

FILLIPINAS AND THE CHURCH:  
THE RECOVERY OF EGALITARIAN LEADERSHIP

By Cynthia Datu

*Introduction*

The Filipino Church needs to hearken back to its roots. To be Filipino and Christian is to be egalitarian. Unfortunately this is not always the case when it comes to the role of women in church leadership. Filipino leadership needs to rediscover both reasons for the loss of egalitarianism within their churches and challenge a misguided belief that that the traditional indigenous worldview supports the supremacy of the male.

To assist such a search/challenge the article begins with two case studies in the Faith Evangelical Church of the Philippines, a denomination taken as representative of the larger Philippine Evangelical Church in spite of its slightly liberal position on female leadership. Tracing the historical causes of female discrimination in the Philippines, the article reveals how Western biases impinged upon the Church and carry over to the present generation. There is a discrepancy between the perceived high status of women in society and their real status as male subordinates, including certain conditions manifested in the Philippine Evangelical Church. The article closes with recommendations for granting women greater participation in church leadership and achieving balance between males and females leadership.

*A Narrative on Filipinas in the Church:*

*Two Cases in the Faith Evangelical Church of the Philippines (FECF)*

In 1999 Joy Pabito was a fresh graduate of Faith Bible College (FBC) and about to embark on a year of internship at Faith Fellowship Ministry Center in Quezon City. When asked what degree she had earned, she replied, “Bachelor of Theology.” She was a Pastor? With a small smirk, she answered, “So they say. But people are more comfortable calling us (women)

‘Christian workers,’ so call me that.” What was the difference, in terms of qualification?

“Nothing,” she said.

In 2000, Joy was assigned to Bulacan Faith Fellowship, a church known for its good rapport with her male predecessors but notorious for its tithing problems and lack of organization. In the past year, Joy has managed to put the church in the black and to create order out of the ministerial chaos that once plagued it. In spite of this, Joy is struggling. Regardless of her contributions, the congregation still refuses to accept her as Senior Pastor because she is a woman. Her denomination, Faith Evangelical Church of the Philippines (FECP), short of pastors as it is, is keeping her on as acting Senior Pastor until a male pastor is found to replace her.

A similar case existed in Rizal Faith Fellowship, a church that resorted to the use of an American OMS missionary (to replace a Filipino pastor who had gone on indefinite leave) due to the *perceived* unavailability of Filipinos ready for assignment. This is significant because OMS International prefers to install Filipino pastors in line with its mandate to establish indigenous churches in its global fields. Having a missionary take over from a Filipino was a last resort. Meanwhile, Brenda Corpuz, another FBC graduate and also a member of Rizal Faith Fellowship, completed her year of internship and became ripe for a pastorate. Instead of being asked to take the pastoral position from the male missionary (according to OMS/FECP policy), she was assigned to assist him in all his duties from preaching to administration. In addition Corpuz also took on the sundry tasks the missionary was not be expected to deal with (such as preparing the Children’s Sunday School teaching schedules, etc.). In spite of her acknowledged preaching skills and other abilities, she was not considered for the Senior Pastor position because she is a woman. The congregation simply would not accept her.

These are only two of the gender-related situations FECP has recently had to confront. As more women discover their potential for ministry, the issue of gender and position is pushed with increasing force to the top of its list of concerns.

By Filipino standards, FECP is a progressive denomination that, unlike its conservative (traditional) counterparts, does not hinder the advancement of women in ministry. In FECP, men and women become eligible for ordination as full or lay ministers when they meet the qualifications stated in the manual and subject themselves to the rigors of the credentialing process.<sup>1</sup> If it were entirely up to the FECP leadership, women would be taking on pastorates all over the country. Unfortunately, it is not, and FECP has reluctantly accommodated congregational biases for the “higher good” of protecting its churches from controversy. As a result, the women ministers of FECP continue to warm the benches, so to speak, while they watch their male counterparts take “rainbow shots” from the sidelines.

Granted, the problem is caused primarily by cultural prejudices; however, it involves the self-perception of the women ministers themselves as much as congregational attitudes towards them. Many of FECP’s female workers prefer to work “behind the scenes” on church-planting teams, building the nascent congregations and then leaving them to male co-workers to shepherd. While the men accept the “glamour” role of “pioneering pastor,” the women move on to new locations to do the considerably harder work of beginning a church-plant. They find nothing wrong with this; it is a natural and proper progression of events in the patriarchal mindset.

Restricting women from leadership has much to do with the cultural impositions made by Spain and the United States during their 424 year-long intrusion into Philippine affairs. Women were not always the deferential helpers they predominantly are today. The precolonial Filipina

knew her worth and held her own, and was in every respect, the equal of man. Her fascinating character – and how it was bound and gagged by the colonizers – will be explored in the next section.

### *The Evolution of the Filipina*

The Filipina has lost no greater estate than her egalitarian status in precolonial Philippines. While she was by no means *primus inter pares* among her male compatriots, she was certainly accorded the respect and consideration due a person of equal stature. According to feminist writer and activist Mary John Mananzan, “precolonial women enjoyed the same privileges, rights, and opportunities as did men,”<sup>2</sup> and were allowed to explore their potentiality with unbounded fervor.

### *Precolonial Woman*

The popular creation myth of *Malakas at Maganda* describes this equality with vivid imagery: a bamboo stalk is dropped by a stork and splits to reveal fully grown *Malakas* (“strong,” the male identity) and *Maganda* (“beauty,” the female identity) springing from its halves.<sup>3</sup> The legend demonstrates the absence of gender precedence from the precolonial mind, for it claims man and woman emerged simultaneously and with parallel vibrancy from the same source. They shared not only a birthplace but a self, being anthropomorphisms of the male-female *Bathala Maykapal*, the supreme god.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Faith Evangelical Church of the Philippines Manual, 1998, 40-43.

<sup>2</sup> “The Precolonial Filipina,” in *Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People*, vol. 2, Fr. Gabriel S. Casal, et al., ed. (Manila: Asia Publ. Co., 1998), 194.

<sup>3</sup> Jaime A. Belita, C.M., *The Way of Greater Self: Constructing a Theology Around a Filipino Mythos* (Manila: DLSU Press, 1991), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Anne-Marie Hilsdon, *Madonnas & Martyrs: Militarism and Violence in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995), 34.

Women were socially accepted and recognized in their own right. Mananzan points out that husbands and wives were equal, and “wives were treated as companions, not slaves.” A woman was not required to give up her name upon marriage; on the contrary, among the Tagalogs, if the woman was particularly notable, it was customary for her husband to take on her name so he could share in her prestige.<sup>5</sup>

Baby girls were as welcome as boys because women were great players in family economics. Besides working in the fields, women could engage in trade on their own cognizance and were reputed to be more reliable negotiators as well as better managers than the men.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, women were recognized for their wisdom and intellect,<sup>7</sup> and played an important role in the animistic religion of the day. They were viewed as skillful intermediaries between individuals and *Bathala*, the transcendent god. While both men and women could become *babaylans* and *catalonas*<sup>8</sup> – priests and priestesses who performed rituals and offered sacrifices to appease *Bathala* to gain favor or secure healing – the women were generally considered more effective intercessors “because they were ‘more emotional’ and prone to hear ‘calls.’”<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, the criterion for pre-eminence was not gender but performance; among men and women, it was the skilled who were exalted. Thus, it is a commentary on the natural ability of precolonial Filipinas that they occupied the premier social and religious positions of their time.

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<sup>5</sup> Mananzan, 194.

<sup>6</sup> Hilsdon, 36; Mananzan, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> The legendary *Lubluban* was said to be the first lawgiver, and Princess Urduja of Pangasinan was reputed to be the consummate monarch: “beautiful, courageous, knowledgeable about Asian culture and language, and skilled in the use of weapons...,” while Queen Sima of Cotabato was said to have reigned during the 7th century in “a regime of integrity, honesty, and peace.” [Mananzan, 195.]

<sup>8</sup> The office went to those with the best ability to deal with the devil. [John H. Schumacher, S.J., *Readings in Church History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979), 14.]

While it is not accurate to say they were superior to men, they certainly enjoyed great social stature. The pre-Christian Filipina saw nothing anomalous in pursuing goals, expanding her frontiers, and generally serving the innate impulse for self-actualization throbbing in every human breast. In that era, self-improvement, work, and discovery were not male pursuits but the endeavor of humankind.

Such assertiveness trounced the Iberian worldview. Indeed, upon their arrival the Spanish colonizers considered the gender situation no less than shocking. Even as they recognized the excellence of the indigenous woman, they immediately moved to re-work her into the Spanish ideal – that model of retiring femininity so dear to the Castilian soul.<sup>10</sup> They set to work assiduously and accomplished no less than a debacle in their assault on Filipina independence.

Their effectiveness is witnessed to by every contemporary Filipina who says to her male counterpart, “*Di ko kaya yan. Trabahong panlalaki yan..Ikaw na ang gumawa.*” (“I can’t do it. That’s a man’s job. You do it.”)

*The Spanish-American Makeover (or How the Church Put a Good Woman Down)*

Spain and her friars were vexed about the paganism in the newly-discovered isles. According to Catholic church historians, the missionaries considered themselves spiritual warriors commissioned to defeat Satan in the islands, and to supplement and justify the military action therein.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, they made it their chief priority to bring the “*indios*” to the Cross, and they would do it by whatever means necessary.

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<sup>9</sup> Hilsdon, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Mananzan, 195.

<sup>11</sup> John Leddy Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses 1565-1700* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 53.

They dismissed the similarities between animism and Catholicism as a “diabolical conspiracy” and set about destroying every vestige of paganism they could find. Naturally, the indigenous people resisted this attack and were forced to cooperate with the new arrivals. John Leddy Phelan observed in his study on the conversion of tribal Philippines, “without coercion, or the threat of it, the natives in many cases would have rejected the appeals of the religious to discard paganism.”<sup>12</sup>

The Spanish leadership’s dismantlement of the precolonial notion of womanhood was even subtler. One of the Spaniards’ most effective weapons was their strangeness: to the small, brown, “uncivilized” Filipino, these large, white people with the vivid coloring were god-like. Thus, a colonial mentality was easily planted into the Filipino consciousness when the Spanish emphasized a “mythic” idea that they were holders of truth and models to emulate. They were working, of course, on the implicit (and often explicit) presumption that the locals were “stupid children” who “knew no better and needed to be educated;”<sup>13</sup> the trusting natives, who indeed “knew no better” about deception and subjugation, pliantly agreed.

The Filipina was immediately enrolled into the missionary finishing school where she learned the domestic arts and social graces that softened her rough edges.<sup>14</sup> She was also subjected to a rigorous moral renovation. Her forthright sexuality, once valued as a validation of her character, was anathematized and ideas of taboo erected in Filipino thinking.<sup>15</sup> The Catholic church set up images of woman as sin-bearer and sin-causer (“Eve the Temptress”) even as it revered the Virgin Mother and elevated sexual purity to unheard of heights in local

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<sup>12</sup> Phelan, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn M. Kwiatkowski, *Struggling with Development: The Politics of Hunger and Gender in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999), 160.

<sup>14</sup> Mananzan, 195.

understanding. Spain was so successful at entrenching *Maria Clara* as a female paragon in the Filipino psyche that the natives were soon transferring their esteem for the independent, assertive, courageous helpmeet of precolonial days to the gracious, meek, withdrawing, accomplished gentlewoman of Spain they saw in the lovelies who alit from every galleon. In the end, unbeknownst even to themselves, Filipinos gradually surrendered their identity to worship this image that was the Spanish ideal.

The Catholic Church reinforced the silent campaign against women through its “ecclesiastical patriarchy,” which not only disallowed women from participating in church activities (except in worship) but also barred the people from Scripture and its proper interpretation.<sup>16</sup> (This was a complete reversal of fortune for the *babaylans* and *catalones* who had figured so prominently in the recent past. Early Jesuit historian Horacio de la Costa records the conversion of 30 of these priestesses in one village alone in 1611 after coming into contact with the Christian God; elsewhere Luciano Santiago writes that *babaylans* were among the first to seek entry into the Convent of Saint Clare when it opened in 1621. The compulsion to participate in ecclesiastical functions might have been behind this initial ingress into the nunneries.)<sup>17</sup>

The Church imposed a “policy of deliberate rupture with the pagan past” by purposefully leaving “the key concepts of Christianity” *untranslated*,<sup>18</sup> thus preventing the locals from

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<sup>15</sup> Mananzan, *ibid.*; Hilsdon, 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Hilsdon, 37; Kwiatkowski, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Horacio J. dela Costa, S.J., *Jesuits in the Philippines 1581-1768* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 314; “The Brown Beatas,” in *Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People, vol. 3*, Jose S. Arcilla, ed. (Manila: Asia Publ. Co., 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Phelan, 58.

discovering for themselves the truth of the Gospel, along with concomitant teachings on the equality of humanity before God in terms of race and gender, *inter alia*.<sup>19</sup>

The church also painted Jesus as “Lord” in broad and powerful strokes, creating a striking but unbalanced picture of Christ that effectively cowed people into submission. Using the “lordship theology,” they successfully placed Christ over the tribal leadership and established Him as Supreme Power over all the indigenous spirits. Perhaps with equal intent, they used this lordship ideology to

domesticate the vibrant pre-colonial Filipino women’s self-understanding and power in the community....(As a result, the) active image of the power of Filipino women was diminished as Christianity was spread along with the feudal ideology of the colonial power. The ideal image of the Filipino woman became one of passivity, submissiveness, obedience, and chastity.<sup>20</sup>

This was the type of woman the Americans met when they took over the reins of the Philippines in 1898. Felicitously for the missionaries who came with them, she fit right in with the 19th century model of wife- and motherhood (with the proper blend of intelligence and meekness) that had emerged of late in American fundamentalism.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the spreading influence of American culture on Filipinos, the Protestant Church had a weak voice in Philippine society at this period. More than anything, the Americans helped to secularize the Philippines, and under their tutelage, the majority of Filipinos (and not

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<sup>19</sup> Phelan, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 58.

<sup>21</sup> Randall Balmer, “American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity” in *Fundamentalism & Gender*, John Stratton Hawley, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 49.

just the elite *intelligentsia* of Spanish times) began to expand their intellect and re-acquire the pre-Christian hunger for self-development. Women fought an uphill battle for recognition in professional fields, but they won sporadic battles, opening up for their sisters passageways to the tightly-guarded male enclaves.

In many respects, the colonial attitudes of Spain were shared by America, specially vis-à-vis the character of the native as a “child needing guidance.”<sup>22</sup> The “white man’s burden” of racist stereotyping was heavy indeed. While working out its “manifest destiny” in the isles, America had little time to spend on gender issues and Americans alternated between respect for the sex in general and contempt for the sex in the Philippine race. It was difficult to decide whether racism preceded sexism, or vice-versa.

In the Church, the door remained closed. As women struggled to re-establish themselves in society and gain a modicum of freedom, they were still barred from the leadership echelon and denied recognition as contributing workers of the church. With Spain’s breath still damp on her face, Filipina would not even dream of aspiring to leadership in such a patriarchal institution as the church. It was not her place. It was enough for her to do her part, namely to pray and support the various male-led church activities. As time passed and her social participation grew, this subservience evolved into complementarity, and it was sufficient for her to partner with man yet allow him to take the lead. This is the attitude that has survived to this day, one that recognizes the potentiality of woman but is satisfied to subsume her qualities under the traditional headship of men.

### *Women in Today’s Church*

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<sup>22</sup> Kwiatkowski, 161.

Many new sociology textbooks speak of the high status of women in Philippine society. In outright contravention of the perceived male domination of the female, they allege that this society is matriarchal, meaning that although the breadwinner is the male, he surrenders to the female his earnings and the stewardship thereof, granting her the real power in the household.<sup>23</sup> The more serious scholars balk at this generalization, preferring to say instead that Philippine society is not patriarchal, as has been traditionally thought, but egalitarian. This means that male and female work in partnership – also called complementarity – to secure the harmonious existence of the family.<sup>24</sup>

#### *The Real Status of Women*

Well and good. Unfortunately, it is only half true, according to Lynn Kwiatkowski. In her study of the Ifugao society of the Cordillera Region,<sup>25</sup> Kwiatkowski noted that conclusions about “women’s high status and equality between men and women” in societies like the Philippines derived from the bilateral kinship systems existing in these cultures. However, she makes the insightful observation that:

To say that women in the Philippines traditionally enjoyed high status does not inform us empirically about what *actual power* they have in society, nor of the actual conditions under which women live.<sup>26</sup> (italics supplied)

While women enjoy the benefits of modernization, education, incorporation into the marketplace, and the institutionalization of Christianity, their social role is still largely determined by

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<sup>23</sup> Custodiosa A. Sanchez and Fe B. Agpaoa, *Contemporary Social Problems and Issues*, 3rd ed. (Mandaluyong: National Book Store, 1997), 211.

<sup>24</sup> Isabel S. Panopio, Felicidad V. Cordero-MacDonald, and Adelisa A. Raymundo, *Sociology: Focus on the Philippines*, 3rd ed. (Quezon City: Ken Incorporated, 1994), 199.

<sup>25</sup> Carolyn Israel-Sobritchea concluded that findings on Ifugao culture can be translated to the rest of the Philippines. (Kwiatkowski, 82.)

traditional biases and inculturated attitudes. A woman's performance is valued but her opinion is not; and this is true even in the church where Western proof-texting and bad exegesis have been used as both shield and truncheon to keep her from the pulpit.

The latter statement is supported by Kwiatkowski's important discovery among the Ifugao women in her study: they were expected to work the same hours daily as the men but were paid at least 20% less than their male counterparts; furthermore, "they were also viewed as less likely candidates for social positions of leadership and power."<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, the Ifugao women feel powerless even in their supposed position of equality. They consider themselves helpless to change their situation and perceive that men are in actuality "better suited for leadership positions" than they are. Having no hope of relief, they occupy their niches in mute frustration.<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, Western Christianity has done much to lodge that mindset deeper into place. For instance, one Ifugao woman believed her husband was the head of the family because it was "what the Bible taught," whereas an Ifugao man said that wifely subservience was proper because it was a teaching of the Catholic Church.<sup>29</sup> Western Christianity has unconsciously aided the entrenchment of these gender biases among Filipinos by encouraging men and women to take on tasks that seem gender-appropriate in the Western estimation, but work to nudge Asian women into lower levels of prestige.<sup>30</sup> Filipino feminist scholar Virginia Fabella observed that

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<sup>26</sup> Kwiatkowski, 78.

<sup>27</sup> "Characteristics similar to the cultural constructions of Ifugao women also were found in other areas of the Philippines, as noted by Carolyn Israel-Sobritchea (Israel-Sobritchea 1992:22)." Kwiatkowski, 82.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 86, 94.

<sup>29</sup> *id.*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, motherhood is viewed positively by the Church, but encouraging women to focus only on motherhood prevents them from realizing their potential. (Kwiatkowski, 253.)

Asian churches use complementarity “for men’s convenience in order to perpetuate stereotypical feminine roles for women.” Reacting to this, she asserts, “complementarity is acceptable only if it respects equality.”<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, while the Protestant Church is viewed as a “liberating force” because of its acceptance of female religious leaders (in contrast to Catholic patriarchy and the teachings on female submission), men have been known to subvert Protestantism and Bible knowledge to support their authoritarian treatment of their wives.<sup>32</sup>

The fact of female involvement in the Evangelical Church in the Philippines is undeniable. They are found at all levels, though a diagram of the figures would show a pooling at the bottom and a tapering at the top. While women are given managerial responsibilities and granted access to theological education, the question remains, what actual power do they have to chart the course of their denominations? Also, what real status do they have in church leadership? Do they, like Joy and Brenda, step on the top rung only to be held back by the congregation? Or are they, like so many others, unable to get to the ladder at all? How are we in the Philippine church to influence a change in the situation in a way that honors both the Lord and us? And how are women in the Church to use their leadership to reach out to the voiceless women in society? Some recommendations are offered in the succeeding section.

### *Sobriety in Suasion*

Since gender-issues are fraught with controversy and tension, it is highly important to approach the matter foremost, in a Christian manner – Scripturally, and with love, so that the Lord is not shamed by our actions. Sobriety and patience are called for. It is necessary to

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<sup>31</sup> Chung, 48, *cf.* 43.

remember, therefore, that the women's cause as it pertains to ecclesiology is not about power, nor is it anti-male.<sup>33</sup> It is about the greater participation of women in the leadership and direction of the Filipino Christian church, in order to make it a more efficient means of communicating the Gospel.

The problem, as stated, is not that women are disallowed from serving in church, but that they are not granted full participation in its activities and recognized as true leaders.<sup>34</sup> Women have been disenfranchised from leadership by Western biases introduced more than three hundred years ago, yet which still have the potency to conjure invisible barriers that keep women "in place." These biases must be demolished so that the Filipinos church may rediscover what it means to be truly Filipino and redeem what is best in the culture so as to better reach their compatriots with the message of Christ.

In this respect, education via the pulpit is key – not only to help congregations confront and dispel prejudicial attitudes, but also to enable women to realize their potential and to express their frustrations<sup>35</sup> (thereby putting others in touch with their struggle, which is a significant source of theology).<sup>36</sup>

Educating both church leaders and congregations will bring the Church into the present and correct any anachronism in its policies and convictions. The author hopes that greater female

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<sup>32</sup> Kwiatkowski., 163, 92; also see Chung, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Chung, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Augustina Lumentut, "Towards Greater Participation and Contributions of Women in Asian Churches," in *Asian Journal of Theology* 1 (April 1987): 206-207.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 209.

<sup>36</sup> Chung, 17.

participation in leadership will both result from and foster a richer collegiality among church leaders, one that promotes criticism and correction as well as improvement and advancement.<sup>37</sup>

It is also necessary to ensure the preservation of a balance between male and female involvement in the church leadership.<sup>38</sup> The lopsided ratio of attendance, membership, and participation on the Board of Elders in favor of women is developing into a real concern because it speaks of a waning interest in “doing church” among men. Church leaders need to stress the co-equal privileges and responsibilities held by both genders in the eyes of God by relying on scriptural authority. Women are not interested in leading a church for women alone; nor do they want to “win by default. Both sexes are accountable to God to build the Kingdom, and the restoration of a proper relationship of respect between man and woman is the first step toward that goal.

Finally, leadership choices must be based on performance and not gender. This is nothing new to Filipinos, for performance has long been the main criterion for valuation in society. However, estimation must lead to placement, and this is where the problem lies. The Church needs to review its attitudes on leadership qualifications and determine whether any of the traditional standards used are based on anything other than performance-related issues. Any prejudices that emerge need to be addressed and dealt with.

### *Conclusion*

As stated, the Filipino Church needs to hearken back to its roots. To be Filipino and Christian is to be egalitarian. To bar women from church leadership is un-Filipino and un-scriptural, and therefore, un-Christian. These are rousing thoughts for those – specifically men –

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<sup>37</sup> Lumentut, 208.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 210.

who believe that the traditional indigenous worldview supports the supremacy of the male. Filipino Christians clearly need to assess their convictions. Even the most rabidly nationalistic among them may discover that they are more Western than they can admit – and more oppressive than they want to be. There was a time when women could abide by that. Not anymore. The times, they are a'changin'.

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