Book Reviews


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This book tackles at least two problems among some Filipino Evangelicals. First, many are apathetic or silent on matters of corruption, abuses, and extrajudicial killings. Second, some Christians support Duterte’s indifference to human rights as manifested in the “war on drugs” (175). The book’s thesis is that faith in its biblical sense is connected to “bayan.” The word “bayan” refers to both a place of birth and a group of people.

Federico Villanueva discusses the importance of connecting our worship to the rampant injustice in the country. He gives an example of when a church invited him to preach, and that week a Chinese vessel hit the boat of twenty-two poor Filipino fishermen. Villanueva expected that part of the worship service would at least allude to that event, but it did not. They sang, “Bless the Lord, O my Soul . . . Worship his holy name . . . Sing like never before . . . ” For Villanueva, most Sunday worship in the Philippine evangelical setting is fixated on “rejoicing” and distant from what is happening in society.

Annelle Sabanal segues into justice, mercy, and humility rooted in some important passages in the Old Testament. This chapter is an impressive theological exposition of the prophets’ engagement with their cultural vicissitudes as they proclaimed justice and righteousness. Sabanal challenges the common and narrow evangelical view of salvation as focused on the spiritual and otherworldly. For Sabanal, the Old Testament view of salvation

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is multidimensional. The prophets may rebuke evangelical complacency and indifference concerning the injustice in our country.

Chapter 3 by Junette Galagala-Nacion contains a comprehensive discussion concerning obedience to the government based on Romans 13. She stresses that the verb “be subject” refers to a voluntary submission due to a transformed life. This passage does not rule out opposition or protest on some issues; what it does rule out are actions leading to anarchy. Christians can disobey the government if their calling to love God and their duty to love their neighbors are in jeopardy. Interestingly, this chapter connects Romans 13 to Revelation 13.

Villanueva’s work in chapter 4 examines the importance of complaining, not just “trusting and obeying.” In his observation, most Evangelicals discuss more about the negative aspect of complaining (prohibition) so that they fail to see its importance: the complaints of Christians reveal some aspects of God, namely, his patience and love. Villanueva contends that dissent is necessary for a democracy, especially in an unjust society governed by corrupt rulers. His argument prepares readers for chapter 5, in which Roberto Barredo discusses the centralization of powers by Duterte, such as his attempt to dissolve the executive, judicial, and legislative three branches of government. In discussing the nature of modern democracy, particularly the idea that democracy is messy, Barredo draws on the work of French political theorist Claude Lefort. Barredo then focuses on the dissent and power in the Old Testament by examining the relationship between the kings, the prophets, and the Torah (Israel’s three major institutions). Dissent and democracy exist because when the kings became corrupt, the office of the prophets served to contest or question in light of the authority of the Torah.

Aldrin Peñamora, in chapter 6, adds an important factor for an active engagement: care (malasakit) about the people, particularly the marginalized. While the chapter talks about killings of mostly the marginalized in the “war on drugs,” readers are challenged to think about the image of God in humanity in Genesis 1. One narrative that prepares the slaughter of the poor and alleged “drug addicts” was the idea that they are salot sa lipunan (plague on society) and therefore worthless. Peñamora’s question is telling: “Does a person truly lose his or her dignity as a human being, and become salot deserving to be killed, because of drug use?” (115). Peñamora
does not deny the serious problems brought on by drugs in our society, but he does remind Evangelicals to have compassion and deep concern toward those labeled as plagues.

In chapter 7, Christopher Sabanal discusses the end times, particularly the parousia, encouraging Christians not to become passive observers of what is happening around them. Therefore, waiting for the parousia does not negate the importance of working for peace and justice. Sabanal examines the development and theological readjustment of parousia from the exile in 586 BC, when people hoped for deliverance from their enemies, to the New Testament writings. He presents two implications. First, there is a mystery and even ambiguity concerning the parousia in the New Testament that may remind Evangelicals of “getting too excited and overconfident about their assumptions” (155). Second, Evangelicals should not only be waiting for the second coming but should also focus on Jesus’s ethic of love, which includes seeking righteousness and justice in the now.

Drawing on his experiences as a Convenor of the Coalition for Justice (CFJ), Carlo Dinō writes in the last chapter on the necessity for Christians to take a stand concerning critical issues in the country. He cites an example of the ousting of Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, which was not just a threat to the country’s democracy but also a political evil. He argues that since the church is called to live as a prophetic voice, it needs to speak against the evil government in society. Dinō argues that a just society in the Philippines is not impossible. For him, Filipino Evangelicals need to be educated concerning a holistic view of discipleship. As such, discipleship is more than just a curriculum in the church; it includes a “larger mission, the missio Dei, of establishing justice in the world” (170).

This book reminds Christians of their prophetic role in society. Part of living as faithful witnesses of God’s love is helping the poor and the oppressed. We follow our Savior who has concern for the oppressed and the marginalized. In the epilogue, the editors argue that the reason for Christians’ political engagement is their love for country: “We participate in God’s actions because we have a pananagutan (accountability or responsibility) to our bayan” (180). I think this is my slight difference with the editors of Faith and Bayan. While I appreciate their assertion and sentiment toward country, I contend that Christians should love their neighbors and engage with our political issues, not primarily because they
see them suffering or out of sympathy. Feelings are not enough to sustain our calling to love our neighbors. We address injustice, help the poor, speak for the voiceless because we are a church with a counter politics enabled by the Savior. The salvation that Christ brings should not detach us from the existential concerns of the present. Our hope founded on Christ’s work on the cross should fuel our participation in what he is doing in the world. In short, my primordial guide in loving my neighbors and engaging with my culture is the reality that God has engaged with us in Jesus Christ.

About Reviewer
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