

Translating Christianity into Asian Tongues: Cultural Dynamics and Theological Issues

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The theme of this essay is the relation between Christian Faith and cultural context, that is, a particular geographical and/or social space-time. This theme comes from what appears to be a simple question: what happens when Christianity enters a new cultural context? I say only apparently simple, as it immediately implicates one's understanding of Christianity and cultural context. In other words, it is not only about the relation between these two, but also about their very definitions.

On the whole, the essay suggests that the relation between Christianity and cultural context is a dynamic encounter engendering different shapes of Christianity and which may be appropriately described in terms of translation. Furthermore, the theological issues that arise out of such an understanding call for what I refer to as a theology of cultural context from below.

The essay is organized as a triptych with the following panels: (a) an illustration of the cultural dynamics involved in the entry of Christianity in the early 17th century Philippine society, (b) a proposal to consider translation as a paradigm for this dynamics, and (c) some points for a theology of cultural context from below.

Before discussing the first panel, let me offer the following caveat. Though Christianity entered various cultural contexts from the very beginning, my illustrations come from the Philippines, and other parts of South and East Asia. This is not to claim that these illustrations are unique, nor that the cultural dynamics and theological issues discussed here apply uniformly to these different Asian contexts. Yet, I venture to suggest that these illustrations can analogously apply to other contexts.

1. Beyond Transplanting Christianity

The encounter between Christianity and cultural context has often been described as a unilateral process of transplanting the former into the social, economic and political matrix and the ethos that accompany it. During the so-called age of exploration from the 16th century onward, this encounter often

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occurred within the context of patronage agreements between the papacy and the monarchies of Spain and Portugal, making their kings the effective heads of the church in the colonies. But evangelization in Asia differed from that in the Americas, due to new factors such as the influential views of Dominican Bartolome de las Casas, a well-known advocate in Spain and the Americas of the natives' welfare, and also the different cultural situations.

Of great significance in Asia was the decision to use local languages in the missionaries' task of evangelizing. With painstaking diligence, they produced catechisms, sermon anthologies and prayers and, in some instances, romanized the vernaculars and codified their grammars. Here, outstanding Jesuit examples would be Mateo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India, Alexander de Rhodes in Vietnam and Pedro de San Lucar in the Philippines. Through this grappling with new languages, their task evokes the same question we started with: what happens when Christianity enters a new cultural context? Recent analyses show that their work of evangelization could not be construed as an outright transplantation despite their traditional theology of mission but as a dynamic encounter between Christianity and the cultural context.

To illustrate, allow me to discuss how Francisco Blancas de San Jose (d. 1614), Dominican missionary and author of a Spanish-Tagalog dictionary and a sermon anthology, sought to introduce Christianity through his preaching to an early 17th century Tagalog audience.² In particular, I will focus on Blancas' use of the word "alipin" and its cognates, which he renders in his 1609 dictionary with the Spanish word "esclavo" [slave], a word central to both Christian discourse related to soteriology, and the Tagalog society then. In this process of evangelizing, the religious and theological tradition Blancas belonged to and brought, the shift in language from Spanish to Tagalog, and the social life-world of his Tagalog audience all came into play.

The use of slavery as a symbolic language for the human condition and for redemption has been common from the New Testament onward. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians addressed a unique historical conjuncture of actual slavery and metaphorical slavery of the human before God, and asked Christians, slave or master, to live as God's faithful slave.³ Gerald O'Collins points to other NT passages where "human beings were understood to be enslaved by hostile powers (e.g. I Cor. 15:24-5; Eph. 1:22-3; 2:1-2)."⁴ O'Collins thus notes that "the

² This section of the essay summarizes and updates my earlier article, "Alipin ng Dios, Alipin ng DemONIO: Translating Slavery as Religious Symbol," in Francisco Blancas de San Jose OP (+1614), *Sermones* ed. Jose Mario C. Francisco SJ (Quezon City: Pulong: Sources for Philippine Studies, 1994), pp. 370-95.

³ S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 182.

⁴ Gerald O'Collins, "Redemption: Some Crucial Issues" in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer*, ed. Stephen T. Davies, Daniel Kendall, SJ, and Gerald O-Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

manumission of slaves and the ransoming of prisoners of war (out of captivity by a purchasing agent) also helped to shape the cultural setting in which NT Christians proclaimed Christ as 'redeeming,' 'buying,' 'ransoming,' 'freeing,' or 'liberating' 'us,' 'you,' 'his people,' 'Israel,' 'many,' or 'all.'⁵

But "while nowhere does the NT speak of this 'price' or 'ransom' being paid to someone (e.g. God) or to something (e.g. the law)," this biblical metaphor was often taken literally and subsequently associated with ideas about God's wrath or the devil's cruelty.⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus "vigorously protested against the whole idea of a divine redemption as a ransom paid to the devil,"⁷ but other patristic and late medieval writers "even spoke of human beings as being in the possession of the devil, whose 'rights' of ownership were 'respected' by the price of Jesus' blood being paid to release them from bondage."⁸

Threads of this biblical metaphor and its later medieval elaborations are woven into Blancas' sermons through direct references to medieval sources and the presence of similar analogous expressions. His sermons describe humankind as "God's evil slaves [manga alipin niyang masama],"⁹ who "were disobedient [tampalasan]" and "ran away [mapagtacas]."¹⁰ Created and owned by God but tainted by Adam's sin, they have been enslaved by the devil, a cruel lord who "severely oppresses and maltreats [them], and forces [them] to follow whatever it wishes [lubha niyang pinarorouahagui at binabagsican, at ipinangangahasang piloting somonod sa dilan loob niya]"¹¹ until they become total slaves, body and soul, in hell.

By their transgression, humans have provoked God's wrath, which called for the restoration of justice on the cosmic and personal levels. Here Blancas' sermons betray the influence of Anselm whose "principal theme is that Christ became man in order to put right what had been wrong in the world since the Fall of Adam."¹² In this soteriology whose cultural roots were not juridical and 'Roman' but found in monasticism and the feudal society of northern Europe,¹³ Anselm "portrays God as our feudal Overlord, and human beings as his servant-subjects who have offended against his honour,"¹⁴ and Christ "in no way is to be construed as a penal substitute who passively endured sufferings to appease the anger of

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Oratio* 45.22, cited in O'Collins., 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ Francisco, *Sermones*, 76. Page numbers of quotations or references from the sermon texts correspond to those in the original manuscript.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹² G. R. Evans, *Anselm and a New Generation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 162.

¹³ O'Collins, "Redemption: Crucial Issues," 9-10.

¹⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1989), 97.

a 'vindictive' God."¹⁵

Along these lines, Blancas' sermons emphasize that God "desires to cancel the debt humans owe [ay ybig co ring patauarin co cayo]."¹⁶ More so than the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son,¹⁷ God as a slave-owner looks for run-away slaves¹⁸ to put them under divine jurisdiction [*sacop*].¹⁹ Echoing Anselm even further, Blancas asks why God became human [*Cur Deus homo*]²⁰ and points to the work of Christ whose divinity is "sleeping with" his humanity.²¹ Christ took the form of a slave: born in a humble manger;²² washing his apostles' feet²³ and flogged with immense cruelty.²⁴ Through all this, Christ routed the devil and restored humankind, the devil's former slaves,²⁵ to the original justice.²⁶ Humans are no longer slaves of the devil but have become once more "God's slaves [alipin nang Dios]."²⁷

Thus has Blancas described the meaning of Christian redemption, (drawing from his knowledge of Christian tradition and) employing the biblical metaphor of slavery and its medieval elaboration based on feudal society. Human sinfulness is seen as an unjust transgression, and salvation by Christ as the restoration of divine honor and justice.

However, this soteriological description is languaged in 17th century Tagalog with its own vernacular nuances and for a native audience with a different view and practice of slavery. All these come into play and shape the native reception of Christianity.

This difference comes as a result of the shift in language and from the inevitable fact that missionaries like Juan de Plasencia looked at early 17th century Tagalog society through European eyes and could not place the status of "the unenfranchised and disenfranchised" within Spanish categories of social class.²⁸ In Jesuit historian John Schumacher's words, the local practice of "slavery, at least in some forms, was clearly not quite the same as chattel slavery practiced in the Americas and Europe, but in large part rather consisted of various types of dependency and peonage based on certain customary laws."²⁹ William Henry

¹⁵ O'Collins, "Redemption," 9.

¹⁶ Francisco, *Sermones*, 367.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 345.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-06.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 501-02.

²² *Ibid.*, 94-95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 538.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 529.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 28.

²⁸ William Henry Scott, *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain and Other Essays in Philippine History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985), 99-100.

²⁹ John N. Schumacher S.J., *Readings in Philippine Church History* (Quezon City: Loyola School of

Scott's extensive analysis shows that in essence, "an *alipin* was a man in debt to another man. His subordination was therefore, obligatory, not contractual: the other man was technically his creditor rather than his lord, and might be a *maguino*, *maharlika*, *timawa* or another *alipin*."³⁰ Thus what characterized *alipin* status was "a condition of more or less servitude, but this servitude was negotiable so that they could not necessarily be distinguished from the Second Estate by their economic condition alone."³¹ Another historian, Vince Rafael, concludes: "sixteenth-century Tagalog class structure thus was characterized by forms of indebtedness and servitude that were transferable and negotiable, allowing for random submission to authority. We might infer that rendering tribute [tax] and performing labor were less signs that memorialized one's submission to the master than ways of bargaining with him, of plugging into a circuit of indebtedness in which one could hope to accumulate the means to shift social registers."³²

This flexibility resulted in two kinds of *alipin*, distinguished by their place in relation to their creditor: "The normal *alipin* with land right was called *namamahay* (householder), and the one who had lost that right, *alipin sa gigilid* (those in the innermost part of the house or hearth), a category which also included those who never had such a right in the first place, namely, captive or purchases."³³

This native practice impacts the reception of Blancas' preaching and shapes the native understanding of Christian redemption. For example, angels are referred to and specified as "*alipin sa gigilid* [slaves who live in the house of God and closely associated with their master]"³⁴ and who could have been commanded to build Christ a house of gold to be born in.³⁵

But of greater import is how the native view and practice of slavery, based not on a formal legal code (as the colonizers might have expected), but on a more flexible system of transaction related to indebtedness, molded the native reception of Christian redemption.

Because of closer master-slave relations in the native society, it would have been less difficult for the Tagalog audience of Blancas to conceive a "Lord God who turns to, runs after and forgives his sinner-slaves who offended

Theology, 1979), 30.

³⁰ William Henry Scott, "Oripun and *Alipin* in the Sixteenth Century Philippines," in *Slavery, Bondage and Dependence in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1983), 146.

³¹ Scott, *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*, 100.

³² Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), 145.

³³ Scott, "Alipin and Oripun," 147.

³⁴ Francisco, *Sermones*, 139-40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

him terribly”³⁶ and who “woo[es] his slaves.”³⁷ Moreover, negotiation becomes characteristic of the relations between God and humanity. This transaction between God and the human is called in another sermon as “maquipagsaysay,” literally, settling one’s accounts.³⁸

Within this view of a close divine-human relationship characterized by negotiation, God’s magnanimity becomes even more pronounced. As master, God was under no obligation to save sinful humanity by sending his son. As Jesus Christ the Savior, God took up the life of a slave freely. This double magnanimity—when read within the Tagalog social context—signifies a patronage not born out of legal obligation or social contract as in feudal society, but based on favor.

But the shadow-side of God’s image as a benevolent patron is the prominent figure of the devil as an usurping lord. Once again the context of native society where masters fighting over slaves or raiding settlements for slaves were common contributes to the description of the devil as intruder³⁹ or as another master ready to pounce on others’ property, these “newly-converted Christians [whom] I preach to now”⁴⁰ and who may be tempted to return to their old ways. No longer engaged in idolatry [“pag aanito”], humans have been snatched [“ynagao”] by Christ and are now slaves under his dominion [“aliping quinampong”]. In effect, Christian salvation tends to be seen as a cosmic battle between two slave-owners, a good and an evil one.⁴¹

Hence what emerges in this dynamic encounter between Christianity and 17th century Tagalog society is a Christianity characterized by a view of divine-human relations in terms of negotiation and of salvation as a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Though these characteristics might have been present in the tradition brought by Blancas or even endemic to Christianity, it was the cultural context then that gave shape and prominence to these characteristics of Tagalog Christianity then.

These same characteristics continue to be noted in the discourse and practice of present-day Filipino Christianity. The current word for forgiveness, “pagpapatawad,” has its root in the word [tauwad] for haggling, and the word for savior, “manunubos,” in the word [tubos] for paying for something one has pawned. Prayers for supplication—in the form of novenas, rituals and *panata* [solemn promise]—are popular and talk about the demonic is common in religious speech and popular literature.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 369.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 515.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

2. Translating Christianity as a Paradigm

The foregoing study suggests that the encounter between Christianity and cultural context is dynamic and gives the former a different historical shape within the new context. Another Asian illustration is Francis Clooney's study of Christ as Divine Guru in the theology of Roberto de Nobili:

...it should be clear that calling Christ "guru" is not the same as calling him "teacher"; this new appellation is really the beginning of an effort to understand Christ within the context of whole new set of concepts and spiritual possibilities. That is to say, by utilizing the concept of guru, de Nobili is not only making something new intelligible to the Hindu, but is also thinking and saying something new about Christ that had never been said before. Christ is the guru: the "concealing revelation" of God among humans through the medium of human relationships, the salvific yet demythologized and aniconic presence of the divine in the human. De Nobili's contextualization thereby offers Christian theology (not just in India, but everywhere in the world!) the way toward a better utilization of the salvific/exemplary ideal that was never quite satisfactorily embodied in the tradition of Christ the teacher, the imitation of Christ, and so on.⁴²

Given the dynamic nature of the encounter between Christianity and cultural context, I would like to propose that this encounter should be described in terms of translation which George Steiner says "lies at the heart of speech."⁴³

The relation between Christianity and cultural context has been described in many ways. Robert Schreiter mentions "terms like 'localization,' 'contextualization,' 'indigenization,' and 'inculturation' of theology."⁴⁴ Though each of these terms has advantages and disadvantages, and the choice of one over others is secondary, all of these, Aylward Shorter maintains, are "terms that denote the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a culture, processes which result in the reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either."⁴⁵

Though these terms rightly point out the need for the emergence of, for instance, a Japanese Christianity and a Church of Asia (rather than in Asia), they have been criticized for implicit or overt Eurocentrism.⁴⁶ But an even

⁴² Francis X. Clooney, "Christ as the Divine Guru in the Theology of Roberto de Nobili," in *One Faith, Many Cultures: Inculturation, Indigenization, Contextualization*, ed. Ruy O. Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books and Cambridge: Boston Theological Institute, 1988), 35.

⁴³ George Steiner, "Foreword" in *Translating Religious Texts: Translation, Transgression and Interpretation*, ed. David Jasper (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), x.

⁴⁴ Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 1

⁴⁵ Aylward Shorter, "Inculturation, the Premise of Universality," in *A Universal Faith?: Peoples, Cultures, Religions, and the Christ*, ed. Catherine Cornille and Valeer Neckebrouck (Louvain: Peeters Press, W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 4-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

more significant criticism is directed against the description of Christianity vis-à-vis the local cultural context in the “images of ‘kernel’ and ‘husk,’ ‘seed’ and ‘soil,’ ‘content’ and ‘form,’ ‘gospel’ and ‘cultural accoutrements,’ or, in Paul’s terms, ‘treasure’ and ‘earthen vessel.’”⁴⁷ As Schreiter himself points out, “the gospel is always incarnate, incarnate in the reality of those who bring it to us, and incarnate in those who help us nurture the beginnings of faith. Church is the complex of those cultural patterns in which the gospel has taken on flesh.”⁴⁸ Thus many have rejected some of these terms because of their “underlying kernel-and-husk theory.”⁴⁹

Unfortunately, this same theory underlies Schreiter’s view of translation and his rejection of it as a model for the relationship between Christianity and context. He sees the translation model as “a two-step procedure” in which “the data of revelation are allowed to stand freely and be prepared for the second step of the procedure, namely, translation into a new situation.”⁵⁰

Translation, however, involves more than finding equivalences between the so-called data of revelation and the new situation, whether this means literal equivalents for individual words or, following Eugene Nida’s view of biblical translation, dynamic or functional equivalents for concepts and phrases.⁵¹

This simplistic view of translation is undermined even by the nature of two-language dictionaries which appear to provide such convenient equivalents. Since, as Wittgenstein insists, the unit of meaning is the sentence rather than the word,⁵² what dictionaries offer are but approximations between words abstracted from actual discourse and social context. In the words of Gadamer, “the example of translation, then, makes us aware that language as the medium of understanding must be consciously created by an explicit mediation.”⁵³

Some dictionaries like the Oxford English dictionary compensate for this approximation by including as many equivalents and glosses for each word. But “the fundamental gulf between two languages” or “the gap between the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction” is “a gap that can never be completely closed.”⁵⁴ Hence “every translation is at the same time an interpretation” and “like all interpretation, is a highlighting.”⁵⁵

For example, an Indonesian-English dictionary matches the Indonesian verb

⁴⁷ Max L. Stackhouse, “Contextualization, Contextuality, and Contextualism,” in *One Faith, Many Cultures*, 6.

⁴⁸ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁵¹ Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating with Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden:Holland, Brill, 1964).

⁵² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The English text of the Third Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1968), 24, 146.

⁵³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Rev. Ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 384.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 386.

'mandi' with 'bathe, take a bath' and 'go swimming'.⁵⁶ This association of the word with the English term 'bath' presumes that the reader knows what 'bath' signifies. For an American, for example, 'bath' is differentiated from 'shower'—a differentiation not present in the usual Indonesian context and thus explained in an Indonesian book for foreigners.⁵⁷ Even after this explanation, the connection of 'mandi' with swimming remains unclear. Once again, the social context provides the answer: in rural Indonesia where not all houses have private bathrooms, ordinary people bathe and swim in streams or rivers.

This small example suggests what lies behind dictionaries and what constitutes translation. As interpretation, translation of a text "brings into language the subject matter that the text points to" and this means finding "a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language."⁵⁸ Thus "in order to be able to express a text's meaning and subject matter, we must translate it into our own language."⁵⁹

Furthermore, since "*language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs...*the translator's task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text represents,"⁶⁰ and translation is rightly conceived as a two-way process by which meaning in a source language is carried over into a target language. Thus, like any dictionary, a translation is always embedded within a historical locus, intended for a specific audience and a particular purpose. This does not imply any linguistic determinism like that in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,⁶¹ but simply states that translation, like all understanding, is indeed "interpretation" or "highlighting."

To describe the encounter between Christianity and cultural context as translation then would underscore the following points of similarity. The first concerns what has been referred to as "the textuality of Christian Faith."⁶² Apart from calling attention to the authoritative status of texts like Scripture in the Christian tradition, it is a reminder that Christianity or Gospel does not exist in any pure form but always in a given historical shape constituted by discourse and praxis. Because it is in and through this very "textuality," not apart from it, that Gospel, an encounter with Christ in mystery, is proclaimed and translated into a different locus. African theologian Lammin Sanneh refers to Christianity as a "vernacular translation movement": "...Christianity, from

⁵⁶ John M. Echols and Hassan Shandily, *Kamus Indonesia-Inggris* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1992), 360.

⁵⁷ Yohanni Johns and Robyn Stokes, *Bahasa Indonesia Book One: Introduction to Indonesian language and culture* (Australia: Periplus Editions Ltd., 1977), 17.

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 389.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 396.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁶¹ This hypothesis advanced by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf "has the skeptical view of the possibility that two languages would share a common core of experience." See Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 65.

⁶² Shorter, "Inculturation," 3.

its origins, identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew.”⁶³ Moreover, the disciples’ “clear and firm position regarding the translatability of the gospel,” he continues, comes “with a commitment to the pluralist merit of culture within God’s universal purpose.”⁶⁴

The second is what contemporary social science and hermeneutics, especially that of Paul Ricoeur, describe as the textuality of cultural context.⁶⁵ Here ‘context’ is seen not as an inert place where social history and human action occur, but as a dynamic reality shaping and shaped by such history and action, and characterized today as being less strictly fenced, multi-dimensional and hybrid.⁶⁶ This context is constituted by what anthropologists like Melvin Herskovitz often refer to as culture, that is, “essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people.”⁶⁷ Though this semiotic view of culture, especially in the form given to it by Clifford Geertz, has been dominant in both social science and theologies of culture, criticisms from a postmodern perspective⁶⁸ and in the light of the globalization phenomenon⁶⁹ have rightly pointed out that the elements of culture as a system are never totally integrated and that no one ever completely belongs to a culture. Hence my preference for the adjectival form ‘cultural’ rather than the substantive ‘culture.’ The textuality of cultural context then refers to how this dynamic reality composed of these different elements shapes and is shaped by history and action, and provides a language for expressing reality and communication.

The third is the emergence of different historical shapes of Christianity through translation. Translating or “carrying-over” a particular historical shape of Christianity into a different geographical and/or social locus produces a new interpretation of Christianity. Every time Christianity embedded in a particular language and culture enters into a new cultural context, it takes on a different shape.

One could point to many such examples. According to Nicolas Standaert, the use of *Shangdi* (High Lord), *Tian* (Heaven) and *Tianzhu* (Master of Heaven) as translations for God in a 17th century Chinese text highlights different as-

⁶³ Lammin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1989), 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁵ This is developed in the various essays in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁶⁶ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, 26-7.

⁶⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁹ Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 1-27.

pects of who and what God is.⁷⁰ The Bible in bahasa Indonesia (the Indonesian language) uses 'Allah' for God, much to the dismay of some Christians and Muslims, because of its possible religious and political implications. But apart from these instances that focus on the word "God," one finds central cultural expressions which shape Christianity within that particular context. The Korean '*han*,' which has been described as a "wound" by Andrew Sung Park⁷¹ and as "on the one hand, a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation and nothingness" and "on the other, tenacity of will for life" by Suh Nam Dong,⁷² has become the linchpin for a theology of the *Minjung* (oppressed peoples) and for a psychosocial theology of the wounded.

Rafael, a historian quoted earlier, has described the evangelization of the Philippines in terms of translation:

Conversion in early Tagalog colonial society was predicated on translation; yet the Spaniards' and the Tagalogs' notions and practices of translation differed to the degree that the relative position of one to the other remained ambiguously defined. Christian conversion and colonial rule emerged through what appeared to be a series of mistranslations. But in fact, [as I have tried to demonstrate], such mistranslations were ways to render the other understandable. Each group read into the other's language and behavior possibilities that the original speakers had not intended or foreseen.⁷³

3. Points for a Theology of Cultural Context from Below

This final panel introduces some of the theological issues that emerge as a result of construing the encounter between Christianity and cultural context in terms of translation. I will enumerate general approaches to them and suggest that a theology of cultural context, one from below, is a prerequisite for a more adequate theological response regarding the nature of this encounter.

Two related theological issues immediately come to mind when one describes the encounter between Christianity and cultural context as translation: first, the relation between the unicity and catholicity of Christian faith, and second, the nature of Christian identity. Regarding the first, one needs to reflect on how one accounts for the plurality of historical shapes of Christianity in the context of one Faith. With respect to the second, one must ask what constitutes Christian identity vis-à-vis the cultural context, both as a social reality shared by the ecclesial community and as an intimate identification of

⁷⁰ Nicolas Standaert S.J., *The Fascinating God* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1995), 144.

⁷¹ Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 1.

⁷² Suh Nam Dong, "Towards a Theology of Han," in *Minjung Theology: People as the subjects of history* (Singapore: Commission on Theological Concerns, Christian Conference of Asia, 1981), 54.

⁷³ Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, 211.

a person.

Several general approaches to these issues have been taken. One is to take the route of utter relativism, maintaining in one or other form of modernism or post-modernism, that no such unity is possible or that identity, Christian in this case, is an arbitrary construction. An older form of this is what Stackhouse and Schreiter call "contextualism" which insists that each context is completely enclosed within itself and therefore unconnected with any other.⁷⁴ This approach in effect begs questions.

Another approach has been to uphold some reality that serves as a norm or principle that is "universal" or "transcultural." This approach appears in many variations. For example, certain groups or individuals insist on the assent to doctrinal formulations as the basis of Christian unity and identity. While this appears to be adequate, it mistakenly assumes that the meaning of these formulations is self-evident and that Christian Faith is primarily, if not exclusively, intellectual assent to doctrine. Thus it runs the risk of ecclesiological fundamentalism or what John McDermott describes as "lapsing into the stale repetition of irrelevant formulae."⁷⁵ Another variation that unfortunately McDermott himself falls into is "identify[ing] an enduring, transcultural norm for belief and moral behavior, the sacramental structure of incarnate Love."⁷⁶ Stackhouse analogously speaks about "a vision of a common humanity."⁷⁷ While these different variations offer helpful clues regarding Christian unity and identity, they tend to forget that these norms or principles which form the basis of Christian Faith emerge from and are expressed in particular cultural shapes, and therefore call for continuing interpretation.

The third approach takes this last point seriously and thus proposes not so much a principle as a process of discovery guided, as Mariasusai Dhavamony writes, by the Holy Spirit as "the agent of inculturation, given to the Church as the Spirit of discernment to lead it unto 'all truth.'"⁷⁸ Tanner uses a different formulation, speaking of Christianity as a continuing conversation through time or "a community of argument about the meaning of true discipleship."⁷⁹

While the last two approaches offer many valuable insights for a more systematic theological discussion of translating Christianity in new cultural contexts, what is more fundamental and most needed is a different theological view of cultural context. This theology of locus must be "from below," and its contribution would be analogous to those of Christologies from below and re-

⁷⁴ Stackhouse, "Contextualization," 8-10.

⁷⁵ John McDermott, "Christ and Culture," in *Studia Missionalia* (Inculturation: Gospel and Culture), Vol. 44 (1995), p. 92.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁷⁷ Stackhouse, "Contextualization," 5.

⁷⁸ Mariasusai Dhavamony, S.J., *Christian Theology of Inculturation* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1997), 39.

⁷⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 154.

cent theologies of religions. Just as Christologies from below take the historical Jesus and the unfolding of his life and ministry as starting point, so too will this theology of cultural context start with the particularities of a context and discern there the action of God.

Existing theologies of inculturation have been “from above,” locating the theological basis for inculturation in the Incarnation. Stackhouse writes, “the doctrine of the incarnation suggests that the very reality of the only true and transcendent God took the risk of contextualization in a very human, very concrete, very contextual person.”⁸⁰ As a consequence, borrowing Dhavamony’s words, “the incarnation of the Word of God is the archetype of the inculturation of the Gospel...” and thus “the Word of God has assumed mystically all the cultures in his humanity.”⁸¹ Indeed the Incarnation underscores the value of not only of the Jewishness of Jesus (though Christianity has often downplayed this) but of all particular cultures and of the human.

But Claude Geffré wisely warns about “tend[ing] too quickly to exploit the analogy between the incarnation of the Word of God in the humanity of Jesus and the incarnation of Christianity in a new culture.”⁸² Just as a Christology that is primarily based on the Incarnation and less on Jesus’ ministry and paschal mystery does not adequately take into account the full humanity of Jesus nor present an integral view of Christ, so too with a theology of locus that is so based. This theology from above risks looking at the cultural context as, at worst, an inert stage for God’s action or, at best, a dispensable husk to a kernel of pure Gospel.

Moreover, this theology from above is further reinforced by linking the relation between Christianity and cultural context with the theological binary pairs—“nature and supernature” and “reason and faith”. McDermott mentions that “in supporting its teaching on the autonomy of culture GS [*Gaudium et Spes* by Vatican II] 59 appealed to the traditional doctrine affirmed in Vatican I concerning ‘the two orders of knowledge’ which are distinct, namely, faith and reason” and that “this distinction rests upon the distinction between nature and the supernatural.”⁸³

Without questioning the validity of these traditional binary pairs in expressing the utter gratuity of God’s action or the inability of human reason to attain revealed truth, linking the relation between Christianity and cultural context to them is problematic. It suggests the following misleading equation: Christianity is to grace as cultural context is to nature. Moreover, as McDermott rightly points out, “the notion of nature contains a certain ambiguity, especially

⁸⁰ Stackhouse, “Contextualization,” 4.

⁸¹ Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Inculturation*, 95.

⁸² Claude Geffré, “Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion,” in *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll, N.Y., N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 95.

⁸³ McDermott, “Christ and Culture,” p. 94

vis-à-vis culture,”⁸⁴ since “man is not like the rest of material creation; he enjoys freedom...With his nature man is given, willy nilly, the transcendence of nature, culture.”⁸⁵

As a result of the link with the nature-grace vocabulary, many theological comments about culture have been similar to those about other religions traditions, concerned with their purification and incorporation into Christianity: “the cultural values reach their perfection when they find their fulfillment by their insertion into Christianity”⁸⁶ or “what is wanting is an individual’s, a nation’s, a culture’s willful acceptance of, and submission to, the sovereignty of Christ.”⁸⁷ Many others remind us of the presence of sin and evil in cultures.⁸⁸

As an alternative, a theology of cultural context from below can be based on a different theology of grace. It begins with a concrete description of the historical shape of a particular cultural context and recognizes within it that “culture is ultimately rooted in God, who cherishes and protects His people and their values,”⁸⁹ and that “in the present historical order of salvation we cannot consider cultures and other religions as purely natural or man-made.”⁹⁰ Seeing the cultural context as the locus “where the sacred reveals itself,”⁹¹ we can no longer speak of the concrete personal and communal quest for and participation in the transcendent apart from the supernatural, and can even dare to point to the salvific and liberating value of the cultural context.

One may point out that the Roman Catholic teaching on the possibility of salvation through following one’s conscience is relevant here. Unless one is careful, one may easily consider that a person’s conscience, that interior voice of God, comes from nowhere. But we know from our own experience that we hear God’s word from within and through our own concrete locus. Hence the importance of what is referred to as the formation of conscience, that is, the recognition of the role of context in enabling us to hear God’s word.

This need not lead to an idealized or even idolatrous view of the cultural context, ignoring the presence of sin and evil. Here their presence is precisely understood as the refusal to respond to the sacred at work within human hearts and communities. The cultural context here is conceived in relation to the “transformed world” brought about by the Risen Jesus or, borrowing James Allison’s subtitle of his book on original sin, “seen through Easter eyes.”⁹²

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸⁶ Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Inculturation*, 97.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁸ Stackhouse, “Contextualization,” 7.

⁸⁹ Mcdermott, “Christ and Culture,” p. 113.

⁹⁰ Stackhouse, “Contextualization,” 7.

⁹¹ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 78.

⁹² James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1998).

Within such a theology of cultural context, the task of translating Christianity into different cultural contexts is “achieved only where there is a recognition of the other as other,”⁹³ engendering what Shorter calls a “polycentric or polycultural Christianity.”⁹⁴ This task is “always yet to be achieved,” not only because “it involves a never ending appeal to cultural conversion”⁹⁵ but because of the eschatological nature of Christian Faith. The unicity and catholicity of Christian Faith and the identity it creates come into completion when God is all in all, and when, in Siegfried Wiedenhofer’s words, “there is wholeness and fullness through exchange and communication.”⁹⁶

This may be what underlies the conviction of some Protestant groups who see the translation of the Bible in all the languages of the world as a preparation for the eschaton. Then perhaps all peoples of the world would exclaim, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” (Acts 1:7-8)

⁹³ Mcdermott, “Christ and Culture,” pp. 99-100

⁹⁴ Shorter, “Inculturation, the Premise of Universality,” 16.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, p. 128.