Unconventional Sisterhood
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Published by University of Michigan Press

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Filipina Feminism(s) Revisited

While I have discussed many of the ways in which the Missionary Benedictines might be termed feminist in previous chapters, we might further inquire into the broader implications of the sisters’ practices with respect to Philippine feminism, Third World feminism, and feminist theory in general. Feminism has long represented a contested domain. Most feminists, I think, would argue that both an understanding of the ways in which gender systems operate and a commitment to the radical transformation of practices and ideologies silencing and subordinating women are integral to their projects. However, it is not always easy to get a clear picture of the mechanisms of oppression. We all confront and live within larger cultural systems wherein particular partially integrated and partially contradictory gender configurations are continually reproduced at multiple, potentially unassimilable, sites, both material and psychological. The analysis of gender is especially complicated insofar as gender cannot be separated from other socially significant axes of relationship or criteria of placement, however much academics may attempt to effect such a separation for purposes of clarification. Rather, gender (as both process and product) is always necessarily inflected by race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, creed, and so on, though the ways in which such fluid features of personhood are foregrounded in specific contexts are likely to differ markedly. In short, although generalizations about gender oppression can be useful, such generalizations must be grounded in a recognition that every woman is different. Some of these differences matter very much on an experiential and political level, and, critically, some of these differences arise from a power differential whereby some women are privileged over and complicit in the oppression of others by race or class or nationality, for instance (Carby 1982; hooks 1990; Spivak 1987; Trinh 1989). Solidarity can therefore only really be maintained to the extent that it is inclu-
sive, nonessentialist, and founded on mutual respect and multivocality rather than co-optation.

The experiences of Third World women thus provide a crucial counterpoint to Western ethnocentrism. Indeed, my own work on modern-day Filipina feminist nuns has in large part been directed toward this end as an intellectual but also necessarily political enterprise. My field experiences serve in part to complicate current work on both Philippine and Third World feminism. Unfortunately, little literature about feminism in the Philippines is widely available outside of the archipelago; much of the scholarship that is accessible to foreigners is written either by foreigners or from the diaspora, and much of it is quite self-consciously directed toward a non-Filipino audience. Such work is largely motivated—and laudably so—by the desire to sensitize North Americans and Europeans to some of the difficulties specific to women in Third World countries struggling to redefine themselves in a post-colonial but nevertheless economically and politically dominated context. The prostitution, export, and general commodification of female bodies by Third World governments arguably often interested more in furthering national development than in the welfare of their citizens; the abuse of female labor by multinationals; the health risks with which many Third World women contend in the face of governmental and global environmental exploitation, and so on all serve as critical challenges to First World feminists unaffected by (but, as First World citizens, inevitably complicit in and thus responsible for) years of neocolonialism.

In an attempt to underline the significance of such simultaneous oppression by virtue of both gender and Third World status, such writers as Delia Aguilar (1988), Belinda Aquino (1985), and Lois West (1992), all important scholars of Filipina feminism, have stressed the importance of Philippine nationalism to the feminist movement in the Philippines. All three assert the inadequacy of Western individualism and abstraction to women’s actualities in the Third World context, emphasizing the fact that many Filipinas have grown cognizant of the particularity of women’s problems while involved in larger protests against the U.S. presence, the Marcos regime, inequitable economic policies, and unjust labor practices.

More specifically, West focuses on the Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK), the Women Workers’ Movement, in order to forward her argument that Third World feminism is often coincident with and formulated within nationalist movements. The KMK was formed in 1985 by working-class women seeking a separate forum within which to
air issues of specific concern to female laborers. The organization has fought for the removal of the U.S. bases (now gone), participated in human-rights campaigns, and lobbied for economic changes, paternity leave, menstrual leave, day care, the provision of female gynecologists and obstetricians, lighter work loads during pregnancy, and prosecution in a key sexual harassment case (Lubi and Tujan 1993). KMK members have also been known to engage in revolutionary activity (including armed struggle), and, with patriotic pride recalling Siyudad ideology, the collective attributes the oppression of Philippine women to “the introduction of decadent western capitalism and foreign culture” (West 1992, 572). Given the KMK example, then, West suggests that feminist-nationalist movements in the Third World are prototypically profamily and anti-individualistic and more concerned with the abuses of neocolonialism and material inequities than with specific questions of gender.

Nor is West alone in arguing the importance of attending to the ways in which foreign interests and capitalism play a part in Philippine women’s oppression. Aguilar also forwards this claim, citing Wynne’s interview data:

Although the women interviewed represent different sections of the population of almost 50 million—tribal minorities, church women, urban poor, industrial and agricultural workers, prostitutes, and professionals—to the last woman, the conviction strongly held and acted upon is that freedom from oppression as women can become possible only when the nation is liberated from U.S. domination and when the majority of the people can be released from poverty, illness, malnutrition, and other forms of deprivation rampant in a neocolony. (Aguilar 1982, 254)

Such commitment to emancipation from foreign and upper-class control is, Aguilar further suggests, evidenced by stories of concrete action on the part of Philippine women such as Lagganawa, who is working with the Kalinga in protest against the World Bank–sponsored Chico River Dam project; Petra, who is helping the Bontoc fight mining interests; and Flora, a union organizer in a sugar hacienda. Like many other Third World women exploited by virtue of their nationality and class, all three have developed resistance strategies independently of the U.S. women’s movement (Aguilar 1982). Indeed, their stories both exemplify the situation-specific nature of much social action and support
Aguilar’s contention that institutionalized sexism is secondary to material concerns in each instance.

Aquino emphasizes the importance of material concerns to Philippine feminists, too. She argues that “in Southeast Asia, where as high as 80% of the populations of certain countries live under conditions of poverty, class inequality is a much more pervasive phenomenon than sexual inequality. . . . [C]lass, rather than sex, is the more significant variable in analyzing the role and status of women in Third World countries” (Aquino 1985, 343–44). Unlike the urban middle- and upper-class elite who “are products of, or have been exposed to, Western influences,” the rural majority of Southeast Asian and Philippine women have “limited or no access to education, health, social, and other facilities or resources” (Aquino 1985, 322). Because of this, Aquino observes, revolutionary action and educational reforms in this part of the world are chiefly oriented toward liberation from capitalist oppression.

(Ms)representing the Mass Movements

While such analyses laudably highlight the ways in which neocolonialism, economic inequities, and both international and local corporate interests in the Third World have contributed to the oppression of women, however, they also obscure other forms of internal or domestic oppression that have more to do with gender than with class or nationality. Notwithstanding the intimation that Philippine feminism has arisen within the context of and been supported by Philippine mass movements, the mass movements themselves remain significantly oppressive of women in many ways. Recall Sister Placid’s talk of wife abuse, marital problems, and sexist attitudes within the activist groups with which she has worked, for instance. For the sister, such groups represent not so much arenas within which she has become conscious of her rights as a woman as arenas within which she has felt compelled to intervene, putting a feminism learned in the convent into practice in hopes of inspiring her compatriots to attend more closely to gender issues.

Likewise, Rita, a Filipina activist interviewed by Wynne, observes that the men she has worked with as a Philippine nationalist have often exhibited sexist (or feudal or bourgeois) attitudes toward women and further suggests that female political development within such larger resistance organizations is dependent not merely upon female initia-
tive but also upon male admission of female political capacities (Aguilar 1982). In addition, West notes that the KMK has to appeal to the union leadership of KMU, the broader labor organization with which the KMK is affiliated, in order to make demands of management. Moreover, while the KMK agenda supposedly encompasses male interests in its aspiration toward broad national reform, it seems the reverse doesn’t necessarily hold true for the KMU:

historically women’s issues were relegated to the background of nationalistic issues. During the 1970s, the women’s organization of the national democratic movement, a coalition of left-wing legal and illegal movements seeking Philippine nationalism, found that the leadership of the larger movement was male-dominated which meant that “women’s concerns became a blind spot for the leadership.” (Santo-Maranan in West 1992, 569–70)

Going through the KMU thus presents difficulties for KMK members insofar as women’s concerns are not always prioritized by union leaders, who may compromise on such matters during negotiation and may label KMK requests unreasonable (Lubi and Tujan 1993). Indeed, according to Ka Nanette, a KMK member, “longer maternity leave, provision of day care and nursery, and menstrual leave are not strikeable issues” (Lubi and Tujan 1993, 31), and the KMK is often perceived (and dismissed) as antimale by those misunderstanding their feminist goals, including KMU officials.

Carmen, with her own history of nationalist activity, also told me that the mass movements weren’t always as liberated as they are sometimes set up to be. While Philippine feminism remains quite nationalist in general, she observed that this does not necessarily mean Philippine nationalism is in turn feminist. Women within the national liberation movement are still “mixing the coffee,” she said—in other words, relegated to support functions (such as supplying food and drink for their male companions) rather than given important or active decision-making roles. Then, too, the double burden of simultaneous responsibility for housework and wage work continues to impede significant female involvement in union activities, as West (1992) herself acknowledges: union husbands and fathers aren’t necessarily any more likely than other Filipino men to assist their wives and daughters in the domestic sphere. In other words, the relationship between Philippine nationalism and Philippine feminism is clearly sometimes contradictory and obstructive—if the former has been important to the development of
the latter, Philippine nationalism is also complicit in the continued subordination of women and the relegation of issues specifically concerning women to secondary status.

**Pluralizing Philippine Feminism(s)**

The centrality afforded Philippine nationalism by theorists of Philippine feminism obscures other relevant Filipina concerns, too. While West, Aquino, and Aguilar focus on working women in the Philippines—arguably as a corrective to the equation of feminism with middle-class Western versions of the same—it is important to also acknowledge other sorts of Filipina feminisms as legitimate, culturally specific movements that cannot simply be likened to Western feminism and therefore dismissed as somehow less Filipina. Mention might be made, for instance, of alternative Filipina women’s organizations such as MAKIBAKA (founded in 1970 by students and later affiliated with the Communist Party); the Concerned Housewives of Marikina; the Ermita Ladies Group (a society for businesswomen); the Association of Women in Theology (AWIT); Kapisanan ng mga Madre sa Kamaynilaan (a group of women religious); Katipunan ng Kababaihang Pilipina (an association of women professionals); Women Minding the Basics (originally Women for the Ouster of Marcos and Boycott, or WOMB); and the Alliance of Women for Action toward Reconciliation. Carmen also observed that there are many liberal (as opposed to socialist or Marxist) feminists in government, all concerned with women’s rights but neither involved with antigovernment activity (for obvious reasons) nor necessarily interested in radically challenging Philippine notions of gender and appropriate womanhood. There are now lesbian groups in the country, too, she said—which are more focused on lesbian rights than on national issues, having just begun to organize in 1992. In short, Filipina feminism is diverse—it is not enough to simply call it nationalist or profamily/anti-individualistic.

Nor should the ways in which Filipina feminists have made use of aspects of Western feminist theory be dismissed, obscured, or denigrated in an effort to more strongly situate Filipina efforts within the Philippines itself. Such appropriation need not be taken as a negative or as a betrayal of Philippineness. Rather, it may simply signify the creative (and culturally encouraged) ability of many Filipinas to translate different ideologies across different situations. While Aquino takes pains to distance Asian feminism from Western feminism in a laudable
attempt to squarely situate the former within Asia itself, such tactics seem unfairly exclusionary, and the suggestion that Asian feminists frown on Western feminism is not substantiated, but rather contradicted, by my informants’ behavior. As already noted, Sister Justine not only is highly conscious of class questions and nationalist issues in the Philippines but also claims to have become inspired to investigate and work toward reconfiguring Philippine gender norms after listening to other feminists at an international conference. Her politics and her faith alike are syncretic: “Having encountered various ideologies and philosophies in the course of her personal and academic pursuits, she has successfully combined aspects of each value-set and appears to be comfortable with her own personal, eclectic approach to life. Her ecumenism is manifested in her work” (Almanzor 1990, 340–41).

Other examples might be cited here, too. The Madreng Babaylan ritual recounted earlier involved the use of North American Indian, U.S. New Age, and Mexican material; Sister Placid referenced Rosemary Radford Ruether, a prominent U.S. feminist theologian; Sister Josephine recommended American inspirational author Louise Hay; and the IWS library boasts a reasonably good selection of Western feminist literature. And my informants were not apologetic about borrowing from such sources. Sister Placid herself suggested to me that the “best elements” in both the West and Asia use their privilege to learn from others throughout time and across the world, with the revaluation of Native American traditions by ecofeminists and feminist theologians a prime example of the successful revitalization of traditional wisdom. In short, the Missionary Benedictines’ opposition to Westernization does not imply consequent antagonism to Western feminism: their concerns about foreign exploitation have not bred a more generalized ethnocentrism.

The nuns’ example also complicates the assertion that Filipina feminism is generally family oriented, in contrast to individualistic forms of U.S. feminism. As mentioned earlier, West classifies Filipina feminism as profamily, in contrast to its Western counterparts; while Aguilar says that “the family unit, generally seen in the west as the primary locus of women’s oppression, here serves as a vehicle for mobilizing opposition to oppression” (Aguilar 1982, 255). And Aquino argues that in Southeast Asian cultures, the tendency is not as strong as in the west to confront the traditional social structure and fault the family or male authority for injustice to women. . . . One’s family or kin group is paramount, and is seen as an institution to be pre-
served and strengthened rather than questioned. . . . [W]omen in Southeast Asia, even those who would call themselves “feminists,” think of their families first and do not lament the heavier domestic burdens that they end up having even if they, like their husbands, hold down full-time careers. There is a strong inclination among Filipino women . . . to act more as partners or supporters, rather than as equals of men. They value complementary or compensatory roles rather than separate ones. (Aquino 1985, 342)

Again, however, many of my Missionary Benedictine informants, themselves celibate and childless, proved critical of traditional Philippine family dynamics. Sister Josephine, for instance, explicitly tagged the Philippine household as a primary site of sex-based oppression. Women in the Philippines, she said, learn passivity “from home, when we [are] kids. . . . Even if you’re suffering so much, you accept it, it’s what God gives you. It’s very—how Spanish we’ve been, for so many hundreds of years. You work, you just have to suffer in silence. [Changing such ideas] has to be a very long gradual process.” Moreover, according to Sister Justine,

The Filipino family is patriarchal and male oriented. . . . [M]an is at the highest position with authority, while woman is at the lowest rung of the ladder. Values perpetuated in the family are pro-male and discriminatory. For example, when the father arrives home from work, he gets special treatment, while the wife who works the whole day does not get any recognition or consideration. . . . [T]he boys are brought up as authority successor. On the other hand, like the mother, the girls are prepared for house chores. The best and choice foods are cooked as father likes, and in the distribution, the father gets the choice cut, the children next and the mother last. Thus, the woman is expected to be the ever-loyal wife and a self-sacrificing mother. . . . The man can play around because he will lose nothing, but the woman is morally bound to be at home and not look outside for any other kind of relationship. (Almanzor 1990, 346–47)

Then, too, recall the ways in which Sister Placid decried domestic violence and heavy-handed paternalism in the mass movements, while Sister Micha both voiced concern about Filipino socialization to filial obedience even in cases of incest and proudly observed that the congregation had earlier sheltered two abused women in Subiaco.
Nor is that all. Although West, Aguilar, and Aquino speak primarily of Philippine feminism as a collective, group phenomenon, Carmen both claimed that Philippine feminism was fragmented and assured me that many “independent spirits” could be found within the various Philippine feminist movements. Indeed, she appeared to position herself as just such an independent spirit rather than aligning herself with any particular organization or theoretical stance. And, as previously suggested in discussing the sisters’ local-level activism, many of my other informants exhibited a similar independence of spirit, enacting somewhat idiosyncratic versions of feminism within their primary spheres of influence. Sister Josephine, for example, evidenced a particular concern with the ways in which Philippine Catholicism continues to define women as secondary subjects, creating larger dependencies on male religious authorities. Sister Micha, on the other hand, had a good deal to say about the ways in which sexuality is problematic for Filipinas, who not only are vulnerable to rape and harassment but also are prohibited in many respects from leading sexually satisfying lives because socialized in a repressive tradition wherein women must walk a thin line between virginity and whoredom. Notably, such examples counter the apparent, if ironic, essentialism of much of the literature on Philippine feminism to date.

**Vision Revisited**

And this brings us back to the point that my work is primarily concerned with religious women whose feminism arguably derives more from their faith than from anything else. My informants all positioned their politics as specifically and significantly religious, and the construction of their feminism as a religious impulse is, I think, both critical to their identity as Missionary Benedictines and indicative of the diversity of feminism within the Philippines.

Take Sister Justine, arguably the foremother of Missionary Benedictine feminism in the Philippines, for instance. Admittedly, as previously noted, the sister both emphasized the leftist, nationalist leanings of Pilipina and GABRIELA and talked of having become politicized during the Marcos years: “Most of the feminists in the Philippines, and I’m one of them, we all studied as political activists. I mean, it was the time of Marcos . . . and we thought that . . . we had to do something. We had really to struggle against all the injustices.” On the other hand, she also casts her radicalization as a leftist/nationalist in terms of a religious rev-
elation or rebirth of sorts. During the La Tondeña strike, she claims to have undergone what she significantly terms a “baptism of fire,” not only indexing the importance of Christian ideology to her larger understanding of life but also configuring her conversion in terms comprehensible, and probably particularly persuasive, to her primary community of reference (not to mention Philippine Catholics in general).

Nor is the sister’s choice of language here important only in underlining the primacy of her spirituality and legitimating her experience by way of that spirituality; Sister Justine’s “baptism” also appears to have catalyzed critical shifts in perspective with respect to her larger sense of identity, purpose, and place, effectively marking her initiation into and dedication to social activism much as Catholic baptism marks membership in the Church. For her, the strike afforded the recognition of mutualities of purpose and conviction in the midst of diversity. At La Tondeña, the sister told me, she found herself mixing with Marxists and atheists, which both entailed and signified the expansion of her faith. Moreover, she began listening to some of what her new comrades had to say. As she put it,

Our involvement in this whole thing changed also our way of looking at our religious life . . . because after our sisters got involved with the whole struggle of the people, then we realized, you know, we cannot live the way we are living, you know, so isolated, and so . . . our school was elitist, you know, catering to the upper 30 percent of society without really conscienticizing them.

At last, she began to realize that

[a]nyone who enters the religious life whether through teaching, nursing, doing social work, etc. commits herself primarily to the preaching of the Gospel in her words and deeds, in her life. If action on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel today, any religious woman who is unconcerned with justice cannot be said to be living her commitment. (Mananzan 1992, 64)

Of course, if the sister both talks about her politicization in religious terms and attributes the radicalization of her spirituality to her baptism of fire, her receptivity to the workers’ pleas might also be put down to her faith, or, more specifically, to her religious training. Formation undeniably places significant emphasis on the development of empathetic
capacities, something the strike organizers themselves doubtless recognized in specifically targeting nuns for assistance. Nor should we underestimate the importance of official Church doctrine: the 1971 synod, with which Sister Justine has evidenced familiarity, issued a declaration encouraging social action in the face of oppression, for instance.

In other words, notwithstanding the importance of the Philippine crisis situation during the 1970s and 1980s to Sister Justine’s radicalization, her politicization is nevertheless simultaneously foregrounded and backgrounded by her faith. Likewise, her feminism—an integral “aspect of the whole struggle to transform society”—is something arguably born as much of her religion as anything else. For her, fighting for sexual equality is necessary to the more general fight for justice, which, again, itself represents a religious imperative. Then, too, the very experience abroad she marks as having been significant to the development of a specifically feminist consciousness on her part was afforded her precisely because of her monastic status. The World Council of Churches invited her to the Venice conference on women where she was introduced to international feminist theory specifically because she was Missionary Benedictine. Moreover, Sister Justine observed,

Maybe I would not even have been a feminist if I did not become a nun. Because if you are [a member of the privileged classes, a socialite], you have it good. . . . You are not that type who are going to go into social activism. . . . You would internalize so much what the role of a woman is, which is the . . . cleaning the home, . . . being a good wife and mother, . . . and all these things. So anyway, even though I am not now for very young women to enter the convent, but in my own case, I must say that it has really helped me in developing my skills. Even to be a free person, you know. I have known in the convent what it is to be free, which a lot of married people don’t even know or even experience.

And what, then, of the other Missionary Benedictines? As already noted, my interviewees uniformly credited Sister Justine for introducing them to feminism and opening their eyes to the relevance of gender in social life. In short, by their own accounts, they have become feminist precisely because witness and subject to Sister Justine’s reformatory efforts as members of the same congregation. On the other hand, their very receptivity to her feminist arguments and analyses can
again be attributed, at least in part, to their training as nuns and to the ways in which feminism coincides with (or has been made to coincide with) their understandings of what it means to be Missionary Benedictine. Indeed, as already indicated, if Sister Justine is widely mythologized as the community expert on women’s issues, clearly my other interviewees have also creatively and independently incorporated their own concerns about gender within their everyday lives as part and parcel of their larger mission. Being both nationalist and feminist, for them, is a matter of an all-encompassing, if flexible, religious imperative; religion is primary to, if always simultaneously subject to the influence of, the sisters’ politics.

**Religious Radicalization, Religious Radicalism**

The significance of the Missionary Benedictines’ spirituality to their radicalization also underlines the previously noted fluidity of their Catholicism. While religion in general and Catholicism in particular often serve as conservative forces in human social life, as indicated by my previous discussion of gender in the Philippines, it is important to recognize that my informants’ understandings of faith were both reformatory and constantly in reformation. Nor should this be surprising. After all, the suggestion that religion can be radicalizing as well as reactionary is supported by extant scholarship; consider, for instance, the Philippines’ history of Christian resistance to both the Spanish and the Marcos regime (Ileto 1979; Youngblood 1990), the ways in which the Zionist Tshidi of South Africa have protested their oppression under a neocolonialist regime through the appropriation and transformation of Christianity (Comaroff 1985), the countercultural tone of the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica (Lewis 1993), and the example of Latin American liberation theology (Ferm 1986).

In this case, however, the difference between the sisters’ faith and that professed by the old guard of the Catholic hierarchy appears largely a matter of the degree to which particular aspects of religious doctrine are granted primacy over more abstract religious principles rather than assumed a matter of historical circumstance open to argument. Catholicism is conservative to the extent that traditional rules and religious regulations are deemed central to its practice; on the other hand, it clearly holds radicalizing potential as a spiritual system
essentially understood in terms of more ambiguous imperatives to love God, stand in solidarity with the poor, and work toward social justice. As Sister Justine put it in attempting to explain her spirituality to me,

In the matter of theology, I think that my [biological] sister is more churchy and conservative than I am. Because she has her religion up to high school: after that she has no more at her college, you see. After that, her theological knowledge has not grown, so she is with the catechism and all that. . . . Yes, they study in theology and you have to understand that all these things, you know, and maybe it’s like that, the more you get into a certain thing, you see all what is, you know, what’s not important, you know. I mean, I’m sure that if they looked at my . . . belief system, they wouldn’t even think I’m Catholic. . . . Oh, yeah! I mean, for example, I don’t care if Christ was born of Mary and Joseph, and I don’t care whether she’s a virgin or not. Things like that, you know. I don’t really much believe in the infallibility of the Pope and all these things. I mean, I think that he really can make a mistake, and he’s done lots of mistakes, you know. And that there was a political and social reason for the declaration of infallibility, you know. I don’t believe that I need all these dogmas and doctrines in order to lead a significant life. I will not use up my energy to contest them, either. If people find that they get something—nourishment, spiritual nourishment—out of it, then go ahead, but do they play any significant role in all that? Not at all. I mean, whether the Blessed Virgin is immaculate, it does not have . . . anything that makes my life a more developed one. . . . I am not better because he’s immaculately conceived, you know. It doesn’t have any practical . . . consequence to me whether this is or that. So, OK, if they want to believe it, then, OK, let them believe it, if they believe they have a guardian angel, OK. I mean, if it helps them to be better, OK. But I—must I burden all my life with all those kinds of things which I cannot prove anyway? It is either you believe it or you don’t believe it, so OK. Why must it always matter? You know? What I think is that, OK, I have tried to live my life as significantly as I can, I have tried to make the people who come into my life more happy because they come into my life, maybe, rather than more sad, you know? I will use all my energies to see to it that wrongs are righted, as far as I can do it. . . . And that’s it. And if I am not there, then I am not there. So I am dispensable. I am dispensable: if they can do it without me, OK. But I will do
what I can. . . . And so life becomes simple, isn’t it? It’s not so com-
plicated as we want to make it to be. . . . It’s really so much more simple.

The sister’s profession of faith implicates the Missionary Bene-
dictines’ positioning within the larger Church, too. Notwithstanding
the nuns’ clear commitment to their spirituality, they remain secondary
within, and thus are not necessarily particularly invested in, the institu-
tionalized hierarchy. Indeed, my informants have been doubly margin-
alized by the Vatican both as non-Westerners and as women. Admit-
tedly, Filipino Catholics are no longer structurally subordinate to the
papal representatives sent to the Philippines by Rome; moreover, Fil-
ipino cardinals now have some say over who gets to be Pope, and Fil-
ipino bishops can now participate in the International Synod of Bish-
ops.5 Nevertheless, the history of Catholicism is distressingly racist and
colonialist, and much Church policy in fact remains Eurocentric. Pope
John Paul II remains primarily dependent on the largely Italian-domi-
nated Roman Curia, made up of those cardinals serving in Rome as
administrators, rather than on the International Synod, for instance,
while many Third World Christians continue to struggle against being
represented more as missionary successes than as sophisticated theolo-
gians in their own right.6

Women also remain subordinated within the church: as indicated
earlier, women of all nationalities are excluded from ordination as bish-
ops or priests, and only bishops and members of male orders are able
to participate in the most powerful central decision-making bodies in
Rome. In fact, insofar as non-Western men can be ordained while even
Western women cannot, the marginalization of women within the
Church may be more organizationally significant than that of non-
Westerners. The Church administration, formally headed by the Pope,
includes the cardinal secretary of state, his assistant (the substitute and
the secretary of the cipher), the secretary of the Council for Public
Affairs, and nine sacred congregations headed by cardinals, all offices
occupied by men (Safranski 1985). Moreover, the Church is apparently
so reluctant to grant women a voice that they were initially excluded
from the Second Vatican Council despite its supposed convocation
specifically for reformatory purposes: a mere fifteen invitations to Vati-
can II were issued to women, and then only after the first and second
council sessions when a Belgian cardinal questioned the Church’s deci-
sion to ignore Catholic sisters while allowing non-Catholic males to
attend in an ecumenical gesture (Burns 1992). In addition, while

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“[o]rders of religious men . . . send representatives to both the national conferences and to the International Synod . . . religious women are not yet included” (Safranski 1985, 47). Furthermore, female religious orders may be banned by bishops within their dioceses. And what of the masculinization of divinity within Catholicism, not to mention the sorts of negative and unrealistic representations of femininity promoted by many Catholic practitioners? The Missionary Benedictines’ reformative efforts aside, God continues to be popularly conceived of as male, and although potentially an important icon of female power, the Virgin Mother is still typically assumed to embody morally restrictive and overly idealized understandings of womanhood (Mananzan 1992). In short, Catholic myth and symbolism, at least as commonly represented in the modern Philippines, hardly seem encouraging of the development of female spiritual prowess.

If all of this underlines the liminal position of the Missionary Benedictines with respect to the Vatican, however, it is also worth noting that greater freedom—potentially interpretive, revolutionary freedom—may be had at the peripheries of such larger organizations precisely because the peripheries are typically deemed insignificant, and therefore are poorly policed, by those at the top. As already suggested in my discussion of the nuns’ local action in the Philippine context, marginal persons may have a great deal of transformative power insofar as they are well situated to experiment with and introduce potentially important changes into traditional systems. Subordinate positions may also afford a privileged perspective of sorts. While I have no wish to overromanticize subjugated standpoints, subjugated peoples may acquire special insight into the ways in which power operates and into the ways in which hegemonic structures may be altered (Haraway 1988; Tsing 1993).

Indeed, Youngblood (1990) suggests the applicability of a model of center and periphery to understanding the Catholic Church in the Philippines, with reference to radicalizing ground-level work on the part of the peripheral clergy. In addition, Burns claims,

For popes and bishops, the boundary separating faith and morals from sociopolitical issues is of crucial importance; to a great extent it defines the hierarchy’s relationship to the secular world, as well as defining the limits of collegiality. However, that boundary—whether perceived as something to maintain or to challenge—is less significant for groups less committed, both institutionally and ideologically, to the status quo. (1992, 130)
In this case, then, as marginalized but committed Catholics working with the people themselves rather than spending time managing Church bureaucracy, my informants are well placed to understand the need for a situation-specific morality rather than blindly adhering to dogma in dealing with concrete, real-world problems.

**Feminist by Any Other Name?**

Of course, recognizing the Missionary Benedictines’ relative interpretive freedom highlights another complicating factor with respect to my fieldwork. My informants were in many ways unique individuals, rendering generalization about them inevitably problematic. And the point is of particular concern with respect to my interest in their activism on behalf of women in the Philippines. Thus far, I have been referring to the nuns’ involvement and investment in women’s rights issues as “feminist,” with an emphasis on the everyday nature of much of their feminism. Yet the sisters not only ultimately proved surprisingly ideologically disparate but also represented themselves differently. Sister Justine observed that “about half the [congregation], maybe more than half, will consider themselves and would say themselves as feminist. . . . Then you are going to get some who do not.” While many of my key informants used the label, then, others expressed reservations about it.

Predictably, when I asked Sister Justine if she thought of herself as feminist, she replied, “Oh, definitely! Oh, yes!” Moreover, when I asked what the term meant to her, she explained,

Before I answer what a feminist is, I must answer what I understand by the “woman question.” And what I understand by it is this, that there is a state of exploitation, subordination, discrimination, and oppression of women as women that cuts through class, race, through nationality. In other words, it’s a global structural attitude and a systemic problem. And this is the context of all the issues of women. OK, the moment that is clear, then . . . feminism is answering two questions: one, are you aware of the woman question? Number two, if you’re aware of the woman question, are you willing, are you committing your energies to bring about a change in the situation? And if you answer two replies “yes,” then to me this means you’re a feminist.
Likewise, Sister Micha said she would call herself feminist, going, she said, by Sister Justine’s definition: a feminist is someone who upholds women’s rights, tries to make women aware of their position, and tries to mobilize them to act. And her feminism, she continued, influenced how she responded to her students and handled different cases; it influenced her judgment, even with her friends. For instance, she told me, she now definitely noticed and brought others’ attention to language, as in when people would say “brothers” and leave it at that. Furthermore, as previously intimated, she was happy to capitalize on the emotional charge associated with the term *feminist*. During a chance encounter with me in the priory reception area, for example, Sister Micha introduced me to a male seminarian friend of hers by explicitly identifying me as a feminist. The sister was positively gleeful at his apparent but politely restrained discomfort upon receipt of this news, too. In fact, the subject having been successfully broached, she took the opportunity to proclaim herself also a feminist, leaving her companion virtually speechless.

Sister Placid, on the other hand, talked about her concern with gender equality in terms of a need for mass action in the present day:

The reason why I call myself feminist is because the society, the culture, is such that there is a need for a movement called *feminism*. I wait for a time and I work for a time—the waiting is not just passive waiting—I work for a time, which has to be a waiting at the same time, when there is no more need for a feminist movement because it is an established thing in the society that women have this and are this.

The sister sees feminism as something necessitated by modern times and conditions in the Philippines, then, rather than as an eternal principle; ultimately, she looks forward to an era in which Philippine society recognizes the artificial nature of differences ascribed the sexes on the basis of gender:

Already from the start, women and men are equal and should have equal opportunities, and I always say this to people who come to me with problems, men and women, wives and—couples, rather, you know, married couples, they come to me with problems. My standard maxim—I think it’s coming from my own life, from my own family—is that it should not be that the man is always the one who wins an argument, it should not also be that
the woman is always the one who wins an argument. So one time, I tell them, if I am married, I cannot respect my husband if I’m the only one who’s always winning an argument. I also cannot respect him if he will not allow me to win an argument. And . . . I cannot respect him either if he allows me to win an argument condescendingly. He must accept the argument because it is good and correct, it is logical, it is congruent with actual reality—that’s the test of whether you’re correct or not. Nobody has a monopoly on the truth. So for me that’s very basic for the relationship between women and men. Then, who takes the role for which. There are things that women can do better than men for the simple reason that they were conditioned—by their culture, by their rearing, even by their physique, and probably even patterns in the brain. . . . There are also other things that men are more capable of, again for the same reasons. But that does not alter the fact that what a woman can do, a man can certainly do also. What a man can do a woman can certainly do also. I think the only thing that a man cannot do that a woman can do is bear children. And I think that’s an advantage, a priority of the women over the men.

At the same time, however, the sister wanted me to understand that she was “not militant.” She cautioned me that she was not a very aggressive feminist. But I get very angry when men are very condescending and take it for granted that they are a superior race. I get very angry with that. And I also get very angry with women who think that is how the men should be. . . . But otherwise I’m not very combative. I would rather function simply as a woman and show everybody this is what it means to be a woman.

Nor are such qualifying remarks insignificant. The very fact that even Sister Placid felt compelled to underline the nonaggressive nature of her feminism indexes, again, the degree to which the term is misinterpreted in the Philippines. As intimated earlier, even otherwise enlightened Filipinos often respond negatively to the label. As Sister Justine told me, “Once I did a seminar to our guidance counselors, and I put the word feminist on the board and I said, put anything that comes to your mind when you see it. You know what they did? OK. Sexually promiscuous, check; anti-man, check; . . . lesbian, check; aggressive, check.” In short, use of the word almost immediately requires clarification in the Philippine context, where it is laden with connota-
tions problematic not so much in and of themselves but because conflated with a term that in no way actually implies any of these things.

Sister Placid wasn’t the only one of my informants to express misgivings about such public misconceptions about feminism, either. In fact, Sister Josephine took an even stronger stance on the matter. Although clearly committed to exploring gender issues and working toward women’s rights, she also made it clear to me that she did not really want to be called a feminist:

Personally, I would prefer not to be labeled . . . because at this point, I feel that it’s something that is still not very . . . known in our country. It’s fast coming to the consciousness of people, especially in the Metro Manila areas, but when you get out of Metro Manila and go to the province, not yet, you know. So when you start to introduce it outside of Metro Manila, it’s something very new. So I have made a decision, made a plan, that there has to be something like a gradual introduction to what it is. Very subtle, movie analysis, exposure to tapes of women who have worked abroad—things just to arouse their curiosity, and when they start to respond, then you come in to that. . . . Even [in] Bacolod, I didn’t like it to be known that I was feminist. I didn’t also like it to be known that I attended the course with Sister Justine, because there were very few. I could see that people were not very sold to the idea, some were even very negative. [Even women]—not as often, but some women who were kind of indifferent, who have simply accepted their fate, things like that. So I prefer if it’s like that I know what I am for, and I know I can do this much, so I just want to be simply me. I don’t even announce it. Many of my friends don’t know I took the course.

Thus, from Sister Josephine’s perspective, being tagged feminist was apt to do more damage than good. Associating herself with the term would, she felt, impede her chances of getting people to attend to the sorts of changes she was advocating. It was better, in her opinion, to simply act on her convictions without positioning herself within any sort of political movement whatsoever—not a surprising choice given her more general preference for local-level, everyday action as opposed to the sort of explicitly political rabble-rousing in which Sister Justine engaged.

Sister Claudia’s reasons for avoiding the label feminist, in contrast, had little to do with concern about public misperceptions. While she
acknowledged that the term has “so many negative connotations” and was not an “in thing,” she was nevertheless willing to be publicly known as someone concerned with women’s rights. However, she said, she would rather call herself “pro-woman” than “feminist,” following the lead of Latin American female activists identifying as “mujeres” and African American female activists identifying as “womanist.” Feminism, Sister Claudia observed, has historically been most strongly associated in the popular mind with a largely white, middle-class U.S. and European population, which—again—has not always been sensitive to or understanding of differences among (and forms of economic, national, and racial oppression between) women. Terms like *womanist* or *mujeres* on the other hand, have consciously been adopted by women of color in order to highlight forms of subjugation and empowerment alike not necessarily familiar to or prioritized by white, middle-class American feminists. It was important to mark the cultural uniqueness of the Filipina situation, too—and, in Sister Claudia’s opinion, identifying as pro-woman was a step in that direction.

Nor was Sister Claudia alone in suggesting the need for a label other than *feminist* within the Philippine context. Recall my earlier discussion of the Madreng Babaylan, or “nun priestesses.” However eclectic and ecumenical the group may be in practice, its name quite specifically references a unique cultural heritage. As indicated earlier, the phrase both recalls a precolonial Philippine tradition of female religious specialists (thereby invoking an empowering and personally useful mythology of egalitarianism and female power in local history) and pays tribute to the significant influence of modern-day Philippine Catholic sisters. Being Madreng Babaylan, then, represents a particularly apt way of indexing Filipina interest in feminist theology or, for that matter, Filipina theologian interest in feminism, with both theology and the Filipina condition of primary concern to all involved.

**Concluding Comments**

But what is to be made of such diversity in informant perspective? In part, the point is cautionary. While I set out to interview and have been broadly talking of “feminist” Catholic nuns in the Philippines, the very terms of my research now appear problematic. Although I have been focusing on the ways in which my informants have begun exploring new forms of womanhood and struggling to protect women’s interests and forward women’s rights of self-definition, my use of *feminist* as a
descriptive here might be called into question. While it functions as an adjective to signify the sorts of things Sister Justine indexes—an awareness of the “woman question” and a commitment to the reform of current gender norms—and while the sister herself says that she would call anyone exhibiting both traits a feminist, the fact that at least some of my informants nevertheless resisted the label marks a larger difficulty with the use of “home-grown” categories across diverse cultural contexts within anthropology. Speaking of the nuns as “feminist” here is essentially heuristic, but it also represents the imposition of my own assumptions about how the world works and about what particular behaviors and beliefs mean on my subject population.

I suspect at least some of my interviewees themselves would consider my use of the term as an adjective redundant, or even nonsensical, too. After all, as indicated earlier, the sisters do not strongly differentiate their politics from their religion. While I would call them not only feminist but also nationalist and even socialist and environmentalist for explanatory purposes, all of these qualities are, for them, encompassed by, superseded by, and arguably determined by the simple fact that they are Missionary Benedictine. In short, my attempts to deconstruct and classify their politics are inevitably questionable insofar as the nuns themselves understand their politics as always fundamentally religious in character and derivation; what’s more, their concern with social action on a large number of different fronts is ultimately, from the Missionary Benedictine perspective, representative of a single, cohesive, spiritual imperative.

In the end, then, although tagging the nuns feminist has been an analytically useful move in writing this book, such descriptive license remains presumptuous. I have chosen to employ such terminology in order to facilitate the cross-cultural comparison of activist efforts on behalf of women’s rights and to review and complicate previous studies of Philippine and Third World feminism. On the other hand, I do not thereby wish to abuse my authorial prerogative as an ethnographer and feminist theorist. Nor is the point of relevance only to the current situation. In fact, the appropriate and inappropriate use of labels is of more general concern within anthropology; many cultures have no concept of religion as a whole, for instance—in which case the documentation of select beliefs and traditions as examples of religious practice represents an ethnographic artifice for comparative purposes. In other words, classification in the social sciences is neither an obvious matter nor something to be taken for granted. Insofar as ethnography might be seen as an exercise in understanding alternative cultural prac-
tices and beliefs on their own terms, the application of non-native categorizations should perhaps always remain open to question.

In writing an anthropological account of the Missionary Benedictines’ lives, I have thus attempted not so much a pretense at objective analysis as something akin to what West terms a gendered cultural relativism . . . a methodological and theoretical perspective that puts women at the center of knowledge but contextualizes women’s experiences to their culture. Theoretically, women’s own understandings of their situations are the heart of this analysis. But in analysis of these interpretations, we critically seek to understand how culture constructs gender. (West 1992, 563)

And this, of course, necessitates the realization that terms such as feminism are and will always be ambiguous and essentially multiple in meaning. The trick, here, is to stop looking for an exact definition but rather to heed individual preferences as to the use of any number of different labels indexing a concern with both the social construction and radicalization of understandings of womanhood and manhood alike. Insofar as feminist is employed as a descriptive across diverse cultural contexts, it must necessarily remain contestable, with the recognition not only of a probable shared concern with gender but also of probable divergence in the face of local conditions and individual activist agendas. If first there was the Word, the Missionary Benedictine example cautions us to use it with great care.