not middle-class, you're nothing in a sense, of those labels. You're something else, something I don't know, like in Hinduism, the atman. The atman is unlabeled.

Grace: I think that's possible because language itself, you and I are speaking English right now, is very limiting. That's why in my own work, I bring in Korean language, because there are some words in the Korean language that we don't have in the English language. That would happen with Spanish, and French, and all the languages. Language itself is limiting.

We put labels on things, on our experiences, et cetera, to kind of help us understand, but we have to recognize that there's a constraint in that. I actually welcome your understanding of something beyond the labels, and beyond what you kind of mentioned earlier. I think why we love labels, particularly from a Christian perspective, is in Christianity, grew out of the Greco-Roman period. The Greek philosophy was heavily influenced in Christianity in the sense that everything became dualistic. Heaven and earth was separated, man and woman, word and wisdom. Everything is separated and you put things in categories.

As part of my task, as an Asian American theologian, because in Asia, we don't think in dualistic terms. We think of both and and, that's what intersectionality is all about. Both and and, things are messy, things aren't as clear-cut as Christian theology has tried to present itself for the last 2,000 years, and I'm sure other world religions have tried to do that, too. Yes, I think we could get rid of these labels and kind of experience the divine and different ways that we can't even describe ourselves because we're so limited in our own capacity to communicate, to share, and to even describe these mystical experiences.

Rabbi Rami: Absolutely, and of course, you're right that you and I are talking English, so let's talk Korean. This is what I have in mind. Years ago, I was on the faculty of an amazing retreat program that the United Methodist Church has created. It's a two-year program. People go away for a week at a time on retreat, four times a year. It's just this amazing thing. I was teaching on this, and there are almost always several recently graduated Methodist ministers.

One year there were a lot of Korean ministers who were visiting the States and visiting this specific retreat. We had a great time talking about language, and they told me, now I'm going to probably screw this up, so you can correct me. Maybe they weren't just telling me the wrong thing, but they told me that one of the Korean names for God was Haneunim.

Grace: You got it. Perfect.

Rabbi Rami: Which they told me meant something like Holy Unity or Sacred Oneness, am I still on the right track?

Grace: Yes. Han means one and so Haneunim means One God, One Sacred, yes.

Rabbi Rami: The Honorable One with a capital O?

Grace: Yes.

Rabbi Rami: Here's my question. In your essay, and I'm going to jump around from books to essay. In your essay, you quote Julian of Norwich, who says, "The fruit and the purpose of prayer is to be one'd with, and like God and all things." I'm wondering

if the Korean language brings to the discussion, a more readily available and more accurate language for the divine than well, something like Lord, which I find offensive.

When she's talking about being one'd, and if your name for God or word for God is Haneunim, the Honorable Oneness or Sacred Oneness or something, it seems to me that the language, the Korean language in this case, really speaks to the truth of what Julian is saying in a much more profound and easily grasped way, than English Lord or God, which is always dualistic.

Grace: Yes, I would agree with you. Haneunim we were already using but then when Christians came, they added it and made it Haneunim Abeoji. Abeoji means father so suddenly, God became God Father, if you're going to translate into the English language. Because of the patriarchal understanding of Christianity, the white Christianity, that white male Europeans have been talking about in the last 2,000 years, then Korean Christians started not just using-- we still use Haneunim but then they kept adding Abeoji, which means God Father.

I think that kind of ruined it in a sense, because then you brought in this white patriarchal notion into this earlier Korean notion of the oneness of God. I think your earlier question, yes, with Julian, I think it fits in perfectly, that's why I think dialogue like this, I'm so glad you were able to spend time with the pastors from Korea. When we dialogue like this, we learned so much and it widens our eyes, our minds, our perspectives, because we ourselves, alone, is so limited. We need to grow every day, so thank you for sharing that and I think it is helpful. It's just I feel like white Christians ruined our original term.

[laughter]

Rabbi Rami: That was my sense, and when I brought up something, I made the same or a similar point to the Korean pastors and they nodded and said, "We have to do what we're told to do." This notion of adding that layer of masculinity and patriarchy on to the One, I felt that was a major part of your book, *The Grace of Sophia*, the subtitle of the book is *A Korean North American Women's Christology*. That's you.

I imagine that you are the Korean North American woman. I don't know if people heard it the way you actually wrote it, it's not a Korean North American woman's theology as if this is Grace's theology, but women's, in other words this is the theology that might speak to Korean North American women. Okay, if that makes sense?

Grace: Yes, and I'm hoping it will speak to all women, too, and speak to men, too.

Rabbi Rami: I was going to go there but you've already taken care of that. I would say it speaks to everybody who isn't locked into the patriarchy. You write in this book, "Conceiving of Jesus as an embodiment of Sophia can be meaningful to Korean North American women." I'm going to take your word for it. I'm not Korean, and I'm not a woman, but speaking or conceiving of Jesus as an embodiment of Sophia is incredibly powerful. Jakob Böhme, the German Christian theologian, if I

member right, when he wrote about Jesus, he always spoke of Christos-Sophia, the Christ Sophia, Christ wisdom.

This notion of Sophia as the first, according to the book of Proverbs 8:22, she speaks for herself and she says, she's the first of God's manifesting. She's the first child of God and she's really the mother of the rest of creation. You see that in different mystical traditions that speak of the mother being the origin of things. Let me see if I can make sense of this.

My sense is that conceiving of Jesus as an embodiment of Sophia can be transformational for all Christians, for anyone who's interested in Jesus, and that the return of Sophia or the Divine Mother in all of her forms. In Hebrew *hokmah*, *shekhinah*, also Hebrew, *bat-kol*, Tara, Prajñā, Guanyin. You speak about Prajñā and Guanyin in the book quite a lot. This naming of the divine, all of which is feminine Divine Mother names, is vital for a deeply spiritual life, regardless of one's religion, or lack thereof and, and here's my question, it seems to me essential if humanity is going to progress in its spiritual development, and not get trapped in the patriarchal notion of thing. What's your sense of that?

Grace: Well, thank you for this wonderful question, and thank you for reading my book so thoroughly. I'm just impressed, and I'm just thrown back because actually, that was my first book. After I wrote it, I said, "I'm going to write about Jesus for the rest of my life," but actually, I never returned to Jesus and I moved to spirit. I'll get to the spirit part later, but I think it's so important. As I mentioned earlier, the problem with Christianity was it merged in the Greco-Roman period, with Greek philosophy, which emphasized dualism. In the dualistic mind frame, and in a dualistic world, everything is separated.

The word and wisdom got separated, male and female got separated. For me, the separation did so much disservice to Christianity than service, in the sense that when we think of Jesus, and as you mentioned, *hokmah* and Sophia, the New Testament is written in Greek so they use the word Sophia, in Greek, which means wisdom. Jesus is associated with wisdom all throughout. You mentioned some of the Old Testament passages, or the first Bible or the Hebrew Bible.

It was already present in Christianity, but as Christianity kept growing in this white, patriarchal Eurocentric way of thinking, they suddenly eliminated this understanding of Sophia. You saw it in the early church writings, and then it suddenly disappeared, and almost wiped away, which did so much disservice. When we think Christianity, when we think about God, God is the God of Liberator.

We see that in the story of Exodus. We see that all throughout and when we look in the New Testament, God is the God of Liberator. When Jesus comes, and Jesus says, "I am the Son of God," Jesus came to liberate. He was liberating the lepers, he was liberating the Samaritans, and he was with the woman, all these things that white male probably can't imagine, and they just don't know how to interpret these passages.

In a sense, we need to reclaim this notion of liberation, which is so embedded, and if we retrieve this understanding of Sophia, because-- I don't know about within the synagogues and other faith traditions, but in Christianity, majority of the people

sitting in the pews are women. The men aren't going. The women are going the women, the women are seeking, but if we continue to talk in patriarchal terms about who God is, and who Jesus is, the women are slowly going to disappear eventually.

To reclaim this notion that Jesus is *hokmah*, the Sophia, this feminine understanding of the divine, and you see the feminine dimension in all these other religions, as you mentioned earlier with Guanyin and *shekhinah*. Whenever I do, I teach a course on interfaith dialogue, there is so much similarity between religions. That's why it's so important to dialogue and have this discourse, rather than fighting, and arguing amongst ourselves, because that only leads to destruction, that leads to war, that leads to killing.

I think the communication and the dialogue is so important, we can learn so much from one another. I'm so grateful that you brought up this book, *Grace of Sophia*, and I hope people will retrieve and welcome the feminine dimension of the divine. It's so liberative. It brings us together. Even in the Old Testament talks about God as a mother hen, and there are other feminine images of God, but because we live in a dualistic world, we separate the two. We can't seem to walk on both of them in our understanding of God and understanding of Jesus.

We keep emphasizing the maleness, we keep emphasizing *logos*, which is a Greek word for word, which is masculine. We have to move away from that way of thinking in our frame of mind and be more holistic, be more welcoming, be more embracing of the fullness and the oneness, going back to your comment, the Oneness of God.

Rabbi Rami: In the synagogue world, there's all of these, I don't want to say hidden references to the divine feminine, because they're not really hidden. It's just that no one really pays any attention. Like on Friday evenings, we sing a song of welcome, the Sabbath is feminine, and she's called the bride. You've got this very, I don't know, primitive, but I don't mean that in a negative sense, imagery of a masculine deity with a feminine partner, Shabbat or shekhinah and other context. In the mystical literature, she's everywhere but even in the standard Rabbinic literature, they talk about Shekhinah as meaning the presence of God.

When they felt God's presence, they felt the presence of the feminine, and they even say when they hear the voice of God, they call the voice of God, a *bat kol*, meaning, the daughter's voice. They hear a woman's voice. When in America, we're trying to hear Charlton Heston's voice. It's there, but I don't think people really pick up on it because the clergy and the educators aren't trained in it and probably don't see the value in it.

Grace: Yes. That's the same with Christianity, and because not all denominations ordain women. The ordination of women has been very recent, maybe 50 years. The interpretation for the last 2,000 years did not want to focus on the feminine dimension. As you said, it's there. It's not really hidden. It's just there, just people ignore, people push it aside, and people don't want to talk about it because they feel like it's so offensive to talk about the divine in feminine language. I don't know why people find it offensive. I think it's just the 2,000 year history, for at least Christianity, that if you say something different people think that's so out of this world, it can't be right.

Rabbi Rami: It's just conditioning. We don't have a lot of time left and we really haven't talked about the essay on body prayer. I appreciate you and our listeners indulging me in these other questions, which I find so interesting, but let's talk a little bit about body prayer, but to do so, I still want to quote you from *The Grace of Sophia*. This is another quick quote from the book. You write, "The highest kind of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing."

That made me think of something in the Jewish tradition that you find in the Torah, in the Hebrew Bible in Exodus where it says, "*naaseh v'nishma*" where the people say, "We will do," *naaseh*, and then we'll understand what the heck we're doing, that somehow this responsible doing leads to intelligent knowing. I'm wondering how body prayer might be linked to that.

Grace: I think body prayer is so important because we as human beings, are both body, mind, soul. We are multifaceted, but in our churches, I don't know about the synagogues and other faith traditions, but I have visited a mosque, and a Buddhist temple, people still focus on the speaking aspect of prayer, at least for Presbyterians, I'm an ordained Presbyterian minister, that is the most highly valued way of prayer, through our speaking, which is also going back to this problem of dualism. We have separated everything up and we've compartmentalized rather than this holistic understanding of how do we practice faith, how do we come to understand God, how do we come to God in prayer.

If we move away from the dualistic way, then we can pray with our bodies, with our hands, with our feet, with our minds, with our words, with our language. It becomes a more holistic approach, which is what I believe God will require of us and the prayer, it is His doing. Sometimes the civil activists, when they say you have to march, hold out banners and march down the street, you have to do something. I feel prayer is also doing. We pray with our feet, we pray with our hands and our body, and once we're moving and doing, then actually, that will lead into this intellectual knowing. I think it's all combined together, and I wish within Christianity itself, we just move away from this dualism.

Rabbi Rami: I can't quote the source, I just know the practice, but in, I think it's a medieval form of Judaism, they brought back prostration practice, which is a very powerful thing to do. I learned it more powerfully from my work with Hindu Vedānta swamis where we do prostration, but that whole body, laying the body out on the floor, you see Catholic priests and nuns doing that, it's reserved for the elite, and not the people in the pews. It's hard to do prostration if there are pews in the room at all, but there's something very, very powerful about engaging your entire body in the practice.

You write in the essay that prayer, this is a quote, "That prayer, though it may not be purposed with directly influencing God, would continue to positively change the nature of myself. This is a mindset we should approach prayer with everyday." Speaking personally, how has prayer changed the nature of yourself?

Grace: That's a really good question. I think I grew up in the church. When you're young and you're in Sunday school, they tell you, "Oh, pray for good grades or pray for this. God will give it to you." They keep teaching us, "Ask and you shall receive." Things like that, which is okay. What happens is you keep thinking prayer is all for

yourself, and it's God giving you things but as you realize, you don't get everything that you pray for, right? Some people may be praying for wealth, I don't know, or health, and you have cancer.

I remember in seminary, one of my classmates, an older Korean woman, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was like [gasps]. I was devastated when I found out. I said, "Oh my goodness, are you okay? Are you okay?" She was just there calm, and she said to me, "Why not me?" I thought, "Wow, that's a strange way to answer when everyone else is frantic." If I had breast cancer, I'd be frantic and I'm like, I'll worry, "Please God, heal me." She said, "Why not me?"

That had an impact on me because I think when we pray, prayer does change us, and it makes us understand the world differently, and makes us understand God differently. God's not just this bank that we go to, and retrieve whatever we want, like an account where we can take things out. I think prayer changes us in so many ways. That's why I think it's important to continue to pray because prayer-- some people will say prayer changes nothing but ourselves.

I think prayer does change other things too, but I think a lot of it does change us, and I think we ourselves need a lot of changing. This world is falling apart. We in the US, under this pandemic. I'm Asian American. All those AAPI hate crimes and hate towards us, we need a lot of changing that needs to happen here in this world.

Rabbi Rami: Absolutely. Our guest today, Rev. Dr. Grace Ji-Sun Kim, is the author of 20 books, most recently *Hope in Disarray: Piecing Our Lives Together*. You can read her latest essay, *Body Prayer for Everyday* on *Spirituality & Health's* digital platform at spiritualityhealth.com. You can learn more about her work on her website gracejisunkim.wordpress.com. Grace, thank you so much for talking with us on *Essential Conversations*.

Grace: Thank you so much for having me. You asked me such great questions. Thank you for this time, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Hope to be back again. Thank you.

Rabbi Rami: I would love that. Thank you.

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