THE ART OF INDIGENOUS INCULTURATION

Grace on the Edge of Genius

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Introduction

FROM THE EDGE TO THE CENTER

When Europeans traveled far to the east to reach Cathay, Japan and the Indies, they naturally gave those distant regions the general name "Far East." Americans who reached China, Japan, and Southeast Asia by sail and steam across the Pacific could, with equal logic, have called that area "Far West." For the people who live in that part of the world, however, it is neither "East" nor "West" and certainly not "Far."

–Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank, *East Asia: The Great Tradition*

Experiencing "the holy" in and through the "burning bush" of the culture has led me to a deeper appreciation of the Gospel and of my culture. The culture that was home, I realized, was never really far, for it was and is an integral part of myself. For this reason I am convinced that theology is never far from home.

–José M. De Mesa, *Why Theology Is Never Far from Home*

"The Philippines is in the Far East." I'm no longer sure when I first heard that geographical designation, but it was certainly the default cartography floating in the cultural waters I swam in as a child up to young adulthood. Far Eastern University, Far East Bank, Far East Broadcasting Company, the label was ubiquitous and unquestioned in Manila's urban landscape. It was a truism, like "the earth is round" or "the sun rises in the East."

One day, I asked: "Far from what?"

If language mirrors and shapes our perception of the world, then "Far East" endorses the asymmetric positioning that my birth country is exotic and not familiar, deficient and not whole, socioculturally backward and not progressive, very far indeed from the Euro-American spatial and geopolitical axis that determines the rest of the world's value.[1] It came as no surprise then that my sojourn from the Philippines to the Netherlands and then to the United States to pursue a vocation in theological education from an intercultural perspective was once described as—with no ill intent on the part of the European interlocutor—"a journey from the edge to the center." After all, theology, as many other academic disciplines, is not impervious to an intellectual cartography based on a favored center that is distinctly Western. As smoke to fire, a quick word association exercise in my classes where I ask students to share the top-of-mind name at the mention of "theology" may well be indexical of an extant and operative theological Eurocenter (not to mention andro-center). Like "philosophy" yielding Kant and not Sun Yat-sen, and "art" yielding Van Gogh and not Hokusai, "theology"

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[1] An analogous Eurocentered "othering" is apparent in the field of ethnography: "While the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery . . . it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis—beginning perhaps, with the latter's obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself." Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

consistently yields the names Rahner, Tillich, Lonergan, Kasper, not Gutiérrez, Magesa, Oduyoye, Phan. Scholars who work in postcolonial Third World contexts such as Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa have identified a recurrent Western "cultural possessiveness"[2] of the Christian faith inflected in missionary history, and have called for the in-breaking of cultural viewpoints of many hues, each one deserving equal placement at the center of theological discourse.

It is fair to say that in current times the imbalance is not the consequence of some underlying nefarious plot; for the most part, it is an issue of underrepresentation, not of conscious disregard. Clear, however, are the implications of such an underrepresentation on the side of those who have been overlooked. For those who remain "far" remain invisible, and their faint, distant voices easily and routinely drown in the resounding Western chorus of the proximate. Precisely because theology, as a matter of course, is contextual and perspectival, the direction of the hermeneutical flow has been prevailingly from the center to the edge. As someone who was born into the ecumene of the edge, I seek to contribute to theological counterflows—modest but meaningful reversals of the hermeneutical current that redirect the flow of wisdom from the edge to the center.

This book is a critical and creative exploration of the phenomenon of inculturation from the perspective of postcolonial Third World cultures, what is referred to here as Indigenous inculturation. Indigenous inculturation—*Indigenous* taken in the sense of "native to a local community"—is a departure from what appears to have been the default emphasis on inculturation as a strategy employed by professional foreign missionaries to evangelize cultures of various hues. It represents a retrieval of the term's vital meaning in view of the creative and heroic

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[2] Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 165.

efforts of Indigenous peoples who have, as artisans of their own histories and destinies, upheld their authentic cultural identity and the power of their own agency while seeking religious synthesis in the face of the unholy marriage of evangelization and colonization.[3]

Scholars have emphasized the mutual character of inculturation involving a two-way process of "insertion of the gospel into a particular culture" and "introduction of the culture into the gospel."[4] There is no dearth of studies on the principles of inculturation; the seminal works of Robert J. Schreiter, Stephen B. Bevans, Aylward Shorter, and Peter Schineller, to name a few, have made invaluable contributions to the growth of mission studies and a new way of being church. That said, the scholarly landscape represents a predominantly Western missionary perspective; what has yet to be sufficiently covered is the cultural recapitulation needed to foster an enriching mutuality. When one considers the ground upon which postcolonial cultures stand, their vantage point given regardful attention, the understanding of where agency is located in inculturation shifts dramatically. Although Indigenous inculturation, to a certain extent, does figure in the scholarly debate—the works of Peter Phan, Kosuke Koyama, Ivone Gebara, Laurenti Magesa, and Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator immediately come to mind—it remains inadequately represented, as though there has been an ironic forgetting that the primary agents of inculturation, quite necessarily, are the peoples who have higher stakes in the process. Filipino Bishop Francisco F. Claver maintains, "Foreign missionaries cannot be

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[3] In a similar vein Magesa proposes the term *popular inculturation,* which connotes intuitive processes organic to African culture, in contradistinction to a methodical and teaching-oriented *official inculturation.* See Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation,* 170–71.

[4] Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asian Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 6.

the primary agents of inculturation. They are outsiders in relation to the culture of the people they are evangelizing." The mediating and catalyzing role of missionaries is not lost on Claver, who rightfully affirms the essential task of bringing to birth the "salvific dialogue of faith." He emphasizes, however, that "it is only the natives who own the culture" who can bring what is inherently theirs into a true, dynamic integration with the Christian faith.[5]

This study hopes to widen the aperture as it seeks to usher into the circle the contributions of the very peoples who are being birthed into Imago Christi, not because of, but in spite of, the tortured experience of multiform "crucifixions" meted out by the sentence of religious-colonial history. Indigenous inculturation is an inculturation from the ground up or, more aptly, an inculturation from within.[6]

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[5] Bishop Francisco F. Claver likens the missionary's role to that of a midwife—bringing to birth a faith dialogue to support the local culture in the realization of its own inculturation. See *The Making of a Local Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 118. The analogy is not insignificant; the practice of midwifery has long been considered a critical primary health service for poor communities in the Philippines and many other countries in the developing world.

[6] An inculturation from within, which I further discuss in Chapter 4 of this book, dovetails with the recognition of the value of engaging culture in evangelization as described by Pope Paul VI in 1975 in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: *On Evangelization in the Modern World*: "Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if does not have an impact on their concrete life." The document further emphasizes the importance of keeping the balance between the local and the universal in evangelization (no. 63). Pope Francis echoes this in 2013 in *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*: "We can see that the different peoples in whom the gospel has been inculturated are active collective subjects or agents of evangelization. This is because each people is the creator of their own culture and the protagonist of their own history" (no. 122).

THE AESTHETICS OF LIBERATION

The general trajectory and methodological approach of this study is the "aesthetics of liberation," which, in this application, refers to a critical examination of the ways by which the creative strategies of art conspire to function as an aesthetic form of social and cultural analysis upon which critical theological reflection develops through an inductive process. The term was coined by Ethiopian film theorist Teshome Gabriel as applied to Third Cinema,[7] a Latin American liberationist-aesthetic movement and critical theory of film that burgeoned in the late 1960s, the fecund period that also saw the emergence of theologies of liberation. Third Cinema is determined by the emancipatory import of its formal stylistic strategies—cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, music—that respond to complex Third World structural inequalities in the postcolonial aftermath. My employment of the aesthetics of liberation remains allied to Gabriel's conception and usage in two ways:

- Due attention is given to the capacity of art to serve as visual historiographer and custodian of subversive cultural memory—functionally related to "dangerous memory"[8] in Johann Baptist Metz's theological conception and,

[7] For fuller treatment of the aesthetics of liberation as conceived by Teshome Gabriel, consult his seminal book *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1979). For a cinema-theology interdisciplinary engagement of the aesthetics of liberation, refer to Antonio D. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 11–34.

[8] Johann Baptist Metz speaks of "dangerous memory" in terms of "memoria passionis, mortis en resurrectionis Jesu Christi," the Paschal death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that offers a vision of a salvific eschatological future for the oppressed and suffering. With its source-inspiration in the Divine, the subversive memory presents a profound challenge to the unequal status quo, thus, "dangerous." He asserts, "This definite memory breaks through the magic circle of the prevailing consciousness." *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 90.

descriptively, to "memory of fire"[9] in Eduardo Galeano's literary reimagination of Latin American colonial history—within a postcolonial milieu. Here, *postcolonial* does not only connote a historical chronology in the sense of the period after colonization but, imperatively, a critical-ethical intent and direction.

- The semiotic analysis of a particular genre of art does not in itself represent an aesthetic of liberation; consistent with how Gabriel conceives of the method as related to Third Cinema critical theory, my intention is to examine and interpret the social analysis represented in the given art form. This critical engagement seriously considers cultural and historical contexts in view of drawing lines of causation in the process of postcolonial analysis.

At any rate, I adopt an expanded view of the aesthetics of liberation that applies not just to Third Cinema but to religious icons, painting, frescos, and public art grounded in Indigenous culture and folk religious practice.[10]

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[9] Eduardo Galeano's narrative retelling of Latin American history is found in his trilogy: *Genesis: Memory of Fire*, vol. 1, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Norton Books, 1998; Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010); *Faces and Masks: Memory of Fire*, vol. 2, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Norton Books, 1998; Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010); *Century of the Wind: Memory of Fire*, vol. 3, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Norton Books, 1998; Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010). Citations refer to the reprint publisher edition.

[10] A comparable inductive approach to aesthetics in religious faith can be appreciated in Christopher Tirres's work *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith: A Dialogue between Liberationist and Pragmatic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). In this work he explores Latino/a popular religion and contextual experience to examine the interrelationship between the aesthetic and the ethical—informed by George Dewey's pragmatic thought—in an integral liberation. Also worth mentioning is the use of the similar term "theological aesthetics of liberation" by Roberto S. Goizueta in *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); and Vicente Chong in *A Theological Aesthetics of Liberation: God, Art, and the Social Outcasts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019)—both of whom examine liberation

It is instructive to note that in its iteration here, the aesthetics of liberation necessarily presumes an understanding of artistic forms and expressions as polysemic and polyvalent "texts" that invite interpretive meanings from those who, as dialogue partners, engage them. In *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, David Tracy discusses how the interpretation of written texts and texts in general—the beginning of his first chapter is a discussion of the divergent interpretations of the Polish film *Danton* (directed by Andrei Wajda, 1983)—is comparable to a conversation:

> We converse with one another. We can also converse with texts. If we read well, then we are conversing with the text. No human is simply a passive recipient of texts. We inquire. We question. We converse. Just as there is no purely autonomous text, so too there is no purely passive reader.[11]

In breaking open the meaning of a text, a conversational approach is not confined to a normative principle based on the original intention of the author/artist. The author/artist is not interchangeable with the text; he or she "has become one more reader." Thus, Tracy argues, "Once a text exists, we should question the text, and not the author's biography, for its meaning."[12] This hermeneutical perspective can be traced to philosophical antecedents, specifically the work of Hans Georg Gadamer, who, examining the process of interpretation of a text in light of the issue of historical/temporal distance, argues:

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theology vis-à-vis a Western, abstract view of theological aesthetics, that is to say, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

[11] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19. Citations refer to the reprint publisher edition.

[12] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19–20.

> The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. . . . Not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of the text goes beyond the author. That is why understanding is not merely reproductive, but always a productive attitude as well.[13]

Gadamer does not consider historical distance as a problem to be solved but as a "productive possibility of understanding."[14] The hermeneutical project of this book allows for religious art to speak qua art, that is, to speak on its own terms, relatively autonomous from the intentions of its creators; it follows that the generation of meaning is also incumbent on the interpreter and his or her creative engagement. The absence of a singular god-voice makes possible the holding up of a creative dialectic, so that, referring back to Tracy, "there is only that interaction named conversation."[15]

The Folk Catholic Imaginary

Even as it undermines the monopoly of the written text instituted by established Western hierarchies, the aesthetics of liberation brings to life the often forgotten narratives and histories that emerge from the folk Catholic imaginary. I describe the folk Catholic imaginary as the way by which devotees "imagine and image their relationship with their immediate and extended community, with their religious institution, and with their

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[13] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Seabury, 1975), 263–64.

[14] Gadamer, 263–64.

[15] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19.

God."[16] This understanding shares resonances with the social imaginary as proposed by Charles Taylor:

> By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others . . . and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.[17]

In Taylor's view three characteristics distinguish the social imaginary (and in like manner, the folk Catholic imaginary) from social theory: (1) the focus on how ordinary people imagine their environment as expressed in images, stories, and legends rather than theoretical terms; (2) a sense shared by a considerably large group of people and not simply a small minority; (3) a collective understanding that allows for a wide sense of legitimacy and common practice.[18]

Not confined to the authority of doctrine and theory, the folk Catholic imaginary lies in the intersection of the artistic, the cultural, and the theological. Given this, the *loci theologici* here consist of religious art forms and, integratively, the performative devotions that surround them. In addition, audiovisual narratives from Third Cinema provide adjunct references for a richer *théologie totale,*[19] that is, the realization of a "'semiotic moment' of

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[16] Antonio D. Sison, "Afflictive Apparitions: The Folk Catholic Imaginary in Philippine Cinema," *Material Religion* 4, no. 11 (December 2015): 427–28.

[17] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

[18] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

[19] Sarah Coakley coined the term *théologie totale* to refer to a methodological approach in systematic theology that invites an engagement with a wide range

aesthetic attention and analysis" in doing theology. The recognition of the capacity of image and the folk Catholic imaginary to engender profound theological insight thus serves as a leadoff to our hermeneutical quest.[20]

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The case studies that constitute the main chapters of this book (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) represent religious cultures from Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Masks of Inculturation: Nairobi's Hekima Christus *Reveals Jesus with an African Face*

Chapter 1 contemplates the compelling image of the *Hekima Christus*, a 1988 centerpiece fresco depicting Christ's resurrection. It belongs to a series of paintings of the Stations of the Cross in the chapel of Hekima University College, the Jesuit school of theology and formation in Nairobi, Kenya. The work of martyred Jesuit liberation theologian and artist Engelbert Mveng, *Hekima Christus*, vis-à-vis other artistic renderings belonging to his oeuvre within the African continent and beyond, subverts and interrogates conventional iconography by portraying Jesus's face as an

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of theological sources including a diversity of artistic expressions. *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 90–91.

[20] The autonomy of art, its "independent revealing capacity," is theorized by Sigurd Bergman, who asserts: "Images create different spaces for theological discoveries. There is no doubt that visual art is a 'locus theologicus.' Its pluralistic capacity for creating new meanings, in addition to creating alternative concepts of art, could prepare the grounds for new and challenging concepts of God and religion." *In the Beginning Is the Icon: A Liberative Theology of Images, Visual Arts, and Culture*, trans. Anja K. Angelson (London: Equinox, 2009), 43. For fuller treatment, see chapter 3, "Theological Views of Art," in Bergman's volume.

Indigenous ritual mask, a visual inculturation that meaningfully resituates Christ at the heart of African life. The chapter examines how, iconoclastically, the *Hekima Christus* breaks the image of "anthropological poverty"[21] that has become a constant in condescending Eurocentric portrayals of African cultures evident in a continuum of literary and artistic works, while dialectically imaging anthropological dignity, the eschatologically tensive vision of a fuller humanity for Africa.

Liberative Inculturation: Mexico's Our Lady of Guadalupe Crosses Borders

The revered image of the Virgin of Tepeyac impressed on an Indigenous Nahua *tilma* has innumerable iterations, not only in the Americas, but in a diversity of cultures in the Catholic world. The hermeneutical journey in Chapter 2 begins with an anonymous Guadalupe mural in Chicago's La Villita Hispanic neighborhood, but it finds deeper focus in another Guadalupe mural, the three-paneled *Increíbles Las Cosas Que Se Ven* ("Oh, the Things You'll See") by Jeff Zimmerman, 1996 and 2001, in Pilsen, another Hispanic neighborhood located in the city's Lower West Side. The triptych kindles the hermeneutical impulse to examine the dialectic between a Guadalupan utopian vision and the dystopian sociopolitical scenario in the United States marked by xenophobia, mass deportations, and the looming rise of a US-Mexico border wall. A second critical moment, creatively interfacing the mural with the seminal work of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Mexican feature film *Guadalupe* (Santiago Parra, 2006), challenges pacifist notions of

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[21] Engelbert Mveng, "Third World Theology—What Theology? What Third World? Evaluation by an African Delegate," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 220.

utopia as it frames the concept within the liberative here-and-now dimension of eschatological praxis. This deepens further to a re-rooting to the Guadalupe tradition and its colonial milieu, a diachronic examination allowing for a relativizing view of Guadalupe's power as symbol par excellence of an option for the poor expressed as an option for the poor *Indígena*. The journey cycles back to a synchronic turn as I propose that the Guadalupe image and its accompanying cultural narrative represent a liberative utopia, the subversive vision of a fully reconciled humanity that breaks down the walls of both escapist inaction and racial bigotry.

Inculturation from Within: Manila's Black Nazarene Comes Closer to Home

Poong Hesus Itim na Nazareno (or Lord Jesus Black Nazarene) is a dark-skinned, cross-bearing image of Jesus enshrined in Manila's Quiapo Church, nerve center of folk Catholic piety in the Philippines. Brought by Spanish missionaries from Mexico in the seventeenth century via the Manila Galleon trade route, the icon has attracted throngs of devotees and pilgrims for centuries. Mostly representing the impoverished sectors of Philippine society, the fervor surrounding the Black Nazarene is an astonishing religious-visceral phenomenon, a pilgrimage of touch, that has long eclipsed the original colonial choreography of controlled solemn observance and formality that characterized its original Iberian moorings. Working on the thesis that the shadow referent of this impassioned devotion is a precolonial Filipino primal religion that survived nearly four centuries of Spanish colonial Christianization, Chapter 3 is a comparative semiotic examination of early depictions of the Black Nazarene devotion in colonial and postcolonial paintings. The critical principles proposed by Robert J. Schreiter serve as heuristic touchstones by which to form a reasoned assessment of whether the Black

Nazarene devotion exemplifies inculturation or is simply a case of religious syncretism.

HERMENEUTICAL ROADMAP

For a deep analysis of the three case studies, I have chosen to use a tri-modal methodological approach that enables me to turn the interpretive prism in different ways to reveal not just one but a number of facets in the hermeneutical quest.

A hermeneutics of suspicion to interrogate the relational asymmetries, cultural fallout, and religious implications that issued from a protracted experience of colonization.

The interpretive journey begins with the premise that religious artistic expressions on a timeline are indexical of the ethos of their respective historical contexts. Thus, like virtual time machines, they potentially offer cultural, religious, sociopolitical, and historical markers, windows to understanding the past, albeit "through a glass darkly," in the light of the present. A consultation with written historical references accompanies the aesthetics of liberation in view of sustaining a creative synchronic-diachronic-synchronic cadence. While seeking to deconstruct the ideological layers not just in written references but in religious iconography and ritual, I recognize that historiography is "history-remembered," the preservation and promotion of which are expressed in a narrative retelling of reality, not in a given truth that is taken to be reality itself.[22]

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[22] Mark Bevir argues that "because there are no pure observations, historians partly construct the character of a fact through narratives." A postfoundationalist (as against modernist and postmodernist) approach seeks to "redefine objectivity in terms of a reasonable comparison among the available narratives." "Why Historical Distance Is Not a Problem," *History and Theory* 50 (December 2011): 31.

A hermeneutics of appreciation to treasure hunt for the astonishing creativity, resilience, and tensile strength of Indigenous communities who have insisted on life though the sentence of colonial history had warranted death.

In this hermeneutical moment I look into the ways by which members of postcolonial cultures subversively imagine and image human flourishing for themselves in the face of continuing cultural diminishment. As historical agents and "stigmatists of culture," how have they expressed their cultural identity and self-determination while earnestly seeking religious integration? Taking up this question requires an engagement with anthropological and historical studies with thoughtful attention given to postcolonial and native informants' perspectives.

A hermeneutics of serendipity to bring to light how unanticipated historical turns kindled ironic emancipatory currents that allowed for the flourishing of the Indigenous culture's creative genius in the face of colonial and postcolonial curtailment.

Coined by eighteenth-century English political writer and publisher Horace Walpole from Serendip, the classical Persian name for Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the term *serendipity* refers to "the faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident" (and also the occurrence and instance of these discoveries).[23] Walpole uses the word in a letter he wrote to Horace Mann in 1754; he was describing a "silly fairy tale" he once read entitled "The Three Princes of Serendip," where the king's sons in the story made auspicious discoveries "by accident and sagacity."[24] *Serendipity* has gained wide

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[23] American Heritage Dictionary, online.

[24] Walpole refers to *Peregrinaggio di Tre Giovani Figliuoli de re di Serendippo* ("The Pilgrimage of the Three Young Sons of the King of Serendip"), a collection of tales first compiled and published by Michele Tramezzino in 1555 from an Italian translation of an ancient Persian story by a certain M. Cristoforo Armeno. Theodore G. Remer, ed., *Serendipity and the Three Princes: From the Peregrinaggio of 1557* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 1965.

currency as a descriptive term, from unplanned love affairs in popular cinema to unexpected scientific discoveries and inventions.

One outstanding, meaningfully illuminative example of the phenomenon of serendipity is the story behind the Nit-Occlud, a medical device designed for the treatment of congenital heart defects among infants. Years of research to develop a nonsurgical device to treat young children living in the high-altitude Bolivian city of La Paz unexpectedly led physician Franz Freudenthal to seek the help of the Indigenous Aymara craftswomen of the Andes. Possessing ancestral knowledge of the art of weaving, the native genius of the women surprisingly became the formula for the successful invention of the Nit-Occlud. With a single string made of a special alloy of nickel and titanium, each weaver of a team of forty painstakingly creates a tiny and intricate foldable basket structure that makes its way into the heart through a catheter and then literally "blooms open" to seal the hole that causes the life-threatening problem. The weave follows the traditional fabric design known as Chakana or Andean Cross, and a single Nit-Occlud device requires the weaver to recreate the pattern 120 times. A cosmic dimension is symbolized in the very weave pattern; for the Aymara, the Chakana represents "the symmetry of a universe without beginning, end, center, or direction."[25] Freudenthal himself acknowledges the compelling twin elements of surprise and sagacity in this medical invention; in a TED Talks presentation he turns to poetry to substantiate the experience, a verse from Rudyard Kipling's 1922 poem "The Explorer":

> Something Hidden. Go and find it.
> Go and look behind the Mountains

[25] See the short video documentary "A Bolivian Weaving Pattern That Is Saving the Lives of Bolivian Heart Patients," CGTN America, April 14, 2019.

> Something lost behind the mountains.
> Lost and waiting for you. Go!

He then uses para-religious language to describe the unlikely marriage of medical science and Indigenous art: "It seems beautiful to me that this ancestral weaving together with the technology is saving lives. For me, it is a miracle!"[26]

The suggestion that serendipity has to do with the mysterious movement of the transcendent rather than with mere happenstance can be appreciated in John Paul Lederach's work on mediation and reconciliation, particularly *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Lederach underscores the double-sided character of serendipity that involves the birthing of a fortunate outcome from the "energetic flow of the unexpected" vis-à-vis keen human attentiveness and creativity:

> Serendipity it seems is the wisdom of recognizing and then moving with the energetic flow of the unexpected. It has a crablike quality, an ability to accumulate understanding and create progress by moving sideways rather than in a linear fashion.[27]

Proposing "divine naiveté" as a dimension of an imaginative, serendipitous approach to peacebuilding, he adds, "*Divine* pointed to something transcendent, unexpected, but that led toward insight and better understanding."[28]

In the contextual and postcolonial frame of my work it is purposeful to understand serendipity as a conspiracy of grace;

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[26] See "Franz Freudenthal: A New Way to Heal Hearts without Surgery," TED Talks (September 30, 2016).

[27] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115.

[28] Lederach, 115.

the serendipitous turns of history open up kairological "Exodus moments" for those who have been enslaved, humiliated, and defaced by what is not-God. Against insurmountable odds the peoples of the edge were able to find unexpected creative spaces for themselves where they were afforded the chance to regain a sense of authentic identity, dignity, and agency, indeed, God-in-them, within the colonial crucible and its continuing aftereffect. Thus, grace could be found on the edge of genius, in those fragile turns where surprising mystery and audacious creativity kiss one another. Said differently and in more theological terms, serendipity is a God-human collaboration. A more nuanced understanding of serendipity as it applies to the art of Indigenous inculturation will be inductively clarified as we journey into its contextual expressions in the book's main chapters.

TURNING THE PRISM: CREATIVE DIALECTIC

In sum, referring to a model of contextual theology as proposed by Stephen Bevans may be helpful in navigating the cardinal direction (to borrow a maritime term) of this hermeneutical journey. A discussion of Bevans's six comparative types—translation, anthropological, praxis, transcendental, countercultural, synthetic[29]—is beyond the scope of this study, but one model that merits a mention for its descriptive relevance is the synthetic or dialectical model. Bevans himself points to the risk of associating "synthetic" with "artificial" as against its intended sense of "synthesis," so I opt for *dialectical* as the more apropos

[29] For fuller treatment, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 6th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); for a concise discussion of the six models, see Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 164–88.

term for our purpose. The dialectical model describes what can be called an approach of approaches to contextual theology that is not confined to a singular view but to a variety of perspectives that are brought together in a creative dialectic. Of specific interest to the method of this book is the dialectical model's procedure, which Bevans likens to "cross-pollination" and "producing a work of art" as against conforming to a stringent set of directions.[30] This is evident in the chapters of this book where each moves according to the contours and directions that emerge from its own unique synthesis. Assuming a humbler stance of listening to the method and content of a number of contextual theologies and relevant studies, the dialectical model offers a common site of engagement where meaning is negotiated in the kinetic and interactive middle field. In this study the creative dialectic occurs on a number of levels: intertextually (visual/aesthetic theology, written theology), interculturally (not a single normative theology but a plurality of contextual theologies), and interdisciplinarily (theology, applied aesthetics, postcolonial perspectives). Worth reiterating here is the earlier mentioned metaphor of a prism that is turned at different angles thus refracting facets of wisdom that are at once related and distinct.[31]

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[30] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 92. Similarly, Robert J. Schreiter emphasizes, "There is no one method or single formula for doing contextual theology; it might be best described as a path, a *poeisis*, and a performance." See Schreiter's foreword to Deborah Ross and Eduardo Fernandez*, Doing Theology As If People Mattered: Encounters in Contextual Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 2019), *x*.

[31] Bevans refers to an anecdote where Filipino political figure José P. Laurel "made entries in his diary in the blank spaces of a Western book" as an apt metaphor for the synthetic model. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 88. While this is relevant to his point, which is to illustrate the resilience and integrative efforts of contextual theologians in their effort to make use of "whatever is at hand," it is also iconic of colonial fallout; the Indigenous culture had no other recourse but to find incredible ways of expressing agency because margins

As a sojourner in search of the water of fresh wisdom to fill my cup—for good reason, I was a self-ordained Lonely Planet pilgrim in the course of research and writing—this academic-cum-personal journey led to surprising geographical, cultural, spiritual, and emotional destinations, often leaving me humbled before the wounded and transformative beauty on the edge of genius. To contribute to the art of inculturation on its pilgrimage to a place closer to home . . . this is the hope and mission of this book.

> Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
> It is yourselves you see and what you are.
>
> —Farid ud-Din Attar,
> *Conference of the Birds*

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and interstices were the only spaces left for them by the colonial enterprise. It is telling that Laurel was the president of the occupied Philippines in World War II when the country was a Japanese puppet state. In point of fact, the metaphor triggers a hermeneutics of suspicion. The actual examples Bevans cites—the works of Kosuke Koyama and José M. De Mesa—assuredly exemplify the synthetic/dialectical model.