

Book Review

Body and Sexuality: Theological-Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia

Edited by Agnes M. Brazal and Andrea Lizares Si.

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007. 301 pages.

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Body and Sexuality is a pathfinding volume, which breaks the silence around the long-held taboo of women's sexuality in Asian Christian communities. Based on the papers from the second conference of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia held in Yogyakarta in November 2004, the anthology provides biblical and theological grounding for Asian Christian women to affirm their body and dignity. It makes significant contributions to Asian feminist theology and is an invaluable resource for churches, clergy, seminarians, and pastoral workers who are committed to women's emancipation and liberation.

The anthology is interdisciplinary in nature and broad in scope, including discussions on Body and Sexuality; Asian Societies/World; Body and Scriptures; Sacramentality of Women's Bodies; Sexuality and Church Leadership; and Images of God's Body. The authors engage feminist biblical and theological literature, as well as gender theory, women's psychology, queer theory, and Asian philosophy and religions. Together they criticize the dualistic construction of spirit and body in Christianity and lift up emancipatory elements in various Asian traditions that are life-affirming for women.

Never before have we seen such a plurality of female subjects entering into Asian theological discourse. We have theological reflections on Filipina domestic workers, female sex workers, lesbians, butches/femmes, older women, and victims of clergy sexual abuse. By attending to bodies in their particularities, the anthology testifies to the commitment to diversity and inclusivity of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia.

The use of body as a heuristic key to interpret scriptures offers fresh insights and promising results. For example, an intercultural reading between Pauline body theology in 1 Corinthians and Asian understanding of body points to new possibilities in conceptualizing the Christian community. The bent body of a woman (Lk. 13:10-17) becomes an occasion for critique of patriarchal culture then and now. The presence of women's bodies standing silently near the cross

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bears witness to true discipleship. These critical readings of the Bible point to the body as a site of struggle as well as reclamation for women.

It is noteworthy that in the anthology, sexuality is not seen narrowly through a gender/sex framework, but is consistently placed within the larger cultural, political, and economic contexts. Contributors are keenly aware that sexuality is shaped by changing cultural ethos, as well as globalization forces. The exploitation of women's bodies and sexuality is seen as intimately linked to women's migrancy, patriarchal business culture, and hierarchal leadership in church and society.

Yet, the anthology does not treat Asian women only as victims, but as subjects capable of seeking pleasures and expressing desires. While women's sexuality has been discussed in the church primarily within the bounds of monogamous marriage and procreation, contributors are bold to explore other manifestations of women's passion and desire. Pushpa Joseph articulates a Sakti's theology, which creatively links the spirit, the body, and the erotic through recapturing liberating impulses from Tantric philosophy. Sharon Bong offers a queer revision of Christianity and speaks of the autoerotic pleasure of women, which challenges compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood.

The book also offers concrete suggestions and resources for the churches struggling to affirm the full potential of women. Through re-imagining the church and Eucharist from the perspective of women's body, it mitigates the androcentric biases of church doctrines and enables us to envision the Body of Christ in bold new ways. It also suggests strategies to address pastoral concerns such as clergy sexual misconduct, care for elderly women, and empowerment of marginalized women, such as prostitutes.

I recommend this courageous book enthusiastically and hope that it will be widely read and used as a springboard for further discussions on women's body and sexuality in Asia. The book will stir and agitate, as well as give the readers much food for thought.