

NEW PRESIDENT, FRESH HOPES:  
DOING THEOLOGY IN THE PHILIPPINES<sup>1</sup>

Yeow Choo Lak

I cannot claim to be a stranger to the lovely Philippines since I have been visiting this great country for over twenty times the last two decades. Nevertheless, since the office of the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) office has moved to Manila in April of 1998 I have had the privilege of staying in and not just visiting scenic Philippines. Hence, I can describe myself as a *bagong dating*, or a new arrival (please do not get it mixed up with dating!).

I must confess that I have enjoyed myself tremendously because I have endeavored to try to understand and appreciate Filipino culture. For example, I have attended plays/musicals in Filipino (imaginatively and creatively staged at shopping malls to celebrate the Centennial Year and, O.I.P. - only in the Philippines, is this so pleasantly done), though I understand next to nothing of this intriguing language with a happy mix of Spanish, Malay, Chinese, etc. Surprisingly, one could follow the story in *Walang Sugat* without even knowing the language, so strong is the impact and influence of the play.

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*YEOW Choo Lak (Th.D.) is Executive Director of Association of Theological Education in South East Asia, Manila, Philippines, and Dean of South East Asia Graduate School of Theology.*

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version was presented as a keynote address at the Theological Symposium for Asian Pentecostal Leaders, the 18<sup>th</sup> Pentecostal World Conference, Seoul, Korea on September 21, 1998.

I have also enjoyed my jeepney and FX (mega taxis) rides which is a fun way of observing Filipinos, getting to know how to find my way around and beyond Manila, and at the same time to have some idea of how people drive in the Philippines. Praise God, so far I have managed to survive! The only scratches on my car were inflicted by vandal(s). No wonder Singapore is known to do to the vandals' behind what the vandals do to the front of other people's property. Vandals, beware! Michael Faye knows and remembers it well.

I am also very fortunate to have moved to the Philippines at a time when this fast-improving nation was celebrating the Centennial Year. And, with the election of a new and very popular president who is saying almost all the right things and who is known for his *para sa masa* (for the masses/poor) stance, it is not difficult to notice (a) a well-deserved upbeat atmosphere, the current currency crisis notwithstanding, and (b) a surge of pride in being a Filipino (the same phenomenon happening in Singapore in the early 1970s when the feeling of proudly belonging to a new emerging nation gripped the people for the first time of their life).

Because ATESEA's things are still stuck in Singapore at the time of writing this article, I am unable to make use of and refer to materials that I have collected. Additionally, things like my TV are "missing" which meant that I have been deprived of watching the US Open, NBA, and World Cup. The worst deprivation was not being able to watch the Inauguration of President Joseph Ejercito Estrada on TV. So, my reaction to and observation of what happened on June 30, 1998 has been culled from newspapers.

I refer specially to President Joseph Ejercito Estrada's visit to the tomb of his late father in the wee hours of the morning to meditate before his Inauguration as the 13<sup>th</sup> president of the Philippines.

I am not too sure how aware he was of the fact that when he did that he endeared himself to over two billion people of Chinese blood all over the world.

Nothing can be more meaningful and/or respectful to a Chinese than for him to "report" his success to his late parent(s). They "report" to their late parents before their wedding, upon University graduation, the birth of a child, etc. So, when President Estrada meditated at his father's tomb that day before the greatest success any Filipino can aspire to, the Chinese saw him demonstrating great filial piety. In that sense, he won heaps of praise from many Chinese. He may not have

"reported" in the way Chinese do, but the fact that he was at his father's tomb before his great day has not escaped the attention of many Chinese. Parenthetically, how do Chinese "report" to their dead parents? As if they were still alive.

Dr. ABC had graduated from well-known institutions in England and America. Upon his return after a 8-year absence he was taken to his father's grave where he "reported":

Ah Pa, your useless son (usual humble way Chinese show their respect to Elders) has come back after his study in the West. He asks for your forgiveness for having taken such a long time to achieve success (in fact, he had finished in record time, but remembered he had to be humble in his late father's presence).

Then, taking his 2-year old son's hand, he asked his son to say "Ah Kong" (grandfather). He then continued.

This is XYZ, your grandson who was born in California and who has the misfortune of not having met you.

Again, taking his son's hand he asked his son to address his grandfather by saying "Ah Kong" as if the dear old man was still alive. He ended by saying: "Now that we are back, please grant us your blessing and protection."

In the Chinese tradition, our parents may have died years ago, but the "reporting" takes place as if they were still alive because we believe the dead are still with us somehow. Success may have come our way years after their death but, humanly speaking, we still believe we owe our great success to them.

Finally, "reporting" at our parents' grave is a very serious act of great filial piety. Should we ever make light of that act we are perceived as having brought dishonor to our ancestors, thus bringing disgrace/shame/*hiya* to our family's name. To put it in a vulgar way (please pardon the gutter Chinese which even sounds vulgar in the English translation): "You can urinate anywhere, but no one should ever piss over his parents' grave." The very thought of such vile an act is so revolting that "perish the thought" is very appropriate here. That is how seriously we take our "reporting" at our parents' grave, not to mention the fear of the curse that will fall on us for having desecrated the honor of the family name should we make light of this "reporting."

Personally, I do not subscribe to every aspect of this belief, but since it is wide spread it is good that I bring it to your attention.

So, then, a new president and fresh hopes. A new dawn is streaking into and ushering in a new day. All so promising?

Whilst enjoying and being overwhelmed by Filipino hospitality, I trust that I am not blind to negative realities here which do impede efforts to improve the lot of the people of the land. Let me just mention one such negative reality.

The esteemed *Manila Bulletin*, on June 21, 1998, mentioned that, according to President-elect Joseph Estrada, the problem of the Philippine Airlines (PAL) is basically due to its bloated workforce. Hitting the nail on its head since it is quite apparent that the working principle here is: "employment of maximum number of people for minimum efficiency," and not "employment of competent people for maximum efficiency."

It is a known fact that many offices in the Philippines are run by an Administrative Assistant who normally works less than three hours a day because she is moonlighting: a) She checks into her office at around 10:00 a.m. because she is working in her second place of work; and b) She then checks out at around 4:00 p.m. to return to her second place of work. In between 10 a.m. till 4 p.m. she is seen popping peanuts into her mouth and drinking coke (whilst supposedly working on her computer), and socializing with her boss and subordinates whose goodwill she need to cultivate.

Additionally, she has a third job acting as a sub-agent in an industry that allows her to earn something extra as she is able to use the office facilities (space, telephones, and faxing machines, etc.) and subordinates to do her job as a sub-agent (not a bad arrangement for her, but what about her company?).

In all these, her indulgent boss is supporting her openly, even to the extent of planning to employ another person to assist her since "she is over-worked." Since when has "working less than three hours a day become over-work" is frequently asked by others not so favored, but who are also moonlighting in their own right (light?).

But what will happen when efforts are made to introduce efficiency into a workforce that is 4 times larger than what it should be (but for sure, 4 times more inefficient than what it should be)? In the said office above, the Administrative Assistant would cripple the whole operation by walking out with key people who may not wish to do her

bidding, but who have no choice since she can break their rice bowl. Additionally, they, too, have their own (moonlighting) vested interested to protect.

It seems tragic that it appears impossible to introduce an "all muscles, no fat" work force. It is even more tragic that the Administrative Assistant is so powerful that she is able to keep for life her lucrative arrangement, amounting to no less than a sinecure.

After all, with the Company providing her with reasonably comfortable quarters worth around P20,000 per month, her not to be sneered at side income from moon-lighting in two jobs, plus her official salary, why, she is getting around P50,000 per month. Compared with the average salary for a new secretary which is P7,500 per month her combined monthly salary is pretty good and is definitely more than a doctor's P30,000 monthly salary. Actually, it is comparable to an expatriate's salary. Not a bad deal for her, but a losing proposition for her ailing company who has to support her "less than three hours of work per day" performance, and her using office time and facilities for her considerable side income (who says only policemen are hungry?). Where does ethics come in?

No one is against honest work that puts meals on the table and sends the children to school. But non-stop thieving from the Company is out-right stealing - no ifs and buts about it.

Among other things, her moonlighting makes her company suffer from irreparable damage, financially and otherwise. Simple things are not carried out competently, e.g., telephone calls on significant matters are not followed up. Routine matters are habitually and conveniently neglected. Eating peanuts, drinking Coke and socializing takes place during her few hours in the office. Count your lucky stars if more than two hours of serious work is put in each day.

Her indulgent boss' plan to employ another person to assist her "because she is overworked" just sets office tongues wagging. Why he is doing all these is not lost on the fertile Filipino imagination. Justifiably or otherwise, each body language is examined and assessed for intimacy, and mental "DNA tests" are carried out in sizing perceived physical resemblances and mannerisms between her boss and her son.

Office politicking is making the rounds.

Suppressed resentment for overt favoritism and bottled-up anger for having to do her work that she does not do (phoning people that she

herself was supposed to do) or has no right to ask them to do (doing her agency work) surface through sick jokes that are cowardly but gleefully narrated behind her back. “They are married, but not to each other.” “Behind every successful man stands a woman. Guess?” (punning on a brand name, to boot). A *Guess?* shirt then produces knowing smiles.

All this happens because, among other things, four people are doing the work of one person, resulting in all four messing up a simple job that one person could arguably perform satisfactorily. To boot, all four are moonlighting since they have so much time on their hand.

Bloated workforces seem to be an endemic disease. Can the new president succeed in introducing efficiency in the over bloated workforces? It is left to be seen, but if the above scenario is typical then there must be the political will to want to put to rest, once and for all, all that is self-seeking (graft) and self-serving (corruption). It is about time the workforces knew and did something about efficiency, don’t you think so?

No one owes anyone a living. You cannot loaf and have your loaf. Shape up or ship out.

In the above context, I am more interested and concerned with ethical principles and their implications rather than with just mere principles of good management, not that the latter has no place in our theologizing since stewardship is implicated.

How does one do theology in a “thieving” situation where stealing (office time in this case) is so rampantly prevalent? The word “norm” comes to mind. Stealing is more the norm rather than the exception. So, again asking the same question, how does one do theology in such a context where graft and corruption are systemic, i.e., built into the system itself? How did a nation that calls itself a Christian nation end up in such a messy “graft and corruption” situation? More significantly, what can be done to weed out the all far too obvious “graft and corruption” situation (*especially* in the *church*) which corrodes everything that is good? Where and how does our Christian faith come in?

Blaming it on poverty for such a given is unfair. More likely, it is either greed or a stupid system or both that must bear the brunt of fair criticism. I give a simple example.

Traffic policewomen and policemen are said to have been paid a low salary. The reason for this miserable salary is that the country is so

poor that it cannot afford to pay reasonable salaries to the civil servants. A close scrutiny will tear down this myth.

Yes, while it is true that the traffic policewomen/policemen are paid a low salary, the very fact that almost all of them are on the take means that they are pulling down a salary not to be sneered at. It is said that the traffic policemen ear enough to support three wives, so the story goes. So, a driver who has been stopped for a traffic violation pays up by muttering beneath his breath: this P50 is for the second one, and this P50 is for the third one (implying that the official salary is meant for the first wife and the "fixed it payment," for the other two "wives").

A cursory mental calculation will quickly reveal that if in a day twenty drivers pay P100 (P200 if you drove a Mercedes) each to the traffic policeman, then the latter is "earning" P20,000 per day (in addition to his salary). Even after sharing his loot (the word is carefully chosen, I assure you) with his colleagues and superior (of course) he can still pocket quite a neat sum of money everyday.

If what he had ill-gotten from the drivers had gone to the country by way of errant drivers paying summonses, then the country would have been very rich, at least rich enough to pay traffic policewomen and policemen a salary fat enough to feed their family comfortably, without resorting to corruption and where corruption is heavily frowned upon. But do people genuinely desire to have a clean society?

The above example seems strongly to suggest that poverty is not the root cause of graft and corruption. I would like to cite an example to indicate that there are poor but very honest people in our midst who are not sucked into the almost ubiquitous "graft and corruption" situation.

After almost a "no golf" month I had a round of golf with a friend at the Veterans Gold Club. At the end of the round of golf the woman cashier returned me P300 which was the sum of money that I had overpaid as shown on a piece of paper she had used:

P 1,200 - given
P 900 - local (contrasted to what foreigners have to pay)
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P 300 - over payment

Alongside this honest woman is the countless number of honest and hard-working jeepney and FX (mega taxis) drivers who literally

work long hours (12-16) everyday except their rest day. They do not steal time from the Company to moonlight.

Two contrasting facts. Unfortunately, the negative one seems to be both dominant and normatic. In a serious “no employment” situation what can be done about the hordes of jobless women and men where women are the first to be retrenched when companies fold up? This brings me to my next concern.

Nearly 70,000 workers had lost their jobs in the first three months of 1998 alone. In less than a year, the number of unemployed has soared to 4.1 million, i.e., in the first six months of 1998, 421 workers lost their job everyday, half of them permanently dismissed and the rest temporarily laid off or were “undergoing job rotation.” (Fine linguistic sophistry and nuancing camouflaging a wicked reality.) This takes place in the midst of workers stealing from their company.

Incidentally, it has been said that huge salary increases introduced the last few years are the major cause for the waves of retrenchment and bankruptcies as numerous companies are now unable to stay viably solvent. Parenthetically, how can they stay solvent when there are so many thieves in them?

July 1997 and the George Soroses (corporate robbers?) credited former president Fidel V. Ramos’ great success in trickling down the economic success to the masses of Filipinos who found their buying power halved when the peso depreciated against the US dollar from a comfortable 22 to a frightening 42.

Progressive corporations take out loans for business and industrial expansion, basing expansion plans on prudent projections. In the process, they consider seriously significant factors like interest rates, projected sales growth, the state of the nations’ economy, and naturally cash flow.

The July 1997 peso devaluation which doubled interest rates (housing and car loans are pegged at daylight robbery/cut throat rate of 17.5%!) scuttled all the finely-tuned plans and strategies and simultaneously and logically depressed sales. The hardest hit victims are corporations, which are saddled with huge loans, especially the dollar denominated loans.

Evidence is ubiquitous. Once cash-loaded developers have stopped work on their condominiums and high-rise castles in the sky. Buyers are no where to be seen, thus daily drying up the fast vanishing

resources of once-rich developers who now must pay the exorbitant bank interest through the nose, figuratively speaking and otherwise.

The poor are equally hit. Construction workers idle around, contributing to the on-going increasing unemployment rate. Contractors, manufacturers of housing components, and hardware stores feel the painful pinch, if not crunch. Car sales dip. Buyers have to be enticed to make a purchase. "Buy your new Civic and drive home with a fabulous Centennial Package worth more than P15,000. Drive a friend who wants to buy a new Civic . . . and get Centennial Bonus Checks worth P5,000. Refer as many friends as you can and earn a bigger windfall." Even attendance at Philippines Basketball Association games (and basketball is the real religion of Filipinos, so it is said) has nose-dived due to the economic slump (with only 4,312 paying spectators on the average each playing day) if the League's financial officer is to be believed.

It is conceivable that the Philippines may join Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia as countries in our region most badly hit by the current economic crisis unless the present unfavorable situation in our region takes a turn for the better. Presently, the Philippines is weathering the currency crisis pretty well, but danger lurks around the corner.

So, how does one do theology in such a situation? New president and fresh hopes at least are a jump-start.

President Joseph Ejercito Estrada is seen to be making inroads in paving paths to greater prosperity and peace for the Philippines. He is seen to want to apply "the preferential option for the poor" principle when he publicly affirmed that the poor must have a place at the table. I was pleasantly pleased when a taxi-driver told me that he supported unreservedly and trusted completely his president's commitment to improve the lot of the masses (people of the land). One swallow does not a summer make, but I firmly believe that there are many people of the land who have exercised "people's power" in voting in the new president.

Additionally, I have been quite impressed by President Joseph Ejercito Estrada's strategy and plan to kick-start the agricultural lines of production, distribution, and marketing (exporting as well). I do not know how much of this has escaped the notice of the public, but if they had been discerning I am pretty sure they would have perceived a correlation and from it a conclusion. Surely, it is not lost on them. Let me explain.

The new president has been most astute in discerning that if the Philippines' agriculture industry booms it will not only feed the nation, but it will also roll in big bucks through exports. The Philippines can aspire to this height because it has both the fertile land and intelligent people to make good their president's intention to improve and upgrade the nation's agriculture industry, making the Philippines affluent beyond measure when success comes its way. People need to eat. If the Philippines can export basic food items then big bucks will automatically roll in. In this, the people need to put their shoulders behind the plow and deliver the goods.

Hope is in the air. The new president has declared war on graft and corruption. The June 1998 inflation rate may have ballooned to 10.7%, but it is gratifying to see the new president inflating efforts to stem out graft and corruption. He has ordered the police to turn in a "big fish" among the country's criminals in 100 days to demonstrate that a crack-down on graft and corruption, crime, and drug trafficking is for real.

President Joseph Estrada has made crime-busting and improvement of the impoverished poor a benchmark of his Presidency. He is aware that crimes and graft and corruption still prevail because of collusion by police and military officials with crime syndicates. Big time tax evaders and "blatantly corrupt government officials and law enforcement officers" are on his hit list. The days of crooks in uniform (police and military), robes (judges), and *barongs* (civil servants) are numbered.

Incidentally, crooks and charlatans who pose themselves as politicians and then rob the country dirt poor should be where they deserve to be – jail. Even in their death when stolen money is used to preserve them they (if not they, then at least their relatives) still should know that much blood is on their hand. It would be right and proper and would do no one any harm but all much good if President Joseph Estrada were to include them in his hit list. Of course, the president himself must be clean. I believe he can since former president Ramos himself had an apparently clean presidency.

Filipinos have shown themselves to be world-class in the entertainment industry, second to none in many cases. Lea Salonga of the *Miss Saigon* fame is one such example. I have chosen to believe that with such God-given and carefully nurtured talents a nation of good-looking Filipinos and beautiful Filipinas can win hands down in

the entertainment industry. Dine in any restaurants anywhere in Asia, and the musicians providing entertainment are most probably Filipinos. This is already a fact of life.

One reason for having been so upbeat is due to the fact that I have deliberately chosen to affirm that Filipinos are no pushovers. Great and difficult efforts are required to stand tall, but I intuitively feel that Filipinos have sufficient gumption to want to frog-leap others.

Filipinos are aware of the need for sufficient stamina in riding out the present currency crisis when money is flowing out of Asia. They look at Singapore's difficulty, and they realize how difficult it is to tough it out.

Singapore's banking system is sound. The US\$71 billion foreign reserves is impressive, especially when there is no foreign debt. The Singapore dollar has depreciated far less than other currencies in our region. Political risk is unheard of. Yet, Singapore pales when compared to itself yesteryear.

If the above is true for Singapore, then the Philippines have much to watch out for. For me, this is where doing theology comes in. Toughing it out is that difficult.

Doing theology has a prophetic role to play. In adversity, it succors the struggling to tough it out. In prosperity, it challenges the well to do to remember that life is more than mere material acquisition and possession. Theology follows that time-honored tradition and practice: comfort us in our affliction and afflict us in our comfort zone when we zombie in the good life.

The Catholic Bishops of the Philippines (CBCP) have proposed programs that would improve the lot of the people of the land. In a 20-page exhortation, the following were emphasized:

- A social action program that looks at crucial issues of peace and economy, agrarian and industrialization concerns, the exploitation of women and minors and overseas workers, children and youth and the organization of grassroots people for empowerment and self-reliance through co-operatives and livelihood programs.
- Fostering domestic saving and increasing access to credit through supporting micro-saving and micro-financing activities of the poor, by linking them to formal savings and credit institutions.

- Government support for the informal economy of small independent producers and sellers in cottage industries.
- A better Social Reform Agenda specially targeted to provide safety nets for the most vulnerable groups.
- To increase investment in human development, especially in health and education.

Putting together the intention of the president and the efforts of the church to improve the overall economy of the nation, with special emphasis on eliminating poverty among the poor, one can see that the future seems bright.

There are so many things going on for the Philippines, natural calamities, e.g., earthquakes, typhoons, etc., notwithstanding.

There is so much under the ground (precious stones, metals, etc.). So much grows on the ground (just throw a mango seed and it will grow). It now leaves for those who walk above the ground to bring in the rich harvests. This is much more than what affluent but extremely land-hungry Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, can ask for. So, why are Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore doing better than the Philippines? It defies logic that such a question is being raised.

I end this theological exploration with a disturbing question: how can the Philippines with abundantly rich natural resources coupled with good-looking and intelligent people do less well than the ever land-hungry and hence deprived of rich natural resources Taiwanese, Hongkongers, and Singaporeans, slit-eyed, to boot?

In this soul-searching time we ask:

God, our Creator, to remind us Whose we are and Whom we serve.

Jesus Christ, Who came to pay a debt He didn't owe

because we owe a debt we couldn't pay.

The Holy Spirit, Who leads us to greater height

in our service of fallen humanity.

A-Men.