

## “Culture Meets Religion”

By

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The Philippines is a country so Catholic, we are one of only two states in the world that do not have divorce. The other is Vatican City. Here, just a few years back, a man was imprisoned for “offending religious feelings”.

Back in 2006, in Manila, I was co-leading a small UU chalice circle with around 10-15 in attendance and the regulars were less than 10. Although it would seem too small, UUs from other countries would come attend once in a while. We would have UU leaders and ministers from US, Canada, the UK, Europe and Australia. In those times, co-leaders, Bob and I, would get excited as it would feel to us truly more churchy than a book club or a garage band. During their visits, we had at least once said giddily, “Intelligent lifeform has landed.” It felt to me like we were this young struggling religion that would feel affirmed by their presence until I went deeper inward into my own culture.

I had long resonated with the sensibilities of Thoreau, Whitman and Emerson. I had long followed them as wise teachers of a culture I thought I was part of. An American might boast, it only took half a generation for the

Philippines to be Americanized. But that's less because of American power and more of Filipino's cultural savvy. Filipinos easily learn cultures wherever we find friends and family. Our nation is many nations heavily intermingling among the 100 ethnic groups traveling to make new friends and new families. Because learning is faster when knowledge is embedded in relationship, Filipinos' penchant for friendship helps us harvest the power of cultural difference. And conversely, almost anywhere in the world, when I say, I'm a Filipino, there is more often this welcome accorded to us.

Even if the Americans had granted us national independence 3 generations ago, I still grew up feeling and seeing myself as a brown American like people from Guam or Puerto Rico. Four generations ago, during World War II, Filipinos drove away the Japanese from Philippine soil and supported their American colonizers to prevent the Japanese from advancing to the rest of the Pacific, therefore saving Australia and New Zealand. This was when we were still part of the American Commonwealth. Back then, it was as if Filipinos were fighting for American territory and so they demanded American rewards. So, the Filipino veterans were given American citizenship.

One such veteran was Enrique Jurado, an air force pilot. Because of him, his son, Gene, became an American citizen. And before Gene passed away 2 years ago, he was a member of the First Universalist Church of Denver. And that church is a partner to my home congregation. Gene came from a line of educated Filipinos and one of his ancestors was a woman named Paz Marquez-Benitez, a well-known author of a 1925 short story that gave birth to modern Philippine writing in English.

In 1925, it's the first generation of Filipinos experiencing American occupation and already we had become luminaries of your language. And now we are the fourth largest English-speaking country in the world. So, when people ask me why do you speak English so well, I can roll my eyes. Filipino women authors had a very special reason for liking English. Because unlike the Spanish colonization before that, women and men were given the same opportunities. In short, it was less Catholic.

I began to discover this literary star Paz Marquez-Benitez and found one of her works called *Night in the Hills* in which she wrote, I suspect, are her real beliefs about God. Now remember, this is a heavily Catholic to this day, with 90% of the country believing in the bread as the literal body of Christ. So, the author had to be extra careful. He wrote about this character, a man, who, in a scene where he should be musing about his lover, instead muses about God from out of thin air - which adds nothing to the plot - and to me these are the author's beliefs. She wrote:

"God for him was always up in the sky. Only the God he thought of now was not the God he had always known. This God he was thinking of was another God. He was wondering if when man died and moved on to another life, he would not find there the things he missed and so wished to have. He had a deep certainty that that would be so that after his mortal life was over and we came against that obstruction called death, our lives, like a stream that runs up against a dam, would still flow on, in courses, fuller and smoother. This must be so. He had a feeling almost an instinct, that he was not

wrong. And a Being, all wise and compassionate, would enable us to remedy our frustrations and heartaches." Sounds Universalist to me.

Anyway, a decade before this was written, a certain American author Frank R. Blake had written a book titled *Philippine Literature* in which he wrote this: "All these tribes with these languages have produced little or nothing which can claim to be literature in the sense of elegant and artistic writing." This American's book was written in 1911. And a decade further back before Blake even knew of the Philippines, our national hero Jose Rizal was executed by the Spanish for writing two novels. When we trace Rizal's sensibilities, we can see authors in his cultural ancestry espousing liberal religion and we can also discover warriors that include women generals, heretics, and apostates who led bloody religious rebellions that were not hoping to convert others but to defend just their freedom to practice their own faith. You see, these 7,600 islands had many faiths but no religious wars before the Catholics came. This very old humane civilization inhabited as early as 700,000 years ago has persisted in our culture of care and acceptance that other nations count on Filipino workers.

When the Americans started occupying the Philippines, President Roosevelt appointed a Unitarian to be the civil governor of the Philippines, his name was William Howard Taft. Taft would later become the president of the American Unitarian Association and even the president of the US. But before he even got here, Unitarians were already here, numbering more than a million Filipinos, far more in number than all Unitarians in the world combined. They called themselves the Philippine Independent Church and they had independently and organically come into their own Unitarian theology as a homegrown response against Catholicism. Our

culture was already that liberal and much of Philippine literature attests to that.

Although well-known Philippine literature may be in Spanish and English, they are still rife with Filipino sensibilities and culture. Tales, epics, legends in the languages of over 100 ethnic groups who call this country home have persisted from before they could be written. They were orally transmitted through time. They include popular proverbs, riddles, and lullabies. And they are fascinating to study. For instance, in the Mangyan ethnic group, there is no word for war. In the Bontoc region, it has been observed that no rape has ever been spoken of and until now, a lot of artists go there for a sort of personal healing pilgrimage just immersing among the people, their culture, their language, customs, art and cuisine. In the Tagalog region you will know of ways of feeling that have no translation in English. The word **tampo** for instance means I am nursing a hurt you caused but not as a victim, but as a sibling waiting to be reconciled.

Here's another great author during the brief American occupation. A woman named Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido, from her poem titled **Muted Cry**, she wrote:

They took away the language of my blood,  
giving me one "more widely understood."  
More widely understood! Now Lips can never  
Never with the Soul-in-Me commune:  
Moments there are I strain, but futile ever,  
To flute my feelings through some native Tune...

Alas, how can I interpret my Mood?

They took away the language of my blood.

The Americans granted Philippine independence in July 4, 1946, after World War II. But the colonization continues unabated through cultural domination, especially in the capital Manila where they have stronger ties to American financial markets and the American economy. I look at culture as rightfully belonging to our Sources of Living Tradition. In the beginning of the service, we read to you the Six Sources of our Living Tradition. But it doesn't mention cultures as living traditions. Cultures are tentative tapestries that help us design our communities, they are the language of revelation unfolding within our existing communities and embed in our relationships. Culture deserves to be recognized as a source of human understanding that bridge us to the mysteries - cultures provide us ways of coping with problems by posing alternatives to our ways of seeing and being. Also, it is by making cultural accountable, the way we view other Sources mentioned, making the Bible accountable, making humanist teachings accountable, and so on, gives us a sensitivity to our true influences.

I remember how free I felt upon knowing what my personal theology actually is. It's the same liberation I felt realizing what our culture is. When we take our personal theology for granted, we can get hijacked by dogma. If we take our culture for granted, we can get hijacked by dominant culture.

We Filipinos come from peoples of many nations who call this place home and those that we bring into our homes. For every 2 Filipino

households, there is at least one Filipino working abroad as nurses, teacher, seafarers, doctors, peacekeepers, engineers, and others. They work in more than 100 countries all over the world. They are more likely to devote their finances to saving their families here. Think about how that enriches our culture and helps keep us open hearted such that we have an open-door policy for refugees since ancient times. The UN refugee agency cited the Philippines as one of the model countries for seeking refuge.

We can look to other cultures to see them as communities of practice that we can learn from and help us recognize our own. In our times of uncertainty, when many are hesitant to lead, we sometimes need untested modes of leadership. We can hold our sentiments in different spaces in our minds, bodies, or among our community as modeled by many other cultures. When we look at our Six Sources, we can see how these are imperfect, faulty, and problematic sources all. Yet, it is in continuing to converse or engage with them that we become more faithful to our personal journeys. Culture is a lived religion and a living tradition.

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