

The Dynamics Between Catholicism and Philippine Society

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As a country where more than 80% of the citizens belong to one religious group, the Philippines provides an interesting case study for the topic of our conference, Religions and Civil Society/State. This paper offers an analysis of the dynamics between Catholicism and Philippine society with special reference to two recent pastoral letters of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). These letters came from the entire body composed of all active and retired bishops, and were written for dissemination among Catholics throughout the country. The two letters issued in 1998 and 1999 focus on politics and culture respectively; hence their relevance to our conference theme.

CONTEXTS OF DISCUSSION

This study of the dynamics between Catholicism and Philippine society is undertaken within a context wider than simply the relations between Church and State. Church-State relations stay on the level of institutions and their relations therefore are governed through legal codification, more specifically that of the constitutional principle of separation of Church and State. According to Jesuit constitutional lawyer Joaquin Bernas, this principle, which in all versions of the Philippine Constitution is lifted from the American Constitution, refers to the guarantee of freedom of religion and the non-establishment of a particular religion. Under this principle, the State cannot regulate the internal affairs of any religion nor use any of its resources in favor of a particular religion.

What the constitutional principle says is clear, but as we know, the constitution like any legal document exists within the wider social context. Its application therefore depends on this social context. Take the use of state property such as government buildings for any religious

purpose. In the United States, local governments cannot put up Christmas decorations with images of the Baby Jesus because in doing so they would favor Christianity. Here in the Philippines, this is not only common but expected in any government office building. You may have even noticed a statue of the Virgin Mary in a corner of the airport lounge. It is therefore not adequate to simply focus on Church-State relations without a consideration of the social context.

The second context of this paper's discussion has to do with our common interest in inter-religious dialogue. At the background of the following *analysis* of the dynamics between Catholicism and Philippine society lies a question that is most significant for us: Can Catholicism, given its overwhelming majority and long history in Philippine society, truly engage in inter-religious dialogue? This question is not primarily concerned with theology. We are familiar with the efforts of Catholic theologians like Paul Knitter, Aloysius Pieris and most recently Roger Haight to justify inter-religious dialogue within Catholic theology. While such theological justifications have their use, the above question is posed on a broad sociological level with serious consideration of Catholicism history and social presence. And if our answer is yes, Catholicism in the Philippines can engage in true inter-religious dialogue, e.g. the Bishops-Ulama Conference, then we need to ask further what provided the conditions for this possibility.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the present dynamics of Catholicism and Philippine society and state, a brief and broad historical background is in order.

As is well known and analogous with other Asian countries, Catholicism came to the Philippine archipelago aboard the ships of the Spanish monarchy in the 16th century. This historical fact has been interpreted in two extreme ways—on the one hand, that Catholicism was completely imposed on the natives through the use of superior military, political and cultural force, and on the other hand, that Catholicism rescued native society from pagan and uncivilized darkness.

More careful historical analysis though proves both extreme interpretations inadequate. There was clear inequality between Spanish colonial power and native society, which was then fragmented into small settlements of several hundred families. At the same time, the early

bearers of Catholicism, the Spanish missionaries, were not simply functionaries of the Spanish monarchy who administered the churches in the New World by virtue of the *Patronato Real*. In fact, they were at times critical of the exploitation of the native *indios* by the Spanish *conquistadores*. Thus there was ambiguity in the relationship between the representatives of Catholicism and those of the Spanish colonial state.

This ambiguity was used by both parties to their advantage throughout the history of Spanish colonial presence in the Philippines. Moreover, representatives of Catholicism were at times divided between the diocesan clergy and the religious orders, between Spanish and native, and each faction allied with the functionaries of the Spanish colonial government for their own interests. Native society, often the bystander in these conflicts, gained or lost as a result of these conflicts.

Still Catholicism unavoidably played an important part in native society. Though dismissive of any perceived trace of idolatry in local culture, Spanish missionaries had to employ the local languages and native cultural resources in order to be able to evangelize. They gathered the scattered settlements into towns centered around the church and the municipal hall. They introduced not only the lives of saints but also new crops and new methods of farming. Later they set up schools, hospitals and orphanages. In brief, they played a far-reaching role in native society, often doing what they perceived to be for its good.

But there was a dark side to this also. Being Spaniards, the missionaries paid allegiance to Mother Spain even if at times, they had sharp differences with her functionaries. Being humans, they were also prone to take part in the exploitation of the natives and to protect their own interests at the expense of those under their pastoral care. This conjuncture of national allegiance and personal self-centeredness became most intense against the Moslems because it was given theological justification; hence protracted conflict between Catholics and Moslems the effects of which remain today.

By the 19th. century, however, Catholicism had ceased to be under the control of its missionaries. Generations of native Catholics had made it their own, despite the abuses of its supposed representatives and the attempts of Church officials to control the interpretation and practice of Catholicism. This native appropriation of Christianity is most manifest in popular devotions, which though originally from Spain took native roots. An important strand of the nationalist and

revolutionary movements that culminated in Philippine independence came from this stream of popular Catholicism.

The coming of the Americans changed the situation of Catholicism in Philippine society. First, it brought contacts with a society then increasingly shaped by modernity. Second, it had to face the reality of a different reading and tradition of Christianity in the Protestant Churches. In spite of the ravages of the Philippine Revolution and these changes, Catholicism quickly adjusted to the new regime. While it was put out of the newly organized government/public school system under the guise of the American constitutional principle of separation of church and state, it established schools with an vengeance. New religious orders, some of them with experience in the United States, set up Catholic schools within the civil framework of the Philippine Commonwealth. In a sense, the defeat of the Spaniards worked to the advantage of Catholicism in the Philippines. Though it had to initially bear the ire against Spanish friars, the cutting of its ties with civil government during American occupation freed it from being identified with the ruling political power. This distance from the political establishment even enabled a small but influential group within Catholicism to be prophetically engaged in social problems, especially the problem of land tenancy, from the late 1930 up to the 1950.

This brief and broad historical background points to the extensive but not entirely flattering role that Catholicism played in the history and formation of Philippine society. In other words, though it does not emerge from history unscathed, it is not surprising why it retains an overwhelming majority of the population.

READING OF THE CBCP PASTORAL LETTERS ON POLITICS AND CULTURE

The foregoing historical background focused on the role Catholicism played in Philippine society. This section examines how the highest official body within Catholicism in the Philippines understands Philippine society in its last two general pastoral letters.

These letters, the first on Philippine politics and the second on culture, deserve to be commended for their consideration of significant dimensions of the social situation and their efforts to provide guidance to Filipino Catholics regarding these dimensions. Furthermore, their theological foundations and directives reflect the wisdom and boldness of contemporary thinking as found, for example, in the FABC tradition.

The following reading of both letters, however, prescind from their pastoral value and theological content, and is rather concerned about their analysis of Philippine society itself. And here the two letters, together and separately, describe much that is observable but leave much to be desired, especially on the points discussed below:

(a) the lack of an integral framework of analysis

While there are occasional attempts at cross references, the two letters do not clearly articulate the relationship between its largely negative account of Philippine politics and its description of Philippine culture in terms of values. Moreover, both do not contain any serious discussion of how economic factors and structures determine or at least influence both politics and culture.

(b) the facile identification of the root of political malaise as greed and selfishness

Though there is more than a grain of truth here, the letter on politics fails to consider that perhaps the reason why Philippine political culture is marked by anomalies is the weakness of civil society. Cheating before, during and after election may be rampant, in part because of some self-centered people but also because there are not enough NGO's or PO's to safeguard the whole process. In fact, the main reason why traditional politicians in the Philippines, who are derogatorily called *trapos* ('rags') do not listen to NGO's and PO's is because they do not matter in terms of votes.

(c) the absence of a discussion of culture as response to the physical and social environment

As mentioned earlier, the letter on culture concentrates on values. This is grossly insufficient because cultural values change as a function of changes in the environment. This insufficiency is further evident in the fact that the negative points in its analysis of Philippine culture are simply an excess of the positive. The value of the close family ties is praised; correspondingly, giving the family too much value is criticized. In the end then, this kind of analysis leads nowhere.

There are other points that could be mentioned regarding both pastoral letters, but let the above suffice to suggest the unavoidable question that arises when we put the conclusion of the section on the

historical background with the CBCP analysis of Philippine society: If Catholicism played such an extensive role in Philippine society, why is Philippine politics practically as a whole, and its culture to some extent, as damaged as they are? The two pastoral letters fail to answer this because of their lack of an analytical framework, and this leads us to explore the dynamics between Catholicism and Philippine society further.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN THEIR DYNAMICS

Limitations of time prevent us from elaborating a full analytical framework, but we can indicate certain necessary considerations if we are to understand the dynamics between Catholicism and Philippine society better.

First, we need to distinguish between the influence of the Catholic Church and that of Christian stories and symbols. As has been mentioned, Catholicism in terms of the Catholic Church still retains an overwhelming majority, though only thirty percent of Catholics have any regular contact with the Church. Nevertheless, the reach of Christian stories and symbols is far greater, because they have historically shaped Philippine culture to a great extent and politics to a lesser.

Because of this wider reach of Christian stories and symbols, the Catholic Church often forgets the limits of its own actual influence. It always points to the EDSA Revolution as witness. This is of course true in part; but this dramatic social moment came about also in part due to the fact that the Catholic Church provided a relatively safe umbrella for social critique against the Marcos dictatorship, and in part due to the imaginative power of Christian stories and symbols long part of Philippine culture.

This memory lapse on the part of the Catholic Church always exposes it to the temptation towards Christendom, that is, a practical union of Church and State. Of course, it will not declare this openly, but actions on the part of certain leaders of the Catholic Church speak louder than words; for example, the much publicized visits of presidential candidates to the Archbishop of Manila before elections. This temptation will continue to be strong as long as membership in the Catholic Church constitutes the overwhelming majority.

But there are reality checks to this illusion on the part of the Catholic Church. There have been three instances when the leaders of

the Catholic Church were rebuffed by many in Philippine society—the election of President Joseph ‘Erap’ Estrada (though the Church veiled its opposition); the execution of prisoner Leo Echagaray (the first after the reinstatement of the death penalty); and the ratification of the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States. These indicate that Philippine Society is increasingly becoming ‘freed’ from the grip of the Catholic Church, largely as a result of globalization and the pluralism it brings.

In conclusion, let us return to the fundamental concern that has brought Inter-Religio together, inter-religious dialogue, and which was identified as the context of discussion of this paper: Can the Catholicism in terms of the Catholic Church truly engage in inter-religious dialogue, given its overwhelming majority and long history? After the preceding discussion, one can say yes. but only if it learns to participate in the *kenosis* of the Son, only if it acts not out of power but powerlessness.