

MY JOURNEY TOWARDS CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY IN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIZING

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In the article, the author recounts the personal context of his theological work. Convinced that "the Gospel must be presented with tools, methods and expressions coming from the culture itself," he narrates the Western influences he has had and their impact. He cites the crucial role of the Filipino language amidst the dominance of Western sources in his country and the continuing use of English as the theological lingua franca. Contextual theology must be done in loco. The God-human relationship must be articulated in terms that are intelligible, meaningful and challenging to the culture. To this end, issues, presuppositions, cultural thought patterns and theological language must be carefully considered. The Judaeo-Christian Tradition and human (cultural) experience are the two poles of contextual theologizing which are essential and constitutive. Due to historical reasons, the author privileges the positive aspects of both over the negative. Procedure-wise, he distinguishes in theologizing between starting principle and starting point, leading to keeping in mind the former and starting where one prefers with the latter. The discussion on the loob (will) of God illustrates this and points to his personal experience of God as singularly warm and irresistibly captivating. The inter-relationship of cultures within globalization is not neglected. He speaks of inter-traditionality as one culture building its own theological tradition interacting with other theological traditions. Theology is less focused on the interaction with other cultures per se, but is more attentive to how communities use their cultures to express their faith. The social relevance of the author's theology is seen in his inculturated interpretation of the core meaning of "salvation" as ginhawa. Its dynamic cultural translation becomes the hermeneutical key to understanding the reality of "salvation" as total well-being of all on earth which is not completed within history.

INTRODUCTION

MY PERSONAL CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY

Because theologizing, like the theology that one articulates, has a personal context, the most significant transformation for me was the way I theologize. My theological education has been mostly western in orientation and content. With some exceptions, a few

of which were significant, I was taught how to regard as my own the concerns of theologians in the West and to think their thoughts. This mainly happened in an explicit manner. Through the courses I took, I got acquainted with the methods utilized by western theologians as well as with the theological questions and answers that preoccupied them. I consulted resources written by well-known and not so well-known Western theologians and studied their ideas, at times adopting and adapting them to the Filipino setting. Constantly, then, my mind was grappling with Western theological concepts and interests. At times, however, I think the process was more subtle, a realization that comes from hindsight rather than foresight.

It is only after years of struggling to deliberately think as a Filipino that I have come to realize how successfully I had been made to think theologically as a Westerner. Western theological thought and language dominated the content of classroom lectures. Books and journals found in the library were (are?) mostly from Europe and the United States. With English as the *lingua franca* of the theological enterprise in the Philippines, the Filipino language and the perspectives it could provide were merely sidelined. It is like having an elephant (Western ideas as mediated by the English language and thought) in the classroom. You cannot ignore or avoid referring to it. With little awareness how crucial language was to thought, even the token use of Filipino in theological education was already considered progressive.

As I learned, I taught. The knowledge that I had gained was what I passed on in general to my students when I started my ministry as a theology professor. It is not that I did not learn from this kind of education. I learned a lot. I was introduced to the craft of theologizing and was honed in it through such training. It even stimulated my mind with ideas that were possible to render in translation in my own setting. The discipline provided me with a modicum of the theological *habitus* and taught me how to be theologically critical. It extended my intellectual reach beyond what is local. But little did I realize that this assumed expansion of theological thought marginalized the very thing that I should have mainly attended to in the first place, our own cultural tradition.

Among the many approaches to contextual theology, I chose the cultural. Culture is a people's total and dynamic way of living which constitutes a system of patterned set of feelings, beliefs and behaviors and expressed institutionally. I am deeply interested in how culture affects our faith understanding. The history of their interaction and their contemporary expressions drew my attention. Trust in the theological potential of the Filipino culture and a continuous exploration of it through study and research gradually led me to finally see how relative to its own cultural and historical context Western theology was and is. On the one hand, the realization that Western theologizing drew its relevance and strength from its being sensitive, attentive and responsive to what was western was liberating. It convinced me that I should be doing the same thing within the Filipino context. But, on the other hand, becoming aware of hindrances that Western thought, the theological included, had put on the path of local theological efforts to rethink the faith with indigenous categories caused pain.

Over the years of teaching and doing research, it has become clear to me how these have contributed to the stigmatization of the Filipino culture and, thus, to the erosion of confidence and pride over our very own culture.¹ Over the years I have exerted the effort "to return where I have come from," that is, my being a Filipino, so that the Filipino culture could once again gain respectability, even if it were only before my own eyes. *Kailangang maibangon ang dangal ng ating kultura!* (The dignity of our culture must be revived!). I am convinced that unless the culture is de-stigmatized in our consciousness, the endeavor to inculturate will not succeed. In this theological journey I took as my guide the wise saying, "*Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa kanyang pinanggalingan*

¹ The Philippines was colonized by Spain for 350 years and by the United States for 50 years. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who made "conscientization" a popular term among agents of change, says that in a situation of oppression, the oppressed over a period of time unconsciously internalize the oppressor's attitudes towards them. As a result, even when the oppressor is no longer around, he is in a real sense even more present because he is in them, in their psychological selves. The oppressed no longer "need" the actual physical presence of the oppressor to regard themselves the way the latter considered them. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 49-51.

ay hindi makararating sa kanyang paroroonan" ("Those who do not know how to look back at where they have come from will never reach their destination").

As applied to the endeavor and process of inculturation, the attitude embodied by the proverb parallels the *aggiornamento*, the goal of renewal, espoused by Vatican II which was simultaneously a movement of returning to the foundations, an *ad fontes*. Our very own Second Plenary Council of 1991 not only echoes this sentiment of Vatican II, but also expresses clearly what this "looking back at where we have come from" means in practice: "Faith must take root in the matrix of our Filipino being so that we may truly believe and love as Filipinos. But for this to happen, the Gospel must be presented *with tools, methods and expressions coming from the culture itself*. It must be accepted within a person's cultural heritage"². Moreover, it does not hesitate to assert the need to "promote the use of the vernacular languages...in the teaching of religion and theology"³.

WHAT IS INCULTURATED (CONTEXTUAL) THEOLOGY FOR ME?

Theology, in the oft-quoted words of Augustine of Canterbury, is *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), and I would add today *in loco*, in the locality or in culture.⁴ It embodies an *inculturated* or *contextual* vision of life in the world lived in relationship with God or a worldview, if you like. In general, this constitutes the contribution of theology to society. All human beings believe in and hope for something that can make their life worth living in their own context. Faith and hope constitute a necessary dimension of being human.⁵ We believe and

² Article. 72, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1992), 30.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Ever since the significant shift of perspective in the 1950s from the "classical" to the "empirical" view of culture, we tended to look at cultures not only as differentiated but in their specificity. Generic theology does not exist; only contextual ones.

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 740

hope that there can be a better future for human life than simply enduring the system we currently have. Various philosophies, ideologies and utopias compete for our adherence. Theology *proposes* a Kingdom of God-centered life lived humanly and humanely together with others within the cosmic community. We want to live in this world humbly and humanly well. This vision has to be articulated in terms that are intelligible, meaningful and challenging to the culture of the community concerned.

Christian theology proposes a specific form of belief and hope: that faith in Jesus the Christ - the one who has manifested God's gracious and loving kindness personally - gives meaning and hope to one's life in all its dimensions, including the cosmic. I understand God's love as interpreted in the vernacular: *kagandahangloób* (gracious and winsome goodness).⁶ "God" may be an unknown figure or concept that may be filled with human interpretations. It is thus possible that God may be made in the image of human beings, instead of human beings being made in God's image. But in Jesus, God became human. For Christians God then is like Jesus. Living the God-centered life is not based on Jesus being like God, which is a popular way of seeing Jesus. Christians need to look at Jesus, the human being, in order to find out what it means to be human. Belief in Jesus Christ is a "way", in a similar manner to the conceptions of it by the great religions of Asia. It is understood as it is lived. Jesus is the proposal of Christian theology to be human and to be human with others and, together, to further humane and cosmic flourishing. This is why faith is considered a "wager," *isang pusta*, *isang sapalaran*, *isang pagtataya* (a bet, a risk-taking, a venturing). It cannot be proved that it is meaningful, but to one who has faith in Him, *it is so*. The only "proof" that is offered is that of hope and deed as demonstrated by the life lived well. Somebody said that "if you see a world that others do not see, then become that world and others may join you."⁷ To link this to a basic question that ordinary people ask

⁶ A limited translation of *agape* in the Filipino language. I have realized that the words which I use in the vernacular may only have affective significance to Filipinos, but very little resonance to outsiders who only get the general sense of the words through the English translation.

⁷A saying attributed to Gandhi.

about the discipline, "What is the relevance of theology?" To which I answer with a question: "What is the relevance of love?" Love is the quintessential reality that humanizes the world. It makes for a human and humane world. And the key to the God whom Jesus revealed is that "God is love." And He revealed that truth personally and humanly.

Within the awareness of contextual theologies⁸, the significance of Jesus and the Christian faith can and ought to be articulated in different cultural ways and idioms. Cultures are like languages. They may describe the same world, but invariably do it differently in their own way. In the words of an Asian Christian to a group of missionaries, "You say that you are bringing Jesus and a new humanity to us. But what is this "new humanity" which you are referring to? We want to see, touch, taste, and feel what this is. Jesus cannot just be a name to us; he needs to become real to us. You must be able to describe Jesus as a fellow human being."⁹ Jesus must become real in the culture if he is to be understood and appreciated. Indeed, "there is no way we can speak, communicate or even think without placing ourselves within the constraints of a particular language whose contours were shaped by hundreds of generations of speakers, storytellers, artists and visionaries who came before us, whose legacy we inherit and of whose story we become a part... What we cannot do is place ourselves outside the peculiarities of language to arrive at a truth, a way of understanding and responding to the world that applies to everyone at all times. That is not the essence of humanity but an attempt to escape from humanity."¹⁰

What is important for us, Filipinos, is the kind of theology that is truly meaningful to us culturally and engages us socially. For

⁸ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

⁹ See Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 374. The cultural approach is one among the many theological methods.

¹⁰ Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the *Dignity of Difference* as quoted in Peta Jones Pellach, "Bibliodrama in the Context of Interreligious Dialogue: Refining the Art of Conversation," in Maria Schejbal, ed., *The Word and the Act: Bibliodrama in Intercultural Dialogue* (European Commision: BASICS Project Partners), accessed May 06 2015, <basicsproject.en>.

"evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life." (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63). Context, and specifically culture, must set the parameters of a local theological endeavor. A relevant theology takes the issues, questions and concerns of the local community seriously. It also considers in earnest the presuppositions of the culture with regard to God, humanity and creation. The thought patterns of the culture and the vernacular are harnessed primarily to give substance to theological thought.¹¹ Since thought, language and culture are intimately linked, they play a prominent role in a theological reflection. In this regard, the late Filipino linguist, Br. Andrew Gonzalez, FSC, insisted on the use of the indigenous language to actually think and express one's thoughts about the faith. For "the use of an indigenous language to speak of the local experience of a faith-community is not only a badge of authenticity; it is above all a means to re-think one's theological experience in categories which are non-western."¹² Gaining this insight was not possible without the turn to the specifically cultural dimension in the investigation of the issue, the language used.

HOW I DO THEOLOGY

As for my approach and method of theologizing, I posit, in general, two poles ~ the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and Experience/Culture ~ mutually interacting to simultaneously generate *a* theology, not *the* theology, but a *contextual* theology, or an *inculturated* theology as I prefer to call it. The two poles are essential and constitutive sources in any theologizing, however each

¹¹ Language is the "reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive the world." Hans-George Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 96.

¹² Source not known. This method of using Filipino in theological research is similar to the experience of the psychologists of the University of the Philippines doing research in their field in the Filipino language. Not only have they unearthed new areas of investigation, they have also discovered nuances of feeling and sensibility in their study of psychology through it.

is defined. Essential, because each is *sine qua non* in the theological process; and constitutive, because each affects the outcome of the theological reflection. They shed light on one another by bringing out the best elements in each other and by correcting each other when necessary.

My approach in theological reflection is to privilege the positive over the negative. As a whole, I prioritize and utilize the positive aspects of both the Tradition and the culture first before turning my attention to the negative. I call this a "hermeneutics of appreciation." It is different from a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of balance. The former gives preference to the negative, suspecting existing reality as covering up overt interests; the latter values balancing the positive and negative as each culture undeniably exhibits both traits. But given the contextual situation where the Filipino culture has had humiliating experiences due to the residual effects of colonization and its aftermath,¹³ I opted for a hermeneutics of appreciation. It aims its searchlight on what is primarily good and beneficial, rather than what is bad and harmful. This is not to deny that there are negative realities and aspects in the Tradition and in every culture. The approach to reality is to ask first the question "what's right" rather than "what's wrong." Again, this decision has a context. Apart from the colonized cultural experience of the Filipino, historically in the church, we have been asking questions about our sinfulness rather than human goodness. Contextually in theology, I think that it is high time that we foregrounded God's love and goodness in Jesus towards the world. Theologically, this makes sense because grace is prior and supremely influential than sin.

I opted to "wager" my life (*tinataya ko ang buhay ko*) with the person of Jesus as interpreted by his first disciples. Based on Him and around Him grew a tradition of beliefs, values, and customs as

¹³ Anthropologist G. Arbuckle reflects on what is residual in the culture that can affect present-day concerns. Gerald A. Arbuckle, SM, "Conflicts in the Church: Some Mythological Reflections," *New Theology Review* 27 no. 1 (September 2014), 8-16. In the same vein, the Indian writer, Ashis Nandy, refers to the colonial mentality as "the intimate enemy" lodged within the mind. See *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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well as institutions which is aimed at actualizing His spirit and legacy. It arose from the Jewish Tradition of faith and blended onto the Christian re-interpretation of it. Here, the theological method I am subscribing to comes into the picture: the pole of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and the pole of (cultural) experience in mutual interaction. Each throws light on the other. Each is understood in the light of the other. Seen in this way, we ask the question, how do we translate broadly Jesus' spirit and legacy to our own context? Translation here is a contextualization, an interpretation of sorts. But when you consider the other pole, that is, experience/culture, and start with that, then it is a question of hermeneutics. How do we make sense of Jesus, his spirit and legacy, given our situation? When we consider our culture, our history, our socio-political situation, and our ecological concerns, what does our faith in Jesus the Christ have to say to us and to our society?

Allow me to make a distinction in my methodology between my *starting principle* and *starting point*. It is the awareness of the two poles as a *starting principle* that makes it difficult for me to answer the question which comes first, the pole of Tradition or the pole of experience/culture. Basing it on the starting principle, I would say both: the Judaeo-Christian Tradition *and* culture, though there are those who would prefer one or the other as their *starting point* for doing theology.

Let me share an experience. I had already behind me a number of years of studying and teaching revelation and faith in English with the usual European and American structure and categories of thought when it dawned on me, that if I allowed culture to be my guide in the endeavor to inculturate the Good News, the process of development would be faster and surer, though not in an absolute way. All those years I had been intellectually persuaded that I understood, and understood quite well, what the technical word "revelation" means for Christian life and practice, albeit in the Western manner of interpreting it. It was really a translation of the western conception of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition. This was not really wrong, but I had unwittingly equated the western interpretation of the said Tradition with the Tradition itself. So I was at a loss myself as to how to rethink "revelation-faith" (God's initiative in relating with us

widespread popular belief is that everything happens, whether beneficial or destructive, because God wills it.

This implies that the theologizing which began with the exploration of the cultural experience, was quickly followed by matters theological. Is this really God's will? Even more fundamental was another question, what kind of God do Christians believe in? In my search for the answers to these questions, I saw how God's will and God's character (nature) were, within the culture itself, twin questions, intimately intertwined. Indeed, I was at the heart of theology; I was pondering over the God-question culturally. Significantly, these reflections were done in the *Filipino* language, not in English.

The most important and most frequently used Filipino word for "will" is *loób*.¹⁵ God's will is God's *loób*. To be of "bad will" was to have *masamang loób*. Conversely, to will what is good is to manifest *kagandahang-loób*. The notion of *kagandahang-loób* comes from two concepts: *loób* and *ganda*. *Loób*, literally meaning "the within," refers to the core of one's personhood and the most authentic inner self of the Filipino which is essentially related to other selves. It is, moreover, regarded as the organizing center of human reality and the wellspring of feeling, thought, and behavior. This makes *loób* slightly different from the English "will" which takes its cue from the Latin "voluntas." The western conception of "voluntas" (volition) is distinguished from the "intellectus" (intellect) and "affectus" (emotions),¹⁶ while *loób* takes the three realities together.

Ganda is literally beauty with a touch of charm. The culture knows of beauty that is superficial and even deceptive. But in the notion of *kagandahang-loób*, it denotes a beauty that wells up from deep within the self and that which is not only ethically good, but winsomely good as well. Note that in the culture *ganda* has an added quality to the good that it embodies. It is attractiveness, a

¹⁵ For a systematic study of *loob*, see Albert Alejo, S.J., *Tao Po! Tuloy!: Isang Landas ng Pag-unawa sa Loob ng Tao* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publication, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990).

¹⁶ Bernard Wuellner, *A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee, Wis.: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966).

charm which draws people nearer to the good that they perceive. Perhaps, for Filipinos, *kagandahang-loób* is primarily “pure positivity” (Schilllebeeckx) that captivates and wins people over. Jesus is remembered as the one who “did all things *beautifully* (Gk. *kalós*)” (Mk. 7:37). Surely, it is a reminder of the one who “went around doing good” (Acts 10:38). Indeed, he is the face of the *kagandahang-loób* of God. This is why it may not be enough to call him the “good shepherd,” as the phrase is translated in English. It is better, in the context of the Filipino language, to translate the Greek text “*ho poimen ho kalós*” in Jn. 10:11 as the “shepherd with a graciously beautiful inner true self.” *Kagandahang-loób*¹⁷ refers to a goodness that is not cold, but rather warm; a kindness that is not enslaving, but liberating; a graciousness that is not overbearing, but winsome.

This discovery would lead me further into the inner sanctum of the culture. The essentially relational concept, *kagandahang-loób*, obviously refers to kindheartedness, benevolence, beneficence, goodness (as a specific act), and the term *loób*, when looked into more profoundly, yields a meaning equivalent to “nature,” the quality not just of a relationship, but the quality of one’s personhood, albeit within a relational way of thinking. *Kagandahang-loób* then is not merely a positive act in relating to others; it is the manifestation of what the person truly is deeply as shown in a specific act in a particular relationship.

So God is *agape*, better rendered, I think, in Filipino as *kagandahang-loób* rather than *pag-ibig* (another general term for “love,” used mostly in romantic contexts). This realization that *loób* is our most authentic inner self where our true worth lies, moreover, led me to conceive faith as the interiorization of this divine *loób*. “To become like God” in our *loób*, in our true selves is what it means to believe. Consequently, I paid greater attention to God’s *kagandahang-loób* in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your will (*loób*) be

¹⁷ “*Malakas*” (the strong or powerful one) for the man and “*Maganda*” (the beautiful or the humane one) for the woman are the names given to the first couple in the Filipino myth of creation. Differing from the biblical story that Eve came after Adam, *Malakas* and *Maganda* appeared together thereby suggesting partnership and equality, not superiority-inferiority. We get a glimpse of what theologizing in using the local language can contribute to the enterprise.

done." This is not merely a matter of obeying what God wants in a definite situation. More than a "*fiat voluntas tua*," it is the interiorization of who God is, making God's *kagandahangloób* as my *loób*. *Ang pagsasaloób ko ng pagka-Diyos ng Diyos (loób)*. (My internalization of God's very Self). *At ang Loób Niya ay kagandahangloób*. (And the very Self of God is *kagandahangloób*).

It was only when I concretely attempted to reinterpret revelation and faith with Filipino categories that I realized that culture could be a guide I could follow with benefit, if I allowed it. My use of *loób*, a key concept and term in Filipino culture, in *kagandahangloób* is dictated by its meaning and use in the culture. Since *loób* refers to the core of the whole person, the inner relational self and source of feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the Filipino self, when I affirm God as *loób* in theology, I am affirming the very depths of God and the very Godness of God in relationship with humanity and the whole of cosmic reality.

The reason was this. By attending to Filipino concerns, utilizing cultural presuppositions and following cultural thought structures, utilizing the available cultural vocabulary and taking advantage of the local cultural concepts in order to respond to particular issues in the Philippines, I "felt" the goodness of the Good News and was drawn by its beauty. I was no longer just intellectually fascinated by it. I was personally touched by such an inculturated interpretation of revelation-faith, touched by God in and through my very own culture. I became grateful to God for the gift of a beautiful culture and felt proud of belonging to it. Experiencing "the Holy" in and through the "burning bush" of the culture brought me to a deeper appreciation of both the Gospel and of my culture. It was a contemplative moment for me. I found out, in that moment of study and research, a way to facilitate the Christian experience of God within and through the instrumentality of my ministry. I was at the heart of theological concerns: a personal experience of God, the beginning and end of theologizing. So does it matter if I started with the Judaeo-Christian tradition or with my experience/culture so long as they truly interact and mutually engage one another?

"INTER-TRADITIONALITY": LOCAL THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS DIALOGUING WITH EACH OTHER

Vatican II (1962-1965) has been a strong impetus and a great source of inspiration for development of Catholic contextual theology. At least, this has been true for my theologizing. At first, like many who became aware of the personalist approach of Vatican II, I was heavily critical of the then prevailing neo-scholastic theology which I deemed to be largely irrelevant to the contemporary situation and experience of the Filipino local church. What was the use to us, Filipinos, of a theology that was forged in the western world, spelled out through a western philosophical thought system and articulated in very western terminology? This was how one could be a progressive theologian at the time: to be critical of neo-scholasticism and attentive to the contemporary changes in Western theology. As a reaction to the dominant neo-scholastic thought, I followed the new trends in Western Europe and the United States until I became aware that this was not what contextual theology should be. First of all, theology does not mean Western theology. Theology was a generic term for what was done in different ways all over the world. The theology done in the West might be suitable for the West, but may not be for everybody else, based in different contexts and realities. The effort of theologians of the West, albeit imperfect, to inculturate the Gospel, made me realize that both neo-scholasticism and modern Western theologies were also theologies that were contextual, expressing the faith in their own milieu.

Initially, my intention was to communicate dynamically in my setting, through indigenous thought and language, major themes of Catholic theology like "revelation and faith," "grace," "sin" and "salvation," and who Jesus of Nazareth is for us, Filipinos. I know that this sounds like a translation method of contextual theologizing. But with the "Good News" to be transmitted, contextual theologizing is somehow a translation. However, with the awareness that it is contextual, the experience of the locality is also constitutive of the theological interpretative process. Experience necessarily includes situation, cultural and historical presuppositions, local thought patterns and indigenous languages.

In my mind, themes, like the ones I mentioned above, were to be the building blocks that would lead me towards the creation of a *Filipino* theology of something, like an inculturated version of "revelation." Gradually, over the years and the experience that I have gained in teaching and learning theology, I have come to realize that not only was it possible to have an inculturated Filipino theology, but also to look forward to having a *Filipino theological tradition*. Contextual Filipino theologizing, growing side by side with other contextual theologies, would begin to stand as a theological tradition together with other theological traditions. In my attempt to help in the creation of a Filipino theological tradition, I find myself resonating with Horacio de la Costa, S.J., who said: "There should be a distinctive Filipino style of being a Catholic, a manner of style Catholic in full communion with the universal church, yet fully, truly Filipino, adapted to our needs, our attitudes, our patterns of thought and actions, our economy and society, our traditions and ideals, all that we mean or imply when we say, 'I am a Filipino,'"¹⁸ All in all, I want the dream of Vatican II about the "truly world church" (Rahner)¹⁹ to become a reality by contributing the Filipino way of being a Christian to the universal vision of the church. And in the context of globalization, this means to be able to contribute to the Christian vision of what it means to become human together in the world.

The doing of theology in the local setting cannot be done today without interacting with other contexts. It may be noted that this sort of procedure in theologizing suggests that theologizing contextually requires a sense not only of interculturality, but more importantly, of theological inter-traditionality. In a world of many cultures in touch with one other in different ways, the doing of theology cannot ignore the cultural influences that impinge on one's own. No culture is really isolated and, more and more, cannot afford to be so. One risks impoverishment in, so to speak, "doing it alone."

¹⁸ Source unknown.

¹⁹ See Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* XL no. 4 (December, 1979), 717.

But theologizing is more than just taking into account culture *per se*, but rather in the way the culture, the total way of life of a people, is harnessed to give shape and express one's theological tradition. The dialogue of cultures with one another, albeit beneficial to the theologian, is still very much in the domain of the anthropologist, sociologist or cross-cultural specialist. More specifically, the theologian's interest focuses on the theological formulation and tradition being created in a context different from his/hers. He/She looks at the way other theological traditions have interpreted recurring themes in the Judeo-Christian Tradition such as "revelation-faith." For in the creation and the recreation of a theological tradition, the theologian facilitates the mutual interaction of the Judeo-Christian Tradition and his/her context. One may wish that theological inter-traditionality, the dialogue of theological traditions, will go beyond Graeco-Roman Christianity and include those of Eastern Christianity.

EARTHING "SALVATION" AS INSTANCE OF THEOLOGY'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

"Salvation," the main message of Christianity to the world, has been generally construed as a "going to heaven." Unfortunately, it was interpreted through the lens of dualism. Dualism saw the individual as made up of a superior spiritual component, the soul, and of an inferior material element, the body. "Salvation," the goal of everyone, was contrasted to living here on earth which is "a valley of tears," a place of testing and trial to assess worthiness to enter the heavenly realm. This view has had debilitating consequences to Christians who wanted to better the world. Instead of being encouraged, they were discouraged from bettering their world. They were told by the church to "leave the world" and "save their souls." Thus, society was deprived of what faith-filled Christians could contribute to its well-being. We are now aware that this is part of the influence of Graeco-Roman dualism on the theology which we inherited from the western missionaries. By the nineteen-sixties, Vatican II, in its document *Gaudium et Spes*, officially abandoned dualism saying "They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think

that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more than ever obliged to measure up to these duties, each according to his/her proper vocation...The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation" (GS 43).

This was the common Catholic assertion for "salvation" for the whole church after the council. It was now up to the community and its theologians to localize its meaning. Every cultural community has to give voice to what it meant by reflecting on its reality and naming it. Bearing in mind what I have said about starting principle and starting point in contextual theologizing, my approach here is to examine the Judaeo-Christian Tradition against the background of the Filipino culture and language. I have to look for the "inner meaning" (Koyama) of the reality of "salvation" and then analyze what it humanly and culturally stands for in its original context. Once that is clear, I have to determine its dynamic equivalent, not its formal (literal) correspondence.²⁰

"Salvation" represents the happiness and total human well-being of humans and humanity. Well-being includes all the aspects of life, the most obvious is earthly life. More than just our humanity, the notion of well-being includes the natural world. In "salvation" we dream about the interrelationship of human and creation in cosmic flourishing. Beyond these is our future collective hope for what Jesus describes as "life" (Gk. *zoe*) in Jn. 10:10. Then, in the context of contrast experiences, after laying out cultural and historical articulations of well-being, I focus my attention on the Filipino interpretative model of *ginhawa* (relief; releasement; sense of wellness).

Every cultural context has a contrast experience involved in their concept of "salvation." There is a movement from a negative situation, from which one has to be freed from, to a positive one, to which one longs for. Thus, for the Hebrew culture there is a metaphorical shift from *tsarar* (being hemmed in) to *yasha* (given

²⁰ "Dynamic equivalence" and "formal correspondence" are notions taken from linguistics and Bible translation. Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979).

space). For the Greek culture it is *apoleia* (destruction) to *soteria* (wholeness), and for the Romans *infirmetas* (sickness) to *salus* (health). The Anglo culture has *damnation* becoming a *salvation*. Latin American liberation theology posits a movement from *dominación* to *liberación*. For the Filipino, it is *hirap* (suffering, pain, burden, difficulties) to *ginhawa* (sense of well-being, relief from pain, sickness, straits or difficulty, freedom from want, comfort, and convenience). It should be noted that *hirap* and *ginhawa* refer primarily to earthly realities, not heavenly ones. Finally, because of the mutuality between the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and culture, the dynamic equivalent becomes the interpretative model of what we think of "salvation."

A theology of *ginhawa* becomes the Filipino interpretation of what "being saved" means.²¹ It consists of relief from physical and inner (*loób*) suffering of all sorts. Above all, it means well-being *in this world* and *this society* such as working for justice by alleviating the wide-spread poverty and caring for the earth, striving for restoring cultural pride and dialoguing with different religions. And as *ginhawa*, by extension, is made sense of in Christian terms, the statement that it is God-given in Jesus Christ is affirmed. This notion of *ginhawa* as "salvation," happily, coincides with a very popular narration of the Passion of Christ written by a layman in 1760²² and which is sung widely during Holy Week as part of the popular religious practice. In this way, a contextualized or an inculturated vision does service to society. Instead of making Christians think only of their souls' future, an inculturated theology of "salvation" prods them on with their earthly responsibilities while keeping their hope alive. With *ginhawa* they realize that their faith does not turn their attention away from the society in which they live; it summons them to live fully in it and cooperating with others to build a society worthy of human beings.

²¹ For a fuller treatment of *ginhawa* and the trajectory it follows about well-being in the Filipino context, see my article, "The 'Ginhawa' that Jesus Brings" in *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987), 75-101.

²² Gaspar Aquino de Belen, *Mahal na Passion ni Jesu Christong P. Natin na Tola* (Manila: Imprinta de la Compania de Jesus, 1760).

CONCLUDING WORDS

My initial personal context for theologizing was focused on my western theological training and my initial experience of teaching theology. Although there was a desire right at the very beginning of my teaching ministry of inculturating theology, it was really in the midst of teaching and researching that I gradually realized what my theological education, on the one hand, has done to me and what inculturation / contextualization, on the other hand, demanded of me. It was then that I opted to use culture as my primary guide in my theological endeavors. Since it was from my culture that I was alienated, it is to my culture that I must come back.

All through the years of the ministry of teaching and research, I tried in my own way to communicate and propose the *kagandahang-loób* (love) of God that brings *ginhawa* (total well-being) to my fellow Filipinos so that they might experience (*madama*)²³ for themselves the overwhelming gracious Self of God. My wish is for us, Filipinos, to bring this experience of God to bear on our culture and society today. To put it explicitly, the Filipino people are my main conversation partners. Perhaps, others would say that my agenda for theologizing is too limited, given the expansion of consciousness regarding inter-connectedness in a globalized world. Mindful of this development, "inter-traditionality" responds to this consideration.

As far as I know, theologians have their central ideas from which they theologize in their own context. That is why these thoughts are repeated again and again in a variety of ways in what they teach and write about. Mine is the *kagandahang-loób* of God communicating (*pinadadama*) *ginhawa* to everyone God has created. To this end, my approach has been to privilege the positive, both theologically and culturally, that is, to show first the beautiful side of the Tradition and the culture before engaging their ugly side.

²³ *Dama* is, first of all, to feel intensely but not without understanding. It is the Filipino term "to experience." To communicate something meaningful to the Filipino is to make him/her experience (*pinadadama*) what it is you want him/her to experience. I use this term *dama* in the active form, *pagpapadama*, for God's communication of the Godself's relational inner Self.

The cultural approach I took has guided me to see culture in a positive way. It has helped me not only to overcome the alienating aspects of a western education, it has also aided me to discover the wisdom and genius of the Filipino culture. This has been my journey towards cultural authenticity. And the way of doing inculturated/contextual theology has led me to experience the God of *kagandahang-loób*.

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