

Bazzell, Pascal D. and Aldrin Peñamora, eds. *Christologies, Cultures and Religions: Portraits of Christ in the Philippines*. Mandaluyong City, Philippines: OMF Lit., 2016.

I have waited for a book like this for a long time. Finally, Filipino evangelicals have begun to break out of the ill-fitting “wineskin” of western theology and have begun to give credence to doing Christology within their own context, a domain that has traditionally been dominated by Catholic scholars. The articles included here were originally presented at a theological symposium sponsored by the Koinonia Theological Seminary (KTS) in Davao City, Philippines, in 2014. The work is also co-sponsored by the Asia Theological Association, which has produced a number of excellent books by Asian theologians.

Co-editor Pascal Bazzell explains the difference between western and non-western theologies:

What sets non-Western Christologies apart from many Western Christologies is the way in which non-Western theologians not only articulate Christology from the triune God sending his son into the world (Christology from above) and from the historical Jesus (Christology from below), but also from three other points “from within” Asian contexts: the “religious other”; “cultures”; and “poverty.” Authentic Christologies in the Philippines can emerge only if they encounter the religious other, cultures and the oppressed, and the migrants and the poor. (3-4)

While this approach has some challenges to it, such as not rooting theology deeply in the soil of Scripture, this approach does take seriously the fact that theology is always done in the human context.

He goes on to say:

Some of the best Christologies today were not developed in safe environments like our classrooms, consultations, and conferences; but often in rather difficult situations marked by great loss, challenges, and pain. Sedmak pointedly remarks that “theology is about being honest to [sic] reality. And the face of reality can be painful and ugly. It is the face of slavery and famine, cancer and war, tears and blood. We do theology in the middle of the storm.” (7)

Doing theology in this manner, then, for Bazzell, leads us to the “vision of a promised land, the vision of unbroken closeness and unthreatened community.” (Ibid.)

The variety of articles in this volume is wide, reflecting the backgrounds, interests and social engagement of the presenters. The book is divided into two parts, Christology in Cultural Perspective and Christology in Inter-Religious Perspective.

In Part I, there are eight articles: *Searching for Jesus Christ in Philippine History: The Dream Does Not Die* by Mariano C. Apilado; *Encountering Jesus in the Midst of Struggle: A Christology of Struggle* by Victor Aguilan; *The Faith of Jesus as 'Pagsasalooob at Pangangatawan' [Interiorization and Embodiment]: A Cultural Approach* by Jose M. DeMesa; *Christology From a Filipino Woman's Perspective* by Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro; *A Face of Christ In Binondo, Chinatown* by Chiu Eng Tan; "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?: Christology Amid Disasters" by Rico Villanueva; and *Manobo Blood Sacrifice and Christ's Death* by Brian Powell. The level of engagement in the culture and history of the Philippines is truly exceptional and much can be gleaned from these pages, although some articles in Part I reflect a lack of balance with Scripture—the supreme law of faith and practice. This does not hold true in Part II.

Apilado takes us on a journey of theological engagement from the Spanish colonial era in 1521 to the end of the American colonial era in 1946. He then proposes the development of an indigenous Christology, based on the incarnation of Christ and taking into account both the positive and negative factors of their colonial history and the missionaries that accompanied the colonizers. He contends that when we find the real Jesus, understood through a Filipino cultural lens, we will enjoy the true fullness and abundance of life. (22)

Aguilan writes of understanding Christ in the struggles of daily life—struggles that are embodied by and reflected in the various images of Christ that are so popular in the Philippines. He also draws on themes of western theology and global pop culture, which he contends, affects Filipino Christology.

De Mesa, a well-respected lay Catholic theologian, picks up on the theme of *Pagsasalooob* (Interiorization) and *Pangangatawan* (Embodiment) of the Kingdom of God. Here, he admits that for many years, he followed western forms of theologizing and found it difficult to think in terms of contextualizing the gospel within Filipino cultural concepts (37-8). He did, however, make the change and has produced some thought provoking work here and elsewhere. De Mesa's work also highlights the difficulty of expressing some Filipino terms in the English language. There is much to be said for doing theology in the indigenous languages.

I have serious reservations about Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro's feminist reflections on the incarnation of Christ. To begin with, she roots

her thoughts not in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, but in the Hindu concept of an avatar (53-4). Then she compares the incarnation of Christ to the “Trickster” of Native American mythology. (54) In short, she leads us down a path we would do well not to follow.

The remaining articles reflect a more conservative theological viewpoint, starting with Chiu Eng Tan’s insightful article on Christology in Binondo, Manila’s Chinatown. Chiu reflects on the mix of folk Buddhism and folk Catholicism practices there and highlights the reality of an animistic worldview where practitioners seek supernatural power in ways and means that benefit the practitioner, regardless of the source. Chiu accurately reflects that these practices are not biblical; however, he stops short of offering biblical answers. Still, his article presents excellent details for anyone wanting to understand animism in the Philippines.

Rico Villanueva provides an excellent article on Christology in disasters. Indeed, he has written much on the issue of theodicy from an Asian perspective. As usual, he provides an excellent balance between faithfulness to the Scriptures and the realities of everyday life in the Philippines.

Brian Powell’s article on Blood Sacrifice and the cross of Christ among the animistic, Manobo tribe of Mindanao provides an excellent pattern of contextualization by relating the death of Christ using cultural concepts understandable to the Manobo without compromising the message of Scripture.

Part II of the book is entitled *Christology in Inter-Religious Perspective*, seeks to relate the gospel to other religions. Given that KTS is in Mindanao, where Islam is strong, three of the articles, written by Emo Yango, Lee Joseph Custodio, and Herbert T. Ale deal with Christianity and Islam. In general, I found their articles to be excellent, especially Custodio’s article comparing Christology in Islamic writings with that of the apostle Paul.

Following Ale, Edgar Ebojo, a noted authority on NT textual variants, takes us on an interesting journey of Christology in the textual variants of the NT in the 2nd to 4th centuries of the church, reflecting on the Christological thinking of the time. He introduces this article by referring to the furious debate on the use of the translation of the Christological title “son of God” in Muslim Bible translations, which appears to be why his article is included in this part of the book. He then relates this to the history of the struggle of defining and explaining Jesus’ dual nature throughout history. He makes an excellent application to Bible translation work, which is critical to his own translation work at the Bible society.

Bazzell and Omar Abu Khalil then present some excellent insights on the Muslim-Christian dialogue, giving particular attention to the strong prophetic tradition in Islam and the prophethood of Christ. They do an excellent job of remaining faithful to the Scriptural descriptions of Christ, but they also note that Christian scholars down through the centuries have not done much reflection to Christ's role as prophet. Hopefully their contribution to this field will inspire others to take up the issue.

Aldrin Peñamora, who is heavily involved in Muslim-Christian relations throughout Southeast Asia, concludes Part II with a reflection on Christian-Muslim relations and the Eucharist. He states that it is not a good idea to try to whitewash the unsavory parts of the history of Christianity as it relates to Islam, especially because the current tensions between these two groups in the Philippines relates to "Christians" taking the Muslims' ancestral land through the force of passing laws enforced by military arms. He then goes to great length to demonstrate how reconciliation can be achieved through the meaning of the Eucharist.

The editors thoughtfully included an afterward by social anthropologist Melba Maggay who, despite her claims to the contrary, is one of the finest evangelical theologians in the Philippines. Maggay rightfully exults in the breaking free of western theological categories that this book embodies. She proposes that we move toward "contextualization from within," meaning that we select biblical themes that will be well understood within the Filipino cultural and historical context, dealing with the issues of our day. I concur. This volume is a good step in that direction.

Reviewed by Dave Johnson, DMiss