

Philippine Christianity and Corruption

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*“But let those who have never sinned
throw the first stones!” (John 8:7b NLT)*

There is not a day when I am not conscious of having to decide whether to be corrupt or not. I have in my possession a 300-watt heater of which my landlady doesn't know about. I also have a 295-watt personal computer and monitor with which I take note the number of hours I've had it plugged on. So I figured that I would not really be deceiving my landlady if I'd add the number of hours I've used both plus a little extra. It is an arrangement which you can see isn't really quite honest, though the tally on kilowatt-hours has been very exactly done.

Why the secrecy then when I was prepared all along to pay the expenses? Well, since I badly needed a heater for my tea and coffee, I was not prepared for a possible denial to my request. Therefore I circumspect the conventions, hope not to get caught, compensate for the misdemeanor so that the victim here, my landlady, will not be disadvantaged.

My conduct is only one of the faces of graft-corruption here in the Philippines. Petty things and big things, they all still come under the same label: dishonesty. Fortunately I know my conscience hasn't yet gone

numb to these bothersome occasions of immorality. Every time that there is an opportunity to participate in it I could still pause and ruminate on the possible consequences, and make my decisions from there.

I still manage to react with a sincere gesture of shocked awe whenever I hear instances of gross dishonesty, especially when the person allegedly guilty is a leader of my immediate community. My initial reaction to such stories is still one of disbelief, even if it is a given fact that "it is everywhere and everybody does it."

There are many instances when I have seen corruption to pay, the culprits getting away with their conduct and somehow gaining by it. No matter that they have committed an immorality, just as long as some cost has been cut, time has been saved, or labor has been conserved, then it's all worth it. It is the consequences that are exactly the big issue here.

Is it a given fact that corruption goes round in a vicious cycle with poverty and illiteracy? Or does it start somewhere among the three? Is there an argument running here that sounds like: "People are corrupt because they are mal-educated," or "People are corrupt because they are hungry?"

Well, my late Lolo formally studied until Grade 1 only and I have known him to be corrupt at times. Lolo was very good at cheating at card games. I cannot recall all the street-smart antics he's participated in as he told them to us, but I can very clearly see in my mind's eye the quirk of his smile and the twitch of his eyebrows as he relates some anecdote or another. He enjoyed telling quips on how somebody has put one on another, telling them like they're just among those given games in life.

Sure Lolo's family wasn't among the rich of folks. Whatever little ancestral lands they had began to be somehow transferred from one hand to another until all of it was lost to them. Yet Lolo was among the greatest haters of sloth and spendthrifts. That is, Lolo was poor but he valued hard honest work and the monetary com-

pensation that goes with it. Still for me he was the best Lolo in the world.

And so we ask now, how could my beloved country the Philippines be Christian and at the same time corrupt? Lolo was a Roman Catholic, by which many in my immediate circle today would consequently pass him as an “unbeliever.” Is it that, therefore? That the Philippines is corrupt because she is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic? Or is it that she is corrupt despite her being predominantly Roman Catholic?

Who gave her Christianity? Was the Christianity that first came to her the Christianity we are talking about in our classes in the College of Theology? Was it the Christianity of Christ? Of the apostles? Has this Christianity changed with the times at all? If ‘no’ to the last question, then why?

A ‘Superintendent of Sea Trade’ of Fo-kien (China) named Chao Ju-kua, wrote in the 1200s about the people of Ma-i (how the Philippines or part of the Philippines was called by them) in his ‘A Description of Barbarian Peoples’:

“The custom of the trade is for the savage traders (*that’s supposed to be us*) to assemble in crowds and carry the goods away with them in baskets; and, even if one cannot at first know them, and can but slowly distinguish the men who remove the goods, there will yet be no loss. The savage traders (*that is, my ancestors*) will after this carry these goods on to other islands for barter, and, as a rule, it takes them as much as eight or nine months till they return, when they repay the traders on shipboard with what they have obtained (*for the goods*).”¹

¹ Harry J. Benda and John A. Larkin. *The World of Southeast Asia: Selected Historical Readings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p.8. Italics enclosed in parentheses are mine.

Again, though I have heard of this other story from other sources still I feel like entertaining it here. Who among those living in sophisticated medieval Spain and Portugal would find it appealing at all to transport roots and start a new life in some obscure primitive far away land where 'natives' may have not even heard of clothes voluminous enough to smother its wearer? The missionaries you may say, but this was the field then of the all-assuming Dark Ages clergy of the pomp and power of Rome, however sincere their intentions may have been. In what sense that sincerity was, it is open for debate. The artists you may say, in search for new inspirations and new avenues for expression. But did their genre exist then, the ones restless for 'unexplored possibilities?' Besides, artists are ideally sensitive people and therefore averse to inflicting senseless cruelty, excepting maybe the 'cruelty' their forms and media of expression inflict on our ingrained sense of what's beautiful and harmonious. Were there "social workers" then, concerned of the living conditions of the peoples of the new colony? Were there educators willing to risk status among peers for the sake of educating primitive minds? Or say that there were business, or otherwise, entrepreneurs excited of stories of pliant and subservient laborers who did not have sophisticated weaponry for a successful redress of grievances with the use of them? Yes, we may have these latter kinds going for us. They would be of those types who seek adventure by their cunning and brawns, and for what they could get from it. This, I think, is exactly how it all started for us. We were colonized by *pale hairy smelly barbarians* who sought 'a place under the sun' for themselves when they did not think it could be found in their motherland. We were colonized by opportunists who thought the newly found land was theirs for the taking, and that they were God-given gifts to its inhabitants.

Let's say you are with a wealthy benefactor. You see him and his family, his wife, children and all, lead an ostentatiously extravagant life. Rather than let good food be

wasted to the dogs, you take them home to your family without your benefactor knowing. Otherwise, how can you say that you're taking home waste food for your family to eat? Would the excuse rather be given that it is your dogs, too, that will benefit from them? The benefactor would hardly notice anyway, such concerns that belong to the working sub-class, so why bother to tell of it at all? Then, what else could be 'excusably' brought home without the benefactor noticing also? Why not take advantage of the situation when no one's getting hurt at all, and your family benefiting from it besides? No one's getting hurt, except your increasing 'burden', if it could be called that, of furtiveness.

Exactly if it could be called a burden. This issue is related to that big issue on consequences. For I am aware that I live in a society of the Us-or-Them positions. If someone is not for Us, then he is for Them. Only the most adept can legitimately exist in both these worlds, in my society. So that if you are for Us, how can you take sides with Them? If you-are-one-of-Us, you-will-not-tell-on-Me. You are ethically bound to take my side on issues such as this, when my 'face' is at stake.

This facet of group belongingness is very strong in my society. This has allowed 'petty' corruption against the wealthy benefactor of the Them group, to proliferate until it has become so ingrained into the culture that it has ceased to become an urgent matter of consequence.

I will come across difficulty if I would have to sort out here the processes that have contributed in the cessation of its being a paramount concern as a facet of our culture --- as to causes, vehicles, transformations over a long period of time. I will just have to accept the fact, and have it restated here explicitly this time, that corruption in the Philippines is so pervasive that it has become part of the norm.

If this is therefore the case, then what about our identity as the only Christian nation in Asia – is this identity a gross mistake, a misnomer? Is it possible for both

tags to go together – being Christian and being corrupt? The first question above concerns Biblical jargon, and therefore a question of linguistics. The second question concerns anthropology vis-à-vis the Biblical perspective. The answer to both questions is “yes.”

The term “Christian” as Acts 11:26 says is the term used to call the group of people who have come to follow the teachings of Jesus’ apostles. Now if one was to follow what Jesus taught, one was assured of a safe ‘position’ relative to The Supreme Being, who is the Personality to whom these “Christians” (as well as their precursor Judaists) attribute all the ideals the human being has been found to be incapable of having all at once: integrity, impartiality, wisdom, gentleness, forgiveness, justice, power, majesty, and might. By consequence therefore Christians were, as implied by the Biblical narratives, those who, as much as possible, adhered to these ideal characteristics. That is, they were those who agreed to *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor.”* This is a passage from Romans 13, verses 8 thru 10, which scholars unanimously attribute to Paul of Tarsus. Only him or her who believes in, adhere to, and practice these tenets at least is called a Christian. From this perspective therefore the Philippines is not a Christian nation since not everyone in his or her jurisdiction answers to the description above of being a Christian. This, of course, is equally true even if there were no Muslims, Hindus, and all others who belong to ‘minority’ religions living in the land.

The “yes” to the second question can be approached in two ways. The first way takes into consideration the argument that has just been placed above. That is, if the Philippines is labeled a Christian nation despite a non-

strictly “Christian” population, then there is no inconsistency at all. (It must be added here that the latter statement is made in view of the consideration that “Non-Christian” adherents may not be so finicky about not coveting and not stealing, and in this sense not being judgmental about a “Non-Christian” value system. Again, without suggesting that coveting and stealing may be fine, and that the “Christian” set of values is relative. The emphasis is on trying to present the case without assigning “Christianity” as the norm against which all other value systems are evaluated.) There is no inconsistency in the sense that “The Only Christian Nation in Asia” label does not particularly mean that the country is made up of people from the Romans 13:8-10 perspective, who courageously condemn stealing.

The second way has in view the consideration that, in the Pauline sense for instance, man is corrupt: *“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ...,”* Romans 7 verses 15 and 18, among others. In this sense as well as in Romans 13:8-10, it is possible to be a Christian and be corrupt.

The rejoinder to the last paragraph is the timely introduction to the next segment of thoughts. Yes it is possible to be a Romans 13:8-10 Christian, but the story must not end there. For Paul urges that the correct sense is that *“...we have an obligation --- but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. ...be transformed by the renewing of your mind. ... Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”* Romans 8:12; 12:2,9.

If my *savage* ancestors of the old Ma-i knew how to be honest, if the demand be that, then so could I. So could my contemporaries. For if my Ma-i ancestors knew Romans 13:8-10 decency without having heard of it, how much more those of us now who expressly profess belief in it.

The issue now is in the manner of gravity we as a nation look at the consequences of dishonest acts, both big and small. (The collective “us” does not imply a literal 100% involvement with corruption among the Filipino citizenry.) Just as the consciousness of our forefathers shifted from non-practice to tolerance, so we must now return to that period of trustworthiness. The biggest contributor to this endeavor must be the institutionalized education system.

In my experience alone as a teacher I am overcome by the lack of discipline I encounter among my students. Lack of discipline in terms of substandard compliance to the academic demands of a particular course. In College Algebra, for instance, I can sweepingly say that most of the time less than half of my classes rightfully deserve passing marks. Lack of discipline in terms of attempts at cheating at various degrees during scheduled exams if the proctor’s vigilance is just so. Irresponsibility in terms of absences and tardiness. Moreover, my co-teachers have collectively concluded that the overall decorum of the university students nowadays is despicable. Of course there are always exceptions, but that’s just it: the rule has become the exception. The lamentations of instructors gathered in my faculty room any day is just heartbreaking. There always is a never-ending string of anecdotes all around to be shared, condemned, analyzed, or just helplessly be laughed at when the extremely serious could not but must be seen as downright hilarious, or there will be nothing left at all but raw frustration.

How much of my concern I am willing to make manifest for these young citizens is a separate topic. For now I would just like to express this big question hanging over my head: WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THESE RASCALS IN TERMS OF DISCIPLINE THROUGH ALL THE 10 YEARS, AT THE LEAST, PRIOR TO ENTERING UNIVERSITY? And now that they are here, is the system enough to either reinforce discipline or redirect those who

have been misguided? The question rightfully applies to any post-secondary school in the country.

We must have an overall drive towards the raising of sensitivity to minor misdemeanors, that must start with teachers themselves. The drive must be consistent, if not as strongly imposed as in the manner of my elementary school teachers, who were the minor gods and the bane of my childhood existence. Though I must confess that it is their doing that a preference for a high standard of performance has been ingrained into my system despite my overwhelming tendency to take things easy, just as they come. Perhaps we can best start from here, gradually working our way towards countering our culture for glossing over misconducts even when they are glaringly gargantuan, as in the Them-or-Us syndrome. The moral fiber of the country must be the thing to work on. Whip up more and more of our historical heroes' ideal characteristics from time to time. Redefine who we are, incorporating the good and the bad that our national consciousness has gone through, throughout all the colonizations and the maltreatments. Get reacquainted with ourselves, try to figure out why we are so adept at adapting to whatever has come to us, and if indeed they have irreversibly changed our values from the Ma-i era, or if we're still the same.

The name "Christian Nation" is stuck to us. This is not to say that we have to work things out so as to live up to the label. We have to work things out because we as a people are suffering, with or without this added burden of an identity.

Of course we are averse to corruption. Whoever says otherwise must be crazy. But we just can't get away from it. It's gone under our national skin. It has become a sort of a prison for us. This is where that vicious cycle of corruption, mal-education, and poverty is made manifest.

Next to educators are leaders who have a great accountability in this thing. If momentum has to come from somewhere then it must be with them. Filipinos are great

adulators of those who are in the limelight. This trait must be taken advantaged of, in the positive way.

Alas, strong leaders come from, where else, but the people. As the people are, so is the leadership. Now, where do those who profess Romans 13:8-10 come in?