Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro

Re-thinking Incarnation: An Asian Woman's Perspective

Incarnation is the Christian doctrine that articulates the belief that God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. This paper argues that the doctrine needs rethinking not only because it has provided a romanticized justification for the violence of the cross, but because it conveys androcentric concepts that privilege the men and marginalize women and discriminate the female body and sexuality by associating it with sin. Consequently, it removes Mary from her femaleness and humanity and makes maleness ontologically necessary for incarnation. Moreover, the traditional doctrine of incarnation is exclusivist and privileges the story of only one people. Yet, God is incarnate in many forms and ways. In dismantling the grand narratives of Christianity that have fixed God's revelation in Jesus, Asian feminist theologians have argued that while Jesus is recognized as the epiphany of God, He may not be the sole embodiment of God's revelation. Incarnation is not even limited to a human figure. Women also experience God as Christ embodied in other ecological forms. Therefore, believers need to understand that incarnation is the continuous flow of the relationship between God and human beings, and other created beings on Earth.

INTRODUCTION: THE "LINK BETWEEN NATIVITY AND GOOD FRIDAY"

A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because her children are no more.

Jeremiah 31: 15

When I was a young college student, Christmas would always bring me some feelings of sadness. As I grew older, I began to connect that feeling of sadness with the other end of the Christmas story—the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, especially after college, when I spent some good years working with women and children in the urban poor area and saw their suffering. It dawned upon me that the melancholic feeling that suffused me every Christmas had some connection to Rachel's lament.

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The daughter of Laban and sister of Leah, the biblical Rachel is the favored wife of Jacob, mother of Joseph and Benjamin, grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh, and the foremother of the northern tribes of Israel. The story of her lament is first heard in Jeremiah, but her memory continues, from Genesis to Matthew, in Jewish and Christian tradition, in theology and church, in literature and culture. Centuries after her death, Rachel is depicted by the prophet Jeremiah weeping for the children of Israel as they are led away to Babylon: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is grieving for her children; she refuses to be comforted because her children are no more" (Jer. 31:15). In Jeremiah, Rachel cries out from her grave in a time of spiritual and moral turmoil, giving voice to God's own anguish at the loss of his children to sinfulness.

As the spiritual mother of God's people, Rachel follows her children in their journeys through time—inconsolable until they are safe. In the gospel of Matthew, centuries later, the writer depicts Rachel crying out again, personifying the pain felt by the mothers of the babies murdered by Herod's soldiers in their quest to kill the baby Jesus (Matt. 2:18). In 4 B.C.E., about the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Herod became insecure about a rumor that a child who will rise to be king was born in Bethlehem. That child grew up to outright rejection, rage, and hate that culminated in destruction and execution. Immediately after his appearance in this world came a massacre of the holy innocents, those caught in the net of politics and economics and the fear of the poor who might grow up to change the order of things. According to the gospel story, the baby Jesus survived because Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt and came back to Palestine only after the death of Herod in the same year. However, Herod's sons who succeeded him were just as brutal as their father. Collaborating with the Roman Empire, Herod's successors devised different ways of killing the children of Israel who were suspected of rebellion. Thirty-three years later, on a Friday, one more descendant of Rachel was crucified on the hill outside Jerusalem. His name was Yeshua – Jesus of Nazareth. The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and his death on the cross on a hill outside Jerusalem are inseparable segments of the gospel story.

THE CHALLENGE TO REVISIT THEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS

The connected themes of the Christmas-Lenten seasons of the Christian calendar can move towards different trajectories. One trajectory leads to a re-thinking of the meaning of what happened on Good Friday and the salvific value of the cross. Another trajectory leads us to re-examine the notion of incarnation. In the gospel according to John, *Logos* or the Eternal Wisdom became flesh and lived among human beings. What the fourth gospel expressed in poetic style, the writers of the synoptic gospels tell us the story of Jesus' birth and death. The gospel writers attempted to articulate their reflection that God was present in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. This God-presence in the life of the human Jesus is what theologians call "incarnation."

In reality, Christians should not separate the main themes of the Christmas and Lenten season for they, like the two elements of the *yin-yang*, comprise the whole of the Christ-story. The birth-story and the story of Jesus' death in the hands of the powers-that-be are inseparable and point to the reality that Jesus, in flesh and blood, was fully God-conscious. Many books have been written about these themes, mostly from the Eurocentric perspective. Yet, it does not mean that one could not take a look at these themes in a different light. After all, theologies, just like doctrines and articles of faith, are not timeless truths. Rather, theology is a timely reflection of the Gospel in a particular time and space.

Theology is simply an attempt to intelligently articulate one's faith and understanding of the Divine, and as such, it makes an appeal to truth. Once again, we are reminded that human knowledge of truth is always partial. The creeds formulated by the councils from Nicaea to Chalcedon and the theological treatises that emerged in the past centuries were products of human reflections set in particular contexts. Moreover, no particular person or group of persons can claim monopoly of the truth. Theologies and doctrines are shaped by the believers' contexts and cultures. Indeed, scriptures, revelation, tradition, and reason inform theology and doctrines. Yet, these sources have proven to be inadequate in making theology address the human condition. Today, one can no longer ignore the categories of social location, gender, culture, ethnicity, and race that always play significant roles in giving a theology its shape and content. Theologies are therefore bound to be reformulated.

With this understanding, it is imperative to revisit doctrines in order to give them a fresh interpretation that is liberating and meaningful to the Filipino faithfuls in contemporary times. This compels me to take up the challenge to re-think the doctrine of incarnation, though this could not be exhaustive given the limits of space. I hope, however, that this will stimulate others to open their eyes, minds, and hearts so that we can journey together in faith and find deeper meaning in our existence. Re-thinking the doctrine of incarnation is necessary for several reasons, and I will cite only two here.

First, the idea of incarnation is not a monopoly of Christianity. Other Asian religions also believe in the revelation of the divine in an embodied and this-worldly form, usually human. Through incarnation, the nature and will of the Divine becomes "recognizable and intelligible to humans."[1] In Hindu tradition, an *avatara* is the incarnation of a deity. The Bhagavad-Gita tells us that Krishna is the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, the supreme God, the "all pervasive one." Krishna became human to teach the believers and enable them to see the path to liberation.[2] Philosophy, as represented by G.W.F. Hegel, also theorized that humanity may incarnate the divine Absolute or the Spirit. In the Christian tradition, incarnation is about the belief that God had once for all became flesh – in human form. This revelation became possible in Jesus Christ, the Son, as one of the persons of the Triune God.

Second, the discourse of the church fathers and their followers on incarnation appears to romanticize the death of Jesus on the cross, the very in-

strument of religious and state violence. Their discourses gloss over the violence of the cross and associate the instrument of violence with the symbol of salvation. Indeed, they provide a justification for the connection between violence and the sacred as they invoke the notion of the scapegoat. On the other hand, I argue that the discourse on the nexus of incarnation and atonement almost always provides a justification for the violence of the cross. Is violence truly a pre-requisite for Christ's work of redemption? To me, the notion of necessary evil suggests an image of an unjust God who predestines people to do evil. From this perspective, Judas became powerless to break free from the role of the villain that the scriptwriter has assigned him, if only to provide the tension and arouse hope for the resurrection. Is evil in the form of the violence of the cross necessary to attain salvation? Is the violence of the cross indispensable as necessary evil just so humanity will understand that Jesus, whom we take as the Christ, offers hope for an abundant life?

I argue that violence is not necessary for redemption; instead, redemptive work demands from the believers of Jesus Christ the commitment to resist violence. Salvation is located in Jesus' redemptive, liberating praxis. Jesus' death is not the locus of salvation and should not be detached from his life and ministry. He confronted the forces of evil—of discrimination, of sickness, hunger, brokenness, patriarchy, corruption and other forms of violence that the people of his time experienced in their daily lives. He died because the powers-that-be were threatened by Jesus' embodiment and incarnation of God's love made concrete in his prophetic and redemptive work of resisting evil. In doing so, Jesus worked for the fullness of life. His crucifixion was the highest form of state violence at that time.

I do not believe that evil is necessary in this matter. However, I recognize that evil arises when humanity abuses the abundance of God's love and abandons the call to live as bearers of God's image. It is not necessary for women, children, and the oppressed poor to experience violence and suffering in order to gain awareness of their dignity and humanity. I believe that when we continue to think that the cross is the locus of salvation, rather than looking at the cross as an instrument that stopped Jesus from doing his empowering and liberating ministry, Rachel will continue to refuse to be comforted.

This paper engages the question that continues to provoke diverse reactions, particularly among feminist theologians. What is the impact, especially on women, of the belief that God became incarnate in a male human being? To understand the feminist reactions to this question, it is instructive to begin by examining the highlights of some formulations of the concept of incarnation by the church fathers.

INCARNATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

The doctrine of incarnation was formulated by the male leaders of the ancient church, aptly called the "church fathers" to argue against the prevailing heresy

of the time—the dualistic view of the Gnostics. The adherents of Gnosticism claimed that Christ was divine and was never a historical human being. To counter this view, the doctrine of incarnation was formulated to argue that Jesus is the divine Christ and at the same time a truly historical human being. According to this doctrine, divinity and humanity converged in the person of Jesus Christ. Generations of thinkers hence have built upon the works of the early church fathers and formulated their views of incarnation, attempting to explain the reason and mystery of God becoming flesh in Jesus. Starting with Paul's interpretation that revolves around the concept of disobedience and sin, Christian thinkers constructed the idea of ransom and recapitulation (Ireneaus of Lyons), and of payment of debts and satisfaction of God's wounded pride (Anselm of Canterbury). Irenaeus argued that God became flesh in Jesus Christ to recapitulate the creative and redemptive purpose of God: "Christ became what we are so that we could become as he is."[3] Thus, the doctrine of incarnation is always intertwined with the doctrine of redemption.

Origen's thoughts and language found their way into the conciliar debate on christology. One may find a thread that connects his view of incarnation with the notion that the betrayal and death of Jesus on the cross was necessary evil to highlight Christ's victory in the resurrection.[4] Athanasius followed this line of thinking and asserted that the death of Jesus the Christ was a payment for humanity's debt to God and penalty for their sins.[5] Why did God become human? What is the rationale of incarnation? Anselm of Canterbury answered these questions by offering his theory of satisfaction. This theory reflects a feudal, honor-oriented male God who demands payment from humanity for wounding his honor. According to this view, humanity sinned and dishonored God by yielding to the devil's deception. Death is the only penalty for this sin. Someone who is also fully divine that the devil cannot lure into its lair must offer the satisfactory payment. This someone must die on the cross to pay for humanity's sin to fulfill the satisfactory payment. To solve the problem, Anselm employed Origen's view of *deus-homo*,[6] and argued that only a "God-Man" — one who is both a perfect God and a perfect human — could be the substitute of humanity to die on the cross. This "God-Man" serves as a bait to deceive the devil, and to provide a satisfactory payment to the dishonored God. Thus, says Anselm, God must become human.[7]

In Anselm's time, this idea worked for sometime until Abelard of France contested the idea of a sulking God who demands a payment to satisfy *his* wounded honor. Yet, even Abelard's view is more problematic. This masculine God seeks to express a love that sets humanity free from sin. As God's son, Jesus must die as a necessary sacrifice to express God's love for humanity. Jesus' death was intended to stir up in humanity a loving response to God and to repent in true freedom. Following Augustine, Abelard insisted that the one who truly loves God "should not hold back from suffering anything for his sake."[8] One should not complain in the face of suffering, even one that is imposed by powers-that-be.

When I was young, I used to listen to a radio program whose signature statement was, "*Ang mabuot nga panghunahuna nagagikan sa pangutana.*" (A good idea emerges from a well-thought question.) Indeed, great ideas do not fall from the skies. These ideas are great because they spring from critical thinking about the human condition and experiences, and because they are liberating. Along the same vein, Paulo Freire noted that critical thinking entails asking questions and problematizing.[9] Deconstructionists also suggest that language is a temporal process, and the meaning of words and sentences "will never stay quite the same from context to context."[10] Thus, truth are merely assertions or claims that we make about things; reality is neither one nor objective but subjective and many, and meanings are unstable. This could very well be applied to the theological discourses and traditions about the incarnation. I do not find this thinking far from Anselm of Canterbury's famous view of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum.* Faith must seek understanding, and along this line, I see that in my context, the church fathers' view of incarnation stands inadequate or has even ceased to be meaningful. Yet, I do not delete the word "incarnation" from my memory because, although it is inadequate, it is a necessary aspect of my christology. Instead, I problematize it to find new meaning that I can hold on to.

As a Filipina theologian, I problematize these understandings of incarnation for a number of reasons. First, these concepts of incarnation were formulated centuries ago by church "fathers" whose time and geographical location are distant from my Philippine context. If these incarnation theories provided meaning in the ancient times, do they make sense to us in the twenty-first century? Moreover, because these concepts were conveyed to us through the androcentric (male-centered) language and patriarchal culture of the church "fathers", these formulations privilege the male and patriarchal views about the Divine in relation to the human being.

Second, the concept of incarnation that is rooted in the church fathers' narrow view about woman and woman's body needs to be dismantled. Athanasius discriminates women by associating his view of sin with sexuality, particularly female sexuality. It is possible that the church fathers, Athanasius included, were influenced by the early Greek philosophy that viewed woman as inferior, misbegotten, a defective copy of man who is the true human, and, therefore, has no capacity for spiritual discernments.[11] Arguing for the true humanity of Jesus, Athanasius insisted that Jesus the Christ must come from a woman's body that is "in very truth pure from intercourse of men."[12] By insisting on the value of hymen virginity, Athanasius removed Mary from her true humanity and from her femaleness.

Along the same vein, Gregory of Nazianzus asserted that the Logos must become flesh to save a defective humanity. Like Athanasius, he used Mary to argue for the humanity of the Logos, but he blurred the image of Mary by removing her from her context and from her powerful Magnificat in Luke 1:46-

55. In effect, these church fathers have portrayed Mary as alien to the nitty-gritty of women's experience as human beings. Instead, they have reduced Mary to a mythical virgin baby-maker, a womb for rent, or a *ci-baji*[13], whose body was useful only to satisfy male desire for power—be it sexual, political, economic, religious, or intellectual power. Ironically, this view leads to the denial of the full humanity of the man Jesus. Logically, a human being cannot come from a woman who is not quite a normal human and was denied of her female sexuality. In effect, these church fathers have mystified Mary. As a consequence, this mystification has disempowered women as subjects of their own lives.

A third aspect of incarnation I want to scrutinize is the notion so rooted in the church tradition that maleness is ontologically necessary for the incarnation of Logos. Although Gregory of Nazianzus may not have explicitly meant to argue for maleness as an ontological necessity for incarnation, his understanding that the Son came to save defective humanity is also congruent with Greek philosophy's view of woman as frail and as a defective copy of man, who is the true human. His view that the Son has "assumed manhood for our salvation"[14] and his soteriological explanation of incarnation, "that which he has not assumed he has not healed,"[15] has helped to reinforce this view of male role in incarnation. Although some male theologians have begun to refute such claim as a distortion of Jesus' humanity, the church tradition that has perpetuated such understanding is still stuck in such claim. Until now, the Roman Catholic church and some Protestant denominations do not ordain women. This view also provides the underpinnings—both implicit and explicit— for the churches' argument against the ordination of gay men and lesbian women into the ministry. Some years ago, a friend and radio broadcaster, Paciencia "Nene" Parawan, interviewed a Cebuano cardinal aired over the radio station DYRC. In that interview, the cardinal categorically said: "Our Lord Jesus had no female disciple; that is why women cannot be ordained." Although some Protestant churches have conceded to women's ordination, in practice, however, this is still treated as a sub-ordination. While serving as chair of a United Church of Christ in the Philippines conference committee that examines candidates for licensure and ordination, I discovered the irony that although there are women who seek ordination in order to gain equal status with the male clergy, many of them do not consciously shed off the patriarchal perspective.

A fourth view of incarnation that I seek to problematize in this paper is the belief that the traditional doctrine of incarnation comes to us through the vehicle of the history of one people from the Mediterranean basin. This doctrine privileges only the story of Israel over other peoples' stories. While God indeed became incarnate in Jesus the Christ, in religiously pluralistic Asian contexts, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the only incarnation of God needs rethinking. I recognize that the Jewish faith, and then the Christian faith, is a vehicle for understanding incarnation as a way for God "[to] express in human form God's nature and will for our salvation."[16] To us, Christians, this is revelation. However, we can no longer say that we have the monopoly of God's revelation. We also need to reflect and answer these questions: In what ways and

forms do we experience God's incarnation in our midst today? If God's incarnation is stuck with Jesus of Nazareth, are we saying that people of other faiths do not and could not encounter God anymore? If we say they do through the work of the Holy Spirit, is it not possible that the Holy Spirit stirs new bodies to incarnate God? Furthermore, we need to rethink the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. How do we discern more deeply the ways God is present and the ways God is involved in our lives and struggles in the midst of death-dealing realities? A Christian's responses to God's self-revelation will be determined by one's understanding of incarnation. The traditional view of incarnation that numbs many Christian spirits therefore needs to be revisited.

DISSENTING VOICES: DISMANTLING CHRISTIANITY'S GRAND NARRATIVES

The Divine reveals the Godself in many ways. Even the reformer, John Calvin, in a rarely mentioned position, admitted "there are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare [God's] wonderful wisdom."[17] Feminists continue to tread along this path. They have re-examined and contested a good deal of the claims of traditional doctrine of incarnation. Among those contested views was the issue of Jesus' maleness as an ontological requirement for the incarnation. A Catholic theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, wrestled with the question, "how can a male Christ save women"?[18] Leonard Swidler, also a Catholic, asserted that Jesus, though male, is a feminist. However, in her groundbreaking work, philosopher and theologian Mary Daly insisted that a feminist Jesus would not make any difference for women because the church teachings and interpretation about the *imitatio Christi* continue to be oppressive and make women accept imposed suffering.[19]

Bringing into the discussion her experience as a Black woman and the memory of her ancestors' experience of slavery, womanist theologian Delores Williams lifted up the issue of race and class in the discourse on incarnation. Williams' concerns resonate with the African-American theologian James H. Cone's view that Jesus is the Black Christ. Jesus is Black both in literal and metaphorical sense as Christ becomes *one with* the oppressed Blacks.[20] However, Williams goes beyond Cone's christology and beyond the white feminist preoccupation with Jesus' maleness. She shifts the focus of the discussion to Black women's experience of surrogacy. She asks: "Does a surrogate Jesus have salvific power for black women who bear the suffering that surrogacy and exploitation bring?"[21] In making the doctrine of incarnation crucial in her theology, Williams situates Jesus' ministerial vision of making relationships right at its center. In the works of other womanists, the Christ can be male or female. What is decisive for them is the fact that the face of Christ is manifest in anyone who works for the freedom of the Black community from oppression.

Like the womanist theologians, most Asian women do not see the maleness of Jesus as the primary problem. Roman Catholic theologians Virginia Fabella and Mary John Mananzan of the Philippines assert that Jesus' maleness "was not essential but functional."[22] To Asian women, the notion of incarna-

tion is relevant and significant because they see Jesus the Christ as one who accompanies them in their struggles for a full life. In liberationist theologies, the believer sees Jesus to be incarnate in the lives of the Dalits, the Tribals, the laborers, the Minjung, the Burakumins, and the Indigenous Peoples who continue to resist against oppressive systems of society. There are Asian women, such as Kwok Pui Lan of Hong Kong/U.S., who move towards an organic christology and draws inspiration especially from the Johannine materials. Organic christology contests and relativizes the notion that God's revelation is fixed in a "finite, historically specific human form."[23] Kwok dismantles the grand narrative of Christianity that has fixed God's revelation in Jesus as the Logos. She asserts the need to understand that Jesus appeared to us "once and for all" in flesh and blood and became the prototype of humanity that points to the signs that God is truly with us. Although Jesus is the epiphany of God, Jesus is not the sole embodiment of the revelation of God. Incarnation is not limited to human form. Indeed, Asian women who experience hunger and pain in the midst of massive poverty and religious plurality see Jesus as the gruel, the grain, as mother, and as a shaman who works for the healing of wounded spirits and bodies.[24]

Another challenging reflection on the incarnation also comes from the Queer communities. Jesus is incarnate in the lives of people who experience homophobia but are acting up to resist such attitudes of "othering." Jesus is incarnate in Queer people who transgress heterosexist boundaries that limit the possibilities of life. Marcella Althaus-Reid of Argentina deconstructs and challenges the imperial view of incarnation that controls the "spiritual production of meaning"[25] and suppresses the rise of subjugated knowledge by labeling their source as "heretics." Jesus the Queer loves life and that is why He came out from the dark tomb of death to embrace life. For the Queer, coming out from the dark closet and embracing life to the fullest is a resurrection experience.

Indeed, Christ is incarnate in a multiplicity of forms and ways as Christ's salvific power is realized in the concrete lives of those who have been oppressed and marginalized – for example, of African-Americans in their experience of slavery and exploitation, and of the Queer community for whom Jesus' coming out of the tomb to be resurrected back to life becomes a metaphor for liberation.[26]

THE CARING COMMUNITY AS EMBODIMENT OF THE CHRIST

In Israelitic communities, Rachel is a powerful symbol for mothers in every generation whose pain will not let them rest, mothers who refuse to be comforted, who refuse to sit stoically while things are not right with their children. Her grief speaks to mothers across the ages, reminding them to be inconsolable as long as their children suffer. In our time she continues to inspire because she will not be placated. She moves us to feel, to grieve. She provokes us to action. And we are at a moment when we should listen again to the voice of her la-

ment. Rachel wept for her children, 'for they were no more.' Through Rachel, the story of Jesus' birth meets the story of the Lenten season. As my former professor Christopher Morse puts it, "[in] Rachel, the gospel's link between the Nativity and Good Friday"[27] is clear. Today, Rachel still weeps. How does incarnation impact the life of the Christians? What does incarnation mean to our daily life as Filipinos?

Just by reading the front page of a newspaper, one may draw some conclusions that the Philippine society is undeniably very sick. It is a brokenhearted society in which Rachel's story continues to resonate. Rachel continues to weep not only in Ramah, but also here in the Philippines, the so-called "pearl of the orient seas." She refuses to be consoled as massive numbers of Filipinos suffer in abject poverty and more and more trade union activists, journalists, church workers, and peace activists have been killed since the day Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo sat in Malacañang. Even the schooled—nurses, doctors, caregivers, engineers, teachers, and a host of professionals—infected with the malaise of hopelessness, flee from their motherland. In the midst of this brokenhearted society, many succumb to heartlessness. The Philippine society is becoming a heartless, cruel society. The indifference and greed of the few have infected the many and bring so much misery and suffering to the vulnerable, the poor, and the innocent. That this is happening to a country in which ninety-eight per cent of the population are Christians, people who are supposed to embody the teachings of Jesus Christ in their lives, is mind-boggling. Whatever their denomination, they all belong to the church that claims to be the body of Christ. If the church is the incarnation of the Christ at this time and in this place, why is it that a Christian who is supposedly part of Christ's body does not, or hardly makes a difference in this Christian society? Indeed, why is it that leaders of other countries who claim to be Christians build oppressive empires, instead of caring communities?

This malaise affects the Philippines, so-called "Christian" country because in reality, Christians would rather practice piety than take their faith seriously and live it. After all, spirituality means practicing and reflecting the faith in God as demonstrated by Jesus in one's lifestyle. Because catechism and Sunday school classes continue to spiritualize the concept of incarnation, people easily romanticize the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. In this way, Christianity is turned into a security blanket. Most "Christians" tend to turn their gaze away from the historical reality of the cross. Many forms of crucifixions are going on in our time, yet many of us who publicly claim to be Christians refuse to see our complicity in the tragedy of the cross. Christians tend to spiritualize and exalt this symbol of violence by saying it is necessary and salvific. This spiritualization is a manifestation of a kind of passive helplessness, if not utter smugness. This passive helplessness and complacency, according to Rita Nakashima Brock, manifests the "alterego of the egocentric, destructive masculine self . . .[and] balances the sins of hubris but finds no path to empower the heart."[28] Consequently, the "Christian" hardly exerts any effort, or not at all, to celebrate the resurrection and to bring down the powers of darkness mani-

fested in various forms of oppression. Many "Christians" would rather enjoy hiding behind this darkness.

At a time such as this, Christians need to remember Rachel's story and pay attention to her reasons for refusing to be consoled, despite God's assurance that "There is hope for your future" (Jer. 31:15). The lament of Rachel in the midst of the brokenhearted people reaches God's ears. Indeed, Rachel's refusal "becomes a witness pointing to the Resurrection."[29] However, this hope for the resurrection does not simply fall from the sky. Rachel's lament is a finger pointing at the church, challenging the church to incarnate the Christ in the midst of a brokenhearted people. In the twenty-first century, people may encounter and experience Jesus the Christ in a caring community, one that embodies the power of love that connects hearts and prompts them to resist and defeat evil. This community directs its vision to the path Jesus of Nazareth had taken. This community may not necessarily call itself "Christian." After all Jesus affirmed that anyone who embodies the love of God for all peoples and creation is actually working for the christic cause. This is a community that embodies the power to connect the hearts of people into a chain of mutuality and reciprocity. Like the Episcopal woman priest Carter Heyward, Rita Nakashima Brock describes this primal power of interrelatedness as the erotic power. This erotic power enables us to be sensitive to the needs of others, to be open, and to be in touch with our own selves. It is "sensuous, transformative whole-making wisdom"[30] that arise from the involvement of the heart in relationships.

TAKING THE RISK OF THE CHALLENGE TO RE-THINK INCARNATION

Rethinking theology is always a challenge because many people still believe that doctrines are like pills to be swallowed without chewing them. I understand the apprehensions of the reviewers of this paper about my discourse. I am aware that some people may find my views here as overwhelming; at worse, "blasphemous" or "approaching" heresy. As one of the reviewers correctly understood it, I do not intend to impose my interpretation on people. However, I want my readers to consider my thoughts. My position in this paper may spark a debate or a controversy. Nevertheless, I will take it as an indicator of my success in stimulating Christians and even those who belong to other faith traditions to think critically, and try to make sense of the theology of incarnation in our own time and space. Although this paper may probably appear as a discourse intended for academics and theologians, yet, since I consider each Christian to be a theologian in his or her own right, it is my earnest desire that each believer should know where these concepts of incarnation came from and how these thoughts developed. Besides, Christians need not be afraid to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit works to inspire new ways of interpreting incarnation. Christians must recognize that the Holy Spirit works in many ways to show new possibilities of incarnation. Human beings – even Christians – could not stifle the Holy Spirit from encouraging people to think out of the box of theological smugness.

the seminaries, formation centers, and local churches. These are the venues where pastors, preachers, Christian religious educators, church school curriculum writers and teachers, facilitators, liturgists, hymn writers, and church leaders are supposed to give shape to their experiences of walking with God, or "God-walk", and transform these experiences into a coherent reflection as God-talk. A patriarchal and androcentric approach to pastoral ministry ignores the church's complicity to the perpetuation of "teachings and rituals that are detrimental to the psyche and wellbeing of people, especially women and other oppressed beings."[32] The church, as partner of the seminaries, is especially accountable for the nurturance of the people in the pew. As a teaching community, the church must also care and dare to examine the soundness and relevance of the doctrines and creeds in people's lives in particular contexts.

Because it requires a lot of openness to discern the work of God through the Holy Spirit, the church needs a lot of will and courage to carry on its task. On the one hand, there are indeed situations where people fall off the pew. When this happens, it is either because their emotional needs are not met or the contents of the imported "theological package" no longer speak to them. On the other hand, there are also situations when certain individuals grab power not only by holding on to the pew but also by controlling the pulpit to "sanitize" the theologies and biblical interpretations that threaten their vested interests. Rethinking incarnation actually challenges Christians to incarnate Christ in their daily lives as an expression of one's obedience to the first greatest commandment that says, "Love your God with all our heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Matt. 22:37)

The concern for the pastoral dimension raised in the review of this paper is important, and I agree that a continued discussion on this matter is needed. In response to this concern, I must say that the pastoral could and should not be separated from the task of helping the person in the pew understand one's faith. I believe the academic should not be separated from practice. Theology should not be severed from ethics and pastoral ministry. It is inevitable that a person who does not seek to understand or who refuses to understand one's faith and the articles of such faith may "fall off the pew." In the present time the worse things that are happening to the church in the Philippines are not about people falling off the pew or people seeking to separate from their "mother" church and organizing their own group. The worse things that are happening now are the killings of church people who seek to incarnate the Christ in their lives. These are the individuals who took the challenge Jesus gave when he said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Unfortunately, these are the very same ones who are killed, ironically, by "Christians" who use religion to gain power and wealth.

Another terrible thing that could happen to a church is when it is grounded and stuck in irrelevant doctrinal statements to preserve itself as an institution and cease to become a catalyst in the search of life-giving wisdom.

More than "having people falling off the pews," the worse thing that can happen to the church is when it pretends to be the body of Christ when in its practice it embodies the evil force that seeks to hinder the realization of the reign of God on this Earth. Apparently, the reviewer is aware of this when she said that "there are worse things that could happen to the church besides having people falling off the pews."[33] It is important to re-think the doctrine of incarnation in order to help human beings find ways to embody the christic character Jesus had demonstrated. If Jesus believed that those who believe in him could even do greater things, then the best thing that could happen to a church is to embody the Christ in its daily collective life.

Incarnation is a continuous flow of the relationship between us and God. Thus, those who claim to be believers are called to reveal the just and loving God in their daily lives – in relationships with people and with the Earth. In this light, the church must redefine and re-value the centrality and moral religious power of the doctrine of incarnation in their lives. Hopefully, the church will truly become the embodiment of the Christ.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro finished her Ph.D. from the Union Theological Seminary in New York. She is currently the Dean of the Divinity School at Silliman University, Dumaguete City.

NOTES

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[2] The Bhagavad-Gita, IV:1-14, in *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. Dominic Goodall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.

[3] Ireneaus of Lyons, "The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called," in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), Preface, Bk. 5.

[4] Origen, "On Relation of God and Evil," in *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, U.S.: Blackwell, 1995), 96.

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[6] Origen, *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles and Selected Works,* ed. Richard Payne, trans. Rowan A. Greer, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 34.

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[16] Hebblethwaite, 251-54.

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