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Review

Johann Ev. Hafner, 2022, *Indigene Selbstbehauptung und katholischer Ökokommunismus. Der philippinische Rebellenpriester Conrado Balweg*, Baden-Baden, Ergon Verlag, 242 pp. ISBN 978-3-95650-969-8

The biography of Filipino rebel-priest, Conrado Balweg SVD (1944-1999) who joined the communist New People's Army (NPA) served Prof. Johann Ev. Hafner to provide an inside into essential chapter of contemporary civil and Church history of the Philippines. The biography, entitled: *Indigenous Self-Assertion and Catholic Eco communism. The Filipino Rebel Priest Conrado Balweg* has been intertwined with author's autobiographical involvement. Hafner inspired by an SVD missionary embarked on missionary experience in the North Philippines (1984-1985) within MAZ (a short-term missionary), a programme destined for young lay people and sponsored by the Society of the Divine Word. He met personally with Conrado Balweg during one hour interview conducted in February/March 1987, though Hafner himself gives the date 1986, while remarking that it took place one year after

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the overthrow of President Marcos (1986). On learning about Balweg assassination in 2000, Hafner started biographical research on him equipped with own experiences and old notes. He set off for several interview-trips in the Philippines and interviewed 30 struggle companions, members of the SVD, military personnel, neighbours and relatives. The interviews provided the essential material for a biographical study and in the same breath contemporary history of the Filipino Catholicism. The author made a reservation not to write both a history of a hero and a history of scandals since Balweg was neither a saint nor a criminal. He was an average student with a clear head but not theoretician. He was “daredevil fighter, stubborn treasure hunter, lovable spouse, hero of women, enthusiastic speaker but a bad moderator” and poetically in words of Quintero: “Balweg has the determination of a storm, the consistency of sunshine, the faith of a child and the trust of a woman” (p. 13).

Through the decades, the New People’s Army (NPA) as military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP, 1968) run on the Maoist ideology conducted the struggle under the banner of battle against the exploitation and poverty. It sought to overthrow the Philippine corrupt regime of President Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986). Marcos enjoyed unconditional US backing from Washington against the communist threat. His rule marked by economic stagnation and authoritarian kleptocracy saw a strengthening opposition, targeted by the introduction of Martial Law (1972-1981).

This biography of a revolutionary hero published in 2022 coincided with the presidential elections in the Philippines on May 9th, which witnessed the return of the Marcos clan to power with the victory of Marcos’s son Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Junior. Although, time heals all wounds, it also forewarns in the words of Cardinal Tagle (2016): “We suffer a collective amnesia”. This publication merits a particular attention. Especially, it alludes to the work of the Society of the Divine Word in the country and provides an interesting study of circumstances which led several of its missionaries to join the revolutionary path.

The biography follows the path of Conrado Balweg, who was one of a four SVD rebel missionaries, next to: Bruno Ortega (1949-1987), Nilo Valerio (1950-1985) and Cirilo Ortega (1950-). In the 1970s, several Catholic priests joined the NPA and influenced its shape. Balweg went through conversion from theology student to guerrilla fighter within the communist ranks. It is a puzzling history of a sensitive theology student in the Mission Seminary of the Society of the Divine Word

in Tagaytay (ca. 60 km south of Manila). He lived within himself a conflict between two unreconciled realities of academic theology and of his tribal minoritarian identity. Balweg along with two other SVD rebel priests came from the Tinguian minority in the western Cordillera Mountains of Luzon. The Tinguians were often scornfully regarded as primitive and underdeveloped. The biographer highlighted the importance of geographical factor that divided the Tinguians into Lowlanders and Highlanders. The latter fought for its independence with every means at their disposal for three centuries under the Spanish rule. Proud of their self-identity, the Tinguians strongly dedicated to their indigenous religion, they resisted Christianisation. Balweg embodied the deep sense of communalism with fierce allegiance to his own ethnic group, marked by powerful sense of solidarity between the individual and the community: "They do not leave you alone. And at the same time, your life is for the benefit of the whole. And this is very much expressed among the minorities" (p. 63). This absolute priority of ethnic factor explains Balweg's later breaking away from the New People's Army. He had absorbed the self-consciousness of his people and initiated establishment of an autonomous region for the mountain tribes.

In the 70's, Balweg rose to the rank of a commander in the guerilla of the Maoist New People's Army and became the most wanted "terrorist" under Marcos. One faction pursued national revolution, while another with Balweg emphasized the preservation of indigenous culture, being concerned with the autonomy of his people.

Conrado Balweg was born in village Bangilo as a third son of a poor farmer Tomas and Felicidad, nee Mangwag on December 28, 1944. It was a time of Japanese invasion. Conrado went first to the St. Joseph's elementary school in Bangilo (1951-1957). At the age of 13, supported by his parish priest Peter Mayers, Conrado entered the Minor Seminary in Bangued (1957-1961). Then he entered the Major Mission Seminary in Christ the King in Quezon City/Manila and did there the SVD novitiate (1961-1966). Then, he pursued his theological studies in Tagaytay (1966-71). Meanwhile, he was sent for a yearly program of exposure called Regency (1967). The SVD Seminary introduced exposure programmes, initially only for voluntary but then as a part of curriculum. The students were sent to mix with the poor and formed the basic communities: "On our free Thursdays and Sundays we went out to the farmers, we spoke with them and exposed ourselves to their situations. During summer-break we worked and prayed with the people and read the Bible with them. We had our cassocks, and the

people had a high esteem, but we did not want to manipulate them. We tried to conscientize them, why they live in their situations" (p. 45-46). However, during the exposure the seminarians experiences a praxis shock, not finding answers to the people questions. Balweg preferred always the villages (Barrio Balabag) and the people loved him.

His ordination was delayed and took place on July 8, 1972. The formators lauded his apostolic zeal, but pointed out his neglect of duties as a student and someone also doubted his genuine motivation. In his favour was the Society's strong commitment to further the indigenous vocations. Conrado was friendly and generous but short-tempered, and extremely stubborn. He could easily influence others. He gained strong support of his companions of the 3rd theology course who petitioned the superiors for his admission to priesthood. After ordination Balweg was assigned to Abra in the mountainous parish Luba-Tubo as an assistant priest and then as parish priest to semi-Tinguian parish Sallapadan, from where he then went underground in 1979.

The biographer investigated the theological formation in Tagaytay and pondered about its influence on Balweg. He encapsulated the dominant theology as "theology of consolation" which was unable to address the problems of the revolutionary left. The scholastics got into contact with the teachings on Marxism and the Liberation Theology during the lectures of a young German professor Fr. John Füllenbach (1968-1975). He was the main importer of Liberation Theology into seminary, after finishing his theological studies in Rome and sociology in Washington. Füllenbach strongly emphasized the differentiation between the Church and Kingdom of God against the ecclesiocentrism. He presented Marxism as a secular form of Christian hope without God. Nevertheless, his version of Liberation Theology was based on Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, but he did not lecture on its radical representatives like Ernesto Cardinal and Clodovis Boff, and did not include the Filipino theologians. According to Hafner, Füllenbach was foremost an academic lecturer who did not deliver social analysis and did not offer bridges for political programs. Thereby, he cannot be blamed for the radicalization of the young rebel priests who perceived the well provided seminary life as distraction from the reality and obstacle in the formation of solidarity and class awareness. The anti-Marcos movement was largely a student movement. The students in Tagaytay lived in a sort of conflictual situation, proud of belonging to Society but at the same

time, they did not feel understood by the European superiors. They felt obliged to defend their own people in the mountains, and were critical about the hierarchical Church and bishops as the representatives of the higher social class. In several seminaries after the Martial Law followed the radicalization. In general, the students could be divided into three groups: a very few like Balweg joined the underground; the majority waited and remained in the religious orders; and the third group followed the middle way by getting involved in the social projects. Balweg got influenced ideologically by Edicio de la Torre (ordained in 1968) who joined the noncommunist armed National Democratic Front (NDF) formed under the initiative of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Torre was not really a rebel priest. After many years, he wrote an article "The Spirit of 1968", which is not listed in the author's biography but highlights the expectations which resonated also in Balweg: "For the Philippines, we hoped that the farmers would own the land they till, and cooperate to make them productive, as the foundation for equitable agroindustrial development. For the Catholic Church, we hoped for its incarnation through a Filipino theology and spirituality, liturgy and ecclesiology" (Verbum SVD, 2018, fasc. 1, 83). Torre contributed to the Balweg's politicisation and stamped on Balweg his Christian Mao doctrine, but he did not trigger in Balweg the decision to take up arms. In one interview Balweg was asked about the use of arms: "Do you think that it is a sinful? His poignant answer was: "It may be a sin. But I believe it is a sin that can be forgiven". For Balweg the driving force for his actions was Igorotism, the self-consciousness, the defence of his exploited mountain people.

The first years of Balweg priestly life were ever more absorbed by the ecological conflict related to the big governmental project of deforestation of the North Cordillera. Its aim was the activation of production of paper in the Philippines. In March 1972, the government granted a concession to the Cellophil Corporation for 2500 km² of land. The project affected considerably the Tinguian people who resorted to protection of the left. Balweg united the opposition under the roof of United Communities of the Cordillera against the sale of ancestral lands, especially the communal lands. He established collaboration with the Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA) and unfolded a conscientizing campaign by preaching and organizing seminars in the mountain parishes of Lacub, Malibcong and Luba. The program of 20 points which denied development at the expense of the people was formulated and signed by 20 tribes. It postulated cancellation of the concession for Cellophil to prevent the deforestation, erosion and

destruction of fields as well as the destruction of the native culture, traditions and customs. The CPLA fighters cut and blocked the roads of the Cellophil heavy-loaded trucks. The diocese did not react. The work of Cellophil was stopped in 1985. Balweg action brought him the title of the Father of Cordillera. Meanwhile the campaign radicalized. The Abra Action Group was created composed of young rebel priests. The group met in Baguio in 1977 and elaborated New Pastoral Approaches – Community Pastoral Program.

Soon, this revolutionary orientation among some SVD priests met with resistance in the Society, especially due to Fr. Eugen Reinhardt, rector of the Minor Seminary in Bangued who became influential as the efficient manager for development projects. He had his own experience of communism behind. He was born in Strassburg/Tiraspol, near Odessa in Ukraine and his father was shot in 1938 by Soviet “agents” and the family escaped to Germany. Reinhardt was responsible for the irrigation program in Manabo (1972-1986). The NASSA (Caritas) was accused of revolutionary influences. Balweg rejected the development aid as a part of the colonial system. The disagreement between Reinhardt and Balweg referred to their different visions: the first wanted to improve the infrastructure and material situation of the people whereas Balweg wanted to change the indigenous social conditions (self-liberation from social injustice). Reinhardt’s memory of Stalinism and pragmatism clashed with Balweg’s social utopia. Reinhardt opposed the views of some SVD rebel-priests and claimed “We have fallen victim to an ideology”. Balweg had a strong social apostolate at the expense of sacramental ministry. In May 1979, Fr. Wim Wijtten denounced him as a communist: “I can’t tolerate this to go on”. Balweg was reproached to neglect his pastoral duties in the parish as he was frequently absent and there was no Mass even on Sunday.

The rebel priests pursued their goal by meetings and seminars with calls for solidarity using the method: “See-Judge-Act”. Balweg and Cirilo Ortega organized resistance against Cellophil in the affected communities. The Cellophil – the tapping of pine trees from the mountains for different products (paper factory-Tayum) was the strongest accusation against Balweg. This activity brought him onto ire of the military government officials. The meetings became suspicious as centres of communist formation with the deployment of soldiers in civil clothes. Balweg was targeted as rebel (red-tagging) organizing revolutionary groups. In June 1979, he was the hunted man and a warrant arrest against him was in force. The Bishop Conference received from Home Ministry a list of collaborators of communists

(4 bishops, 25 priests, 2 sisters and 120 lay workers). This governmental infiltration had a push effect and the rebel priests went to the underground. There were undertaken some assassination attempts on Balweg. The SVD bishop Artemio Rillera and Reinhardt undertook an effort to save him in Gallapadan. The Provincial Council decided that he should rest for a while in a Catholic Trade in Manila or Tagaytay and maybe sent abroad. Two close companions accompanied his transfer but after several days, Balweg disappeared and the only trace he left was a book with a hole inside to fit in the gun.

Balweg divided the community and used money as well as resources and infrastructures to pursue his own goals. It was decided to withdraw the rebel priests from the mountains with the assent of the diocese. But they joined the New People's Army. Balweg followed the Maoist-Communist path and embarked on armed struggle and revolution. In 1979 Balweg went through a three months basic military training and strategy, and was sent for test mission. His task was propaganda and education committee of the CPP Abra. As platoon political officer he was charged with the recruitment of new members. The Generalate in Rome decided for the four rebel priests to ask the Holy See for their excommunication; they remained SVD members, obliged to observe celibacy but could not wear the cassock and exercise any priestly ministry. The clergy of Abra addressed General Santiago Barangan expressing understanding for the revolutionary priests in a letter of July 15, 1983. They also highlighted the motives behind the action of three SVD Tinguian priests who had known from childhood the poverty of the people living in depressed and neglected areas. They had known the hardship and the difficulties caused by the inadequacy of services delivered for the uplands and the intrusion of the Celophil (CRC) into their ancestral lands. They developed intense activity to help the people. Besides, the letter hinted that the people support NPA out of fear not to be killed (p. 107-108). Balweg remained in the mountains. He lived in Bontoc, the Mount Province, being in touch with his home region. The NPA fighters lived in camps, sometimes for two years in the same place. They received military, medical and ideological training based on discussions about the quotations of Max-Engels-Lenin and guiding principles by Joma Sison, and Luis Jalandoni. Their slogan was: "The government has forgotten you". They had the task to inform the people on the political situation and provide class analysis. They divided people into three groups: exploited, middle class and high class. Apart from the indoctrination, NPA offered practical courses of alphabetization and agriculture.

Underground, Balweg married his earlier catechist and companion of struggle Corazon Azon Cortel in 1981. They had five children. But he also had son Jordan with another woman. Balweg became also internationally known due to the photo of a BBC reporter where he poses with a machine gun. However, Balweg claimed that "the guns will not win war but the justness of the cause will". He once said: "A revolution is a declaration of a just war against an unjust system" (p. 24). In 1979, he and his people killed 46 soldiers, 6 informants in 20 battles in different ambushes. But he himself was at the point to be killed more times. In 1983 the prize for his head was 200,000 pesos and he was the most wanted NPA fighter.

In case of Balweg, there was present a strong, naïve idealism sort of revolutionary religion. For him the military fight was fulfillment of his priestly religion. In this sense he never betrayed religion or religious vows using his proper exegesis. For him the high point of love was to be revolutionary, this was most unselfish kind of love up to the point of martyrdom. He claimed that through Marxism one can understand religion better (p. 141).

The year 1986 was both a turning year in the whole country and in Balweg's life. President Marcos announced snap elections. The bishops reminded him: "We must obey God rather than men". Although most of the votes received Aquino, the widow of the killed senator Benigno Aquino (1983), the electoral commission declared Marcos as the winner. However, the Bishop's Conference declared the elections of February 7 as invalid and fraud, and claimed that the government lost its moral basis to govern. Events of bloodless people revolution saw over two million people on the streets. Nuns kneeled in front of tanks with rosaries. Prayers and rosaries strengthened by faith were the only weapons that the Filipinos used to recover their freedom from President Ferdinand Marcos's iron hands. Revolution was an extraordinary nonviolence resistance (Rosary Revolution). When Marcos saw that the majority of military was not on his side he gave in and went into exile to Hawaii.

On April 7, 1986, Balweg established the Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA) and with 180 fighters separated from the communist NPA. Hafner argues that Balweg was never a real communist but allowed to be used. Balweg became the enemy of NPA, which acted in terms of class struggle and was interested to seize the political power in Manila by military means. Balweg realized the unbreakable gulf between NPA and his objective that was the provision of autonomy within the national administration. He justified his collaboration with

the government of Cory Aquino to get the autonomy. He did not have a full grasp of Marxism and Leninism. He was influenced more by the indigenise ideas of South America. In September 1986, the CPLA and the Government of the Philippines made a "sipat" (ceasefire). Cordillera rebels agreed not to disrupt government functions in the Cordillera Administrative Region, except for matters related to Cellophil. The ratification of the Constitution in 1987 with a promise of nationwide plebiscite gave rise to the establishment of the Autonomous Cordillera Administrative Region, with a right to selfdetermination.

Gradually, Balweg was ever more marginalized. He contested unsuccessfully a seat on behave of the LAMMP party of Joseph Estrada. As a result, Balweg decided to go to his family home Bangilo "to make peace" with his brother Jovencio in the village. Jovencio belonged to the NPA accusing him of betraying the masses.

In the final consideration, the biographer stated that Balweg did join the communists mainly due to the lack of alternatives. Balweg's reasoning was based on simplifications. The liberation theology was not applicable in the concrete reality. Balweg's world collapsed during the seminarian years of formation in confrontation with the reality of his people at home when he recognized the seminary as part of the exploitation system. However, for Balweg the decisive trigger for actions were not the theories of Marx-Lenin but the lectures on the Mao strategies conveyed in form of simple and radical sentences. As a result, he rejected the socioeconomic efforts and development aid provided by the Society and dioceses as reactionary healing. Balweg took up to the arms to react to exploitation and destruction of the forests of his people. In his view, violence of the government legitimized the use of violence by the guerrilla as a right for self-defence. The impunity of military generated the self-justice. The Martial Law suppressed the critics and drove the suspects to underground. The violence is always justified as counter-violence. Both the military and the guerrilla saw themselves entitled to defend themselves against attacks. "In the final analysis it comes down to use of a just violence over an unjust one. When an unjust war is declared, that unjust war should be eliminated by mankind. Marcos has declared an unjust war on the Filipino people" (p. 216).

Balweg broke away from the communist NPA and chose the way of peaceful dialogue with the government. In 1986, shortly after Marcos' fall, he laid down his arms and began negotiations with the Aquino government. His change can be defined as passage from the revolutionary theology to theology of inculturation. He sought to create

a cultural free space for the peoples and advocate their autonomy rights. The tragic of Balweg was his final realization of ideological mistake. He wanted to withdraw, but there was no return. He was taken hostage by the communists who could not forgive his betrayal. They only waited to strike a deadly blow. He was not afraid to pay the highest prize with his own life. Balweg was executed in his family home by a communist guerrilla group led by his younger brother at 4 a.m. on December 31, 1999.

Johann E. Hafner's biography provides a solid piece of historical writing and the critical assessment is limited to minor shortcomings or suggestions of improvement. An index of persons would be helpful to follow the contents. The listing of all interviewed persons do not provide the exact dates when they were conducted. The narrative flows chronologically and it is well incorporated in a relevant context. Although this biography is thoroughly researched, the Balweg's ideological portrait could be better accentuated, especially his adherence to Maoism merits more extensive treatment, with better elucidation of the question: how did he understand the compatibility of Maoism with Catholicism? Overall, the author has delivered a convincing and balanced portrait of Conrado Balweg in the context of the historical time without succumbing to onesided interpretation.