

**‘WHEN THE CONSTANTS OF FAITH MEET CONTEXT:’<sup>1</sup>  
TOWARDS RECONSTRUCTING FILIPINO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper presents a qualitative study that puts forward a discourse on the reconstruction of Filipino Religious Education. First, the research argues that there is a need to place high premium on the Filipino culture (context) as one of the valid sources of faith alongside scriptures and tradition (constants of faith). Classical Theology somehow failed to recognize culture in the enterprise of Theology. Second, the research contends that despite the stigma brought by colonizers from the past, the Filipino culture remains a genuine source of shared and collective meanings. Finally, this reconstruction is a living testament to the resiliency of the local culture. Despite years of colonization, it has assimilated and accommodated foreign elements to make them its own. Making the faith relevant and more intelligible can involve utilizing the vernacular, indigenizing the Christian faith, referencing the local context, and using local signs and symbols. These principles should remind the Filipinos that faith is not transported from the west but can be locally produced.

*Keywords:* context, inculturation, religious education, scriptures, tradition

## **INTRODUCTION**

Jesus is the decisive and definitive salvation of God to all people. “This faith conviction of the apostles, born after reflection on their total experience with Jesus, is the starting point of all Christian Theology (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 7).” Having been commissioned by Christ himself to preach to the farthest corner of the world, the apostles communicated their experience of God to others. They wanted to account for their faith and formulated writings that were now collectively called the Bible.

In the following centuries later, Christianity spread all over the Roman Empire. After Constantine the Great signed the Edict of Milan, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the growth of Christianity became inevitable. More people coming from various backgrounds were converted to Christianity. This was a problem the Church will soon face. Converted Christians realize that their newfound faith uses symbols and terminologies they are unfamiliar with. Theology soon became a filter for human experience. Experiences and values that run contrary to the Church’s teachings are removed, even destroyed.

“Since the Middle Ages and the beginning of Scholasticism, theology has been regarded as a scholarly, academic discipline (Bevans, 2003, 17).” Theologizing is done inside universities and seminaries, and its participants are learned individuals well versed in the scriptures and raised by divine tradition. Ordinary people, at that time, were seen as passive recipients of perennial truths.

Theologizing was an exclusive property, and theology was understood as a finished product.

“Renaissance marks a revolution in human understanding of the world. The religious worldview crumbled through the growing scientific, rational explanation of the surrounding world reality (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 9).” The period in time marked a new understanding of reality apart from any religious claim. “While theology used only philosophy before as its handmaid, that is no longer true at present (Mercado, 1992, vii).” As new findings of the world are being discovered, as modern philosophical thoughts and other human sciences emerge, and as technology challenges the limits of human potentials, faith now begins to collapse. Despite the Church’s initial reaction to block progress, the world admittedly has not ceased to change and progress. The logical thing would be to accept and adapt to these changes. Change is indeed a force to be reckoned with. But the Church has shown stubborn resistance and remained indifferent to the changes in the world. Theology became detached from reality and had superficially touched people’s lives.

“Theology today is in crisis. Divorced from the actual realities of life, it has been criticized as irrelevant and therefore meaningless (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 4).” Theology must offer concrete answers to concrete problems experienced by human beings in their social milieu. “It has to be reborn at the grassroots level, in the midst of life and lived-experiences of people (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 3).” To do this, context must be considered necessary in constructing a local and indigenous faith.

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<sup>1</sup>The running title is loosely based on the book of Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder titled “Constants in Contexts: A Theology of Mission for Today” published in 2004.

## Problematique

Given the premise that religious education should be rooted in the constants of faith and the context of the human person, there should be a continuous effort to uphold what is local and indigenous. This would empower believers to develop a reconstructed religious education framework to ensure that faith would still be relevant in this postmodern era. Taking tradition and scriptures as the only two valid sources of faith would become haphazard to this day and age where context and local experience are considered. The crucial question now is, 'Is it possible at all to conceive a religious education framework that would consider the constants of faith and the local context?'

The present study intends to reconstruct religious education. This reconstructed pedagogy is a far-cry from the Spaniards' approach in spreading Christianity all over the Philippines. This framework is based not only on what is written on the Bible or the Church's living tradition but also the daily struggle of persons embedded in a particular context. To realize the main objective, the following arguments are posed:

1. That colonization brought a stigma on the local culture (context).
2. That despite colonization, the local culture remains intact.
3. That inculturation is a theological imperative.
4. That the mutual utilization and interaction of the constants and context of faith is a form of valid and relevant theology.

## METHODS

This research is qualitative in nature. It is descriptive because it observes, describes, and extrapolates a specific phenomenon of this world. Conceptually, it follows a philosophical-theological approach. The data used in this research are based on documentary analysis and secondary data analysis. In reconstructing Religious Education, the study uses Constructivism. The study utilizes the Constructivist method as it employs critical and defense analysis of the main concepts and principles such as Inculturation and Filipino Theology.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### 1. Bearing the Stigma from the West

"*Romano Katoliko po ako*," has been the customary sentence used by Filipino Catholics to designate their religious affiliation. However, this is problematic since Filipinos are in no way Roman. At the same time, it "reveals something about the nature of Catholicism in the Philippines, namely, its origins

and expressions. From the inception of Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the present time, Catholicism in the Philippines was and still is fundamentally Roman Catholicism (De Mesa, 2003, 1)." This western origin of Catholicism in the country is logical insofar as it has been brought by missionaries coming from the west. And this understanding seems to continue until today, leaving only a tiny room for local expressions of faith. It appears then that the Christianity that Filipinos have inherited and practiced today is not really Filipino in substance and form.

"To most people, to be a Christian often means becoming a Westerner in attitude and culture (Mercado, 1975, 2)." The more western people are, the more Christian they become. Similarly, the closer the church model to Rome, the better and more faithful it is. Anything from the west is considered good and beautiful, and what is produced locally is met with indifference even ridicule. "Christianization and Westernization became synonymous (Mercado, 1975, 2)." Mercado (1975) gives a vivid example of how pervasive Western influence is. He writes:

The celebration of Christmas is an example of the Western imposition of Christianity. In Christmas, 'Western-style,' snow is one of the dominant features. Yet it hardly snows in Bethlehem and other places of the Near East. When the first missionaries converted Europe into Christianity, the celebration had fallen during winter. They had then used the snow culture of Northern Europe and built it around Christmas. Thus the Holy Family was pictured in a snow setting. Then developed the Western tradition of pine trees, gift-giving, carols, and other Christmas customs developed out of the existing Western cultures (2).

The first missionaries successfully used snow as a familiar symbol of Christmas. It was a symbol that Europeans could relate to, given their climate. It comes as no surprise that this practice flourished. The use of snow was compelling insofar as it was culturally familiar. They understood what the first Christmas celebration was all about. It was an expression that went home. However, Mercado (1975) adds:

When Western missionaries came to the Philippines, they brought their ways of celebrating Christmas with them. The Northern Europeans and the Americans introduced the Christmas tree and other winter trappings. Because Filipinos were taught to think that Christmas would not be genuine without snow, they began to put artificial snow on their Christmas trees and

store window displays. Those who could afford to get Baguio pine trees were thought luckier and closer to the Christmas spirit. Among the favorite carols even now are White Christmas and Jingle Bells (Dashing through the snow). Hence the more authentic the Western Christmas trappings are, the better the Christmas spirit (2).

Filipino Theology bears this stigma caused by the proliferation of western influence. Christmas is just one of the many celebrations that was westernized. "We even had to pray in Latin during the pre-Vatican II days. We were preached a Western Christ, a Christ with blue eyes, Caucasian nose, white skin, Christ with Western attitudes (Mercado, 1982, 17)." In the past, to become a Christian entailed being a foreigner in one's own culture. If the Filipino people are not yet wholly Christian after many centuries of Christianity, it is not likely due to the fact that no faith grew in the Philippine soil. It could be that faith was never made Filipino. "Filipino Christians, therefore, have the same right to incarnate Christ into their culture as the Westerners did (Mercado, 1975, 8)."

## 2. Revitalization and Resiliency of the Filipino Culture

While it is true that Western missionaries risked their lives and showed the early signs of Inculturation in the Philippines, they were still religiously ethnocentric. "Such a narrow-minded outlook limited the action of God to restricted channels. It was like the attitude of the first Jewish Christians who expected the Gentiles converts to behave like them (Mercado, 1975, 120)."

In the past, it was mistakenly thought that to embrace Christianity, people must abandon their culture. "The Christians identified religion with their own culture, and converts had to assume the culture of the Christians. The first Christians, who were converts from Judaism, believed that Greek converts had to forsake Greek culture before they could embrace Jewish Christianity (Mercado, 2000, 28)." Similarly, it was perceived that the Filipino culture had nothing to give to the faith. However, recent upheavals in the Church led to the understanding that the enterprise of theology is two-way traffic, that of giving and receiving. "While it was true in the past that the Christian faith purified and enriched the Filipino culture, it is equally true that Filipino culture has Filipinized Christ and continues to do so for Filipinos so that the culture re-translates, re-roots, and re-conceptualizes the truths of Christian faith (Gorospe, 1988, xii)."

"Faith in God need not be realized by means of western experience and categories (Gorospe, 1988, 64)." Long before the Spaniards came to the country, faith was already evident in the

ancient Filipinos. "The concept of God as Creator is already found in the Philippine creation myths as if pre-Christian Filipino experience was already proportioned and ready to hear the Christian revelation (Gorospe, 1988, 68)." They even improved the creation myth by showing that man (*malakas*) and woman (*maganda*) are equal since they simultaneously came out of a bamboo (*kawayan*), unlike in the Genesis (2:22) account wherein Adam was created first, and Eve stems from Adam.

It is true that Western influence is so pervasive in the Filipino culture. Yet, it is very enlightening to realize that amidst the rich multiplicity and pluralization of philosophical, ethical, cultural, and theological influences, Filipinos have always come up with a way of mixing and integrating all these influences to produce something uniquely their own. The Filipino penchant for *halo-halo* or *pinakbet* shows how different and even contrasting tastes could create delicious dishes. In the realm of theology, as in culinary, the various and differing influences of the Spaniards, Americans, Japanese, and others Asian elements were combined to form an indigenous concept of Theology that reveals a genuine *theophany* expressed in the Filipino experience. While new features were introduced into the Filipino culture, foreign influences did not simply replace indigenous elements present in the native culture. In fact, the centuries' long colonization did not, in any way, destroy the local cultural stratum. "The foreign elements were assimilated and modified into the native pattern. They were re-appropriated (De Mesa, 2003, 67)."

In a manner of speaking, the Filipinos were not merely passive recipients of outside influences. "The natives were not only critically receptive, but they were also creative (De Mesa, 2003, 67)." The Filipino culture not only withstood the damaging effects of foreign influences but also benefited from them. Foreign elements were added to the melting pot to produce something uniquely Filipino. Therefore, despite western influences, Filipinos can still construct a theology that is theirs.

## 3. Inculturation as a Theological Imperative

As a real person, Jesus Christ lived, acted, and thought like a Jew. "His being a Jew has challenged other nationalities through the centuries to make him alive, so to speak, in their cultural way of following Christ (Mercado, 1992, 32)." Hence, culture must never be taken for granted when doing theology. "The rift between the gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times just as it had been in other eras (Paul VI, 1975, no. 20)." Inculturation recognizes that human beings do not interpret the world from a neutral point of view. "Theology is always done from a certain perspective within a particular context (Sedmak, 2002, 15)."

Even Classical Theology and its claim of transcendence were bound to a specific particular experience. No theology is born out of nowhere. Every theological reflection originates from a certain cultural framework and social pattern. Mercado (1974) asks, “Are the words of Christ in the gospel not colored by the evangelist’s preoccupation of the local community to which he belongs (4)?” Preaching Jesus Christ has always been inculturated. “In other words, preaching Jesus Christ as the Good News is not culture-free because it always has the cultural bias of the preacher (Mercado, 1992, 32).”

“Culture has its own signs and expressions (Mercado, 1992, 34).” Therefore, a certain kind of pluralism in religious reflection and practices is legitimate and desirable. Theologizing must be the marriage of both culture and faith. Through this, faith acquires a human face, and culture is given a divine dimension. Inculturation then is a theological method that seeks to understand the Christian Faith in relation to a particular context. It is only in the light of inculturation that this faith becomes meaningful to different people with diverse backgrounds. It is perceived as something fresh but at the same time traditional.

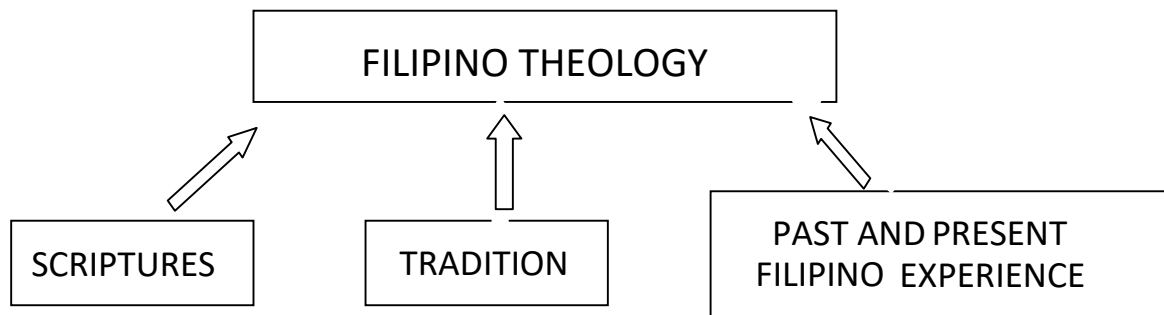
On the one hand, this kind of theology seeks to give the Christian Faith a new footing. But, on the other hand, it represents the traditional

methodology that was used in writing the Scriptures. “Doing theology is ultimately the interpretation of experience. This is how the Scriptures came to be written; this is how the doctrinal tradition was formed; this is how theologians theologize today. Theology has always been done this way. What contextual theologizing proposes is to recognize this in a conscious and deliberate way (Bevans, 2010).”

Inculturation tries to express the same truth via images familiar to people. “A contextual approach to theology is in many ways a radical departure from the notion of traditional theology, but at the same time, it is very much in continuity with it. To understand theology as contextual is to assert something both new and traditional (Bevans, 2003, 3).” It “accents an awareness of the contextual nature of human knowledge and mandates a critical awareness of the role of culture and social location in the process of theological interpretation and construction (Franke, 16-17).”

It should be noted that inculturation is not a new kind of doing theology. It facilitates, however, the evangelization of culture and the re-rooting of the gospel message. “In order to evangelize effectively, it is necessary to adopt an attitude of exchange and comprehension resolutely to sympathize with the cultural identity of nationalities, of ethnic groups, and varied sectors of modern society (Pontifical Council for Cultures, 1983).”

#### 4. The Roles of Scripture, Tradition, and Human Experience



Inculturation enables the three poles of scripture, tradition, and context to engage in dialogue to produce an authentic, relevant, and faithful expression of faith.

##### Scripture

For Christians, God speaks to humans. This “popular understanding suggests the imagery of a direct phone line between heaven and earth through which God made known certain essential truths for the benefit of humankind (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 49).” God, especially in the person of Jesus, spoke to human beings and the evangelists faithfully wrote them down to form the Sacred Scripture. God revealed supernatural words and truths coming from heaven. “Coming as they did from the Eternal One,

these truths are perennially valid for all places and all times (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 49).”

Scripture functions as theology’s norming norm. “It is the ultimate norm of theology, the *norma normans non normata*, since every new theological insight ought to be tested against its testimony (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 86).” It is the instrumentality of the God who speaks in and through the word to construct genuine faith expressions. “The power of inculturation ultimately lies not in the faith imposing itself on an already

existing culture but in the faith enabling the natural world to be itself in a higher way (Staudt, 55, 2014).”

The Bible has authority because God divinely inspired it. It narrates the story of how God slowly revealed Godself to the chosen people of Israel. The summit of this narration is the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the fullness of God’s revelation. By extension, the fullness of God’s revelation is also found in the text that narrates that story, the Bible. “The original authority of the Bible, it being a norming norm which is not in itself normed, lies in the total event of a new experience of salvation, gradually narrated in texts (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 98).” New stories of Christian experience are possible if and when they provide legitimate interpretations of the original experiences found in the Scriptures. The Bible then serves as the point of reference in any theological endeavor.

#### Tradition

Theology, to be Christian, ought to be also rooted in the historically-based tradition of the Church. Tradition refers to the profession of past confessional statements and practices that stand as the living testaments of past community of Christians in their communion with the divine. This tradition dates back to the ancient Jewish people and finds its culmination in Nazareth’s Jesus. “The faith experiences of Christians found and continually find their expression in a Tradition, a distinctive way of living and believing as a community which emerged and developed gradually in history (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 47).”

Certain statements and symbols have become an integral part of the Church’s life in her various cultural locations. These “classic statements and symbols of the historical community stand as milestones in the thought and life of the church universal and therefore have a special ongoing significance for the work of theology (Franke, 32).” They have been preserved and have continuously provided the stability of the faith. “For example, the near-universal acceptance by the global Christian community of ecumenical statements such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed serves to make these- classic symbols of the faith a vital resource for theology (Franke, 32).” Confessions and creeds have long been a part of the Christian tradition and have played an essential role in the formulation of theology throughout the Church’s history.

Throughout the Church’s history, Christian believers of different generations gave witness to their faith in God in their contextual situations. “In this act, they have participated in the faith of the one Church as co-confessors with all who have acknowledged the one faith throughout the ages. So also, in confessing the one faith of the Church in the present, we become the contemporary embodiment

of the legacy of faith that spans the ages and encompasses all the host of faithful believers (Franke, 32-33).” “It is these traditions which make Christians take their basic model of interpretation to understand reality, and also —as a framework which has to be re-rooted into their own socio-cultural situation so that it can be born anew and challenge the situation afresh (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 47).”

Human beings confess their faith not in solidarity but in union with other faithful believers. They must do so in “continuity with the faith of the one people of God, including both our forebears who have made this confession in ages past and our successors who will do so in the future (Franke, 32).” In the task of theology, human beings must keep in mind that they are continuing the legacy of those who have engaged the task before them, and they must never forget to set the ground for dialogue and acceptance for the next generation. “Because we are members of this continuous historical community, the theological tradition of the Church must be a crucial component in the construction of our contemporary theological statements so that we might maintain our theological and confessional unity (Franke, 33).”

#### Context

Aside from scripture and tradition, theology must take culture seriously as well. It is one of the authorities to which theologians must listen to. “While Western theology has tended to focus on the church as the sole repository of all truth and the only location in which the Spirit is operative (Franke, 30),” this is not anymore the case. Context now plays a crucial role in people’s construction of meaning and truth.

The meaningfulness of a particular symbol, word, or belief reflects real experience. “In other words, the experience of our everyday existence in the world must give meaning and reality to our theological talk (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 20).” Hence, a theology that does not touch real experience means nothing to an individual bound to a specific framework of thought and ideas. “It is only when our theological formulations are drawn from experience that we ensure their intelligibility (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 20).”

Context then provides theology with a kind of rootedness. Though theology is seen as something transcendental, it must not entirely be the case. Humans also long for a theology that would speak to them in their particularities. They long for a theology they can call their own using images and symbols they themselves have construed. Context somehow binds theology to the ground disallowing it to stay off course. It enables faith expressions to be culturally valid and familiar to people. It assures that people can see the relationship between theological formulations and their ordinary experiences. “A theology which was written for

eternity, a theology stripped of historicity, would be irrelevant to people living in time (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 21)."

God's word cannot be reduced to mere human activity. Yet God's word is only given within human history and in a particular faith expression. Context reminds theology that the world is not a "valley of tears" (Psalm 84:6) where humans must escape from. A faith that does not take culture as its vessel can never be fully accepted by people living in the midst of context. Considering the inculturated nature of faith enables people to "go back to the basic Christian conviction: God's revelation is God's offer of a full and meaningful life in human history of people who are struggling to find and to create meaning in their world of suffering and oppression (De Mesa & Wostyn, 2005, 53)." This offer of life comes to people not from another world but in and through ordinary human experiences.

It is noteworthy to point out, at the same time, that the gospel transforms culture. "Faith and culture stand in a reciprocal relation in which the two require each other if they are to flourish (Staudt, 2014, 52)." Thus, the interaction is undoubtedly a process of mutual enrichment. When the gospel enhances the culture, it becomes easier for believers to live out the faith and non-believers to observe that witnessing. Elements of the culture deemed harmful are cast aside. Just because the culture is crucial in meaning-making does not make all of its facets worthy of being considered. Cultural change, precipitated by the faith, takes human dignity and worth at its center. "We must then rediscover the apostolic creativity and the prophetic power of the first disciples to face new cultures. Christ's word must appear in all of its freshness to the young generations whose attitudes are sometimes difficult to understand for the traditionally-minded, but who are far from being closed to spiritual values (Pontifical Council for Culture, 1983)."

Theology is an ongoing dialogue between and among scripture, tradition, and culture. All three are vessels of the one God who revealed Godself to create an authentic expression of faith in various local and particular settings. This approach seeks a flexible and versatile theology that recognizes human knowledge's local and contextual character while simultaneously remaining distinctly Christian. "In this way, theology is both one, in that all truly Christian theology seeks to hear and respond to the speaking of the one Spirit, and many, in that all theology emerges from particular social and historical situations. Such theology is the product of the reflection of the Christian community in its local expressions. Despite its local character, such theology is still in a certain sense global in that it seeks to explicate the Christian faith in accordance with the ecumenical tradition of the Church throughout its history and on behalf of the Church throughout the world (Franke, 17)."

## 5. Filipino Religious Education

Filipino Religious Education in the Philippines has been as old as the presence of Christianity in the country. It began when the missionaries from the west reached the islands to teach and hand the faith to the early Filipinos. They began baptizing the natives, translating doctrines, and preaching the good news to the ends of the Philippines. They even showed signs of early inculturation as they try to orient the natives to help them understand the basics of this newfound faith. Without exaggeration, Christianity flourished because of these tireless missionaries who taught the fundamental doctrines and laws of the Church. They started the fire of faith that is burning brightly until today.

There is, however, a need to revitalize and rethink the way Religious Education in the Philippines has been done for the past years. The classical method of teaching Religious Education cannot anymore address the changes in Philippine society. It has been treated merely as an academic subject with requirements and grades for the longest time. It was considered a discipline of the mind and has been confined to the four corners of the classroom.

Filipino Religious Education has become irrelevant to Filipino students and their native culture. "Moreover, it has been said so often that the authoritarian method of teaching in Catholic schools has not helped but hindered the development of self-reliance, independence, and creativity demanded by modern changes and by the goal of Christian renewal (Gorospe, 1988, 15)." The authoritarian approach may have proven useful during the era of colonial expansion and colonization. However, such an approach seems futile in today's world, which values the little narratives and moves along with a more dialogical teaching method.

The days of Scholastic Religious Education are over. Though this classical approach to Religious Education is still valid, it is worthy to note that such an approach is imperfect and limited. It cannot be construed as valid at all times and in all places. Foreign categories, symbolisms, and discourses used are far removed from the Filipino religious, moral and societal experience. Filipinos must see theology's "close interrelation with other disciplines to be open to much wider areas of human experience (Roche, 1985, 46)."

"Reality is too rich and constantly changing to be captured in any set of categories (Gorospe, 1988, 6). Religious education is never a closed book. It is never a changeless system of learning and teaching. It needs constant rethinking and re-evaluation to address present challenges in keeping with the spirit of renewal in the Church today. An appeal to the heart goes a long way than just an appeal to the mind. With this in mind, the

study proposes a reconstruction of Religious Education.

#### 6. Towards a Cultural Approach to Religious Education

Filipino Religious Education should consider the three valid sources of theology. It must never turn a blind eye to the Filipino context to which it treads. Scholastic theology, the grand and unified way of doing theology, ceases to be pastorally significant and at times may be alienating to the Filipino people. What they need today is not theology that transcends historicity and specificity but a theology that speaks to all aspects of the Filipino human person. “Believing in Christ must be related directly to the daily Filipino human experience of living as Christ’s disciple (CBCP, 1999, 13).”

The Philippine Church was forced to follow a scholastic form of theology. “Like any theology, scholasticism was really culturally conditioned and historically rooted. But considered as *theologia perennis* by its advocates and propagators, this school of theology dominated the theological scene (De Mesa, 2003, 78).” Its study was obligatory for would-be priests, people interested in the fare of evangelization, and students enrolled in Catholic institutions. Christianity in this form only made sense to a few with a background of philosophy and theology but is estranging to the whole populace who is seen as passive recipients of faith.

There is no grand and unified way of doing theology. Sensitivity to culture has added much help in making the faith flourish. Filipino Religious Education then should always be the meeting point of the Christian faith (constants) and the Filipino experience (context). It is theologizing which starts from experience and not from doctrinal statements. It should enable the Filipino to appreciate the beauty of their culture and all the symbols and beliefs that go along with it. It sees the context as a vehicle of revelation. If Filipino Religious Education fails to consider the Filipino indigenous way of living, it will continue to be irrelevant and meaningless to

Filipinos in general. Culture then could expand the horizon of theology while making it stay on the ground.

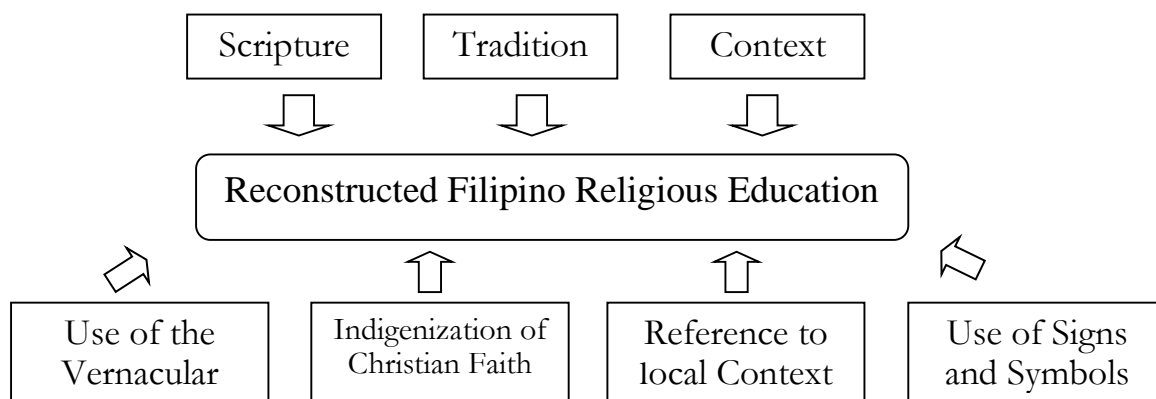
Religious education should be scripture-centered and culture-based. A cultural approach to teaching and learning religion is not a one-time encounter but a continuous dialogue of the three poles of faith. After all, inculturation is not merely juxtaposing these poles side by side but characterized by mutual exploration, inquiry, and transformation. As CBCP (1999) states, “to preach the Gospel in Asia today, we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization, then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local Church.”

By taking culture as the vantage point, faith becomes a spiritual and contextual journey. To evangelize culture does not mean that there was something wrong with the former. Inculturation is not a callback from the past but a renewal of the present. It seeks to meet the demands of the postmodern world as it personifies the essence of the scriptures. This new evangelization calls people towards the mutual harnessing of the transformative power of scriptures and the potentialities of culture in faith constructions.

#### 7. A Reconstructed Religious Education Framework

We need to have a reconstructed religious education framework to make the faith relevant in this contemporary world. We need principles to guide us as we articulate such a conceptual framework. These are:

- a. Using of the Vernacular (Mother Tongue) in Teaching Religious Education
- b. Reinterpreting the Christian Faith in Indigenous Categories
- c. Making reference to the Local Context
- d. Using signs and symbols that are locally familiar yet scripturally valid.



**a. Use of the Vernacular (Mother Tongue) in Teaching Religious Education**

This principle gives importance to the vernacular dialects in teaching Religious Education. Language is an integral part of the culture. Through language, “the culture understands and explains itself in its own terms: categories, structure, and style (De Mesa, 2003, 88).” Perhaps this is one reason why one feels at home when one communicates using his native language. It is “the bank of experience and the collective unconscious of a people (Mercado, 1992, 12).” Since the language encodes the culture, the experience, and the worldview of the people, its use is imperative in inculturation.

Language is thought. If Filipinos speak their native language, they think and feel Filipino. When one is hurt, one would say *aray*. This is a more automatic response than saying, *ouch!* *Aray* expresses pain in the Filipino way better than the word *ouch*. To speak, therefore, of a foreign language is to think and feel non-Filipino.

However, the colonial mentality brought about by many years of foreign rule brought a stigma to the Filipino language. For the most part, English has been regarded as the language of the elite, the elegant, and the academe. Even by many Filipinos, it has been considered superior to their native language. To speak English with a particular accent is good. Any person who deviates from speaking English in this specific accent is ridiculed even laughed at. They are accused of using non-standard English (*Carabao English*). Filipinos put so much effort to speak English with a certain twang in the process. The danger here is when people use western language; they accept the western ideas and paradigms that come with it.

Since the time of the Spaniards and Americans, religious education has been using languages other than the Filipino language. With the western language at hand, western thinking follows. Hence, the theological scene was dominated by western thought. Anyone who uses the vernacular is seen as inferior to one whose theological language is western. The Spanish missionaries even “had a translation policy of not using the local terms for around 25 key theological terms. Examples are Dios, Santisima Trinidad, Gracia, Eucharistia, Sacramento and other key words found in the Catechism. This policy was to safeguard the purity of doctrine (Mercado, 1992, 122).” It is, however, against the spirit of inculturation. To think that there is a ‘pure’ doctrine is absurd since every doctrine is culturally bound and found within a specific social milieu.

The study suggests a need to intensify the use of the mother tongue in Religious Education. When Filipinos teach Religious Education in the vernacular, they express and explain key theological concepts that are culturally familiar to the

worldview of the Filipinos. This is a call for the rebirth of the native language. The moral is to conduct the biblical apostolate in the local language. Filipinos should teach, learn, and pray the Bible in their native language. Theological language ought to have a recognizable reference to the lived experience of Filipinos.

Western influence may have had a tremendous impact on the way Filipinos theologize. Though separating the Filipino faith from the western categories to which the faith was presented is futile still, a local theology can be achieved. “Unless we make Filipino culture marry the Christian faith, our Christianity will not be authentic (Mercado, 1992, 29).” It is hoped that the vernacular will be the ring that marries the faith and the Filipino culture. This study calls for the indigenization of Religious Education through the use of the mother tongue.

**b. Reinterpreting the Christian Faith in Indigenous Categories**

There is also a need to use indigenous values. Religious education must use the vernacular and re-appropriate certain aspects of the Christian faith in indigenous categories. This is not a mere translation of Western categories to Filipino terms. Instead, it focuses on native characteristics and ideas that best express western categories.

Religious Education in the Philippine context must use indigenous concepts which are familiar to Filipinos. These categories are rich in meaning and speak to them culturally. Unless Christian categories are re-appropriated, faith will never be understood in its entirety. Therefore, teaching Religious Education should limit the use of the classical approach to theology to give a chance to the more relevant and cultural way of doing it.

It is worth mentioning that Filipino theologians are now making use of indigenous categories to better explain the Christian faith. De Mesa (2008), for instance, makes use of the native term *bakas* (1-90) to re-appropriate the understanding of the sacraments. In solving the environmental crisis which threatens life itself, De Mesa (2003) also cites the concept of *sapat/enough* (28-32). In describing the Church as the People of God, Mercado (1975), uses the term *Sakop*. (50-66) This *sakop* mentality is seen during marriage (union of two *sakops*), fiestas and funerals (the affirmation of the *sakop* solidarity), and *bayanihan* (helping other members of the *sakop*).

In addition, there are certain local concepts that do not have a direct translation in other languages. Miranda (1989), in his linguistic analysis, found out that *loob* is a local term where existing translations do not exhaust its whole meaning. Thus, concepts should never be just translated. To reinterpret the Christian faith is to find



the local dynamic equivalence of faith concepts found in one's culture.

In teaching the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the classical approach would present it as Jesus' offer of love and life through the bread that becomes his body and the wine that becomes his blood. The Eucharist shows Jesus' salvific work for all humankind. However, this approach would never ring a bell to the Filipinos immersed in a particular context. Teaching religious education would be more relevant and intelligible if, for instance, teaching the sacrament of the Eucharist could use the Filipino penchant for food. Food is a major symbol in Filipino culture. The most common way of showing Filipino hospitality is by offering food to the guest. In the Philippine context, food does not only satisfy hunger but "strengthens existing bonds and create new ones (De Mesa, 2003, 77)." Having table fellowship has "something to do with the cementing of friendship (Mercado, 1975, 177)." Hence, the Eucharist offer of food could mean cementing friendship between God and the human person. It means strengthening the bond that Jesus won for us by dying on the cross. The act of feeding somebody, in addition, is not necessarily an act of dependence. The act symbolizes affection, like when newlyweds provide each other with a piece of the wedding cake. The bread offered to people by the priest or the extraordinary minister shows dependency on God and, more importantly, Jesus' affection and compassion for people.

Furthermore, "just as a meal is a sign of friendship and unity, so it is a sign of communion with the other world (Mercado, 1975, 178)." It has been commonplace for Filipinos to offer food to their departed loved ones. During the fortieth day after death or death anniversaries, Filipinos would hold a big celebration. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the meal offered is not only for the living but also in remembrance of the faithful departed. Together with the official teachings of the Church regarding the Eucharist, such re-appropriations are also needed to make the Christian faith marry the Filipino culture and bear much fruit.

### c. Reference to the Local Context

Religious education must consider the Philippine culture. The first missionaries failed to understand this. Instead of looking at culture as a treasure chest of ideas and beliefs, they saw it as a stumbling block. They began to remove aspects they deemed superstitious and impose the Christian faith they know. Unfortunately, they failed to distinguish between Christianity and the Spanish understanding of it.

Nevertheless, credit must be given where credit is due. "The Spanish missionaries have the honor of having brought Catholicism to the islands. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the Spanish missionaries succeeded in creating a nation that

eventually overthrew the Spanish rule without rejecting Christianity (De Mesa, 2003, 78)." The Spaniards brought Christianity to the islands, and it has never left the country since then.

Western faith was introduced to the country by missionaries, who wanted to convert Filipinos to Christianity in good faith. When they saw how 'superstitious' Filipino practices were, "the missionaries forced the natives to live in settlements and enforced on them a western Christianity (Mercado, 2004, 45)."

Since the ordinary Filipino Christians did not feel at home with the western kind of Christianity introduced to them, many modified it. They became Christians but still retained the traditional worldview, giving rise to popular religiosity. However, western missionaries and even some church officials look down on popular religiosity. They even consider them mere superstitions and could hinder the Filipinos from a meaningful and appropriate communion with God.

Are popular devotions mere superstitions? If these are mere superstitions, why are there thousands of people who join processions during Good Friday, watch the *Ati-atihan*, and the like? "A Filipino devotee in Quiapo Church piously wipes with a handkerchief the feet of the black Nazarene statue. He uses the same handkerchief to wipe his aching head. The critic who watches the whole scene will dismiss the devotee's action as plain superstition and will further find fault with the whole popular religiosity in Quiapo church (Mercado, 1992, 43)." However, there is now a need to look at popular devotions from a new light since they could provide insights into the inculturation of theology. The challenge is to look into folk beliefs to expand the potential of cultural analysis in a new context.

Folk beliefs are ambivalent. They are neither good nor bad. Nevertheless, religious education and even theology must use folk beliefs to advance the Christian faith. In no way are popular devotions mere superstitions. They are just cultural expressions that needed a theological re-rooting.

For instance, the prevalent practices of Filipinos to touch Christian images and wipe them with their handkerchief are traces of the animistic orientation of the pre-Spanish Filipinos. An outsider may judge this as mere superstition. Western theological thinking would even consider this as idolatry. Therefore, animism is judged as having no room in theologizing. However, animism may bring people back to the sense of awe about the world around them. In the past, Filipinos were made to believe that animism is the work of the devil.

Nonetheless, it is actually "a signal of transcendence, points to the presence of the holy, and preserves man's sense of God (Gorospe, 1988, 69)." Animistic practices could help Filipinos see God in everything around them. It could assist the

Christian faith to explain the doctrine of an immanent God, a God who is not contented to stay in the heavens but plays an active role in the lives of human beings. It could also enlighten the doctrine of the Incarnation, God becoming a human being. Finally, it could facilitate understanding that God is within the world, and his loving presence is seen in the created realities.

Man is always more than matter. "Filipino animism treats things as persons. A farmer, after a long dry spell when at long last the rains fell, exclaimed in joy: *tuwang tuwa ang mga halaman* (Gorospe, 1988, 69)." Animism can help the Church in its advocacy to protect the environment. "Traditional folk beliefs in spirits and enchanted beings are more often than not regarded today as mere vestiges of an unsophisticated and unscientific way of thinking among animistic people (De Mesa, 2003, 29)." With the rise of rationality and scientific inquiry, mythical understanding of the world has been neglected. "Given the ecological crisis which threatens the very possibility of the continuance of life on Earth, traditional wisdom of the past is becoming a factor in contemporary discussions and decisions related to the preservation of the environment (De Mesa, 2003, 30)." To consider that God is in the world is to respect everything in the world. People show respect to God when they appreciate God's traces here on Earth. The environmental crisis that people are experiencing "is a forceful reminder that people are more important than objects, that we must respect the bond between man and nature, that we must not destroy indigenous culture and the integrity of a people in the name of modern technological development (Gorospe, 1988, 69)."

Animism bridges the gap between the spiritual and the material which have been severed by the western dualistic sacramental way of thinking. "Materiality is not the antithesis of spirituality but its vehicle and expression, and that whatever is sacred is not set apart from the realities of human life (De Mesa, 2008, xv)." Animism shows that spirituality and materiality are never apart. When culture throws light on the tradition, and when tradition throws light on the culture, animism is re-appropriated and given a new meaning. Without this re-appropriation, the ordinary would remain ordinary, and the supernatural would remain supernatural.

People are all encouraged to work with the culture at hand as what happened with Jesus and the Jewish culture, the patristic fathers and the Graeco-Roman culture, and ultimately Filipinos and the Filipino culture. After centuries of religious education, the Philippines has not been genuinely Christianized because it continued to teach the faith in foreign categories. Maybe the reason why after centuries of Christianity, folk beliefs still persist is that Christianity never reached the core of the

Filipino psyche and has touched only the external dimensions of the culture. Folk beliefs will always be a part of the Filipino culture. Instead of eradicating these beliefs, which would seem ineffective after all, theology must use them as a springboard towards a more culturally relevant yet dogmatically valid expression of faith.

#### d. Use of Signs and Symbols

The last principle talks about the need to use signs and symbols that are culturally familiar. Human beings need signs and symbols to worship God better. This is because "man is a symbolical creature when it comes to expression (Mercado, 1975, 159)." As Filipinos think concretely, signs and symbols provide the concreteness of abstract expression of faith. It is, therefore, natural for the Filipino that "statues of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints are taken seriously as the persons themselves (Mercado, 1975, 163)." Hence, a genuinely Filipino Religious Education must use signs and symbols that are both religiously faithful and culturally familiar.

For instance, water has various symbols in the Filipino culture that could enhance its biblical connotations. Water is a symbol of life. Life ceases to exist without water. Culturally, water enhances life and makes it thrive. Water is indeed vital. Biblically, Jesus uses the symbol of water in his preaching. He described himself as the '*living water*.' When he spoke to the Samaritan woman by the well, he said, "whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:13)."

Water also indicates cleanliness in the physical and moral sense. "The early Spanish missionaries noticed that Filipinos were fond of taking a bath-both for the sake of cleanliness and for the pleasure of taking a bath in the rivers and the seas (Mercado, 1975, 168)." For the Filipinos, water purifies both the body and the soul. In ancient Filipino myths, there are several versions of a Great Flood. "One common element among these versions is the fact the people involved have sinned (Mercado, 1975, 168)." The flood was sent to purify and cleanse the world from evildoers. In the same manner, biblically, "it recalls the story of Noah and the Great Flood (Genesis 6:9-8:22)." God sent a destructive flood to cleanse the world with only a handful of people saved. St. Paul also said something about cleansing or purifying. "As Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27)."

Water signifies death as well. “The early Filipinos believed that a river or a body of water has to be crossed in going to the other world (Mercado, 1975, 170).” Hence, crossing the water means new life. Likewise, after the burial, family members would wash their hands with water to indicate a new beginning and protection from harm. In the Biblical sense, water is also connected with new life. “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5).” In addition, Paul shows that the sacrament of Baptism also indicates this crossover. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).”

Given the above examples, water is considered both in its cultural and theological implications. Therefore, teaching the Sacrament of Baptism would be culturally intelligible if the symbolism of water in the Filipino culture is also considered. Hence, a truly Filipino Religious Education must find symbols that serve two purposes: a biblical symbol that exposes the main doctrine and a cultural symbol that enhances the understanding of the topic at hand.

### CONCLUSION

As an overview, a reconstructed Filipino Religious education provides a grassroots way of teaching Religious Education. It must be based and rooted in the everyday struggle of the local community as they make their faith a way of life. It (1) uses signs and symbols to retell religious narratives. It also respects (2) local context as it facilitates the transition from local religiosity to Christian spirituality. It is also characterized by the (3) reinterpretation of the Christian Faith in indigenous categories. It (4) uses the vernacular in teaching Religious Education as the Church is encouraged to speak the people’s language and use their local narratives as starting points of authentic Theology.

The enfleshing of faith in one’s culture is one of the most celebrated products of the renewal in the Church brought by Vatican II. Culture is now considered one of the most important sources of theology. For faith to be relevant and meaningful, it must take root in the culture to where this faith is being interpreted. However, inculturation was never intended to seek originality for originality’s sake. It must not “confuse Christ’s message with the baggage of one’s own culture (Byrne, 1990, 142).” It is, by no means, throwing of traditional formulations of faith to give way to new ones. It should never degenerate to the mere ethnocentric enterprise as it also violates the very nature of inculturation. Hence, balance must be struck

between the Church’s tradition and her culturally sensitive formulations.

The principles mentioned above are merely suggestions. More formulations can be created in the broad arrange of contextual experiences. Creating a framework for an inculturated religious education, however, is just the start. The work of evangelization, the breadth of renewal, and the scope of the contextualization are perpetual processes. Let this be a wake-up call for an unceasing communal engagement to ensure that faith comes home, where the gospel lightens the dark corners of experience. As “God revealed Godself to humans (CCC, 54),” let inculturation empower human beings to reveal their faith in their lived experiences.

Sensitivity to culture gives opportunities to formulate new ways to teach Religious Education. In view of this, reconstructing Filipino Religious Education is being proposed. One way to do this is to take culture seriously. Religious education cannot afford not to take culture seriously since culture provides the basic expressions and values of people bound within a specific social milieu. Hence, it must be born at the grassroots level. A universal and grand way of doing theology seems futile as every theology is culturally and historically bound. It must also use the vernacular as language serves as the vehicle of culture. It must also find indigenous categories to reinterpret the Christian faith and use signs and culturally familiar symbols. Reconstructing Filipino Religious Education is undoubtedly an arduous task but a task worth doing anyway.

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