

Agnes M. Brazal, PhD

Research Project: Book
Doing Vernacular Theo-Ethics in a Postmodern World

Postmodern discourses while opening up a space for hitherto marginalized voices to be heard has ironically led to the problematizing of cultural identity and thus the project of inculturation as well. One particular approach that has come under attack is vernacular hermeneutics. Vernacular interpretation makes use of the reader's cultural resources and social experiences to understand the biblical narratives and the broader Christian tradition. This can draw on three dimensions of the culture: ideational (worldviews, values and rules); performantial (rituals and roles); and material (symbols, food, clothing, etc.).

Vernacular hermeneutics has made "culture an important site for hermeneutics." It has enabled Christians to inculturate Christianity and to re-valorize the wisdom in indigenous cultures which many missionaries denigrated. It enriched biblical interpretations through alternative visual and non-rationalist modes of interpretation. Also, vernacular hermeneutics is not just addressing the academe but more importantly the local Christian communities. On the negative part, in its stress on a hermeneutics of appreciation, it tends to overlook the death-dealing ways in which a cultural text/artefact is used. Secondly, in privileging the "insider" perspective as the authentic one, it tends to be suspicious of anything that comes from the outside, thus making mutual enrichment impossible. Lastly, it espouses an essentialist view of culture as it aspires to recover the cultural soul or essence of the nation which has been degraded because of colonization. R.S. Sugirtharajah captures the spirit of vernacular hermeneutics with the phrase: "desperately seeking the indigene".

This book, nevertheless, argues that the vernacular remains to be an important source of energy for marginalized communities toward solidarity. It re-articulates vernacular theologizing within the post-modern context through the employment of discourse analysis both on the vernacular and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, guided by a hermeneutics of appreciation and suspicion, from the perspective of the margins and a standpoint shaped by the effective history of the Gospels. The method is post-colonial-intercultural because it stresses mutual listening and dialogue between the local culture and the Christian tradition and a consequent positive transformation in the view of the other. It further recognizes that the gospel and the local culture are not monolithic wholes and therefore the dialogue is occurring between multiple cultural orientations.

This book is divided into two main parts. Part I focuses on the methodological framework. *Chapter One* elaborates on the postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall whose perspective on language, meaning and representation serves as starting point of our methodological approach. *Chapter Two* centers on vernacular theology as a form of postcolonial theology which can be rearticulated in the postmodern context within what Hall refers to as "politics of representation" (in contrast with "politics of identity"). Supplemented by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of [cultural] practice: [(habitus) (capital) + field]= practice, the hybrid character of this theological practice is explained as located within the context of power relations (e.g. structures of exploitation). *Chapter Three* illustrates how Hall's discourse analysis can be appropriated both in the analysis of the ideational, performantial or material aspects of culture on the one hand, as well as, the faith tradition on the other.

Part II consists of essays on vernacular theological ethics in the Philippine context, illustrating the use of the postcolonial-intercultural discourse analysis which has been elaborated in the first part of the book. *Chapter Four*, in particular, analyses the power-beauty dialectic in the Philippine culture, particularly its manifestation in popular religious discourses—Philippine creation myth of Malakas (strong) and Maganda (beauty), the image of Christ in the Pasyon as power guided by gracious goodness, and the Santacruzán, a folk religious procession which features literally beautiful women to represent strong Christian female personages — and explores further its implications for theological anthropology. *Chapter Five* focuses on how a traditional dance has been tapped by the Christianized Obo-Manobo tribe as source of energy to fight for their ancestral land. Since dance is an important element in Philippine indigenous rituals and Christian festivities, the essay also interrogates how dance has been largely marginalized in formal Christian liturgies/celebrations and concludes with the challenge to retrieve the role of dance in worship.

Chapters Six to Eight elaborate on vernacular virtues. *Chapter Six* explores how “bayanihan” (mutual help) and “padugo” (bloodletting) can/have been transformed into Christian virtues in the praxis of Gawad Kalinga (formerly a social arm of the Couples for Christ Movement) which has successfully harnessed these virtues to promote housing for marginalized communities. *Chapter Seven* does a discourse analysis of “hiya” (loosely translated as “shame”), highlights how “hiya” has been tapped to fight a culture of corruption, collusion and deception, and re-articulates “hiya” within the faith tradition as a virtue. *Chapter Eight* analyses the discourses on the Filipino value “pakikipagkapwa”, reinvents its sense of “relating with one who is similar or different” as a Christian virtue in a pluralistic and ecological context, as well as employs this to understand the relationship of the persons within the Trinity.

This book hopes to make a contribution to postcolonial theological studies in the following areas. First, most theologians that engage with postcolonial theories are in the fields of missiology, feminism and biblical studies. This book would be among the few, if any, in the field of theological ethics. Secondly, unlike many postcolonial studies that are heavily reliant on literary theory and thus neglect at times socio-political analysis, our methodology draws from Hall and Bourdieu whose frameworks integrate both linguistic-philosophical and socio-political analysis.

Timeframe: The researcher plans to do research and writing from July 1 to October 30 at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, De Paul University. Chapter One has been written while the rest of the chapters are half-finished. The researcher aims to finish Chapters 2-6 in Chicago.