

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Elements of Filipinos Theology

Review Author: Andrew Gonzalez

Philippine Studies vol. 24, no. 4 (1976) 486–490

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

The study is an initial attempt at using a case study approach to population dynamics in an urban area. It has achieved its main purpose of being descriptive and evaluative. This could very well serve as a pattern for other local demographic studies. Research of this kind will be useful to regional development planning. It can help bring policymakers to realize that more local studies are needed to help understand local problems.

Gabriel C. Alvarez

ELEMENTS OF FILIPINO THEOLOGY. By Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD. Edited by Victoria S. Salazar. Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1975. 251 pages.

Presumably a companion volume to the author's earlier (1974) book, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, this pioneering work, which attempts to express the Christian Filipino's reflections on Christ and His Church and the Christian's response, is certainly a welcome one. As the insightful though hastily written preface by C. G. Arevalo, S.J., points out, it contributes to the implementation of the mandate of both Vatican II (Ad Gentes) and the Asian Bishops' Conferences (1970 and 1974) to indigenize theology in the Asian, in this case, Philippine, setting.

Crucial to this enterprise is the chapter on indigenizing theology, which in effect describes the method followed throughout the volume, a volume intended to be a college textbook in Filipino theology, supplied with guide questions and reading suggestions.

The fact that the volume has an editor makes one surmise that it arose from class lectures that were transcribed and eventually edited for publication. Some chapters amount to outlines and précis rather than full expositions.

Basically, the method is one of discussing a particular topic (God, spirits and the departed; the individual, society and ownership; fate and freedom; sin and *gaba*; law; work and leisure; faith; hope; mercy and love; respect and obedience; nonegoism; signs and worship; water and baptism; food, fiesta blood and the Eucharist; marriage and celibacy; ministry; health and sickness; death) from the point of view of Philippine culture, using the reports of cultural anthropologists, linguists, sociologists and participant observers and such cultural sources as proverbs, sayings, customs, festivals, behavioral patterns of Filipinos, and showing points of similarity and comparability between these views and Christian thought as embodied in the Scriptures and in the living life of the Church.

One can cavil at minor features in an initial attempt of this kind (the proverbs cited from Tagalog, Bisayan, and Ilocano, mostly in the section entitled "Response" are sometimes contradictory in their import; a few are irrelevant to the topic under discussion; the summary treatment of certain

topics makes the style almost aphoristic and the lack of transitional markers suggests an associational rather than a logical structure for the exposition of certain topics; some of the linguistic observation — for example the alleged mixing of tenses and kinship terms and pronouns focusing on seniority rather than gender in the Philippine languages — are somewhat simplistic; the repetition [on p. 200] of the physiologically naive belief that “athletes also know that the sexual act makes them weak; hence they follow the rule of abstaining sexually before a game” is amusing), but such infelicities should be secondary to a more primary consideration.

What is important is to evaluate the methodology and to see its results.

Mercado makes a distinction between phase one and phase two of faith and its varied manifestations: phase one, the personal commitment to Christ; phase two, the manifestations of this commitment, which are necessarily culture-bound. In phase two, one reflects, and when reflection becomes critical and systematic one has a theology.

The ideal procedure for theology is that this reflection arise from one's culture, behavioral patterns, values, thought system, rather than be imported wholesale from another culture. The indigenization of theology demands reflection on the Christian faith and Christian life on native soil.

Mercado systematically contrasts Western thought with Oriental (presumably Filipino is subsumed under this dichotomy) thought. One gets the distinct impression that straw men are being set up and knocked down. Simplistic characterizations of Western thought being dualistic, perpetually dichotomizing between the profane and the sacred, based on linear time, makes one uncomfortable, since the West has spawned so many varieties of thought as to make such generalizations suspect. One is likewise disturbed at the way the author lumps Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Filipino culture under the general label of “Oriental.” One can also question whether or not Philippine culture as it is in the 1970s is adequately mirrored by the proverbs cited, by the rituals of the cultural minorities, by the anthropological observations of social scientists of certain barrios. Does not the urbanized and even Westernized Filipino qualify as one type of emerging Filipino side by side with the rural mass-based Filipino? If theology is to be indigenized, must the Filipino necessarily go back to the barrio and to the uplands to qualify as a participant in the ecclesial task of reflection and systematization?

Linguists speak of dead metaphors, fossilized idioms which when first coined had a certain novelty and vitality, but which over the centuries, when appropriated into the language, cease to hold their original meaning, undergo semantic shift, and are in effect employed in contemporary usage solely in terms of their current meanings. Even native speakers are seldom aware of how such pat phrases arose. While etymology hunting and explication is a preoccupation of philologists, one wonders if theologians worried about the impact of the Christian message on contemporary man should go about doing

their task by digging into ancient meanings with a view to making them come alive to contemporary man. This is the kind of feeling one gets as Mercado cites Tagalog, Visayan, and Ilocano terms, some quite artificial, and through a mode of semantic reconstruction relates these terms with other terms, with a view to explicating the "Filipino" concept of a certain theological theme. If such semantic reconstruction is needed for systematic reflection, one wonders if such reflection can be spontaneous and really speak to the heart of the modern Filipino. Can theological reflection arise then from an experience which is not lived but reconstructed?

More felicitous are the many parallels cited by the author between Biblical Hebrew cultural aspects and aspects of Philippine culture, a natural enough convergence given the fact that both Biblical Hebrew and Early Filipino were products of an agrarian nontechnological and nonindustrial culture. Granted the parallelism and the similarities, how *relevant*, to use the cliché, is such an agrarian-based cultural system to the emerging and urbanizing Filipino who constitutes the educated sector of the Church and from whom one expects the leadership to arise?

In the same way that liturgical renewals that consisted of a return to the Psalms, reflective of an agricultural primitive culture, have not succeeded among many modern Christians, will a return to the Filipino's agrarian culture succeed among the many who have participated in the phase of modernization?

Presuming, for the sake of argument, that the programmatic enterprise proposed by Mercado is a sound one, does it succeed? Can one really free oneself from the limitations of one's education? Mercado is well-read and is *au courant* with the latest Western sources as well as knowledgeable in the literature on the anthropology, psychology, and sociology of the Filipino done both by foreign and native (but often foreign-trained) scholars. Does he succeed in really extricating himself from his own intellectual history? The divisions of the book alone manifest his traditional seminary training, for part one ("The Frame of Reference"), part two ("the Response") and part three ("Worship in the Life Cycle") are reminiscent of the traditional division of the catechism into Dogma, Morals, and Worship, surely as Romish as you will ever get. So much of the theological discussion is "Western" — a summary of "Western" scholarship on the Bible related to "Western" findings on Philippine life, values, ethos and mores.

On the positive side, the sections on "water and baptism" and "food, fiesta blood and the Eucharist," where the author deals with universal symbols still relevant to Philippine life, are rich in suggestions on liturgical innovation and the section on "sin and *gaba*" suggestive of pastoral approaches.

Mercado seemingly accepts certain Filipino traits uncritically and attempts to correlate them with theological considerations, but in terms of the development imperative and the need to modernize, one wonders whether we should

reinforce the Filipino's beliefs in certain spirits, his liberal interpretation of ownership, his belief in fate and luck, the emphasis he places on shame rather than personal guilt, the lack of structure to his time that prevents him from clear goals within set time-frames, *utang na loob* that results in influence peddling and nepotism, reliance on the *sakop* (extended family) and the *compadrazgo* system, a type of humility (*pailob*) which makes him endure rather than fight social oppression, unscientific and superstitious beliefs about health and sickness. There are Filipino traits that Filipinos wishing to develop themselves would rather see extirpated than reinforced, least of all, by the theologian who in his own way must sometimes play a prophetic function and provide the intellectual leadership for a counterculture.

Without in any way trying to discourage reflection on the lived experience of Christianity and the systematization of this reflection which is the function of theology, and assuming that theology must arise from the living experience of Christ and of living His ideals within a community of believers, Filipino theology if it is to be prophetic and of service to the Filipino Church must read the signs of the times and meet the imperatives of the multifaceted Filipino emerging into the twenty-first century.

This is not to deny that more than two-thirds of Filipinos are still rural-based. Nor is this to denigrate the value of rediscovering roots. But after the Filipino has looked back, he must look to the present and the future, and within his living experience, which of necessity has been deeply influenced by external factors, attempt to witness to the Christian ideal here and now.

The Filipino reflecting on his commitment sees the present social evils of his country, the perils of the future, the injustice of the past. His response is not *pagamalasakit* (long-suffering) but in many cases must be an active opposition to oppression (*makibaka*) and a sophisticated sense of timing and even opportunism to take the best political means to create social change.

The development of a Filipino Christology and Soteriology will spontaneously arise when the reality of the Christ-Event becomes personal to the Filipino. One doubts if this can be induced by hearkening to the extended family system which must be narrowed down if the human population will survive.

And truly Filipino ecclesiology will arise when the community of Christ's believers in the Philippines begin to love one another as a Christian community in the Spirit and in loving one another begin to reflect on it. Then fiestas and baptisms will become meaningful but only as expressions of a perceived reality in a native context. Then native pastors will arise who will be as qualitatively different from the *baylan* as from some of the purple-robed Neo-Romans at present.

Withal, this volume should be read, if only to provoke discussion, even generate violent disagreement, for with such heat generated, perhaps light will likewise arise to stimulate not only the author and his students but his

peers to begin systematically reflecting on the lived experience of the Filipino committed to Christ and to live his commitment for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond it.

Andrew Gonzalez