

Doing Theology Among Filipino Peasant-Farmers

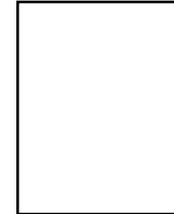
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The Philippines is often in the news today, frequently because of the exploits of the New People's Army (NPA), the guerrilla arm of the Communist party. What news reports often fail to mention is the pressure put on the average Filipino peasant farmer by members of the NPA. How does one do theology among people who are oppressed both by the government in power and a group trying to overthrow that government? Does the Bible have anything to say to people caught in this situation? Abigail Ramientos Harootian, who has worked among such people, says that indeed there are answers, albeit answers which may prove uncomfortable to those unaccustomed to living and working amidst political upheaval.

“So you’re Ka Abing!¹ Word has been going around that your troop has come up here. Are you just passing through?... How many days are you staying? At long last I’ve met you, Ka Abing. We’ve heard of your ‘victories’ in Barrio Latagan.² Someday, the same thing will happen here. That day will come when we peasant farmers will receive justice—the downfall of the landlords. I believe this will happen... people like you will help make this happen.”

I was startled (and speechless!) by this greeting I received from one of the peasant-folks at our fieldwork site. In 1985, my classmates (from the University of the Philippines) and I conducted a survey to explore the feasibility of an appropriate socio-economic project in a remote barrio in Quezon Province (southern Luzon Island). On this occasion we stopped at a certain household for a drink and rest from trekking rugged mountain trails and rivers. The greeting I received was shocking and scary.

Apparently, I was mistaken for a female guerrilla leader with the same name as my nickname. Although my classmates and I were not carrying weapons (like a typical guerrilla



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troop would), and though we were not dressed like guerrillas, still we were thought to be members of the New People's Army. The NPA is the guerrilla arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The assumption among Filipino peasants living in remote areas of the country is that only the Communists would take all the trouble and sacrifice to visit them in their isolated communities. Since my classmates and I were believed to be guerrillas, we were heartily received in this peasant-farming community.

Why is the NPA accepted and supported in this remote, serene, and small farming community? Why do these people embrace the insurgents with open arms when the insurgents stop at their homes? Why are the peasants willing to give aid to the members of the NPA? These were difficult questions for me to answer, yet other questions posed even greater difficulty. For example, as a Christian, what issues should I consider in view of attempting to present an authentic Gospel witness to this peasant-farming community? How is Jesus Christ relevant to these peasant farmers who have totally given up hope on the existing socio-economic-political system of the Philippines, and instead, have placed their hope for liberation in the Communist rebels?

Historical and Cultural Background

The particular community I have described (somewhere in Quezon Province, one of the NPA-infested provinces in the Philippines) is representative of most peasant-farming communities in the Philippines. Most peasant communities are considered "territories" of the NPA and have been included in the NPA's zone³ as "conquered."

Peasant-farmers are tenant farmers—that is, they do not *own* farmlands, even though they do all the work to produce a harvest. In exchange for the peasants' homestead on the land, landlords or landowners exact a monthly rent equivalent to 65-70% of the total money gained from the harvest. When a tenant receives 35%, he is considered extremely lucky. This traditional agricultural system of the Philippines benefits the landlords at the expense of the tenants and makes it impossible for tenants to purchase land and become landowner-farmers (Tai 1974:34-36). What is more aggravating is that most landlords in the Philippines are absentee-landlords who do not live on their own farmlands. This arrangement makes it virtually impossible for landlords to be available to assist peasants in producing a harvest, e.g., providing fertilizer, pesticides, extra

manual labor, etc. The landlord or his trusted representative visits the farmland only at harvest in order to collect the 70% of the total harvest earnings. The 30% that the farmer is left with is not even enough to cover the production expenses he has incurred!

The peasants, like most Filipinos, are nominal Roman Catholics who are secularistic. They believe that as long as one lives harmoniously with his fellowmen and does good deeds, one will also reap good fortune or good life. They think that to believe in God is enough. It does not matter what religion one has as long as that religion causes one to relate well with people.

For the peasants, religion is not found in the performance of sanctioned religious rites—like going to church. Besides, for the peasants, going to church is impractical. Peasant farmers usually live in communities far removed from the towns with political and religious centers. To take 1-2 hours to travel by foot or passenger jeepney just to go to town seems a great loss to the peasant receiving meager earnings from 12-14-hour workdays. If, by chance, the peasants do have a few hours of free time, they would rather use this time for rest or leisure—anything that takes their minds away from their burdensome work.

The guiding Filipino proverb by which the peasants perceive life on earth is “Whatever you cook, you eat.” This is synonymous with the Scripture, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (2 Corinthians 9:6). This proverb guides one’s social relations or conduct, spiritual outlook, and financial expectation from his labor. But the proverb has not held true for these peasants. The peasant gives 100% of his time and effort, but he gets a meager 30-35% of the total harvest earnings. Herein lies the attraction of the New People’s Army.

Due to the growing unrest of farmers nationwide, the land reform program in the Philippines was established in the late 1970s. This program supposedly seeks to redistribute land equitably and rationally. Its goal is that farmers will receive land transfer certificates and thus gain ownership of the land they and their ancestors have worked. But peasants have lost their trust in the government’s land reform program because of breakdowns in program implementation. Peasants are still, to this day, landless.

It is not surprising, then, that the NPA, with its promise of “land to the landless” through revolutionary means, is accept-

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ed by the Filipino peasants. It is the hunger for land that the Communists have exploited to win the peasants' faith and confidence. The country's agrarian *reform* has failed the peasants, who have therefore come to believe the NPA's claim that only violent agrarian *revolution* will make the landlords give up all or some of their lands. For now, the NPA acts as the active executioners of the agrarian revolution, but the NPA hopes the peasants will eventually follow suit and revolt with them.

Theology of Vindication

Christian theology (at least, the kind of theology I have been exposed to as a middle-class Asian Christian) has treated very lightly the fact that God vindicates (cf. Isaiah 34:8; Nahum 1:2; Romans 12:9). Many theologians treat the vindication of God against injustice in a soft and lenient way, failing to explore many of the related issues. For example, how is God's vindication fulfilled? Is it through violent means or "accidental" and natural calamities? Cannot the oppressed, as they follow Christ and become His instruments, do anything concrete to bring about God's vindication for themselves?

Throughout the Bible God shows a definite sympathy for the poor and oppressed. Jesus Himself felt this heartbeat of God, and He lived out God's concern for the poor and judgment on the rich. The Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20ff), for example, has much to say about judgment and vindication. Jesus declares, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God...." He also speaks "woes" to the rich, e.g., "Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry...."

It is significant to note that Jesus' parable about injustice highlights the theme of *perseverance* in prayer (Luke 18:1-5). Prayer is a concrete act to do. Jesus told this parable to His disciples "that they should always pray and not give up," just like the widow in the parable who received justice from an unjust judge because of her perseverance. Then Jesus said, "I tell you, he (God) will see that they (the exploited) get justice; and *quickly*. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find *faith* on the earth?" Will Jesus find faith that perseveres in loyalty to Him in spite of persecution or hardship?

A theology among Filipino peasants should affirm that God vindicates the oppressed. Thus, the peasants can *pray* (with hope) to God for His vindication to come quickly, just as He promised to His followers who cry out to Him. The peasants can have faith in God based on what Jesus has said—that

God will vindicate them. It is God's prerogative, and not man's, to determine how and when the vindication will take place.

Theology of Non-Violence

The Philippine Roman Catholic church has endorsed "arms" and violence as a *last resort*. It teaches that a Christian must avoid any kind of violence, but, under very restricted circumstances—as a last resort—violence can be moral if it is done in self-defense. This is true for both the individual and his community (Claver 1986:336-337).

Armed violence for self-defense is very different from the NPA's use of violence to establish a new order. Violent revolution to create a "new" order is a contradictory statement and strategy (Yoder 1971:40). Violence assumes that the cause of revolution is more important than the human being; thus, anyone who belongs to the "wrong side" is eliminated. Violence supports the common and unscriptural belief that "might is strength." This is an outright contradiction to servanthood—the tool which God has chosen to restore or re-create the world.

I am not saying that the Filipino peasants should be unmoved by the injustices against them. A Christian theology has failed if it endorses apathy and complacency. But instead, the peasants should, in persevering prayer, be strengthened in spirit and confront their exploitative landlords for the landlords' and the community's sake. In a spirit of truth and love, without inflicting direct and physical violence to the landlords, the peasants need to confront the landlords with God's judgments and commands to rich people (1 Timothy 6:17-19; James 5:1-6). Filipino peasants, when they become children of God, can use His Word as their standard and weapon. Perhaps the landlords have never heard the message of God's judgment against exploitation and accumulation of wealth, and even if they have the peasants can do the landlords a great service by warning them that their lifestyle of injustice will incur the wrath and judgment of God.

Jesus did not take the path of violence. He did not side with the Zealots who believed that violence was justified to topple the oppressive Roman Empire. Jesus illustrated how violence was to be met—not with counterviolence, but with love and forgiveness (cf. Luke 22:47-51), an attitude and course of action that His followers should adopt today.

Theology of Sin and Salvation

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A theology of sin in a peasant-farming community must convict people of collective/participatory sin and also denounce personal sin.

Filipino peasants understandably resent their absentee-landlords and the landlords' representatives. The peasants know that the landlords are aware of their representatives' abusiveness and deceit and yet do nothing to correct these abuses. Therefore, the peasants rightfully believe both the landlord and his representative to be guilty of exploitation.

Yet this same principle should apply to the peasants' support of the New People's Army. Most of the peasants may not resort to violence to get rid of their landlords and their landlords' representatives, yet the peasants feel that their landlords deserve to die. They are glad that the Communist rebels are executing justice on their behalf since no one else has, and they sense a great relief that the insurgents are the ones carrying out the elimination of their oppressors. But the peasants must be confronted with the fact that their support of the NPA's killings makes them equally guilty of murder. Jesus elucidated the meaning of "Thou shall not kill" by addressing the level of personal intention (Matthew 5:22). When Jesus said that any man who says "Thou fool" is in danger of the fire of hell, He implied that an interior offense (a thought or a curse) and an outright public expression of offense are both sin (Yoder 1971:50).

In my observation of the peasants, they have seemed to get along well with each other when they are united by their craving to own the land nurtured by their sweat and blood. But in other matters they squabble a great deal. I have seen envy, pride, dishonest intentions, and grudges. A Christian theology of sin presented to the peasants should not only expose sinful deeds but also the motives.

A theology of salvation among the peasants should also include deliverance from subserviently fulfilling their oppressive landlords' unjust whims and demands. There has to be an alternative whereby peasants can collectively and creatively refuse injustice toward them (being sinned-against) through nonviolent means. Unconditional obedience to the oppressive landlords' demands, which are clearly against God's ideals, makes the peasants participants in their oppressors' sin. This refusal of injustice must be accompanied by a faith that is ready to suffer the consequences.

A theology of sin in a peasant-farming community must convict people of collective/participatory sin and also denounce personal sin.

Theology of Reconciliation and

Forgiveness

The Filipino peasants are justified in desiring vindication—to see justice come to pass. God promises those who are wronged that He will vindicate them. The peasants can hope and pray with confidence in this truth. But the overriding motive for praying for vindication, for not endorsing NPA killings, and for disobeying unjust landlords nonviolently, should be the desire to be reconciled to the landlords. The goal is to live in peace, in truth, and in love. Only a person who has experienced the unconditional love of God through Jesus Christ can sincerely desire peace, truth, and love for that person's persecutors.

A theology of forgiveness should aim to restore relationships *among the peasants* and *between the peasants and their landlords*. Jesus said that one cannot worship God without being reconciled to his brother (Matthew 5:23-25). Christianity is not only reconciliation between God and man, but also reconciliation between man and man. Unqualified love of the neighbor, including the enemy, even to the point of readiness to suffer unjustly at his hands, appears not only understandable but possible for someone who will choose to follow the example of Christ (Yoder 1971:52).

This is a revolution of love. What is more revolutionary than a change of mind and heart that expresses itself in actions? The NPA simply seeks to eliminate those who oppose its ideals, but to follow Christ means to receive a changed heart—a heart that seeks reconciliation, a heart that forgives.

Jesus Christ—the True Revolutionary

In His earthly ministry Jesus sought to bring about change involving *attitude* (repentance) and *social practices*. He was considered revolutionary because He pronounced the judgment of God upon the present order (including the oppressive Roman Empire) and announced the coming of a promised new order. Jesus called people to be His followers and then gave them a new way to live.

Jesus taught a revolutionary way of dealing with offenders: forgiveness. He taught a revolutionary way to endure violence: suffering. He taught a revolutionary way of dealing with money and possessions: sharing. He taught a revolutionary way of leading, not by might and money, but by drawing upon the gifts and talents of even the poor and meek. Jesus taught a revolutionary way of dealing with a corrupt society by building a new one, *not* by smashing the old.

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Jesus sought to build a new order characterized by new patterns of relationships—relationships characterized by unselfish love, unconditional forgiveness, and limitless humility. Jesus, the ultimate Revolutionary, is our pattern for doing theology among the peasant farmers of the Philippines.

Notes

1. “Ka” is a short-cut for the title “Kasama,” which is the Filipino word for comrade. Comrade is the title Communists often use to address each other.

2. The actual name of this place is withheld for security purposes.

3. The NPA has “zoned” villages of people who will support them in the event of civil war in the Philippines.

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