

EMANCIPATING RELIGION FROM RELIGION: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF KARL GASPAR, CSSR

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This article attempts to engage the thought and contributions of Karl Gaspar to theology, liberationist theatre and various areas of advocacy centred on the themes of human rights, ecology and indigenous religious experience. The article traces the methodological journey of Gaspar throughout his extensive oeuvre. The first part looks at his theological contributions using axiomatic themes of liberation theology. The second section is a reflection on Gaspar's ideas on specific theological themes with specific emphasis on experience and praxis intertwined with ideas on church reform, integrity of creation, plight of the Lumads and religious creative expression through street theatre. The third segment is an active dialogical engagement where the author discusses the organic theology and methodology of Gaspar as an activist, social-anthropologist and playwright.

INTRODUCTION

Recalling his years as a political prisoner in 1983, Karl Gaspar relates about a classmate of his, named Rodrigo Roa Duterte. I quote: "our paths crossed again 20 years later after high school...when he was already a lawyer, working as a state prosecutor under the Marcos dictatorial regime, and I was a political prisoner. The hearings of my subversion case took place at the Regional Trial Court where Rody served as prosecutor. Jesus Dureza another classmate who was one of the first members of Free Legal Assistance group in Davao City was one of my lawyers. So here we were-classmates of Batch 1963-gathered under one roof inside a court,

representing three roles: Prosecutor, Lawyer and Prisoner!”¹ By the way, the prisoner was their class valedictorian!² Thirty three years later, 20 books³ after, dozens of articles written and countless talks/teach-ins given, Karl Gaspar is a Redemptorist Brother, Rody Duterte is President of the Republic, Jess Dureza was for a time Duterte’s Presidential Adviser on Peace Process; and it is Martial Law again in Mindanao where it all began for Karl.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

From a historical-chronological perspective, one can place the beginnings of Karl’s thought within the theological tide of liberationist discourse which came at the heels of Vatican II during the Martial Law years in the Philippines. As theology searches for relevance in this period of turmoil and transition, the method of correlation appeared to be among the viable options for

¹ Karl Gaspar, *A Hundred Years of Gratitude* (Davao City: Aletheia Publications, 2017), 170.

² Carolina Arguillas, Tribute to Mindanao’s Karl Gaspar: 3 awards in one month in *Mindanews* September 16, 2017. <http://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2017/09/tribute-to-mindanaos-karl-gaspar-3-awards-in-one-month/>. Accessed: September 16, 2017.

³ *How long? Prison reflections from the Philippines* (1985); *Pumipiglas: Teyolohiya ng Bayan* (1987), *Manual for Pastoral Workers* (1988); *A People’s Option: To Struggle for Creation* (1990); *Readings on contemporary Mindanao church realities* (1994); “Behind the Growing Trees: An Evaluation of the San Fernando Integrated Forestation Project (1994); *The Mindanao Lumad Social Movement* (1997); *Lumad’s Struggles in the Face of Globalization* (2000); *Mapagpakamalinawon: A Reader for the Mindanawon Peace Advocate* (2002); *To be Poor and Obscure: The Spiritual Sojourn of a Mindanawon* (2004); *Mystic Wanders in the Land of Perpetual Departures* (2005); *The Masses Are The Messiah: Contemplating the Filipino Soul* (2010); *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People’s Struggle to Keep Their Homeland* (2011); *Desperately Seeking God’s Saving Action: Yolanda Survivors’ Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations* (2014); *Davao in the Pre-conquest Era and the Age of Colonization* (2015); *A Hundred Years of Gratitude* (2017); and *Panagkutay: Anthropology & Theology Interfacing in Mindanao Uplands [The Lumad Homeland]* (2017). Novels under the pen name Melchor Morante: *Ugma Puhon, Junjun* (1994), *Tuburan sa Handurawan* (1995); and *Si Menda ug ang Bagani’ng gitahapan nga maong si Mangulayon* (2015). The next two are still unpublished: *Performing Defiantly* (2005) and *She Sang You Are my Sunshine* (2016).

theologians.⁴ Karl appeared to embrace this method-associated with Paul Tillich—which contends that theology becomes intelligible and relevant when it holds in fruitful tension human experience—the religious and historical—and the originary Christian witness found in the Scriptures.⁵ Many of Karl’s writings seem to follow this method notably in his books, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church*,⁶ *Desperately Seeking God’s Saving Action: Yolanda Survivors’ Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations*⁷ and *A Hundred Years of Gratitude* among others.⁸ The decidedly emancipatory and liberationist bent of his writings arose from his immersion in the context of violence, injustice and oppression in Mindanao during the Martial Law in the 70s. Moreover, his theological reflections in this period appeared to rely on the lenses of ‘reading the signs of the times’—a phrase from *Gaudium et Spes* and Congar’s understanding of church as people of God⁹ synthesizing it with the theology of liberation. In short, the commencement of Gaspar’s praxis and organic theological journey traversed the methodological terrains of correlation, *ressourcement*, *aggiornamento* and structural analysis.

⁴ Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 47-48.

⁵ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 59-66.

⁶ Karl Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1994), 67-71.

⁷ Karl Gaspar, *Desperately Seeking God’s Saving Action: Yolanda Survivors’ Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations* (Quezon City: ISA, 2014). See *Via Crucis* in the appendix, 297-315.

⁸ Karl Gaspar, *A Hundred Years of Gratitude*, 48-49.

⁹ Yves Congar, “The Church: The People of God,” in *The Church and Mankind*, eds. Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Concilium* (1965/1): 11-38, 27; Yves Congar, *Mon journal du concile*, 2 vols (Paris: Cerf, 2002).

CONTRIBUTIONS ACCORDING TO THEMES IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Karl's affiliation with the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) since 1983 and his membership in DaKaTeo-Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines since 2010 are indicators of the specific theological posture he associates himself with. EATWOT is committed to a critical theological reflection from the struggles of people in order to build a more just world¹⁰ while DaKaTeo's articulated purpose in its constitution are as follows: to develop and promote theologies for a just and inclusive Church and society; to promote theological reflection and discussion on current issues and questions in society; to foster fellowship among its members and solidarity with the oppressed and excluded.¹¹ Common between the two organizations are the liberationist themes which seemed to figure in many of Karl's writings. In the succeeding lines, we organize our reflections on his contributions to liberation theology around some axiomatic themes understood as determinant of liberation discourse,

First is the theme of theology as an articulation coming out from the struggles of the non-person in history.¹² As narrated in the 2016 book *Oh Susana: The Untold Stories of Martial Law in Davao*, the initial attraction and option to work for and with those in the underside of history has already been there even before the initial forays into the theological discourse.¹³ This theological non-neutrality manifested in the preferential option for the poor as

¹⁰ Final Statement, "Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 5-12, 1976," in *The Emergent Gospel. Theology from the Underside of History. Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians*, Dar es Salaam, August 5-12, 1976, ed. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, MM. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 259.

¹¹ <http://dakateo.webs.com/constitutionpolicies.htm>. Accessed: 18. 09.2017.

¹² In reflecting on the themes common among liberation theologians, I borrow, re-arrange and synthesize the axioms posited by Roger Haight in his book, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology*, 44-47.

¹³ Macario Tiu, ed., *Oh Susana: The Untold Stories of Martial Law in Davao* (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao Publications Office, 2016).

defended at length by Juan Luis Segundo¹⁴ has always been the decisive posture of Gaspar's thought from the day he decided to leave the corporate world and work for Mindanao Sulu Pastoral Conference. But while the Latin American theologians have more or less with them the support of the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM),¹⁵ Karl (and for that matter Filipino liberation theologians at that time) did not have a Bishops' Conference behind them. In the violent context of the 70's in Mindanao, when theology was considered to be an exclusive domain of the ordained presbyterate, his praxis and theology opened a whole movement of empowered lay leaders, many of whom were martyred for the cause of liberation.¹⁶

Second, the symbol of emancipation or liberation is an axiom that functions not only as a qualifier for theology but also of the method and locus of doing theology. Gustavo Gutierrez considers liberation from three overlapping spheres: liberation as a response to dependency and social oppressions; liberation as a symbolic of the theory of history as a process of humanization; and liberation theologically understood as a hermeneutical lens to soteriology.¹⁷ These themes are seen in Karl's reflection on how liturgies become symbol of the people's commitment to their own emancipation. The first and the third spheres appear very

¹⁴ Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976)

¹⁵ In the first session of Vatican II on October 1962, there was already a group of council fathers who gathered around and supported the notion "Church of the Poor". The spokesperson of this group was the great Dom Helder Camara. See, Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2 (New York/Leuven: Orbis and Peeters, 1997): 200-203. Some bishops in Mindanao like Ttudud, Morelos and Claver were involved but others were not very supportive of the MSPC initiative.

¹⁶ Karl Gaspar, "Church Persecution in the Philippines: From the Pastoral Perspective," in Promotion of Church People's Rights, *That We May Remember* (Quezon City: PCPR, 1989): 308-320.

¹⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1973), 36-37, 149-178 as paraphrased and cited in Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology*, 45-46, 301.

prominently in his early writings, notably in his essay on the “People’s Worship in the Context of their Struggle”:

Many scriptural texts took on new meanings with their experiences of oppression and powerlessness... Not surprisingly, these were the ones that had explicit messages related to justice and liberation... Salvation history became concrete and real; their present struggles were now seen as a continuation of what had been written in the bible.¹⁸

The concretization of the Christian faith for a vast number of lay Catholics and base communities owe a lot from Gaspar’s and other lay leaders’ work in articulating and creative appropriation of the emancipatory discourse according to the Mindanawon socio-economic situation, language, metaphors, arts and experiences.¹⁹

Related to the preceding, the third axiomatic theme is dependency theory that influences the methodology of liberation theology. The general view of dependency theory is that ‘peripheral’ third world countries are in a dependent and oppressive relationship with the “core” Western First World countries.²⁰ Thus, to authentically read the *sitz-im-leben*, one needs to employ mediations of social and economic sciences if theology and pastoral work will be able meaningfully engage in a context of incommensurate social-economic arrangements. In his essay on “Contextualized Theology,” Gaspar traces the development of “structural analysis” as the tool that was appropriate to the Philippine setting and his pioneering work in using and teaching the tool in base communities who found it useful in order to reflect on their faith-life as they confront injustice, oppression and killings

¹⁸ See Karl Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church*, 49-85, 81.

¹⁹ See Carlos Gaspar, “Charism and the Redemptorist Lay Vocation,” in *To be a Redemptorist Today* ed. Noel Londoño (Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1996):255-269; See also Eugene van Erven, *The Playful Revolution: Theater and Liberation in Asia* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 82ff.

²⁰ An example is the dominant capitalist system that feeds on the resources and cheap labour of the third world in exchange for outmoded technologies.

during the dictatorial regime. “This tool of social analysis,” contends Gaspar,

Provided a perspective on pastoral work which clarified its goals and objectives. In the past, most pastoral programs tended to be narrow in their concerns. With social analysis, it became clear that the objectives of pastoral programs must be linked to the social issues of the times. This became possible because analysis had helped the people to identify the roots of their poverty and powerlessness.²¹

The fourth axiomatic theme is the centrality of praxis. While praxis can be defined as lived faith, in liberation theology praxis moves beyond the definition of the concrete lived experience of Christian to “praxis of corporate liberation in society.”²² This may be equivalent to what Gaspar calls 'grassroots theologizing':

Attending the bible-reflection sessions at the barricades almost always provides time for listening to the faith-life reflections of the people. Here is grassroots theologizing at its best as the people share the *pamalandong* (reflection) drawn from their daily struggles, hopes and dreams. Because of such sharing, these turn out to be the arena where the connection between the people's faith and commitment is established, where their spirituality and collective outrage fuse into a world of meanings and symbol.²³

Coming from a background of social sciences, theological-philosophical synthesis came after Gaspar began actively involving himself in *Mindanao Sulu Pastoral Conference* (MSPC). The tool of

²¹ Karl Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church*, 140-141.

²² Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology*, 46.

²³ Karl Gaspar, *A People's Option: Struggle to Creation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990), 26.

structural analysis was a “method of analysing the situation that leads to concrete engagements in social issues of justice.”²⁴ Theories were at the service of concrete action in community organization, conscientization and mass actions. The unique contribution in these engagements was that it was done and documented within the ambit of the mass ecclesiological movement of the MSPC that was mainly initiated by empowered lay Mindanawon Catholics with the support of religious sisters, priests and some Mindanao bishops. The organization of Basic Christian Communities (*Gagmayng Kristohanong Katilingban*) as a conscientized and conscientizing community and the emphasis on the people’s Church that was both refreshing and threatening to the institutional church have given a decisive posture and face to the Mindanao church in those challenging times. In the context of the oppression and violence of Martial Law (1972-1976), with Karl as the executive director of the MSPC, this contribution was unprecedented!

²⁴ Karl Gaspar, *A Hundred Years of Gratitude*, 19. In a section of this book, “Praxis First, Theory Later”, Gaspar intimates their fledgling attempts at looking for mediations and frameworks to analyse the situation of the many parts of Mindanao. “It was not until the FERES seminar that took place in Baguio City in mid-1976 that we found a theoretical framework that would guide us in our pastoral engagements”(p.19). The resource person of that seminar is Dr. Francois Houtart from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Houtart came to the Philippines in 1977 and held a month-long seminar in Baguio City on Marxist structural analysis. He is the founder of CETRI (*Centre Tricontinental*) in Louvain-la-Neuve in 1976. He served in Vatican II as secretary in the sub-committee that helped draft the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). See, François Houtart, *Socialisme et marché : Chine, Vietnam, Cuba* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001); François Houtart, *Théorie de la religion et marxisme*, UCL. Institut supérieur de philosophie. Séminaire de philosophie des sciences 1980. Rapport ; v.5.4 (Louvain-la-Neuve: Cabay, 1980). See also, Joaquin Cadorna, “Relief and Rehabilitation Work during Martial Law,” in Macario Tiu, ed., *Oh Susana: The Untold Stories of Martial Law in Davao* (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao Publications Office, 2016): 137-142; Daz Lamparas, “Life at MDC,” in Macario Tiu, ed., *Oh Susana: The Untold Stories of Martial Law in Davao*, 211-217.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO OTHER AREAS IN THEOLOGY

Karl's contributions organized around the axiomatic themes for liberation theology are enriched by his input and involvement in other areas of theology. First, in the area of ecclesiology, Karl's name has been associated with the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC).²⁵ The MSPC established five years after the conclusion of Vatican II is among the first collective appropriations in the Philippines of the incipient theology of the local church characterized by an active participation of the laity clearly aware and assertive of the equal baptismal dignity with every member of the church. According to Bishop Claver, who was one of its convenors, MSPC was propelled by the Vatican II ideas of dialogue, participation and co-responsibility. These ideas were to become the architectonic themes for MSPC I.²⁶ The contribution of the immediate local appropriation of the reforms of Vatican II gave birth to an ecclesiology of the People's Church. This new way of being church is highly contextual in its social analysis and praxis, in its organization, in its creative liturgies, its relationship with the hierarchy and in the language by which it articulates its identity.²⁷ However, it seems that along with the issues of red scare, the institutional church was not ready for such a kind of church.²⁸ The movement was institutionally disavowed and the original inspiration that fomented the collective consciousness of a Mindanao Church reverted to scattered attempts at contextualizing

²⁵ An overview of the inception, organization, debates and controversies that led to the decision of the Mindanao bishops to dissociate from the MSPC may be found in Warren Kinne, *The Splintered Staff* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990).

²⁶ Francisco Claver, "The History of BCCs: Philippines," *Church of the People: Basic Christian Communities*, Bishops'-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1988): 18-27, 20.

²⁷ Karl Gaspar, "Personal Interview by Randy Odchigue", April 14, 2007 in Leuven, Belgium.

²⁸ *Proceedings of the M-S Bishops with the MSPC Board and the Secretariat*, 8 March 1982, Davao City, 8. Francisco Claver, "The History of BCCs: Philippines," *Church of the People: Basic Christian Communities*, Bishops'-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1988): 18-27, 21.

Vatican II at the diocesan level. However, the People's Church was not totally decimated. There remains the collective consciousness of the Diocesan Clergy of Mindanao, the progressive Sisters' Association of Mindanao, the still very active Rural Missionaries of the Philippines and the praxis of BCC and BECs are here to stay in the dioceses of Mindanao.²⁹ Moreover, many of the practices and reflections in the MSPC made inroads in the mainstream Philippine Church thanks to the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines.³⁰

Second, in 1990³¹ and 1994,³² Gaspar already made the connection between the emancipatory theological discourse with the deep questions of ecology and integrity of creation. Leonardo Boff makes the connection between the cry of the earth as the cry of the poor in his book published in 1997.³³ In a context like Mindanao where mining and logging operations victimize the poorest of the poor, Gaspar is among the first who will crossover from treating the environmental issues as socio-economic questions into them being issues of the integrity of God's creation. In his subsequent publications,³⁴ Gaspar would critique the

²⁹Amado Picardal, *An Ecclesiological Perspective of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Rome, 1994; Filoteo Pelingon and Aimee Ramirez (eds.), *Faith-Experience in the Emerging Church of Mindanao-Sulu* (Manila: CFA Group, 1989).

³⁰ Francisco Claver, "A People-Oriented Communion of Churches: the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Council (MSPC)," in *Kinaadman* 15 (1993): 1-9. In page 8 Claver contends: "The PCP II, the historic gathering of 1991, has clearly mapped out the Philippine Church's direction for the rest of the century and beyond, and, as earlier stated, it points to the Philippine Church's becoming what the Mindanao-Sulu Church already is— or at least has been striving to be..."

³¹ Karl Gaspar, *A People's Option: Struggle to Creation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990)

³² Karl Gaspar, *Behind the Growing Trees: An Evaluation of the San Fernando Integrated Forestation Project* (Davao City: Kinaiyahan Foundation, 1994)

³³ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

³⁴ Karl Gaspar, "To Speak with Boldness," in *Re-imagining Christianity for a Green World*, eds., Randy J.C. Odchigue & Eric Genilo (SVST/AdU: Quezon City, 2011): 19-38. Gaspar problematizes what appeared to be an ambivalence in Benedict XVI's, *Message for the 2010 World Day of Peace* No. 13 as an example.

anthropocentric approach of the Catholic hierarchy who appear to ignore the critical potential of the indigenous discourse of interconnectedness and the intrinsic value and sacredness of the land.³⁵

Third, on the question of religious experience as a *locus theologicus*. Gaspar's earlier praxis and writings that were heavily resonant with liberation theology's option for the poor seemed to have brought him to a realization that in the context of Mindanao, the poorest of the poor are the *Lumads*. The earlier theological focus of the experience of socio-economic inequality and injustice is broadened to include the experience of the *Lumad* worldview suffused with their own cosmological mindfulness of the intrinsic connection between, people, land, culture, social arrangements and religious presence.³⁶ While the experience of injustice and oppression can easily find resonance with the Judeo-Christian narrative of the Exodus, the otherness of the *Lumad* worldview sits uncomfortably with the metaphysical tradition of Christian religious discourse. Its refusal to be domesticated has earned labels like, pagan, primitive and exotic. In his intervention during the recently held *Concilium* Conference in Manila last June 29-July 1, 2017, Karl suggested that along with the foundational texts of Christianity, we should also look to the texts bearing the religious experience of the *Lumads* and the indigenous as veritable locus for theologizing. In blurring the boundaries between that which is strictly Christian and that which is labelled as the *Lumad*, he contributes to the emancipation of religious experience from the dogmatic boundaries regulated by the totalizing narrative of the

³⁵ See Jay McDaniel, "Where is the Holy Spirit Anyway?" Response to a Skeptical Environmentalist," *Ecumenical Review* 42, no. 2 (1990). It appears that only in the encyclical of Francis *Laudato si*, where the notion of interconnection and pantheistic worldview are adopted in to the mainstream catholic social thought on environment. Francis, *Laudato si* § 91 (May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Accessed: September 21, 2017.

³⁶ See Karl Gaspar, "To Speak with Boldness," in *Re-imaging Christianity for a Green World* eds. Randy J.C. Odchigue & Eric Genilo (SVST/AdU: Quezon City, 2011): 19-38.

metaphysical religion. Gargani correctly points out that the danger of religion today is that “of tying the subject matter of religion into a preoccupation, rooted in metaphysical tradition...with establishing the reality and presence of the objects of religious discourse.”³⁷ Indeed, the “vocabulary of religious experience” can neither be reduced nor be allowed to become subservient to the “assimilatory violence of traditional metaphysics of presence” conveniently serving the power games of an institutional religion.³⁸ Karl seems to intuitively resonate with the postmodern concern of recuperating the eventual character of religious experience that resists domestication of a regulative religious discourse and recognize that the “moment of excess in the in distinction” resists any modern “referentialistic and representationalist” ‘grasping’ as in the schema of *adequatio rei intellectus*.³⁹

Fourth, Karl’s commitment to the plight of the *Lumad* in Mindanao necessitated a methodological expansion of categories of mediation. Where structural analysis became relevant to questions of oppressive structures and dependency dynamics, the *Lumad* engagement seemed to beg for other philosophical categories and a more anthropological ethnographic approach. Hence, in his award winning book *Manobo Dreams in Arakan* (2011), one encounters phrases like “colonization of lifeworld”, “communicative rationality,” etc—phrases associated with the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. In this book Gaspar looks to the Habermasian framework as a heuristic tool to interpret and articulate the lifeworld of the *Manobo* in Arakan, their colonization (muting their communicative capabilities) and their tactical engagements to fight

³⁷Aldo Gargani, “Religious Experience as Event and Interpretation,” in *Religion* eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998):111-135, 135.

³⁸ Aldo Gargani, “Religious Experience as Event and Interpretation,” 120, 127.

³⁹ Aldo Gargani, “Religious Experience as Event and Interpretation,” 127-128. One good example of this is the attitude of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith with regards to the Eastern Religions and religious experience manifested in the encyclical *Dominus Iesus*. See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. “‘*Dominus Iesus*’ On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, August 6, 2000.

for their dreams. This project proved to be a watershed moment for a contribution at establishing methodological connections between anthropology and theology vis-à-vis the *Lumad* question. This methodological connection has been attempted at length in his most recent book *Panagkutay: Anthropology and Theology Interfacing in the Mindanao Uplands (The Lumad Homeland)* (2017). In this book, he pushes the method of participant observation to experiential participation of a faith-based advocate enabling him to describe culture from the inside where the indigenous themselves as the relevant questions “about themselves and the world around them.”⁴⁰ The anthropological approach this book employs contributes towards an understanding of inculturation that does not denigrate the religious reality and experience of the *Lumad*. He points to the critical potential that anthropology exercises in “allowing religious reality to be itself, rather than always thought of as a system of symbols pointing to something else. This also involves rejecting the univocal assumption of the meaning of religion which has remained constant through the various historical eras.”⁴¹ The anthropological approach employed by Karl unmasks the power dynamics of a constructed religious ideology that establishes the preconditions of the normative religious identity and authorizes, regulates and disciplines which religious practices and articulations are acceptable or heretical.⁴²

Finally, Karl has also contributed in the development of the religious theatre arts. He is critical of the prevailing ‘textualization’ of theology in seminaries and institutes as Western influenced. Karl contends that theology can be “expressed in songs, poems, theatrical pieces, paintings and sculptures... and other visual productions.”⁴³ More than being a prolific author, he has written and produced many theatre performances between mid-70s and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Rey Raluto, “A Tribute to a Grateful Mindanawon Theologian,” in Karl Gaspar, *A Hundred Years of Gratitude*, 275.

mid 80s.⁴⁴ And the influence of liberation theology in his plays are quite discernible: “The theme of struggle is pre-eminent in the 27 plays owing its liberation framework...The gut-level inspiration comes from the basic communities and situations that make struggle a necessity.”⁴⁵ These performances have contributed to the Freire-inspired conscientization process of reflection-action-reflection in view of liberation especially at the grassroots communities in many parts of Mindanao.

We close this still-to-be-completed list of Karl’s contributions by quoting a stanza from his play *Binilanggong Damgo* (Imprisoned Dreams) that tells the story of Filipino political prisoners within the Exodus story:

*Dili kita mahadlok, ug dili usab nato wad-on ang paglaum. Ang atong pagka-anaa sa bilanggoan, dunay kahulugan. Kay kini nahilambigit man sa pakig bisog ngadto sa kalingkawasan. Hangtud naa ang Dios sa kaluwasan nagpaluyo kanato, ug hangtud naa ang katawhan nagbarug sa maong tuyo, mosanag ang bidlisiw sa mga taliabot nga adlaw, diin malingkawas ra gayud kita.*⁴⁶

ENGAGING SOME ASPECTS OF KARL GASPAR’S THOUGHT

Aspects of the provisional list we have mentioned in the preceding pages provoke some reflections that perhaps need to be thematized not as a critical appraisal but as a way of engaging the thought of a theologian, social anthropologist, activist and playwright. First, Karl Gaspar’s leadership in the activism,

⁴⁴ Pamela del Rosario Castrillo, “The Theater of Karl Gaspar: The Biblical Religious Plays,” in *Philippine Studies* 45 (1997): 353-384.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 381

⁴⁶ “We should not be afraid and should not let go of hope. Our being imprisoned is meaningful. It is very much related to our struggle for liberation. As long as the God of salvation inspires us, as long as the people are committed to our cause, sunlight will filter through in the coming days and then we will be free.” As quoted in Pamela del Rosario Castrillo, “The Theater of Karl Gaspar: The Biblical Religious Plays,” 374.

conscientization and faith-based struggle within and outside of Mindanao church in the 70's and 80's are already stuff of legend for us young Mindanawons. It remains a challenge for theologians to continue the liberative praxis started by the lay pioneers of the MSPC while being critical of the tendency of some quarters in the Catholic Church to reform the reforms of Vatican II. Along these lines, it seems important to find new synthesis of the different ecclesiologies in dialogue with postmodern and postcolonial contexts without having to forsake the liberative critique fomented by the People of God ecclesiology.

Second, in Gutierrez's development of the hermeneutical spheres of liberation, the third sphere of liberation as lens of understanding soteriology can still be fully articulated.⁴⁷ In short, the question of the synthesis between history and eschatology in the understanding of liberation is an area that can still be reflected upon. The underlying theological-philosophical reasons for the need of this synthesis of Christian narrative are two-fold, on one hand, the linear historical causality becoming an ideology and a totalizing violent master narrative, and on another, of the Platonic dismissal of history in the guise of transcendence thereby becoming hostage to the classic Marxist critique of religion. The function of the open narrative of religion secures the space of the eschatological Other who interrupts and questions the essentialist horizon that shelters human projects in the form of dogmatic ideology or dogmatic religion. In the words of Michel de Certeau, because of the other, there is a perpetual departure and destabilization and we become humble passers-by and wanderers – never coming to rest.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ It seems that hints are provided by Karl Gaspar on a soteriological position that situates strategic and tactical engagements within the ambit of the "mission of participation in God's mission". See Karl Gaspar, *Desperately Seeking God's Saving Action: Yolanda Survivors' Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations* (Manila: ISA, 2014), 99-140.

⁴⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 299. Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 125-140. There is however a critique against the postmodern alterity involving negation, rupture and leaving behind. It is also possible that in the movement of perpetual departure,

Third, the task of highlighting the concerns of the *Lumads* using the Habermasian framework of communicative rationality possesses great critical potential.⁴⁹ The concept of communicative rationality “carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and... assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld.”⁵⁰ Without making any overt suggestion or finding a facile solution, an attempt in looking at the presuppositions of Habermas can hopefully sharpen the problematic faced by the *Lumad* in fulfilling their dreams of their ancestral domain. It appears that the possibility of communication as far as Habermas is concerned seems to rest on the presupposition that there is a universal necessary consensus in language and everyone speaks following legitimate social rules. Language, it seems for Habermas, as a structure or intersubjectivity “implies that we share a form of life, is indeed itself a form of life.”⁵¹ This means that in order to disagree we have to be in language understood “as an intricate network of words and practices.”⁵² Moreover, when one brings in the notion of power in the Foucaultian sense, one becomes aware on the incommensurate power discourses at work between rationalities. Hence, one can understand why there is “one-sided rationalization” between the system and the *Manobo*.⁵³ Parallel to this concern is the question of incommensurate rules of languages games between cultures vis-à-vis universal consensus. Risking

the particularities are affirmed in and through their mutual relationship because the otherness of the Other is affirmed through this authentic relationship that does not assimilate, co-opt or subsume the other.

⁴⁹ See Karl Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams of Arakan*, 45-63.

⁵⁰ Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I *Reason and Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 10 as quoted in Karl Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams of Arakan*, 11.

⁵¹ Emelia Steuerman, Habermas vs. Lyotard, in *New Formations* 7 (1989):51-66, 55.

⁵² Emelia Steuerman, Habermas vs. Lyotard, 55.

⁵³ Karl Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams of Arakan*, 64.

oversimplification, following Wittgenstein's ideas on rules of language games, in his study of the *differend*, Lyotard wants to articulate a conflict that cannot be solved without doing an injustice because the parties involved in the conflict do not have the same basis for settling the conflict or operate in the same language game rules as in the case where the parties "belong to different legal systems or are separated by a cultural gap."⁵⁴ For example, the lowland state civil law influenced by the regalian doctrine has a very different understanding of ownership with that of the customary law of the *Manobo*. Lyotard sees that "any litigation under the law of one culture will inevitably result in injustice for the other."⁵⁵ While inroads are made in relation to the communicative action between civil society and the IPs in their claim to their ancestral domain, what remains is that this praxial contestation is still done under the rules established by the state laws governing IPRA, CADC and CADT. In short, the argument is settled according to the rules of the language game and idioms of ownership established by the State while the *Manobo* dreams are inadequately represented in that idiom. This perhaps can explain why until now there is no end to *Lumad* dislocation and internal displacement whether it be with the *B'laans* in Davao Occidental or the *Manobos* in Surigao del Sur.⁵⁶ If the aforementioned intuitions are valid, the continuing challenge is to bear witness to this incommensurability by constant critique to the status quo e.g. the co-optation of customary laws to the bureaucracy of the monolithic state legal system, while at the same time struggle to search for new inclusive and pluralistic idioms that can at the very least point to a possibility of representing that which we can only appropriate.

⁵⁴ Peter Pelzer, "Art and law, land rights and overcoming injustice: The example of the Spinifex people," in *Culture and Organization* vol. 15, no. 4 (December 2010), 349-360, 351.

⁵⁵ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1988)

⁵⁶ Karl Gaspar, "No End to *Lumad* Dislocation from Their Homeland: The Case of the Sarangani *Manobo* and *B'laans* in Davao Occidental," in *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 2015-2016 30 (2)-31 (1): 73-94.

Finally, the evental character of religious experience calls for a careful consideration relative to the possibility that narrative heterogeneities are subsumed under a rubric of nebulous Sameness that is devoid of particularity and thus demands no praxis. Here, respect is given to the Marion's phenomenological exploration of the "saturated phenomenon" as the "irregardability" and "non-objectifiability" of the religious experience of the absolute-rendering it as non-object of intentionality.⁵⁷ But while Marion abundantly uses the words and deeds of Jesus in his illustrations, it seems that he has not completely spelled out the heterogeneity of the Christian call to prophetic action (understandably as he is taking pains to distinguish his phenomenological work from theology, albeit with not much success).⁵⁸ Traditional theological language calls this prophetic witnessing. In relation to Christian discourse, *kenotic particularity* seems to best appropriate this heterogeneity. Kenosis which is the self-emptying love of God described by Paul in Philippians 2,1-11 guarantees its open narrativity where religious experience is not used to legitimize extremist violence and oppressive discourse. Kenosis also frames the discourse of excess as an excessive of *caritas* of a God who is both prodigious in compassion and prophetic in praxis of redemption.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If one goes through the Karl's praxis, books, articles, narratives and theatre productions, one can discern the faith-based emancipatory commitment to society and religion. His contribution in the areas of theology, sociology, anthropology,

⁵⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 215; Jean-Luc Marion, "Sketch of the Saturated Phenomenon," in *Jean-Luc Marion: The Essential Writings*, ed. Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham UP, 2013): 108-34, 119; Jean Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham UP, 2002), 157-159.

⁵⁸ Marion has been criticized as a closet theologian by Janicaud. See Dominique Janicaud, et al, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham UP, 2000), see part one.

theatre, the environment, *Lumad* and the Mindanao church could not be emphasized enough. These contributions oftentimes take shape in a form of critical collaboration that serves the cause of liberation. One can frame the legacy of Karl Gaspar as a life of witness for someone who gave his life to emancipate religion from religion— to unshackle and unleash the originary spirit of the liberating narrative of the God of Exodus and the redeeming praxis of Jesus from the clutches of an institutional church pre-occupied with its prerogatives of power and dogmatic importance.

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