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Body and Sexuality: Theological–Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia

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Book Reviews

AGNES M. BRAZAL AND ANDREA LIZARES SI, EDS.

Body and Sexuality: Theological–Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007. 301 pages.

There are many perspectives on women that are constructed, shared, and experienced within the power dynamics of society in Asia. These differing views that are inscribed on women's body and sexuality have diversified, based not only on gender but also on class, race, caste, age, sexual orientation, and religious status. Christianity and other religions of Asia—along with colonialism, neocolonialism, and the networked world—have been constitutive forces in the construction of women's identities. However, women's body and sexuality are not only acted upon by external forces, but are also mediums of action, power, and resistance. This possibility for mediation calls for the re-discovery of narratives by women who resist oppressive discourses and define their own body and sexuality via alternative humanizing ways. These narratives serve as new and noble ways of understanding the faith and tradition that have been handed down to and sustained by the community. The book *Body and Sexuality* reflects the struggle of Asian women for liberation from oppressive forces and their attempt to articulate relations between their body and sexuality—two concepts normally conceived negatively in patriarchal, white, and Western theology.

This book is a collection of different theological and pastoral perspectives on how body and sexuality have been defined in various Asian contexts, and it

critically reflects these perspectives and understandings in the light of various faith traditions. Most of the essays in this anthology were presented at the Second Biennial Conference of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA 2). These essays are theologies of the body and sexuality that are built on the rich cultural heritage and experience of Asia, but also exhibit openness to dialogue with the continuously changing world and various religious traditions. They are an engagement of texts and reflections with, between, and among women in an attempt to weave a theology of the body, for the body, and with the body.

The book is divided into six sections. The first section consists of two chapters that focus on Shifting Foundations and Methodologies. The first of the two, Christine Gudolf's chapter, "Body, Self, and Sexual Identity," dwells on understanding postmodernity's insistence on the body as being inscribed and constructed. Drawing from science, psychology, culture, and the simple experience of being human, Gudolf concludes that "body grounds the self, but does not exhaust the self, which can develop an element, even a strong and prominent one, of transcendence over the body" (24). The second chapter by Pushpa Joseph, F.M.M., "Revisioning Eros for Asian Feminist Theologizing," links the creative powers of Eros with the divine energy in Tantric philosophy. She proposes—as an alternative to the excessive intellectualism of patriarchal theologies—an empowered feminist theology grounded on Sakti, which is rooted in women's experience, nourished by women's struggles, and enhanced by women's dynamic creative faculties.

The second section, that on the Body and Sexuality: Asian Societies/World, thinks about the theological challenges posed by the inscription of domestic work on the bodies of Filipina migrant workers in Hong Kong; the so-called right to sex work in the context of Taiwan; and the need to acknowledge one's embodiment from an ecological, feminist, and multicultural perspective (xii). In her reflections on Filipina migrant workers in Hong Kong, Gemma Tulud Cruz speaks of the difficulty of women being sacrificed not just at home but also in the workplace, and their experience of gendered transitions and gendered violence in unjust working environments. The commodification of Filipina migrant workers and its inscription in their bodies reveal "not only identification of domestic work with women but also that it is . . . specifically for poor women of color . . ." (68); such commodification is the reason for such a debasement. Cruz argues that Christian theology should scrutinize the boring and routinized activities to unmask body-based mechanisms employed to oppress women to serve as springboard to bodily integrity.

The third section, which is on Body and Scriptures, begins with the chapter by Julia Ong Siu Yin, I.J.S., wherein she explores the metaphorical women in the marriage imagery of Ezekiel 16, and how readers in Singapore identify with the characters depending on their gender. Gender thus becomes an ingredient in doing theology; it becomes a mode of understanding reality. The second chapter, written by Nozomi Miura, R.S.C.J., discusses Paul's body ethics in 1 Corinthians and how an East Asian concept of the body possesses striking similarities with Paul's concept of the *sōma*. This conception of the body as holy manifests a view of the sacred as immanent. Evelyn Monteiro, S.C.C., who writes the third essay under this section, provides an Indian feminist liberationist perspective on the story of the bent woman in Luke 13:10–17. Closing this section is the essay by Mary Cecilia Claparols, R.A., which highlights the body as a language of resistance as expressed in the silent testimony of the women in John 19:25–27. This section manifests alternative ways of reading scriptures from a discourse grounded in the body and influenced by sexuality.

Two of the chapters in the fourth section, titled "Body and Sacraments," touch on women as *imago Christi* (images of Christ). The first, written by Antoinette Gutzler, M.M., asserts that the "body" is integral to "Christicness" and that the Gospel can only be good news to Asia if women are neither violated nor denied—an incarnational reading that demands being embodied as necessary in the imitation of Christ. In the second chapter Astrid Lobo Gajiwala dwells on the broken bodies and spilt blood of women's Eucharistic lives, and questions a communion ritual that prevents those who set the table from setting the agenda. A third essay, written by Han Soon Hee, R.S.C.J., gives center stage to ageing women in Korea, suggesting a spirituality of imperfection that empowers elderly women to embrace new visions of themselves.

The fifth section, titled "Sexuality and Church Leadership," includes the essay by Leonila V. Bermisa, M.M., on the reality of sexual misconduct by clergy in the Philippines and the Catholic Church's response to such misconduct. Bermisa speaks of the publicity of these gendered violence and argues that the "[n]egative portrayals of women by the Church have definitely influenced and reinforced the subordination and violence against women in society" (222). After tracing gendered violence throughout Philippine colonial history, Bermisa urges religions to recognize how patriarchal structures, systems, and practices reinforce unjust relationships and perpetuate violence

against women. The section ends with Sharon A. Bong's essay, which critically assesses Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Women* in relation to the lesbian body with its dialectical tension between sex and gender.

The sixth and final section, on Images of God's Body, discusses ecofeminist attempts at reclaiming women's bodies and their biologically linked roles in two papers. A. Motti, S.C.C., in the first essay deconstructs oppressive facets while appropriating liberative elements of Hindu goddess myths, as well as underscores the challenges these pose to Christian God-language and ritual. The second essay, by Jeane C. Peracullo, explores the image of the world as God's womb, which in many Asian religions is a powerful symbol that suggests hidden growth and creative power. This section emphasizes women's physiological difference as an originary experience and source of theological reflection. In the first, women's bodily experience of menstruation, birthing, breastfeeding, and menopause (which entails being gifted with a womb) are appropriated in the theological reflection on how women live the Eucharist in their daily lives. In the second, embodiment is discussed as an essential ingredient in women's understanding of God and the world, and the intelligibility of imaging the world as God's womb.

Overall, *Body and Sexuality* provides a helpful overview of how Asian Catholic women today do (re)constructivist theology on their body and sexuality using Asian cultural resources and experiences. It is the voice of women theologians in Asia who are trying to articulate their difference and their faith-experiences in ways that are faithful and challenging to the Judeo-Christian tradition. True to its claims, the book is a clear manifestation of women doing theology grounded in a constitutive difference as determined by their body, sexuality, identity, and experience. The book questions patriarchal claims that limit women to a passive role; it argues that faith is not the sole territory of men, but also of women. True to its purpose, *Body and Sexuality* serves "as a 'free space' and a 'laboratory of ideas' on a topic in which women's voices have long been muted" (vii). In the book, we hear the beautiful voices of women theologians blending together in their difference and in harmony as they bear witness to the song of God's love made more intelligible and personal through their bodies and more meaningful and whole because of their sexuality.

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MARIANO A. DUMIA

Of Dreams, Sweat, and Tears: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Modern Filipino Heroes

Quezon City: New Day and Mariano Dumia, 2009. 250 pages.

Despite its geographic distance from the Philippines, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a land that is close to the hearts and minds of countless Filipinos. Of the kingdom's current population of 28 million, about 6 million are foreigners. One in six of those foreigners is a Filipino. Indeed, since 2006 at any given year about a quarter of a million Filipino workers goes to Saudi Arabia—the single largest deployment to any country of destination in the world, and more than half of the annual deployment to the entire region of West Asia. Of those quarter million Filipinos who leave annually for jobs in Saudi Arabia nearly half falls in the category of new hires, i.e., on new work contracts. Of the more than US\$14 billion in remittances that are sent back by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) from around the world to their families in the Philippines through the formal banking system, more than a billion dollars come from OFWs in Saudi Arabia.

The first Filipino workers arrived in the kingdom during the early 1970s, just when the Philippine labor export program was beginning to make itself evident as a national policy. This labor export program has now become a cornerstone of Philippine foreign and domestic policies. Not surprisingly, Filipino contemporary popular culture is replete with stories of those who have braved the deserts of Saudi Arabia in order to extract its life-giving essence—hence the term *Katas ng Saudi*, which roughly translates as Saudi juice or extract. Indeed, a movie was made in 2007 with the same title, featuring a member of the Philippine Senate, Jinggoy Estrada, the son of another famous actor, former Pres. Joseph "Erap" Estrada.

It is in such a context that one must appreciate the contributions of Mariano A. Dumia in his book *Of Dreams, Sweat, and Tears*. Its five chapters attempt to shed light on the kingdom and how Filipinos living and working there have adapted to its peculiar social, economic, political, cultural, and religious conditions. Chapter 1 provides a general and straightforward description of the kingdom, its topography, climate, history, politics, and so forth. Chapter 2 describes Philippines–Saudi Arabia relations as a kind of preface to Chapter 3, which is a lengthy discussion (nearly a hundred pages) of the history and current situation of Filipino labor migration to Saudi