

Book Reviews

The Comfort Women

George Hicks
St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin,
1995. xxi, 265pp. Paper.

True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women

Keith Howard, editor
London: Cassell, 1995. viii, 200pp. Paper.

*Reviewed by Daniel Adams,
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In 1962 a Japanese journalist, Senda Kako, came across a wartime photo of two women accompanied by a Japanese soldier crossing the Yellow River. His interest was kindled by this photo and he began to make inquiries as to just who these women were. Little did he know that this would be the beginning of the uncovering of one of the most tragic and at the same time officially denied stories to come out of World War II—the story of the comfort women. In his book *The Comfort Women*, George Hicks chronicles the development of this story from its beginning in 1938 up to the present. It is not a pleasant story; it is a story of betrayal, rape, prostitution, duplicity, denial, and broken lives. Yet it is a story that must be told if we are to ever come to terms with the full horror of war.

Hicks begins with a brief but insightful overview of what he calls the relationship between Mars and Venus during wartime. Soldiers and sex have always gone together and the Japanese were not the first to officially sanction and support prostitution

for the troops. The Romans had a similar system in their empire as did Spain in the sixteenth century, and both the British in the nineteenth century and the Americans in the twentieth have made certain that the sexual needs of the troops were cared for although usually not with official government sanction.

With the expansion of the Japanese Empire in the 1930s and the deployment of troops overseas, it became obvious that something needed to be done. Incidents of rape were so common that in 1932 one general opened a comfort station for his troops in Shanghai. The majority of the women were ethnic Koreans taken from mining communities on Kyushu. It was not until 1938, however, after the Rape of Nanking, that the Japanese government became alarmed and took official action to put the system of comfort stations into place. The first government-sanctioned comfort station opened in Shanghai and served as a model for comfort stations in virtually all areas of the Empire.

Technically these comfort stations were operated by civilians with the military providing transportation and medical support. Women were recruited from virtually all ethnic groups, including Japanese, but the vast majority were Koreans. Hicks provides full details of the system interspersed with personal interviews by surviving comfort women. Drawing upon official military and government documents he offers irrefutable evidence that as many as 139,000 women were hired, deceived, or kidnapped and forced into prostitution between 1938 and the end of the war in 1945. Yet it was not until July of 1992 that the Japanese government

finally admitted its role in this sordid affair. Even now the issue has not been resolved.

Estimates are that as many as 116,000 comfort women survived the war and that there could possibly be as many as 58,000 of these women still living today. In 1991 several of these women sued the Japanese government demanding financial compensation. Hick points out that at the rate the trial is progressing it could take up to twenty years for the verdict to be decided. By that time of course, most if not all of the surviving comfort women will be dead. Even now there are influential Japanese who deny that such a system ever existed. Writing in *The Japan Times* on 26 November 1995, one former government official praised the government of China for breaking up a Beijing "news conference on the issue of the 'comfort women' who were supposed to have been forced into sexual servitude during World War II." Fortunately, numerous NGOs, including church-related women's groups, are keeping the issue of the comfort women before the public eye, both in Korea and Japan and at the United Nations.

Although the Batavia Military Tribunal in 1948 sought and received compensation for Dutch women who were forced to serve as comfort women, it has not been until the 1990s that Asian women have been willing to come forward. This has been due to two major factors. First, most Asian governments have been under military rule and public protests of any kind were forbidden. As Hicks points out so well, there is a politics of sex, which involves covering up the past in exchange for economic benefits in the present. Secondly, most Asian cultures, and certainly Korea, are strictly patriarchal and women who had served as comfort women would most certainly not want their past to become public knowledge. The shame and social criticism would be too great. In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, things in much of Asia began to change. Democratically elected governments began to take root and

the women's movement gained prominence. These changes provided the impetus for more and more women to step forward and to demand both a sincere public apology and financial compensation from the Japanese government. Hicks tells the story of these women from their years of sexual servitude, through their years of socially enforced silence, up to the ongoing struggle for justice. He tells the story well with both objectivity and passion.

While Hicks focuses on the history and organization of the system of comfort stations and the continuing legal struggles of the surviving comfort women, Keith Howard lets the women tell their own stories in *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*. Howard's book is an English translation of the personal stories of nineteen comfort women compiled by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. In virtually all of the cases the story is the same—being forced into prostitution by outright kidnapping, trickery, or false job offers on the part of the Japanese; or treachery and deceit by Koreans in the employ of the Japanese. Most of the women were from poor families, relatively uneducated (some were illiterate), and from rural areas in the southern part of Korea. Many came from families which were so impoverished that virtually any offer for economic betterment was accepted. Several of the women were, as young girls, forbidden to attend school by their fathers or brothers and they were forcibly taken out of the classroom and their school books burned. Their only value was as wage earners for the family or to be married out and thus relieve the family of an unwanted economic burden. Such naive young girls became easy prey for the smooth-talking traffickers in women.

Their stories tell of unspeakable treatment in the comfort stations. For most there was literally no one they could trust. Helpful doctors demanded sex in return as did

officers who sometimes showed compassion. Only rarely did a soldier show kindness and understanding and not demand sexual favors in return. Most women were never paid; they were physically and sexually abused, and suffered from disease and chronic illness. Many attempted suicide as an escape from their ordeal.

Following the end of the war these women returned to Korea only to face a life of suffering. Many never married and those who did marry usually entered into unhappy marriages to poor men, older widowers with children, men who were already married but initially kept that fact hidden, or men who were drunkards and physically abusive. The women themselves frequently ended up as alcoholics or drug addicts, suffered from mental derangement, and sought treatment for chronic illnesses resulting from venereal disease, malaria, and gynecological disorders. Today most are living either alone or with relatives and depend upon some form of public assistance for their livelihood.

These are the untold stories of the war, stories that not only affirm the dictum that "war is hell" but also tell us something of the position of women in Asia. But most significantly, these are stories that many in high places deny ever happened and these are women who, according to some government officials, do not exist. It is the NGOs and church organizations and journalists such as George Hicks and Keith Howard who are keeping the issue of these women before the world. These two books tell the story of one of the darker sides of World War II, a side that has remained hidden for far too long.

Two major issues emerge from the story of the comfort women. The first is the conspiracy of silence on the part not only of the Japanese government, but also the governments of other Asian countries affected by the comfort women issue. Economic benefits are clearly at stake here, and the under-

standing is that nothing is to hinder the economic development of the region. It is highly significant that it has been NGOs, women's organizations, and church-related organizations that have spoken out on the comfort women issue. If nothing else, the story of the comfort women clearly demonstrates the crucial importance of a strong and persistent Christian voice in public affairs. Governments cannot be relied upon to speak with integrity nor do they always seek justice, even for their own citizens.

The second issue concerns the position of women in Asia today. It is no secret that foreign women are still lured to Japan with lucrative job offers, only to find themselves sold into prostitution with no means of escape. Horror stories are told of women who escape to the local police station only to find themselves handed back to the very people from whom they had run away. And in Korea women are still kidnapped off the streets and delivered to brothels while police and other officials look the other way and give the excuse "We can do nothing." The thriving sex industry in many Asian countries has become an international scandal and yet nothing is done even though AIDS is devastating large sectors of the population. At the root of this tragedy lies the low position of women, a position that is characterized by extreme poverty, lack of education, limited employment opportunities, sexual discrimination, and the persistent view that women are commodities to be bought and sold. Here too, it is the NGOs and women's organizations that have been at the forefront for the rights of women.

Unfortunately the churches have sometimes been only lukewarm and on occasion downright hostile to raising the status of women in Asian societies. And yet it is here that the solution to the issue of the comfort women is to be found. When women and men are both understood to be fully created in the image of God and when this understanding is reflected in society and culture,

then and only then will things began to change. This is not to say that the churches have not made significant contributions in this area, especially in providing educational opportunities for women, but considerably more must be done. The comfort women and their stories serve as a tragic example of what can happen when women are treated as less than fully human and when political ideology, cultural traditions, and economic interests are allowed to obscure the God in whose image we have all been created.

Toward a Theology of Struggle

Eleazar S. Fernandez

Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994.

vi, 193pp.

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I hesitated to accept the invitation to write a review of this book for two reasons. First, I am not a theologian nor am I a theologically-trained layperson. Secondly, I am suspicious of titles that begin with the word "Toward" or with the word "On" (as in "On Jane Austen," which promises everything but commits itself to nothing). However, curiosity got the better of me and after reading the first few pages I could hardly put the book down—I was committed.

After reading the book, however, I concluded that a more appropriate title would probably have been *Theologizing the Filipino Struggle* since much of the discussion is not really about the Filipino theology of struggle itself. The book also includes the author's critique of dominant (Western) theologies and ideologies, and much of it is devoted to the author's theological construction, taking the context of the suffering and struggling people, not only in the

Philippines but also in other settings where oppressive conditions and structures exist.

I think that the publication of the book is timely. There is a growing dissatisfaction with Western models of thinking, seeing, and being and new indigenous models are being developed. I hope that every seminary in the Philippines will make the book a required reading. Then, hopefully, our pulpits will become more relevant and our churches escape the judgment of the church of Laodicea.

The Jesus that the Western missionaries brought to our shores was a conquering Jesus, a friend of the rich and the powerful. Thus began the exploitation, oppression and cultural alienation of the Filipinos. Fernandez quotes a poem that sums up what he calls the "Filipino malady":

We are a brown race
with white gods
and whitened soul.
We are aliens
in our land
hostage by our past.

The churches have emphasized a kind of spirituality which the Filipino Bishop Labayen describes as "individualistic and vertical, historical, dichotomized and inadequate in terms of understanding human beings"—a spirituality that "legitimizes oppression." (Franklin Jayakumar Balasundaram, "The Theology of Bishop Julio Xavier Labayen, O.C.D." *CTC Bulletin* 11/2-3 (May-December, 1992, p. 55). Thus the development of a "people's theology" becomes necessary not only in reflecting the struggle that is part of the everyday reality of the people, but also in reconciling the people with their own cultural roots and historical past and in inspiring the struggle itself. To this, Fernandez says, "the act of struggle itself as an experience is an experience of God's presence, a foretaste of liberation in the making... a new spiritual experience."