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Comments:

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Comments

JOSE MARIO C. FRANCISCO, SJ

The Essentially Contested Vocabulary Related to Fetal Personhood

Hannah Bulloch's (2016) article is a welcome contribution to the growing volume of studies of everyday religion in both various contemporary contexts as well as earlier historical periods. These studies shift interest in social science research from institutions of religious traditions to everyday religious practices of individuals and groups within and outside such religious traditions.

The specific focus of Bulloch's article on fetal personhood is timely and important, as it adds an important and neglected dimension to this much-discussed and, to use W. B. Gallie's term, "essentially contested concept" (Ruben 2010). Her ethnographic approach relying on interviews and oral histories from Siquijor informants analyzes vocabulary from these discourses and other related practices without disregarding other social factors. The article concludes that "local notions of personhood are processual" and "ensoulment, while thought to occur at conception, is not sufficient to produce a person" (Bulloch 2016, 195).

The article's approach and argumentation are clearly articulated and highly commendable. Its analysis of native discourse related to fetal personhood is rightly based on a view of language and its usage as carrier of cultural meanings and nuances, and offers insights into the social world of the local population that other approaches may not be privy to.

Like any piece of serious research, Bulloch's article also opens doors to fundamental issues and questions for further consideration. The first, often discussed in translation studies, involves the relation of terminology in different languages, be it translation however that is taken, paraphrase, or any rendering from one language to another. This obtains in Bulloch's discussion of Visayan discourse in English. It notes that "the term Cebuano speakers use to denote the person is *tawo*, which also means 'human'—importantly the concepts of human and person are not differentiated as they are in English" (ibid., 208). Such a lack of differentiation is not interrogated at all but simply accepted as given. One may ask whether there is a Siquijodnon equivalent to the Tagalog expression, *Madaling maging tao pero mahirap magpakatao* (It is easy to be human, but difficult to be humane). Furthermore, the Visayan word *kalag* is taken to be somehow equivalent to the English "soul": "A *tawo* is constituted by body and soul combined. In other words, all persons have a soul—it would be impossible to be *tawo* without a *kalag*—but a soul can exist independent of a body and therefore a soul can exist without being a person" (ibid.). Even without debating whether "soul" or "spirit" is the better rendition, one cannot avoid questions regarding what *kalag* means in Visayan or how it is related to the Visayan word *lawas* for body. The "body-soul" vocabulary is used differently in various everyday cultural contexts as well as in different technical areas (e.g., Brown et al. 1998).

My studies of this vocabulary in Tagalog (*katawan-kaluluwa*) serve to illustrate the point. My first study, which is on a late-sixteenth-century missionary manuscript, reveals that, despite the presence of the Catholic understanding of the vocabulary then, the use of *loob* (literally, inside) in relation to both *katawan* and *kaluluwa* subverts the binary relation implied in the vocabulary (Francisco 2001).

My second work, that on cultural, theological, and scientific perspectives on the body-soul relationships, shows that Filipino notions of *kaluluwa* are *not* the same as the Catholic Church's understanding of soul (*anima*, Latin) in its official documents (Francisco 2006). On the one hand, some indigenous communities view the soul as "invisible" except to those it wishes to appear to or persons as having multiple souls related to different body parts, human activities, or animals (ibid., 136–37). On the other hand, Catholic teaching drew from cultural and philosophical resources through various historical periods to condemn forms of materialism that denied the spiritual nature of humans or of dualism that viewed matter and body as evil.

The Christian concept of "soul" expresses this spiritual nature and is related to each person's relation to God as ultimate origin and immortal destiny (ibid., 140–46). Given these divergences in views, one cannot presume that *kalag* is simply equivalent to "soul" in English, whether in ordinary or technical discourse.

The second issue opened by Bulloch's article involves the terminology regarding life and death and within this terminology, abortion. While this is outside the parameters of her ethnographic focus, one could surmise the essay's reluctance to engage in the contentious discussion about life, death, and abortion, especially when the word "life" has been coopted in popular discourse by so-called prolife groups. Nevertheless, these questions are implicated in any discussion of fetal personhood. In this regard, an ethnographic study of how local populations talk about these realities in their languages would be an important contribution. In fact, the article already takes initial steps in noting the use of the word *nakuhaan* "when talking about pregnancy loss, which principally denotes miscarriage, although it is also a term for abortion. It derives from the root word *kuha*, to take, and implies that something was taken or extracted, but the prefix 'na' makes the term passive, deemphasizing agency or intent (as if to say, 'it happened to be taken' or 'it was accidentally taken')" (Bulloch 2016, 206). Tagalog usage of *nakunan* for miscarriage is analogous, but induced abortion is rendered in terms of *pinalaglag* (literally, that which was willfully detached and left to drop). Another step toward thematizing the local understanding of life and death lies in the article's discussion about the fate of the aborted.

On account of the "essentially contested" vocabulary involved in these questions as well as in the meanings this vocabulary expresses, one must realize that there cannot be a unitary language about them. These questions will be discussed differently in discourses on the street, in the academe, within healthcare, in civil institutions, and within religious traditions—each with varying languages, norms, and ends. Given that all are concerned with matters of life and death, of humanity and personhood, of personal and social well-being, all stakeholders are called to engage in open and respectful conversation with each other and to search together for concrete policies and programs that serve, always imperfectly and never definitely, what is construed as the common good with deliberate attention to those at the margins like Bulloch's Siquijodnon informants. These voices from below need to be heard in such a conversation through the work of social scientists like Bulloch.

Thus in the continuing conversation, not debate, on reproductive health and related issues in Philippine public space, such voices alongside those of other stakeholders would test whether any policy or program—mandated by the Reproductive Health Law or voluntarily offered by NGOs and faith-based communities—are informed by the health sciences, respectful of religious freedom, and protective of people’s cultural ethos.

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JULIUS BAUTISTA

When One’s Birthday Opens Up a Cosmological Pandora’s Box

The common way of inquiring about someone’s birthday in Binisaya is to ask, *kanus-a ka na tawo?*—literally, when did you become a person? It is an intriguing feature of the Visayan worldview, one that may well be rooted in an ancient cosmological order, that the quintessential stage of one’s personhood is intuitively located not at conception but at the point in which we emerge into the world, when we take our first breath and attain an independent physical viability.

The notion that personhood is emplaced upon birth does have serious social and even political implications, particularly in the Philippines, where the debates about the recently passed Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health (RH) Law have been dominated by issues of sexual morality, theology, abortion, and the link between demography and economic development. Yet, why is it that cosmological beliefs about personhood have not been considered a source of crucial insight into these discussions, even though such beliefs are important to the majority of those who are the most affected by the RH Law’s ramifications?

This problematic remained in my mind as I considered Hannah Bulloch’s (2016) wonderful article, which is an attempt to grasp Visayan cosmological notions of fetal personhood in a manner that is well grounded in her observations of the practice of everyday life in Siquijor. It is refreshing and timely to read an ethnographically robust analysis that, at the very least, encourages us to take cosmology seriously in our discussions about such crucial legal and political issues. I agree with Bulloch’s central argument that, from a Binisaya perspective, personhood is processual and that having a “soul” is seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a person. But I would suggest, further, that if we are to really take cosmology seriously, we have a responsibility to cultivate a finely tuned and nuanced sense of the supernatural entities that condition what a person is from a Binisaya perspective, as well as the extended spectrum of the process of personhood.

With this in mind I offer what I hope could serve as an addendum to Bulloch’s interpretation of the ethnographic data. I suggest that, in addition