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Exploring the (In)Visibility of the Christ-believers' 'Trans-ethnicity': A Lowland Filipina Catholic's Perspective

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Recently some Western scholars have problematized the issue of the alleged 'trans-ethnicity' or universalism of the earliest Christ-believers based on new interpretations of biblical texts.¹ From the perspective of my predominantly Roman Catholic upbringing in the Philippines, in this essay I shall argue that the Western-influenced view of trans-ethnic Christianity in relation to issues of ethnicity, race, and religion can be seen not only in the biblical text but also in relation to the identity of the Catholic biblical interpreter(s) and their choice of particular hermeneutical approaches and methods.² Given these interrelated factors, I will explore the question of the possibility and/or desirability of 'breaking out' of these Western assumptions and offer suggestions for a way forward through a dialogical method.

1 The lowland Filipino Catholic interpreter

Let me begin with the interpreters. Currently about 80 per cent of Filipinos are Catholics.³ Most live in the 'lowland' setting which is generally influenced by

¹ For a recent discussion, see David G. Horrell, 'Ethnicisation, Marriage and Early Christian Identity: Critical Reflections on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Peter 3 and Modern New Testament Scholarship', *NTS* 62, no. 3 (2016): 439–60.

² For a critical view, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction, and Some Thoughts on Asian Biblical Hermeneutics', *BibInt* 2, no. 3 (1994): 251–63; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Asia: From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Heikki Räisänen et al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki* (Reading the Bible in the Global Village 1; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds, *Reading from This Place. Vol. 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

³ This means about 74,211,896 in 2010. See Philippine Statistics Authority, *Philippines in Figures 2015* (Quezon City: Philippine Statistics Authority), 28. Available online: <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/2015%20PIF%20as%20of%20June%202016.pdf> (accessed 29 April 2017).

Catholicism brought by the Spanish colonizers in 1521.⁴ The riverine or coastal areas of the various islands are occupied by the major ethnic and linguistic groups of Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano, Visaya, Hiligaynon, Waray, and Bicol. The other ethnic groups and earlier Islamic groups that did not convert to Spain's brand of Roman Catholicism have been forced to go up into the mountains or live near the sea or on boats due either to Christian-Muslim conflict or because of the Christians' exploitative relationship with them.⁵ While consciousness of the varied ethnic and linguistic groups in the Philippines persists, the identity of being 'Filipino' and 'Catholic' was also embraced as a new way of affirming communal identity. The character of Filipino Catholics' trans-ethnic identity was influenced by centuries of Spanish colonization (1521–1898), followed by American Christian missions (1898–1946),⁶ and, thus, is of a Western character. The changes brought about by Vatican II and the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, particularly the shift from the model of Christendom to the Church of the Poor, emphasized this shared and dominant Filipino Catholic identity.⁷

In my observation, the perception of being a Filipino Catholic moves within a complex continuum of visibility–invisibility. The sense of being Filipino highlights our ethno-racial identity. Being a Catholic underscores our religious trans-ethnic identity of belonging to a more universal group, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, which often eclipses our awareness of other Christian rites and denominations worldwide. The relationship between 'Filipino' and 'Catholic' is also very complicated, without necessarily being directly proportional. Within the country, the Catholic and Filipino identities are visible even if being a Filipino tends to be dissected into the various ethno-linguistic identities. The identities 'Filipino' and 'Catholic' also strengthen each other in situations like a papal visit, pilgrimaging or working abroad, or when helping others during environmental disasters. Abroad, 'being Filipino' becomes more prominent (although regionalism persists) because Catholicity is often presupposed among Filipinos unless outward signs indicate otherwise. Yet, the two identities may also clash. For example, the issue of extra-judicial killings related to the government's so-called war on drugs contrasts with the official Catholic Church's teaching and stance on the sacredness of *everyone's* life.⁸ Being Catholic seems to be secondary to Filipinos who consider supporting the current administration's drug

⁴ See Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *A History of the Philippines: From the Spanish Colonization to the Second World War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 17–23. The issue of ethnicity, race, and religion in southern Philippines, particularly the Christian-Muslim and Lumads conflicts, is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Stuart J. Kaufman, 'Symbols, Frames, and Violence: Studying Ethnic War in the Philippines', *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2011): 937–58.

⁵ See Edgar Javier, *Building Christian Community: A Case Study of the Ethnic Minority Communities of Mindoro, Philippines* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Facultas Missiologiae, 1985).

⁶ For a concise treatment of Philippine history and its impact on biblical interpretation, see Niceta Vargas, *Word and Witness: An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013), 287–90.

⁷ See Julio X. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor* (Quezon City: Claretians, 1995); William Holden, 'From the Church of the Powerful to the Church of the Poor: Liberation Theology and Catholic Praxis in the Philippines', in *The Changing World Religion Map*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 3095–114.

⁸ See Roy Lagarde, 'Church and gov't should collaborate, not clash – Cardinal Rosales', *CBCP News Online*. Available online: <http://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/church-and-govt-should-collaborate-not-clash-cardinal-rosales/> (accessed 29 April 2017).

'war' as being patriotic, without taking into account the Church's teaching on the sacredness of life.

Focusing on the influence of being Filipino and Catholic in interpreting the Bible, the degree of understanding of Filipino Catholics' trans-ethnicity (i.e. the blurring of Filipino ethnicity) differs slightly depending on the different groups of lowland Filipino Catholic Bible interpreters and their exposure to other ethnic, racial, and religious groups within the Philippines and in the global diaspora. Trained exegetes, Filipinos and non-Filipinos, who are in the Philippines and who are largely trained in Western universities and guided by mostly Western-born or Western-educated mentors tend to be more aware of the varied ethnicities in the Bible. Yet, since most of them belong to international religious orders or are members of the clergy, they either facilitate the recognition of the various ethnicities in the Bible in their academic work or unconsciously promote the trans-ethnicity of the Catholics in their pastoral engagement. This is a point that I will take up again below.

The fluidity in recognizing and promoting the Christ-believers' global trans-ethnicity can also be found among the Filipinos and the international theology students (mostly Asians) as they prepare for priesthood or as part of their formation as religious/consecrated persons, lay church workers, religion teachers, or catechists. They receive biblical formation mostly through formal studies in seminaries and formation centres, some of which are multi-ethnic settings. Groups like the Episcopal Commission on the Biblical Apostolate provide additional help to other biblical interpreters. The use of various media of communication also promotes Bible knowledge which does not necessarily delve into the issues of ethnicity, race, and religion and their intersections. Recent academic research on the Bible, including on these topics, is not necessarily accessible, distributed, or discussed by these various groups of interpreters, much less shared with the larger Catholic community. However, while the knowledge-sharing might be inadequate in relation to issues of ethnicity and religion, and trans-ethnicity is inadvertently promoted, universalism is communicated in an ethnically and linguistically differentiated manner (Filipino languages, English).

In my observation, the lowland Filipino Catholics' way of relating to issues of ethnicity, race, and religion is influenced by what Ernst Conradie calls 'doctrinal lenses' or 'heuristic keys'.

Heuristic keys are typically based on the dominant beliefs, doctrines, values, customs, theological trajectories, and habits of (ecclesial or academic) interpretative communities. They are not directly derived from either the Biblical texts or the contemporary world but are precisely the product of previous attempts to construct a relationship between text, tradition and context.⁹

The idea of Christianity as a trans-ethnic group can arguably be considered a doctrinal lens. It has been formed through the history of interpretation of the biblical text and it also influences the ongoing interpretation of the Bible while engaging the challenging

⁹ See Ernst Conradie, 'The Road Towards an Ecological Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics', *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 305–14, at 306; see also *idem*, 'Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project', *Scriptura* 85 (2004): 123–35.

issues of our times. This doctrinal lens of trans-ethnic Catholic Christianity is dominant among lowland Filipinos through the idea of 'fictive kinship'. It is based on the interpretation of the language of God's Fatherhood and the sibling references to the Christ-followers in the New Testament. The Catechism for Filipino Catholics describes self-identity as rooted in the Filipinos' family-orientation: God is the heavenly Father and Jesus is a brother (*kapatid*).¹⁰

The doctrinal lens of fictive kinship as applied to church members of different ethnicities promotes trans-ethnicity primarily through the Church's liturgy and sacraments. Mt. 6.9-13 is taught as the basic prayer that inculcates God's Fatherhood and projects an image of the Church as a universal fictive kinship group that goes beyond race, ethnicity, and nationality. Popular liturgical songs like *Hesus na Aking Kapatid* (Jesus, my Brother), which depicts Jesus like the poor Filipinos, also deepen the trans-ethnic sibling message.¹¹ The sibling language in the liturgy communicates the invisibility (plurality and differences) and visibility (unity) of the trans-ethnic character of Catholicism. The Catholic lectionary convention of using 'brothers and sisters' as an introduction to the second liturgical reading when it is taken from one of the New Testament epistles also promotes trans-ethnic fictive kinship even if the word ἀδελφοί does not appear in the pericope being cited. Despite some variation, usage of ἀδελφοί as referring to the Christ-believers' fictive kinship is frequent in the Pauline corpus,¹² and the liturgical use today fosters the trans-ethnic idea of siblingship. The same is true with the direct sibling address in the liturgical/sacramental greetings and in the homily of a Filipino/non-Filipino priest, bishop, or the pope.¹³

The notion of fictive siblingship conveys an almost perfect image of Roman Catholics' trans-ethnicity when used by the pope in his messages, especially at Christmas and Easter before an international crowd waving their nations' flags, broadcasted worldwide in various media.¹⁴ Using sibling address in international gatherings such as the World Youth Days emphasizes trans-ethnicity too. Universalism is also achieved by the use of 'brothers and sisters' in official documents, especially those coming from the pope. The trans-ethnic character even extends to non-Catholics during ecumenical encounters and to non-Christians as exhibited in some of the papal encyclicals.¹⁵ Universal siblingship is also promoted by the titular usage of local and foreign missionaries who through or despite their multi-ethnic and multiracial origins refer to one another

¹⁰ See Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (Manila: ECCCE/Word and Life, 1997), nos. 34–5.

¹¹ Eduardo Hontiveros, 'Hesus Na Aking Kapatid', in *Bayan, Umawit*, ed. Jesuit Music Ministry (Quezon City: Jesuit Communications Foundation, 2015), 81.

¹² See David G. Horrell, 'From Ἀδελφοί to Οἶκος Θεοῦ: Social Transformation in Pauline Christianity', *JBL* 120, no. 2 (2001): 293–311.

¹³ For attempts to highlight the ethnic differentiation in the Bible in view of liturgical readings, see, for example, John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Pope Francis, 'Urbi et Orbi' (2016). Available online: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20161225_urbi-et-orbi-natale.html (accessed 29 April 2017).

¹⁵ For example, Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*. Available online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed 29 April 2017). The sibling term 'brothers and sisters' is found in paragraphs 1 and 78 of the encyclical, while 'brotherhood' is found in paragraphs 19, 55, and 59.

as 'Brother Y' or 'Sister X' within their own religious congregation and among other people. Non-verbal expressions like statues/images similarly underline the Catholics' trans-ethnicity. For instance, the feast of the translation of the revered and well-loved image of the life-sized Black Nazarene in Quiapo as a *poón* (lord) underscores Jesus' identity as being God's Son, God's Fatherhood, and the devotee's fictive siblingship with the Nazarene and with fellow devotees.¹⁶ The Catholic trans-ethnic idea of fictive kinship is intensified by the Filipino way of treating other people as *kapwa*, that is, as one's self. Virgilio Enriquez, a pioneer in Filipino psychology, explains: 'The English word "others" is actually used in opposition to the "self," and implies the recognition of the self as a separate identity. In contrast, *kapwa* is a recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others.'¹⁷

Thus, the understanding of Catholic trans-ethnicity by the various groups of lowland Catholic Filipino biblical interpreters is shaped by Western influence through colonization. The doctrinal lens of fictive siblingship that nurtures the idea of Catholicism as a trans-ethnic identity is rooted in the teaching of God as Father and of the members as siblings through Jesus. Trans-ethnicity is communicated mostly through liturgy and other international Catholic gatherings and by non-verbal expressions. Along with the Filipinos' strong family-orientation and the concept of *kapwa*, the lowland Catholic Filipinos' awareness of identity moves in a continuum of visibility of ethnic differences to its invisibility (trans-ethnicity) with a stronger leaning towards the latter.

2 The biblical text

Additional Western-influenced factors affect the fluid perception of issues of ethnicity related to the biblical text. Filipino Catholics only had indirect access to the biblical narratives through catechesis, sermons, and liturgical readings. This prevailed until the reforms of Vatican II and the organization of Basic Ecclesial Communities. A more direct engagement was possible in the post-Vatican II period and after the mass-production of the Bible in various local languages.¹⁸ Only a few Filipino Catholics are actually aware that the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Geographical and temporal distance from the biblical text in its historical settings likewise contributes to the difficulty in recognizing ethnic identities in the biblical text. For example, the reference to the Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites in Num. 13.29 is crucial in geographically locating the promised land, but the places and ethnicities mentioned would seem abstract to the average

¹⁶ Mark Joseph Calano, 'The Black Nazarene, Quiapo, and the Weak Philippine State', *Kritika Kultura* 25 (2015): 166–87, esp. 173: 'While devotees know that the "*Panginoong Hesus Nazareno*" is the only true Son of God, by walking with him, an informant said, they become adopted as children of the Father and thus are "*magkakapatid*" (siblings to one another) regardless of social class or status.'

¹⁷ See Virgilio G. Enriquez, 'Kapwa and the Struggle for Justice, Freedom and Dignity', in *Pamamaraan: Indigenous Knowledge and Evolving Research Paradigms*, ed. Teresita B. Obusan, Angelina R. Enriquez, and Virgilio G. Enriquez (Quezon City: Asian Center, University of the Philippines, 1994), 1–181, at 3.

¹⁸ See Vargas, *Word*, 290.

Filipino Catholic. The same goes for Acts 2.8-11,¹⁹ even if Judea, Egypt, Rome, and so on, recall present-day ethnic groups or geographic places where overseas Filipinos work. Advances in education and increased international economic migration have enlarged the chance of Filipinos being able to differentiate the ethnic identities found in the Bible. Yet the doctrinal lens of fictive siblingship continues to blur them and project unity with other Catholics worldwide.

The distribution of readings in the Church's liturgical year, fashioned after the Western hemisphere's seasons²⁰ also influences the degree of visibility of the Catholics' trans-ethnicity. Advent and Christmas readings express the longing for the Jewish Messiah, but ethnicity is blurred when these readings are interpreted as presenting Jesus' birth not as a Jewish messianic fulfilment but a cosmic event that often overlooks his Jewish roots. Ordinary-time liturgical readings similarly tend to lessen the awareness of the specificities of ethnic identities since Jesus is portrayed and interpreted as ministering to people in need, but their varying ethnicities are overlooked. Texts like Mk 3.31-35//Mt. 12.46-50//Lk. 8.19-21 tend to be interpreted in today's preaching in the Philippines as setting aside Jesus' blood relationship and his Jewish ethnicity in favour of a more universalistic openness which should characterize present-day Christ-believers who hear God's word and put it into practice. When these biblical texts are popularized through audio-visual, symbolic and artistic forms, the trans-ethnic message is reinforced and perpetuated.

A different kind of example is found in the passion narratives read on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Many preachers in Filipino churches tend to highlight the antagonists' Jewish ethnicity but inadvertently downplay Jesus' and his disciples' own Jewishness. Moreover, the *Pabasa* or *Pasyon*, as 'a type of religious verse that narrates the life of the Saviour and which has appeared in the major vernaculars in the Philippines'²¹ since the Spanish colonization, continues in some areas until today. It encourages readers and hearers to identify with Jesus but with minimal focus on his Jewishness, even if he is recognized as a Galilean.²² The reasons behind the expulsion of the Jews in Spain in 1492²³ most likely influenced the many ways Jews are negatively perceived both in Spain and its colonies.²⁴ During the Spanish and American colonization, images from

¹⁹ For a recent work on ethnicity in Acts, see Eric D. Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16* (WUNT 2.294; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 2-3 where he explains, 'Acts does not erase ethnic difference but employs the flexible bounds of ethnicity in order to illustrate the wide demographic ambitions of the early church movement but also the uneasy negotiations of ethnicity such a religious movement required.'

²⁰ See Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16.

²¹ Rene B. Javellana, 'The Sources of Gaspar Aquino de Belen's *Pasyon*', *Philippine Studies* 32, no. 3 (1984): 305-21, at 305.

²² Reynaldo Clemenña Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1997), 16.

²³ The issue of ethnicity, race, and religion becomes more complicated in connection with the medieval Castilian passion narratives where Jesus and Mary are themselves portrayed as anti-Jewish. See Jessica A. Boon, 'Violence and the "Virtual Jew" in Castilian Passion Narratives, 1490s-1510s', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 8 (2016): 110-29.

²⁴ See Minerva Generalao, 'Time to Check Pabasa for Anti-Semitic Contents, Says Caloocan Bishop'. Available online: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/888866/time-to-check-pabasa-for-anti-semitic-content-says-caloocan-bishop> (accessed 29 April 2017).

the *Pasyon* that speak of movement from death to life or from misery to salvation 'nurtured an undercurrent of millennial beliefs which, in times of economic and political crisis, enabled the peasantry to take action under the leadership of individuals or groups promising deliverance from oppression.'²⁵ Thus, a conflict *within* the realm of Jewish ethnicity has been evoked: The colonially oppressed Filipinos identified with the suffering Jesus, whose Jewish identity was (inadvertently) diminished, while the hated Spanish religious leaders and government officials were equated with the negatively characterized Jewish religious leaders and Jewish people. While the Catholic religion was (mis-)used by the colonizers to subjugate the local people, the Filipino Catholics' own re-appropriation of Jesus' message became their inspiration in the quest for freedom and a better life. The question of why the Jews were identified with the colonizers and at the same time Jesus' Jewishness was 'overlooked' demands closer future study.

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, who was a guest at the 2003 annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines, comments on the negative characterization of the Jews in the *Pasyon*:

I cannot help but wonder what those who hear this text recited thought about 'the Jews', especially since here the Roman soldiers disappear and 'the Jews' are the ones who mock, torture, and crucify Jesus. ... In case we miss the distinction between 'good Christians' and 'bad Jews', epithets accompany references: 'Scheming Jews' (882); 'ravenous Jews' (1615); ... this list does not even consider the epithets against the various Jewish groups, who are lumped together in any case.²⁶

This example and the use of secondary literature, especially from the West, that inadvertently promotes (potential) anti-Judaism, presents a hermeneutical challenge in a post-Holocaust, post-Nostra Aetate world, even if some would consider the Philippines to be geographically far from Europe.²⁷ It is, however, significant to recognize that despite the popularity of the eighteenth-century *Pasyon*, it did not necessarily lead to hatred towards particular Jews. The Philippines is one of the few countries that welcomed Jews fleeing the Holocaust and is the only one in Asia that voted for the creation of the State of Israel.²⁸ It is the country with the second lowest percentage (3 per cent) of anti-Semitism in Asia.²⁹ Presently, many Filipinos also work in Israel.³⁰

²⁵ Ileto, *Pasyon*, 14.

²⁶ Amy-Jill Levine, 'A Jewish Reading of the New Testament', in *Same Stories, Different Understandings: Jews and Catholics in Conversation* (CBAP Lectures 2004; Manila: Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines, 2004), 21–37, at 34.

²⁷ See Levine, 'Jewish Reading', 30–7.

²⁸ For a concise history of Jewish presence in the Philippines, see Jonathan Goldstein, 'Shaping Zionist Identity: The Jews of Manila as a Case Study', *Israel Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2009): 296–304.

²⁹ See Anti-Defamation League, 'Philippines'. Available online: <http://global100.adl.org/#country/philippines/2014> (accessed 29 April 2017).

³⁰ See Philippine Embassy, 'Profile of the Filipino Community in Israel'. Available online: http://philippine-embassy.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=56:profile-of-the-filipino-community-in-israel&catid=15&Itemid=33 (accessed 29 April 2017).

In sum, the history of accessing the biblical text, the geographical and temporal distance from the historical roots of the biblical text, the chosen readings according to the changing liturgical seasons, and the religio-socio-cultural and political influence in interpretations like the *Pasyon*, have various effects on the Filipino Catholic readers of the Bible. They become aware but not fully cognizant of the ethnic identities in the Bible. They develop close identification with Jesus' character in a way that tends to diminish the particularity of his Jewishness while identifying strongly with him in his ministry and passion, emphasizing his character's trans-ethnicity.

3 Hermeneutics

In addition to the interpreter and biblical text, hermeneutical processes marked by Western assumptions similarly influence the Filipino Catholics' lens in considering ethnicity in the Bible. From my lowland Filipino Catholic viewpoint, four aspects of the hermeneutical process show how the supposed universality and trans-ethnicity of Christian identity is infused with a clear Western bias: the language used in scholarship; the pattern of scholarly exchange; methodological preferences; and how the Bible is regarded.

First, the mainly Western languages used in biblical scholarship and the way ancient biblical languages are taught in Western universities highlight the issue of ethnic bias. For example, differentiating terms such as γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός³¹ helps to underline issues about ethnicity in the biblical texts, but it will be challenging for students of theology or religious studies in the Philippines to appreciate the differences, since they are not required to study the biblical languages, even if courses might be available in some educational institutions. For non-Western students, understanding critically the nuances of the debate is demanding. One needs to deal not only with the ancient languages and documents but also the different, mostly Western, languages of the secondary literature. Non-English native speakers similarly have some difficulties writing academic essays in the Western tradition. Western language courses do not fully solve the problem, because they are not necessarily geared towards exegetical issues or theological use of the Bible. Moreover, one's work is expected to be mostly written in English, and editing by a native speaker is expected, if it is for a publication or international conference presentation. Consequently, those who have good facility in these Western languages and who have access to or can pay a good language and stylistic editor have an immense advantage.

Second, the Western brand of trans-ethnicity in the interpretation process is likewise evident in the way biblical scholarly exchanges happen. Important opportunities to actively participate in the scholarly conversation are usually of Western origin using Western languages,³² following the Western hemisphere's academic calendar and

³¹ See David G. Horrell, "Race", "Nation", "People": Ethnic Identity-Construction in 1 Peter 2.9; *NTS* 58, no. 1 (2012): 123–43.

³² For example, the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense (CBL) uses English, Dutch, French, and German.

are held mostly in the West.³³ Other factors make this similarly prohibitive: lack of available updated materials in preparing competitive papers that will be accepted in an international conference; travel and accommodation costs; and the unpredictability of securing a visa on time if one is travelling from the Philippines.³⁴

Publication opportunities are also heavily Western focused. In 2013 I met with other Asian scholars in the context of the Society for New Testament Studies Asia Pacific Liaison Committee in Perth, Australia. I recall some of the difficulties that we discussed, such as the use of mainly Western criteria to determine whether or not a paper is worth publishing by mainly Western reviewers for Western journals that are deemed more preferable and reliable in the academy. Furthermore, these journals have prohibitive subscription rates whether in paper or digital form for non-Western scholars who may or may not have institutional support and who are mostly working within faith communities of modest budget. Likewise, non-Western styles of writing or methodology tend to be less likely to be published. This is not to mention the cultural journey of Asian students who are culturally trained to respect the wisdom of the elder and more established scholars and who need a lot of time and effort to 'overcome' their upbringing and adapt to Western ways of making 'critical' remarks. These factors make it difficult for non-Western scholars to participate actively and continuously in the global scholarly conversation. One of the dilemmas that I face is where to send my studies for publication: to Western journals (which generally are rated higher by project-approving bodies) or to the home-grown publications so that local knowledge-sharing is enhanced and continued research is promoted? Which choice brings most benefits and in which ways? Is it the global, generally Western, audience who can be exposed to non-Western insights, or the local scholars who can benefit from new insights from a fellow Filipino scholar who has an increasingly hybrid exposure?

Third, varying preferences regarding the methods and approaches also highlight the Western bias and the ethnic differentiation of biblical scholars. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church' describes various hermeneutical approaches and methods including many that were developed in the West but with some openness for inculturation.³⁵ Other approaches and methods have been developed since then which deal with the three worlds of the biblical text.³⁶ They have their advantages and disadvantages depending on the context and preferences of the user, the kind of questions posed to the biblical text, and to what end these hermeneutical tools are being used. Many problematize the Western character of these methods and approaches while others have pointed out that they are all conditioned by

³³ July and August are the months for the Society of Biblical Literature's international conference (ISBL), the annual meetings of the European Association of Biblical Studies and Society for New Testament Studies, and for the CBL. The Philippine academic year, which starts in June, makes it difficult to participate in these conferences.

³⁴ Although I could not be at the ISBL 2016 conference in Seoul, I was glad that it was held there in cooperation with the Korean Society of Old Testament Studies, The New Testament Society of Korea and the Society of Asian Biblical Studies. I hope that the opportunity led to genuine discussion and exchange between the various participants, from Asia and elsewhere.

³⁵ See Pontifical Biblical Commission, 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,' *Origins* 23, no. 29 (1994): 497–524.

³⁶ See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 97–178.

the one who uses them.³⁷ Others underscore their limitations, recalling the remark of Audre Lorde, that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.³⁸

Fourth, the Western academic preference of treating the Bible as ancient literature to be studied 'objectively' sometimes highlights the difference between them and Filipino Catholic Bible readers, including Filipino exegetes who (almost automatically) continue to regard the Bible also as God's Word, revelatory of God's will, with relevance to their own present context and a better future. In a complex way, the blurring of the ethnicities of Jesus and his early followers, that is, their trans-ethnicity, is then used to produce an inculturated and recontextualized interpretation of the Bible that responds to challenges in the Filipino context. The concern for the way Jesus' ministry was good news to the poor becomes more predominant than the question of the ethnicities of the biblical characters. This kind of engagement may or may not be supported by (Western) scholars who might find the research implications quite ideological. For example, the socio-political-cultural and economic contexts of the Philippines are motivating factors for the publications of Helen Graham, a long-time Maryknoll missionary to the Philippines from New York even before the Martial Law years, and for the late Carlos Abesamis, a Filipino Jesuit whose work is imbued with attempts to critically incorporate the Filipino context into his way of inculturating biblical interpretation.³⁹ The Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines' Annual Convention Papers also focus on a wider ecclesial theme based on the needs of the Catholic Church in the Philippines while using Western-inspired exegetical methods and other approaches.⁴⁰

These four hermeneutical considerations, namely, the language used in scholarship, the pattern of scholarly exchange, methodological preferences, and how the Bible is regarded as a revelatory text in addition to being a subject of academic study, show how the hermeneutical methods and approaches, which generally stress the trans-ethnicity and universality of Christian identity, actually continue to reflect and support their specific (ethnic) origin in the West, and thus continue to be problematic and inadequate for the lowland Filipino Catholic Bible readers. These readers need something more in addition to the academic information that one can gather from the biblical text and the currently available studies.

³⁷ For a critical view see, for example, Fernando F. Segovia, 'The Emerging Project of Asian Biblical Hermeneutics: Reading Asian Readers', *BiblInt* 2, no. 3 (1994): 371–3; Justin S. Ukpong et al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town* (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); Fernando F. Segovia, 'Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task', *JBL* 134, no. 1 (2015): 6–29.

³⁸ See Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 94–101. (See further Wei Hsien Wan's chapter – Eds.) Likewise, see Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd C. Penner, eds, *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

³⁹ See Helen R. Graham, *You Shall Be Handed Over: The Persecution Prediction in Mark 13:9-13* (Quezon City: Claretians, 1987); Carlos H. Abesamis, *Salvation: Historical and Pastoral: Towards a Faith-Life that is Biblical, Historical, Indigenous* (Integral Evangelization Series; Quezon City: JMC, 1978); *idem*, *The Mission of Jesus and Good News to the Poor: Biblico-pastoral Considerations for a Church in the Third World* (Nagliliyab 8; Quezon City: Claretians, 1987).

⁴⁰ Available online: <http://catholicbiblicalassociation.blogspot.be/> (accessed 29 April 2017).

In sum, Parts 1 to 3 show that the identity of the interpreter, the biblical text itself and the hermeneutical processes employed, all affect the lowland Filipino Catholics' level of perception of the Western-influenced idea of trans-ethnicity in the Bible in relation to their own ethnic identity and context. While the first two show how an emphasis on trans-ethnicity promotes the 'Catholic' identity of the lowland Filipino people, the (Western) methodological choices indicate how the production of biblical interpretation continues to pose practical difficulties as well as to convey ideological and faith convictions which may relate awkwardly or unhelpfully to their ethnic identity as *Filipino* Catholics.

4 Responding to the predominantly Western assumptions

One of the aims of the 2016 Exeter conference on Ethnicity/Race/Religion: Identities, Ideologies, and Intersections in Biblical Texts and Interpretation was 'to explore and to problematize the extent to which the dominant models of biblical scholarship remain "Western" in their assumptions, and to consider what breaking out of these might entail'.⁴¹ Parts 1 to 3 enumerate some of the challenges related to this issue from a lowland Filipino Catholic's perspective. This part explores the question of 'breaking out' of the Western assumptions and offers some ways forward through a dialogical approach.

Many Filipino exegetes have been schooled in Western methodologies, and I am not so sure if we can, or if we need to, totally break out of 'Western assumptions'.⁴² Yet a related challenge has been posed: While we who are non-Western endeavour to learn the Western methods, are Western scholars also ready to learn from us?⁴³ This challenge raises more questions. How are the Western scholars who are in the West or in the Philippines supposed to practise or help develop Filipino biblical hermeneutics? Will it solve the problem of too much 'Western influence' or will it produce more challenges of 'Western imposition'? Do Filipino scholars only need to use indigenous methods? I believe that the world should be a global learning community, so I welcome the possibility of learning critically from each other and being enriched mutually by

⁴¹ See the description of the conference at: <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/conferences/identitiesideologiesandintersections/> (accessed 29 April 2017).

⁴² However, see Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction', 251–5. He laments: 'Asian biblical interpreters have yet to come up with a distinctive Asian mode of reading ... why are we so unoriginal?' (251). He differentiates between metropolitan and vernacular readings: 'Metropolitan readings' are those that use 'methodological and theoretical approaches worked out and originating in western academies [that] are creatively put to use to meet Asian needs' (252). But he comments that 'we have been the consumers of these methods and have not felt the need to transform them in a distinctively Asian direction' (252). 'Vernacular readings' are those that 'depend on another form of borrowing, but this time from Asia's past. It is an attempt to reclaim ancient reading theories and methods of storytelling'. He encourages neither of these but desires 'to work out a reading practice which will make use of Asian cultural perspectives to illuminate the biblical world' (255).

⁴³ See Justin S. Ukpong, 'Reading the Bible in a Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings', in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, 9–39; Musa W. Dube, 'Villagizing, Globalizing, and Biblical Studies', in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, 41–63.

Figure 10.1 The Bible in Asia: In Dialogue with Culture, Religions, and the Poor within the Continued Pastoral Spiral

our differences and similarities. This position will clearly demand critical efforts, but the result of reciprocal cross-fertilization that is respectful of plurality today and in the future is worthy of this effort.⁴⁴ Using the mat/wall-weaving metaphor inspired by common patterns of material construction in the Philippines, the idea of making interconnections between various strands beckons me to consider the dialogical approach in hermeneutics and explore some ways forward.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference pointed out the need for a threefold dialogue with cultures, with other religions, and with the poor in inculturating and interpreting the Bible, especially Jesus' message in Asia.⁴⁵ This threefold dialogue takes place in the context of a 'pastoral spiral' that includes a sequence of actions in a continuous circle (see Figure 10.1).⁴⁶

The dialogical approach can be honed further to suit the changing context of lowland Filipinos by including those who are in the diaspora and the succeeding generations who have increasingly mixed ethnicities. This approach matches Abesamis' proposal

⁴⁴ See Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer, 'The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered: Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible', in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia 61; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 377–402, esp. 393–4.

⁴⁵ See Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, 'Evangelization in Modern Day Asia: Statement and Recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly', in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Documents from 1970–1991*, ed. Gaudencio B. Rosales and Catalino G. Arevalo (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 11–25, at 13–16.

⁴⁶ See Orlando Quevedo, 'Asian Realities and Cultures: Their Implications to Education', in *Proceedings of a Colloquium on Education in Asia: Toward a Formation-Oriented Education*, ed. Vicente Cajilig (Manila: UST Printing Office, 1993), 7–20.

for theologizing which can be adapted for biblical interpretation. He combines a range of factors: the immersion of the committed interpreter in the Filipino context with the capacity for social analysis, critical knowledge of salvation history, Vatican II, and Social Teachings; knowledge of Filipino and Asian psychology, history, religions, and cultures; ability to contemplate; possession of pastoral and other interdisciplinary skills; and awareness of church history, particularly its contemporary teachings, alongside contemporary global theologies and Western theological and philosophical traditions.⁴⁷

This dialogical approach critically complements the *Dialogue School* pedagogy developed for Catholic schools in Belgium and Australia to nourish Catholic identity in the midst of increasing socio-cultural-religious diversity at the school level and in larger society. It is initiated by a team of mostly Western scholars in Leuven with whom I cooperate.

The Dialogue School ... is typified by a combination of maximal Catholic identity with maximal solidarity. It concerns a Catholic school in the middle of cultural and religious plurality in which both Catholics and other-believers can develop themselves maximally. A Dialogue School explicitly chooses to emphasise its Catholic inspiration and individuality through and thanks to a hermeneutical-communicative dialogue with the multicultural society. The multiplicity of voices, views and perspectives, is recognised as a positive contribution to an open Catholic school environment. Receptivity and openness to what is different is a chance to re-profile the Catholic faith amidst contemporary plurality (Recontextualisation). A preferential option for the Catholic message sets the tone for this dialogue.⁴⁸

By adapting this pedagogy to the context of biblical hermeneutics, 'maximal Christian identity' opens the way to include the lenses of the specific and varied ethnicities of Christians. The 'trans-ethnic' character of 'maximal Christian identity' influencing biblical interpretation needs at the same time to recognize the plurality of ethnic identity among the Catholics who attempt to recontextualize critically⁴⁹ the biblical message in the service of 'maximal solidarity' with others. Since 1999, the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines in its annual convention and interest-group meetings and lectures has provided a very good space for its members to continue their own research in dialogue with one another and to offer the membership services to the needs of the larger ecclesial community.⁵⁰ In this venue, the issue of the Catholics' trans-ethnicity and its intersection with specific ethnic

⁴⁷ See Carlos H. Abesamis, *What Is Inside the Wooden Bowl?* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1997), 50–1.

⁴⁸ Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens, *Identity in Dialogue: Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity. Research Methodology and Research Results in Catholic Schools in Victoria, Australia* (Christian Religious Education and School Identity 1; Zurich/Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014), 63.

⁴⁹ See Pollefeyt and Bouwens, *Identity*, 173–5.

⁵⁰ For a short overview of the CBAP as an organization and its activities, see Randolph Flores, 'Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines', *Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines*, 10 January 2017. Available online: <http://catholicbiblicalassociation.blogspot.be/> (accessed 29 April 2017).

identities – including the interpreter's own ethnic identity and context – the biblical text, and the hermeneutical tools suited in their own context, can be discussed further communally.

I would like to suggest that historically-informed and inculturated ways of doing narrative criticism could be used beneficially to allow exegetes and the larger ecclesial community to explore the issue of trans-ethnicity and ethnic specificities, because this approach builds on the Asian and Filipino's preference for storytelling.⁵¹ The historical information available upon critical consideration helps in constructing the implied reader so that the biblical text is better understood, and insights can be recontextualized to become more relevant for Catholic life today and in envisioning a better future inspired by the biblical text.⁵² With a more conscious use of narrative conversation (the Filipino *kwentuhan*)⁵³ in analysing and reflecting on the biblical text, new insights and challenges can engage other interpreters, other hermeneutical tools, and the changing Filipino contexts at home and in the diaspora.

In addition, while English remains the main language in an international academic setting and in the Philippines, it will be helpful to prepare students to learn Greek and Hebrew in order to explore the meaning of words and texts, using their own language(s) for a more nuanced interpretation. Supporting efforts that critically adapt existing methods of biblical interpretation and finding or inventing new ones from our own culture, using various means of communication including digital and social media, can open the dialogue to more people.⁵⁴ For the academic conversation to continue it would be helpful to nurture the efforts to adapt, rediscover, and invent new methods of interpretation and send the results of our studies to both local and international journals, online and otherwise. It is similarly important to continue to find means of participating actively in international gatherings to ensure a multiplicity of voices and to find ways of continued collaboration.

While I have tried to problematize the extent of 'Western' assumptions above, the predominantly Western setting of academic biblical scholarship, as it has evolved

⁵¹ See Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, 'Fostering Narrative Approaches to Scripture in Asia: The Primary Task of Explicit Recognition', *East Asia Pastoral Review* 46 (2009): 124–41; Teresita B. Obusan, Angelina R. Enriquez, and Virgilio G. Enriquez, eds, *Pamamaraan: Indigenous Knowledge and Evolving Research Paradigms* (Quezon City: Asian Center, University of the Philippines, 1994); Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and exp. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 200–21.

⁵² See, for example, Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, 'Including the Hungry *Adelphoi*: Exploring Pauline Points of View in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34', in *By Bread Alone: The Bible through the Eyes of the Hungry*, ed. Sheila E. McGinn, Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, and Ahida Calderon Pilarski (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 159–84; *eadem*, 'Re-Reading the Lord's Supper Story in Corinth (1 Cor 11:17–34): A Normativity of the Future Perspective', in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia 61; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 239–77.

⁵³ See Teresita B. Obusan, 'A Hiyang Approach', in *Pamamaraan: Indigenous Knowledge and Evolving Research Paradigms*, 89–110.

⁵⁴ See the activities (such as Bible Anime, Bibliodrama, Original Gospel Song Festival, Basic Bible Seminar, etc.) listed in the Episcopal Commission on the Biblical Apostolate of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. Available online: <http://www.ecba-cbcp.com/activities.htm> (accessed 29 April 2017).

through a history marked by globalization, diversifying membership, and growing critical awareness likewise provides new possibilities (inadvertently or not) that increasingly include non-Western insights. Support and active participation in alternative research groups such as the Society of Biblical Literature's 'Islands, Islanders, and Scriptures', 'Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation', and developing other new groups will be necessary to continue this diversification.⁵⁵ Inviting Western and non-Western scholars to come to the Philippines for critical and mutual sharing of expertise can also be reciprocally enriching.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show from my lowland Filipino Catholic upbringing how the colonial and Western-influenced trans-ethnic sense of shared Catholic identity intersects with the specificities of Filipino ethnic identity and context, with how the information about ethnicities in the biblical text is understood, and with the choices of hermeneutical methodologies and approaches. I noted that the relationship is complex. Emphasis on the trans-ethnicity of Jesus and his early followers can further the sense of belonging to a bigger, international group like the Roman Catholic Church, blurring one's own specific ethnicity. Yet, the focus on the trans-ethnicity of the characters of Jesus and his followers also permits stronger inculturation of the Gospel message, recontextualizing it to the needs of specific ethnic groups, like the Filipinos, in their own context. In analysing the hermeneutical process and methods used, however, the Western character of the Catholic trans-ethnicity becomes more obvious, so that the inculturation of biblical interpretation in the Filipino context also becomes more challenging. Given this background, I also questioned the possibility and desirability of totally breaking out of Western assumptions, and I enumerated some ways in which they can be addressed critically through dialogical approaches that foster interconnections. From my Filipino background, Lorde's metaphor of dismantling is rather violent. Instead, I offer the mat/wall-weaving metaphor which finds strength in tools that facilitate tight intersections to work. Thus, my proposals invite critical tinkering with the existing tools, along with inventing new ones, so that they can be more multi-functional in ways that can go beyond our imagination and their original purpose. We cannot underestimate the power of the many people who interrelate, use, interchange, and revise tools and make new ones. In the process, they become the new masters who continuously shape the ever-changing outcomes of biblical interpretation, so that there will be not only a hugely renovated hermeneutical house, but also new houses to build and dwell in.

⁵⁵ See Society of Biblical Literature 2017 Annual Meeting. Available online at: https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_ProgramUnits.aspx?MeetingId=31 (accessed 29 April 2017). Among new groups see, for example, the European Association of Biblical Studies' 'The Bible and Ecology Research Group'. Available online: <https://eabs.net/site/the-bible-and-ecology/> (accessed 29 April 2017).

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