

Book Review

Toward a Bai Theology: Catholic Feminism in the Philippines. Edited by Virginia Fabella, MM and Agnes M. Brazal. Quezon City: Claretian Communications, 2023. Pp.x +273.

On May 27-29, 2011, thirty Filipina feminists, who before had been working separately, gathered together in Tagaytay City both to celebrate the gains of feminism in the Philippines and to share their concerns about growing fundamentalism, which would threaten to turn back the hands of time and move back whatever advances already made. This volume is the outcome of the gathering. For some reasons which would be unnecessary to elaborate, it took more than ten years after the gathering before a published collection of articles came out. But it is worth the wait. Any serious student not only of feminist theology in particular but also women's studies in general should have this book on their shelves.

There are many Filipino Catholics who have become so at home with patriarchal structures that they immediately view feminism as a manifestation of evil influences making inroads into our pristine faith. I am not sure whether these Catholics would be open enough even to read this book, or whether they would change their minds if ever they read it. Indeed, even among some women committed to gender issues, there is some reservation with the use of the word *feminism* because of its association with the West. Thus, this book is an attempt to show that feminism is not the result of ideological colonization and is consistent with our Catholic faith.

The book is divided into five parts. The first part discusses some historical antecedents of modern feminism in the Philippines. One important highlight of

this part is the presence of *babaylanes*, who made up one of the pillars of ancient society and were predominantly women. Foremost of the functions of a *babaylan* would be to bring the concerns of the people to the spirits. Although suppressed by the Spanish colonizers (oftentimes brutally, as narrated by other sources), the *babaylanes* adapted some aspects of Catholicism to their ancient customs. I personally would like to know more about the connection between the *babaylan* and the later *beaterias*. Other highlights of this section are indigenous spirituality where men and women would have equal footing, the use of feminine metaphors to address God, and the presence of priestess in a religion called Ciudad Mistica de Dios in Mt. Banahaw. The latter religious group continues to exist to this day.

The second part deals with the contribution of Filipinas in the socio-political transformation. This section includes, but is not limited to, participation of women in the struggle for national liberation. Many of these feminists had their awakening during the dark days of Marcosian rule but their advocacies continue to these days, even if the causes they are fighting for have evolved.

The third part deals with the story of consciousness-raising among the women religious. The process of conscientization met some barriers from the male-dominated church and from some women religious themselves because of stereotypes of what feminism is.

Feminism in educational institutions is treated in the fourth part. Included in this section is the slow but steady inroads of gender studies in the academe, and a comparative study of how different theological schools treat feminism in their respective curricula.

Feminism in the Philippines does not mean a conscious refusal to appropriate methodological approaches and even conceptual categories from other

countries. This is evident in the fifth part. For instance, the essay on feminist biblical spirituality is indeed rooted in the Philippine setting, most especially in the context of biblical reflections with communities of poor people. But to challenge the people to go beyond a dualistic mindset with which the Bible has been interpreted for them for generations, it is necessary to appropriate hermeneutical approaches that originated mostly in the Western academic milieu. The theological essay on sexuality as *pangangatawan* profoundly roots its discussion on the analysis of vernacular words. But this analysis would presuppose knowledge of the discourse on theological anthropology in the West. Furthermore, it would serve not only for its own sake but also as a critic of the traditional worldview of sexuality, as recently propounded most notably by John Paul II. The last essay also compares, albeit briefly, the different methodological approaches of the three leading feminist theologians today. This essay notes that these theologians, all receiving advanced theological training in foreign universities, would appropriate liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics, even if we can also discern some differences in their methods. This last essay seriously engages with Pope Francis' ambivalence toward gender issues. On the one hand, if we compare him with his predecessors, the current Pope is most open to feminist and LGBTQ+ issues and has taken a stand. But on the other hand, he also issues statements that would reduce feminism as part of ideological colonization.

The book ends with an epilogue that synthesizes all the essays. The distinctive features are again elaborated: *babaylan*, indigenous spirituality, nationalist struggles, etc. Before it ends, it addresses the issue of naming. If the term *feminism* carries some unnecessary baggage and is too Western and bourgeois for comfort, what is the alternative word? These female theologians

came up with *Bai* theology. This nomenclature is clever since *bai* is the root of *babae*. (If I have some reservations, it is that for some strange reasons which for now I cannot explain, *bai* is actually how male Cebuano speakers call each other. I am wondering whether there is any etymological connection between *babae* and *bai* as used by Cebuano males.)

I end my review with two suggestions: First, the *beaterias* deserve more than just a passing mention. *Bai* theologians who specialize in the (her)story of Philippine church can study this past phenomenon more seriously. Second, one must be careful in essentializing feminism in the Philippines. Just like many ideas, it is also evolving.

Ramon D. Echica