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FROM THE MARGINS, FOR THE MARGINS: A PROFILE OF DR. ATHENA GOROSPE

Evelyn Reynolds



SCHOLARLEADER INSIGHTS

Dear Friends of ScholarLeaders,

In this feature on Dr. Athena Gorospe, you'll read about how a theologian in the Philippines combines Biblical scholarship with activism. Athena calls for justice for the marginalized, and she teaches others to do the same. You'll also read about how she applies the Bible to issues in society.

ScholarLeaders supported Athena during her PhD at Fuller Theological Seminary, and she serves as co-organizer for the *ScholarLeaders Women's PeerLeader Forum*.

As you read, consider

- How does our treatment of one marginalized group impact other marginalized groups – as you'll see in Athena's discussion of the marginalized in the Philippines?
- What are specific situations in your context to which an unusual Biblical narrative might speak?
- What might it look like for you to be "downwardly mobile," as Athena says?
- After reading this profile, how might you respond to Christ's call to care for "the least of these"?

With excitement for our work together,

Evelyn Reynolds, PhD
Communications



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Athena receives the 2017 ScholarLeader of the Year Award.

Photo credit: ScholarLeaders

Fifteen years ago, Athena Gorospe gave a devotional in which she called her audience to be downwardly mobile. She argued that we should recover "Jesus's concern for the marginalized."

Athena has dedicated herself to this plea – and to practicing what she preaches – especially in the Philippines.

Athena came to Christ as an 11-year-old. She immediately used her own money to buy New Testaments for her classmates "because I wanted them to hear the Word of God."

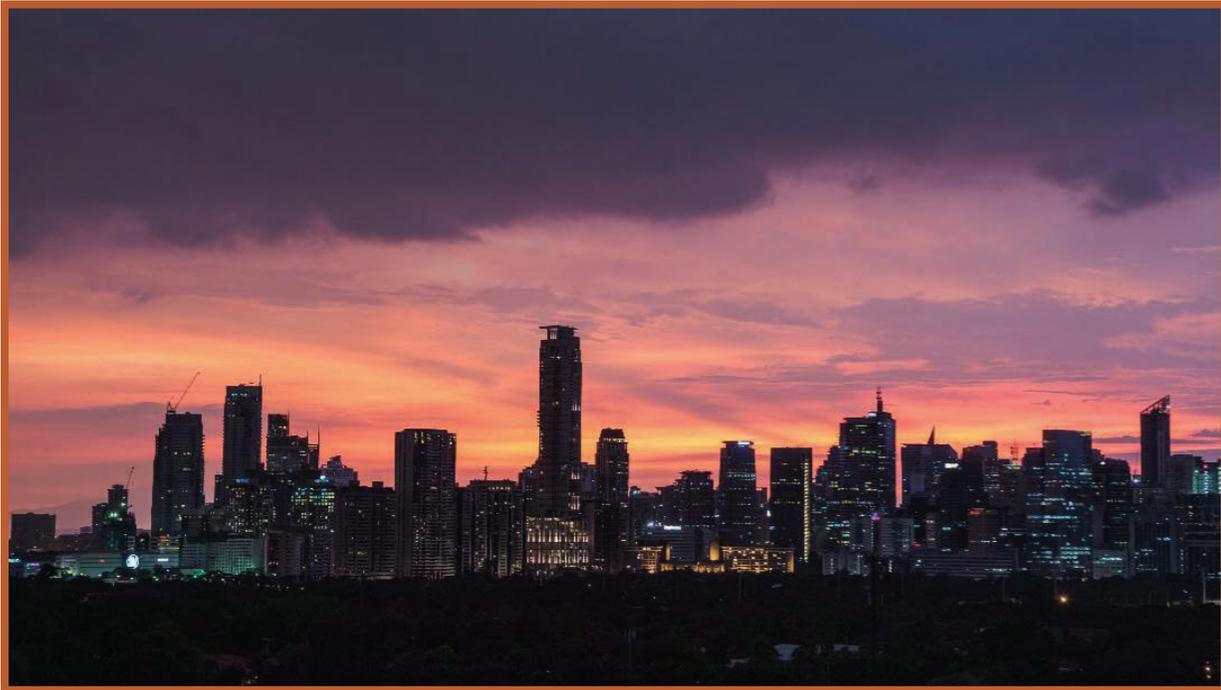


Photo credit: Andrey Andreyev

Manila, Athena's home and home of ATS.

Her college years, however, were “the Marcos years,” years of dictatorship. “I was taking journalism, and my classmates were out [protesting],” she recalls, “but... I could not relate my faith with what was happening in society.”

This gap pushed her toward spiritual darkness. A mentor committed suicide; relationships failed. Remembering those years, she says, “Sometimes in my Christian community, you are affirmed if you are doing well, but if you fail... you get marginalized.” Eventually, she dropped out of school.

Grieving what she perceived as her failures, Athena read the Bible. She found the promise that God “is able to keep you from falling and to present you blameless before Him with great joy. I said, ‘I don’t feel that I’m blameless...’ but there’s this promise!”

She was serving at a Filipino-Chinese church, but she felt that she needed training, so she finished her Bachelor’s. She jokes, “Oh, I was trying to find the meaning of life, but I couldn’t..., so I went back to school.”

She started studying at Asian Theological Seminary (ATS). During a course on Christianity and society, a professor wrote on an exam, “I hope you would go for further studies, Lady Theologian.” With that encouragement, Athena earned her MDiv at ATS.

When she finished, ATS invited her to earn a PhD and join the faculty. For decades, ATS had had only non-nationals as faculty. As Westerners retired, ATS began to hire Filipinos.

Athena said yes to ATS’s faculty development plan – “I really want to study God’s Word, and I really want to share God’s Word,” she remembers thinking – but she had to wait for more senior faculty to earn their degrees. ATS could not support most of its faculty leaving at once.

While she waited, Athena started teaching at ATS in 1993. In 2000, with support from *ScholarLeaders*, she entered Fuller Theological Seminary’s PhD program. At a *ScholarLeaders* board meeting, she delivered that call to downward mobility.

Indeed, Athena still sees herself as speaking for the margins from the margins. “Not that I’m against ordination,” she notes, “but I never see myself as playing a role in the hierarchy.” Instead, she wants “always to be in the margins... working with people in the grassroots.”

Athena returned to ATS in 2006. She now directs ATS’s Contextual Theology PhD program, which is “an interdisciplinary PhD. Most people would just concentrate on Bible,” she says, but ATS integrates Theology with Social Sciences. Thus, Athena trains the next generation of Christian leaders to address societal questions.

Social problems have a distinct edge in the Philippines right now, so outside her academic work, Athena engages in activism. In June 2016, Rodrigo Duterte became president of the Philippines thanks to explosive anti-drug rhetoric. Some observers have even suggested that he encouraged ordinary people to kill anyone suspected of drug involvement.

Now, the situation is so drastic that “People... kill people and then wrap them in masking tape with a cardboard [sign] saying, ‘I’m a drug user.’ And that means that you’re worth being killed,” Athena explains. As of 2017, “7,000 people have died.” Athena and her colleagues have used social media, protests, and petitions to call for justice.

She also criticizes Filipino attitudes toward women. With disgust, Athena says that “even the top leadership has made a lot of jokes about women.” When a Filipino congresswoman “launched an investigation on the extrajudicial killings..., she became a target.” In order to discredit her, leaders “wanted to show her sex video in Congress!”

When Athena’s male students at ATS minimized the situation as “just a joke,” Athena turned to the Bible, to Judges 19, in which a woman is raped and hacked in pieces to make a political point. After reading that passage, her students “could hardly talk,” she recalls.

For Athena, this is one of the Bible’s primary functions: just as the prophet Nathan confronted David about Bathsheba, so Scripture forces us to look from society’s problems to our own behaviors.

In such intense situations, Athena asks students, friends, colleagues – and her international community – to consider “how Scripture can speak to the issues of today.” She says that “Christians often have a naïve understanding of what goes on in society: ‘Just because I read it this way, then it is this way,’ when actually, there are other factors going on.”

Athena does see growth in the Filipino Church, partly thanks to emphasis within the Lausanne Movement on “social action and evangelism.” Regarding poverty in particular, she says, “I think we have matured so much in that area.... There are... ministries to children, ministries to women in prostitution.”

Athena’s own ministry ripples from ATS. For example, she has mentored “three generations” of women – Anawa, Georgie, and Jeannette. Athena mentored Anawa in her ministry to Iraqi refugees. Anawa encouraged Georgie to enroll at ATS. Together, they guided Jeannette, a recent ATS graduate, to participate in Wycliffe.

In 2017, Athena received the *ScholarLeader of the Year Award*, in recognition of her dedication to theology and the marginalized. As part of that award, she worked with a leading school in Colombia, in March 2019, on the topics of women and violence. She notes, “It’s an opportunity for them to learn from me, and I’m also going to learn and listen.”

Whether she is tweeting about women’s rights, managing academic paperwork, protesting against extrajudicial violence, or analyzing the Old Testament, Athena calls us to consider how we will answer Christ’s challenge – “If you have done it to the least of these my siblings, you have done it to Me.”



Photo credit: Jonathan Simcoe

Athena focuses on interpreting Scripture.