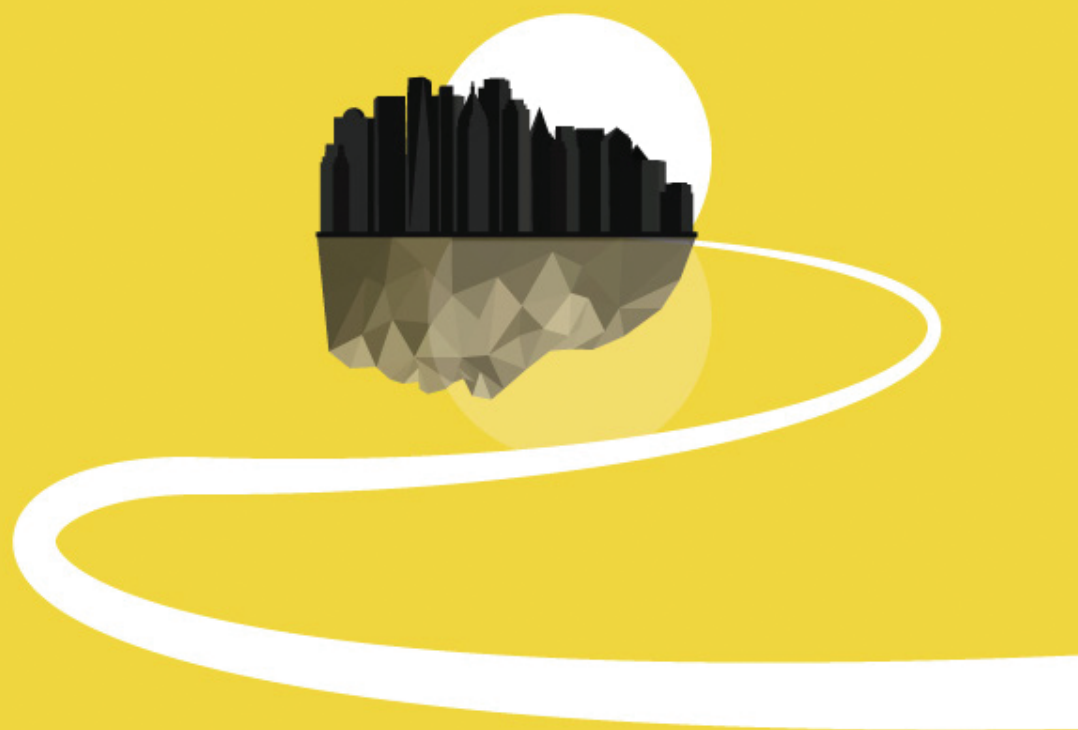


JOSHUA Z. ZONITA

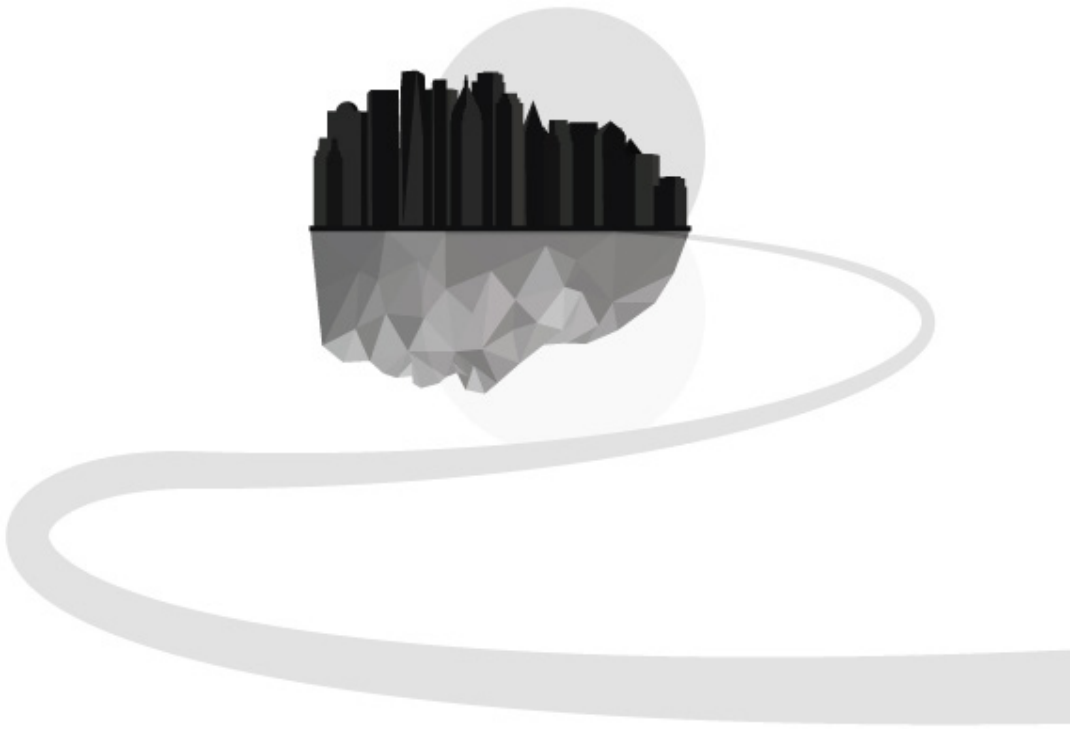
# BANISHED



**Rediscovering Jesus in a fast,  
furious, and fantastic culture**

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furious, and fantastic culture**



CENTRALOGOS

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Every dot I spot, a curse.  
Every word I mark, a bud.  
The world of fear, I trod.  
Marred, and in scorn immersed.

In silent mutiny, I prayed.  
“O heaven, why not speak?”  
In search, I the rebel kneeled.  
“Kindly grant the sign I seek.”

From tyranny, “I am free at last!”  
Did the despot pull his shot?  
No pen but blood and eyes in shut.  
Beat stops, the wordsmith is free at last!

- Onesiforo Berina, Jr. (The Writer and His Versus)

*To my wife Pauly, to my daughter Scottish Lyn 'Panther,'  
and to my father Ortencio, for their delightful love, support, and  
life-shaping memories throughout these years.*

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# FOREWORD

Banished is a reflection and fruition of the author's personal conviction, thoughts, feelings, and reactions through his personal interactions and immediate immersions with God's people and the world. This book is a collection of essays which became his creed and guiding principle in helping his countrymen, especially Christians not only in finding but experiencing the real essence of what hope, true freedom, meaning, abundant life, and destiny is in the light of the evangelion brought about by his Master Teacher, Jesus.

In this book, the author has included some of the relevant issues that Christians are facing today. He noted that modern society's value, which is consumerism, has trivialized the worth and dignity of human beings. He addressed the crisis of authenticity, crisis of self-image, and crisis of values in the modern world. He averred that in this digitalized world, knowing Jesus can result in a deeper understanding of our authentic faith and relationship with God, humanity, and the created order.

Out of this rigorous research from some prominent authors and theologians, he had come up to produce a relevant and useful reference for some of our subjects in the seminary and Bible schools. All the more, this book is a valuable resource material and reference for contemporary pastors or educators who are seeking guidelines for responsible and informed interpretation of current situations. This book then is enlightening and useful. The author based his arguments and presumptions moving from biblical to theological insight for reflection and application.



Joshua Zonita is one of the faculty members in the College of Theology of Central Philippine University; a promising writer and theologian.

Rev. Dr. Bernabe C. Pagara  
Dean  
College of Theology (CPU)

# PREFACE

The book that you are holding is a manifesto of the so-called “underside community of faith.” This manifesto is rooted in two biblical texts. The first one is a mandate from God: “*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain* (Exodus 20:7); the second is Jesus’ question for his disciples: “*Who do you say I am?*” (Matthew 16:15).

Contrary to market, profit, and consumer-driven Churches in many urban cities today, this manifesto of the underside community asserts: “*Do not industrialize, commercialize, marketize, monetize, and commodify the name of the Lord.*” This manifesto is shaped by New Testament narratives about the historical Jesus and how he is understood by the tradition of the faith community.

When I started to gather the materials that I needed for this book, Professor Hans Schwarz, a German theologian and a visiting lecturer at Central Philippine University, advised me to describe “what Filipinos should expect from the Jesus of Nazareth.” As I was thinking about his advice, my mind started to wander on the religious landscape of the Philippines as well as its socio-political conditions. Despite our colonial past, we Filipinos seek to rediscover our uniqueness and identity in Jesus, the Christ. For Filipinos, Christian identity is beyond ethnicity and religion or culture. It is because Filipino individuality is irreplaceable in the universe.

This book is not a biography of Jesus. No one can really know the total reality of Jesus. No honest scholars has claimed to know the totality of Jesus in their work. But there is more to discover about Jesus. This book underscores the determination and motivation of Filipino Christians in finding hope, true freedom, meaning, abundant life, and discovering our destiny in the light of

the gospel of Jesus. We do not put our trust or hope in Pharaoh or Caesar of our time. Rather, we affirm our allegiance to Christ the centerpiece of history and our Christian faith.

When we talk about Christian faith in the Philippine context, we cannot simply bypass the body politic and religious traditions in our country. We need to interpret the historical Jesus in the light of his gospel and our contemporary context. It requires, however, a clear understanding of our colonial past and critical reflective meditation. As such, the biblical narratives need to be studied critically, so that we could inform not only the theology and missiology of the Church, but also the public interest. In that sense, inputs on the historical Jesus, not just the dogma, should also inform the pastoral ministry and the church's vision in our current condition.

This book proposes an “onion peel” reading of the Bible. As you come across one chapter to another, you will find yourself peeling off the multilayer stories, reflections, propositions, and critiques on the birth, life, and teachings of Jesus. In other words, an onion-peel reading of the Bible connotes a reflective Christology that aims to understand the historical Jesus as the Christ of our Christian faith and the transforming character of his message for anyone regardless of his or her ethnicity.

In such manner, everyone is invited to peel off layers of assumptions or notions on Christ that have been marketed in our country. A person who is sincere in searching for the real Jesus will be confronted with multilayer beliefs—fabricated or marketed images of Jesus in the global arena. In the Philippines, several organized religious sects succeed in marketing their ideology or dogma to attract followers in the name of Jesus. After World War II, the Philippines became rich soil for the mushrooming of different religious groups. It turned out, however, that their charismatic leaders became endorsers or promoters of big-time politicians in the country.

This book avoids the pitfall of some charismatic religious leaders. The bias of this book is totally suspicious and antagonistic

towards any organized religion or sect which has been successful in marketing the name of Jesus. Content-wise, this book is a defense against the massive “falsification of the kingdom of God” propagated by sophisticated preachers in the regions. Also, it is a counter-perspective to the values conditioned by a market-driven society, where profit or money rules over human conscience and reason. As an interpretive approach, this book wrestles with the existential questions of different people who grew up in an urban and market-driven society. If a reader is expecting a dogmatic or fundamentalistic explanation of the Bible, this book falls short of such an expectation.

Nevertheless, I am hugely indebted to the works of some reputable scholars: Ben Witherington III, N.T. Wright, John P. Meier, Richard Bauckham, Hans Schwarz, as well as Filipino rural pastors, students, and the underside community of faith who helped shaped the interest and content of this book. Although this book is deeply influenced by Western biblical scholarship and theological insertion, I did some critical-reflective thinking in shaping its content as a Filipino Christian, that is interrelated with my Asian or Filipino context.

# INTRODUCTION

We are living in the “age of imaging.”

Any person can now create his or her self-image in whatever ways and useful tools available, whether it's social media, advertisement, entertainment, magazines, sports, religion, and politics. This is the lie that shapes our modern culture: *“I acquired; I succeed, therefore, I am.”*

Recently, newspapers, blogs, and Facebook pages have been filled with reports about the suicide of some celebrities, rock stars, and business executives. Conferences or seminars in the country have placed a lot of emphasis on depression and mental health. Depression or mental illness has been driving people into mental institutions, if not to the grave. Cases of suicide have become ubiquitous in our time.

One student in my Religion and Ethics class approached me and said: *“Sir, I am confused and have no goals in life; tell me what I should do.”* As an educator in a Christian institution like Central Philippine University, I have received hundreds of written questions from the students, but this question is more daunting because it was an honest revelation of a young man searching for meaning, authenticity, and clarity in a culture overloaded with information by Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. After listening to his confession, I replied: *“Do me a favor; hang on and stick with me for a while. Let's build friendship here.”* He sobbed like a child, shook my hand to thank me and left the room.

This book intends to address the “crisis of authenticity,” “crisis of self-image,” and “crisis of values” pervading our religious community and larger society. Such crises affect the very core of many young people and religious devotees today. In the last

century, people have been celebrating the domination of the fittest, the fastest, the latest, and the most fantastic trends in our society.

Half a decade ago, I started to launch an investigative journey, a journey of rediscovering Jesus in a fast, furious, and fantastic culture. The industrial revolution gave birth to a market-driven society based on capitalistic ideology. There is a growing insatiable desire for more, a desire for instant and easy acquisition of wealth, power, romance, and promotion. Not all people can discern and conceive the seduction of power, money or mammon, prestige, and spotlight. So many people have been sliding on the slippery zone of such limitless seductions in our modern culture.

This modern culture is possibly the most sophisticated human invention that we have embraced in the last century. Some confessed: “Balance is far beyond reach; my life is messed up.” Albert Einstein once wrote to his son Eduard, “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.”<sup>1</sup> This is where Christian faith come in. Christian faith, despite the odds or adversities, strikes the balance which means finding the reason to believe or risk to believe just to understand the purpose and meaning of life. Pain or suffering is meaningful for those who believe in Jesus.

In that sense, Christian faith is never icy stuff; it is moving—dynamic. It means the Christian faith is decisive, for it can enable a person to change his or her life in the process.

Without a doubt, the question asked by Jesus to his disciples: “*Who do you say I am?*” is still an important question for us today. It is, I believe, an important question because our answer might reveal something more about us or our pre-occupation, rather than what Jesus claimed he is. I do not want to sound too theologically subtle and ambiguous. Rather, I wish to invite you to see and to consider the pathway Jesus took upon himself.

As I have traveled all over the country for the past ten years, visiting churches, listening to the life stories of fisher folks and laborers in the seaport, street vendors, farmers, commuters, activists, indigenous people such as the *Lumad*, *T’Boli*, *Badjao*, *Ati*,

Igorot, and Bangsamoro people in Mindanao, I could not evade the question of Jesus: “Who do you say I am?” If ever Jesus would reappear the way he appeared to his first disciples in Palestine and asked me the same question, at least I would know how to explain my answer.

In the last three years, my journey has led me to study volumes of books written by the leading scholars of the New Testament. Recently, my fascination with Jesus took me to some blood-stained areas of Bangsamoro provinces in Mindanao and the villages where the Lumad or indigenous people dwell. These people revealed to me how they strived to survive from human extinction brought about by the war and political oppression in Mindanao.

For several years, I have had regular interaction with the people in some depressed areas or slums in Western Visayas. As I witnessed the plight of hundreds of families in a poverty-stricken parts of Luzon, I couldn’t hold my emotion. It was one of the most horrible reality of human victimization I have ever seen. After all these years, the question of Jesus to his disciples appeals like a case study for me: “Who do you say I am?”

As I read John’s account, I began to recognize the similar predicament Jesus had exposed in his trial. The deep-seated problem in judiciary, bureaucracy, congress, senate, private sectors, local government units, institutions, organizations, and churches in our country forced me to critically assess my life work. Reflecting on these contemporary issues, the historical Jesus or the Christ of faith started to emerge in my imagination.

There are three catastrophic conditions that this book attempt to address: “crisis of clarity,” “crisis of authenticity,” and “crisis of values.” These catastrophic conditions affect the very core of many people and religious devotees today. It is everywhere. A school, a seminary, a church, an organization—once it fails to offer clarity of meaning, of purpose, of direction, of anchor, of moral conviction, of freedom—is comparable to a “tomb” that houses the dead.

John's account of Nicodemus' secret meeting with Jesus at night (John 3) shows the "catastrophic failure" of the temple or religious establishment in his time. Nicodemus, as a member of the Jewish ruling elite, was captivated by the power and wonders of Jesus' miracles. A miracle as a happening is scandalous to the human logic. It was a big issue even for Nicodemus. Jesus as a rabbi proposed to Nicodemus: "*You must be born again.*" This proposition left Nicodemus bewildered, a bit confused, and frustrated. But the conversation moved him to ask a question which perhaps turned to be his personal quest: "*How can this be?*" That question asked for "clarity."

All these years, I have been "searching for clarity." I tried to consume the logic of Western and Eastern worldviews and values, yet I ended up empty, dry, disappointed, and hopeless. It never worked in my real world. In my book *Betrayal of Secrets, When Doubt and Faith Collide*, I revealed the reason why I became an occasional "closet agnostic." I was preoccupied with Western philosophies and overwhelmed by the systemic evil in an institutionalized church—politicized and polarized. Gradually, I buried my Christian faith and the church's tradition in the tomb of doubt because it no longer provided a reference for truth and clarity of meaning to me.

After more than a decade, I realized that I am still searching for unwavering ways to be a faithful disciple of Jesus in this century of militarism, technological disruption, terrorism, imperialism, ecological catastrophe, modern slavery, fake news, human trafficking, political squabbles, institutional erosion, and moral bankruptcy. In situations like these, my conviction keeps driving me to find the balance—asking meaningful questions to find a meaningful answer.

Clarity is what I am searching for.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This book is the fruit of God's work in my vocation as a teacher, writer, and a pilgrim. Also, my journey with Jesus in the context of Filipino struggles for dignity and liberty allowed me to re-assess my teaching ministry and prophetic vocation.

I cannot adequately express the gratitude I have for all the people who were instrumental in the making of this book. Some of them were my students, friends, co-workers, colleagues, and reputable scholars.

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For my wife, Paulyln and our daughter, Scottish Lyn (Panther) as well as my family circles, thank you for all your prayers, love, and untiring support.

To God belongs the glory and honor!

As the waves of 21st century reaches the shore of our existence, we must embrace the fact that they carry ideas that are more evolved and progressive.

As you open the pages of this book, it is best to have a silent pause with the Divine asking Him to grant you an open mind and an emphatic heart to fully grasp the topics discussed.

“Banished” compels its readers to rediscover the truth of Christ in this fast-paced world. As culture continues to evolve so are our ideas and our theology, but sometimes we choose not to discuss or relay it in fear that many won’t understand. But in this book, fear is replaced with boldness. Boldness that shall open your ears to hear even the faintest whisper of God in this world banished by an irreflective mind and negligent heart.



**Joshua Zonita** is the author of *From Aquarium to the River and Betrayal of Secrets, When Doubt and Faith Collide*. He is recognized by the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI 2018) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) as one of the emerging theologians in Asia. He is also the founder of the Accompanying the Church Ministries (ATCM) and Chief Visionary of Centralogos Distribution and Publishing, Inc. Joshua is currently teaching at the Department of Religion and Ethics and the College of Theology, Central Philippine University.



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