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And God said, “Bahala na!”: The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context

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Book Reviews

AND GOD SAID, "BAHALA NA!" THE THEME OF PROVIDENCE IN THE LOWLAND FILIPINO CONTEXT. By Jose M. de Mesa. Maryhill Studies 2. Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1979. 206 pages.

This study is the second of the Maryhill Studies series of the Maryhill School of Theology in Quezon City, which "places special emphasis on the pastoral and missionary aspects of theological courses and encourages both faculty and students to engage in the task of indigenization in the Philippines." As the published version of the author's doctoral dissertation at Louvain University in Belgium, the study belongs to the genre of theological attempts to indigenize theology in the Philippines and follows earlier attempts at a theological hermeneutics from Philippine life and experience.

The first three chapters lay the theoretical groundwork for indigenous theologizing. De Mesa writes in a clear and understandable style, using not only Philippine sources but likewise Asian and African, in addition to the standard European sources, to explain "theological re-rooting," which according to him contains two dimensions: "inculturation," or finding ways to explain the faith experience in terms harmonious with the culture, and "contextualization," or evaluating aspects of the culture against the standards of this faith experience. The first dimension is interpretative or hermeneutical, the second prophetic. In attempting theological re-rooting, he relies not only on anthropological data (mostly folklore) but data from the other social sciences as well as literature.

Although language is mentioned as an important component of this indigenization, I would have felt happier if more weight were given to the necessity of actually thinking and expressing oneself in an indigenous language to carry on the theological re-rooting enterprise. The use of an indigenous language to speak of the local experience of a faith-community is not only a badge of authenticity; it is above all a means to re-think one's theological experience in categories which are non-Western. In the process, based on similar attempts to indigenize other disciplines, one discovers dimensions of reality and areas of investigation hitherto neglected. This has been the experience of the psychologists at the University of the Philippines doing psychological

research in Pilipino. In the process, they have unearthed new areas of investigation, for example, capturing nuances of feeling and sensibility in their introspective studies using Pilipino.

The initial three chapters, which outline the frame of reference, are excellently done. De Mesa has a way of explaining himself in diagrams, which is pedagogically useful. His figures 1, 2 and 3 (in chapter 1, pages 11-13) are not explicitly explained in the text, however. In an earlier diagram in the same chapter (page 2), when explaining Filipino national culture, there is a mixing of metaphors, as he speaks of the "Basic Malay Cultural Stratum" on the one hand, and of the "Spanish Cultural Strain" and "American Cultural Strain," on the other. To complete the picture, I would have included Chinese elements in Filipino culture (quite important especially in the area of kinship and the extended family system), Hindu elements (important for pre-Spanish religion), and Muslim elements (elements of which filtered into northern and central Philippines prior to the coming of the Spaniards).

The core of the study is found in chapter four, the last chapter, which attempts to exemplify the programmatic section by reflecting on the theme of providence in the lowland Filipino context.

Using data from folklore, literature, even pop culture (comic books, radio and TV serials, soap operas), earlier anthropological studies on Filipino belief systems and values, historical analysis and most novel of all, sociological data on life in the rural areas and in the urban slums, including the perceptions of the poor and their expressions of these perceptions expressed in interviews, de Mesa considers both the negative and the positive aspects of the *Bahala na* attitude. He takes the position that *Bahala na* connotes not only fatalism but likewise responsibility and management; positively, *Bahala na* is the poor Filipino's way of coping with circumstances beyond his control after he has taken all necessary means to do what he can. In other words, it would be a cultural expression of the Ignatian advice: "Pray as if everything depended on God, act as if everything depended on you."

Tied in with the *Bahala na* complex is another Filipino concept, *pagamamalasakit* or "caring." With these, de Mesa then goes on to explain God's *Bahala na* attitude or risk-taking in giving freedom to man but at the same time His continuing *pagamamalasakit* (care) for His creatures manifested in the Old Testament, Christ's own risk-taking in accepting the responsibility of Messiahship, and His care in accepting the crucifixion. In turn, the Christian continues this risk-taking and caring for others through social action and even revolution, if necessary, to liberate his fellowman.

The last chapter ends with a "final word" summarizing the chapter.

From a purely rhetorical point of view, I would have divided the essay into three parts: the first three chapters to constitute the first part, the theological frame of reference; the second and major part would contain the theological reflections on the theme of providence; the third part, the concluding chap-

ter, would then attempt to draw out further theological and programmatic implications for methodology as a result of the reflective experience contained in the major sections.

The dissertation breaks new ground in its successful attempt at presenting an integrated discussion on the methodology of theological re-rooting and its exemplification of this venture by dealing with the theme of providence. In its catholic use of every available datum from the social sciences (including pop culture and literature, not merely folklore, and sociological data, actual interviews among the rural poor and the urban slum dwellers, reported by sociologists) as a springboard for theologizing, the investigation likewise breaks new ground.

There is a foreword by Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B., who has pioneered in the indigenization of worship, an appendix on Pilipino words culled from Panganiban's thesaurus; and an excellent bibliography.

One hopes that de Mesa's programmatic work will be followed by other attempts to reflect on other dimensions of the faith experience by theologically re-rooting, for example, the Filipino's worship (devotion to the Sto. Niño and the Blessed Mother, devotion to the saints, and fiestas, including the Moriones) and the Filipino's moral values (his sense of commitment, responsibility, justice, social relations and charity, patriotism and social awareness).

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ABORTING AMERICA. By Bernard N. Nathanson, M.D., with Richard N. Ostling. New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1979. 320 pages.

A well-known New York City obstetrician and gynecologist, at one time the most prominent doctor in the 1967-73 legal battle to repeal existing American laws prohibiting abortion, Dr. Bernard N. Nathanson has come to the conclusion, after years of agonizing reflection, that abortion on request is morally wrong. The largest abortion clinic in the Western world was under his direction in New York City where, as he now admits, he had "in fact presided over 60,000 deaths." (p. 164) Today he is in the paradoxical situation "of considering elective abortion to be an unjust taking of human life and yet performing one now and then when I was unable to avoid it. Perhaps in the future I will refuse regardless of circumstances." (p. 248)

This immensely readable book is the story of the evolution both of Dr. Nathanson's long-cherished convictions about abortion, and of the medical knowledge-explosion in the past decades about fetal life that forced him to change his moral position. Religion did not influence him in any way. Following the path of his doctor father who had renounced his Jewish religion, Dr. Nathanson became a professed atheist. His opinions about the morality of abortion "have never been influenced in the slightest by the empires of faith." (p. 6)