

Christ and Filipino Cultures: The Changing Faces of Christ in the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper draws inspiration from the insights of Filipino creative artists, both literary and visual, in constructing a Christology that could be an impetus for ecclesial and societal transformation. It also builds on the previous pioneering scholarly research done by Filipino theologians and attempts to synthesize the prevailing images of Christ embedded in Filipino culture for almost five centuries. It recognizes the diverse images of Jesus inherent in the gospels. The first part describes the different portraits of Christ in diverse historical situations in the Philippines. Secondly, it deals with the challenge of Jesus Christ to the new Filipino. Thirdly, it attempts to present a Filipino Christology that provides an impetus in bringing about a liberational transformation in church and society. The paper concludes with the image of the risen Christ who accompanies us in the vicissitudes of our struggle –the Christ who dies, buried but rose again in victory! He is the Risen Lord who challenges us to care for the least of our sisters and brothers. He assures us: “I will be with you always till the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

Introduction

As we celebrate the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines this year, we must engage ourselves in confronting the central figure of our Christian faith: Jesus Christ! Among eighty years ago, a man inside a lonely prison cell wrote a letter to his friend: “What is bothering me incessantly is the question... who Christ really is, for us.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a German pastor executed by Nazi regime on April 9, 1945, due to his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. In our time, the question raised by this martyr has become a concern not only among theologians but even by poets and public entertainers. The now famous rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar” raised the question through its chorus:

Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ

Who are you? What have you sacrificed?

Jesus Christ, Superstar

Do you think you are what they say you are?

“Who Jesus Christ is?” is a basic question that every Christian, especially we who are engaged in theological education, need to wrestle with. Thus, we have to engage our students and colleagues in wrestling with this fundamental question. Even the New Testament dealt with this question. Jesus himself raised the question to his disciples: “Who do you say I am?” (Mt.16:15; Mk. 8:29; Lk. 9:20). Simon Peter’s reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” became a classic declaration, repeated by every Christian for over two millennia. Let me point out also that Martha’s declaration is as profound and full of conviction as that of Peter’s confession. With all the weight of a woman’s conviction, Martha declared: “I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” (John 11:27). Later, both formal declarations, became a concise creedal formula with an acronym ICTHUS (*Iesou Cristou Theo Huios Soter* “Jesus Christ, God’s Saviour.” The acronym forms the Greek word for FISH. Thus, FISH became the symbol of early Christianity.

In this paper, I propose a Christology that speaks of the struggle of the Filipino people for personal and social transformation. It is an understanding of Jesus’s life and works gleaned from the Filipino religious tradition and especially from the people’s popular culture and religiosity. It seeks to understand Jesus as viewed by the gospels and recognizes the diverse images of Jesus inherent in the gospels. These varied images help us construct a Filipino Christology that brings a synthesis of the Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus that has become part of the lives of the struggling Filipinos. At the outset, let me reiterate the common themes found in the Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus portrayed in Filipino popular religiosity. The first part describes the different portrayals of Christ in different historical situations in the Philippines. The second part deals with the challenge of Jesus Christ to the new Filipino generation. Thirdly, the paper attempts to present a Filipino Christology that provides an impetus in bringing about a liberationist transformation in church and society.

Thus, I want to present an understanding of Jesus the Christy which is at the center of the forces and processes of ecclesial and societal transformational. I venture to show a Christology that brings about transformational experiences in people who are engaged in the struggle and, therefore, not interested in an abstract academic Christological formulation. Intellectual discussion on the doctrine of Christ is not the concern of people whose survival is constantly threatened and who make do with isang-kahig-isanmg-tuka existence.