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Gender and Family in the Philippines.

Does Liberation Theology Provide a Cultural Framework for the Study of the Family?

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Leonardo Boff sums up the basic approach of Christian liberation theology as being tantamount to an unfolding inductive methodology, or praxis, that combines theory and practice. It discerns God's presence in the world by taking into consideration the aspirations of individuals in the context of their families and societies, and then looking to see what the spirit of the Bible has to say. It is biased for the poor and less fortunate because the God of the Bible is on the side of all who suffer, regardless of gender role or sexual orientation. Liberation theology does not begin through the entry point of some universal, male-centric idea of

organized religion or the family that is unchanging and the same everywhere. Rather it goes back to the people to think and reflect upon their different and gendered experiences in relation to the earth and each other, to better understand and identify their problems in solidarity with the people concerned.

In the Philippines, local people have interlinking ethnic diversities and regional affiliations that form a national heritage and self-identity. They have unique cultures, steeped in tradition, being passed down from generation to generation. Nothing is constant but change, as traditional cultural values and behaviors may change in response to the concerned community's social and economic circumstances resulting from globalization and, more recently, climate change and the effects of natural disasters on the affected communities and environments. Nevertheless, traditional pre-colonial cultural and spiritual values often continue to persist in the face of change, in new guise.

Fanella Cannell,¹ who did fieldwork in the Bicol region of Southern Luzon, for example, explains that the idea of traveling with a companion is an ancient and on-going cultural notion in the Philippines. No one goes anywhere alone or meets someone new for the first time, unless accompanied by another. The question asked of anyone departing is never “When will you be back?” but “Who will go with you?” Many traditional family relational concepts are found in the form of mediators and go-betweens. Young adult daughters, traditionally, were not permitted by their parents to enter into a courtship relation with a man, unless accompanied by a chaperon. Third-party intermediation also is an important concept

¹ Fanella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

in local traditional customary forms of behavior. Should a misbehaving child incur a problem at home to disentangle with his or her parents, a rule of thumb would be to ask a trusted elder or family member to intercede on their behalf. Arguably, children are locally believed to have a spirit that, given proper respect by parents and elders, helps to guide them to develop into good human beings. Another example, it is common knowledge in the Philippines that a gay male child asking his parents for a doll instead of a truck, often is given the doll for, to use a commonly heard colloquial expression, in other words, “Who would want to mess with a child’s mind and spirit? If that is the way they are, love them and let them be.” Similarly, take the case of the spirit possessor, who, in taking pity on someone, allows that the healer can cure the sick person. This idea of traveling with a spirit companion may also be comparable to that of a charismatic priest, or basic cultural community organizer, who walks with God (God being Love and Love being not just a word but manifest in the spirit of community building in harmony with nature).

When the Spanish brought Catholicism to the Philippines, they introduced the saints and persona of Christ and the concept of heaven and hell. They may also have introduced a different way of perceiving death as being opposite of life, rather than death being birth into the next life. Local and indigenous people incorporated the new beliefs into their own traditional belief systems. This is well exemplified by their use of the persona of Christ in the form of a life-size statue to celebrate the crucifixion and resurrection and also in calling upon spirits to help the local community.²

² Ibid., 127.

Fanella Cannell explains that beauty pageants are molded on the United States tradition, although they have roots in Spanish colonial Catholicism—for example, religious processions such as the crowning of Queen Mary. Beauty, from a Bicolano Filipino perspective, is a sort of protective layer that also can elevate the status of those who do not have it, although, colloquially at the different community levels, one often hears that beauty comes from within. An example is that the gay members of the community find that they are most accepted during beauty contests, when they are at their loveliest. Whereas before colonialism, they had meaningful roles in the community such as helping with household chores, taking care of children and the elderly, and healing the sick and less fortunate, gay men have a somewhat ambiguous status within contemporary Bicol, Philippine, culture. They consider themselves men, but with women's hearts. Until recently, partly as a result of globalization and the increasing achievements of the gay rights movement, the occupations they normally took were beauticians, hairdressers, and seamstresses. However, today, more and more gay men are entering into elementary school teaching, nursing, and other professional, traditionally female leadership roles in the community that used to be mainly held by women but now are gender-free. Gay men provide a fundamental service for non-gay residents, argues Cannell, especially when it comes to beauty contests. While the local people overwhelmingly accept the gay community, there is a lot of teasing, which arguably, is a remnant of the colonial negativity towards gender differences. Elders will mock gay greetings and teach their children to do so. Highly prized in the life of the gay community is beauty: for themselves and their clients. The pageants give them an opportunity to show off to the community just how beautiful they are. Accordingly, the male judges often find

themselves uncomfortable when judging such beautiful persona. Cannell suggests that underlying these festivities is the American ideal of a beauty pageant. English songs are sung, and beauty contests follow the American pattern. In contrast, however, children in the context of the traditional Filipino household domain, regardless of their sexual or gender orientation, were and continue to be regarded as cherished and valuable members of their family and society in the Philippines.

In other words, to say it again, in the traditional Philippine setting, boys who wanted to do female tasks were most highly likely to have been a very welcome addition to the family. They were widely valued for helping to care for children and elders and doing domestic chores around the home. Men and women's pre-colonial roles were not likely to have been rigidly applied. For example, it is well known in the Philippine studies literature that, early on, Filipina women enjoyed greater equality with men as compared to their early counterparts in the patrilineal societies of Europe (e.g., in Spain). Archaeologist Barbara Andaya documents cases of Southeast Asian island queens leading royal followings in their own right, although there is no evidence of their existence after the eighteenth century, which makes sense if the colonizers chose to negotiate primarily through the agency of male leaders.³ Another example can be drawn from local variations of *aswang* folk tales (witch lore). The female undead of the Philippines, like their European counterparts, are represented as using sexual appeal primarily as a means of disguise, but the creatures' goals and functions do not indicate that

³ Barbara Watson-Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 169.

hypersexuality is an innate part of their character or a required means of attacking their victims. Another example, Filipino male viscera suckers, or *aswang*, are rare but do sometimes appear as a cat, but unlike the European vampires, they seek out specifically children, much like the female vampires/witches/*aswang* do. This seems to imply that in addition to greater gender equality in the context of the Filipino family domain, there is some corresponding equality in folklore.

Liberation theology offers an open-ended approach that takes its cue from the spirit of the local community, and goes beyond differences of gender, economic class statuses, and political orientations. It argues that we are children of a loving and compassionate God, neither male nor female but embodying both. She sustains creation. It is open to the traditional conceptualization of the extended Filipino family that domesticates and makes friends into family, and is more accepting and tolerant of gender differences than officially pontificated in the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. More than this, we as Catholics are called to treat each other, and every human being, like brothers and sisters, as members of the human family, and to live in harmony with nature. This is a difficult calling given false colonial and Darwinian Euro-American rationalizations of free and unharnessed (uncivilized) enterprise being equated to individualism and democracy, as capitalism is falsely likened as tantamount to our human nature. Such false notions continue to give rise to needless suffering, ranging from recent local tragedies and travesties of justice resulting from “disaster capitalism” to the wanton destruction of the environment and all natural life. Other alternative traditional models of familial and social life exist. These alternative approaches build upon the local structures of collaboration and cooperation, rather than the

“winner takes all” competitive democratic model. Through the building of faith-based communities modeled after the traditional concept of the Filipino family, eco-feminist liberation theology offers another way for the promotion of sustainable development in the Philippines.