

Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context

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How does one actually “do theology” in a specific cultural context? One answer to this question involves developing a contextualized theology, or “ethnotheology,” that is relevant to each specific people group. Such an ethnotheology could be made even more relevant if it used hermeneutical methods already practiced by a specific people group. Discovering a people group’s hermeneutical methods is what the discipline of “ethnohermeneutics” is all about. But how does one discover these hermeneutical methods? After briefly analyzing the relationship between ethnohermeneutics and contextualization, this article follows Tom Steffen’s “Four-Legged Stool” model for storytelling to uncover the unique anthropological, theological, pedagogical and curricular elements existing in every culture that may offer insights into the hermeneutical methods used by each culture. Steffen’s model is then applied to a case study of lowland Filipinos.

Ethnohermeneutics at Two Levels

Searching for receptor-oriented hermeneutical methods is the heart of ethnohermeneutics.¹ Simply put, ethnohermeneutics is Bible interpretation done in cross-cultural, multi-cultural and

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¹ For more information on ethnohermeneutics, see Caldwell (1990,1996, 1999, and 2000); cf. Kaiser and Silva (1994:178-181); Tate (2006:125-126).

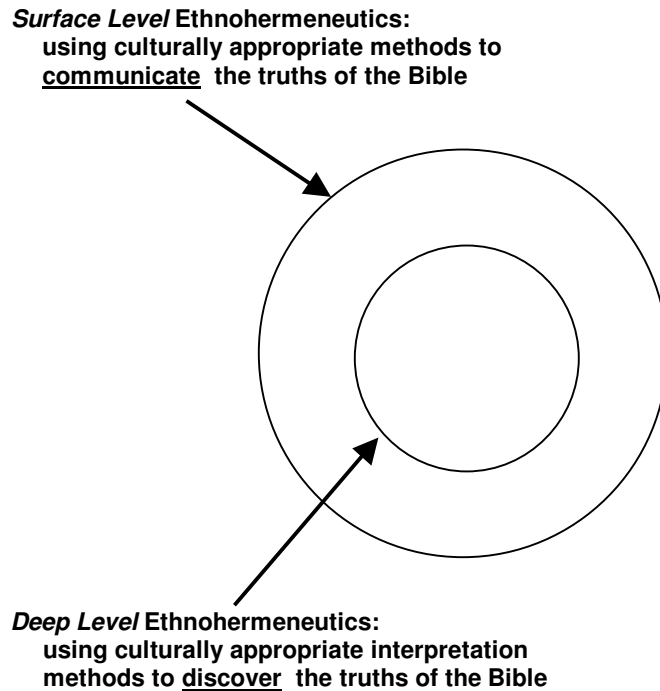
multi-generational contexts that, as far as possible, uses dynamic hermeneutical methods already in place in these contexts.² The primary goal of ethnohermeneutics is two-fold: to interpret and communicate the truths of the Bible in ways that will be best understood by the receptors. In other words, the ethnohermeneutically sensitive Bible interpreter will first look for indigenous hermeneutical methods already found in the culture that may aid in the actual interpretation of the Bible within that culture and then, secondly, the interpreter will seek to relay biblical truths to the local people in culturally appropriate ways, including the use of the culture's own hermeneutical methods.

The above definition of ethnohermeneutics underscores the two levels of Bible interpretation necessary for every culture: surface level and deep level. *Surface level* ethnohermeneutics involves looking for culturally appropriate ways, or forms, to better communicate the biblical truths of the Gospel message to people within the culture. *Deep level* ethnohermeneutics involves looking for culturally appropriate hermeneutical methods that are already used within the culture to help to discover the truths of the Bible for the people of that culture.³ The differences between the two levels can be seen in Figure 1 on the following page.

² For the sake of clarity I will henceforth refer to the various cross-cultural, multi-cultural and multi-generational groups as simply "the receptor culture."

³ I am adapting Kraft's ideas of surface level and deep level; cf. his 1979:242.

Figure 1. The Two Levels of Ethnohermeneutics



Most evangelical theologians, pastors and missionaries would affirm the need to look for culturally sensitive ways to communicate the truths of the Bible. They would agree, in principle, that it is good to attempt to contextualize the message of the Bible in order to make it more receptor-oriented. In other words, most would agree with the need to do surface level ethnohermeneutics. In fact, contextualizers of the Gospel across cultures have been doing good surface level ethnohermeneutics for two thousand years. Unfortunately, this sensitivity to the receptor's culture has not extended to exploring the best way to do hermeneutics *within* that culture. There has been a noticeable lack of concern for deep level ethnohermeneutics, though recently several scholars—Western and non-Western—have begun

to lead us in the right direction.⁴ Most of these recent scholars and their writings, however, revolve around the insights of non-Westerners on various passages of Scripture based upon their own unique cultural experiences. Regrettably, few of these non-Westerners appear to use hermeneutical methods indigenous to their own culture in order to discover these insights. Most simply use the traditionally accepted Western methods to arrive at their culturally insightful conclusions. Thus, even these non-Westerners are doing surface level ethnohermeneutics.

The Relationship Between Ethnohermeneutics and Contextualization

If missionaries through the centuries have been doing good surface level contextualization, what, then, is the relationship between contextualization and deep level ethnohermeneutics? To best answer that question we must first define contextualization since

⁴ See, for example, Adeyemo (2006) and the Africa Bible Commentary written by 70 African scholars who attempt to interpret and apply “the Bible in the light of African cultures and realities today; Blount (1995) and his emphasis upon cultural interpretation; Dietrich and Luz (2002) and their experiments in contextual hermeneutics; Kitzberger (1999) and her insights on the personal voice in hermeneutics; Kwok (1995) and her desire for multifaith hermeneutics; Lee (1996) and his cross-textual hermeneutics; Levison and Pope-Levison (1999) and their appeal for global perspectives on the Bible; Patte (2004) and the Global Bible Commentary that “presents a wide diversity of biblical interpretations made possible by the globalization of Christianity”; Pham (2003) and his desire for Asians to interpret the Bible “in their own tongues”; Segovia and Tolbert (1995a, 1995b, 1998) and their attention to the social location of the interpreter, also Segovia’s related diaspora hermeneutics (2000); Smith-Christopher (1995) and his call for cultural exegesis; Sugirtharajah (1991, 1998, 1999) and his appeal for both extratextual and postcolonial hermeneutics; and Yeo (1998) and his analysis of biblical interpretation from a Chinese perspective.

the definitions and approaches to this term are many and varied.⁵ One helpful definition is that given by Dean S. Gilliland (1989:12):

Contextualized theology . . . is the dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in light of the Word of God and historic Christian truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the cultural milieu, bringing these under the lordship of Christ. As members of the body of Christ interpret the Word, using their own thoughts and employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation.⁶

In Gilliland's definition the burden is upon each particular localized ethnic church, or people group, to develop a relevant theology for its own people. Where the localized church is not yet established, or is not yet large enough to do this totally on their own, it is imperative for missionaries to assist this process in culturally sensitive ways. Such a theology should be developed by each group, as Gilliland says, "using their own thoughts and employing their own cultural gifts." But there is something missing from this definition; indeed from all definitions of contextualization. Should this development not also include using their own culturally specific hermeneutical methods in interpreting the Bible? Unfortunately, such "dynamic reflection" leading to a contextualization theology has seldom been done using the particular culture's own dynamic hermeneutical methods.

As a result, while the concept of contextualization has been very helpful in the cross-cultural communication of the Gospel, it usually has not gone far enough, or deep enough, into the existing receptor culture. Contextualization, therefore, usually has not been *fully* carried out. Such contextualization has not been fully done; as Gilliland says: "using their own thoughts and employing their own cultural gifts." Why not? Because both the local Christians and/or the

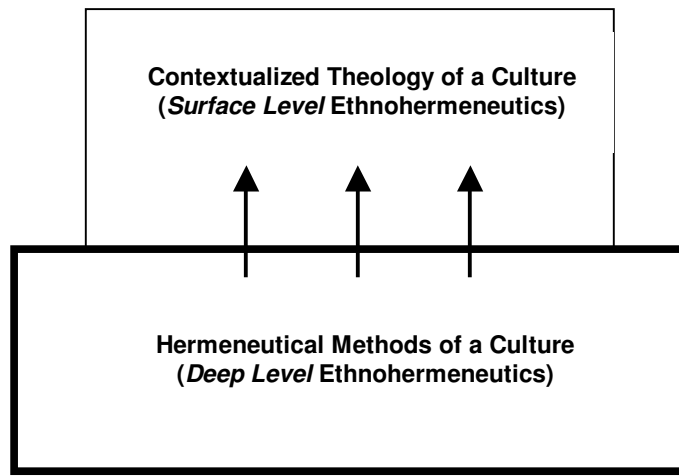
⁵ Cf. Conn (1984); Hesselgrave (1978); Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989); Hiebert (1985); Kraft (1979); Schreiter (1985); and Bevens (2002).

⁶ See also Gilliland's (1989:313-317) succinct analysis of the seven different models of contextualization; cf. Bevens (2002).

resident missionaries within these ethnic peoples and cultures have predominantly used hermeneutical methods imported from the Western world. The indigenous hermeneutical methods already at work within the receptor culture have seldom been used, let alone evaluated for their potential use, in interpreting the Bible. Looking for alternatives to Western hermeneutical methods was never considered. The Western methods were so dominant they were simply taken for granted. This has resulted in most non-Western church groups not having fully developed their own hermeneutical methods in the course of contextualizing their own theology. Many, therefore, have struggled to develop truly relevant contextualized theologies. As a result, the church has sometimes been hindered in her evangelistic efforts among some people groups because the contextualized theology has not been done using its own indigenous hermeneutical methods. This can be seen most often in cultures where the formally educated individuals in a culture (usually through Western-based education) have accepted the contextualized message while the uneducated masses have not.

Unfortunately, most Western cross-cultural Bible interpreters in the past have had little knowledge of, nor interest in, the hermeneutical methods already existing in the receptor culture. Most of the local Christians, furthermore, were trained in a foreign method and consequently were unaware of other hermeneutical possibilities. Both groups—missionaries as well as local Christians—need to explore the possibilities ethnohermeneutics offers for developing, or continuing to develop, more truly contextualized theologies. Both groups need to realize that good contextualization should first look for existing hermeneutical methods using deep level ethnohermeneutics as the essential prior foundation for developing truly relevant surface level contextualized theologies (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Relationship Between Ethnohermeneutics and Contextualization



It is oftentimes a classic case of "getting the cart before the horse." No cart can ever go anywhere without the strength of the horse out in front, pulling the cart to its destination. Without the horse the cart remains where it is. Likewise, a good contextualized theology—the "cart" of culturally-relevant biblical truths—is best moved by the "horse" of indigenous hermeneutical methods.

Those doing surface level contextualization, and its resulting surface level ethnohermeneutics, have assumed that Western hermeneutical methods, typically using the grammatical-historical or historical-critical tools, are sufficient for any culture. As a result, the following two questions are seldom asked by Bible interpreters:

- What are the hermeneutical methods found within the culture of the people among whom I am ministering?
- How can I possibly use these methods both when I attempt to interpret the Bible as well as when I attempt to communicate the truths of the Bible to individuals in or from this culture?

What I am arguing for here is an acknowledgment that God not only works through culture—hence the need to communicate the truths of Scripture in culturally relevant forms—but, correspondingly, that *God also works through the hermeneutical processes inherent in each culture*. This means taking deep level ethnohermeneutics seriously. This, indeed, is modeled for us in the Bible itself, where the best examples of deep level ethnohermeneutics are found. For example, the New Testament writers, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, used their own culturally-relevant hermeneutical methods in communicating Old Testament truths to their particular audiences.⁷ In like manner both Westerners and non-Westerners who are tasked with communicating the truths of the Bible cross-culturally, multi-culturally and multi-generationally must seriously consider using hermeneutical methods appropriate to their target group.

Let me cite just one example from the Philippines that illustrates my point. Most missionaries who have arrived in the Philippines in the last decade or so have had some training in anthropology and cross-cultural studies, oftentimes including instruction in contextualization. Although they are now better trained to *enter* Filipino culture (surface level ethnohermeneutics), they have not necessarily acquired the skills necessary to *analyze* that culture (deep level ethnohermeneutics). How so? Filipino culture is dominated by two religious elements: animism and Roman Catholicism. However, most missionaries to the Philippines have little prior training or an understanding of Filipino animism or Filipino folklore; furthermore, most of them have never studied Filipino Catholicism, let alone any tenets of the Catholic faith. Unfortunately, few Philippines-based first-year language and culture requirements include these topics. It is not surprising, then, that most missionaries to the Philippines are not aware of some of the basic hermeneutical systems underlying Filipino culture at the deep level. Most missionaries simply assume that the outward Western façade of Filipino culture presupposes that Western hermeneutical methods will work among any group of Filipino people.

⁷ For extended examples of how the New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament, see Caldwell (1990:140-241).

Once again, searching for receptor-oriented hermeneutical methods lies at the heart of ethnohermeneutics. Why? Because all cultures have deep level hermeneutical methods that they use to interpret their own sacred traditions. Most missionaries, in their well-placed zeal to make converts and plant churches, usually do not take the time to fully understand and appreciate these deep level hermeneutical methods. It is seemingly a lot easier to simply import hermeneutical methods that are generally foreign to the non-Western culture in which they minister. The unspoken, and oftentimes unrealized, attitude of most missionaries is this: It is the responsibility of the local believer to take the time and effort to learn our hermeneutical methods; we don't want to take the time and effort to learn theirs.⁸

What is true for missionaries is likewise true for pastors with multi-ethnic and multi-generational congregations. They, too, must consider the differing hermeneutical backgrounds of their respective audiences. How many of these pastors, for example, have ever attempted to comprehend the struggle of a recently converted Hindu as she seeks to make sense of the Bible in light of her previous interpretations of the *Upanishads*, or of the convert from Islam who has previously been using Sufi hermeneutical methods when interpreting the Koran? How many pastors have sought to comprehend the new hermeneutics of internet hypertexting and the digital world of the computer?⁹ Like missionaries, pastors also need to take time and effort to do their deep level hermeneutical homework.

⁸ Note that Western methods may indeed be appropriate in certain non-Western cultures where Western influence has been strong and the people really do think in comparable Western thought forms. Caution needs to be exercised here, however. For even in these non-Western cultures that, on the surface, seem to be heavily influenced by Western culture the underlying worldview assumptions may still be very non-Western.

⁹ See Caldwell (2005) for an analysis of some of the complexities involved in interpreting the Bible for the digital internet generation.

Tom Steffen's "Four-Legged Stool" Model

So how does one go about attempting to understand the deep level hermeneutical methods of a particular culture? Unfortunately, there are, at present, no textbooks that give us detailed rules or instructions. In general, however, the contributions of anthropological study will go a long way towards understanding a culture. But anthropology, by itself, is not enough; there must be more than just the typical ethnographic study. Tom Steffen, in his challenging book, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (2005), refers to anthropology but adds three other essential elements of study to what he calls the "Four-Legged Stool" model for understanding any culture or subculture. While Steffen's remarks are particularly directed towards what is necessary for learning how to tell stories within a culture, they are also helpful in attempting to arrive at some basic understandings of the deep level hermeneutical methods of a culture.

The four legs of Steffen's stool are: *anthropology*, *pedagogy*, *theology* and *curricula*. Let's examine each of these four legs in more detail. The *anthropological leg* refers to a group's "world view, values and social environments. This leg requires the [missionary] to take sufficient time not only to learn the [receptor's] language and culture, but to become competent participant within it" (2005:69). On the one hand, this leg respects the diversity of God's creation and thereby seeks to communicate the truths of the Bible in culturally appropriate ways. On the other hand, this respect does not go so far as to compromise the Bible's truths in the name of cultural relevancy.

Respecting the culture's learning style is what the *pedagogical leg* is all about. Here the missionary must "discover the [receptor's] preferred way to learn, store, and retrieve information on the formal, nonformal, and informal levels. It refuses to take for granted...that all people learn like Westerners" (2005:71). Steffen illustrates the pedagogical leg from his own missionary experience among the tribal Ifugao people of the Philippines:

The Ifugao challenged my understanding of the way people learn, forcing me to reconsider the pedagogical "story" I had unconsciously accepted. In that we tend to teach as we were taught, I was no different. The teaching I received focused heavily on the cognitive, presented in a logical manner. The only problem was that the Ifugao did not find my enlightenment-based logic and my emphasis on the cognitive either appealing or logical. More importantly, they could not reproduce it. The gospel message became lost due to my pedagogical preference. This left me with two basic choices: (1) keep on with what I was doing and distance my hearers, or (2) become a learner and change. I choose the later (2005:71).

The third leg, the *theological*, "respects the [receptor's] religious beliefs and practices." It "requires that the [missionary] grasp—but not necessarily accept—the [receptor's] understanding of the supernatural, covering the entire life cycle as defined by the [receptor]. Such a study may bring to light theological categories hitherto overlooked by the [missionary]" (2005:72). These theological categories in many cases may be ones that the missionary (especially the Western missionary) has never dealt with before: dreams, demons, deliverances, healings, ancestor veneration, barrenness, and polygamy, to name but a few. Such a life cycle study "will no doubt also redefine fundamental doctrines related to the gospel" (2005:73). Furthermore, it is the theological leg, according to Steffen, where both the missionary and the receptor will be confronted with the hermeneutical aspects of the receptor's culture that impact on his/her interpretation of the Bible. Thus the missionary

...will want to investigate the [receptor's] understanding of the key components of the [Bible] and other theologies, recognizing the powerful influence of worldview. As the [receptor] seeks to guard the gospel, he will intentionally explore the [Bible] acknowledging that no one can interpret the [B]ible cultureless! [Receptor's] will reflect on competing interpretations, recognizing that the [Bible] read in communities both past and present will help point out current cultural blind spots. All theologies must be de-Hebrewized, de-Hellenized, de-Westernized, and de-nationalized as much as possible (2005:73).

Finally, the fourth leg—the *curricular*—will help the missionary make the best use of information gleaned from the other three legs in order to better present the truths of the Bible. Missionaries “will want to reflect on the particulars of curricula from the [receptor’s] perspective” (2005:74). In other words, what does the receptor culture value in terms of how to present information so that such information will make sense to the individuals within the culture while at the same time it will be understood as true? Here missionaries “will want to reflect on the particulars of curricula from the [receptor’s] perspective” while at the same time recognizing differences from their own curricula (2005:74).

Steffen argues that each of these four legs are equally important so as to allow for a cultural stool that will be very sturdy and useful in the receptor’s culture. As he says, “Because of the placement and balanced support provided by a four-legged stool, users find it difficult to turn over” (2005:69). In a similar sense, missionaries who consider the anthropological, pedagogical, theological and curricular legs in regards to the interpretation of the Bible within a culture will “make it much more difficult” for the receptor to miss the Bible’s intended meaning. “Investigating the four legs of the story will help [the missionary] provide the [receptor] with culturally and theologically sound [gospel] stories” (2005:69).

Towards a Lowland Filipino Ethnohermeneutical Model

It is now time to demonstrate how Steffen’s “Four-Legged Stool” model might be used to arrive at some basic understandings of the deep level hermeneutical methods of a culture. What follows is but a brief examination of the lowland Filipino culture in respect to the four legs as described by Steffen. Before this examination, however, I offer two caveats. First, by using the phrase, “lowland Filipinos,” I am referring to the vast majority of Filipinos—both urban and rural—who are neither tribals nor Muslims. Of course, when ministering among a specific lowland Filipino group, whether Cebuano, Tagalog, Ibanag, and so on—and whether located in an urban and rural setting—one will have to do much more specific “Four-Legged Stool” analysis geared to each particular group.

Second, I am not an expert on lowland Filipino culture. What follows are simply my general observations after having lived for many years in a lowland Filipino context. While I do believe that my observations can indeed help outsiders to better understand the deep level hermeneutics of lowland Filipinos, I will leave it up to other experts—especially those Filipinos from within these various lowland groups—to more finely delineate the defining characteristics of the various legs.

Leg Number One: Anthropology

There have been many anthropological studies of various Filipino peoples, including those from lowland Filipino cultures.¹⁰ Most of these studies speak of several common components of any Filipino people group: smooth interpersonal relationships (SIR); the importance of the group vs. the individual; “go-between” intermediators; *pakikisama* (“conforming to the group”); reciprocity; *hiya* (“shame and embarrassment”); *Amor Propio* (“pride and self-esteem”); *bahala na* (“God’s will be done”); and *utang na loob* (“debt of gratitude”). Whether in urban or rural settings, these common components still highly influence the worldview of lowland Filipinos. From my own observations there are at least six dominant “shapers” of lowland Filipinos in which these common components are fleshed out. I list them below in no particular order.

The first “shaper” is the *animistic background of lowland Filipinos*. Whether urban or rural, Protestant or Catholic, this animistic background has great influence.¹¹ Almost all lowland Filipinos would attest to an active world of spirit beings. What

¹⁰ See, for example, Lynch and Guzman (1973); Headland (1980); Gorospe (1988); and Miranda-Feliciano (1990).

¹¹ Note that one of the most popular books on the spirit world for lowland Filipinos—referred to by many evangelical Filipino writers and professors—is Rodney L. Henry’s *Filipino Spirit World* (1986). The fact that Henry is not a Filipino indicates that evangelical Filipinos have probably not adequately investigated some significant theological issues, like the spirit world, that are of utmost concern to most Filipinos, whether lowland, tribal or Muslim.

Hiebert (1982) refers to as the “middle zone” for North Americans is central to the worldview of the majority of lowland Filipinos from birth to death. Animism helps lowland Filipinos answer the question: “What is my place in relationship to the spirit world?” It helps them deal with issues related to sickness and health, protection and safety, and the afterlife.

The second “shaper” is *Catholicism*. Catholicism, as practiced by lowland Filipinos, is an interesting (and for Western missionaries, exasperating) mixture of animism with the basic tenants of the Catholic tradition. Many lowland Filipinos, on the surface level, are practicing Catholics: regularly attending mass, taking the Eucharist, praying the rosary, and so on. However, at the deeper level of religious consciousness many still remain animistic in their basic beliefs. This is particularly seen in times of stress, transition, sickness and death. For example, when someone in the family is seriously sick it is not unusual for lowland Filipinos at such times to go to church to pray the rosary for a special healing and then afterwards go to the spiritualist to sacrifice a chicken to the malevolent spirits. From a Western perspective such actions appear duplicitous: as if such lowland Filipinos are trying to “have their cake and eat it too.” However, for lowland Filipinos—who for the most part view reality as “both/and” rather than as “either/or”—there is no problem with such seemingly diametrically opposed actions. After all, isn’t it more prudent (and wholistic) to ensure that all possible avenues concerning a problem are properly addressed? The Catholic Church in the Philippines seems to understand such actions and, as a result, has remained the dominant religious force among lowland Filipinos for the past 500 years. But even more than this accepted blending of tradition with animism, Catholicism helps lowland Filipinos answer the question: “How do I ensure my place in heaven?” It helps them deal with issues related to eternal security, authority, faith and works.

The third “shaper” is *family/community*. Many of the previously mentioned common components of any Filipino people group deal with this “shaper.” Family/community “rules”—both spoken and unspoken—help lowland Filipinos answer the question: “What is my role in interpersonal relationships?” Most lowland Filipinos have high respect for their elders as well as a keen sense of their place in

the context of their immediate community, both in the family as well as in the community. Thus this "shaper" helps them to know how to deal with issues related to authority/hierarchy; to understand how to act with appropriate behavior; and to handle the intricacies of SIR, *pakikisama*, *hiya*, *utang na loob*, *Amor Propio*, and "go between" intermediators.

The daily crush of *poverty* is the fourth "shaper" for most lowland Filipinos. This "shaper" deals with the basic question: "How will I and my family survive?" Here the lowland Filipino deals with issues of money, relationships, and many of the same issues related to the "shaper" of family/community listed above. For most lowland Filipinos, the struggle for basic survival is very real, with many living on less than \$3 per day. The attitude of *bahala na* often contributes to a fatalistic view of their poverty for poor lowland Filipinos. The vast gulf between the extremely rich and the extremely poor also contributes to this particular shaper.

A *submissive national consciousness* is the fifth "shaper." By this I mean that most lowland Filipinos have experienced—through their common history—four centuries of Spanish domination, followed by a half-century of American domination, followed by the dominating years of the Marcos' dictatorship. Such all-encompassing domination over the past almost five centuries has resulted in an underlying national inferiority complex. Even a world-leading "People's Power Revolution" could not bring the lowland Filipinos out of their deep sense of inferiority. The recent economic situation that puts the Philippines on par with many other impoverished "Third World" countries has not helped matters any. This "shaper" deals with the basic question: "How do I act in relationship to someone who is perceived as my superior, especially to outsiders?" Here the lowland Filipino deals with issues of status and role, submission, relationships, *bahala na*, and inferiority complex.¹²

The sixth and final "shaper" of lowland Filipinos is, for lack of a more precise word, best defined using the word *media*. This word is

¹² Note, however, that there are positive aspects to this particular shaper, among them is the fact that the Philippines has started no wars with their neighbors and are therefore readily welcomed abroad as visitors or foreign workers.

really a “catch-all” for the driving force behind the motives and aspirations of many lowland Filipinos who long for something, or somewhere, different from what they currently have or where they currently live. This shaper is greatly influenced by the previously mentioned shaper: poverty. Though many cultures have such media influences, poor lowland Filipinos, in particular, ask the question: “What can I dream of being/where can I dream of going some day?” The huge exodus of Filipinos as immigrants to other countries and as overseas foreign workers (some seven million) attests to the reality of the media influences that cause lowland Filipinos to deal with issues of consumerism, the “American dream,” the idea that the “West is best,” and boredom with life as it is lived by vast numbers of poor lowland Filipinos.

Leg Number Two: Pedagogy

Pedagogy deals with a culture’s learning style. How, then, do most lowland Filipinos learn, both formally and informally? Formally, like many Asians, Filipinos have tremendous rote memory ability: memorizing vast quantities of facts, figures, lecture notes, and so on. Such rote memory skills are reinforced in formal schooling where there are strict teacher/student roles. Informally, learning takes place through a variety of situations. Learning occurs through the matriarchal structure of the lowland Filipino culture, where the role of the mother as bearer of family and cultural truths to the younger generation is paramount. It occurs through the group dynamic of *tsismis* (“gossip”) or *chika-chika* (“chit-chat”), where learning takes place in the context of talking about people and events. Finally, learning occurs through the vast oral traditions, folk beliefs and customs that form the unwritten core of the lowland Filipino consciousness.¹³

¹³ There is a vast quantity of oral Philippine folk literature, beliefs and customs that have been preserved in written form. Cf., for example, Pil (1977); Demetrio (1990 and 1991); Ramos (1990a and 1990b); and Eugenio (1994).

Leg Number Three: Theology

The theological leg deals with understanding the Bible in relation to the culture's beliefs and practices. It is here where most Western missionaries to the Philippines in the past failed to hit the mark. Even today, because of past Western domination, most lowland Filipinos themselves struggle with arriving at theologies that are relevant for their own people.¹⁴ Here is where some of the issues mentioned above under the anthropological leg become crucial to developing a relevant theology. This is especially true in relationship to the lowland Filipino's understanding of animism and Roman Catholicism, two areas that must govern any attempts at appropriate lowland Filipino theology. However, there are other cultural issues that are significant here as well:

- their understanding of the "go between" and applying that cultural concept to Jesus as the Divine "go between";
- their concept of sin—not primarily as guilt, but rather as shame and broken relationship;
- their emphasis upon the group and relationships;
- their emphasis upon "being" more than "believing" and its implications for theologies based primarily upon correct doctrine with only passing reference to correct living;
- and, finally, their inclination to accept a "both/and" approach to reality, in contrast to the Western "either/or" approach.

All of the above issues must be fully considered for any development of a truly appropriate lowland Filipino theology.

¹⁴ There have been a number of more recent attempts at Filipino theologizing, both from the Catholic and Protestant perspectives. See, for example, De Mesa (1979); De Mesa and Wostyn (n.d.); Tano (1981); Beltran (1987); Maggay (1987 and 1999); Dominguez (1989); Belita (1991a and 1991b); Mercado (1992 and 1997); Lapiz (1997); and Santos (2003).

Leg Number Four: Curricula

The curricula leg deals with developing relevant contextualized theologies that relate to the other three legs, theologies that are culturally appropriate because they incorporate deep level hermeneutical methods. Of course much of what has been said above will be appropriate for this fourth leg. Especially pertinent will be the informal learning styles of lowland Filipinos, their animistic background, and most importantly their rich tradition of oral stories. Another avenue for study in the area of curricula is the vast array of Tagalog movies that are readily available to all lowland Filipinos. Many of these Tagalog movies have all the major elements of lowland Filipino worldview in their storyline and can give some good insights into how the culture as a whole interprets reality.

Concluding Observations

Steffen's "Four-Legged Stool" model is a good way to begin to determine a particular culture's deep level ethnohermeneutics. By considering the four legs of the group's cultural foundations the missionary will go a long way towards understanding more deeply about the culture and how it verbalizes, collects, stores and interprets information. Such understanding will give the missionary rudimentary clues as to how to use the culture's own dynamic hermeneutical methods when sharing biblical truths.¹⁵

From the above brief analysis several hermeneutical observations can be made in regards to appropriate hermeneutical methods to use with lowland Filipinos.

First, lowland Filipinos will likely interpret the Bible with more confidence and accuracy when encouraged to employ a group approach to Bible interpretation. Though this goes against most

¹⁵ Of course, what is true for cross-cultural missionaries is likewise true for pastors working in multi-ethnic and multi-generational churches, and even for any individual Christian who desires to better understand his or her own culture's deep level hermeneutics.

Western ideas of silent individualized Bible reading and personal private interpretation—not to mention classrooms with assigned seats, where everyone is admonished to “do their own work”—lowland Filipinos are much more comfortable working in groups with lots of personal sharing and vigorous interaction. Group dynamics are important and the opinions of the group are oftentimes more trusted than the opinions of individuals. Thus, any Bible study involving lowland Filipinos—in both formal classroom settings as well as in informal Bible studies—should naturally tend towards group discussion and group interpretation of particular Bible passages. This active group interaction will also aid the praxis-minded lowland Filipinos as they seek to live their lives on the basis of the group’s decisions. I have tried both individual and group Bible interpretation exercises in my own Bible interpretation classes among lowland Filipinos and I can attest to the fact that a group approach not only works, but that satisfactory hermeneutical conclusions can be reached as well.

Second, an in-depth study of the vast amount of oral stories, folk beliefs and customs of lowland Filipinos will likely offer great insights, not only into how they interpret life but how they interpret narrative. Such interpretation methods may then be transferred to the actual interpretation—by Filipinos—of the Bible’s own vast narrative materials. How lowland Filipinos separate truth from untruth within this oral material should also prove helpful in understanding how truth and untruth will be arrived at when lowland Filipinos interpret particular Bible texts. A study of cultural events like *tsismis*, Tagalog movies, and so on, will also help lowland Filipinos understand how they separate truth from untruth, as well as how they interpret reality.

Third, the “both/and” mentality may make it harder for lowland Filipinos to arrive at one interpretation for a particular Bible passage. Lowland Filipinos, unlike their Western theological counterparts, are quite content to live with ambiguity. Thus, various interpretations of particular Bible passages must be considered as equally valid.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit’s role in interpretation must be given a great role because of hierarchy, authority and “go-between” issues. All too often the Holy Spirit is either ignored or given token

acknowledgement in Western Bible study. Lowland Filipinos, by contrast, will recognize the vital role of the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, the role of the Catholic Church in the lives of lowland Filipinos cannot be ignored. How does the Catholic Church in the Philippines both interpret the Bible and teach lowland Filipinos how to interpret the Bible, both formally and informally? Since lowland Filipinos are greatly influenced by the Catholic Church these questions must be carefully considered.

Sixth, Bible interpretation for lowland Filipinos must have more of a “this worldly” orientation—a concern not for theological theory but rather for theological understandings that relate to the here and now. In short, Bible interpretation must be more pragmatic. It must relate directly to the everyday lives of lowland Filipinos, especially in light of the fourth shaper, poverty.

Seventh, growing out of the fifth shaper, most lowland Filipinos will automatically have a high opinion of Western hermeneutical methods and Western scholarship, resulting in undue deference to both. Lowland Filipino theologians and Bible interpreters will need to exercise great effort to move beyond in-built Western bias to arrive at appropriate hermeneutical methods for themselves and their peoples.

These above-mentioned observations are merely suggested starting points from a Westerner who still has much hard work to do to better understand lowland Filipino culture. Ideally it will be lowland Filipinos themselves who will do the self-study necessary to understand their own underlying deep level hermeneutical systems and to determine how they may be applied to their own interpretations of the Bible. Such self-study will hopefully continue to free the lowland Filipino church from the oftentimes irrelevant hermeneutical methods and resultant theology of the Western world. What is true for lowland Filipinos is likewise true for all peoples who seek to understand the truths of the Bible for their own cultures.

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