


# THE CRAFT OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

## TOWARDS A CONVERSATION ON THEOLOGICAL METHOD IN THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

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his paper is an attempt at conversation. I find it difficult to start since my dialogue-partners are my elders in the Philippine theological family, many of whom were my revered professors or favorite authors from whom I will be forever grateful to have learned the skills of the craft. In a culture which holds 'elders' in great esteem, we have not been trained to tell them a piece of our mind. But as a tribute to their laudable pioneering endeavors, I have tried to muster some courage in order to raise some issues on their theological methods with the view to keeping alive the theological conversation they have started as the Philippines continue to grapple with its new and ever-changing contexts.

Beyond this seemingly personal concern, I think that theological conversation is demanded by the nature of contextual theology itself. As was already observed in the 1986 EATWOT Conference (Oaxtepec, Mexico), theologies from the Two-Thirds World were described as *ghetto theologies*.<sup>2</sup> Coming from the context where one form of oppression (politico-economic, racial, gender, cultural, religious, etc.) predominates, each also tends to exclude other forms. Ironically, what started as critiques to monolithic Western theologies also end up possessing the same universalizing tendencies. Ghetto mentality in fact reinforces ethnocentrism and vice versa. Theological conversation, thus, is salutary. Finally, this paper is also an attempt to communicate what happens in the Philippine theological scene with the hope of establishing some sort of conversation with the greater theological community.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and extended version of an article which first appeared in *Chakana: Intercultural Forum of Theology and Philosophy* 1 (2003) : 19-42.

<sup>2</sup> See Frank Chicane, "EATWOT and Third World Theologies: An Evaluation of the Past and Present," *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergencies*, ed. K. C. Abraham (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 147-69.

There has been a sizable amount of effort that went into the project of contextual theology in the Philippines. This paper will only focus on ‘methodology’. First, I will present the main trajectories of this diverse undertaking to serve as our working outline. Second, I will attempt to present a theoretical framework as a platform from which to assess the different attempts at doing contextual theologies. Third, from the perspective of my proposed paradigm, I will try to engage the different theological approaches. My modest aim is merely to raise some questions on method in order to keep the conversation going.

## Theologies in Context: Mapping in the Philippine Scene

Several attempts have already been done to map contextual theologies in the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will follow the main trajectories proposed by one of the leading Jesuit theologians in the Philippines, Catalino Arevalo. In his recent contribution to the *Dictionary of Mission*,<sup>4</sup> he classifies contemporary theological efforts in the Philippines into three areas of interest. The first area is what he calls ‘mainstream theology’ - one which uses the discourse of the magisterium as its base for reflection.<sup>5</sup> In the history of theology, magisterial pronouncements have always been distinguished from theology proper. Most often in the West, these two charisms find themselves in constant clash and tension. But in the Philippine context, Arevalo argues that magisterial texts and those of the FABC, in fact, constitute what he calls ‘mainstream theology’. “They [the texts] have given the overall direction to the life and work of the church in those areas of its mission

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<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Leonardo Mercado, “Contextual Theology in the Philippines: A Preliminary Report,” *Philippiniana Sacra* 14 (1979): 36-58; Rodrigo Tano, *Theology in the Philippine Setting: A Case Study in the Contextualization of Theology* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1981); Jaime Belita, *From Logos to Diwa: A Synthesis of Theological Researches in the Catholic Graduate Schools in the Philippines (1965-1985)* (Manila: De la Salle University Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Catalino Arevalo, “Filipino Theology,” in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. K. Mueller (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), 161-67. See an earlier typification in C. Arevalo, “Prenotes to the Contextualization of Theology,” *Philippiniana Sacra* 14 (1979): 19-22.

<sup>5</sup> Arevalo identifies some bishops and theologians mainly connected with the Jesuit school as belonging to this trend: Teodoro Bacani, Francisco Claver, Sabino Vengco, Catalino Arevalo, Antonio Lambino, James Kroeger, John Schumacher, Pedro Achútegui, Romeo Intengan, Vitaliano Gorospe, A. Blachand, F. Clark, F. Gomez, G. W. Healy and others.

which might be seen as new or as responses to new challenges - the 'growing points' of history - in the Philippines and in Asia."<sup>6</sup>

The second sphere of theological interest is 'culture' in general. Part of the conscious attempt to construct a distinctly 'Filipino' theology, this theological trend delves into the complexity of the Filipino traditional culture, its popular religions, its language and cultural structures, in order to discern the Good News already embedded in it. Theologians engaged in this work seek mainly to identify some key concepts in language and practice (e.g., *loob*, *kapwa*, etc.) that may serve as the fundamental guide to understanding Filipino identity.<sup>7</sup> With the local culture as the starting point of theological reflection, it is characterized by its reaction to the Western forms of Christianity. This theological method consists in correlating key - Filipino terms and their cluster concepts with the Christian message itself, making the latter more logically and emotionally accessible to the Filipino sensibility.

Being a part of the Two-Thirds World, one of the most appealing fields for theological reflection is that of the liberationist thematic. Though differing in degrees of depth and extension, this third trend directly engages Marxist analysis and praxis towards the economic, political, social and cultural transformation of society. Arevalo identifies three sub-groups within this area. First, we see the Filipino theologian-members of the EATWOT and the Christians for National Liberation (CNL) whose social analyses are parallel to those of the left-wing political parties.<sup>8</sup> This group of theologians has gained a wide international hearing due to its belonging to a worldwide network (i.e., EATWOT). Second, we have a centrist group which 'consciously and explicitly' relies on the official ecclesial magisterium in the discernment of an appropriate Christian praxis in our times. Third, we have also some

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<sup>6</sup> C. Arevalo, "Filipino Theology," 163-64.

<sup>7</sup> Among others, Arevalo identifies the following theologians as belonging to this group: Ruben Villote, Leonardo Mercado, Benigno Beltran, José de Mesa, Vitaliano Gorospe, Vicente Marasigan, Roque Ferriols and Dionisio Miranda. Another trend which Arevalo does not include in his classification is the movement towards liturgical inculturation, the main proponents of which are Anscar Chupungco, Moises Andrade and Sabino Vengco. This group of writers also uses the signs and metaphors of Filipino culture to elaborate an inculturated way of celebrating the liturgy.

<sup>8</sup> The following are said to belong to this group: Edicio de la Torre, Carlos Abesamis, Mary John Mananzan, Louie Hechanova, Karl Gaspar and Virginia Fabella.

‘theological’ reflection going on among grassroots communities (BECs) whose political position ranges from ‘far left’ to ‘left of center’. However, it is quite difficult to account for all these reflections since they can only be found in mimeographed or ‘xeroxed’ forms. But Arevalo remarks that it is their positions which are most influential in grassroots mobilization.

The above mapping is meant to show the diversity of methods in Philippine contextual theologies. But there is barely a communication among these rich and varied approaches. Arevalo himself acknowledges the lack of a ‘theological community’ in the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> My attempt to raise some questions on method is founded on the realization that these various ways of doing theology need to interact, cross-fertilize and critically collaborate. This connects with a central concern in doing contextual theologies: the dialectics between particularism and universalism, the local and the global, i.e., between the particularity of a specific approach and its readiness to listen to other points of view. Yet the main task of this paper is also to argue that such a problem is rooted in one’s theory of culture. It is from one’s notion of culture that a theological methodology takes its frame. To be able to establish a conversation on theological method, there is a need to clarify a theologian’s conception of culture.

## **Beyond ‘Values’: An Attempt at Theorizing ‘Culture’ as Praxis**

### *Culture as Praxis*

In anthropological discourses, ‘culture’ is always used as an abstract ‘noun’ for something. It either refers to some ‘elitist’ social practices (e.g.,

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<sup>9</sup> Arevalo states: “[A] local theology in a way presupposes theological community; in the Philippines this hardly exists. I believe such a community is necessary, even for the solitary genius who might give us a truly significant study. Even our professors of ecclesiology have never (not even once!) met to discuss that significant area. In the past there have been attempts like Fr. Mercado’s to write on Filipino theology. Mercado explored on the language, sayings, thought patterns of Filipinos as starting point. We have Dr. de Mesa’s well-read books, Fr. Dionisio Miranda’s impressive work... But as I said, we have not developed a corpus of writing which is on a par, say, with Latin American theological output, moving in rather clear directions, etc.” C. Arevalo, “A Life in the Service of Church in the Philippines and of Asia: Catalino Arevalo, S.J.” [Interview with Fr. Catalino Arévalo, S.J., Loyola School of Theology, Quezon City, Manila, May 3rd 1995] in *Jahrbuch für kontextuelle Theologien 1995*, ed. Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio, e.V. (Frankfurt, Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1995), 24-25.

music, paintings, theatre, etc.) or, in more contemporary sociological egalitarian views, to some determinate communal forms of life, meanings and everyday practices. It is located either in the past (as traditional values and ‘ways of life’) or in the future (as socialist or religious ideals). Both the Vatican discourse of the so-called ‘Christian culture’ and the radical communist utopia fall in either of these two categories. Despite their seeming differences, what binds these two positions is the abstract determinate form in which culture has been conceptualized and captured.

A contemporary cultural theorist, Raymond Williams (1921-1988) argues against this passive connotation of pre-determined values by emphasizing culture as ‘verb’. Before becoming an abstract ‘noun’ for something, culture was first a ‘process’. The Latin term *cultura* can be traced to its root *colere* which, among other things, means ‘to cultivate’. ‘Culture’ thus originally is a word to denote an actual practice, that is, the cultivation or tending of something, generally of plants or animals, and by metaphorical extension, of human ‘tending’. Only in later developments did it come to denote an abstraction, a thing-in-itself. In Williams’ neo-Marxist analysis, the shift came at the time of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>10</sup> What I intend to underline here is culture’s original meaning. For beyond abstract and determinate cultural ‘forms’, it refers to collective human praxis, one which presupposes a sufficient amount of skill and ingenuity, if a local community has to survive in the social and physical environment it finds itself in.

But what is praxis? This word is as complex as ‘culture’. The Aristotelian distinction between praxis and poesis is well-known. In the Greek scheme, praxis is precisely used to describe the moral sphere characterized by autonomy and not dictated by the urgency and arbitrariness of daily needs and wants (which characterizes poesis). Thus, it properly belongs only to the members of the Greek polis since the rest of the populace, like the women, slaves, farmers, laborers and merchants, do not have the leisure to deliberate on the moral directions of society, as they busy themselves with providing for their daily bread. Leisure is thus a pre-requisite for

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society Coleridge to Orwell* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993 [1958]), xv-xvii. See also idem, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1988), 87-93.

morality. What in effect is sidelined is the discourse and practices of those who provide for the needs of the greater society by their manual labor. Since these people are not eligible for membership in the polis, neither can their actions be admitted into its moral discourse. What was suppressed is the notion of *metis* - a sense of ‘cunning intelligence’ held in esteem among the pre-Socratic Greeks. The rationalist scheme in the conception of moral boundaries denies the fact that, in certain activities like navigation, medicine or hunting (as Aristotle also admits), the Greeks also value a type of intelligence which combines flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, dexterity, resourcefulness, vigilance, creativity - various skills, and experiences acquired over the years as they are made to bear upon the “transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation and rigorous logic.”<sup>11</sup> Being ‘in touch’ with its *kairos*, anyone born into a culture can dance with the complexities of its unpredictable and conflictual situations. *Metis*, thus understood, shows some intrinsic connection to the English word *craft* or the French *métier*, both of which refer not only to a sense of *skill*, *cunning* and art but also to *intellectual power* in relation to work, especially to manual labor, commerce or any profession aimed at earning one’s livelihood. Though the adjective *crafty* refers to astuteness or deception, it also means ingenuity, resourcefulness and creativity in the art of living.<sup>12</sup>

*Metis*, craft or knack can be translated into the Tagalog (the language of central Philippines) notion of ‘*galing*’. When one is *magaling*, s/he displays some ingenuity and mastery of a skill, an art or a practice. This means that one who is *magaling* is also ‘born into the [cultural] game’. Of course, *galing*, like *metis*, is a double-edged aptitude. One could be *magaling makipagkapwa* (i.e., sociable) or *magaling mangurakot* (i.e., corrupt). But what makes me wonder is that this notion, despite its pejorative potentials, has not been totally cast out (unlike *metis*) of the Filipino moral discourse since *galing* or *kagalingan* is also the same word for health, well-being or wholeness (*eudaimonia*, if you like), both external or internal.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. J. Lloyd (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 3-4. Originally published as *Les Ruses d'intelligence: la mêtis des grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> See Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).

When someone is sick and I wish her well, I say: “*Magpagaling ka!*” (Get well soon!).<sup>13</sup> This same assertion is quite prominent in Cebuano language (in Central Visayas and most of Mindanao). The Tagalog noun, *galing*, can be translated as kamaayo. Its adjective, *maayo*, refers both to metic dexterity (*maayong mokanta o manulti*, i.e., good singer or speaker) but also to moral goodness (*maayong tawo*, i.e., honorable person; or *maayong kabubut-on*, i.e., good will). If the Greek discourse has expelled *metis*, what I want to point out, through this short lexicographic excursus, is that the Filipino culture shows itself to be at home with this ambiguity (or the *double-vérité*) of all discourses and practices. Unlike the Greeks, we have not expelled from our moral discourse the possibility of playing with all the resources at hand within the tempo of the human game. The issue of morals is thus decided not on the level of concepts but on the rough grounds of practice, that is, in its capacity to contribute to human well-being.

### ***Culture as the ‘Feel for the Game’: The ‘Double-Truth’ of Practice***

In the contemporary anthropological-sociological scene, it is the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), who theorizes most prominently on the concept of culture as practice. Crucial to his theory is the notion of *habitus*.<sup>14</sup> *Habitus*, in a way, is an interface between what we call an objective culture (e.g., systems, contexts, practices) and subjective culture

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<sup>13</sup> The double connotation of *galing* can be found in one of the oldest *Tagalog* manuscripts. Tomas Pinpin, the first Filipino printer, published in 1610 a Spanish language-learning manual for the Tagalog natives (a linguistic group in central Philippines where Manila is located). In its prologue, Pinpin states his objectives: “Paralang sulat ni Tomas Pinpin tauong Tagalog sa manga capoua niya Tagalog na nagaabang magaral nang dilang *macagagaling* sa kanila.” (The letter delivered by Tomas Pinpin to his fellow Tagalogs who are expecting to study the language which can advance their well-being [or which can do them good]).” In the context of colonization, this assertion is far from neutral. According to Vicente Rafael, such an appropriation of a foreign language is in fact also a subversion of its grammatical constructs. It affords the natives some leverage to get around the colonizers’ demands and to evade their intentions of full mastery. Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), 55-83.

<sup>14</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); idem, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990 [1980]); idem, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. M. Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

(e.g., worldview, values, meanings, etc.). It is a social agent's 'feel for the game' - a cunning dexterity to play with the available time and resources at one's disposal - a skill generated by being born into the game itself. It is also a reflection of the outside world within the human internal schemes of thinking, valuing and acting. Beyond being just mental, *habitus*, value or culture shows itself in one's 'postures, gestures, ways of standing, walking, speaking'. "The strength of the ethos," to quote Bourdieu, "is that it is morality made flesh."<sup>15</sup> But even if culture has become a 'second nature' to us, Bourdieu also dissects it to be unevenly structured. It reflects the uneven vision and division of the social world of which it is a part. In Kabylia (a region in Algeria where Bourdieu did his earlier anthropological researches), for example, 'real' men of honor are enjoined to walk forward with face upright in a steady determined pace or, when face to face with the adversary, to look at him straight in the eye. On the contrary, a woman's 'proper' composure is to walk slightly stooped, to look downwards and to walk some few paces behind the men. The *burka* Afghan women wear is but an extreme example. In other words, *habitus* or culture is inculcated by everyday motivations and injunctions for 'proper' postures, 'good' manners, 'right' protocols, 'exact' pronunciation or 'nice' company, but always to the exclusion of 'the other', the stranger and 'the different'. This critical edge internal to any cultural analysis is necessary, otherwise any talk of culture is, at best, in danger of naïveté or, at worst, colluding with the project of domination masquerading itself as 'cultural formation'.

But beyond being a 'structured structure', culture is also a 'structuring structure'. Being a 'feel for the game', it also constitutes creative resistance. This aspect of culture highlights its *praxis* dimensions. That is, to have the 'feel for the game' resists the consigning of oneself into the inherited categories of a dominant culture but also enables one to get around it quite ingeniously in order to promote one's good or well-being. To be in a culture, therefore, does not spell a mere passive resignation to a 'second nature' which we can do nothing about. It points us to the possibility of resistance through inventive, '*metic*' and cunning ways even as dominant forces continue to impinge on our ways of being in a specific social world.

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<sup>15</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. R. Nice (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), 86.



### *Oblique Resistance: Theorizing Cultural Praxis in the Philippine Colonial Context*

To see this theoretical framework in the local Philippine context, we would look into two ‘inculturated’ practices handed down from the Spanish period: the recitation of the *Pasyon* and the practice of confession. The *Pasyon* (a word derived from the ‘Passion’ of Jesus Christ) is an extended verse form of the whole biblical narrative from the creation of the world in Genesis to the last judgment in the Book of Revelation. This popularized narrative account of salvation history, filled with local idioms, images and metaphors, is chanted in local popular tunes by neighborhood groups in individual houses during the Holy Week even to this day. This activity, one of the first attempts to inculturate Christianity, could be interpreted as an (un)conscious ploy of the Spanish colonizers in order to lead the Filipino mentality into submission to the Church and the Crown. In the context of a colonial regime, the model of Jesus as the ‘silent lamb led to the slaughter’ had fatal political repercussions. There was, however, a surplus function of the *Pasyon*, which the missionaries never at all intended. A Filipino historian, Reynaldo Ileto, argues that the people’s chanting of the *Pasyon* has provided a narrative which served as the rallying symbol for their hopes and aspirations for liberation.<sup>16</sup> In this work, Ileto studies popular uprisings against the Spanish and American regimes, mostly composed of rural farmers and workers often branded as bandits, heretics, or fanatics by the colonizers. He argues that as a religious text and cultural practice, the *Pasyon* inherently carries with it a double-truth which, to the surprise of the colonizers, was ingeniously and dexterously utilized by popular leaders to foster solidarity among the oppressed and to propel these groups towards some liberative social goals. As these unlettered masses dutifully chant the metered verses during the Holy Week to the pleasure of the missionaries, they were also given the language and vision to articulate their longings for a new world far from what the colonizers had ever imagined.

Another significant case is the practice of sacramental confession. It must be remembered that the Philippines only had fewer missionaries in the

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<sup>16</sup> Rafael Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1975).

field and far less military forces than what Spain sent to the Americas. Yet in the mid-1600s, less than a century since Christianity came to the islands, more than half a million of Filipinos had already converted to the faith. Another Filipino historian, Vicente Rafael, attributes this fast spread of Christianity to a double reduction - that of 'language' and of 'bodies', both of which are related to 'conversion'.<sup>17</sup> Just as the local native scripts were reduced to Latin-Castillian grammatical structures of declensions and conjugations, people were also relocated to administrative centers (i.e., *pueblos, cabeceras y poblaciones*) so that these 'native bodies' will live *bajo de la campana*, that is, within the range of evangelization but also of political control. One of the more effective ways to pursue conversion was through *sacramental* confession. That the practice of confession was quite crucial to the evangelization-colonization project is attested by the numerous vernacular translations of confession manuals during this time. Early missionary accounts also attested to the eagerness with which the natives rush to the confessional sometimes to the point of begging the priest on their knees. Yet these same missionaries also found the native practice confusing since, instead of following confessional rules laid down in the manuals, the penitents turned this event into opportunities for justification of one's deeds or for 'showing-off' since they tell the priest not their own sins but that of 'their wives, mothers-in-law and the people they do not like'. Does this mean that the natives did not have the intellectual capacity to comprehend the intricacy of this foreign religious practice, as some missionaries believed? Or was it a different dynamics that was at play altogether? Rafael's conclusion is quite insightful. The *Tagalog* word (the language of Central Philippines) for asking for forgiveness in confession is *tawad*, which also means 'to bargain, to haggle or to use evasions' (or in Spanish *regatear*). In other words, the practice of confession which was used as a machinery of the colonial powers to control bodies and minds, was in fact seen by the natives as an act of bargaining with authority - a sort of oblique resistance against the totalizing grip of a dominant power.

With the above, we have come full circle in our theorizing of culture as praxis. First against all conceptions of culture as some formal conglomer-

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<sup>17</sup> Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988).

ate of determinate values, abstract systems of thought or traditional ways of life as expressed in the privileging of certain artifacts or values over others, I propose the notion of culture as process, as movement, as practice. This move is done in order to avoid succumbing to the tyranny of some determinate forms either located in the past as lost paradise or in the future as achievable ideals, even beyond the quite passive and neutral connotation of culture as context. Culture is a continuous negotiation between human ideals and the demands of the rough grounds of the shifting context of history. Thus, follows the second consequence. The ‘feel for the game’ of culture is, in effect, a skillful play with *time*, between the demands of social standards and the available resources found in the actual circumstance, as also shown in our attempt to recover *metis*. This ingenuity of the human agent to creatively maneuver through the complex intricacies of life, even in the context of domination, makes possible the necessary resistance towards human promotion and emancipation. Even as the *Pasyon* and confessional practice were (un)consciously designed to further oppression, it is the natives’ ‘feel for the game’, i.e., their capacity to play with the resources at hand, which protected them from total domination. Thirdly, I have shown how each cultural practice contains a ‘dual-truth’ or what Bourdieu calls a *double-vérité* (as seen in the *Pasyon* and *confession*). While the colonizers had their motives, the natives came up with another - the effectivity of which can only be arbitrated in the actual rough grounds, that is, whether they contribute to human well-being or not.

What repercussions has this theoretical reflection on culture in doing contextual theology in the Philippines? It is to this that we now turn.

## **The Craft of Contextual Theology: Towards Conversation on Method**

### ***‘A Theology of Bits and Pieces’: Theologizing in the Two-Thirds World***

The so-called mainstream theology in the Philippines is far from being a conservative force. If the Philippine hierarchy has been very vocal against the political establishment from the time of the Martial Law under Marcos to the recent ouster of the once-popular Erap Estrada, it is largely due to the

statements and analyses provided to the bishops by mainstream theologians, as Arevalo himself acknowledged.<sup>18</sup> Far from being armchair theologians, they have a concrete grasp of the country's main political and economic movements, so as to act on them in the spirit of the Gospel. Such a theology is necessarily contextual. It is Arevalo himself who calls the theological task as a *métier*<sup>19</sup> which, as I have shown, not only means technical know-how but also grounded knowledge and *metic* skillfulness that can creatively merge the demands of the Christian message and the exigencies of the often complex and conflict-ridden situations. This intrinsic connection with *time* and historical circumstance can be discerned in Arevalo's theological method of 'reading the signs of the times'.<sup>20</sup> Founded on the authority of magisterial statements, the *theology of the signs of the times* is "a theology of the discernment of the action of God and the grace of God in history."<sup>21</sup> It tries to feel the pulse of 'what is going on' in history in order to discern 'what is going forward' in the aspirations of peoples.<sup>22</sup> 'Aspirations' here is not only an abstract word; it has intrinsic political connotations. Filipino theology, as Arevalo sees it, endeavors to make the Philippine Church "bear a word, bear the Gospel of Christ, precisely as it encounters *what-is-going-forward* in our common journey as a people, going forward towards building a nation."<sup>23</sup> In other words, this methodology challenges the theologian 'to live as close to the people as possible as to be able to hear their heartbeat' so that s/he can 'walk with' them and help point out the way to the Kingdom. I would like to highlight three positive characteristics of this approach: (a) its *ad hoc* theologizing; (b) its liberationist concerns; and (c) the centrality it accords the magisterium and its texts.

First, theology as played in the midst of pressing needs and urgencies, as they exist in any other parts of the Two-Thirds world, can only be done in

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<sup>18</sup> C. Arevalo, "Filipino Theology," in *Dictionary of Mission*, 165.

<sup>19</sup> C. Arevalo, "After Vatican II: Theological Reflection on the Church in the Philippines 1965-1987," *Landas* 2 (1988): 17.

<sup>20</sup> C. Arevalo, "On the Theology of the Signs of the Times," *Philippine Priests' Forum* 4 (1972): 14-26.

<sup>21</sup> C. Arevalo, "Prenotes to the Contextualization of Theology," *Philippiniana Sacra* 14 (1979): 29.

<sup>22</sup> C. Arevalo, "The Task of the Church: Liberation and Development," in *The Filipino in the Seventies*, ed. V. Gorospe and R. Deats (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1973), 235-45.

<sup>23</sup> C. Arevalo, "Some Thoughts on 'Filipino' Theology," *Landas* 12 (1998): 96.

an *ad hoc* manner. It is not a theology of theological journals and academic conferences. It is a theology-on-the-spot. Its home is “the heat of the day and the dust of the road, the wayside inns of the evening, with the inevitable partialities of half-formed questions and unfinished discussions: a theology in *via*, of a people also on its way.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, theologians in the Two-Thirds world are not just interested in contextual theology; they are forced by circumstance to ‘do it’, as Arevalo attests. Called to speak in grassroots seminars, regional or diocesan discernment processes or workshops among religious communities and laity, theologians from the Two-Thirds world do theology not with the publication of a *magnum* opus in mind. They do not wrestle with mere concepts and hair-splitting distinctions but with “real flesh and blood issues, with concrete policies and decisions which had to be worked out.”<sup>25</sup> This is exemplified in the life of Arevalo himself who has not only been a teacher of several bishops and hundreds of priests, but also drafted numerous church documents, pastoral letters, speeches, homilies, statements for bishops and cardinals, etc. If all these written pages were collected, by his estimate, it will amount to around 8000-9000 typewritten pages. Yet none of these, except for some few articles, are credited under his name. This humble anonymity under which a theologian labors, also due in part to the many persistent demands with which s/he has to cope (e.g., teaching, meetings, conferences, organizing, administration, etc.), mainly characterizes most of the Two-Thirds World theologizing. Arevalo describes it as a kind of theology ‘done on our feet’ in order to help the Church (e.g., communities and leaders alike) think her way through its ever-changing situations.<sup>26</sup> The provisional and transitory character of this theologizing shows itself in many titles of Arevalo’s articles which most often bear the title ‘notes’, ‘prenotes’ or just ‘some thoughts’ on something. Such a life-witness of a theologian exemplifies the notion of theology done at the point of urgency and difficult circumstance. “A theology of bits and pieces gathered and scotch-taped together in hours of doing and suffering, in dialogue and confrontation. In reflection and prayer, in emptiness, in confusion and paralysis - in all the times and seasons of *Qoheleth*, it would

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<sup>24</sup> C. Arevalo, “After Vatican II: Theological Reflection on the Church in the Philippines,” 17.

<sup>25</sup> C. Arevalo, “A Life in the Service of the Church in the Philippines and of Asia: Catalino Arévalo, S.J.,” 14-15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

seem! - in struggle, sometimes in anguish and despair, sometimes with the shedding of real blood and tears."<sup>27</sup>

A second feature of this theology is its liberationist concerns. In the view of Arevalo, reflection on liberation and development is itself "the concrete exemplification of the theology of the signs of the times."<sup>28</sup> Among the Filipino theologians, it was Catalino Arevalo who, after having interviewed and exchanged views with Gustavo Gutiérrez, Lucio Gera and Juan Luis Segundo in Latin America in 1970, pioneered the introduction of liberation theology to Philippine audiences (at a time when the movement itself was beginning to make itself heard in the international theological community).<sup>29</sup> Even before the term 'preferential option for the poor' gained worldwide currency, Arevalo already speaks of the Church 'siding' with the oppressed as she also takes issue with 'attitudes of selfishness and structures of institutionalized egoisms' found in 'politics and trade systems that exploit the poor.'<sup>30</sup> From the very start, however, Arevalo already distanced himself from the uncritical appropriation of Marxist categories by Latin American theologians, thus, describing himself as never having been a total 'convert' of liberation theology. This critical relationship with both the political *status quo* and Marxist-Maoist thought characterizes mainstream theologizing in the Philippines. It relies not so much on these ideologies as on the Church's teachings.

This leads us to the third feature of this method: its very close and integral link with the magisterium and its texts. Theology, in this context, finds itself in and consciously reads the statements of the Council, the Popes and the Episcopal Conferences as 'source texts', in the hope of making palpable within theological reflection the spirit of catholicity and tradition. "Filipino theological reflection," comments Arevalo, "has considered this a

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<sup>27</sup> C. Arevalo, "Some Thoughts on 'Filipino' Theology," 98.

<sup>28</sup> C. Arevalo, "The Task of the Church: Liberation and Development," in *The Filipino in the Seventies*, ed. V. R. Gorospe and R. L. Deats (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1973), 245.

<sup>29</sup> C. Arevalo, "A Life in the Service of the Church in the Philippines and of Asia," 13.

<sup>30</sup> C. Arevalo, "The Church on the Side of the Poor," Paper presented at the Asia Ecumenical Conference on Development in Tokyo, Japan, July 14-22, 1970; idem, "Development: The Christian Vision," *Philippine Priests' Forum* 2 (1970): 27-34; idem, "Notes for a Theology of Development," *Philippine Studies* 19 (1971): 79-91.

strength, not a weakness; a source of greater assurance in discernment and decision.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Arevalo considers the pastoral statements of local bishops and the documents from national and regional conferences to be theologies in themselves.<sup>32</sup> Thus, when he speaks of the theology of ‘bits and pieces’, he has in mind these documents and pastoral letters which the regional (FABC) and local magisterium (CBCP) have issued, and which he himself has also helped to produce. Though these documents are “a far cry from the magnificent *summae* of the middle ages... [they] are yet the substantive Filipino theological texts of our generation.”<sup>33</sup> In the careful and creative crafting of these statements is located the service of the theologian in the Church. It is precisely these documents, which show what inculturation of the Church and theology ultimately means - “a task of the local church in the process of its self-realization in history.”<sup>34</sup>

As described above, this theology of ‘bits and pieces’ displays not only an informed grasp of the Christian message but also the ‘knack’ and cunning to play with *time* in the context of socio-political conflicts. Many of the pastoral statements and calls to action by the Philippine hierarchy in recent times, for instance, are not only realistic assessments of the national situation but also timely interventions to effect real changes in decisive moments (e.g., to defend the sanctity of the ballot, to depose a dictator, to denounce graft and corruption, etc.). From the perspective of our appropriated framework, however, we give two comments to start a conversation with Arevalo’s methodological proposal: (a) on the ambivalent nature of texts; and, (b) on the necessary distinction between the magisterium and theology.

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<sup>31</sup> C. Arevalo, “After Vatican II: Theological Reflection on the Church in the Philippines,” 16.

<sup>32</sup> In his address during the conferral of doctor of humanities *honoris causa* by the Ateneo de Manila University on July 30, 1998, Arevalo states this conviction: “May I suggest that they [the magisterium texts] can bear the weight of the name ‘theology’. They are pastoral and missionary reflections and directives, true, yet roughly articulation of a developed practical ecclesiology in the line of what has been called ‘an ecclesiology of transformative praxis in history.’ May I submit that they represent, despite obvious deficiencies, the FAITH and HOPE of the Filipino Catholic community seeking to understand itself and its mission today. And expressing its LOVE, in the Spirit, - a love seeking to name its imperatives and number its deeds. Is this not itself authentic theological endeavor? Even a prophetic theological word? You might even call it, the theology of our patristic age. For it is a true theological search to understand and live out the Gospel of Jesus and make it redemptive in our history.” C. Arevalo, “Some Thoughts on ‘Filipino Theology,’” 98-99.

<sup>33</sup> C. Arevalo, “Some Thoughts on ‘Filipino’ Theology,” 98.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

In the first case, I would like to raise a point on the plea to consider these excellent church ‘texts’ as ‘theology’. I have already shown earlier that texts, like practices, are quite ambivalent. Just like the *Pasyon* and early confessional manuals, any magisterial text is dual-faced. It possesses both liberative and oppressive potentials. Any act of textualization is always an assertion of something, as well as an exclusion of another. The more a magisterial text poses itself as an interpretation backed up by authority, the more this dimension of exclusion also seems to gain weight. For as the authority speaks, it also asserts itself as *the orthodox* reading of reality. It is precisely the role of theology to critically reflect on these authoritative texts in order to bring out repressed themes, multiple interpretations and hidden meanings relevant to the complex and ever-changing contexts. To conflate magisterial texts with theology is to preclude from the very start the possibility of heterodox readings which, often to our surprise, might also be a movement of the Spirit in history. Moreover, such conflation freezes, as it were, theological reflection, thus, making it less sensitive to the actual workings of history in motion. Instead of letting complex events speak for themselves, they are made to fit into some sort of Procrustean bed of magisterial texts. I do not deny the possibility for these excellent Church documents to serve as *locus theologicus*. But when we speak of contextual theology, our methodological option is to start with the praxis of culture and society, not with texts. Though these texts are excellent expressions of theological production in their own contexts, they can only serve as guides to contemporary theological reflection, not as theologies in themselves.

I think that the above difficulty is rooted in the non-distinction between the role of theology and the magisterium. This brings us to our second observation. In Arevalo’s framework, it appears that the theologian’s real role is to be a spokesperson of the magisterium. However, Schillebeeckx writes: “Theologizing, it is true, implies standing up for the magisterium, but theologians must do more than just that. They must mark out paths and take risks which the magisterium cannot forbid. They are in no way merely an extension of the *magisterium*.”<sup>35</sup> In the history of the Church, a distinction between the *magisterium episcoporum* and *magisterium doctorum* has al-

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, “The Magisterium and Ideology,” in *Authority in the Church*, ed. P. Fransen (Leuven: Peeters, 1983), 17.



ways been acknowledged. This separation is necessary for one not to encroach on the proper role of the other. For there was a time in the history of the Church when bishops did not have proper theological training and theologians interfered even in the properly episcopal functions (e.g., issuing of condemnations) with the magisterium as mere stamping pad. But there was also a period when theologians merely served like party ideologues, acting like faithful parrots for magisterial thought. The differentiation, therefore, was salutary. It was because of this distinction that Bonaventure could straightforwardly say, that in some specific matters, ‘the pope was off the mark’ or, Thomas Aquinas, through his method of *exponere reverenter*, could also interpret a text quite opposite to what the magisterium intended.<sup>36</sup>

I am advancing this position in order to preserve the critical function of theology vis-à-vis the church and society. As our appropriated framework shows, any culture harbors within itself the co-called ‘double-truth’. The church, like all other cultural entity, is not exempt from this ambiguity. Thus, as it exercises its critical function vis-à-vis the state, it also needs to be reflexive about its own texts and practices. It is this role which the theological body needs to assume and which the magisterium (local, regional or worldwide) must also recognize if it wants the Church to be an effective voice in the world. This critical role can only be fulfilled when, while rendering service to the magisterium, the theological body should also distinguish its roles from it.<sup>37</sup> This is precisely indispensable in the assessment of the hierarchy’s political options and its relationship with political leaders. For instance, as another Jesuit theologian remarks, the Philippine Catholic Church is always exposed to the ‘temptations towards Christendom’ when political

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 15-16. See also Piet Schoonenberg, “The Theologian’s Calling, Freedom and Constraint,” in *Authority in the Church*, ed. P. Fransen, 92-118.

<sup>37</sup> In his earlier articles, Arevalo advocates this distinction quite clearly. In the context of contextualization of theology, he makes a plea for ‘patient accompaniment’ and some space of freedom from the magisterium: “we ask individual bishops, the hierarchy in our local churches, the various dicasteries of the Holy See, to foster this work. To tell us that Faith is ours as much as it is the Faith of Europe and the peoples of the ancient Christendom, not to be folded in ancient theological napkins and buried, but to be ‘traded’ till he comes. We raise a plea for patient accompaniment and encouragement. To have the willingness to try to understand the difficulty of the task of our situation, not to move quickly ‘to quench the smoking flax’.” C. Arevalo, “Prenotes to the Contextualization of Theology,” 34.

leaders pay homage to bishops and cardinals before elections.<sup>38</sup> It follows that some of its statements and decisions proceed from such relationships. But even in opposite circumstances, as in the Church's active role in political revolutions, a critical theological view also proves indispensable. For instance, when almost the whole Church was extolling the miracle of the first People Power Revolution (1986)<sup>39</sup> in which it played a major role or, acclaiming the ouster of Erap Estrada in People Power II as a moral victory (2001), a theological critical voice becomes necessary to point to the more concrete and pressing demands of the poor, the jobless and the destitute which have always been relegated to the sidelines once politicians hold power after any political change. In these predominantly middle class upheavals, some have asked: "Where were the poor in EDSA?" In fact, they came months after and made themselves heard in what is now called EDSA Tres (People Power III). This movement might have been instigated by opportunist politicians or most of the crowd could have gone there for a fee; but those who were there constitute the really poor of the Philippine society. And they derided both elitist politics and Church hierarchy for insensitivity to their plight.<sup>40</sup> It is thus theology's role to alert the magisterium to this situation in order to keep the institutional Church from complacently sitting on its laurels.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Jose Mario Francisco, "The Dynamics Between Catholicism and Philippine Society," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 38 (2001): 165-71.

<sup>39</sup> For a positive theological assessment of EDSA I, see, among others, Loyola School of Theology, *The Miracle of the Philippine Revolution: Interdisciplinary Reflections* (Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1986).

<sup>40</sup> Walden Bello, one of the Filipino economists, comments: "To the Catholic Church hierarchy, recent events underlined how badly out of synch it is with the vast masses of Filipinos. Indeed, along with President Arroyo and former Presidents Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos, Cardinal Jaime Sin was one of the principal figures of the so-called 'Edsa III's' rogues' gallery. If the Iglesia ni Kristo and the El Shaddai are welcomed at the Edsa Shrine by the pro-Estrada masses, this was not only because of their numbers, but because they represented faiths that were seen as more relevant to the needs, aspirations and fears of the poor." Walden Bello, "May 1st Riot: The Birth of Peronism Philippine Style," in idem, *The Future in the Balance: Essays on Globalization and Resistance*, ed. A. Mittal (Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 2001), 295.

<sup>41</sup> While mainline thinking assesses EDSA Tres as 'paid mob, unwashed, uncouth, uncultured' masses whose 'profanization' of the Shrine of our Lady needs a reparation of prayer and penance, Ben Moraleda, one Filipino theologian, gives an opposite assessment. See Ben A. Moraleda, "the Church of the Poor: Did you Recognize it in EDSA Tres?" [http://www.world-webspace.net/penuel/articles/church\\_poor.htm](http://www.world-webspace.net/penuel/articles/church_poor.htm) (access 01.03.2002).

### *Hermeneutics of ‘Appreciative Awareness’: Recovering Cultural Self-Esteem*

I have shown that mainstream theology’s primary strength (i.e., the skillful crafting and creative reflection on magisterial texts in socio-political contexts) also presents itself as causing its own vulnerability. The second trend of contextual theology breaks new grounds by its preference for a different starting point. In the context of the classical framework of the two poles of doing theology, mainstream theology can be said to start with christian tradition while this second group methodologically opts to begin with the analysis of culture. One of the pioneers in this field is a very creative and prolific lay theologian in the Philippines today, José de Mesa. Already in 1979, in his published doctoral dissertation, *And God said, “Bahala na!”*,<sup>42</sup> he calls his method as ‘theological re-rooting’. The notion is taken from *Kosuke Koyama’s Waterbuffalo Theology* which defines ‘theological re-rooting’ as “a thoughtful attempt to translate the inner meaning of the message of Jesus Christ from one historical cultural milieu and root it into another.”<sup>43</sup> There is an intrinsic relationship between evangelization and theological re-rooting since, if the Gospel is to be effectively proclaimed today, it can only be understood through the language of the culture itself. Christianity in the Philippines, in its Catholic and Protestant forms, has come through two successive colonization projects by the West (Spain and the United States). As de Mesa loves to say: “We have been 350 years inside the convent and 50 years in Hollywood.” Thus, the Filipino eyes have been trained to see the Christian faith in its Western garbs. The project to re-root the Gospel, therefore, aims at deconstructing these colonial traces with which the faith was first presented. It seeks to strip Christianity of its ‘relatively-bound formulations’ so that the ‘inner meaning of the message’ and its ‘living core’ can be expressed in distinctly Filipino categories. “The task today is that of bringing the same message to other people in terms of their

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<sup>42</sup> José de Mesa, *And God said, “Bahala na!”: The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1979). This is the published version of his dissertation, “Providence as God’s Concern in the Lowland Filipino Context: An Attempt at Theological Re-rooting of a Gospel Theme,” defended at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) in 1978.

<sup>43</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), 121 in *ibid.*, 34.

own language and culture beginning with their own cultural values.”<sup>44</sup> I will try to elaborate on his theological method so as to bring out the novelty and advantages of this approach. I will highlight three crucial steps: (a) cultural exegesis; (b) appreciative awareness; and, (c) dynamic equivalence model of translation.

First, de Mesa decidedly opts to start with ‘culture’. The first step thus is *thematic cultural exegesis*. We are beings totally immersed in cultures so much so that culture becomes second nature to us. This feel for culture is in effect the fundamental way in which theology can be done. Cultural exegesis, therefore, is a hermeneutic act which “intends to make explicit the meanings a culture holds.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, there is a ‘text [that] has been written by previous generations of people’ which awaits interpretation. Where is this text located? It is mainly found in the past. But cultural exegesis, as de Mesa advises, must only recover that part of the past which has some bearing on present questions, issues and needs. Otherwise, such hermeneutic activity becomes irrelevant and out of touch with ‘what is currently going on in the lives of people’. Moreover, since cultural exegesis is primarily connected with evangelization, it intends to mainly recover those cultural meanings and values which have ‘potential for expressing the Gospel’ so that they can be made ‘to sacramentalize God’s active presence’ in the world. Such an interpretative activity can only be done from the ‘insider’s point of view’. He rightly insists here on the use of the vernacular, for language is the most fundamental path to one’s culture. In my view, however, the novelty of de Mesa’s work lies not so much in the complete use of vernacular. Though some of his articles are written in Tagalog, his main works are in English. His originality lies mainly in the creative reflection on central theological themes through a rethinking of the meanings of cultural values in their local linguistic contexts. De Mesa rightly insists that there are nuances and innuendos which can only be expressed through the language itself. Thus, ‘providence’ as God’s adventurous risk-taking is expressed in his rethinking of the otherwise fatalistic Filipino expression, ‘*bahala na!*’ (come what may!); ‘salvation’ is *ginhawa* (well-being and wholeness) in-

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<sup>44</sup> J. de Mesa, *And God said, “Bahala na!”*, 35, 36-38.

<sup>45</sup> J. de Mesa, “A Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology,” *MST Review* 4, No. 2 (2000): 6.

stead of the trite *kaligtasan* (salvation); ‘resurrection’ as *pagbabangong-dangal* (vindication of one’s dignity and honor); or, God’s unconditional love as *kagandahang-loob* (benevolence, generosity, kindness, goodness and more).<sup>46</sup> These new terms are so powerful that they evoke emotions and significations which are otherwise absent in mere transliteration (e.g., from the Latin *gratia*, and the Spanish *gracia*, to the Filipino, *grasya*). Contextual theology, thus, is an ongoing work of thematization of these cultural values in order to express classic theological themes in local contexts. This explains the option for culture as starting-point. He loves to quote the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama who says: “Third World Theology begins by raising issues, not by digesting Augustine, Barth and Rahner.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the option to start with cultural analysis can only be done in a respectful and appreciative stance.

This leads us to the second basic feature of this method: ‘appreciative awareness’.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the Latin American option for a hermeneutics of suspicion, de Mesa argues that the Philippine context needs a hermeneutics of appreciation. The reason for such methodological decision is the tragic effects our double colonization has brought to our sense of cultural pride. The pervasive colonial mentality is a witness to this. An analogy may help express de Mesa’s preference. A person who has just come out of a deep emotional tragedy is not helped by self-flagellation and criticisms. S/he is

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<sup>46</sup> See J. de Mesa’s collection of articles in idem, *Solidarity with Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987): “Understanding God’s Kagandahang-Loob,” 43-55; “The Ginhawa which Jesus Brings,” 75-101; “The Resurrection in the Filipino Context,” 102-146; “Providence in Lowland Filipino Context,” 147-77. See also idem, *Kapag Namayani ang Kagandahang-loob ng Diyos* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> K. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 3 in J. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting*, 9; idem, “A Hermeneutics of Appreciation,” 60.

<sup>48</sup> This term is taken from J. J. Mueller’s interpretation of Bernard Meland’s cultural theology. It is an adaptation of Bernard Meland’s phrase, ‘appreciative consciousness’ - Mueller’s way of “turning appreciative consciousness or knowledge into a skill.” See J. J. Mueller, “Appreciative Awareness: The Feeling-Dimension of Religious Experience,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 65; idem, *Faith and Appreciative Awareness: The Cultural Theology of Bernard E. Meland* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981). For Meland’s work where this emphasis is found, see Bernard Meland, “The Appreciative Consciousness,” in *Higher Education and Human Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). It must be stated here that ‘appreciative awareness’ is not the only key to the interpretation of Meland’s theology. For other emphases, see Tyron Inbody, *The Constructive Theology of Bernard Meland: Postliberal Empirical Realism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars’ Press, 1995).

not yet capable of a balanced assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses. All s/he can take are positive strokes in order to recover his/her beleaguered self-confidence and drooping spirits. As in personal life, so it is with culture. "Thus, cultural analysis has a very specific agenda in the lowland Philippines today: the strengthening of the corporate cultural self-esteem or the legitimate cultural pride about who we are as a people"<sup>49</sup> which has been lost due to colonization. De Mesa is, of course, aware of the need for critical social analysis in order to avoid cultural romanticism. And he asserts that this need can be fulfilled even in the context of the hermeneutics of appreciation.<sup>50</sup> Thus, highlighting original grace instead of original sin is a basic methodological decision seen to be relevant in the Philippine context.

The third characteristic feature of this method is the use of the dynamic equivalence model. Since theological re-rooting has intrinsic connections with evangelization, the act of 'translation' is central to the project. If the purpose of inculturation is to 'transform humanity from within and make it new' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18), as de Mesa insists, the living core of the Christian message needs to be translated effectively into the culture it comes in contact with. De Mesa employs here the method of dynamic equivalence. Dynamic equivalence is originally a method of bible translation developed by Nida and Taber and was later adapted by Charles Kraft for elaborating the project of missionary 'translation' of church structures into different cultures.<sup>51</sup> This method is a move away from the so-called 'formal correspondence model' which merely seeks to translate (or, more properly, transliterate) biblical terms into its formal equivalent in another culture. Nida and Taber argue that since no two cultural fabrics exactly correspond, one cannot transpose the original terms into another. The best way to translate,

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<sup>49</sup> J. de Mesa, "A Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology," 15.

<sup>50</sup> "A hermeneutics of appreciation is employed not only to reveal and to appreciate the admirable patterned efforts of people to cope with the challenges of their social environment, but also to suggest what positive cultural institutions can be promoted to precisely transform the situation." See J. de Mesa, "A Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology," 19.

<sup>51</sup> Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969); Charles Kraft, "Dynamic Equivalence Churches," *Missiology* 1 (1973): 39-57; idem; *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

therefore, is to determine the response of the original receptors and proceed to search for its dynamic equivalence in the new culture which can approximate the same response. Here, 'response' does not only refer to the intellectual grasp of concepts but also to the level of emotions, decisions and action. Dynamic equivalence, thus, enjoins the theologian to start with linguistic and cultural analysis of the Judaeo-Christian context which is the original cultural matrix of the Gospel in order to bring out the essential elements of the Christian message. It then proceeds to search for equivalent forms in the new cultures with the purpose of approximating the original response.<sup>52</sup> And "once a dynamic equivalence is found in the culture, it in turn functions as an interpretative element or model of the very reality that was translated in the first place."<sup>53</sup>

The work of de Mesa is quite influential and widely read in Philippine theological circles. The creative and respectful interaction he establishes between the local culture and theological themes clarifies to the Filipino mind not only the classical dogmas once expressed in terms of Western philosophical categories but also recovers the rich meanings of the culture itself suppressed by centuries of colonial brainwashing. His insistence on using the vernacular to express these theological themes gives the necessary 'feel' in the process of understanding their overly cognitive Western formulations. From the perspective of our appropriated framework, however, I would like to forward two comments on his methodology: (1) his notion of culture; and, (2) the problem with dynamic equivalence.

First, de Mesa's option for an appreciative awareness of culture is founded on a view of Filipino culture as still recovering from a deep colonial tragedy, thus, the impossibility of being able to evaluate itself critically. All it can handle for the moment is to highlight its positive dimensions. We can, therefore, ask if colonization has totally wrecked our culture. It is true that there are traces of colonial mentality in the Filipino psyche. But Iletto's *Pasyon* and Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism* have ably shown that we are in fact a resilient culture. We have had and still have our ways of circumventing the otherwise absolute grip of colonial power. Culture is quite a complex

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<sup>52</sup> J. De Mesa, *And God said, "Bahala na!"*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> J. De Mesa, "A Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology," 86.

practice. While the dominated manifest external subservience, they also resist, subvert and undermine colonial discourse, thus, thwarting its totalizing imposition. In the face of a totally oppressive power and discourse, it was as if the natives had always something different in their minds, sometimes acquiescing, other times subverting. For in front of an immense power, passive gentleness and compliance sometimes present themselves to be the only strategy for survival and resistance.<sup>54</sup> It is with this vagueness, ambivalence and *double-vérité* that I view culture.

But de Mesa's notion of a 'damaged culture', like the consciousness of one who has just come out of a deep emotional trauma, appears to be different. It leads to a dualist view of core and periphery, of 'kernel and husk'. It suggests that deep beyond the colonial layers is a pristine pre-lapsarian cultural structure. Since the husk has been badly damaged, the only beneficial option is the retrieval, rediscovery and recovery of the unaltered core, i.e., "the wisdom and the genius of the lowland Filipino culture". Put differently, it argues that once we have peeled off the husk, we will arrive at the kernel which is the real and authentic Filipino culture. But is there a cultural kernel to recover? Is it retrievable? Or is not the retrieved theme an invention of the cultural exegete? I think that the difficulty with such a position comes from the notion of culture as noun and as a determinate structure of positive values deep within the Filipino psyche or as a cultural text composed by past generations - some determinate reality which can be either recovered or interpreted. What I have proposed is to look at culture as verb, as an ongoing process, a dynamic negotiation with the past and the present, the inside and the outside, the familiar and the unknown, the foreign and the local, the old and the new. Far from harboring within

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<sup>54</sup> Edicio de la Torre speaks of the Hanunuo (an indigenous community in Mindoro, Philippines) as a very passive and gentle people who prefers to run than to fight the aggressor. But living with them shows that each family has spears or arrows in the corner posts of their huts. De la Torre remarks: "One can only wonder what series of defeats and futile resistance led to their passive gentleness. Should we judge it as a sign of broken spirits? Or should we understand it as a tactic imposed by unfavourable circumstances?" Edicio de la Torre, *Touching Ground, Taking Root: Theological and Political Reflections on the Philippine Struggle* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute and Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1986), 13. A parallel case happens in the slums. See F. L. Jocano, *Slum as a Way of Life: A Study of Coping Behaviour in an Urban Environment* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1975).



itself some cultural constants, the cultural community's 'feel for the game' in fact strategically plays with *time* and circumstance, combines or modifies these elements, subverts one or assimilates the other, always having human well-being as its end.

The second comment is very much related to the first: the problem with the theory of dynamic equivalence. What is translated here is the 'inner message' or the 'living core' of the Gospel. This presupposes the possibility that Christianity possesses an essential core beyond the historical embodiments in which it has incarnated itself. What is to be translated into dynamically equivalent terms is this core which is also related to the reaction of the original receptors. And the translation is successful to the degree that "the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language."<sup>55</sup> But contemporary biblical scholarship tells us of the impossibility of such a recovery. Contemporary hermeneutics already eschews the idea that the original discourse (both the author's intention and the response of his/her audience) can still be retrieved. We can only understand the past from the perspective of our present issues and concerns. Understanding is always interpretation. In fact, de Mesa also emphasizes this dimension of hermeneutics in his insistence on starting with culture.

It appears, therefore, that there is an inherent contradiction in de Mesa's methodology in his resolve to start with culture and his adoption of the dynamic equivalence theory. He gives very valid reasons for taking cultural analysis as his starting-point.<sup>56</sup> It is mainly grounded in the conviction that the 'seed of the Word' is already present in the culture even before the Gospel is preached.<sup>57</sup> This means that if the culture is made to bear out its real essence through cultural exegesis, it can already express in its own terms the Good News which it already contains in the first place. It is in this perspective that de Mesa quotes M. A. C. Warren: "Our first task

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<sup>55</sup> E. Nida and C. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 24 in J. de Mesa, *And God said, "Bahala na!"*, 49; also in idem, "A Hermeneutics of Appreciation: An Approach and Methodology," 85.

<sup>56</sup> J. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with Culture*, 6-9; also in idem, "A Hermeneutics of Appreciation," 57-61.

<sup>57</sup> J. de Mesa, *And God said, "Bahala na!"*, 46.

in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More seriously still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival."<sup>58</sup> Yet in his adoption of dynamic equivalence, de Mesa is inevitably led to admit the contrary position: that theological reflection, being itself a translation of the Good News into new contexts, should start with Christian tradition. It must necessarily be so since dynamic equivalence is essentially a tool for biblical translation and the missionary project of adapting churches to new cultures later. It is this intrinsic connection with evangelization which makes him quite easily and prematurely 'Christianize' and 'transcendentalize' what otherwise can be a local culture's secular discourse.<sup>59</sup>

Our preference here is to pursue the consequences of de Mesa's first option: to start with culture. But instead of viewing it as a recoverable set of positive values, I propose to see it as an ongoing process, a continuous game played in the ambiguity and *double-vérité* of each specific historical conjuncture.<sup>60</sup> Cultural exegesis, therefore, does not pre-determine or pre-judge the nature of a cultural practice from the outset. There is no way one can tell that a cultural element is a positive resource and the other a negative trait before plunging into the uncertain forces of the cultural game itself. Its evaluation is only possible in the ambivalent and rough grounds of lived experience. For even Bernard Meland (from whom de Mesa takes his theory of 'appreciative awareness') sees cultural analysis as also having

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<sup>58</sup> M. A. C. Warren, "Introduction," to John Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 10 in J. de Mesa, "A Hermeneutics of Appreciation," 35; also in *ibid.*, *In Solidarity with Culture*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> This is Mario Bolasco's criticism of de Mesa's theological enterprise: "If Filipino culture is radically this-worldly, then the construction of local theology must have an addendum vastly different from the way it has been going till now. The issue is not the irrelevance of Christianity but the form of inculturation. The hasty postulation of a transcendent dimension to Filipino culture, as I think happens in José de Mesa's theology, blocks appreciation of the theological task in the Philippine context, on the one hand, and waters down liberation, on the other." Mario Bolasco, "Notes on Revolts and Popular Religiosity in the Philippines," in *idem*, *Points of Departure: Essays in Christianity, Power and Social Change* (Manila: St. Scholastica's College, 1994), 231.

<sup>60</sup> "[I]t is the *contradictions* a faith or a culture gets into in responding to social challenges that are not only the crucial signs of life and ability to renew itself, but also the real lesson it has to teach to anyone who cares to learn." Mario Bolasco, "Catholic Spirituality: Paradigms in Tension," in *ibid.*, 295.

the ability to account for “the ambiguities that attend such human evil in the *lived experiences of men*.”<sup>61</sup> If the ‘seeds of the Word’ are really present in cultures, cultural exegesis should be able to render it explicit. But in this view, the Good News is not an automatic outcome. This is what happens when the method has decided from the start to only recover the positive strands of the culture and mainly those that has bearing on Christian themes. Our option could be more challenging since one needs to grapple with the contradictions of all cultural practices. And it is only in this contradiction that one can discern the traces of the Good News. The theological *métier*, therefore, not only needs a creative genius to conjure facile positive meanings but also sufficient critical capacities (and all the scientific instruments at its disposal) to come to grips with both the brutal and subtle acts of domination which continue to beset human cultural praxis, especially in our post-colonial and globalized contexts. In the midst of this agonistic process, both in cultural praxis and theological enterprise, the people and the theologian with them cannot pre-determine the Good News in a culture but only long and wait for the God of life and well-being to reveal Him/Herself to them!

### ***‘Theology of Struggle’: Liberationist Perspectives in Changing Times***

The framework of a ‘hermeneutics of appreciation’ risks downplaying socio-structural conflict in favor of the culture’s positive elements. The third way of doing contextual theology aims at squarely facing these economic, political, and social asymmetries. This is the distinctive feature of Latin American liberation theology. In the Philippines, however, this method has been called the ‘theology of struggle’.<sup>62</sup> Arevalo’s earlier description makes it appear that this is quite a varied grouping and not very easy to describe. Though some writers among this group have made it to the EATWOT publications, many reflections, particularly those coming from the grassroots,

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<sup>61</sup> Bernard Meland, “Culture as a Source for Theology,” in idem, *Fallible Forms and Symbols* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 170.

<sup>62</sup> See Louie Hechanova, “The Christ of Liberation Theology,” in *With Raging Hope: A Compilation of Talks on the Church Involved in Social Transformation* (Quezon City: Claretian and SPI, 1983), 13.

do not get a hearing as they only exist in mimeographed forms or photocopies. Thus, it would be difficult to account for a systematic method here not only because they are not published but also because such a theology does not intend to do ‘systematics’ (as Western theology does) in the first place. What unites this loose grouping, however, are several factors. To mention just a few: the option to start with concrete socio-historical reality; the use of the tools for social analysis (particularly that of Marxism); commitment to concrete action toward social transformation; the view that it is the grassroots who are the ‘real theologians’. For our purposes, we will focus on a famous theologian, Edicio de la Torre, a former SVD priest who was arrested twice during the Marcos regime, released by Cory Aquino and later occupied a cabinet position in the Estrada administration. Already in 1971 (before Marcos’ imposition of the Martial Law), his pioneering reflections on Christianity and Maoism signaled the continuing relationship between theological reflection and Marxist thought (thus, also an alliance with the political Left) in the Philippines. Though de la Torre has moved beyond this initial Maoist line in his recent reflections, we will try to explicate his position in those early years. Like all Marxist-oriented international movements, leftist theology in the Philippines is undergoing a re-positioning and re-thinking process. For lack of a new synthesis at the moment, our focus on de la Torre’s early theological method intends to give a picture of one dominant direction in leftist theological thinking in the Philippines whose residues may still continue to exercise some influence.

De la Torre’s journey was part of the emerging nationalist consciousness in the 1960s.<sup>63</sup> Together with the clamor for Filipinization of literature, sciences, education and institutions was also the clamor for Filipino theology. But who is a Filipino? Eschewing the intellectualist trap of delving into written sources, he was led to search for the Filipino identity among the oral traditions and actual conversations. This brought him to seek the ‘people’ themselves and meet them where they lived. He observed that it was quite different to read a sociological report of peasant responses to a survey than to participate personally in an actual farmers’ meeting under one of those trees in a rural barrio. Yet it was this direct contact with people that led him

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<sup>63</sup> Here, we follow his personal account in Edicio de la Torre, “Looking Back,” in idem, *Touching Ground, Taking Root*, 1-14.

to realize the grip of ‘class’ in all social interactions. Thus, to be able to understand the people well in fieldwork, one needs ‘to do one’s homework’: ‘to acquire and sharpen categories that I need for understanding’.

This is the role of Marxist-Maoist thought in his theological methodology. The three-layered Maoist analysis of Philippine society - imperialism, domestic feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism which became the slogan of student protest movements in the early 1970s - also became the lens of de la Torre’s theologizing. Here, Maoist thought is seen mainly as a method, not as a dogma. Something one can ‘use’, and not to be considered a ‘scripture’. De la Torre singles out three main elements in Maoist thought: the dialectical unity of theory and praxis, nationalism and the vision of a permanent revolution. If knowledge only proceeds from one’s participation in actual praxis, to achieve liberating knowledge, therefore, is to ‘take sides’ (i.e., to be partisan) with the oppressed majority in order to articulate their side of the truth. This partisanship leads to the agenda of nationalism which is the second element. If truth needs to take sides, it must be partisan to the situation where it finds itself (i.e., Filipino nation). Mao is credited for having adapted Marx (not followed him ‘blindly’) in the Chinese context. The challenge thus is to re-read Maoism in the Philippines. Central to Mao’s re-reading is his “trust in the creative enthusiasm of the [rural] masses” as compared to the organizational skill and technical knowledge of the urban proletariat. Thus, in a situation where the majority are peasants trapped in semi-slavery by their neo-feudal landlords, Maoism could be very effective in the Philippines. Thirdly, the Marxist-Maoist line agrees on the notion of permanent revolution where these rural masses become the most potent revolutionary subjects “precisely because they are blank and malleable”.<sup>64</sup>

What repercussion has this on Christianity and theology? First, the challenge of nationalization should lead to the Filipinization of Christianity. Second, there is a need for continuous criticism of all existing structures of the status quo. Third, criticism is not enough. One needs to take a ‘provisional’ but well-founded ideological choice and Maoism’s national democratic

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<sup>64</sup> E. de la Torre, “The Challenge of Maoism and the Filipino Christian,” in *Challenges for the Filipino: Lenten Lectures 1971*, ed. R. Bonoan (Manila: Ateneo Publications Office, 1971), 26.

programme serves as the best alternative. For the middle class Christians, with whom de la Torre also belongs, the only path to liberation is to immerse their petty bourgeois existence in the ‘passion, death and resurrection’ and be converted to the vision and thinking of the ‘masses’. In the context of a dictatorial regime, this proves to be a perilous path. Such is also the destiny of Christian theology. In prison, de la Torre was once asked ‘what brought him there’. “I was looking for a Filipino theology,” he replied. “You don’t land in prison for that. Theology is not a dangerous enterprise,” a co-prisoner objected. “It can be.”<sup>65</sup> For it really was for him.

From the perspective of our appropriated framework, this way of doing theology takes into account our notion of culture as *praxis*. Culture is not only seen here as some ethereal value system or way of life but as a concrete socio-historical struggle. Theology of struggle can also be commended for retrieving poiesis, that discourse and practice of those who are excluded from contemporary (cosmo)polis - e.g., farmers, workers, fisherfolks, women, youth, etc. Moreover, the analysis of culture in its subjective (e.g., attitudes, visions) or objective aspects (e.g., institutions, structures, etc.) takes seriously the notion that culture as *habitus* is unevenly structured. This intrinsic critical component in cultural analysis unambiguously avoids all notions of cultural romanticism. From the liberationist perspective, all practices and discourses need to go beyond their present asymmetrical state as seen in the rejection of the ‘petty bourgeois’ culture and the intention to liberate the ‘masses’ from their enslavement to the ‘culture of silence’.

Despite these strengths, I would like to forward a cluster of related issues that can be problematized, mainly its notion of the so-called ‘masses’. Are there ‘masses’ really? Where does this discourse come from? Which ‘masses’ does it refer to? These questions lead to calling into question the professed close relationship between the poor ‘masses’ and these radical revolutionaries, liberation theologians, grassroots workers, etc. According to Raymond Williams, “there are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.”<sup>66</sup> Masses are other people whom we do not

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<sup>65</sup> Prison Conversation (Camp Olivas 1975) in E. de la Torre, *Touching Ground, Taking Root*, 1.

<sup>66</sup> R. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 184.

know, who are far from our own circles of intimate signification. Calling them ‘masses’ is our way of classifying them. Such discourse comes from the social location of middle class radicals “who do not come *from the people*, and then see them beyond themselves, as masses with whom or for whom they must work: *masses* as object or mass as material to be worked on.”<sup>67</sup> Mao’s notion of the poor peasants and rural masses falls under this category, quite akin to the discourse of many middle class religious workers and theologians who work for the people. But for my parents, cousins and friends who are farmers, laborers or fisherfolks, they would never be ‘masses’ to me. Neither will I call them ‘the poor’. I call them by their nicknames. Thus, even as these radicals purport to speak for the poor and the masses, even as they shake-off their middle class values to the best of their capabilities, they will never be like the farmers or fisherfolks in terms of culture, education or *habitus*. This also puts into question the theological production coming from such a perspective.

This has concrete consequences on the view of revolutionary praxis. For many people in the Left, only the organized and conscientized masses are capable of revolutionary praxis. That is, those who conform to the idea of revolution imposed on them by enlightened ideologues. The rest of the people, even as they practice resistance in their daily lives are labeled as ‘reformers’ or ‘romantics’. It is precisely this elitist notion of revolutionary praxis which Iletto’s *Pasyon and Revolution* was in polemics with. Iletto argues that the millenarian movements and popular peasant uprisings - also dubbed as fanatic, religious, backward-looking, pre-political - have always been seen as ‘romantic’ rebellion, distinguished from the rational, secular, forward-looking and modern revolutions of the *ilustrados* or the ‘enlightened’. It is asserted that the local farmers’ communalist demands for reduction of taxes or improvement of the tenancy system fall short of, and would never lead to, the *ilustrado*’s greater dream: *independencia* from Spain, for example. Though such distinction between these unsuccessful peasant rebellions and the nationalist struggles for independence may help in tactical planning, “it does not take us very far in understanding the mentality

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<sup>67</sup> R. Williams, *Keywords*, 196.

of the inarticulate.”<sup>68</sup> To call these struggles ‘religious, traditionalist, or nativistic’ signals our failure to comprehend the complexity and pluriformity of resistance since we are trapped in the standards imposed upon us by the paradigm of rationalist and modern revolutions. These directions separate liberationist discourse from the people who are themselves the real subject of any revolution.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, all Marxist-inspired movements went into serious re-thinking. In the Philippines, however, it was much earlier. The political left’s option to boycott the Marcos elections in 1986 and their non-participation in the People Power Revolution left them in a political limbo in its aftermath. In the early 1990s, there ensued divisions, splits, clashes and personal squabbling in the Party itself. Some stuck to the Leninist-Maoist line while others went into all kinds of reinterpretations. Edicio de la Torre himself re-thought his options. He was released from prison in 1986 and from then on was involved in non-government organizations (NGOs) and the formation of grassroots leaders (‘education for life’). Though he does not anymore publish theological themes, his reflections signal some shift in direction. For instance, he can now agree with Ileta that the chanting of the *Pasyon* “is not simply catering to popular religiosity or popular messianism.”<sup>69</sup> Reflecting on his life, after 25 years of struggle for change, he now values continuity. From crying for a radical break, he now ponders about linkage. To be always on the move, to explore frontiers may be attractive when one is young. But he now thinks of Augustine’s *Pilgrim Church* and ponders that pilgrims in fact “do not move all the time. At the end of the day, they check into inns... That’s institutionalization.” The time for “shak-

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<sup>68</sup> R. Ileta, “Critical Issues in ‘Understanding Philippine Revolutionary Mentality,’” *Philippine Studies* 30 (1982): 101. Ileta is in polemics with Sturtevant’s thesis that the peasant rebellion led by ‘local messiahs and bandit chiefs’ belong to the ‘Little Tradition’ which has little to do and is incompatible with the ‘Great Tradition’ following the élite’s (*ilustrados*) notion of nationalism, independence and revolution. See David Sturtevant, *Popular Uprisings in the Philippines* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

<sup>69</sup> E. de la Torre, “Bible Study and Reflection.” <http://www.daga.org/btr/btr9p/p93-75b.htm>; see also <http://www.daga.org/btr/btr9p/p93-75a.htm>; <http://www.daga.org/btr/btr9p/p93-75c.htm> (access 03.03.2002).



ing institutions” is over; what we need is “strengthening institutions.”<sup>70</sup> If De la Torre would have continued to do theological reflection at this juncture, such a re-thought position would have new repercussions: it would lead not only to a renewed sensitivity to people situated in multiple and new forms of poverty in their many colors and shapes but also to new visions and strategies for liberation beyond the Marxist-Maoist revolutionary *praxis*.

### **Cultures and Theological Method Towards A Liberationist Interculturality**

Instead of concluding, let me go back to my original intention: that we continue conversing. My objective in presenting these different approaches to contextual theologies in the Philippines and raising some methodological issues is to start (or continue) a conversation. We witness the grace of myriad and plural approaches to contextual theology in the Philippines. For decades now, each of these approaches has been developing ‘in bits and pieces’ but in its own separate path. The particularity of each method and the lack of communication among them are caused not so much by intrinsic incompatibility of frameworks but by the differing locations and circumstances which an individual theologian or group of theologians find themselves in. Moreover, the multiple and pressing demands imposed upon theologians in the Two-Thirds World (e.g., teaching, formation of priests/lay/religious, administration work, assistance to the hierarchy, building of grassroots communities and other pastoral activities, all at the same time) leaves little room for conferences and congresses of purely ‘academic’ type. This ‘theology on-the-spot’ in actual conversation with its historical locus has no other way but to be particular and contextual. Yet in my view, conversation and dialogue, even if concrete practical demands make them difficult, are necessary for the sake of theology itself and for the sake of the people whose faith theology is supposed to articulate.

This problem of theological methodologies can, in fact, be extended to the problem of cultural communication as a whole. I have argued that it is

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<sup>70</sup> See Emmalyn L. Kotte, “People Power in the Philippines: Civil Society Between Protest and Participation.” <http://www.dse.de/zeitschr/de601-8.htm> (access 05.03.2002)

the view of culture as an abstract determinate reality which enhances this ghetto mentality. Since it is only I who have access to *my* own value-system or the grasp of *my* historical context and its problems, it is only *my* worldview that matters. Such an ethnocentric thinking which is said to characterize all cultures has already led to universalistic and imperialistic tendencies both in cultures and theologies. It also generates a hostile stance against ‘the other’, ‘the new’, ‘the unknown’. In our case, this explains not only Rome’s fear with new theologies but also contextual theologians’ allergy to any Vatican statement, both of which find each other ethnocentric. It is my contention that it is this static view of culture which leads us to this theoretical impasse between the particular and universal - one which has plagued all discourses on culture or theologies based on it.

I have suggested viewing culture as a process - a skillful, creative and dynamic negotiation between the familiar and the unknown, the native and the foreign, the local and the global. From this perspective, each cultural community engages itself in a continuous dialogue with everything it comes in contact with, be it Western values or technological advancement, Gospel message or magisterial proclamation, other belief systems or emerging philosophies, etc. This gives culture a sense of openness which it originally has. For whether we like it or not, all cultures have always been engaged in syncretistic adaptation over time.

It may be objected that this line of thinking seems to serve as an apologia for globalization and the WTO! For the battle cry of the new global economy goes: “Open your markets for this in fact is its very nature!” In the theological scene, even Ratzinger expressed a parallel vision: there is a need to foster openness of all cultures (*interculturalism*) as a precondition for receiving the Christian message.<sup>71</sup> One objection can proceed thus: where in this scheme can we find the respect for the particular, the local and the contextual? Should we not defend ourselves and our local identities from the inroads of dominant cultures - be it understood as multinational capitalism, Western universalism, Vatican imposition or petty local dominations?

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<sup>71</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures,” *Origins: NCS Documentary Service* 24 (1995): 679-86.

This objection, however, must be properly and adequately nuanced. Such necessary defense against new ‘universalisms’ is not found in the overarching and overly optimistic globalization thesis or the seemingly neutral and ‘soft’ interculturality theories which flood the so-called postmodern markets. It is found in the practical dexterity of the praxis of social agents situated in each local cultural game. Be it in cultural practice or theological reflection, it is these grassroots communities - from the cunning generated by their own ‘feel for the game’ - who decide which elements to assimilate or modify, to adopt or subvert, to acquiesce or resist. For even in the face of the totalizing control of (neo)colonialism, dominated peoples are in fact so resilient that they have their own way of communicating with and reacting to the powers-that-be in such an ingenious way as to contribute to their own well-being and those of the ‘other’.

This is in fact what *praxis* is all about!

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