

Validating What Is 'Pagan'

Lizette Tapia-Raquel¹

Introduction

Do you read the Bible while seated on the toilet seat? Have you ever contemplated on your sermon outline with your pants down? Have you ever prayed to God while taking a bath naked? I have. In fact, God's most life-changing revelations and my profoundest theological thoughts have almost always originated in the bathroom. Could this theological exercise be called 'indecent theology?'

In her book *Indecent Theology*, Marcella Althaus-Reid, an Argentinian woman theologian, relates how women sold lemon in the streets of Argentina without their panties on. These old women with long skirts thought nothing of squatting on the streets when they needed to relieve themselves. They peddled their wares like this for many years until the advent of foreign evangelists who condemned them for their supposed 'immoral behavior.' Soon they were harassed and insulted by Argentinian police officers who in earlier years related to them with kindness and respect. In one of the many summers that she sat in the midst of these women, smelling their female odor and hearing their articulations about God, she began to find an interest in theology. Marcella is indignant about the disrespect and the demonization of these old women. To her, they are unusual poor women who are unusual Christian believers. They may not fit the mold of theologians but their articulations are expressions of contextual theology which exhibit the realities of their struggle for life and dignity.

In Philippine history, before the Spanish colonialists came, Filipino women wore no undergarments and dressed only in thin clothing because of the tropical climate. In some tribes, women had no top garments and only wore skirts. Then, with the advent of Roman Catholicism which imposed a cult of virginity and purity upon women, a standard of decency in dressing was forced upon the natives, the women in particular. The sensuality of the female natives was demonized and the Spanish nuns became the model for female behavior and decent attire. The long, flowing hair of women was kept in a bun to imitate the short hair of nuns which was tucked under a wimple and the thin clothing was replaced with layers of garments that constricted movement and completely shrouded the female form. This code of dressing was an imposition upon the natives and they did not give in without resistance. The colonialists responded with determination and the accounts in the Spanish chronicles report that female Igorots who came to the towns without upper garments were given as many as fifty lashes on their backs (Brewer, 2001).

But does it really matter whether you wear undergarments beneath your clothes, while you are selling lemons? Or for that matter, does it matter if you do theology without your clothes on? Marcella puts forward 'indecent theology' as a method that does not and must not deny the sexuality of persons. It is a commitment to pronounce the realities of

¹ Ms. Lizette Tapia-Raquel is a Methodist and teaches at the Union Theological Seminary in Dasmariñas, Cavite, Philippines. She is also taking her Master of Theology at the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST).

our sexuality in dealing with economic, political and ecclesiological issues in relation to theology. It is an attitude of honesty that is intent on unraveling appearances and standards as prescribed by society, to reveal realities that may need to be challenged.

If we can accept the validity of indecent theology, can we also acknowledge the authenticity of 'pagan liturgy'?

Validating 'Pagan Liturgy'

'Pagan' has been used for beliefs and practices associated with the worship of nature. Paganism may take many forms, including pantheism (belief that the whole of reality is divine), polytheism (belief in many gods), and animism (belief that natural features of the world are invested with divine power). Historically, the adherents of the three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have applied the term to the indigenous religions they encountered in the course of their expansion." (Microsoft Encarta)

When we call people of other faiths 'pagans,' we are saying that their belief system is wrong, while asserting that we, with our rituals and doctrines, are right. When we call them 'pagans,' we condemn their understanding of the supreme being as 'false,' while ours is 'absolute' and 'true.' When we call them 'pagans,' we dismiss the validity of their faith and presume that they need to be converted to experience the 'true God.'

In Philippine history, our ancestors have been called 'pagans,' among other derogatory terms. Even in schools today, children are taught that the early Filipinos were godless. But did God really arrive only with the Spanish and Americans? Did God need a religion like Roman Catholicism and Protestantism to reveal Godself to a people? Did God take a boat or an airplane to get to the Philippines? If we cannot imagine God present among our people before the colonizers came, then we believe in an inadequate god, a god that can be placed in boxes and suitcases.

The Spanish and American do not have a monopoly of God. As empires, they used God to justify their imperial projects but their articulations about God hardly resembled the God of the Scriptures who took the side of the slave or the oppressed. I believe God revealed God-self to the Filipino natives from the very beginning. Therefore, what I propose is to validate "pagan liturgy."

Ed Lapiz, a Filipino preacher, has promoted indigenous liturgy and has referred to his project as 'redeeming indigenous liturgy.' However, it still presumes that indigenous rituals are 'wrong' or 'sinful' that is why they need to be 'redeemed.' It follows that only by some act of 'consecration' would indigenous liturgy become fit for worship and made acceptable to God.

What I propose goes beyond the redemption of indigenous rituals. By naming 'pagan liturgy' as liturgy, I mean to authenticate the rituals and practices of minority groups as valid expressions of faith of a people who seek God. Their acts of worship have value and must be acknowledged as genuine expressions that are meaningful and transformative in

the life of the community. Perhaps the only qualification we can propose is that it should promote life, dignity and integrity for all creation.

At Union Theological Seminary, we have celebrated 'Lakbay-Samba' or 'Laksamba,' a prayer walk, for the past four years. The liturgy involves a journey through six stations in the seminary land and at different points there are rituals that celebrate community life, lament violence and injustice, honor God as the author of creation, and challenge those present to respond to a world in need. Much of what we do cannot be found in the Books of Worship from abroad but our self-created articulations are relevant and meaningful to our contexts in the seminary and in our churches.

Resisting Prescribed Liturgy

Liturgy is a body of rites prescribed for formal public worship (Microsoft Encarta). As Christians, a more specific definition would be: *liturgy is a body of rites prescribed for formal public worship by people who seek God.* If the Ifugaos, tribal peoples found in Northern Philippines, have an offering ritual for the rice god "Bulol," is that not liturgy? If an Aeta community plays the drums, dances and chants in thanksgiving for courtship and marriage, is that not liturgy? If an Igorot kills a chicken in a public ritual of thanksgiving, is that not liturgy? Going back to our definition, 'pagan liturgy' qualifies as it fulfills the second part: "formal public worship by people who seek God." However, it falls short based on the first part of the definition as it is not "prescribed."

This brings us to the question—who 'prescribes' liturgy. In the movie "Monalisa Smile," Julia Roberts, an American actress, plays the role of an art teacher. She presents various pictures and paintings to her class and at one point asks them, "Is this art?" One student replied, "There are standards." Another one says, "Someone has to say 'it is art.'" "It's art!" remarks the teacher. And a student says, "Not just anyone can say 'it is art,'" it must be the 'right people.' Who are the 'right people' who can 'prescribe' liturgy?

To prescribe liturgy is to believe that there is a 'universal' liturgy. One set of rituals and practices that is relevant and meaningful for all cultures and races wherever they may be. Can we prescribe a universal liturgy? Yes. This has been done too many times in history. And this universal liturgy is just part of a bigger package which includes language, culture, form of government and economic system. If we accede that there is a universal liturgy, then we submit to the impositions of stronger nations and institutions to the detriment of many local traditions and systems that have genuinely expressed the ethos of these communities. We undermine the capacity of peoples to self-expression, self-identity and self-determination. So then the question is no longer "who can prescribe liturgy?" The question is: "Is it ethical to prescribe liturgy?"

Is God a Christian? God is bigger than Christianity. This statement comes from the faculty paper of Union Theological Seminary. If we can believe that God is bigger than Christianity, then it has very serious but liberating implications on our liturgy. We can no longer 'prescribe' liturgy. This means that our Christian liturgy is no longer the only way to experience God. However, there is a more significant question, "Are we really able to

create ways to communicate with God, or does God continue to reveal Godself to us in new and exciting ways?"

The White and Black Buffalo (Ang Puti at Itim na Kalabaw)

One of the graduation requirements we give our senior students in the seminary is that they preach in the chapel service. Bladymer San Jose, who graduated in April 2007, spoke about the 'white' and 'black' buffalo in his message. One of our national symbols is the 'kalabaw' or black buffalo. According to him, when he first came to the seminary, he thought everything 'white' was good and better, if not the best. In the course of his theological studies, he witnessed the clash of the 'white' and 'black' buffalo. He realized that white is not always good and better. In fact, he found himself, surprisingly, closer to the black buffalo. The kalabaw or black buffalo was able to embody the aspirations, struggles, perspectives and visions of people who like him had a colonial past, continue to be ruled by 'empires' and remain subjugated politically, economically, and spiritually.

Going one step further, is there really such a thing as a 'white' buffalo or a 'puting kalabaw?'

Ang 'puting kalabaw' or the 'white buffalo' is a misnomer. The Critical Asian Principle, as a guideline for Asian theologians identifies what is distinctively Asian and provides critical basis for judgment on matters dealing with the life and mission of the Christian community, theology, and theological education in Asia. It emphasizes the plurality and diversity of peoples, the colonial experience, the need for self-reliance, self-identity and cultural identity, the challenge to create alternative social orders that would uplift human dignity, and the reality that Christianity is a minority in the Asian context. Therefore, to do contextual theology, one must embrace one's true identity. There is no such thing as a 'puting kalabaw' or 'white' buffalo

'Indecent theology' and 'Pagan Liturgy.' In Christian tradition, theology and decency can be incongruent. Pagan and liturgy are bi-polar opposites. By validating 'indecent theology' and 'pagan liturgy,' we begin to embrace theological discourses and articulations that may be able to more honestly and genuinely articulate the struggles of the marginalized Asian people. More importantly, we no longer demonize the 'black buffalo' or the 'itim na kalabaw.' I believe that to do multi-cultural ministry is no longer about converting and transforming cultures and peoples according to our standards. Our task today is to validate the variety of gifts and revelations of God in these various cultures.

References

- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Brewer, Carolyn. *Holy Confrontation: Religion, Gender and Sexuality in the Philippines*. Manila: