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**TO STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN AND
ECOLOGICAL LIBERATION: TOWARDS
AN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF
LIBERATION IN THE PHILIPPINE
CONTEXT**

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Introduction

This dissertation offers a theological reflection on the praxis of human and ecological struggle against oppressive relationships that produce global/local (“glocal”) poverty and the ecological crisis. It critically appropriates the framework of the emerging ecological theology of liberation, which embraces the broader notion of the preferential option for the poor — including the socio-economically

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poor, the socio-culturally oppressed (the indigenous peoples and women), and the victims of ecological exploitation (the natural world). Following this framework, my theological approach consists of three stages. First, I entered the “world” of the poor Filipinos whose direct and immediate experiences with oppressive relationships served as raw materials for my scientific analysis and theological reflection. Second, I used the analytical mediation of the social and ecological sciences to unmask the ideologies behind these oppressive relationships. In light of the hermeneutic mediation of Christian faith, I recognized these oppressive relationships as counter-signs of the coming of God’s Kingdom, which is the total liberation and salvation of the whole creation. And third, I used this inclusive regnocentric perspective on liberation to propose some transformative actions that appropriate the ethical imperatives of ecological praxis.

Overview of Chapters

By way of presentation, this research project has five chapters which are arranged according to the see-judge-act dynamism: the first chapter corresponds to the moment of existential seeing; the second, third, and fourth chapters serve as the moment of analytical and hermeneutical judging; and the fifth chapter attempts to be the moment of transformative action. Let me briefly present a summary of each chapter.

The first chapter, which is the contextual part of this paper, is paradigmatic to my research project as it highlights three forms of colonial oppression that have chiefly contributed to the present Philippine situation of poverty and the ecological crisis. First, I recounted the socio-political oppression as experienced by the class of landless Filipino labourers who continually struggle for an authentic agrarian reform. Second, I described two forms of socio-cultural oppression, which remain a “dangerous memory”: the religious oppression suffered by the indigenous Filipinos who tried to practice their animistic religion in the face of the hegemonic process of Christianization, and the sexual oppression imposed on Filipino women whose full humanity was not recognized. Third, I tried to show that the social oppression during the colonial period has always been accompanied by an ecological exploitation. I emphasized the fact that the colonial oppression had not only impoverished the Filipinos, but also grossly exploited their natural resources — putting

their country in a critical ecological condition. With this historical background, the second-half of this chapter provides contemporary narratives of the agrarian oppression of the indigenous peoples in Mindanao and the ecological struggle in Bukidnon. I considered both contemporary narratives of oppression as negative residues and a continuation of the centuries of colonial oppression that have largely contributed to the present situation of poverty and the ecological crisis. Being a Filipino, it is clear to me that our poverty and ecological vulnerability to the disastrous strikes of nature are neither *God's will* nor simply part of our *fate* as a people. We are beginning to realize that our poverty has human causes and that *many* of our ecological problems could not simply be attributed to the consequences of an evolutionary world but are also actually human-induced. Thus, knowledge of our history of colonial oppression is a crucial factor to my analysis of our poverty and the ecological crisis.

The second chapter utilizes the analytic mediation of both social and ecological sciences in order to identify the roots of oppressive relationships, which produce the *glocal* situation of poverty and the ecological crisis. Based on my analysis, the complex phenomenon of oppressive relationships may be traced from the confluence of several Western social and ecological ideologies of domination. To highlight the operation of these oppressive ideologies, I explored both the negative and positive influences of some dominant Western worldviews. On the one hand, I reviewed the historical roots of anthropocentric relationships promoted by the *modern* ideologies of social and ecological domination which appropriate the insights of the mechanistic worldview, the philosophical "turn to the subject," the pursuit for an unlimited economic growth in capitalism and socialism, and the "culture of waste." On the other hand, I tried to enrich the indigenous worldview by exploring the emerging Western ecological perspectives (e.g., the ecological insights from the New Cosmology, the superorganismic worldview, and the ecosystem ecology), which enabled me to see three errors of anthropocentric domination, namely, its failure to recognize (1) the intrinsic value in nature, (2) the natural limits of the earth's finite material and energy resources, and (3) the ecological truth that human beings — as part of the evolving cosmos — have a common origin and destiny with all creation. Arguably, these lacunae are now, to some extent, being addressed by some emerging ecology-conscious disciplines, which creatively appropriate the "ecological praxis" and non-anthropocentric

perspective on nature (e.g., the ecological economics, ecological ethics, and the critical environmental movements of Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism). My dialogue with these emerging ecological disciplines and environmental movements has enabled me to view ecological domination as a “causal extension” of social domination. Indeed, with the analytical mediation of social and ecological sciences, I have tried to unmask the same perverse logic that operates in the oppressive ideologies of developmentalism (class), colonialism (culture), patriarchalism (gender), and anthropocentrism (ecology).

In the third chapter, I scrutinized the glocal reality of poverty and the ecological crisis with the use of the hermeneutic mediation of Christian faith. In view of constructing an ecological theology of liberation, I made a cursory exploration on the magisterial texts, particularly the Catholic social teaching (CST) and the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) documents, which try to address the issues of poverty, culture, gender, and ecology. I deliberately focused my research on these particular magisterial texts, as they contain the Church *magisterium's* complementary approaches to poverty and the ecological issues treated in my research project. Moreover, it has been claimed by some Filipino theologians (e.g., C. G. Arévalo) that the magisterial texts “have given the overall direction to the life and work” of the church in the Philippines, which is a predominantly Roman Catholic country. With these presuppositions, I was challenged to determine whether or not the Church *magisterium* could really be my adequate resource and dialogue-partner for constructing a Filipino ecological theology of liberation. To achieve this goal, I have decided to dwell on the two theological interests of the Church *magisterium*. On the one hand, I revisited its liberation theology and examined its two different but complementary approaches to the preferential option for the poor: one approach is the upward preferential option for the poor embraced by the progressive members of the CELAM; and the other is the top-down approach preferred by the CST, as well as by the Vatican doctrinal authorities. Between these two approaches, I have argued that the CELAM's liberation theology, which proposes an upward preferential option for the poor, needs to be emphasized in the Philippine context. I have also expressed my criticism of the Church *magisterium's* treatment of indigenous peoples and women issues. On the other hand, I attempted to systematize the Church *magisterium's* ecological theology. Significantly, this approach has

enabled me to highlight the fact that both CST and CELAM documents on ecology emphasize the centrality of the theology of stewardship, presumably, (1) to correct the erroneous assumptions of exploitative anthropocentrism and (2) to maintain the balance between the uniqueness of human dignity and the integrity of creation. I have, however, argued that the prevailing perspective of both magisterial texts on ecology remains anthropocentric, as indicated in its commitment to prioritize human ecology and in its tendency to regard the advancement of human interests as the main motivation for safeguarding the sustainability and balance of nature. Nevertheless, I critically appropriated the Church *magisterium's* complementary approaches to liberation theology — that is, both its upward and downward preferential option for the poor, — but not its ecological theology, due to its anthropocentric perspective on stewardship. Thus, in view of my project, I concluded that the Church *magisterium* could neither be my adequate resource nor a sufficient dialogue-partner for constructing an ecological theology of liberation in the Philippine context.

The fourth chapter introduces the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff as my main dialogue-partner. I deliberately chose him because of his emphasis on an upward preferential option for the poor and a non-anthropocentric perspective on liberation and ecology. In many ways, Boff's theology may be seen as an attempt to complement and transcend the Church *magisterium's* inadequate approach to poverty and the ecological crisis. Furthermore, being a Third World theologian, Boff's context and perspective is arguably relevant to my construction of a Filipino ecological theology of liberation. For these reasons, I critically appropriated Boff's expanded notion of the preferential option for the poor, as well as his corresponding proposal for a holistic notion of liberation — including the liberative aspects of class, culture, gender, and ecology. Boff's ecological perspective on liberation theology may be summarized in two concerns: first, as an option *against* human and ecological forms of oppression; second, as an option *for* the liberation of human and non-human creatures. This approach challenged me to give a preferential option for the weakest and the most threatened creatures, including human and non-human creatures. To a certain extent, I followed Boff in his claim that the historical events of human and ecological liberation are partial but concrete anticipations of the eschatological realization of God's Kingdom. However, due to my

search for a more adequate hermeneutic mediation, I decidedly departed from Boff's theological framework, as he fails to develop an ecological perspective on God's Kingdom. In contrast with Boff's approach, I insist on making the vision of the Kingdom of God the central hermeneutic mediation in the construction of an ecological theology of liberation. This approach presupposes that I have to retrieve the inclusive meaning of salvation and rediscover the non-anthropocentric perspective on liberation, which is implicit in the Christian vision of God's Kingdom. I opted to ground the theological notion of the preferential option for the oppressed creation in this non-anthropocentric perspective on God's Kingdom. From this regnocentric perspective, the salvific events of the indwelling of the Spirit and the incarnation of the Son may be seen as historical unfolding of the mystery of the coming of God's Kingdom.

The fifth chapter focuses on transformative action, which is the culmination of my analysis and theological reflection. This task demands that I have to return to where I started: the "rough ground" of Filipino *struggle* for human and ecological liberation. As a sequel to the realities of oppression narrated in the first chapter, this chapter begins by showing how those seemingly meaningless centuries of colonial oppression have actually allowed the Filipinos to develop the *praxis* of "revolutionary" struggle, as vividly revealed in their heritage of bloody revolution (e.g., the revolution against Spanish, North American, and Japanese colonizers) and the subsequent series of peaceful EDSA People Power. Thus, if in the first chapter the focus was on the history of colonial oppression, here in this present chapter I emphasized the *praxis of struggle*, which is a valuable Filipino response to the reality of oppression. Arguably, the Christian reflection on this historical *praxis* has given birth to a Filipino "theology of struggle," which is presently beginning to embrace both human and ecological struggle for liberation. Moreover, in this chapter, I affirmed that the Christian mission to build communities in the light of God's Kingdom is central to the present Filipino theological reflection. At this juncture, I emphasized that a regnocentric vision of community does not only call us to build ecclesial and human communities but also impels us to form "ecological communities" grounded in the principle of interdependence and interrelationship of all creatures in the "web of life." In this light, I insisted on the imperative of struggle to overcome both human and ecological barriers of forming communities, namely:

(1) the widening class division between rich and poor, (2) the oppressive cultures (e.g., the ambivalent Filipino values, clerical culture, colonial mentality, and patriarchal ideology), and (3) the anthropocentric attitude toward non-human creatures. I considered the latter as especially crucial to my appropriated vision of the “greening” of theology, as it challenged me to embrace the ethical imperatives of *ecological praxis*. In fact, I have proposed to creatively integrate this ecological praxis at three levels of Filipino theological reflection. First, on the level of the academe, I proposed the “greening” of fundamental theology by embracing the ecological struggle in the Filipino theological agenda. I challenged the professional Filipino theologians to develop a non-anthropocentric perspective on liberation, which critically appropriates the ecological insights of the emerging Earth sciences and the ecological worldviews of the indigenous peoples. Second, at the grassroots level, I proposed the “greening” of the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) by appropriating the non-anthropocentric vision of community. I emphasized the perspective that a BEC is not only a *Christian* community within the larger human community but also a *human* community within the whole *ecological* community of creation. And third, on the level of the local church *magisterium*, I proposed the “greening” of the Bishops’ pastoral letters and other magisterial documents. I tried to call the attention of the Filipino church *magisterium* to the fact that its ecological advocacy uncritically appropriates the CST’s anthropocentric perspective on stewardship, as indicated in its vision to make the human interests and security as the main motivation for its ecological advocacy, thus, giving the impression that the *raison d’être* of non-human creatures is merely to serve and provide for the needs of human generations. Thus, as an alternative, I proposed a different model of ecological advocacy in which the eschatological hope for the coming of God’s Kingdom is the main motivation to struggle for a fully reconciled and a totally renewed community of creation.

Annexed Theses

1. The emerging ecological theology of liberation treats poverty and the ecological crisis as intimately interconnected issues and as products of oppressive social and ecological relationships. Oppressive relationships have their social and ecological faces which

mutually affect each other. In that sense, the ecological crisis is also fundamentally an issue of social justice, and vice versa.

2. An adequate method of ecological theology of liberation needs the analytic mediation of social and ecological sciences. These sciences enable us to critically analyze the reality of oppression operating in class, culture, gender, and ecology. Both social and ecological analyses provide us with valuable insights for theological reflection on poverty and the ecological crisis. This whole theological process culminates in the transformative actions based on the social and ecological praxis of the people.

3. The expanded notion of the preferential option for the poor — which embraces (at least) the structurally oppressed class of poor people, the culturally excluded indigenous peoples, the sexually dominated women, and the ecologically exploited earth — demands a corresponding expanded view of liberation. From the Third World context, the approach from below is to be preferred but without necessarily neglecting the top-down approach of the pro-poor advocates.

4. Our construction of an ecological theology of liberation is grounded on the basic ecological insight that the being of creatures is relational — both horizontally and vertically — imaging the relational being of the triune God, and actualizing their self-communicative nature. Thus, it is the being of creatures to form a communion of communities in which everything is related to everything else.

5. The Kingdom of God must be treated with absolute importance, “to which everything else must be referred” (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 8). The normativity of God’s Kingdom serves as the central hermeneutic mediation in our construction of an ecological theology of liberation. In fact, from a Christian perspective, our struggle for human and ecological liberation becomes meaningful only when it is done in view of our hope for the coming of God’s Kingdom — the total salvation of the whole creation.

6. From an ecological perspective, all forms of oppression are essentially relational. In that sense, there is no such thing as oppression that exists in a vacuum but always within the context of relationship, which has both human and ecological consequences.

7. Poverty and the ecological crisis are *glocal* realities in that they have impact both on our immediate context and the planet as a whole. Thus, it is imperative to take into account both the local and the global perspective on poverty and the ecological crisis.

8. The same perverse logic operates in the social and ecological ideologies of oppression. Both ideologies are intimately linked in the sense that an ecological domination is a “causal extension” of social domination.

9. Many Third World countries affirm the fact that the colonial oppression has not only impoverished their human resources, but also grossly exploited their natural resources. This means that their poverty and the ecological crisis are neither the *will of God* nor simply part of their *fate* as a people, but have human causes that can be mitigated, if not totally removed. The poor, especially the indigenous peoples, are more of victims than as perpetrators of the ecological crisis, for they are the first ones to suffer greatly from a crisis they have not caused.

10. We affirm that “the ecological crisis is a moral issue” (John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator*, no. 15), on which the Church should not remain silent or neutral. As a moral issue, we need to treat the “ecological questions” in their entirety, that is, as issues related to the “social questions.” Both moral issues are to be treated together.

11. Liberation theology claims that the social *locus* of the Third World gives a very distinct understanding of the biblical notion of the “Kingdom of God.” This hermeneutic from below is a specific contribution of liberation theology to the general discussion on the Kingdom of God, which biblical scholars should not ignore.