Indonesian Journal of Theology
Vol. 9, No. 1 (Juli 2021): 62-92
E-ISSN: 2339-0751
DOI: https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v9i1.187

THE THEOLOGY OF STRUGGLE

Critiques of Church and Society in the Philippines (1970s-1990s)

Lisa Asedillo
Drew University
lisasedillo@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores writing and scholarship on the theology of struggle developed by Protestants and Catholics in the Philippines during the 1970s-90s. Its focus is on popular writing—including pamphlets, liturgical resources, newsletters, magazines, newspaper articles, conference briefings, songs, popular education and workshop modules, and recorded talks—as well as scholarly arguments that articulate the biblical, theological, and ethical components of the theology of struggle as understood by Christians who were immersed in Philippine people's movements for sovereignty and democracy. These materials were produced by Christians who were directly involved in the everyday struggles of the poor. At the same time, the theology of struggle also projects a "sacramental" vision and collective commitment towards a new social order where the suffering of the masses is met with eschatological, proleptic justice—the new heaven and the new earth, where old things have passed away and the new creation has come. It is within the struggle against those who deal unjustly that spirituality becomes a "sacrament"—a point and a place in time where God is encountered and where God's redeeming love and grace for the world is experienced.

Keywords: Philippine Christianity, theology of struggle, Christian resistance, decolonial praxis, Christian ethics, US Christian colonialism

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi tulisan dan kesarjanaan terkait teologi perjuangan (*theology of struggle*) yang dikembangkan oleh umat Protestan dan Katolik di Filipina pada tahun 1970-an hingga 1990-an. Fokus yang diambil adalah tulisan-tulisan populer—seperti

pamflet, sumber-sumber liturgis, buletin, majalah, artikel koran, catatan-catatan konferensi, lagu-lagu, modul-modul semiloka, dan rekaman pidato-pidato—maupun juga argumentasi-argumentasi sarjana yang mengartikulasi komponen-komponen biblis, teologis, dan etis dari teologi perjuangan sebagaimana dipahami oleh umat Kristen yang terlibat di dalam gerakan-gerakan massa di Filipina yang berjuang untuk kemerdekaan dan demokrasi. Materi-materi ini diproduksi oleh umat Kristen yang terlibat langsung dalam perjuangan sehari-hari rakyat miskin. Pada saat yang sama, teologi perjuangan juga memproyeksikan sebuah visi "sakramental" dan komitmen kolektif terhadap sebuah tatanan sosial baru di mana rakyat yang menderita akan mendapat keadilan eskatologis dan proleptis—langit dan bumi yang baru, di mana hal-hal terdahulu telah berlalu dan ciptaan baru telah tiba. Di dalam perjuangan melawan ketidakadilan, spiritualitas menjadi sebuah "sakramen"—sebuah titik dan tempat dalam sejarah di mana Allah dapat dijumpai dan di mana kasih penebusan dan rahmat Allah bagi dunia dapat dialami.

Kata-kata Kunci: kekristenan Filipina, teologi perjuangan (*theology of struggle*), perlawanan kristiani, praksis dekolonial, etika Kristen, kolonialisme Kristen Amerika Serikat

Introduction

In the late twentieth century, Christian resistance in the Philippines created unique forms of decolonizing ethics that have too often been erased in narratives of colonial history. In this article, I explore the writings and scholarship emerging from *the theology of struggle* developed by Protestants and Catholics in the Philippines during the 1970s-1990s. The theology of struggle movement is an incarnational theology which cannot be reduced to any writing "about it." Rather than being a movement of academic elites and experts, theology of struggle writings primarily emerged from Filipino people's reflection on praxis, and writings were considered secondary to the concrete work of Christian solidarity with the poor and oppressed people of the Philippines. Amidst increasing academic attention paid to decolonization and deimperialization in Christian studies, however, as well as to deepen understanding of liberation theology and ethics, it remains critically important to engage the theo-ethics that have emerged and continue to emerge from the major sites of present and historic US imperialism, colonialism, and Christian hegemony. I believe dynamic intellectual conversations on decolonization in Christian ethics and faith-based activism addressing coloniality and US imperialism in Asia would be enriched by this particular Philippine resistance history.

My sources are primarily drawn from Christian tradition, focusing on Christian reflection within the disciplines of theology, biblical studies and Christian ethics, as well as non-academic Christian writings that took place "on the run," as Edicio de la Torre famously commented on the nature of much theology of struggle writing.[1] The theology of struggle is and was a conversation, debate, and living discourse that emerged from the contributions of many voices with different inflections, priorities and nuances. What binds these voices together is that all were centrally concerned with the daily struggle of the Filipino poor for their liberation as they grappled with the role of people of faith in speaking and responding to these realities.

After providing an overview of social and historical context for the creation and development of the theology of struggle in the Philippines, this paper addresses three areas: (1) key theological ideas and methodological commitments of the theology of struggle, exploring the ways the theology of struggle is a form of liberation theology; (2) the praxis of this theology, examining how the theology of struggle was both informed by and informed the active confrontation with coloniality that occurred on the ground, in the forms of activism, popular education, cultural work, community organizing, and more; and (3) a list of some of the foundational texts, both popular and scholarly, for the theology of struggle movement.

Historical Context: Christianity, Philippine-American War, Colonialism

Before exploring reflections and critiques concerning the theology of struggle, it is crucial to understand the national context and social conditions in the Philippines between the 1970s-1990s that created the impetus and fertile ground for the emergence of the theology of struggle. Christianity—in particular, certain forms of Catholicism—was initially brought to the Philippines by Spanish colonizers in the sixteenth century. In response, Filipino resistance movements struggled almost 400 years for freedom from Spain (1565-1898) and eventually the United States (1898-1946). By the time the theology of struggle movement was gaining momentum in the 1970s, 90 percent of the population in the Philippines were baptized Christians, with 85 percent of them being Catholic (over 75 percent overall).[2]

[1] Sr. Mary Rosario Battung, RGS, Liberato C. Bautista, Ma. Sophia Lizares-Bodegon, Alice G. Guillermo, eds. *Religion and Society: Towards a Theology of Struggle* (Manila: FIDES, 1988), iii.

[2] Carlos Abesamis, "Faith and Life Reflections from the Grassroots in the Philippines," in *In Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1980), 124.

Christianity was also a central aspect of US colonialism in the Philippines, and American Protestantism was no less rooted in the quest for colonial rule. *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (1974), for instance, describes US Protestant missions to the Philippines in the following way:[3]

> In March 1898, Bishop James M. Thoburn . . . arrived in Manila with letters from the Missionary Society of America appointing him to begin missionary services in the newly-liberated land.
>
> The long restlessness of the Filipinos under Spanish rule . . . all contributed to the churchmen's desire to conduct their own religious services and institutions free from anything that looked like American domination or tutorship. . . Unfortunately, the American Methodist Church, moving as fast as its machinery for organization permitted, was not speedy enough for some of the Methodists of the Philippines, and a considerable group of the latter broke away from the Annual Conference and formed "The Evangelical Methodist Church in the Philippine Islands."

Contrary to the narrative of the Philippines being a "newly-liberated land," 1898 marks the beginning of the Philippine-American War, where thousands of U.S. Americans and at least 1.4 million Filipinos died.[4] The fact that this encyclopedia entry on the Philippines found nothing worth noting on the Philippine-American War reflects a deep denial of the United States' imperial past. *Sari Sari Store: A Philippine Scrapbook,* compiled by Rebecca C. Asedillo and B. David Williams, recounts this past, citing Senator Albert Beveridge who famously said "My President, the times call for candor. The Philippines are ours forever...We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee under God, of the civilization of the world."[5] Speaking to the interrelatedness of white supremacy, US imperialism, and colonial Christianity, Beveridge adds "[Filipinos] are a barbarous race, modified by three centuries of contact with a decadent race...God...has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns."[6] The ongoing relationship between the United States and the Philippines cannot be understood apart from this early imposition

[3] Lois Miller and Byron S. Lamson, "Philippines, Republic of the," in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, ed., Nolan B. Harmon (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 1899-1900.

[4] E. San Juan Jr., "Imperial Terror, Neo-Colonialism and the Filipino Diaspora." Lecture, St. John's University, New York, October 9, 2003.

[5] Rebecca C. Asedillo and B. David Williams, *The Sari-Sari Store: A Philippine Scrapbook* (New York: Friendship Press, 1989), 23.

[6] Ibid., 24.

of U.S. colonial desire and military violence legitimated by white supremacist worldviews and Christian language.

The formal end of colonialism (1946) did not rid the Philippines of the presence of US empire. Consider Fr. Pedro Salgado's description just one generation ago, that "the United States has military installations in practically all the Philippine Archipelago, the biggest of them being Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base. There are no ordinary bases, but bases with all the logistic[s] and arsenal . . . that a superpower is capable of having."[7] Ongoing US militarism in the Philippines, even until the present day, represents a continuation of the United States' colonial legacy through neoimperialist foreign policy.

It is within this long, geopolitical trajectory that the theology of struggle emerges in the past half century—in the words of Sr. Mary Rosario Battung and colleagues—as the "irruption of the poor, deprived and oppressed defiant against a repressive state."[8] Philippine politics cannot be properly understood apart from this protracted history of imperial subjugation. Eleazar S. Fernandez explains that[9]

> Filipinos are among the most colonized people in this world: they were colonized by the Spaniards, the North Americans, the Japanese, and then again by the North Americans. Perhaps, more than other Third World peoples, they despise their own selves, their culture, their heritage, and the products of their own hands.

In many ways, the theology of struggle is an assertion of dignity, and "supportive of the quest for identity, self-determination, and liberation of a people.[10]

Theology of struggle writings reject the enduring ideologies that undergird much of Christianity's colonial practices. In the words of movement leader Feliciano Cariño,[11]

> Ours is a generation whose mission is to make that big, bold step of saying finally "no" to American colonial and imperial control, so that from that negation can grow the

---

[7] Fr. Pedro Salgado, "National Sovereignty, A Historical Perspective," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 10 (1990): 10-11.

[8] Battung, et al., *Religion and Society*, 49.

[9] Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 4.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Feliciano Cariño, "Towards a Culture of Freedom: On Saying 'No' to the American Bases," in *On Wastes and National Dignity: Views and Voices on the US Military Bases*, eds., Aida Jean B. Nacpil-Manipon and Elizabeth B. Rifareal (Quezon City, Phillippines: International Affairs Desk, National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1988), 75.

> roots of the culture of freedom and the real foundations of authentic friendship with all peoples everywhere.

The story of the Filipino people can be understood as "a history of centuries of domination, not only economically, but also culturally," according to Teresa Dagdag, another leading thinker of the theology of struggle movement. She adds, "It is also the history of a people who have repeatedly refused to be stopped in their 'long march' towards freedom from slavery and towards national identity."[12] Although the 1970s-1990s marks the most intense periods of theology of struggle thinking and organizing, the movement is by no means over and has continued to develop and evolve into the present day.

Historical Context: Resistance to Martial Law

The theology of struggle must be understood within the context of a people's movement, organized against the political authoritarianism that escalated under the right-wing regime of Ferdinand Marcos in the latter half of the twentieth century. Bishop Erme Camba is quoted as describing the theology of struggle as being both "as old as the coming of Christianity to the Philippines and as new as each effort to reflect upon the Filipino people's struggle for liberation and freedom from the bondage of exploitation and oppression."[13] It was the repressive rule of the Marcos dictatorship, in particular during the years of martial law from 1972 to 1986, that ultimately presented the "*kairos*" moment for the theology of struggle to be born and to have spread rapidly among progressive Christians in the Philippines. As a continuation of centuries of resistance against colonial rule and multiple imperial ideologies, the theology of struggle emerged as a social movement that opposed the political dictatorship, which it regarded as colluding with the American (neo)colonial presence in the Philippines.

Amidst this larger resistance movement based on Philippine nationalism, the nation's theologians were forced to grapple with the church's role in the struggle. Levi Oracion explains that "the old way of reflecting on God who breaks into the struggle is transformed into a new way of participating in the nature and course of the struggle with the people of God."[14] In this new way, the theologian can no longer sit on the sidelines to interpret the struggle; rather, the theologian is called into the struggle to walk

---

[12] Teresa Dagdag, "Emerging Theology in the Philippines Today," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 3 (1983): 4.

[13] Levi Oracion, *God with Us: Reflections on the Theology of Struggle in the Philippines* (Dumaguete, Phillippines: Silliman University Divinity School, 2001), vi.

[14] Ibid.

with the people as an active participant. The theologian must no longer write theology about struggle—as the call becomes to write a theology *of* struggle.[15]

In Kathleen Nadeau's 2002 ethnography on liberation theology in the Philippines, she locates the people's movement in the Philippines within the larger context of poor people's movements all over South Asia and Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. She explains that these movements had represented not only a struggle for better everyday living conditions, but a deep rooted resistance against global cultural imperialism, thereby resisting "the ideological distortions, false consciousness, and fetishisms of world capitalism."[16] Indeed the theology of struggle maintains a strong nationalist perspective, contending that Marcos' authoritarian politics were not a program of national uplift but a means of preserving the dictator's alliance with the United States—even as it entailed holding down the majority of Filipinos, to suffer in poverty.[17] Over against such injustice, the Filipino theology of struggle shows itself to be an explicitly anti-colonial discourse bringing to bear expressions of resistance against Western empires.

Theology of Struggle as Liberation Theology

That the theology of struggle proceeds from the suffering of the Filipino poor aligns the movement with liberation theology. Its utterances and reflections are primarily accountable to the anger and anguish of the poor at the injustices they face. Christian tradition has offered many different answers to the question of where we begin the task of theological inquiry (e.g., the natural world, the Bible as the "inerrant" word of God, the rational human mind). Liberation theology begins theological inquiry with the plight of the poor. Robert McAfee Brown writes,[18]

> [L]iberation theology claims that it is in the life and situation of the poor that God is to be found, that God is at work. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the poor and oppressed, a God who sides with them. . . . The God of the New Testament is the same God, a God who becomes incarnate . . . in one who belonged to the "poor of the land."

Segundo Galilea adds that liberation theology focuses "on the meaning of the commitment of the Church—including all its

[15] Ibid.

[16] Kathleen M. Nadeau, *Liberation Theology in the Philippines: Faith in a Revolution* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 103.

[17] Ibid., 30.

[18] Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1978), 61.

members—to justice, to the defense of human rights, and the liberation of its peoples in the perspective of evangelization."[19] Sr. Mary Rosario Battung says in *Towards a Theology of Struggle: Book I* (1988), that "it is precisely out of this active discovery of and immersion in the suffering and struggles of these millions of poor, deprived and oppressed people that the primary shape and character of a theology of struggle emerged."[20] Central to liberation theology's task of theological reflection is the church's proper engagement with society, thereby linking matters of faith with emancipatory praxis.

At the same time, the theology of struggle also projects a "sacramental" vision and collective commitment towards a new social order where the suffering of the masses is met with eschatological, proleptic justice—the new heaven and the new earth, where old things have passed away and the new creation has come.[21] If a "sacrament" is understood as "a point and a place in time where God is encountered and where God's redeeming love and grace for the world is experienced," then spirituality becomes *sacramental* within the struggle against those who deal unjustly.[22]

The term "theology of struggle" is generally attributed to Edicio de la Torre, who in an interview said that, in the Philippine context, what is needed is not so much "a theology of liberation but a theology of struggle."[23] Commenting on that interview with de la Torre, Cariño explains that the distinction he was making neither disavowed the theology of struggle as a form of liberation theology nor diminished the importance and relevance of liberation theology in the world. Rather, Cariño clarifies that,[24]

> while it remains important to stay within the ambit of the theological mode represented by the theology of liberation, it is nevertheless necessary that in our situation [i.e., in the Philippines] we pay more attention to the "means" by which "liberation" as an imperative of faith may be attained.

Therefore, a theology of struggle is only completed once the "struggle" has been finished; until then, it is always "on the way."[25] For de la Torre, the theology of struggle describes a spirituality, even a fresh experience of conversion, which Fernandez relays as

---

[19] Segundo Galilea, *Liberation Theology and the Vatican Document* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1958), 8.

[20] Battung, et al., *Religion and Society*, xv.

[21] Ibid., xi.

[22] Ibid., xiii.

[23] Feliciano Cariño, "Theology, Politics & Struggle," *TUGON: An Ecumenical Journal of Discussion and Opinion* (1986): front editorial.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

being "a new attitude and lifestyle, one that is not marked by indifference and resignation but a commitment to struggle for the fundamentally new and better."[26] Liberation is the direction of the theology of struggle, but the focus of theologizing is on the struggle itself.

Elsewhere, Cariño discusses the biblical relevance of *struggle* for a theology of struggle—beyond the etymology of the name *Israel*. Since "struggle" can suggest a broad semantic range, Cariño draws parallels to the biblical concepts of "combat" and "warfare" as these notions inform the theological tradition of imagining the Christian life in similar terms. For example, Paul the Apostle looks at the cross of Jesus as the site of God's victory in the struggle against evil forces (Col. 2:15). The resurrection of Christ is recognized as the "first fruit" of that contentious victory. Yet the "warfare" continues until all the powers are brought under the reign of God (I Cor. 15:20ff.).[27] Cariño explains that the theology of struggle has a militant and activist stance, in that it takes on this conception of the Christian life as having "warfare" and "combat" as its primary components.[28] In this way, the theology of struggle has "close affinities with and belongs to the same genre of theological reflection as the theology of liberation."[29] When de la Torre noted the need of the Philippines for a theology of struggle, he was not criticizing or negating the broader category of liberation theology—far from it. By emphasizing the Filipino context, these theologians and activists were drawing attention to the "means" by which *liberation* as an "end" may be reached.[30]

Theology of Struggle Method

Theology of struggle writers are centrally concerned with method—in fact, the theology of struggle method precedes the theological product. Within its methodology, one cannot start with doctrine, because there is no pre-existing or inherent theological doctrine that can be applied to the Filipino situation. Fr. Carlos Abesamis, SJ, offers an introduction: "What we share with you is not so much the content, for we believe that such a content does not and cannot yet exist. What we will share is rather what we see to be the way towards it."[31] As the movement's name suggests, the

[26] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 23.

[27] Battung, et al., *Religion and Society*, vii.

[28] Ibid. Space does not allow any thorough consideration of how such conceptualizations of the Christian life may be received by other religionists—namely, the Philippines' vibrant Muslim populace. The notion of (holy) *struggle* figures profoundly in Islamic theology.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid, vii.

[31] Abesamis, "Faith and Life Reflections from the Grassroots in the Philippines," 124.

theology of struggle focuses first and foremost on the contentions necessary, as means of attaining liberation.

In this following section, I will describe theology of struggle methods, focusing on the starting point for the theology of struggle—and therefore who and what the theology of struggle is primarily accountable to; focusing on the role of social analysis for doing theology; and finally examining the ways theology of struggle methods are always contextual and based in history.

First, the experiences of those who are oppressed—both historically and in present reality—comprise the valid starting point for the theology of struggle. Abesamis declares that,[32]

> in the moment preliminary to the doing of theology in Asia today, the question is not posed by theology. Rather, the question is posed to theology. . . . In Asia and the Third World today, it is the history of our Asian and Third World peoples that propounds the question to theology rather than the other way around.

The intention of the theology of struggle is not to translate or transplant what Fernandez refers to as "the potted Christianity," received as it was from the Western powers.[33] Rather, the intent is to produce theology that begins with the daily lives of Filipino people. The theology of struggle as task or process is not about translating theological products from their Latin, French, German, or English origins. So, the Filipino "indigenization of theology" is not about translation from language to language, nor is it about applying the wisdom of the theologies of Athanasius, Ambrose, or Vatican II to "the local situation." Instead, theology's indigenization within the Filipino context necessitates beginning with the situation of the Philippines and the lives of Filipinos themselves. All theology comes after.[34]

Culling from various issues cited, points raised, and theology of struggle sources, Fernandez identifies at least five sources for the theology of struggle: "(1) the Filipino people's experience, (2) the context or situation, (3) sociopolitical-cultural analysis and expressions, (4) traditions and dogmas, and (5) the Scripture."[35] The sources that serve as the starting point for theological construction, however, are "far from being doctrinal

---

[32] Ibid., 123. Regarding the broader Asian context, Abesamis observes, "[F]irst we are made aware of Asia's struggle for full humanity and then invited to work towards a relevant theology." Ibid., 124.

[33] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 25.

[34] Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Developing World: Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians* (London: G. Chapman, 1980), 118.

[35] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 169.

truths which one seeks to organize into a system" and "far from being biblical texts or truths which one seeks to apply to a given human situation . . . instead, the raw materials are 'contemporary Philippine Third World history, and life itself.'"[36] This mode of theologizing disrupts the traditional supremacy granted to Scripture and the classical Christian tradition—all necessary for decolonizing a colonial religion. Abesamis poses the question as "What does your religion and your theology say to our history of struggle and our history of hope? Are you with us or against us?"[37] By following this method, theology is accountable to the daily lives of people, rather than people being accountable to a ready-made, pre-packaged version of theology likely shipped in from the West.

Second, the theology of struggle method is based in a critical analysis of Philippine society. Bible reflection groups were one way of practicing the theology of struggle in community, that is, doing theological reflection in a way that is based on social analysis and critique. In a small pamphlet titled *Faith in Struggle,* Asedillo describes one such Bible reflection group at a sugar plantation in Negros, where people were dealing with massive starvation and reflecting on the times when they felt the presence of Christ. One sugar worker said,[38]

> I saw a mother with three starving children in the cane field. The children were crying, because they were hungry, but the mother had nothing to feed them. So, with bare hands, she started to squeeze the juice out of the sugar cane and gave it to her children. I discovered Christ in that life-giving act.

Following a theology of struggle method, oppressed Filipinos in these Bible studies are able to exercise interpretive authority and to make meaning of the Scriptures for their daily lives. Asedillo writes, "The theology of struggle is a theology articulated by people who have a critical analysis of their social situation, those who 'suffer, and therefore struggle,' according to de la Torre's categorization."[39] She adds that "they are people whose view of reality would be those of people in the bottom of the social and economic spectrum, are aware of it, and are seeking to change it."[40] Exercising their own interpretive authority to make meaning of both the Scriptures and

[36] Ibid., 25-26.

[37] Abesamis, "Faith and Life Reflections from the Grassroots in the Philippines," 123.

[38] Rebecca Asedillo, *Faith in Struggle* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1988), 2.

[39] Ibid., 6.

[40] Ibid.

their daily lives, therefore, involves a critique of the oppressive structures that create and perpetuate their suffering.

Third, interdisciplinarity is vital for theology of struggle method in the retracing of history. For instance, theatrical productions were an alternative mode through which theology of struggle artists took up the centrality of social analysis, by posing questions such as "Why is the situation of the peasants, the workers, the tribal people, the urban poor—the majority of people—one of poverty, deprivation, exploitation and oppression?"[41] It is in the developing of "critical-minded and transformation-oriented communities made up of free, participative and active human beings" that an *historical option*, as Fernandez identifies it, may present itself. "This historical option involves a retrieving of our past."[42] Ultimately the stated goal of such interdisciplinary, liturgical, and artistic forms was to shape communities.

Finally, since the theology of struggle is both contextual and based in history, its method is to implicate itself by means of such a commitment to historicity. As the context itself shapes one's perception of reality, the way theology is done and the themes that may emerge are by no means "innocent". The movement must be[43]

> rooted in the suffering, aspirations, and struggle of the people, [given that] the theology of struggle claims to be a contextual theology. . . . [W]e should move further toward understanding that context, not simply as important [approaches] for communication . . . but as a "mode of apprehension."

Lester Edwin J. Ruiz describes this as a commitment to *located* truth, explaining that a community's "perspective, as well as context, is critical. Since [communities of dissent] engage in a politics of struggle that is situated within a context of domination, their struggles become practices of clearing."[44] Rather than approaching the work of theology as if to ask, How can we adapt theology to our needs? the question becomes, How can our needs create a theology that is our own?

To summarize, as a contextual theology of liberation, the theology of struggle stresses the importance of history. In his availing of "contemporary Philippine Third World history, and life itself," Fernandez follows Karl Gaspar in the methodological

---

[41] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 11.

[42] Ibid., 15.

[43] Ibid., 25.

[44] Shin Chiba, George Hunsberger, and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, *Christian Ethics in Ecumenical Context: Theology, Culture, and Politics in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 266.

assertion that the "raw material" of theological reflection is found neither in "doctrinal truths which one seeks to organize into a system" or in "biblical texts or truths which one seeks to apply to a given human situation" but in the context of contending for justice, namely in history and—life itself.[45] Locating the Philippines' long history of colonialism as a starting point for understanding the context of the theology of struggle, in particular, foregrounds history as the methodological crux for understanding the concrete, this-worldly reign of God.

Theological Categories

There is a sociopolitical norm running throughout the theology of struggle—namely, the liberation of the Filipino people. In the landmark monograph *Towards a Theology of Struggle*, Fernandez identifies the nature of the theology of struggle as: [46]

> (1) a reflexive/reflective activity of Filipino communities who are involved in the struggle; (2) a struggle discerned in light of the Christian faith through the vehicle of traditions or Scripture; (3) informed by the contemporary situation (both domestic and global) through the agency of various analytical and critical theories; (4) the interpretations and analysis of which are carried out through Filipino idioms; and (5) [intended] for the continuation of the liberating struggle of the Filipino people (praxis).

Everything that contributes to the continuing struggle for the liberation of the Filipino people supports the norm, while everything that contributes to the dehumanization of the Filipino people goes against it. Specifically, as Fernandez explains, "this liberation means the right to self-determination, the restoration of their self-identity as a people and greater rootedness into their culture (indigenization), socioeconomic and political well-being, and the formation of an ecological sensibility."[47] In this section, I discuss theology of struggle reflection on the Church, Christology, Salvation, and the Kingdom of God, by exploring these specific theological *topoi* through a theology of struggle lens that holds Filipino liberation as its guiding norm.

First, writings on the theology of struggle include extensive reflections on the church and its purpose—the vast majority of which writings are focused on "the new church," namely what it will take to achieve the "renewal of the church." Cariño explains that the theology of struggle is "neither anti-ecclesiastical nor non-

[45] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 5.
[46] Ibid., 167.
[47] Ibid., 175.

ecclesiastical"; rather, it seeks the renewal of the Church, which can be achieved by fully partnering with the Filipino people in their struggle for justice.[48] Fernandez writes that, in order "for the new church to emerge, it must itself be a site of struggle, with a view toward the ongoing wider struggle"; as such, struggle becomes necessary, both theologically and sociologically—insofar as the church is called both to be a sign and instrument of divine liberation and to engage fully in struggle, without reservation, as an instrument of social, economic, and political liberation.[49]

The 1982 issue of the magazine, *Kalinangan*, focusing on "Colonial Mentality in the Church," featured on its front cover a segment of text that points to the ways in which colonial mentality is embedded in Filipino culture, education, mass media, and in the church. In order to resist, the text proposes that "we unchain our pervasive colonial mentality through involvement with our people in the struggle for genuine freedom."[50] To be faithful to Jesus Christ and be a truly Filipino church, the church "must align itself on the side of the poor, the vast majority of our people whose plight increases daily."[51] This is one example of theology of struggle writings that reflect on the purpose of the church and its renewal.

Second, regarding Christology, theology of struggle writers interpret the theological significance of Jesus through the lens of Filipino liberation. Telling the story of Jesus' birth, Lydia Niguidula narrates that it was "while the government officials were too busy in their business as usual: census-taking, tax-collecting, people-molesting, they were not aware of a birth that was taking place among the peasant women."[52] After describing the smelly stable and reflecting on the fact that the birth announcement by the angels' song could only be heard by lowly shepherds and the marginalized poor, Niguidula asks, "Can there be a more powerful criticism against the existing social order and political reality than this lowly birth of a king?"[53]

In the December 1995 issue of *Kalinangan* titled "In Communion With the Poor," the magazine instructed youth to read the following words for their Christmas liturgy: "We believe that the message of Christ's birth is a promise of a new day/Land for the landless/Food for the tillers/Justice for the people of the land!"[54] Beyond being a Jesus that sides with the poor, this is a

[48] Battung, et al., *Religion and Society*, xiv.

[49] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 146.

[50] "No Title," *Kalinangan* Vol. 2 (1982): front cover.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Lydia N. Niguidula, "God's Strategies in Oppressive Systems," in *Human Rights: Biblical and Theological Readings*, ed., Liberato Bautista (Quezon City, Phillippines: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1988), 57.

[53] Ibid., 57.

[54] Norma P. Dollaga, "Family Altar/Local Church Service for Christmas Eve," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1995): 24.

Filipino Jesus whom theology of struggle writers present to Filipinos. One writer illustrates an aforementioned methodological point mentioned above, when asserting, "first of all, an understanding of the life and work of Jesus [that is to be] gleaned from the Filipino religious tradition and especially from the people's popular culture and religiosity."[55] With full knowledge that siding with the poor and exposing crippling injustice had gotten Jesus "crucified by those who sought to protect the security of the political and religious establishment," theology of struggle writers understand the task of taking up the gospel of Jesus entails great risks.[56]

Addressing the topic of Christology in a scholarly monograph titled *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, Fernandez refuses to adhere to traditional categories or meanings as ascribed to Christ. "For people who are not even sure where to get the next meal and whose very survival is constantly threatened," Fernandez writes, "I do not see it as urgent and relevant to address the topic of Christology in its orthodox and classic formulation."[57] He adds that, while struggling Filipino Christians are deeply interested in the story and life of Jesus, in Fernandez' view they have also never seemed overly concerned with questions such as Christ's essential relation to the Trinity.[58] Struggling for survival bring about an articulation of Christology for the lowly, because this lowliness Christ himself took on.

Third, salvation is understood by the theology of struggle in concrete, this-worldly terms, namely as being connected with liberation. Gaspar emphasizes that the theology of struggle is rooted in a theology of total salvation, and that the biblical understanding of concrete and total salvation entails not only the healing or rescue of the soul from sin but also a revolution that "announces the liberation of the oppressed, [namely] those in captivity and afflicted by all kinds of enslavement."[59] In an introspective passage, Asedillo reflects on the revolutionary nature of salvific work.[60]

> It took living under Martial Law and the popular struggles which I supported and in which I participated, for me to realize that salvation really had much to do with the here and now, with the reign of God on earth, with the concrete,

[55] Gordon Zerbe, "Enlivening [Reinvigorating] Our Imagination about God's Reign," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1997): 18.

[56] Sr. Helen R. Graham, "On a New Way of Being Church: A Biblico-Historical Reflection," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1990): 17.

[57] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 98.

[58] Ibid., 98.

[59] Ibid., 22.

[60] Rebecca Asedillo, "A Protestant Woman's Emerging Spirituality," *In God's Image*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1993): 16.

> material and historical concerns of people as they struggle for land, for food, for shelter, for the most basic stuff of life which are denied them. Some Philippine theologians name this new paradigm as the "theology and spirituality of struggle."

Salvation, thus, involves repentance from the evil of domination and a turning fully towards the broader struggle of the Filipino poor, in their political struggle for democracy. As such, conversion relates to a raised political consciousness about the evils of society and bestows the urgent call upon the Christian to change society, in deep solidarity with the poor.

Fourth, the Kingdom of God, is theologized in a similar vein, as a place "where there is daily bread for everyone." For Luna L. Dingayan, the notion of divine rule or reign—styled as God's *Kin-dom*, to neutralize patriarchy and promote relationality—implies the need "to live one day at a time." According to Dingayan, "[T]he reality of too much accumulated wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many is a result of worrying too much for the morrow."[61] Even though the Kingdom does not fully represent the contemporary moment, given that the first shall be last and that the privileged will serve the lowly, God's people are called to traverse the very path that Jesus walked, to bring this divine reign into existence.[62]

Elizabeth Dominguez describes the rising tide of people's movements throughout Asia as "foremost among the signs of the Kingdom of God"—where the poor and exploited assert themselves, having realized their common experiences of oppression, and join forces to change their collective situation. Dominguez recognizes these people's movements to rise up and seek liberation, in the face of a tyrant seeking to perpetuate his (i.e., often patriarchal) power, as fitting certain patterns in the Bible.[63] The Kingdom of God, which involves a radical change in society that eventually brings about a "new world, under the reign of God, where a new humankind (individually and collectively) will participate in a new history, in which the blessings of definitive salvation will be the fullness of life," as Abesamis articulates.[64] Bringing about this new world requires our collective activity—deeds done in the here and now. In 1971, the Catholic Synod of

---

[61] Luna L. Dingayan, "Your Kin-Dom Come," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1997): 5.

[62] Niguidula, "God's Strategies in Oppressive Systems," 57.

[63] Elizabeth Dominguez, "Signs and Countersigns of the Kingdom of God in Asia Today: Some Biblical Reflections," *Kalinangan,* Vol. 4, No. 4 (1984): 10.

[64] Carlos Abesamis, *Where Are We Going: Heaven or New World?* (Manila: Communication Foundation for Asia, 1986), 8.

Bishops had arrived at the following insight, as reported by Abesamis, availing deep biblical roots:[65]

> Action on behalf of justice and participating in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

In a prepared Bible study that was often used for popular education and consciousness-raising among Christians in the movement, participants read Matthew 6:33 together: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Participants then reflected on what this passage meant for their everyday lives. The facilitator would lead a discussion and eventually ask, "What is it that we must do to establish the kingdom of God?" Answers arising from the group might express sentiments, like "If others are shedding blood, what right have I to shed tears?" and "[T]his is the first time I've understood that heaven was here on earth."[66] Bible studies guided by theology of struggle principles were structured to bring faith together with both history and social analysis. The people's reflections gave new and liberating meanings to the Kingdom of God—meanings that had been culled from the concrete experiences of participants who engaged in both these formative sessions and the work of solidarity.

Theology of Struggle Praxis

In an essay titled "Praxis and Religious Thought: Toward a Practical Theological Reflection in the Philippine Setting," Cariño explains that "praxis" is of Greek philosophical origin and that its common and ordinary meaning generally corresponds to the English word "action," "doing," or "practice."[67] Aristotle used the term to make a distinction between *theoria* and *praxis,* wherein praxis typically had to do with politics and the work that it took to maintain and build the polis.[68]

Under martial law, the common response that met any who would choose to defy the dictator's laws amounted to human rights violations. Landless farmers, tenants, leaseholders, and settlers who

---

[65] Ibid., 25-26.

[66] As recounted in Asedillo, *Faith in Struggle*, 29-30.

[67] Feliciano Cariño, "Praxis and Religious Thought: Towards a Practical Theological Reflection in the Philippine Setting," in *Asian Politics and Ecumenical Vision: Selected Writings of Feliciano V. Cariño*, eds., Philip L. Wickeri and Marina True (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2013), 32.

[68] Ibid., 33.

lived in the countryside struggled to survive. Land reform, one of the promoted programs of martial law, yielded nothing for the poor and allowed many loopholes for the rich to keep their huge, landed estates. Meanwhile, as agri-businesses that were run by transnational companies took up more of the scene, small farmers were routinely pushed out of their farms.[69]

Transformative, praxiological action must be focused on restoring justice, which Cariño defines as a relational term in that justice "involves the relation between two subjects rather than the relation of subjects to a universal idea. . . . It is in the negation of the subjectivity of one in relation to the other that injustice occurs. . . . To be faithful to this relationship of subjects is to be just."[70] For anyone to legitimately claim that they carry out the theology of struggle, these would have been—and still are—practitioners and activists engaged in concrete action on behalf of the poor and oppressed people of the Philippines.

As praxis, the theology of struggle both was informed by and had informed active confrontations of coloniality that occurred on the ground-level. The measures taken—such as grassroots activism, popular education and writing, scholarship, cultural work, and the daily practices associated with developing the theology of struggle, including liturgy, symbolisms, songs and poetry, stories and narratives, the sacrifice of martyrs, and the lifestyles of those who ascribed to it—all of it posed a significant critique of the national social conditions of the time. Centrally concerned with changing social structures, theology of struggle praxis' methods for achieving such sweeping change are as important as its guiding theopolitical vision.[71]

As the theology of struggle expresses the cry of the poor for revolutionary social change, the movement calls the church to rise up and to engage as well as further inspire this change. This Filipino theopolitical praxis grappled profoundly with engaging Marxist ideology as a method for social transformation. Not everyone involved in the theology of struggle embraced wholesale Marxist ideology, and people shifted in their thinking at different times. While its relationship to Marxism made practicing any form of liberation theology in the Philippines a risky engagement, Marxist ideology significantly informed much of the movement's

[69] Oracion, *God With Us*, 13.

[70] Feliciano Cariño, "Biblical and Theological Reflections on Current Economic Life," in *Asian Politics and Ecumenical Vision: Selected Writings of Feliciano V. Cariño*, eds., Philip L. Wickeri and Marina True (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2013), 56.

[71] In the Philippines, according to Nadeau, both "social justice workers and sustainable development practitioners have turned away from an orientation based on merely transferring technology and services to the poor, toward an orientation based on changing social structures democratically from within." See Nadeau, *Liberation Theology in the Philippines*, 104.

critical analysis and activism approaches for social change. The systemic injustice and greed that intensified under the Marcos regime provoked resistance from various sectors across the Philippines, including the Christians for National Liberation that organized under the tutelage of Catholic nuns and priests and Protestant pastors. This ecclesial alliance also joined forces with various nationalist organizations, forming the National Democratic Front. In turn, the broader coalition came under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the armed wing of which still operates today—called the New People's Army.[72]

In its praxis, the action-oriented component of the theology of struggle aims to change the conditions that deny the *image of God* among the poor and oppressed, namely to oppose the devastating dehumanization and deprivation of God's children. Abesamis, the late Jesuit biblical scholar, frames matters in the following way:[73]

> We have always known in some way that good theology must lead to a good pastoral action. But somehow, our long association with Greek metaphysics has conditioned us to regard theology as abstruse speculation. Now, praxis, analysis, and faith all conspire to make us see that for theology, too, the point is not to contemplate or explain the world but to change it. And so we speak of a theology that leads to transforming action. And whereas any good theology must lead at least to individual transformation, we see that today's theology must not only do this but go beyond this and contribute to total life through societal transformation.

Such a critical stance towards dehumanization posed a threat to the status quo, and conflicts often ensued that necessitated shifts in how churches worshiped together. One example took place in Bislig, Surigao del Sur, Mindanao on December 9, 1984, when the Mangagoy United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) decided to alter their usual Sunday morning service to link arms and stand in solidarity with striking paper company workers who were experiencing military harassment. They held their worship service in the middle of the picket line, rather than at their usual

[72] Under the Marcos regime, the formal military force was brutal in its suppression of such variegated signs of resistance to its rule. Oracion explains that "journalists, lawyers, medical doctors, pastors and priests, students, workers and farmers who were suspected of subversion were arrested, tortured, and some summarily executed. Many more simply disappeared." See Oracion, *God With Us*, 14.

[73] Karl Gaspar, *Pumipiglas: Teyolohiya Ng Bayan—A Preliminary Sketch on the Theology of Struggle—from a Cultural-Liturgical Perspective* (Quezon City, Phillippines: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1986), 26.

church building.[74] In another example in the same province, this time in a village called Salvacion, members of a small UCCP congregation walked seven kilometers through the rain to the Philippine Constabulary headquarters where some of their members were being held as political prisoners. As they walked, congregants hummed the hymn "I Surrender All," in effect, to surrender to the Spirit who inspired their church to take this direct action.[75]

Central to theology of struggle praxis is the awareness that theology and knowledge come from the poor and oppressed themselves. For instance, Fr. Louie Hechanova opines that most *hacenderos* (sugar plantation owners) were kind, generous, and sincere people whenever dealt with on an individual basis; as a class, however, they will do what it takes to protect their class interests. Hechanova shares that this realization[76]

> led me to tone down somewhat the denunciation aspect of my preaching. I began to realize that denouncing the injustices of the oppressors was virtually acknowledging that the solution was going to come from them. Whereas I had reached the point of becoming convinced that their liberation as an oppressor class would come only through pressure from below.

Mariano C. Apilado affirms this observation that liberation comes from the margins, writing provocatively that "the poor must have this murderous mentality to destroy and kill poverty; that is to say they must have an indomitable spirit, a political will to destroy the obsolete concepts that some are born poor and are meant to remain poor."[77] Cariño similarly stresses that the orientation of the theology of struggle is set towards the grassroots and that "a practical theology of the future must be a theology that arises from a Christian life that is rooted in and primarily oriented towards earth. Such a theology can only arise from below and not from above."[78] Later, he poignantly adds that "theology must start from the angle of the victims of the disappearing forests. To do so is not ridding theology of heaven; it is simply transferring heaven to earth."[79] To return to Hechanova, "It is when the poor themselves

[74] Asedillo, *Faith in Struggle*, 11.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 18.
[77] Mariano C. Apilado, "Blessed Are the Poor," *Kalinangan*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1991): 13.
[78] Cariño, "Praxis and Religious Thought," 38.
[79] Ibid., 40.

get liberated that a liberation would occur among the rich."[80] There is no longer any need to look to the powerful elite for solutions.

Theology of struggle praxis ultimately comes to life in the places where despair meets hope. According to Cariño, "[T]o say that theological reflection must start from the earth means it must begin at the point where human suffering and human hope meet."[81] To speak of the earth in this way is not to romanticize it; yet the starting point remains the "earth that is being raped and deprived of its forests and trees, its fish and its waters." To start from the earth is to begin, for example, with the Kalinga tribesman, as he and his people organize against the building of the Chico River Dam across their ancestral lands and waters, and to ask in solidarity with this people, "Where will our trees and forests go, and where will we fish?"[82] Cariño explains,[83]

> [T]o de-romanticize the earth and to start from the under-earth is not to despair. When one enters the shack of a deprived and poor person, one sees desolation, but one might also discover there the infinite capacity and power of people to renew their lives and the world in which they live.

Thus, to begin with those who are struggling leads the theology of struggle back to a position of hope.

The theology of struggle embodies, therefore, both despair and hope. It privileges a view of reality extending beyond the perspective of *suffering*, in general terms, to the vantage points of "the suffering who dare cast themselves in the workings of the divine Spirit who . . . silently yet mightily struggle[s] to wrestle with the world's principalities and restore creation to its wholeness and lead it to its highest consummation."[84] In the dialectic between the suffering of the earth and the possibilities for its renewal is where theology and the Christian life must be practiced, for such is the path from despair to hope.

Process for Identifying Key Texts and Gender Dynamics

No short selection of foundational writings can do justice to the breadth and multiplicity of sources that emerged during the era of the 1970s to 1990s, as theology of struggle writings emerged in magazines, pamphlets, popular education materials, poetry, songs, worship services, and speeches at protest rallies. In my assessment of the theology of struggle movement for the purposes of this article, I identify four key texts that are crucial to the

[80] Asedillo, *Faith in Struggle*, 18.
[81] Cariño, "Praxis and Religious Thought," 39.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., 40.
[84] Oracion, *God With Us*, 42.

development of theology of struggle discourse. This assessment is based on the following two criteria: (1) the texts have been authored by some of the most influential and widely recognized theology of struggle writers, and (2) the articulations can be validated against, i.e., triangulated in alignment with, the majority of theology of struggle writing being produced in the same time period (1970s to 1990s). The four "foundational" texts to be identified in the next section are only representative—and inadequately so—of a much larger discourse involving many more voices and perspectives. Therefore, some further comment on the delimitations of process is in order.

Writers of the theology of struggle have shared their particular perspectives on what the most important "sources" of the movement are. Most notable among these, perhaps, is Gaspar's claim, "If you want to know about the theology of struggle, the indigenous theology emerging in the Philippines, do not look for a book. There isn't one; and none may be written soon."[85] Cariño explains that many of the books on the theology of struggle have either been produced mainly to "satisfy the inquisitiveness of non-Filipinos or of Filipinos who are not in the struggle."[86] He also adds that some books are written in forms that do not "look like theology at all," referencing Gaspar's own *Pumipiglas* as an example, since many who do this kind of theology are "busy doing other things than writing theology"; another reason for the unrecognizability, according to Cariño, is that "the Filipino context is one that is dominated primarily by a mode of oral tradition" that relatives the importance of texts.[87] As generations come and go, however, it is vital for the movement to record and recall its experiences and articulations.

In the theology of struggle, the theological "Subject," as it were, is much more varied that in traditional theology. The theology of struggle "is not the product mainly of the professional theologian," and, instead, people from different sectors of the Philippine church and society are considered its primary creators. As an example of such variant *Subjects*, Cariño points to peasant leader, Jimmy Tadeo, whom he calls one of the theology of struggle's "most passionate articulators." He describes how Tadeo conveyed the urgency of land reform "in beautiful Tagalog, almost always delivered in rapid fire fashion," and how he presented "in vivid and moving language the predicament of the Filipino

[85] Battung, et al., *Religion and Society*, 45.

[86] Feliciano Cariño, "The Theology of Struggle as Contextual Theology: Some Discordant Notes," in *Asian Politics and Ecumenical Vision: Selected Writings of Feliciano V. Cariño*, eds., Philip L. Wickeri and Marina True (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2013), 45. Cariño specifically cites Battung, et al., *Religion and Society* as informative material for the disengaged.

[87] Ibid., 45-46.

farmer."[88] Such experiences and articulations call for memory and reflection. Cariño explains that, "although there are some projects being conceived to systematize the religious thought of 'Ka Jimmy,' it is more important, I think, that this rapid fire theology born in the risky task of organizing peasants on the march is grasped in its original language and in its original locus"; in other words, Cariño warns that, once Tadeo's theology is translated apart from its context, it actually "loses its primary import."[89] For those without the benefit of comprehending Tagalog, the translation process for archiving Tadeo's contributions is being undertaken, yet much may be lost in translation vis-à-vis Tadeo's context.

Another procedural delimiter is the reckoning of a "gendered" archive. Three of the four foundational sources I will identify as "key texts" for the theology of struggle movement were authored by men, while the fourth—a compilation featuring women writers—is largely dominated by male voices, nonetheless. Although there were, in fact, several notable women contributors to the theology of struggle—including Sr. Mary John Mananzan, Elizabeth Dominguez, Rebecca Asedillo, and Virginia Fabella—in the movement's own historical memory, women have not generally been considered the foundational originators of the movement in the ways that men like Edicio de la Torre, Karl Gaspar, and Eleazar Fernandez are regarded. Around the same time that theology of struggle writings were being generated, an ecumenical women's movement was also rising up in the Philippines, committed to unlearning patriarchy and innovating feminist, liberationist Christian faith practices. Philippine women, trained in theology and sponsored by EATWOT's (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) Commission on Women, held their 1984 consultation in Tagaytay City. Emerging from that gathering was the sense that, while a theology of struggle was emerging largely in response to political instability and economic crises in the Philippines, the movement was not explicitly addressing women's concerns. Thus, the Philippine National Consultation set as its objective the promotion of a liberationist theology of struggle from the perspectives of Philippine women. If the broader theology of struggle could be defined as centrally involving a critique of US colonialism and imperialism, while focusing its activism locally on the struggle for national freedom and democracy in the Philippines rather exclusively, then the ecumenical women's movement stands apart, in that it focused on transnational grassroots solidarity among Asian women's theologies from the start, while being less nationalistically driven concerning only the Philippines. With all of

[88] Ibid., 47.
[89] Ibid.

these considerations in mind, the pathway for identifying the movement's core texts now leads to an overview of the same.

Overview of Foundational Texts

The first source I identify as a foundational text of the theology of struggle movement is Edicio de la Torre's *Touching Ground, Taking Root: Theological and Political Reflections on the Philippine Struggle*. Before Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines in September 1972, de la Torre had been involved in a range of political organizations: national chaplain of the Federation of Free Farmers or *Khi Rho ng Pilipinas*, national council member of *Kilusang Kristiyano ng Kabataang Pilipino*, board member of Philippine Ecumenical Committee for Community Organization, and founding chairman of Christians for National Liberation. With the declaration of martial law throughout the Philippines, de la Torre went into hiding, given his prodigious political activity that by the time would have marked him a threat to the government. However, on December 13, 1974, he was found and arrested for "conspiracy to commit rebellion." Imprisoned without trial for half a decade, he was released in April of 1980 and permitted to study in Europe. Upon returning to the Philippines to conduct his field research, de la Torre was arrested once more on April 22, 1982, and charged again with rebellion. He was finally released from prison on March 1, 1986.

Bishop Labayen describes de la Torre's significance in the following way:[90]

> The name Ed de la Torre was a by-word in the social activism of the sixties. His personal commitment and involvement in the struggle of our Filipino people towards a much-needed and long-overdue social change gave indisputable credibility to his fiery eloquence in rallies, conferences and seminars.

Touching Ground, Taking Root is the first published collection of de la Torre's writings in English (1986). The anthology helps those of us who come afterward to understand the thinking that influenced a significant number of church people, in particular during the early years of the movement. Some of de la Torre's pre-martial law writings comprise the first two sections of the volume, with the first titled "Looking Back" representing what has been named as his "reformist" phase of social involvement, and the second titled

[90] Edicio de la Torre, *Touching Ground, Taking Root: Theological and Political Reflections on the Philippine Struggle* (Quezon City, Phillippines: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1986), vi.

"Through the Storm" representing de la Torre's attempts to reconcile Christianity and political radicalism.

The second source I identify as a foundational text of the theology of struggle is Karl Gaspar's *Pumipiglas: Teyolohiya Ng Bayan—A Preliminary Sketch on the Theology of Struggle—from the Cultural-Liturgical Perspective* (1986). Gaspar was recognized to be a staunch human rights advocate and an active lay theologian even before he joined the Redemptorists (Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer) in 1984. A "writer-artist" and church worker, Gaspar pursued liberation and peace, especially in Mindanao where he was based. He also popularized people's theater through creative liturgical dramas and stage plays. *Pumipiglas* is full of poetry, songs, liturgies, and theater productions that dramatize the Filipino people's desire for freedom, thereby expressing their articulations of the social and political context in which they lived as well as how they envisioned their spirituality to be deeply aligned with the quest for justice.

Gaspar was the first layman elected as executive secretary of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (1977-1980). In March of 1983, he was arrested and tried for "subversion." Almost two years later, the judge dismissed the charge and had him released. Published by the Socio-Pastoral Institute, *Pumipiglas* bears witness to the many artistic forms by which the theology of struggle was conveyed in community. Gaspar argues that, before the theology of struggle was communicated through scholarly works or the written word, it was conveyed through more symbolic and expressive forms of language— "images, symbols, life expressions bursting out in the arts (songs, poems, artwork, plays and the like). One cannot begin to explain what [the theology of struggle] is without first tapping the richness of this source."[91] He describes that oftentimes "the message is between the lines, the symbolism is beyond words, the meanings are embedded in the totality of the theatre piece."[92] Other religiously inflected art forms Gaspar describes in the book include prayer rallies, funeral masses for martyrs, and ecumenical liturgical celebrations on human rights issues.

The third foundational text I will identify as pivotal for understanding the theology of struggle is Eleazar Fernandez' *Towards a Theology of Struggle*. Published in 1994, Fernandez' text was the first systematic and constructive scholarly account of the theology of struggle. In his introduction to the book, Fernandez recognizes that, "given my vocation and training, I see that I could contribute to a larger cause by helping to articulate the theology of

[91] Gaspar, *Pumipiglas*, vi.
[92] Ibid.

struggle."[93] His monograph builds upon existing theology of struggle literature and critically assesses its methodology and content. The book also does constructive work, by pursuing and thematizing the theology of struggle's most important points and by proposing additional interpretations based on the movement's stated goals and aspirations.

Fernandez divides his book into three sections— (1) context, (2) theological construction, and (3) method. Throughout the text, Fernandez fuses the "the suffering and struggle of Filipinos" with "the horizon of Christian and other sources," so that the interpreter might "project a new reality in which she or he may dwell poetically and construct politically."[94] Thus, Fernandez locates the theology of struggle in the history and culture of a people who have endured colonial oppression, neo-colonialism, and dictatorship, thereby rooting it as an anti-imperialist struggle:[95]

> On March 16, 1521, the Philippines was "discovered" by Fernando Magallanes, so many noted historians say. Discovered? From whose perspective? From whose point of view? Is it not from the conquerors of the Filipino people?

Because Christianity and colonialism historically colluded in the oppression of the Filipino people, as Fernandez explains, resistance to oppression must include a struggle within the very realm of theology itself—an ongoing struggle to redefine symbols and to realize divine empowerment, namely in encountering the God of liberation who comes to set the people free from their bondage.

The fourth foundational source I identify is the essay anthology *Religion and Society: Towards a Theology of Struggle Book I,* edited by Sr. Mary Rosario Battung, Liberato Bautista, Maria Sophia Lizares-Bodegon, and Alice G. Guillermo. The volume was published in 1988 by the Forum for Interdisciplinary Endeavors and Studies, and the compilation features writings by three groups that were involved in the development of the theology of struggle, viz. the Ecumenical Bishops Forum, the Forum for Interdisciplinary Endeavors and Studies, and the Theologians for Renewal, Unity and Social Transformation. These groups had been united by a common engagement in the struggle of the Philippines' poor and taken by an ecclesial vision of a transformed church that would be equipped to respond to the particularities of oppression in the Philippines—as the editors say, to "accompany the Filipino people, particularly the struggling poor, through the complexities of becoming a free and sovereign nation vis-a-vis the spectre of

[93] Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 2.
[94] Ibid., 5.
[95] Ibid., 6.

imperialism."[96] The book describes its contribution as being grounded in "pastoral experience, active solidarity with people's movements, shared theological reflection, and a commonly shared faith in Jesus-Christ."[97] In an opening disclaimer, which also reads as a statement of values, the collection clarifies that its writers, editors, artists, and subjects were all "on the run." In fact, the book describes its coalescing as "Theology-Written-on-the-Run," with[98]

> writers skipping across islands and even continents in between deadlines and critique sessions; editors dipping in and out of financial statements, national conventions, hospitals, classrooms; proofreading on buses; bishops, priests, sisters, lay people meeting in church offices, cafes and fast food centers, and during car rides.

This description gets at a central value of the theology of struggle—its scholarly articulations and manuscripts are secondary to the movement's praxis, located as it is in community and in the midst of the struggling poor.

In his introducing the theology of struggle for the volume, Cariño describes the movement as "vintage Filipino theology" that emerged from the Philippine context as a primary mode of theological reflection for those Christians involved in the Philippine struggle. A noted theology of struggle writer and one of the Philippines' foremost theologians and ecumenical leaders of the late twentieth century, Cariño primarily engaged the work of solidarity through his connections with the Student Christian Movement, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the World Student Christian Federation, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, and the Christian Conference of Asia. More important than any articulation of a novel theology, according to Cariño, has been the "usefulness and serviceability of the Christian tradition in its theological, liturgical and symbolic expressions to make Christians more effective in the struggle to bring about a transformed Philippine society and equally transformed Philippine church."[99] He notes that the emphasis for theology of struggle writers lies mainly upon sharpening the Philippine struggle itself, namely in finding ways for Christians to participate in and contribute to that struggle more fully.

---

[96] Battung, et al., *Religion and Society*, i.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., iii.
[99] Ibid., vi.

Conclusion

The liberationist theo-ethics developed through the theology of struggle writings between the 70s-90s in the Philippines are hardly being engaged in the theological academy, and its original writers are aging. If we do not collect the information, we have access to now, this critical resistance knowledge may fade into obscurity. The focus of this essay has been on writings that articulate the history and basic tenets of the theology of struggle as liberation theology — arguments that consider the tasks of Christian theology and ethics in relation to solidarity with the poor and oppressed in the Philippines and national struggles for freedom and democracy in the 1970s to 1990s.

While the theology of struggle movement itself could have benefitted from a deeper and more explicit engagement with the ecumenical women's movement and the feminist theology that was then being generated, Asian feminist postcolonial theology and ethics today would also benefit from resisting the historical amnesia that so often besets us when we do not remember or forget to look to the crucial theological and ethical production of our Asian Christian forebears in the struggle for justice. The theology of struggle was itself a form of postcolonial theology in its interrogation of the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, and its writings can be interpreted as instances of decolonial and postcolonial work and resistance.

Amidst increasing academic attention paid to decolonization and deimperialization in Christian studies, as well as to deepening understanding of the meanings of liberation theology and ethics, it remains critically important not to subsume these theologies under the "Asian" category without true representation, but instead to engage the particular theo-ethics that have emerged and continue to emerge from the Philippine theology of struggle and other sites of resistance to present and historic US imperialism, colonialism, and Christian hegemony.

About the Author

Lisa Asedillo is finishing her PhD in Christian Ethics at Drew University. Her dissertation, which focuses on the theology of struggle and ecumenical women's movement of the 1970s-1990s in the Philippines, mines the history of Philippine Christian resistance for what she terms *pedagogical strategies of freedom*. In addition, she teaches writing at Pratt Institute in New York and serves on the board of PANAAWTM (Pacific, Asian, and Asian North American Women in Theology and Ministry).

Bibliography

Abesamis, Carlos. "Faith and Life Reflections from the Grassroots in the Philippines." In *In Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*. New York: Orbis Books, 1980.

_____. *Where Are We Going: Heaven or New World?* Manila: Communication Foundation for Asia, 1986.

Apilado, Mariano C. "Blessed Are the Poor." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 11, No. 2 (1991).

Asedillo, Rebecca. "A Protestant Woman's Emerging Spirituality." *In God's Image*. Vol. 12, No. 3 (1993).

_____. *Faith in Struggle*. Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1988.

Asedillo, Rebecca C., and B. David Williams. *The Sari-Sari Store: A Philippine Scrapbook*. New York: Friendship Press, 1989.

Battung, Mary Rosario, Liberato C. Bautista, Ma. Sophia Lizares-Bodegon, and Alice G. Guillermo. *Religion and Society: Towards a Theology of Struggle*. Manila: FIDES, 1998.

Brown, Robert McAfee. *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1978.

Cariño, Feliciano. "Biblical and Theological Reflections on Current Economic Life." In *Asian Politics and Ecumenical Vision: Selected Writings of Feliciano V. Cariño*. Eds., Philip L. Wickeri and Marina True. Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2013.

_____. "Praxis and Religious Thought: Towards a Practical Theological Reflection in the Philippine Setting." In *Asian Politics and Ecumenical Vision: Selected Writings of Feliciano V. Cariño*. Eds., Philip L. Wickeri and Marina True. Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2013.

_____. "The Theology of Struggle as Contextual Theology: Some Discordant Notes." In *Asian Politics and Ecumenical Vision: Selected Writings of Feliciano V. Cariño*. Eds., Philip L. Wickeri and Marina True. Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2013.

_____. "Theology, Politics & Struggle." *TUGON: An Ecumenical Journal of Discussion and Opinion*. Quezon City, Phillippines:

National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1986.

_____. "Towards a Culture of Freedom: On Saying 'No' to the American Bases." In *On Wastes and National Dignity: Views and Voices on the US Military Bases*. Eds., Aida Jean B. Nacpil-Manipon and Elizabeth B. Rifareal. Quezon City, Phillippines: International Affairs Desk, National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1988.

Chiba, Shin, George Hunsberger, and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz. *Christian Ethics in Ecumenical Context: Theology, Culture, and Politics in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995.

Dagdag, Teresa. "Emerging Theology in the Philippines Today." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 3 (1983).

Dingayan, Luna L. "Your Kin-Dom Come." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (1997).

Dollaga, Norma P. "Family Altar/Local Church Service for Christmas Eve." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 15, No. 2 (1995).

Dominguez, Elizabeth. "Signs and Countersigns of the Kingdom of God in Asia Today: Some Biblical Reflections." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 4, No. 4 (1984).

Fernandez, Eleazar S. *Toward a Theology of Struggle*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.

Galilea, Segundo. *Liberation Theology and the Vatican Document*. Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1958.

Gaspar, Karl. *Pumipiglas: Teyolohiya Ng Bayan—A Preliminary Sketch on the Theology of Struggle—from a Cultural-Liturgical Perspective*. Quezon City, Phillippines: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1986.

Graham, Helen R. "On a New Way of Being Church: A Biblico-Historical Reflection." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 10, No. 3 (1990).

Juan, E. San Juan. "Imperial Terror, Neo-Colonialism and the Filipino Diaspora." Lecture given at St. John's University, New York, October 9, 2003.

Kalinangan, Vol. 2 (1982). Cover.

Miller, Lois, and Byron S. Lamson. "Philippines, Republic of the." In *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*. Ed., Nolan B. Harmon. Vol. 2. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974.

Nadeau, Kathleen M. *Liberation Theology in the Philippines: Faith in a Revolution*. London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.

Niguidula, Lydia N. "God's Strategies in Oppressive Systems." In *Human Rights: Biblical and Theological Readings*. Ed., Liberato Bautista. Quezon City, Phillippines: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1988.

Oracion, Levi. *God with Us: Reflections on the Theology of Struggle in the Philippines*. Dumaguete, Phillippines: Silliman University Divinity School, 2001.

Salgado, Pedro. "National Sovereignty, A Historical Perspective."

Kalinangan, Vol. 10 (1990).

de la Torre, Edicio. *Touching Ground, Taking Root: Theological and Political Reflections on the Philippine Struggle*. Quezon City, Phillippines: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1986.

Torres, Sergio, and Virginia Fabella. *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Developing World: Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians*. London: G. Chapman, 1980.

Zerbe, Gordon. "Enlivening [Reinvigorating] Our Imagination about God's Reign." *Kalinangan*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (1997).