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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: THE PARADOX OF NIHILISM

Restoring the Gregorian Event: The Separation of Power and Faith

After the fall of the dictatorship in 1986 until of quite recent date, the Philippine Catholic Church continued to demonstrate its clerical strength, often, in terms of advocating popular social reform agenda.² For its part, the Vatican did not run amiss in reminding the clergy of the veritable agreement with worldly powers, derived from a widely agreed, historically enforceable notion of the separation of church and state (Schapiro, 1967: 158-159),³ specifically, at a time when its Philippine counterpart was experimenting on an otherwise dangerous surplus of pastoralism, its more than doc-

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² Its most recent position includes its support for the plight of Sumilao farmers in the southern part of the country (Bukidnon). In a drawn out legal dispute with the country's top brewery and producer of a long line of other consumer products, the San Miguel Corporations which claim ownership of the 144-hectare farm property, the Sumilao farmers invoked the agrarian reform law that ought to favor their plea for land ownership since the passage of the *Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law* (CARL). For almost two decades, the sentiments of the farmers remained unheeded, until the church took up the cudgels and openly supports the plight of the farmers. After weeks of protests, the national government buckled and signed the land titles of the disputed farm lands (See *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 21, 2007 issue).

The notion of Christian social reform was first brought to its modern form by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical, *Rerum novarum* (1891) in which he urged, among other things, that “the state assume the responsibility of enforcing humane conditions of life and work” (Ehler and Morall, 1954: 332-333). Seven decades after, this was adopted into the form of Social Catholicism by Pope John XXIII (who convened the Second Vatican Council) in his encyclical, *Mater et magistra*.

³ Known as the *Separation Law* of 1905, this principle started in France which applied the ideas earlier propounded by the eminent French jurist and Nobel laureate Aristide Briand who argued that a democratic state should be neutral in religious matters (Briand,

trinal participation in the four-day people's revolt that overthrew the dictator.⁴ But the radical changeover it had undergone after leading a people's revolt was quite surprising as much as telling. Undoubtedly capable of mobilizing the faithful to hammer home its interest, the church could either throw its support for or reject social and political agenda which are to its liking or tending to challenge its wider extra-apostolic interests.

In the course of its vital role in the post-Marcos restoration period, the church also proved itself as a versatile institution capable of harmonizing its apostolic duties with the obligation to participate in the secular ends of social-building. Some of the church's leading theologians⁵ were sent to contribute intellectual and expert illuminations on the drafting of the new constitution. Heavily favored in a people's referendum, the victory of the new constitution, needless to say, set the seal on the church. Until after its most recent engagement, on which critics are agreed it is rather ambiguous⁶, vis-à-vis another major looming social upheaval, the church enjoyed unambiguous popular image in the post-dictatorship era.

Before finally coming out to lead the first EDSA revolt, however, the hierarchy's own knowledge of the moral bankruptcy of the dictator (*Marcos*) and his oligarchic cohorts in both the government and business sector was not enough to rally its people against the regime. Unreported atrocities of the dictatorship were also known to

1905: 347). In the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the separation of church and state is declared (Art II. Sec. 6) citing, among others, that "the church is not to interfere in purely political matters or temporal aspects of man's life and the State."

⁴ In Philippine history, this four-day revolt took place on February 22 to February 24, 1986 at the now Epifanio de Los Santos Avenue, formerly Highway 54. When Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin enjoined the faithful to support the military coup staged by Marcos's defense secretary (now senator) Juan Ponce Enrile and former Philippine Constabulary chief (former President) General Fidel Ramos, thousands trooped to EDSA to form a human blockade against the loyal troops of the dictator ordered to disperse the crowd gathering in front of the army camp (Camp Aguinaldo) where the leaders of the coup and their followers were holding position. When the crowd turned to millions, defection among the ranks followed, until Marcos and his family were forced to flee to Hawaii on board a US Air Force chopper.

⁵ Most prominent of them was Fr. Joaquin Bernas, S.J. appointed by former President Corazon Aquino (who replaced Marcos) to the Philippine Constitutional Commission. Fr. Bernas, who holds a Masters of Law and Doctorate in Juridical Science (New York University), was former dean of the Ateneo De Manila University School of Law. Perhaps his most important work as a constitutionalist is the one used by most law students in the Philippines, *The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines: A Commentary* (Rex Bookstore 2003). Reference to the Constitution is henceforth cited as CRP). Another prominent member of the clergy who was part of the Constitution Commission, now a bishop who belongs to the group critical of the Arroyo administration, is Fr. Teodoro S. Bacani.

⁶ Neither in favor nor against the continued stay of President Arroyo in power, in the midst of allegations of corruptions and other scandals, the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines has yet to issue a call similar to its so-called 'communal action' move that ousted a former president whom Arroyo replaced in a people's revolt. In one of its recent pastoral statements, the CBCP 'urged the President and all the branches of the government to take the lead in combating corruption wherever it is found', on top of the recommendation to abolish the executive privilege of government officials not to testify before investigating bodies as deemed necessary by the executive branch. But when the Supreme Court finally decided on the constitutionality of the executive privilege, the CBCP has been slow in its reaction. (Source: *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 6 to March 28, 2008 issues).

the central local church hierarchy. Knowing too well the capability of the dictator, the church, a land-owning and propertied class in itself, would not compromise its future and resources. The risk of 'power disenfranchisement' was too heavy to ignore should it renege on its constitutional obligation to keep away from politics. The tentativeness of the church's rather soft challenge to the Marcos dictatorship in terms of mobilizing its pulpits to allay the fears of the public through pacific homilies (*God would not forsake His people, so to speak*) offered more strategic advantages than would an open denouncement.

Suffice it to say that the relation of the church to the state is one of power, or of the contingencies of power itself. Tautologically, the special nature of this relation can be understood in terms of a special understanding of the movement of history itself. From a teleological⁷ point of view, the church and the state, their intrinsic antagonism as befits the view that the former is reserved for the political or the temporal while the latter for the spiritual and transcendental, are indispensable tensions in human time that does not proceed from a perfectly linear plane: necessary frictions are to be expected, if only to fully appreciate, for the sake of a religious tolerance of politics, the sense of the vitality immanent to movement. This vitality renders contradictions indispensable. For the Christian, however, this immanence must serve a higher purpose⁸, which leads us to the theological notion of *eternal time*, the *original time* that looks at the immanence of vitality to historical movement as originally transcendental. The happy dissolution of the contradiction between the temporal

⁷ Perhaps, Hegel was the most brilliant proponent of this principle of development, argued in the light of modernity. Hegel's philosophy of history is teleological in form in which historical motion is presupposed of "an internal unchangeable principle" (Hegel, 1956: 55), which, Hegel argues, assures us that development is consistent with the "*vis conservatrix* of the organic principle" (Ibid.). A teleological view of history, therefore, is premised on a naturalist conservatism which ensures that every process of motion is expended for the realization in time of its fullest essence, that is, consistent with the original unchangeable principle. Hegel writes of this principle:

"... a simple essence—whose existence, i.e., as a germ, is primarily simple—but which subsequently develops a variety of parts, that become involved with other objects, and consequently live through a continuous process of changes:—a process nevertheless, that results in the very contrary of change, and is even transformed into a *vis conservatrix* of the organic principle, and the form embodying it. . . . That development (of natural organism) takes place in a direct, unopposed, unhindered manner" (Ibid.).

Of course, when extended to human history, the realization of the essence "is mediated by consciousness and will" (Ibid.). Nevertheless, for Hegel, even the conflicts that ensue from the exercise of human will and freedom are subservient to the dialectical resolution of historical contradictions.

⁸ This principle is brilliantly exposed by the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Immanence takes place in a condition under which "Being is freed from the risk of inertia and immobility with which the absolutization of univocity threatened it by making Being equal to itself in its every point" (Agamben, 1999:226). This notion of immanence is quite similar to Neoplatonism which argues that the One is always presupposed in its own self-realization in the Many. In this participatory format, the world is essentially univocal. The univocal is of course no other than Being or God itself. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari summarize this principle: "Immanence is immanent only to itself and consequently captures everything, absorbs All-One, and leaves nothing remaining to which it could be immanent. In any case, whenever immanence is interpreted as immanent to Something, we can be sure that this Something reintroduces the transcendent" (1994:45).

and the eternal (Hegel, 1977:130), the political and the spiritual, or the restoration of original history, the original transcendental, is the end-goal of this vitalism reflected in different guises of historical contradictions. It may be argued that the possibility of a return to original history in human temporal terms was first offered by the Gregorian event⁹ which founded the modern papacy, at which point the separate nature of the church was established vis-à-vis the state. Indeed, the historical compromise between political sovereignty and ecclesiastical freedom, after its instauration in Pope Gregory's time, which has also shown itself capable of intensifying the original tension that does no more than legitimate the only tension possible in official history, would deeply shape the course of political history, from the age of empires to the postcolonial era. Outside of this 'legitimate contradiction' framework, history is, so to speak, impossible to happen.

As a juridical or publicly acknowledged counterpart of the state in terms of the administration of the faith¹⁰, the church is expected to operate within the acceptable framework of, even, resisting power. It took a military coup to draw the church finally into the fray between a hegemonic class and those in the middle and upper social strata disfavored by the regime. The military, itself part of the juridical totality of the state (CRP, 1987: Art II. Sec. 3), which by right can execute its power to use legitimate violence, was all that was necessary to activate the full and open participation of the church in the theatrics of conflicting power-claims whose closure was unthinkable outside of the framework of the vitality-giving immanence of historical progress, namely, the official proceduralism of resolving contradictions. It is in this context where the public sphere makes sense as a constitutive territorial plane of social therapy, the whole symbolic space within a network of individual agencies, structures and institutions which duplicates, for the sake of a theological affirmation of the vitality of history, the tension between immanence and transcendence—a tension which could prove necessary only within a given univocal space of historical determination. But, as shown by the lesson of the local church that allowed itself to participate in a power struggle only after an intelligent understanding of the need for the totality of so-

⁹ That is, the papal principle established by Pope Gregory VII. In his famous *Dictatus papae*, Gregory declared that "the pope can be judged by no one; the Roman church has never erred and never will err till the end of time. . ." (Bokenkotter, 1990: 112). The historical import of this principle cannot be underestimated with almost seven centuries of its enforcement from Pope Gregory (1073) to Pope Innocent XI (1689). One medieval scholar described this theory of papal power as "one of the grandest, most integrated, and best-developed systems that has ever been devised for the conduct of human life" (Southern, 1970: 102). There is no doubt that, despite the arrogance of this principle, it however helped develop a more enlightened opinion leading to the separation of church and state in modern times.

¹⁰ Faith being a crucial component of social cohesion which originated from a more archaic form of social contract that employed the necessity of consigning to a certain form of social amnesia the arbitrary or inherently disputable nature of this contract, so that it would not be discoverable and thus disputable by the members of society (Pascal, 1966:47; Kant, 1970:162) who are led to take up a natural belief in the destinies of their leaders, for instance. Hegel is more straightforward in his view of the relation of the State to Religion, that is, "*The State rests on Religion*" (Hegel, 1956:50-51).

ciety to reinvent itself had set in, this space of determination, where contradictions are as indispensable as the welter of trials and challenges on faith, must stay within a univocal course for the tension between immanence and transcendence, political and spiritual, social and doctrinal, or between power and faith to be kept in shape.

When then Archbishop of Manila Jaime Cardinal Jaime Sin called for the support of the faithful for the military coup, the juridical character of the church was relaxed in favor of a procedural breathing space that would allow the 'political totality' to re-configure itself. The decision of the Philippine church to toe the line of Cardinal Sin could be theologically explained, apart from the socially imbued moral façade with which the church was led to officially rationalize the political character of that decision. Outside of the framework of this resolution of contradiction, the univocity of historical tensions collapses under the weight of an equivocal or active nihilistic enactment of the death of God¹¹, of the antichrist, of the purposeless and groundless (because equivocally vague) movement of history against which the church, the representative of the univocal reality on earth, the absolute sameness of reality despite the material and contingent variations that make up its totality, mobilizes its institutional and doctrinal arsenal. It does not have to do it openly though despite the everyday challenges on the *sacred*, or the univocity of history. It is enough that the heavenly representative is part of the permissible differential system of power divisions, its being a part of which guarantees that an open challenge to this system¹² risks the option of systematic social isolation, or of being consigned to the position of a socially-challenged other, if not a direct confrontation with its full might. Once, to be a 'socially challenged other' risked the imputation of the antichrist, enough to be burned at the stakes. Nowadays, 'socially challenged others' are gradually unmasking the same antichrist-ian basis of a system of isolation that has far-ranging implications on how we ought to understand the real arbitrariness and the contingent nature of all social contracts, including, of course, the univocity rhetoric.¹³

¹¹ Spanish philosopher Santiago Zabala summarizes the notion of the death of God, derived from Nietzsche's early declaration in the 19th century:

"The "death of God" (an expression that originally belonged to Luther) today refers to the incarnation, the *kenosis* (from the verb "kenoo [I empty]") with which Paul alludes to the "emptying out of itself" accomplished by the divine *verbum* has lowered itself to the human condition in order to die on the cross. All this propels us toward a less objective and more interpretive conception of the revelation, which is to say, toward a conception of the weakness proper to "the last God" (*Christ*)" (Zabala, 2005: 12-13).

In his most provocative remark, Zabala asserts that "Today we can no longer think of God as the motionless foundation of history because the truth of such a God is no longer among the goals of knowledge: in place of the search for truth, we seek solidarity, charity and irony" (Ibid.).

¹² That is, apparently the system allowed by univocity to keep history from regressing to equivocality that smacks of a paganistic celebration of chaos and a poor mimetic practice of copying the univocal through uncontrived and inadequately rationalized system of belief.

¹³ In relation to the history of the church, especially, its medieval past, this rhetoric assumed a powerful "ascendancy over society" (Bokenkotter, 1990:136).

This leads us to the assumption that the church of today, whose strategic confrontations and compromises with temporal powers expose the contingent foundation upon which its institutional strength rests, is gradually falling into its ideological trap. By a gradual fall, we mean here a continuing movement toward irrelevancy. But this irrelevancy does not portend destruction as much as it promises a creative treatment of faith among the faithful.¹⁴ This phenomenon (of the gradual movement toward irrelevancy) implicating the social relevance of faith has assumed a global character. The Philippine revolts of the late 80s (which toppled a dictator) as well as of the early 90s (which dislodged a sitting president accused of massive corruption) where, in both instances, the church played a decisive role, could provide background examples necessary to demonstrate this irrelevancy thesis along the line of a nihilistic understanding of faith. In a series of revolts that have been assigned the namesakes of EDSA 1 and II (because they took place in a famous national highway named after *Epifanio de los Santos*, a local nationalist figure) the church was compelled not only to mobilize in human numerical terms its strength of social relevance but also, and more importantly, to train its mindset on the boiling panorama of history, absorbing its active elements that would percolate later in the administration of the spiritual life of the faithful. Eventually, this practical form of church realism would teach it to negotiate with power in more conservative, discreet terms.

As of this writing, Philippine political life has never been more precarious. Facing charges of massive government payoffs from dubious contracts that spell long-term tax burdens on the public that will be asked to shoulder billions of loan agreements with foreign companies, the present Arroyo administration, however, and despite the growing lack of support and dissatisfaction among the populace, continues to stay in power, permitting even the president to belittle rumors of another EDSA revolt. The staying power of Arroyo is made even more auspicious by the reluctance of

"In harmony with the Church's actual ascendancy over society, its theologians and philosophers developed a social theory that envisaged the whole social order as an organic hierarchy whereby all of man's secular activities were ordained to his religious and supernatural goals as means to ends. Each person was assigned by mysterious destiny to a higher or lower place, and each class contributed to the functioning of the whole body. . . The task of each person was to live up to the calling that God had given him and to remain in the station in life to which he had been born. . . All the ugly and discordant features of social relationships—the violence, inequities, war, poverty, serfdom, and misery—were regarded as the result of sin and hence a permanent part of man's pilgrimage" (Ibid.).

¹⁴ Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (2004) observes that the 'return of faith' in a period where religion has been unmasked of its propensity for violence and deception is telling: "In all of modern historicism, the emancipation and perfecting of mankind entail a move away from the sacral horizon of the beginnings. This is not necessarily the extirpation of religion; indeed it is often perceived as a revelation of the most authentic truth of the divine—most authentic because profound relation to the human (Christ is God Incarnate). . . It is neither absurd, nor perhaps blasphemous, to maintain that the truth of Christianity is not the dogmas of the churches but the modern system of rights, the humanization of social relations (where it has come about), the dissolution of the divine right of all forms of authority, even the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, which deprives the voice of conscience (which is also the voice of the most sanguinary kinds of fanaticism) of its supposed ultimacy, its unquestionable sacrality" (31-32).

the church to openly challenge the Arroyo government. This kind of disinclination on the part of today's Philippine Catholic church is not without its connection to a global Catholic disposition that is made to toe the conservative line of the sitting Vicar of Christ, the current Pope in Rome.

Known for his conservative views, Pope Benedict XVI, to his critics (Manning, 2002: 9: 87-90; 94-101; 121), seems all but unwittingly inclined to transform his church into an extreme conservative organization that naturally disinclines from engaging with the artifices of the public sphere and the profligacy with which it has been living its purpose on earth, except for his official public encounters where the dispensation of faith is rather his most central apostolic aim. In a sense, the current Pope is convincing his flock to be loyal to the Gregorian event, which, in human temporal terms, had provided us a model of restoring original history. What is to be done today is, therefore, to uplift the primacy of the transcendental over the immanent, which amounts to a doctrinal legitimation of the lowliness of the political, its precarious relation to the transcendental has never been more obvious in the midst of the liberalism of the new age. Before Benedict, the church had demonstrated its strength and relevancy in aiding the collapse of communism worldwide through which it had successfully established itself as the defender of universal human rights and human dignity. Devoid of real communist threat, the world is now a far cry from how the former Pope saw it. In short, the tension of history has now shifted from a tentative confrontation of faith with the guises of evil (*communism*) to a more challenging, cardinal struggle with the world itself, stripped of artificial battles and is now being restored to its appropriateness as the site of the movement of history toward univocity, that is to say, the separation of power and faith. Nevertheless, the world is indeed restoring to its appropriateness but not without giving us some reasonable fights to wage as yet in the face of the liberalism of the post-modern age.

On its end, the Philippine clergy is following with so much discreetness as of a carefully contrived indifference the conservatism of the Pope. Its reluctance to challenge Arroyo or call for a new people's revolt is becoming more inclined to let history progress toward its natural path of univocity. But how far this natural course can determine the future actions of the church toward its desired goal of separation of power and faith at which point the church will function in its entire purity, in the pure light of its Catholic mission on earth, will depend on how profoundly political will the more intelligent awareness of the necessity of tampering with univocity (whose critical import for its survival the church knows for sure) will be able to justify its course of non-engagement. It has been proven in so many instances where Catholicism is waging ferocious battles to sustain its faith that 'waiting' does no more than instigate fanaticism and religious impatience as to motivate secret tampering with the natural course that makes for, in the end, self-fulfilling prophecies. We know already that

the faith has a history behind it, a history of atrocities and violence that could be explained as partially derivative of these self-fulfilling divinations.

The Nihilism of the New Church

On the advent of the postmodern age, not only were the terrors of modernity unmasked, but also the horrors of obsessing the 'absolute' typical of the ways of the old church and also, to a considerable degree, of positivistic modernity, inspired by a technological notion of science which when extended to political practices of the control of the social world, could be found out to rest "upon familiar religious themes" (Noble, 1999: 5). For its part, the church has learned its lessons well. It has in a sense rediscovered an oft-beaten track toward reviving its passion for original history, for the univocity earlier exemplified by the Gregorian event. As if discovering a renewed opportunity to challenge science and its exploitable uses, namely, the technological substrate of scientific progress, the church has ironically taken the cudgels on behalf of humanity to unmask the false religiosity of science and technology, especially, when employed through the "levers of power" (John Paul II, 1995: 694 [no. 12]).¹⁵ This new religion comes in the guise of today's liberalism and the rabid consumerism of our age. Its religiosity is false on account of the dysfunctionality it apparently celebrates, that is, the dangerous nihilism of freedom and the aggressive acquisitiveness of its spirit. Its false religiosity can also be extended to forms of political immanentism such as the unguided celebration by the political of the tension between itself and the doctrinal (the promotion of the use of contraceptives, for instance) which, otherwise, if properly guided (that is, the political imposition of the virtue of 'veracious sex' against safe sex) would serve well the affirmation of vitality immanent to historical movement. However, this position leaves much to be desired: owing to a deeper, thus more corruptible involvement of the political with the affairs of the public and its artificial ways, this immanentism is better left unprovoked, lest the church would be participating in the rectification of the affairs of immanentism from which it seeks to disengage. Even so, the church continues to engage this new religion at its most capable shape, that is, along the revitalized thesis of its social relevance, albeit in the form of conservatism. It is this conservatism for practical reasons that compels the church to disengage itself from transformative praxis, otherwise, it would be forced to mobilize its physical and institutional strength to rectify the public sphere, which, obviously, can push its resources to run at a loss (not a good timing when the church is spending much on lit-

¹⁵ The former Pope extended this seemingly social Catholicism in his criticism of some practices of power that are pervasive even in democratic systems of government :

"Even in participatory systems of government, the regulation of interests often occurs to the advantage of the most powerful, since they are the ones most capable of maneuvering not only the levers of power but also of shaping the formation of consensus. In such a situation, democracy becomes an empty word" (John Paul II, 1995: 714).

igation and compensation for its alleged sex victims [Jenkins, 2002]). In other words, if the church is engaging in secular life, it is more of a procedural defense of the official resolution of historical contradictions. Or, better allow the temporal to rediscover the path to the eternal without doing as much effort as converting a recidivist.

In the Philippine experience, this conservative social relevancy thesis is increasingly assuming a more recognizable shape vis-à-vis the evolving political complexion that has witnessed several public outpours against the present administration, all to no avail. Perhaps, what deeply characterizes this evolving political complexion is the moral fatigue that impinges even on the strongest public clamor to challenge the moral ascendancy of a juridical subject of power to lead the nation. This subject is none other than the chief executive, who at one point, declared that the “Lord put her in her office,”¹⁶ following public condemnation of her fraud-tainted victory over a popular movie actor, who died of a heart stroke months after the presidential election. One of her buoyant allies, who once served in her cabinet, put in words for the president’s staying power amidst the high distrust rating she has been earning since the election fraud was broken out to the public, followed by a string of corruption scandals involving the first family—“She may be a bitch, but she’s the luckiest bitch around!”¹⁷ Luck or providence, minus the ceremonial divinistic guarantee that these terms hold for other more appropriate, that is, holy occasions, have started to penetrate the public imagination without the qualms as would have rendered an ‘old conscience’ acute in employing the divine’s name and its attributes in vain. Indeed, luck has become Gloria’s providential ticket to escape from accountability. But this luck can be best understood in a certain combination of historical circumstances and the probability that seems to favor her. The church, which was instrumental in elevating Arroyo to power, after the second EDSA revolt that ousted a corrupt president (a former movie-actor-turned politician), had been partly responsible for obtaining her this fortune. It was a favor that the church afforded a politician at a time when the church worldwide was training itself on the restoration of original history that would promise to nihilate, for the greater glory of mankind, the historical contingency that tolerates the overlap between power and faith, between the profane and the sacred. There was no real threat from the communists during the former president’s time (Joseph Estrada’s) which otherwise would have given the church the motivation to bear with a kind of struggle it had no wish to perpetuate, simply because a higher form of struggle must be taken up as soon as possible. At the same time that the Philippine political scene was priming for the onslaught of postmodern globalization, the ouster of the former president that paved the way for the Arroyo fortune was really a bonus from the church. The former Pope,

¹⁶ In an interview with *Times Asia*, President Macapagal-Arroyo quipped that “God is her best friend” (Full text of the interview can be found at the following link: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/501050613/int>)

¹⁷ See <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20080221-120214>

known for his liberal views, was reported ailing, he could not be issuing a statement, *pro* or *con*; his former rival for the papacy, our own Cardinal Sin who was instrumental in the first EDSA revolt, was also under the weather but still managed to pull his last greatest performance, calling for the ouster of an immoral president known for his womanizing, and his bouts with booze and 'majhong' with his so-called midnight cabinet inside the Palace. Inside Vatican, the faith was tutoring itself to face the challenge of postmodern globalization in which the liberal views of the Pope were found gradually falling out of time's grace, relative to the evolving character of the church. But an interim experiment was still likely, enough to rationalize its future stand based on the inherent limitations of its past actions.

Nevertheless, this experiment proved exhausting on the part of the church, at least, as far as our own recent experience is concerned. By supporting two revolutions, which did not much alter the political landscape, as well as the long-standing issues of poverty, unemployment, and the corruption in the government, etc., the church has rather exposed its own nihilism. It is the nihilism that attends to the principle of the separation of church and state. Ideally, it must have no say on political matters, but it did rally its people to rectify the public sphere, not once but twice. When it finds itself incapable of challenging another corrupt power on the loose bearing the highest secular office in the land, it is surely learning a new lesson. It cannot risk a drawn-out exposure of its political naiveté, or rather its preferred ideological indifference toward immanentism (especially, the ones tinged with the liberal ideas of the contemporary world). It cannot risk a complete disclosure of its nihilistic standpoint, the standpoint that gravitates around the absolute notion of the lowliness of the temporal, and its tempting ambivalence that would have perfectly enjoined poetry but not the faith. This standpoint is secretly nihilistic: inasmuch as it is informed by a notion of an absolute, it believes that, by its own right, it is capable of negotiating with the world (which by nature spurns the absolute) as long as the one doing the trick (*and here's the trick*) is not of a liminal agency, but of mystery itself which alone, by invoking its non-describability, its negative status vis-à-vis human language and comprehension, can trick the natural absolute-disdaining world. But, this standpoint cannot perfectly disguise itself or conceal its zero-or-everything attitude, its own impossibility. Raised to a more active level, this nihilistic standpoint will be forced to schematize the public's official knowledge of the foundations of its faith, a scheme of Heideggerian oblivion of truth¹⁸, or the forced withdrawal of truth from public scrutiny. Still, time will com-

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger (1984) associates this with "the event of metaphysics" in which the paradox of Being is forgotten, and "in it the history of the Western world comes to be borne out" (51). Anticipating the nihilism of this eventuation of Being in metaphysics, or of our conception of truth in metaphysico-theological terms, Heidegger states that the 'oblivion of Being' is the "richest and most prodigious event" (*ibid.*), that is, owing to the fact that this enforcement of oblivion is acutely exposed in and through the workings of history itself in the guise of its own paradox (that is, concealing itself in unconcealment [Heidegger, 1977a: 126-127])

pel this nihilism to raise itself to a positive level such as rallying the faithful around the cause of social morality in our world (which it cannot absolutely relinquish unlike our angelic counterparts) that could help us become aware of the true nihilistic concerns of faith. However, with the recent conservative regress of the Roman Catholic church under Pope Benedict XVI, this awareness is no longer among the goals of faith.

Still, insofar as postmodern history is increasingly being unmasked of its nihilistic orientation, the awareness that could radicalize the goals of faith in order to respond to the challenges of the time, albeit, not without some paradoxes to solve, has somehow shown itself capable of surprising history itself. In a recent statement by a Catholic bishop who is publicly known for his criticism of the sitting president, the separation of power and faith is once again brought to line. The bishop publicly declared that, if given the choice, he would deny giving communion to her and the first family citing moral theology for his justification (*Philippine Star*, March 27, 2008 issue)¹⁹. This salvational blackmail is not new in church history. King Henry IV was once threatened of excommunication by Pope Gregory VII when the former appointed church officials traditionally done by the papacy. The excommunication carried a much graver threat: the imminent release of his subjects from allegiance to the emperor. Henry IV, after a futile deadlock with the church, decided to ask for absolution from the Pope: dressed as a penitent, and standing barefoot in the snow for three days, he finally obtained readmission to the church. For his part, the Pope, considered the earthly representative of Christ, would not be had by a blackmail. Should he refuse forgiveness to a penitent the blackmail is achieved: *Christ was known for his compassion for sinners* (Keen, 1987: 73-83). On the Philippine end, the challenge on the Arroyo government, resorting to a salvational blackmail promises to repeat history in a nihilistic manner, that is to say, in the immanentism of the secular competition with the church. When the blackmail of the emperor left the papacy in another strategic struggle with secular powers (King Henry regained his empire), the succeeding development would have led to an absolute confrontation if not for the therapeutic alternatives offered by the Crusades and the Inquisition in which the spiritual and temporal powers joined hands to orchestrate one of the greatest human mobilizations of force and faith. One can wonder what kind of therapy the Philippine experience would need to undergo to stay within the course of univocity. Another EDSA revolt?

which lend Being to a wide array of experiencing its secrets buried in the past. Thus, our contemporary experiences of Being have exposed its various 'unthought', its misuses, as well as its abuses, most often, in the guise and in the name of truth.

¹⁹ Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Oscar Cruz, who exposed the illegal gambling ("jueteng") operations in his area, linking government officials and provincial authorities to the operations. Incidentally, it was due to his involvement in the same operations that the former President (Estrada) faced an impeachment trial in the Senate before he was deposed in 2002.

The Paradoxical Promise of Nihilism for the Faithful

With 'time' upgrading our awareness of the nihilistic nature of social reality to a level far more reflexive than some of the positive intimations of the past which were hugely limited by the absence of tolerance we otherwise enjoy in our age (Hitchens, 2007: 264)²⁰, the nihilism of the church can be better left to the ecclesiastical authorities to transform the faith into a private religion (Zabala, 2005: 12-13). A contemporary Spanish thinker recommended this alternative in light of contemporary nihilism (Ibid.), perhaps, imagining that the same authorities are about to willingly dismember themselves from the community of believers united by an *ultimacy*-based faith, with God occupying the absolute center. But nihilism has not altered even when it is now gradually enjoying a remake but for better and more reflexive uses. It is that, still, nothing is certain. The previous epochs had denied this; they had established quite a number of certainties based on a number of absolutes. But only in our age, the postmodern, when nihilism has started to earn the courage to confront itself on the mirror it had created far back for centuries. Looking at its own image, nihilism has acquired the reflexivity it was not afforded in the previous ages to see itself with, the kind of reflection that would allow itself to question even its own image, its own creation, its own dark motives. We mean reflexive as the ability to question one's own presuppositions and beliefs, without necessarily antagonizing oneself and his own self's impossible performative contradiction, which would otherwise deny the possibility that the self can make of it's incurable split an opportunity for a creative re-working of its own (Kristeva, 1974: 142-145), apart from the option of turning oneself into a madman. We are more reflexive than, perhaps even, Heidegger who saw the entire schematic oblivion of Being, of the ontology of God, for instance, such that beyond our comprehension of the realistic operations of power that can take the place of truth, we can now avoid the temptation to become too absorbed in a privileged awareness we have gained. This privileging of one's acute grasp of things had motivated Heidegger to withdraw from the public sphere and considered it incurable by even the true *Ereignis*²¹ of Being, the more reflexive manifestation of Being in history, stripped of all forgetful mechanisms under which humans were led to understand things before and beyond their powers of sight and comprehension, except by another deliberate forgetfulness but this time

²⁰ Christopher Hitchens, author of the bestselling book "God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything" argues that even for a sceptic personality as Rene Descartes, who influenced modern philosophy with its emphasis on rational suspicion, had to conceal his deepest sentiment behind his famous method of doubt—apparently the highest wager he could make vis-à-vis the presence of powerful religious institutions, most particularly, Christianity: "Even the relatively conformist Descartes, who found it advisable to live in the freer atmosphere of the Netherlands, proposed a few lapidary words for his own headstone: "He who hid well, lived well" (Hitchens, 2007: 264).

²¹ See Richard Rorty's "Heidegger, Contingency, Pragmatism," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers, vol. 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) for a helpful commentary on this aspect of Heidegger's philosophy of Being.

necessarily reflexive: an awareness of primordial forgetfulness that begins from the exposition of how is it that we had forgotten everything in time. But it will always come down to whose point of view is capable of summoning Being to reveal its secrets; hence, the incorrigible subject-ness that it secretly promotes, the will-to-power endorsed by the later Nietzsche.

But unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger had the chance to join the Nazis. That was his irreversible mistake. We all suffer from our mistakes. Unfortunately, there are forms of suffering borne of mistakes that can also spread to the person sitting next to you, or to the neighborhood, to the congregation, to the nation, and, perhaps, to the entire globe. The atrocities of the Nazis are examples of a form of suffering from the mistake of obsessing the absolute which held the entire human sense hostage to evil. In other words, we are all capable of causing the suffering of others as are others on us, given the right opportunity to do so. If nihilism has become an irreversible trend in our age, as the Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo (Vattimo, 2003) suggests, it is perhaps on account of its most horrendous possibility of completion that we are forced to permit nihilism to take its negotiable course instead. This negotiable nihilism is one that is informed and guided by reflexivity.

Nevertheless, not because nihilism has become an acceptable trend, or the death of God has been in no time ever come to terms with, by even, the most faithful who can live with the blunders and atrocities of religion, or its superfluous lie of eternity; not because nihilism is gradually offering opportunities to believe without giving ultimate reasons to one's own except for the reciprocal loyalty it promotes vis-à-vis the existence of others, or except for the solidarity it strives to build despite our differences with our neighbors, it has truly become what it ought to be. One thing about nihilism that has not changed is that *nothing is certain*. In the ancient world, this knowledge was kept out of the awareness of its philosophers²²: instead of uncertainty, truth is certain to exist in an independent realm. A child needed much assurance from reality he barely knew, so to speak. In the medieval, this certainty assumed the divine form. In the modern period, certainty was achieved by political institutions and the auspices of science. In all these time frames, what is certain is that apart from the assertion of truth, there is no truth (Rorty 1991b: 21-34). Certainty is arrived through intelligent persuasions based on a set of premises that are asserted, argued, and disputed within and by a competent community of speakers (Ibid; Vattimo in Zabala, 2005 51-52). If there is something nihilistic about this, it is certainly without a doubt a good sensible practice of nihilism that enjoins each and every competent speaker to practice respect for each other's opinions, because what nihilism is all about is that nothing

²² A similar line we had broached here is the subject of Rorty's essay "Science as Solidarity," *Objectivity, Relativism, Pragmatism. Philosophical Papers, vol. 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

is certain beyond what we can agree or choose to agree. If faith is involved, certainty is something we allow ourselves to take part in, that is, in mutual participation, a shared feeling of comfort rather than of solid truths of which, for the most part, we may be deluded. Otherwise, if power is employed to impose meanings, or legitimate itself as the sole adjudicator of meanings, certainty is achieved through another form of nihilism, the nihilism of will to power. This nihilistic power breaks off dialogue (Vattimo, 2004:98), the nihilism that we saw operating in extreme modernist paradigms of progress, enlightenment and truth-making, if not of the business of mystery-divination. That nothing is certain renders truth susceptible also to other than a prudent treatment of the negotiated nature of things, such as the exercise of will to power, of subjective bondage, or pessimism (Vattimo, 2002: 105), in contrast to an exercise of soft nihilism such as friendship, charity, and solidarity (Rorty, 1991b: 21-34). By the reflexive option to exercise nihilism that is now offering itself to us, there is no question why we cannot choose friendship, charity, and solidarity.

This nihilistic trend offers an ironic promise for the faithful in an age of the death of God, in an age when even the strongest current of desperation because truth or 'religion is no more' (Vattimo, 2003: xxvi) can be a disguised opportunity to recover from the desperation of our age. In the most recent Philippine experience of faith, the church is increasingly becoming out of touch with the sentiments of its faithful who belong to the majority of the populace that bear the daily pangs of poverty, a stark contrast to the luxurious life of political leaders charged of corruption and huge illicit payoffs from government transactions reported by the media. The reluctance of its powerful bishopric assembly to call for the resignation of the president, indicates not only a division among the ranks of the prelates but an indifference to the public clamor. It took only several street protests and media exposures to enjoin the same assembly to go to EDSA and call for the resignation of the former president. Since the alleged rigging of presidential elections broke out to the public, involving top election officials, the military and other government executives, followed by a string of corruption charges up to the more recent national broadband project that commanded billions of dollars of kickbacks which could have unduly favored the first family and its corporate allies had not for its untimely leakage to the media, not much has changed in the political equation: the president so far continues to enjoy the support of duly constituted institutions, most importantly, the military. Several church organizations and institutions also throw their support behind the president. But if there is anything promising about this rather gloomy picture of the future of social movement in the Philippines (relative to this present crisis), it is that the faithful have been charting their own course independent of the blessings of their religious leaders. The once unified voice of the Philippine Catholic church is now disintegrating into open declarations of independence of opinion, as proven by a host of Catholic universities that joined protest rallies strongly demanding that the president be

held accountable vis-à-vis the conservatism of the Roman Catholic Church and the ostensibly contrived hesitance of its leaders to join in the appeal.

Incidentally, the involvement of some church institutions and organizations in the web of scandals involving the national leadership is beginning to be exposed, which may be seen as predating the division within the church itself.²³ A bishop vocal against the president accused the government of using illicit gambling money to gag his fellow bishops and priest, whose parishes and communities are cash-strapped, on the issue of corruption and government inefficiency.²⁴ In short, the immediacy of needs could help overtake the dictates of conscience and moral decency. Worldwide, it is not unknown that the church has undeclared donors and benefactors including government, private and corporate personalities and institutions beholden to the faith.

Meanwhile, for the faithful worldwide that has witnessed the arrival of the *anti-christ* (that is, in our parlance, the inevitable immanentism of the world in the wake of Christ's death on the cross) in the guise of the temporal immanentism of the church, its being forced to negotiate with the pretences of history orphaned by the death of God, purity is no longer among the highest aims of faith. This is sufficient for the faithful to realize that he, after all, does not need to lean on a set of official assumptions whose reasons for being privileged as compared to other assumptions bearing faith-based practices are never explained to him in the first place, as part of the schematic treatment of the origin of social power the awareness of which is not for everyone to acquire, a politics of forgetfulness that predates the establishment of organized religions (Pascal, 1966:47; Kant, 1970:162). In the case of the Philippine experience of the evolving faith in the postmodern age, the increasing irrelevancy of the church is somehow connected to the vulgar pragmatism that has smitten its apostolic and pastoral purposes, conditioned by special circumstances which are not shared by more advanced church formations in the developed worlds. Where poverty is still the most immediate limitation on the higher aims of faith, the dispensation of belief is played rather in a pragmatically supportable form of vulgar realism, which may not be necessarily equivalent to the practical relinquishment of faith in favor of institutional survival. Meanwhile, the essence of religion is attained, at least, at the minimum, in which people (not their religious superiors) who believe they are doing something for a purpose, and who are conditioned by, at least, an informal set of assumptions (which are not too heavy to bear unlike the official dogmas of the church) for doing so, are united in pursuit of a common goal. Religion, in short, ought to bind people.

²³ In its May 26, 2005 issue, *Manila Standard* ran a news article on priests allegedly receiving gambling money (jueteng). Archbishop of Manila Gaudencio Rosales was quoted there as saying: "Some priests don't have priestly values. They accepted money from jueteng lords because they use the money for personal use."

²⁴ See the February 25, 2007 issue of *The Manila Times* reporting on the "hypocrisies" of the church "in fighting against gambling but using gambling income." A cardinal from Cebu (Visayas) was involved in this scam.

The Promise of the Antichrist for the Philippine Experience of Power and Faith

The collapse of communism which, incidentally, purported to ban religion in society, has given us a certain valence of hope in the wake of a series of historical desperations that weighed down on humanity following the death of God. Rightly viewed as the antichrist, communism gave voice to an aggressive form of nihilism inspired by the desire for totality, the same desire that worked behind religious fanaticism (Vattimo, 2004:32). (In contrast, the advent of the postmodern age is increasingly exposing the ostensible power of the seduction of totality that comes in secret promptings of knowledge and virtue-oriented truth-claims which are so hard to resist owing to their emancipatory appeal). Meanwhile, this voice was later challenged by another antichrist, represented by the German atrocities under the Nazi leadership. These two most infamous nihilistic events in 20th century history in the philosophical sense vied for the attention of *absurdity* (the 'state of anomie' [cf. n. 22] that results from humanity's total confidence in rationalistic-positivism that operates behind the desire for domination by the scientific and metaphysical ambitions of totality, which both met disastrous consequences in the wake of 'terrors' (Vattimo, 2004:32) that accompanied these ambitions) hoping to arrest the apparent irreversibility of the movement of history toward desperation. The absurdity to which these nihilisms reacted took the strongest form of a Durkheimian state of *anomie*²⁵ which could fall prey to aggressive interventions, mostly, by charismatic figures whose personal exuberance was often just enough to seduce a deeply disillusioned public. Heidegger detected this kind of interventionist logic in the concept of the *Urbemensch* who, in Nietzsche, would occupy the place vacated by God (Heidegger, 1977b: 100). The death of God presupposed of a condition of history that is virtually abandoned to near vacuity. After the collapse of moral reason history then became susceptible to the open 'adventures of difference' (Vattimo, 1993) which can

²⁵ Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie or 'normlessness' results mostly from a non-material cause, as egoism and altruism, familiar social currents that are not easily formulated in terms of externalized or materialized social facts. These social currents manifest "a large collective life which is at liberty", that is, they can affect individual lives "in a thousand different ways" (Durkheim, 1951:315). Anomie may result in egoism or altruism, which as Durkheim acknowledged, can otherwise be "crystallized in an objective form" (Ibid.) in terms of, for instance, "man's incapacity to sustain a meaningful existence in isolation from the nomic constructions of society" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 102). As far as egoism and altruism are "vicissitudes of individual existence" (Ibid, 103), the state of anomie would render the human community dependent on "the finitude of individual existence" (Ibid.), which approximates the state of desperation that Nietzsche and Heidegger detected in the wake of the death of God. This phenomenon is aptly described by a Weberian scholar as the "subjectivist validation of the old" (Scarff, 1989:80) in terms of "thinking of modernity's essence as a preoccupation with the "inner self" and the experience of decentering, dissolution, and surrender to the power of inwardness" (Ibid.). In my earlier essay (*Future of Religion* 2008) I identified this inwardness as the nihilistic potential of the private transcendental, that is, the potentiality for absolutizing freedom that can be inspired by the thought of the ideality and the sacredness of one's own values vis-à-vis others which one sees as beyond repair (certainly, a potential for fanaticism). Weber succinctly remarked: "... therefore the highest ideals, which move us most powerfully, are worked out for all time only in struggle with other ideals, which are just as sacred as ours are to us" (Weber in Scarff, 1989: 82).

be as uninhibited as the letting of otherwise formerly constrained feelings, emotions, fantasies and desires in the wake of freedom unleashed by the death of God. For the intervention of the *Übermensch* to proceed on a clean slate, or the 'historical man' who, in Heidegger, has masterfully absorbed the nihilistic tendency of human subjectivity to either chart its own destiny after the collapse of moral order, or compel history to become disaffected of the promise that a notion of destiny can offer, the historical space of determination need be assumed in its nullity, in an anomistic spell of uncertainty, or, as Heidegger put it, in a semblance of 'being' that does not let being be (Heidegger, 1977a: 45) in which semblance takes the place of agreeable or negotiable truth (thereof improving the postulate of a corrupt order that must be abolished at all cost). What we have just broached here, however, speaks of the latent danger of even suggesting a state of anomie which allows for the exceptionality of a subject-position to restart the whole process, often employing violence. The rise of fascism and totalitarianism, therefore, is not an accidental aspect of a relatively receding modernity.

But, even on the advent of the 21st century, the remnants of totalitarianism are still felt. The collapse of colonial powers in Europe and their satellites in Asia and Africa, however positive for the nihilistic project of emancipation put up by the soft, or a more prudent challenge (Rorty, Vattimo, Zabala in Zabala, 2005) on modernity through efforts in democratic emancipation, such as seen in the rise of enlightenment consciousness among literate electorates (in direct contrast to the interventionist nihilism of ideologically marginalized powers, such as the communists aiming to dislodge the capitalists, the nationalists [the *imperialists*], the atheists [the *theists*], etc.), rather beckoned the devolution of powers into aggressive nihilistic resistances that promise of the full actualization of proto-modernity (Smith, 1996:4-18), that is, the maximum desire for totalization. The ideal of modernity, suffice it to say, is to erect veritable shelters of existence against the inevitable fall of humanity into desperation, a mourning for the loss of permanent moral structures, or the promise of salvation. Nevertheless, this ideal must not be pushed to its limit. There the desire for totalization closes in on itself, leaving but itself to destroy in the end. In other words, unless the ideal of modernity be made to suffer the calculated indiscretion of the very perpetrators of power²⁶ (Foucault, 1970:73), the whole logic of exercising power would collapse under its own weight, which also explains why democracy and the exercise of freedom are permitted to develop by the powerful yet *overgrown* children of mo-

²⁶ Foucault writes of his genealogical method of analyzing the operations of power: "... it tries to grasp it in its power of affirmation, by which I mean not so much a power which would be opposed to that of denying, but rather the power to constitute domains of objects, in respect of which one can affirm or deny true or false propositions" (73). In other words, on the aspect of the efficacy of exercising power, it is not in openly contradicting or suppressing resistance to it that power can effectively perform, but in a strategic positioning of its advantages and opportunities to keep resistance in shape. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, extended to the logic of production in capitalism, this means that—"At the extreme, each producer has no other clients than her competitors, who are thus her most merciless judges" (Bourdieu, 1998: 139).

derinity—the modern church and state —for the same strategic reasons that force them to make compromises with each other.

But, not only are the remnants of violence or terror still felt in the post-modern age. Both the church and the state are in a sense actively retrogressing in the wake of their respective self-awareness of their true nihilistic nature. Not for their sake to bear with the full emancipative promise of a post-modernist nihilistic awareness, the modern state and church, however, are compelled to come to terms with the new nihilism coming at the threshold of humanity's break from the totalism of modernity. This acceptance, however, does no more than nurture the play of power in more strategic terms. Along with the improvement of opportunities for power to employ various means in the light of the open adventures of difference in postmodernity (in which the state and the church are the first institutions to ever enjoy the auspices of a receding modernity), the opportunities for taking direct and unbridled advantages from possession of power are in inverse proportion to the number of limitations that are made to impinge upon these same opportunities. In short, the elbow room for power exercises has not widened but has dispersed and fragmented into multiple spaces, leaving narrow opportunities for total mastery of the whole process of power calisthenics (Foucault, 1970:73). This situation however gives opportunities for compromises rather than imposition and mastery, deception and control. Along with the slowly progressing trend of a more prudent type of nihilistic exercises, such as the adventures of difference that practice respect, reciprocal loyalty, tolerance and solidarity, the centralities of power (state and church) are also learning to proceed with prudence in terms of handling power negotiations or even resistances. This promise of the new history is perhaps the antichrist in its most emancipative shape (that is, postmodernity in its most provocative symbol). In short, both the church and the state have accepted the antichrist, but not altogether surrendering their powers to the immanentism of the secular on the part of the church and to the soft nihilism of the period of humanity that is giving way to a culture of suspicion on the part of the public, and to compromises and negotiations on the part of the state. Given their mastery of the wealth of traditions²⁷, the church and the state have at its disposal a variety of strategic options to assert their hegemonic right to official history. The strategicness of their capability to assert dominance, through enforcement, habituation and inheritance of cultural capital, rests on "the permanent disposition to set up the distance from directly perceived reality" (Bourdieu, 2000: 17) where otherwise a more limiting principle is at work, that is, the invasive pressure of reality. In other words,

²⁷ Owing to a "less strictly defined positions" (Bourdieu, 2000:17) by virtue of being at a strategic advantage vis-à-vis the uncertainties and pressures of reality, the perpetrators of the modern state and church are accorded "more scope for manoeuvre" and therefore offered "the possibility of acquiring dispositions that are freer in respect of practical urgencies—problems to solve, opportunities to exploit" (Ibid).

the perpetrators of the modern state and church are themselves “freed from the direct sanction of reality” (Ibid).

Meanwhile, our own (Philippine) experience of power and faith may somehow refuse to establish a formal correlate of this antichrist happening around in the West. The antichrist in our midst is still trying to free itself from the Calvary of vulgar forms of nihilism, if not of a loose and fluid exercise in nihilisms, an indication that our entry into the postmodern is still far from proceeding on a stable course. In other words, our postmodern church and state are post-modern only insofar as no church or state today can outlive the new nihilism to which its major central counterparts in the West have long started to relate. The implication is therefore global, but not necessarily affirmative. Nevertheless, the paradox is at play on both sides. On the part of Western Catholicism, the conservative nihilism of its present standpoint is borne of its checkered history, recently accentuated by the expositions of the scandals of its clergy. Whereas the liberalism of the former Pope did not relinquish traditional tenets of the church against the ordination of nuns, homosexuality and celibacy, etc., the new conservative trend in the church has simply upped the ante, taking off from the Polish pontiff’s response to the history he saw unfolding and aggravating in his time. His liberalism was a valid nihilistic reaction against the threat of communism and toward the ecumenical spirit of the second Vatican council. Faced with today’s aggressive potentials of human cloning, the rise of religious fundamentalism that recently exploded in New York, and the issue of the morality of its clergy, the conservatism of the new Pope gives voice to the undeniable uniqueness of the postmodern age. It is only right that the pontificate’s reaction is one of the same nihilistic response, a response prefigured by the fated immanentism of the world that followed the death of God, which speaks of the teleological orientation of the church that has been unshorn since St. Paul, although this time its reaction is informed by different issues. On the part of the Philippine Catholic clergy, its indecisiveness to participate in another brewing social upheaval rather conveys a promise, besides the expected backlash it is sure to face in the future. But this promise is inclined to benefit more the faithful rather than the hierarchy. For one thing, the faithful is gradually learning to become independent of doctrines. In this growing format of our experience of faith, the hierarchy is suffering from an irresolution that it believes is rather consistent with the conservatism of the Vatican. Nevertheless, should the hierarchy decide in favor of extra-apostolic goals (which it can risk without much real damage in as much as nihilism, which does not promise hope, can also operate in the guise of hoping against hope, consistent with the resolute irresolution [Heidegger, 1967: 345] of the postmodern) the Philippine church can still claim to be conservatively nihilist. Joining the people’s revolt is itself a nihilistic response to the kind of desperation that is weighing down on Philippine political life of which the church is an important part. In other words, we are witness-

ing the play of paradoxes on the slowly widening terrain of the nihilism of the post-modern age that has arrived late in the Philippine scene.

For its part, the postmodernism of our present governance is showing some indications that it is not to be blackmailed by the church. It will be the first to enjoy a windfall should the church push the limit of its apostolic agenda. By arguing for moral theology, some members of the clergy risk the future of the church in terms of exposing the ambivalence of the separate nature of the church vis-à-vis the state. On the one hand, the separation can further the claims that the church is meddling with the affairs of the administration of the secular (*absolute formal separation*). On the other hand, it can enhance the position of the church and its moral ascendancy to challenge a corrupt government (*relative formal separation*). "If politicians are exempted from the Ten Commandments, I will keep quiet. But if politicians are still bound by the Ten Commandments, I shall continue to speak. The Church is the soul of the nation (*Philippine Star*, March 27, 2008 issue)"²⁸, quipped the Filipino bishop. Obviously, the bishop is promoting a philosophy of separation that cannot be readily understood in its own terms. But, if a statement can mean anything, it is with a certain amount of power that it can be made to serve the intention of the speaker, a lesson that one can learn best from Nietzsche.²⁹

²⁸ The article bears the following title: "Cruz refuses to give communion to GMA, First Family, other 'sinners'."

²⁹ In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche expresses in plain language: "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous "meaning" and "purpose" are necessarily obscured or even obliterated" (GM, II, 12).

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Abstract

Virgilio Aquino Rivas

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: THE PARADOX OF NIHILISM

The paper attempts to demonstrate, drawing on the recent experience of Philippine Catholic faith, that the relevance of the Church in the postmodern age is as much a political choice as it is a tolerance of the nihilistic mood of the times. It is a political choice insofar as the Church has nowhere to go in the postmodern except through asserting its relevance, which necessarily means homing in on the growing irrelevance of the organized faith, amidst the secular and liberal currents of the present, in order to thresh out strategic directions for its continued survival, which is recently challenged by stories of sex scandals involving its clergy. The postmodern age also compels the Church to come to terms with the nihilism that accompanies what Nietzsche saw in his own time, and still true today, namely, the 'death of God'.

The 'death of God' continues to be a pervasive force behind the historical reaction of the faith toward the secularisation of the modern world, in terms, for instance, of the rise of today's conservative attitude of Roman Catholicism, which can be considered a throwback of the earlier papal orthodoxy that looked down on temporal powers as a disguised evil. This conservatism entails a certain practice and belief in the purity of the faith and the sacred over and against the secular and the profane. It ignores the actual and objective distinctions between the temporal and the sacred, which betrays a form of nihilism, that is, the forced oblivion of the real ambiguity and the paradox that inform the distinction between the secular and the sacred. This kind of nihilism connotes that no distinction can be tolerated at the expense of the sacred, while certain strategic compromise with the secular in the guise of advancing the aims of faith are tolerated if only to allow for the full maturity of the regime of the sacred.

Key words: conservative nihilism, death of god, nihilism, postmodernism, sacred, secular.

Резиме

Вирџилио Акино Ривас

УЛОГА ЦРКВЕ У ПОЛИТИЦИ СОЦИЈАЛНЕ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЈЕ: ПАРАДОКС НИХИЛИЗМА

У овом чланку настојимо да докажемо, на основу недавног искуства католичке вере на Филипинима, да релевантност цркве у постмодерном добу представља исто толико политички избор колико и толерисање нихилистичког расположења нашег времена. То је политички избор јер црква нема други правац којим може да се креће у постмодерном добу осим правца афирмације сопственог значаја. А, то неминовно значи суочавање са све већим опадањем утицаја организоване вере у данашњим секуларним и либералним токовима у циљу проналажења стратешких правца за њено континуирано преживљавање. При томе, Католичка црква је морала да се суочи и са недавним изазовом које су наметнули извештаји о секуларним скандалима њеног свештенства. Постмодерно доба приморава цркву, такође, да се прилагоди нихилизму кога прати оно што је Ниче у своје време видео, а то важи и данас, као „смрт бога“.

„Смрт бога“ је и даље она одлучујућа снага која одређује реакцију вере у односу на секуларизацију модерног света. То се одражава, на пример, кроз данашње све изразитије конзервативно постављање римског католицизма, које се може видети као повратак на ранију папску ортодоксију по којој је световна власт била преобучени ђаво. Овај конзервативизам прати одређена пракса и веровање у чистоћу вере и примат светости над секуларним и световним. Он игнорише актуелне и објективне дистинкције између световног и светог, подсећајући на облик нихилизма, то јест на принудно „заборављање“ стварне разлике и парадокса који показује дистинкцију између секуларног и светог. Ова врста нихилизма подразумева да ниједна разлика не сме да буде толерисана на штету свете вере, док може да буде толерисан одређени стратешки компромис са секуларним ради остваривања циљева вере, али само под условом да то омогућава да режим светог потпуно надвлада.

Кључне речи: конзервативни нихилизам, смрт бога, нихилизам, постмодернизам, светост, секуларност.