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The Gospel According to Prostitutes

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The Gospel According to Prostitutes?

What would the gospel according to prostitutes look like? If the hospitality women of Olongapo and Bangkok met with the biblical Samaritan woman, how would they shape their theology? What would be good news for them?

This question is asked by Dr Kwok Pui-lan, a Chinese feminist theologian who came to the U S as a visiting theologian for 1991-92, sponsored by Auburn Seminary and Stony Point Center in New York. The Fall 1992 issue of *The Auburn News* features her article, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective."

One part of Dr Pui-lan's article discusses the "language of the erotic." She notes how some American feminist theologians "are excited about

the possibility of talking about God and the power of the erotic."* But Pui-lan observes that "feminist theologians from other parts of the world also find it difficult to speak about the power of female sexuality."

Why is this so?

"Afro-American women theologians and ethicists," responds Dr Pui-lan, "are not inclined to use the language of the erotic in their religious imagination because their bodies were sold and their sexuality institutionally controlled during slavery. When their bodies were defiled and used for the lust of the white oppressors, the language of the erotic had also been stolen from them for a long time.

"Asian women find it embarrassing to talk about sex and the erotic not only because decent women are not supposed to raise those issues in public, but also because many of our sisters are working as prostitutes in the hotels, nightclubs, bars, disco joints, and cocktail lounges in the big cities like Manila, Bangkok, Taipei, Hong Kong, and Seoul. The international human flesh trade as a result of sex tourism has brought in much needed foreign cash for so-called economic development.' On the other hand, it has led to the degradation of

women, venereal diseases, exploitation by pimps, bribery of the police, and a host of other social problems."

Dr Pui-lan lists various Asian women's groups who have responded to the tragic situation of prostitutes in Asia by providing alternate jobs and working for stricter enforcement of laws against users and traffickers of women and children. GABRIELA, in the Philippines, New Life Centers for prostitutes in Thailand, and organizations such as the Association for Promotion of the Status of Women. Women in Japan

have also worked with Korean and Filipina women to demonstrate against Japanese involvement in sex tourism.

"The magnitude of the international flesh trade and the courageous action

of these women's groups," says Dr Pui-lan, "challenge us to rethink the connection between the language of the erotic, the control of the female body, and power over women in its naked and symbolic forms. Many women have yet to find a language to speak about pleasure of the body, female sexuality, and the power of the erotic because the yoke of 'compulsory heterosexuality' is still heavy upon us. The experiences of women whose sexuality has been controlled and who suffer violence to their bodies should be taken up as a serious theological issue in our feminist reconstruction."

With tears in my eyes, I reflected on just what "the gospel according to prostitutes" might be. The image coming to me was a photograph of "Christine on the Cross," from our Nov/Dec 1988 *DOS*. Created by James Murphy, it is a sculpture of a naked woman on an upside down cross, her legs spread apart on the crossbar. It is a wrenching sculpture, disturbing to many of our readers, called obscene by some. Yet it is the most graphic image I can think of that might speak to a suffering God identifying with these women who have so few options. A feminist theology including our sisters worldwide who labor under enforced prostitution can speak of no easy eroticism and no cheap grace.

—Compiled by Reta Halteman Finger

Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan reflects on the "language of the erotic."

*See Rita Nakashima Brock's *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Crossroad 1989) and Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (Harper & Row 1989).