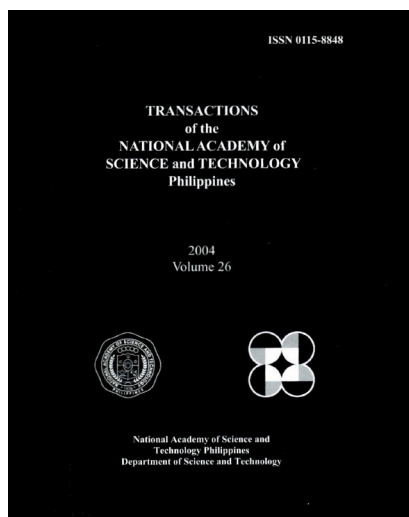


Transactions NAST PHL, is the official journal of the National Academy of Science and Technology Philippines. It has traditionally published papers presented during the Academy's Annual Scientific Meeting since 1979 to promote science-based policy discussions of and recommendations on timely and relevant national issues as part of its functions as a national science academy. Starting in 2021, this journal has been open to contributions from the global scientific community in all fields of science and technology.



CHURCH AND SOCIETY "On Being and Becoming: Where We Are and Where We Want to Be"

Bienvenido F. Nebres, S.J.

Academician, National Academy of Science and Technology
President, Ateneo de Manila University
Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Philippines

Citation

Nebres BF S.J. 2004. Church and society "on being and becoming: where we are and where we want to be". Transactions NAST PHL 26(2): 180-191. doi.org/10.57043/transnastphl.2004.4695

Copyright

© 2004 Nebres BF S.J.

CHURCHANDSOCIETY
“On Being and Becoming:
Where We Are and Where We Want To Be”

Bienvenido F. Nebres, S.J.

Academician, National Academy of Science and Technology
President, Ateneo de Manila University
Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Philippines

Abstract

The paper deals primarily with the role of the Catholic Church and of Christian tradition in national culture, the Church and Christian tradition as interpreter of national experience and bearer of national culture. It cites as an explicit example of this role in EDSA I and in the Revolution of 1896. It further deals with this role of the Church in community and national culture. The author takes note that as the Philippines moves towards modernization, science and technology are essential, democratic ideals are essential, whether we like it or not, global influences through business, technology, our overseas workers dominate our consciousness more and more. The challenge is how we are to remain who we are (identity), how we are to remain as a community, how we are to find meaning in the world that seems to threaten our fundamental self and values. What is emerging in the Church in the Philippines are powerful movements that bring people together towards community and identity, in particular, various charismatic-based movements. Some remain inward turned and risk becoming closed-in fundamentalist groups others respond to the call of the Gospels to be their brother's and revolution needed for modernization.

The paper highlights progress made and challenges faced by movements seeking to build meaning-structures founded on the Christian Gospels and at the same time responsive to need to reach out to the poor and build community among all Filipinos. In many ways this is a search for Christian meaning-structures that will bridge the cultural divide between the modernized Christianity of many middle-class Filipinos and the traditional Christianity of the masses. In building that bridge, the Church can then play a critical role in both moving the Philippines forward towards modernization and at the same time keep our sense of identity, community, and meaning whole.

Keywords: Christianity, traditional, modern, Philippines

Introduction

Reflecting on the theme of our Annual Scientific Meeting, we see today that we remain sadly the “sick man” of Southeast Asia; we are a country of very fragmented and fractious cultures and community. We continue to seek to become a progressive, modernized country. But that cannot be achieved without a national community and culture that can sufficiently overcome fractiousness and division so it can focus on the tasks towards our common goal. Such a level of national community and culture needs shared meaning-structures, shared “myths” and stories, shared vision.

There are many ways in which we can speak of “Church and Society.” But given these dominant challenges of national community and culture, I would like to speak today mainly of the role of the Church and of Christian tradition in national culture, the Church and Christian tradition as interpreter of national experience and bearer of national culture.

Church and Christian tradition as interpreter of national experience and bearer of national culture

The recent past: EDSA 1

This role was probably most explicit in EDSA 1. It was a period where I was deeply involved as Provincial of the Jesuits in the Philippines. In an invited paper I gave in Tokyo in 1988 on “Science, Technology and Spiritual Values: Searching for a Filipino Path to Modernization,” I wrote:

One of the enduring memories for many of us was the experience of the revolution of 1986 as a process of political change, which was also a profoundly religious experience. For myself, I used to turn to Psalm 44 (“We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds thou didst perform in their days ... Yet thou hast cast us off and abased us and hast not gone out with our armies.”) to express my feeling of God being so distant from our struggles. In those February days, there was a feeling of great wonder that God had come to march with us once more. Many of us came to the realization of the power for change in the popular symbols of faith: it was in the rosary that people found strength as they faced the tanks; they struggled to sing the “Our Father” as the soldiers came with teargas attacks. They waved rosaries and bibles to the soldiers in their appeal for unity and peace. It was in rosaries and hymns and the presence of statues of Our Lady that we found strength in the lonely and fearful vigils between midnight and dawn [1].

Soon after the EDSA revolution, the Loyola School of Theology at the Ateneo de Manila held a symposium to reflect on the experience. In the talk given by Fr. Arevalo, he recounted the experience of the seminarians and Ateneo students at Libis as they tried to be a buffer between Camp Aguinaldo and government troops coming in. They actually held for quite a while, but finally had to yield to teargas and soldiers coming with fixed bayonets:

Forgive me if I speak of our common experience at Libis, - there, where Boni Serrano Ave. (Santolan further up!) and Katipunan cross each other. One of the things we will always remember about Libis is what we experienced of communion. "We are one people when we pray." We were at one when we prayed together. We were at one too when we stood "kapit-bisig" and were perhaps willing to die together, with our arms locked together. Not a bad way, in a brotherhood, to die. That was, I guess, an experience of communion. I wonder when we will share another such experience.

Sometime that night an image of Our Lady of La Naval was brought to our corner, in procession. Not a small image, but the big one they use in the annual procession from Sto. Domingo. And people flocked around, to pray the Rosary.... At this hour, here at Libis, not long after we had withstood the first wave of troops, Our Lady of La Naval comes. What that image meant at that moment, as if Our Lady were saying, "As I saved your people from the Dutch, centuries ago, so I will save them now." And the beauty and courage and strength we drew from her presence, and the words of the Hail Mary spoken in that quiet night [2].

A Century ago: Revolution of 1896

Rey Iletto in "Pasyon and Revolution" writes of how peasant leaders in the Katipunan saw in the Christ-figure a model for themselves. On the surface His quiet, meek image may seem to lead to docility, but its effects were, in fact, subversive:

Jesus Christ in the pasyon text appears as a rather harmless leader of humble origins but he manages to attract a huge following mainly from the "poor and ignorant" class. His twelve lieutenants are said to be neither principales nor ilustrados, nor the leader's relatives. They are simply

<i>ducha at hamac na tauo</i>	<i>poor and lowly people</i>
<i>ualang halaga sa mundo</i>	<i>without worth on earth</i>
<i>manga mangmang na tauo</i>	<i>ignorant people</i>
<i>ualang dunong cahit ano.</i>	<i>without any education.</i>

(49: 7)

Yet, the pasyon account continues, these lowly men were charged by Christ with a mission and given special powers to carry it out:

<p><i>Ito ang siyang hinirang ni Jesus na Poong mahal magpapatanyag nang aral gaguua nang cababalaghan dito sa Sangsinucuban. (49: 8)</i></p>	<p><i>These were the ones selected by Jesus the beloved master to popularize his teachings to perform astonishing feats here in the universe.</i></p>
---	---

The pasyon abounds with passages like the above, suggesting the potential power of the pobres y ignorantes, the “poor and ignorant,” to use the common ilustrado term for the masses [3].

We can still hear echoes of this ethos in the views of the poor in the presidential campaigns of President Joseph Estrada and Fernando Poe Jr. In fact, this ethos has continued in many other political movements throughout our history.

The continuity in form between the Cofradia of 1841, the Katipunan revolt of 1896, the Santa Iglesia and other movements we have examined can be traced to the persistence of the pasyon in shaping the perceptions of particularly the poor and uneducated segments of the populace. Through the text and associated rituals, people were made aware of a pattern of universal history. They also became aware of ideal forms of behavior and social relationships, and a way to attain these through suffering, death, and rebirth. And so in times of crisis – economic, political, real or imagined – there was available a set of ideas and images with which even the rural masses could make sense out of their condition. Popular movements and revolts were far from being blind reactions to oppression. They became popular precisely because leaders were able to tap existing notions of change; the pasyon was freed from its officially sanctioned moorings in Holy Week and allowed to give form and meaning to the people’s struggles for liberation [3].

I was very struck in recent years how powerful these images continue to be in our day. The great earthquake that damaged Cabanatuan and Baguio in 1990 also hit several La Union towns and damaged the churches. But the damage stopped before my hometown of Bacnotan. When my townmates later spoke of the event, they told the story of a barrio, where the day before an old man had come when it was already evening and asked to stay overnight. A family took him in, but when they got up the next morning, he was already gone. And then the earthquake struck, but Bacnotan was spared. They said, “That was St. Joseph and we were spared, because we took him

in."One could also cite the very interesting article that appeared in the Economist of December 2000, entitled "The Anthropology of Happiness" about Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong and how their faith gives meaning, direction, and cohesion in their heavily burdened lives.

The key point in these examples is that the Christian Scriptures and the Christian tradition remain the main matrix of interpretation of reality for many Filipinos, especially in times of crisis and challenge in our Filipino life.

Understanding this role of the Church in our community and national culture

The Church has many roles in national, community and personal life: moral authority, interpreter of religious law and practice, and promoter of social justice. The events and stories I have cited above focus on its role as providing meaning and meaning-structure through rituals, stories, and songs.

A. In a very insightful paper entitled "The Catholic Imagination," the priest sociologist, Fr. Andrew Greeley, explains why this level of faith is so central for us. He writes:

Religion begins in 1) experiences that renew hope. These experiences are in turn encoded in 2) images or symbols that become templates for action, and are shared with others through 3) stories that are told in 4) communities and celebrated in 5) rituals. This model is circular, not a straight line, and hence the stories, communities and rituals in their turn influence experiences of renewed hope.

Religion takes its origins and its raw power from experiences, images, stories, community and ritual, and that most religious socialization (transmission) takes place through narrative before it takes place in conceptual, analytic form. Religion must be intellectual but it is experiential before it is intellectual.

The Catholic tradition is passed on especially in the stories of Christmas and the Easter Passover. Maybe half our heritage is transmitted to children around the crib at Christmastime...[4]

B. Another way of looking at this central role of the Church may be taken from Karen Armstrong's "The Battle for God." She writes:

*[Our ancestors] evolved two ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called **mythos** and **logos**. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special area of competence. Myth was regarded as primary; it was concerned*

*with what was thought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Myth looked back to the origins of life, to the foundations of culture, and to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters, but with meaning. Unless we find some significance in our lives, we mortal men and women fall very easily into despair. The **mythos** of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day lives; it directed their attention to the eternal and the universal.*

***Logos** was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world. We may have lost the sense of **mythos** in the West today, but we are very familiar with **logos**, which is the basis of our society. Unlike myth, **logos** must relate exactly to facts and correspond to external realities if it is to be effective. ... **Logos** is practical. Unlike myth, which looks back to the beginnings and to the foundations, **logos** forges ahead and tries to find something new: to elaborate on old insights, achieve a greater control over our environment, discover something fresh, and invent something novel.*

*In the pre-modern world, both **mythos** and **logos** were regarded as indispensable. Each would be impoverished without the other. Yet the two were essentially distinct, and it was held to be dangerous to confuse mythical and rational discourse. They had separate jobs to do [5].*

Christian faith and culture (Mythos): Becoming self-enclosed or opening to the future

The risk of becoming self-enclosed and fundamentalist

As we reflect on the interaction between Church and society, my major focus is on whether and how the meaning-structures, the interpretation of reality within the Christian tradition provide a helpful, even a coherent matrix for understanding ourselves and our national life. There is a risk that this meaning-structure can remain closed—in a timeless ‘mythos’ and thus closed-in from modernization or it can become a meaning-structure that can move us together towards a shared future.

This is completely understandable if we recall that our traditional faith structures were developed in our rural past. This rural past was based on an agricultural economy that had severe limits to growth. Karen Armstrong writes: “The roots [of modernity] lie in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the modern era, when people of Western Europe began to evolve a different type of society one based not on an agricultural surplus but on a technology that enabled them to reproduce their resources indefinitely [5].” Rural society thus tends to live in a cyclical, limited world, limited by agricultural production. To move into the modern world, we need a culture that looks

at continuing innovation as the way to build economy. But this new culture needs a new way of believing, a new way of faith – which nonetheless must connect with the traditional faith of most Filipinos.

Thus our faith can lead to meaning-structures that remain closed, seeing reality in a timeless mode or in an ever-repeating cyclic mode

It can see the shaping of the future as outside our powers — simply waiting for the intervention of the Divine – leading to helplessness/ fatalism. This is quite prevalent in our culture, with our focus on *suwerte*, our weak confidence in our capability to shape our future

It can totally separate the realms of the Divine and of the human – a certain split-level Christianity as described by Fr. Bulatao

It can fall into a form of millenarism as in *Lapiang Malaya* and other movements.

Rey Ilete opens his book “Pasyon and Revolution” with the *Lapiang Malaya* event, reminding us that these millenarist movements continue into our time:

*One Sunday morning in May 1967, residents of Manila awoke to find a strange uprising in their midst. A little past midnight, street fighting had erupted along a section of Taft Avenue between the constabulary and hundreds of followers of a religiopolitical society calling itself **Lapiang Malaya**, the Freedom Party. Armed only with sacred bolos, **anting-anting** (amulets) and bullet-defying uniforms, the **kapatid** (brothers) enthusiastically met the challenge of automatic weapons fire from government troopers, yielding only when scores of their comrades lay dead on the street [3].*

The promise of being a vehicle of meaning guiding us in the uncertain process of change.

In articles I wrote seeking to interpret our experience after EDSA 1, I used images from Exodus and Deuteronomy:

The image which expressed our longing for liberation was Exodus, God hearing the cry of his people and delivering them from the hands of Pharaoh. In February we achieved our liberation, experienced our Exodus. We felt that God’s hands had not been shortened in our time. And then we saw the jockeying for political positions, the bickering in the Cabinet, the quarrels between business and labor and said: “Is this what we had revolution for? Have we achieved anything?” But read on from the crossing of the Red Sea. The Hebrews did not come so easily or so soon to the Promised Land. Listen to the people: “Would that we had died at the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshspots and ate our fill of bread!” Listen to Moses: “What shall I do with

this people? A little more and they will stone me!" Listen to God, "Go down at once to your people ... for they have become depraved. ... Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them." The scenes we are experiencing after our "Exodus" are not too far different from the scenes of the first Exodus. They even had their loyalists and threats of a coup – when they went back to the Golden Calf of Egypt and tried to set up Aaron in place of Moses, because Moses was taking too much time with God away from the camp. The Israelites had to struggle with themselves and their weaknesses, with their leaders, with their God [6].

Several years later in 1989, I interpreted our EDSA I experience in the imagery of the Transfiguration image:

I have searched for the correct images and symbols to express how I regard that experience and those feelings. Reflecting on the Gospel of the Transfiguration on the second Sunday of Lent this year, I thought that they could well be expressed as a Transfiguration experience. In those February days we saw ourselves transfigured. We even gave up beer and the 'Manila Bulletin' after Cory's call on Feb. 16. I remember the courage and the euphoria before the tanks on Ortigas, ordinary people going up to those heckling the soldiers and asking them to please be quiet. As the tanks turned back towards Fort Bonifacio at sunset I remember a hand coming out of one of the turrets in a Laban sign.

It was a heady experience. But as with the first Transfiguration experience when the apostles came down and were presented with an epileptic boy, we left EDSA and suddenly saw no longer our heroic figures but only our very ordinary selves. We saw the various epilepsies afflicting our nation: graft and corruption, greed and selfishness, poverty and oppression. And we found that we could not exorcise them [7].

Can we scientists help in bridging our fragmented cultures? Since we are gathered together as scientists, I thought we might reflect on our particular role in this process of meaning, interpretation and the process of change and modernization. The first thing we have to note is that most of us Filipino scientists are comfortable living in both the scientific world and our world of faith. The traumatic break between faith and reason which is the Enlightenment in the West is something we know about, but it has not created a personal or intellectual trauma for most of us [8]. I believe this is true in general for Asian scientists. Some may be believers, some may not, but there is not the emotional antagonism that one sees in the West due to the legacy of the bitter battles between Church and science/ scientists in the history of the West.

Our challenge in the Philippines, I believe, is different. It is more a break between cultures (including faith cultures), than it is a break between faith and reason. The most obvious illustration is the break of cultures that we see between what we might regard as modernized Christianity and the traditional faith cultures of Iglesia ni Cristo, El Shaddai, Jesus is Lord.

In a very thought-provoking book entitled "The Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400," Marcia Colish writes of the three great civilizations of the middle ages, which were heirs of the Greco-Roman tradition: Byzantium, Islam, and Western Europe. She says, suppose a traveler were to look at these civilizations and cultures at the beginning of the second millennium, the year 1000. If one were to predict then, she says, which would be the dominant culture in the next millennium, one would not have chosen Western Europe. One would have chosen either Byzantium or Islam. But a couple of hundred years later, Western Europe emerged and began its ascent to be the dominant culture of the millennium. Her basic thesis is that the culture that underlay the energies that created modern Europe came from a **living fusion** between high and low cultures in the middle ages. Unlike in Byzantium and in Islam, where high and low cultures remained separate, and high culture eventually became frozen in an idealized state, European Christianity appropriated its Christian heritage and fused it with the traditional life of ordinary people. This interplay between high and low culture, including the rise of vernacular languages and vernacular literature, not separate from, but together with the ancient traditions, created the cultural energies towards modernization [9].

If we look at our situation – of an elite culture that is in English, reads mostly English books, watches American movies and television shows, but comprises about 1 to 5 percent of the population and a mass culture that is Tagalog or vernacular, rarely reads or reads Tagalog, watches Tagalog movies and television shows, and comprises over 90 percent of the population, one way of formulating the challenge to us scientists is whether the thesis of Marcia Colish is valid for us and whether a major task before us is to ask how we might contribute to bridging cultures and fusing high and mass culture together towards the creative energies needed for us to achieve modernization.

We may believe that rationality and "progressiveness" are in our "high" cultures, but I invite you to reflect on the energy and drive that is in the mass culture. This should be obvious as we look at the numbers that faithfully attend El Shaddai community and liturgy events, Jesus is Lord events, Iglesia ni Cristo events. Clearly these faith communities provide energizing meaning for their members – more powerful and motivating than is provided in the mainstream communities.

We might reflect that the rituals, the imagination, the meaning-structures in these traditional faith communities are experienced as giving hope and coherence, giving life to the many who make sacrifices and give time to be there.

What is our role as scientists, intellectuals in this process? – I think our first challenge is to acknowledge this break in cultures, in some way it is even in our own

souls. I think that many of us scientists gathered here grew up in traditional faith communities – our experience is not alien to those in the faith communities I mentioned above. But we have not reflected on this experience enough. Can we reflect on it, find what is deep and energizing in it, allow ourselves to connect to the mass groups and help them to find a modernizing way into the future. The next and deeper challenge is to ask how we may achieve something of what the medieval West did, fuse these cultures together and thus generate the modernizing energy needed for our nation. In some ways it is our way of sharing the mystery of the Incarnation. We need to enter into the cultural, meaning world of traditional faith communities, dialogue from within and see how the cultures can enrich each other.

Left to themselves, these traditional faith cultures are likely to become fundamentalist, at times even millenarist. Because, as Karen Armstrong writes, it is their response to their sense of helplessness, of facing forces too powerful to overcome by rational action. She illustrates this in the Sephardic Jews in exile from Spain, in the Shiites of Iran. We can see the same phenomenon in *Lapiang Malaya*, Santa Iglesia and other groups in Rey Iletto's "Pasyon and Revolution."

What in turn allows such a faith-meaning-structure to become an opening into the future — following Marcia Colish' analysis of the emergence of Europe from what we call the Dark Ages, we see that it is the appropriation of structures of hope from the faith meaning structure in popular culture. The Gospels did not become simply a refuge into the past, but they fused into the popular stories of romance, for example in the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round table, which became not only stories of romance but quests for the Holy Grail.

There have been many different ways in which Christian tradition has sought to connect the new modernizing cultures with faith traditions. Karen Armstrong gives the example of the development of the Social Gospel in early 20th century America:

Protestants developed what they called the "Social Gospel" to sacralize the Godless cities and factories. It was an attempt to return to what they saw as the basic teachings of the Hebrew prophets and of Christ himself, who had taught his followers to visit prisoners, clothe the naked, and feed the hungry. Social Gospelers set up what they called "institutional churches" to provide services and recreational facilities for the poor and for new immigrants [5].

Today for many young people, they resonate with the call of Fr. Pedro Arrupe to be Men and Women for Others. This articulation of the Call of the Gospel both connects with our traditional faith and is a source of meaning and drive to build a better future for our people.

Today our prime educational objective must be to form men and women for others; men and women who will live not for themselves, who cannot even

conceive of a love of God which does not include a love for the least of their neighbors, and who are completely convinced that a love of God which does not result in justice for all is a farce.

Just as we are never sure that we love God unless we love our fellow human beings, so we are never sure that we have love at all unless our love issues in works of justice.

This means, first, that we must have a basic attitude of respect for all men and women, which forbids us ever to use them as instruments for our own gain.

Second, it means a firm resolve never to profit from, or allow ourselves to be suborned by, positions of power derived from privilege.

Third, it means an attitude not simply of refusal to participate in injustice but of counterattack against injustice, a decision to work with others toward the dismantling of unjust social structures so that the weak of this world may be set free to grow as complete human beings [10].

I would like to cite the grand project Gawad Kalinga, GK 777, of the Couples for Christ. The goal is to build 700,000 homes in 7,000 communities in 7 years. I am personally much inspired by generosity and sharing so visible in this effort. It started as a small community project in the slums of Bagong Silang several years ago. Today it is in several hundred communities all over the Philippines. GK does seek to promote "faith communities," but it does not proselytize and reaches out to all faiths. There are several vibrant GK Muslim communities in Mindanao. It fuses faith values with traditional Filipino values of *bayanihan* and *malasakit*. These are faith communities then that are modernizing forces, not self-enclosed, but open to all and to the future.

References

[1] Nebres BF. 1987. Science, technology and spiritual values: searching for a Filipino path to modernization. Proceedings of the International Symposium on Science, Technology, and Spiritual Values, Tokyo, Japan, pp. 156-157.

[2] Arévalo CG. 1986. Lagi nating tandaan: Story and remembering. In: Achutegui, PSde (Ed.), The "Miracle" of the Philippine Revolution. Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, pp. 39-42.

- [3] Iletto R. 1979. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, pp. 22-23.
- [4] Greeley AM. 1971. *The Catholic Imagination and the Catholic University*. *America*, pp. 285-286.
- [5] Armstrong K. 2001. *The Battle for God*. Ballantine Books, New York, pp. xv-xvii.
- [6] Nebres BF. 1986. "Becoming a people," Column in *Business Day*, November 27, 1986.
- [7] Nebres BF. 1989. "Come down from EDSA heights," Column in *The Manila Chronicle*, February 27, 1989.
- [8] Cf. Pertierra R. 2003. *Science, Technology, and Everyday Culture in the Philippines*. Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 95pp.
- [9] Colish ML. 1998. *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition*. Yale University Press, New Haven, p. xvi and *passim*.
- [10] Arrupe P. 1973. *Men for others. Address given to the 10th International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe in Valencia, Spain*.