



Listening Appreciatively to the Voice of Culture: Transcending Linguistic Domination in Theology

ABSTRACT

Filipinos' colonial experience under Spain and the United States had eroded their sense of pride in their indigenous way of life. During the centuries of colonial rule, the colonizers had communicated a negative self-image of what it means to be a 'Filipino'. One of the lingering effects of colonization is the difficulty of using the vernacular language as a means to communicate theologically. For this reason, the struggle to give voice to a Filipino interpretation of the Gospel via the Filipino language has proven to be very challenging. The heart of this paper explores how one's own language enables one to readily experience the God who loves unconditionally. It concludes by thinking about the Filipino word kagandahang-loób as a locus in which God's will and God's character are seen to be intimately intertwined.

Keywords: Colonization; Language; Theology; Kagandahang-loób; Culture



INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago, a Filipina pastoral worker who attended a session on “inculturation” in the Northern Philippines remembered and recorded the following incident.¹ Apart from the presentation which opened her eyes to the big task facing the church, what caught her attention during the session was a remark made by one of the participants. “.... What was more powerful to me,” she recalls, “was the intervention of the elderly sister in the lecture.” With tears in her eyes, she asked (the lecturer), “Are you saying that we need to go back to those things which the Church has asked us to give up many years ago? What is there to go back to? We have lost our culture.”¹

THE RESIDUAL EFFECTS OF SPANISH AND AMERICAN COLONIZATIONS

Against the background of powerful conquering forces of culturally debilitating and psychologically devastating experience wrought by roughly three and a half centuries of Spanish rule and about fifty years of American domination, I find myself – like the elderly sister mentioned above – still affected by the residual effects of those historical events especially in my consciousness as a western-trained Filipino theologian. It was the breadth and depth of the colonial influence that I was not aware of, however, that we guesstimate its long term impact.²

Culturally, belittling or shaming someone publicly is regarded as more injurious to the person's psyche than inflicting physical pain. The visible wounds may disappear over time, but the aching, which the healed wounds have long covered, lingers and

¹Joy Candelaria, in a student paper submitted to the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

²Similarly, a commentary on the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Pan-Amazon Synod of Bishops mentions that the document does “not gloss over the colonial complicity of the church in Latin America and the subsequent centuries of subjugation and injustice that has followed.” Cf. Daniel Horan, OFM, The decolonial and intercultural hopes of the pan-Amazon synod <<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/faith-seeking-understanding/decolonial-and-intercultural-hopes-pan-amazon-synod?clickSource=email>>

continues to be felt. Maybe this is why there is a saying among Filipinos, *saktan mo na lamang ako, huwag mo lang akong hiyain* (Inflict physical pain, but do not put me to shame).

In assessing the effects of four centuries of colonial rule on the collective psyche of Filipinos, an insight from social psychology may be of considerable help. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who made *conscientization* (consciousness raising) a popular term among agents of change in the 1970's, says that in a situation of oppression (in our case, colonization) the oppressed over a period of time unconsciously internalize the oppressor's attitudes towards them.³ 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.

We may consider the thought as familiar. The idea is similar to what happens to children who are socialized in and through their families. The attitudes and behavior of parents towards their children are gradually internalized by the latter and become part of their personalities. Children who generally experience positive, nurturing treatment from their parents tend to grow up liking themselves and are self-confident. This self-image, given as it were as a gift by their parents, continue to be an asset even in their adult life. Those who have been most of the time put down and demeaned by their parents, however, come to dislike themselves and have very little confidence in their capabilities. Even when their parents are no longer around, their acquired image of themselves which had been communicated by these continue to haunt them in the present.

If we liken the indigenous culture to a corporate personality, we can apply analogously the insights derived from psychology and social psychology mentioned above. During the colonial rule, the colonizers, like the parents or the oppressor

³Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1970).

alluded to earlier, had communicated a negative self-image for Filipinos. It was a prolonged and insulting representation which these colonial masters had of their subjects, and an image that probably continues even today to be a burden for the latter. It may have become a force that militates against their well-being and an enemy that they have to overcome. What is particularly frightening about this enemy is that it is literally within; it resides in their minds up to now. This colonial mindset is an “intimate enemy.”⁴

There are many documented examples of such degrading utterances. Let me provide a couple of specifics: In 1720, during the Spanish rule, a letter concerning the intellectual poverty, cultural backwardness and moral depravity of the natives, in general, was penned by Fray Gaspar de San Agustin. Considered by his contemporaries to be an expert on matters relative to the colonial subjects, what he wrote was widely circulated and believed to the detriment of the natives’ dignity. Its credibility depended to a great extent on the prejudices at the time. In that letter, Fray Gaspar spoke about the natives thus: “These wretched beings are of such a nature that they live a purely animal life, intent solely on its preservation and convenience, without the corrective of reason or respect or esteem for reputation.” Such a conclusion is not surprising if one considers the various allegations Fray Gaspar hurled onto the natives: ungrateful, lazy, stupid, rude, curious and impertinent, insolent towards Spaniards, “they do not know their place”, proud and arrogant, tyrannical, excessively fond of feasts, vain, lustful, vengeful, ignorant, cowardly and ate a lot.”⁵

⁴Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁵See Miguel Bernad, S.J., *The Christianization of the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives* (Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1972), pp. 162-170, especially p. 168. The American colonizers apparently thought of the same. To them Filipinos were “treacherous, arrogant, stupid and vindictive, impervious to gratitude, incapable of recognizing obligations. Centuries of barbarism have made them cunning and dishonest. We cannot safely treat them as equals, for the simple and sufficient reason that they could not understand it. They do not know the meaning of justice and good faith. They do not know the difference between liberty and license.... These Filipinos must be taught obedience and be forced to observe, even if they cannot comprehend, the practices of civilization.” (Miller, *San Francisco Call*, September 26, 1900).

The tenacity of this bigotry, to give another example, was also reflected during the Bishops' Conference of the Philippines more than a century and a half later in 1900 when the Philippines was already under the American regime. All the bishops were, of course, foreigners and were discussing the problem that Protestantism had brought in its wake. In that meeting, the Archbishop of Manila argued the case for an absolute need of the European clergy by asserting that the Filipino clergy were incapable of faithfully fulfilling their sacred ministry because the Filipino priest (emphasis, I suppose, on Filipino rather than on priest) was laboring under these defects: extreme shallow-mindedness, uncontrolled propensity to the vices of the flesh, lack of talent which incapacitated him from obtaining a thorough and proper training. Furthermore, the very narrowness of the soul of the Filipino priest, for which reason he was reduced to almost nothing in the estimation of any European, would only give his enemies, the American protestants, cause for mockery. The Bishop of Cebu was convinced that the Filipino clergy would simply disappear by itself because Filipino priests did not have the desire for self-denial and work, and the decreased pious offering to the Church would discourage very many from embracing the clerical life.”⁶

Colonial experience under Spain and the United States had eroded the Filipinos' sense of pride in their indigenous way of life. There is really no need to belabor the point of what colonization did to the self-image and, consequently, to the self-esteem of the natives. This has been amply documented in other works. What

⁶Cf. Q. Garcia and J. Arcilla, “Acts of the Conference of the Bishops of the Philippines held in Manila under the Presidency of the Most Reverend Apostolic Delegate, Monsignor Placide de la Chapelle -1900”, *Philippiniana Sacra* IX:26 (1974), 315-317. Another example is from Francisco Gainza O.P., Bishop of Nueva Caceres, comparing Filipino and Spanish priests. He said that “one cannot in justice demand from a native priest what he expects from a Spanish priest. Generally speaking, [the native priests] lack the strength in character, the drive and initiative in their work; their upbringing is very different from ours, and their habits and customs are not those of Europe. *Caeteris paribus* they are inferior in aptitude and talent. To wish them then to be on the same level as the Spanish priests is to ignore the immense gap which separates the two races, to wish an absurd thing, to demand the impossible.”

Dr. José Rizal, the country's national hero, wrote regarding the effects of the colonial experience suffices as a general summary of what happened to the way people thought about themselves and their culture. Bear in mind that Rizal's novels about the role of the church in colonial affairs were, until relatively recent times, banned by the church in the Philippines. His description of the overall effects of the colonial rule under Spain could virtually cover that of the United States also. Rizal wrote,

“Then began a new era for the Filipinos; *little by little they lost their old traditions, the mementos of their past; they gave up their writing, their songs, their poems, their laws in order to learn by rote other doctrines which they did not understand, another morality, another aesthetics different from those inspired by their climate and manner of thinking.* Then they declined, degrading themselves in their own eyes; they became ashamed of what was their own; they began to admire and praise whatever was foreign and incomprehensible; their spirit was dismayed and it surrendered.”⁷

To this day, perceptions of an inferior culture still persist. From the school children who want to change their citizenship because Filipino spells second-rate, to college students who admit that the colonial mindset overwhelms them, to Filipino authors who wrote textbooks disparaging indigenous values, to individuals who put English before their own native language and pride themselves for it, to a perceptive social scientist who states that

⁷As quoted in Teodoro Agoncillo and Milagros Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People* (4th ed.; Quezon City: R.P. Garcia, 1973), pp. 112–113. Renato Constantino, writing about the miseducation of the Filipino said, “The first and perhaps the master stroke in the plan to use education as an instrument of colonial policy was the decision to use English as the medium of instruction. English became the wedge that separated the Filipinos from their past and later to separate educated Filipinos from the masses of their countrymen. English introduced the Filipinos to a strange, new world. With American textbooks, Filipinos started learning not only a new language but also a new way of life, alien to their traditions and yet a caricature of their model. This was the beginning of their education. At the same time, it was the beginning of their mis-education, for they learned no longer as Filipinos but as colonials.” Renato Constantino, *The Filipinos in the Philippines and Other Essays* (Malaya Books, 1966), 39–65.

Filipinos tend to self-flagellate, that is, put themselves down, we see indications that the colonial mindset is still around.⁸

In a way, this problem of a lingering effect of colonization and what to do about it were already recognized by Filipino ecclesiastical leadership in the 1990's. During its national meeting to formally implement the renewal that was Vatican II, the 1991 Second Plenary Council of the Philippines admitted at least that the Christianization of the islands was marred by violence. It only stated, without further elaboration, that “the faith came to us...in an age which glorified the union of cross and sword,” “though not always without an element of duress” (PCP II, 10). To the historically bent, there is a statue commemorating the coming of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and Andres de Urdaneta to the Philippines in Intramuros, Metro Manila. Side by side, Legazpi represents the conquest, while Urdaneta holds a cross as a symbol of Christianization.⁹ But at this time, the theological mindset was to colonize, and to missionize was to colonize.¹⁰

Then in 2019, commenting in advance of the 500th anniversary of Catholicism in the country, a member of the Bishops' Conference, while highlighting the Christian faith which Filipinos embraced, could not help but cede that there were church people “*who had totally allied themselves with the colonial politics of the conquistadores.*” (CBCP online). However, the overall effect of colonization was not tackled. But as one Mexican Viceroy of the colonial times humorously, but with a grain of truth, put it, “*En*

⁸I elaborated on these in my book, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003), 60–61.

⁹“In the area of Anda Circle just outside of Intramuros, there is a bronze statue erected in the memory of Legaspi together with Urdaneta. The monument shows Legazpi carrying a sword while Urdaneta at his side hold up the cross. There, an inscription reads: “he is the unparalleled cosmographer, pioneer of the Christian and Spanish civilization in the Philippines”. < <http://nhcp.gov.ph/the-voyage-of-fray-andres-de-urdaneta/>>

¹⁰See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 302–313. Karl Rahner in “Towards a Fundamental Interpretation of Vatican II” says of the time that “the actual concrete activity of the Church in its relation to the world outside of Europe was in fact (if you will pardon the expression) the activity of an export firm which exported a European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the world together with the rest of the culture and civilization it considered superior.” See < <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/40/40.4/40.4.4.pdf>> 717.

cada fraile tenia el rey en Filipinas un capitan general y en ejercito entero” (“In each friar in the Philippines, they had a captain and a whole army”).¹¹

The head of the Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples (ECIP) went further of colonization into this matter in 2010. In the name of the commission, he stated that they wanted to apologize for the moments when they, as evangelizers, entered native communities “from a position of power, indifferent to their struggles and pains.” “We ask forgiveness for moments,” he added, “when we taught Christianity as a religion robbed with colonial cultural superiority, instead of sharing it as a religion that calls for a relationship with God and a way of life.” Could this apology be a possible gesture being asked of the Philippine church in general as it enters into the 500th anniversary of Christianity? Since celebrations of the event will surely include the Eucharist, it is worth recalling that asking for pardon follows the practice of asking God's forgiveness in the beginning of every Eucharistic celebration. An apology will also follow the lead given by Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 43.¹² In addition, it will spring from the gesture of papal leadership in the “Day of Pardon” homily of John Paul II as well as from the articulation of the document of the International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation* on the approach of the new millennium.¹³

¹¹Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990), 75.

¹²“By the power of the Holy Spirit the church is the faithful spouse of the Lord and will never fail to be a sign of salvation in the world; but it is by no means unaware that down through the centuries there have been among its members, both clerical and lay, some who were disloyal to the Spirit of God. Today as well, the church is not blind to the discrepancy between the message it proclaims and the human weakness of those to whom the gospel has been entrusted. Whatever is history's judgment on these shortcomings, we cannot ignore them and we must combat them assiduously, lest they hinder the spread of the gospel. The church also realizes how much it needs the maturing influence of centuries of past experience in order to work out its relationship to the world. Guided by the Holy Spirit the church ceaselessly exhorts her children “to purification and renewal so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the church” (*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 43).

In a more positive note, the same PCP II document acknowledged the serious need for inculturation of theology in the country by stating that "faith must take root in the matrix of our Filipino being so that we may truly believe and love as Filipinos." And to emphasize this even more, it says boldly that "for this to happen, *the Gospel must be presented with tools, methods, expressions coming from the culture itself*" (PCP II, art. 72).¹⁴ To me, PCP II was foreseeing a fundamental reworking of theological education in the country, especially through the vernacular.¹⁵

In 1999, the bishops called attention to culture with their *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Culture*. There they concluded that "in doing inculturation, we get in touch with the collective inner spirit of our people: our *kalooban*—as Tagalogs put it—our inner self, a high value in itself. [Note the use of the vernacular *kalooban*]. And we do so not as individuals only but, above all, as a people, a community. But we do the same too with the Spirit of God, God's *kalooban*. Inculturation, then, is this double and deepest interiority, God's and ours, becoming one."¹⁶

Then, in a follow-up endeavor, CBCP released in the same year an exceptional pastoral letter on holiness written completely in our very own language, *Filipino*.¹⁷ With the Bishops' communications normally done in English, was this, perhaps, a sign of awareness that in the area of language there is a felt colonial

¹³The Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (Baguio City, October 13, 2010). See John Paul II, "The recognition of past wrongs serves to reawaken our consciences to the compromises of the present, opening the way to conversion for everyone." (Homily of the Holy Father, "Day of Pardon", Sunday, 12 March 2000) <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000312_pardon.html> and the document of the International Theological Commission, entitled: "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past".

¹⁴*Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1992), 30, No. 72.

¹⁵As an aside, let me say that the time I have spent with the Redemptorists taught me, by way of deeds, the truth of this statement. Every instance of what was called "missions" then, the vernacular was used and privileged.

¹⁶See the CBCP website: <<https://cbcpcwebsite.com>>

¹⁷I am prescinding from the internal language debate, whether Filipino is a truly national language or it is merely Tagalog.

domination too? Together with this letter is a summary, articulated as well in the Filipino language, explaining the contents of the said letter. Called “*Landas ng Pagpapakabanal*” (the Way to Holiness), the Bishops stated their reasons for doing it in the Filipino language. “We deem it fitting that we write this in our national language *Filipino*, because we wanted to reach the hearts and minds of the majority of the faithful. By the same token, in using this language we intend that this summary of this Pastoral Letter inspire you.”¹⁸

LANGUAGE AS A SPHERE OF CONTESTATION

Both Spain and the United States blatantly used language as an instrument of subjugation. Both sidelined the Filipino language, along with its particular cultural worldview, making it difficult to think in and through it. Spanish, at that time, was considered to be the civilized tongue, heir to Latin, and an effective means for conquest. So as early as 1596, the King of Spain had given instructions to the Governor in the islands to teach Castilian to the Filipinos.¹⁹ It was believed that a *lingua franca* would mean national unity under Spain.

In the 19th century, the “benevolently assimilating” Americans imposed English by taking charge of the schools as an adjunct to military conquest and managed to assert their culture through their English tongue. Today, the scope of language subjugation can perhaps be gleaned through the frequent use of English in society and in the churches.

¹⁸ See <<https://cbcpwebsite.com>>CBCP website. “Just as all of us like to be spoken to in our mother tongue, so too in the faith we like to be spoken to in our ‘mother culture,’ our native language” (cf. 2 Macc 7:21, 27), and our heart is better disposed to listen. This language is a kind of music which inspires encouragement, strength and enthusiasm. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 139.

¹⁹ Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990), 97.

In the wider society also, “the formidable clout of English as a status language means that hardly any traffic of discourse flows across the social divide” between the speakers of Filipino and speakers of English.²⁰ The truth of this statement became manifest when I was once in a bookstore to look around for books that I could recommend to our university library. It was then I encountered a sales lady who forbade me to browse. I explained to her, in our Filipino language, that I was a professor at a local university and was merely going over some books that I could recommend to our university library. When she insisted that it was the bookstore’s policy, I decided to ask for the manager. One has to take into account that in the Philippines, one speaks in English to appear intelligent and upper class. Most likely, I unconsciously used English when he showed up. I immediately explained to him in English what I was doing. And he promptly answered, “Oh, yes, sir. You may do that, sir.” This showed the residual power the English language have over our own Filipino language generated by the colonizations that had occurred earlier in our history.²¹ At that very moment, I became both victim and victimizer, a colonized mind using the very language of our colonizer.

If language enables people to think, then it is a struggle to do so in a language that had been stigmatized and marginalized. This is my experience as I strained to utilize the Filipino language in my theologizing. What do people do if they come to the point of realizing that they bear a colonized mind? Is it true that they tend to express themselves more easily, but not necessarily more meaningfully in a foreign tongue than in their own language? Are their thoughts about the faith welling up from their alienated spirit than from their native consciousness?

²⁰ Melba Padilla Maggay, *Understanding Ambiguity in Filipino Communication Patterns* (Quezon City: Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1999), 35.

²¹ Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990).

Language has become a sphere of contestation. Up to now, the Filipino language is seeking its worth as a means to communicate theologically. By and large, it is not considered easy and practical to impart theological matters in Filipino. Lectures, print and digital resources, conversations, conferences, studies, researches and official communications in the theological enterprise are ordinarily in English. One can strive to theologize in Filipino and reach a small yet culturally prepared audience, or do so in English and claim a wider or even an international readership.

It is surmised that the continued use of English in theological matters diminishes the potential that is inherent in the local language to express deep sentiments. Yet, if one regards language as foundational symbols, “perhaps the most basic and important instance of symbols shaping our consciousness,” other symbols may come in “to add to, go beyond and even challenge the understandings that were attached to our native language, but that language remains the most pervasive and powerful medium for interpreting and sharing our human experiences.”²² The example set by Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Art. 37, which privileges the vernacular in the liturgy, set the tone not only for inculturation in general but for use of the native language of the place in particular.

In accordance with this move, the 1991 Second Plenary Council of Philippines commended “the use of vernacular languages...in the teaching of religion and theology” (PCP II, art. 200). At the same time, the Theological Commission of the Federation of Asian Conferences (FABC) also put forward a strong recommendation to the member countries of using the vernacular in the teaching of theology.²³ There are indications that such recommendations are being heeded here and there, but the English language is still the language of preference. Sometimes, I wonder

²²Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty- Third Publications, 1983), 45.

²³See the Theological Advisory Commission, “Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context” [1991] (FABC Papers No. 60).

if its present dominance over the vernacular in theology is a matter and a situation of “*kung gusto maraming paraan; kung ayaw maraming dahilan*” (if one favors the matter there are many ways to accomplish it; if one does not favor the matter there are many excuses to avoid it)?

THE VERNACULAR IS THE VOICE OF THE CULTURE IN ITS OWN TERMS

A most important aspect in comprehending the indigenous culture is the understanding which arises from a grasp of the native language. Language, we must bear in mind, is not a set of labels on reality which we can stick and remove at will because they do not make any difference. Rather, as the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, language is the “reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive the world.”²⁴ Language reveals powerfully the way of feeling, thinking, valuing and behaving of people. When we listen to the culture, then, we should listen to it in its own terms, that is, in the language with which the culture expresses itself, the vernacular. The use of the native language “forces” us to focus on and think through our indigenous ideas, concepts, available vocabulary and patterns of thinking.

Using a foreign language as basis and point of departure to understand the culture conceals and, at times, falsifies the meaning of terms in the vernacular. This is not to repudiate in any way the need for translations which are necessary for inter-cultural communication and sharing of insights. But translations cannot be a substitute for listening to the culture in its own terms because every language has its own genius, its own distinctiveness, its own special character. This also means that what may be expressed very well in one language may not be adequately formulated and represented in another. What can be conveyed clearly in one tongue may only be hinted at in another.

²⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 26.

Let me give an illustration: Consider three distinct cultures and ways of speech on the concept of “positive change”, namely Greek, Anglo and Filipino. These are *metanoia*, *conversion* and *pagbabalik-loob*. Three images representing three ways of looking at reality readily come to mind. With the Greek *metanoia*, the focus is on the *nous* (mind),²⁵ the Anglo *conversion* is in the change of direction. I picture the image of a hippodrome where horses start running in one direction only to turn at another. But while *metanoia* and *conversion* present their own singular metaphors, the Filipino term for “positive change” is not portrayed as a change of mind nor direction but as a *return* (*pagbabalik*) to one's *loob* where the most authentic relational self and one's true worth are located. Hence, one may look at *pagbabalik-loob* as a gathering, a synthesizing, a centering, an integrating of the different aspects of the self (*pagkatao*) towards the truth that we are essentially made in the image and likeness of God.

“*Loob*” in “*pagbabalik-loob*” is not inwardness in the sense of withdrawal and seclusion nor is it an escape to the security of the familiar, a retrogression to a world that no longer is. Rather, it is the movement of journeying to the very depths of personal, interpersonal and communal reality to be in continuous touch with it. *Loob* hints at our being a contemplative people, deemed as our innermost and truest reality as within not the without, the interior not the exterior. “Conversion,” then, for Christians who try to align our lives to God's *loob* have “to return” to our most authentic inner self (*pagbabalik-loob*).

²⁵“*Metanoia* means afterthought, from *meta* meaning “after” or “beyond” and *nous* meaning “mind”. In Classical Greek, *metanoia* meant changing one's mind about someone or something. When personified, *Metanoia* was depicted as a shadowy goddess, cloaked and sorrowful, who accompanied *Kairos*, the god of Opportunity, sowing regret and inspiring repentance for the “missed moment”. This conventional portrayal continued through the Renaissance. “The elements of repentance, regret, reflection, and transformation are always present in the concept of *metanoia* to some degree, ...” The term “...was used consistently in the literature of that time to express a fundamental change in thinking that leads to a fundamental change in behavior and/or way of living.” See *Wikipedia* < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanoia_\(theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanoia_(theology))>

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

My theological education has been mostly western in orientation and content. Thinking like a European or an American was considered reaching a higher level of thought. I was taught how to regard as my own the thought of theologians in the West. Through the courses I took, mostly under expatriates and Filipinos trained in the West, up until my advanced studies in the discipline. I got acquainted explicitly with the methods utilized by Western theologians as well as with the theological questions and answers that preoccupied them. I consulted and studied resources written by Western theologians, at times adopting and adapting them to the Filipino setting. My mind then was constantly grappling with Western theological concepts and interests.

At times, however, I think the process was more subtle, an awareness that comes from hindsight rather than foresight. It was only after years of struggling to deliberately think as a Filipino that I recognized how gradually and successfully I had been made to think theologically as a Westerner. I was unaware of the controlling power of the English language on my thoughts and through my thoughts on my feelings towards my culture. Over the years of teaching and doing research it has become clear to me how these have contributed inconspicuously to the stigmatization of the Filipino culture as “inferior” or “no good”. It was the everyday grappling with western theology which led to the embedded erosion of confidence and pride over our very own culture. In a way, I am exploring the impact of the past on the present. The 1999 document of the International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation*, says it well. “...the consequence of past faults still make themselves felt and can persist as tensions in the present...”²⁶ As they say, “The past is never dead. It's not even past” (William Faulkner).²⁷

²⁶ International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December 1999) <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html>

²⁷ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage International, 1950).

Perhaps, I am not as lucky as those who feel that the effects of colonization are now over and are convinced that in a post-colonial era we must move on by letting the sands of time cover the pain, the feeling of inferiority and difficulties it brought. I am someone who has been handicapped with and by western theology and theologizing, despite my learning much from it. What I express, I express only personally, although I am aware that what is most personal and thought to be only applicable to oneself, also resonates with others.²⁸

I readily recognize the value of English. It is one of the widely used languages in international theological exchange. But it cannot and should not function as a hindrance to indigenous thought. “We Asians professionally theologize in English, the language most of us think, read and pray,” says Sri Lankan Aloysius Pieris. “The theological role of language in a ‘continent of languages’ has been grossly underestimated and our stubborn refusal to consult each other’s linguistic idioms, or even to be familiar with one’s own cultural heritage, will remain one major obstacle to the discovery of a truly Asian theology.”²⁹ But how does one’s own native language gain respectability in the eyes of its own users? This does not mean doing away with western theology. It does mean, however, the attitude contained in the words of Mahatma Gandhi: “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”³⁰

Having been conditioned to think in Western theological categories, it was not easy to move out of them. This is where I felt the lingering yet persistent effect of the past colonizations on the psyche. The struggle to give voice to a Filipino interpretation of the Gospel via the Filipino language has proven to be very

²⁸ Melba Padilla Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures: Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness* (Manila: Anvil, 2011).

²⁹ Aloysius Pieris, S.J., “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” *The Month* (May, 1979), 149.

³⁰ Source unknown.

challenging. The attempts I had earlier made to convey these concepts were confined to, more or less, literal translations of the Western interpretation, albeit more contemporary. Relativizing the inherited cultural expressions of the faith to their own contexts was more difficult than I thought.

REINTERPRETATION FROM A FILIPINO PERSPECTIVE: AN ILLUSTRATION

A clear example was my reinterpretation of the God question in the context of human suffering, specifically, in the form of God's will. My actual rethinking of it began when I took the situation of the country seriously *in the way the culture experienced and articulated it in the Filipino language*. In other words, this happened when I started to think in Filipino rather than in English. Situationally, the Philippines is faced with periodic calamities brought about by natural causes, burdened with massive structural poverty and the suffering brought by people's inhumanity to fellow human beings and to the environment. Culturally, the widespread popular belief is that everything happens, whether beneficial or destructive, because God wills it.³¹ Are these truly willed by God? The sixteenth century Tridentine teaching, which is still widely held by Catholics, only reinforces and legitimates this ingrained cultural understanding of God, instead of challenging it. It speaks of submission in all things to the divine will and exhorts Catholics to "remember that if by prayers and supplication we are not delivered from evil, we should endure our afflictions with patience, convinced that it is the will of God that we should endure them."³²

³¹Jose M. de Mesa, *And God Said, "Bahala Na!": The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1979), 81-92. Typhoon Haiyan, the Philippines' deadliest storm on record and killing at least 10,000 people on November, 2013, once more revealed this belief. A local priest, pointing to the dead bodies and responding to queries whether this was the will of God, said "But this is not God's punishment. I have told them that God still loves us. Because God is a compassionate God. He will not abandon us." <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/529181/faith-stronger-than-storm#ixzz2l0d7nPnr>>

³²*Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests* (New York, 1934), 583.

The most important and frequently used Filipino word for “will” is *loób*. Its range of meanings is more than the western Neo-Scholastic sense of the volitional. The volitional is only one of the capacities of the human being. There are also the cognitive and the affective. These three are separately treated.³³ When the Christian response to God is interpreted as a *fiat voluntas tua* (Your will be done), the Latin language evokes and attends mainly to the language of volition. In contrast, *loób* implies the whole person, with the cognitive, affective and volitional; they are simultaneously and inseparably involved as a wholistic response.

The question then becomes, “is this really God’s *loób*, meaning God’s most authentic relational self?” It is the same question as “what kind of God do Christians believe in?” In my search for the answers to these questions, and guided by the Judeo-Christian Tradition’s central affirmation that God is *agápe* (1 Jn. 4: 8, 16), I saw how in *kagandahang-loób* God’s will and God’s character (nature) were, within the culture itself, twin questions, intimately intertwined.

The Filipino *loób* is the most authentic relational self of the whole person. God’s will is God’s *loób* in relationship. To be good and caring is to manifest *kagandahang-loób*. Conversely, to be of “bad will” or cruel is to have *masamang loób*. The notion of *kagandahang-loób* comes from two concepts: *loób* and *ganda*. This is one of the major cognates of the term *loób*. *Loób*, literally meaning “the within”, refers to the core of one’s personhood and the most authentic inner self of the Filipino. Recall how the bishops in their aforementioned pastoral letter referred to God’s *kalooban* as the Spirit of God and the innermost reality of the Godhead. *Loób* is, moreover, regarded as the organizing center of human reality and the wellspring of feeling, thought, and behavior.

³³Cf. Bernard Wuellner, *A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966).

Ganda is simply beauty with a touch of charm. It combines what is ethically good and, more than that, what is winsomely good. We say in Filipino, “*Magandang umaga*” (May you have a good and charming morning) in contrast to the English “*Good morning*” which is literally “*mabuting umaga*.”³⁴ Our greeting in the vernacular has an element that is over and above the “good”. It is like some people whom we cannot deny that they are good yet they leave us cold when we try to relate with them. Rather, the *maganda* is that which is warm, what endears, captivates, draws, charms, enchants, fascinates and attracts. Of course, the culture knows well of beauty that is superficial and even deceptive. But in the notion of *kagandahang-loób*, it denotes a true beauty that wells up from deep within the self and that which is not only ethically good, but is endearingly good as well.

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, and goodness (as a specific act).³⁵ When fathomed, the term *loób* yields a meaning equivalent to “nature,” the quality not just of a relationship, but the enduring quality of one’s personhood relationally. *Kagandahang-loób* then is not merely a positive act in relating to others; it is the manifestation of what the person truly is as shown in specific acts in a relationship. It is regarded as a supreme virtue and, therefore, supreme compliment most rarely given to a person in the Filipino context.

When applied to the God in Jesus Christ, the quintessential *kagandahang-loób* is God. I was pleasantly surprised to lately discover a similar insight in the writings of the English mystic Julian of Norwich for whom “the love of God is identical with the being of God.” To her, “Love, therefore, is not something which God has or does; it is not a ‘virtue’ or a property of God.” Nor is

³⁴ *Malakas at Maganda* are the first man and woman in a Filipino creation myth.

³⁵ Albert Alejo, S.J., *Tao Po! Tuloy!: Isang Landas ng Pag-unawa sa Loób ng Tao* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publication, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990), 138.

love something that God can decide to give here and withhold there. It cannot be uneven, or pass away. Love is, quite simply, what God is. “For Julian, love is the ‘kindhood’ of God rather than just the kindness of God.”³⁶

Fittingly, Jesus is called the “good shepherd”. But, in truth, it is better translated from the Greek as a “shepherd with a *magandang kaloóban*” - *ho poimen ho kalós* - (Jn. 10:11). *Tinatao* (relating with and treating people as people with human dignity) - that is what *kagandahang-loób* does. It refers to a goodness which is captivating and warm; a kindness that is not enslaving, but liberating.

So what kind of *loób* is God’s *loób*? The unfathomable *loób* of God is wholly characterized as *maganda*. This led me to realize how utterly beautiful and overwhelmingly good God’s self is toward us. In the words of Edward Schillebeeckx, God is “pure positivity”. In no way can this God will human suffering!³⁷ It was at this point that the Filipino culture mediated God’s *kagandahang-loób* to me. At the same time, I became cognizant of the wisdom and genius of the culture through its metaphor of *loób* and *kagandahang-loób*. So the question of God’s will is more than a question of what God wants. It inquires after who God is.

It was only when I concretely attempted to reinterpret God’s will and what kind of God do Christians believe in that I realized that culture could be a guide I could follow with benefit, if I allowed it.

This was the time I “felt” (meaning, experienced deeply) the goodness of God and was drawn by God’s beauty, *ang maganda*. *Nadama ko ang kagandahang-loob ng Diyos!* I was no longer just cognitively fascinated by it. I was personally touched by such an

³⁶See Brant Pelphey, *Christ Our Mother: Julian of Norwich* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 25–26.

³⁷Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 727. “We cannot look for the *ground* of suffering in God, although suffering brings the believer directly up against God.”

inculturated interpretation of who God is in relation to us, touched by Christ in and through my very own culture.

I still remember my reaction at that moment; I was saying to myself, "*Ang ganda...(how beautiful)!*" referring to God, God's relational will (*loób*) and to the Gospel that bears it. It was the time when I found myself overwhelmed by a sense that there is something more than myself involved, something more than what I can account for, a time when something seems like a gift given from beyond myself. This, for me, was a "root experience" which affected the way I would envision culture and my theological work.³⁸ I was impelled by the beauty that I have "felt" to share its winsomeness that captivated and fascinated me by using the Filipino language. Yes, it was and is the *magandang balita* for me, the *beautiful news* about Jesus Christ.

Having experienced God in and through my very own culture and language – specifically, the reality behind the term *kagandahang-loob* – I became aware of the possibility that others too may be drawn by God to the GodSelf in the same way. Through language, specifically, the vernacular, people might more readily experience the God who loves them unconditionally.³⁹ We remember how the people gathered experienced the Spirit during Pentecost and were amazed at the manner this was made possible: "How is it that we hear, each one of us, in our own native language the marvelous deeds of God?" (Acts 2:8).

Although I wish that I could primarily theologize in the Filipino language for reasons already indicated, I could not do enough because the *lingua franca* of theology and theological education in the Philippines is, sadly, still mainly English. Still,

³⁸ The experience of God is both the beginning and the end of all theologizing. If the cultural approach in the midst of the colonial experience has been instrumental in facilitating this, then this approach was worth exploring.

³⁹ "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*, art. 63).

there are somethings I could possibly do given the circumstances. One, it was particularly pressing for me to draw from the positive resources of the culture, particularly its language. I began to develop a *hermeneutics of appreciation*, an approach to the culture and language which looks deliberately to their positive (i.e. *ang maganda*) elements rather than to the negative ones. This is not to deny or ignore the dehumanizing aspects of the culture. The approach only prefers to emphasize the positive rather than the negative.

The advice offered by M. A. C. Warren is a propos here: “Our first task 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.”⁴⁰ Even Vatican II in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, foregrounds the positive in its opening statement. “The joys and the hopes” come before “the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age” (G.S. 1). Original blessing comes before original sin. And together with *Ad Gentes*, Art. 11, I am convinced that in the culture, there are “treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth.”

In addition, there is something I found out from the insights of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, regarding its notion of “revelation” and “faith”. Within the contextual frame of mind, it takes up the Jewish and biblical term *dabar* with its attending vocabulary connections of God “speaking” to humankind and people “listening” in obedience. I realized in the same document that Western theology parallels the Jewish *dabar* with its personalist philosophical category

⁴⁰See M.A.C. Warren, “General Introduction,” in *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion*, ed. John Taylor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 10.

of *traditio personae*, popularly known as I-Thou relationship to express the same thought about “revelation” and “faith”. I discovered that *kagandahang-loob* is capable of articulating with our very own resources the same fundamental concepts of “revelation” and “faith”.

The God who is *kagandahang-loób*, who, at her own initiative, wants to relate unconditionally and intimately with us, makes us “feel, *nagpadama*” (that is, integrally experience) her very own *loób*, her deepest of self. That *kagandahang-loób* is focused on our happiness and well-being as the term suggests culturally. The charm that *kagandahang-loób* exudes and incorporates tells me that God through her winsome goodness wants us to be willingly drawn to Herself. Revelation, then, could be conceived as God's *pagpapadama ng Kanyang kagandahang-loób*. The heart of the Gospel is *kagandahang-loób*: As expressed in the Filipino translation of Titus 2:11: “*Sapagka't inihayag ng Diyos ang kanyang kagandahang-loob na nagdudulot ng kaligtasan sa lahat ng tao*. And the heart of discipleship is *kagandahang-loób*”. This was given voice by Paul when he explained, “*Subali't walang halaga sa akin ang aking buhay, maganap ko lamang ang aking tungkulin at matapos ang gawaing ibinigay sa akin ng Panginoong Jesus – ang pagpapahayag ng Mabuting Balita tungkol sa kagandahang-loob ng Diyos*” (Gawa 20:24).

The implications of our response in faith are numerous. In being captivated by Her beautiful goodness, we, in turn, are moved to a *pagsasaloób*, a cognate of *loób* which means an “interiorization” of that Self into our own *loób*, our very own deepest self in a relationship. Our *loób* then becomes “like God”. This is akin to the Eastern theology of *theosis*, a divinization. Imagine what one key theological term and related concepts of *kagandahang-loob* can suggest theologically. Not only does it parallel the Jewish *dabar* who is God speaking His word to us and we are listening in obedience, and the Western personalist thought of a *traditio personae* or an I-Thou relationship, it reminds Christian Filipinos that the God made known through Jesus the Christ is one

of *kagandahang-loób*,⁴¹ one who does not will the suffering of people but rather is concerned with their happiness and human flourishing.⁴²

What Bernard Lonergan said of the work of Aristotle has been very useful for me. He observed that “what...enabled Aristotle to succeed where Socrates and his contemporaries had failed...(was that) Aristotle moved beyond the ordinary language of common sense and the refinements brought to it by literary development into systematic thinking. He scrutinized words, listed their several meanings, selected the meanings that meshed together to constitute a basic perspective, and made this interlocking group of meanings the primitive terms and relations that provided the basis for derived definitions.”⁴³

⁴¹The thoughts of Martin Luther King, Jr. on *agape* is worth remembering here. He says, “Agape means understanding, redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object... Agape is disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. It is an entirely “neighbor-regarding concern for others,” which discovers the neighbor in every man it meets. Therefore, agape makes no distinction between friends and enemy; it is directed toward both. If one loves an individual merely on account of his friendliness, he loves him for the sake of the benefits to be gained from the friendship, rather than for the friend’s own sake. Consequently, the best way to assure oneself that love is disinterested is to have love for the enemy-neighbor from whom you can expect no good in return, but only hostility and persecution...Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action... Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community... It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community.... If I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love.” < <http://bloomofthepresent.org/martin-luther-king-jr-s-words-on-agape-love/> >

⁴²The document of Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* makes a pertinent comment: “In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God’s truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, art. 17).

⁴³Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Philosophy of God and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 4. Redemptorist Leo English’s work on the *Tagalog-English Dictionary* was and is of great help to me in discovering the various meanings a Filipino term has.

I have discovered the “beauty ever ancient, ever new.” 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. I dream with Horacio de la Costa that “there should be a distinctive Filipino style of being a 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.’”⁴⁴

It was as if I, like Elijah in the book of Kings, did not recognize God in the great and strong wind, nor in the earthquake, nor the fire, but in a low whisper, the low (demeaned) whisper of my own marginalized culture and language (cf. 1 Kings 19:9-13). I have realized that, in returning to my most authentic cultural self, in using my own native language, I was returning to the heart of the Gospel, the God who is *agápe*,⁴⁵ the God of *kagandahang-loób*.

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⁴⁴I would like to underscore especially, the “patterns of thought” in our vernacular because the Latin term *vernaculum* means home.

⁴⁵Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 222.

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