State of Aporia: Violence, Forgiveness and Non-self-asserting Agency in Christian Philippine Society

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the discursive logic of Christian forgiveness in a Philippine society which has experienced low intensity conflict for decades. It identifies a predicament involving legal stalemate and personal indecision which is dubbed as “state of aporia”. For the purposes of the article, state of aporia has three meanings. First, it denotes the ignorance of the victims of communist insurgency and counter-insurgency who cannot know the “objective” truth of political killings due to the Philippine society’s temporary incapacity to legally hold to account the perpetrators of the killings. Second, this “state of aporia” refers to an existential predicament in which impasse and puzzlement continue to perplex those victims who are of Christian faith regarding the “objective” truth of political killings. Finally, state of aporia refers to an ethnographic intervention technique, which may help the victims of political violence to cope with their existential predicaments and make personal decisions. To illustrate the role of Christian faith in the agent’s negotiation for forgiveness in this “aporetic complication”, I shall start with John Milbank’s theological critique, which suggests that sociology and theology are incompatible because of sociology’s tendency to “ontological violence”. The article’s ethnographic focus is on a local form of Christian forgiveness that can be negotiated to cope with the state of aporia. In the light of non-self-asserting agency, as seen through the eyes of a member of the local elite, Cristina S. Mamba-Lavio, the article’s ethnography explicates this particular Christian forgiveness on three counts: (1) Mamba-Lavio’s interpretation of the Indian notion of karma in the Catholic context; (2) her recognition that the suspects also have this-worldly sufferings; and (3) her transgression of the state’s judicial inconclusiveness by leaving the final decision to an otherworldly entity, i.e. God.

Keywords: Christianity, forgiveness, forms of agency, John Milbank, Philippines, theology-sociology dualism, violence

Introduction

This paper aims to illustrate how revelation-based theology and evidence-based sociological reasoning may be reconciled in ethnographic encounters such as in the specific case of a Christian-inspired forgiveness of the perpetrators of political killings in the Philippines. This attempt does not aim to make any scientific generalizations or theological contributions. Rather, it investigates possible forms of human intervention, and acts as an invitation to the exploration of alternative understandings of aporia and reactions to violence. The article