



The Theology of Struggle: Recognizing Its Place in Recent Philippine History

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ABSTRACT. The “theology of struggle” is the name embraced in 1982 by a significant group of socially concerned Christians in the Philippines who, after experiencing conversion as a result of living and working among the poor, committed themselves to a new way of “being church.” For almost three decades, this new way of life saw church people construct new identities, act collectively, and challenge established religious, social, and cultural understandings. Those who joined the struggle felt that they were called to a radical form of commitment. This commitment brought them under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines, a group with an ideology perceived as antithetical to their beliefs. The “theology of struggle” is, however, a misnomer: it is not theological discourse in the traditional sense. Rather, it should be understood as a social movement. Multifaceted and complex, social movements strive for change, though often in dangerous circumstances. To comprehend how Christians in the Philippines came to join a Communist-led struggle, and their subsequent evolution into a movement of significance, one dimension of social movement theory is employed—the construction of identity.

KEYWORDS. Christian · Communist · identity · struggle · movement · CNL

INTRODUCTION

On February 17, 1972, in Manila, a diverse group of Christians gathered around a statue of Jose Burgos, Jacinto Zamora, and Mariano Gomez, three Filipino priests whose execution a century earlier served as a prelude to the Philippine revolution against Spain. In the ceremony, leaders announced the existence of a new organization called Christians for National Liberation (CNL), and in doing so publicly joined the ongoing revolutionary struggle raging in the country. This commitment to a new way of “being Church” was a response to their experiences gained while living and working among the poor. As Christians in a deeply religious country, they were driven

by a moral imperative—to play a part in bringing a more just society to fruition.

Their commitment, however, was not without challenges. The organization they formed, CNL, came under the auspices of the national democratic movement, which in turn was headed by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). A “marriage of convenience,” Christians and Communists coalesced despite the latter espousing an ideology that was historically antithetical to Christianity. Over the next fifteen years, this often uneasy alliance involved organization on several levels, empowerment of self and others, engagement with people at the grassroots, and transformation of both society and the Christian churches. These years also helped church people find their own voice in the movement, a situation that resulted in the emergence of the “theology of struggle.”

This article initially argues that the theology of struggle should be viewed as a social movement. It is premised that social movements are complex entities that essentially attempt to bring about changes in the social order. Due to the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, no single theoretical position adequately accounts for them. But in analyzing specific social movements, one aspect is always present: people, acting in solidarity. Progressive Christians in the Philippines forged unprecedented solidarities that led to the creation of new personal identities and eventually the construction of a collective identity.

From a sociological perspective, collective identity is associated with “recognition and the creation of connectedness . . . [and] brings . . . a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 21). The dimension of collective identity is employed here to assist in comprehending how Christians in the Philippines came to join a Communist-led struggle, and then demonstrate their subsequent evolution into a movement that achieved religious, social, and political significance. More specifically, this paper briefly traces tentative encounters that led to the construction of new personal identities. It delves into how church people, in redefining themselves, came to be involved in revolutionary struggle. It then reveals the fragility of a collective identity when aspects are brought into conflict. Finally, this paper illustrates how church people recaptured and crystallized a collective identity as Christians in the broad Leftist movement.

In order to explore these aspects in a succinct manner, four phases of collective identity suggested by Polletta and Jasper (2001) will be

followed to a certain degree: why movements emerge at a specific time, the motivation behind the commitment, how strategies are chosen, and the impact of the movement.

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

People involved in social movements generally formulate a new identity, constructing and reconstructing it as roles and circumstances change (Melucci 1996, 185). Identity is simply part of learning who we are and who we would like to be. This search for a new identity is often independent of traditional politics and institutions, opening styles of action previously not considered and offering both new ways of doing politics and forging solidarities with different groups.

In the 1960s, new possibilities for political engagement opened up in many parts of the world.¹ For progressive Christians, two institutional gatherings, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the World Council of Churches (1966), were significant. Priests and members of the religious orders, whose identity until that point had been shaped largely by their institutions, welcomed options not previously offered. Their encounters led them to innovative directions.

The laity also experienced renewal as they stepped into new positions of responsibility that were once the domain of the religious order. Reminiscing about the early days of the movement, Edicio dela Torre, one of the early leaders of CNL, writes, "I dealt with words without flesh and blood." Considered an intellectual rather than an activist in his early seminarian days, he learned that he "had to go beyond printed sources, to the oral traditions and current conversations of people" (de la Torre 1986, 6). That meant leaving the security of high seminary walls, which was almost unheard of at the time. Out in the field, church people were introduced to academic literature outlining liberation theology and literacy programs, and were employed at the grassroots level where they conducted diverse programs. They trained leaders and participated in areas of health, education, and community engagement. Much of their work incorporated the all-important activities of "conscientization" (roughly equivalent to consciousness raising) and empowerment of the poor and oppressed.

Transitions such as these have ramifications for traditional identities. In proceeding into new fields and relationships, parts of a person's identity are put aside, while other aspects are strengthened and reinforced. New characteristics may also be added. The transformation of identity eventuates further as solidarities are forged with new groups.

Developing a collective identity is a process that occurs over a period of time. Long before it takes shape, individuals undergo changes in self-identity. Church people who sought alternative experiences initially joined communities or organizations perceived to be “safe”—that is, attached or linked to the Church in some manner, such as the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) and the Zone One Tondo Organization (ZOTO). The institutional churches accorded opportunities through initiatives of the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), the social action arm of the Catholic Church in the Philippines; the Association for Major Religious Superiors (AMRSP), through its various task forces, the most potent of which was the Task Force for Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP); the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference, which was instrumental in supporting Basic Christian Communities (BCCs), among other initiatives; and various programs initiated by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP). Many church people who joined the revolutionary struggle began their “immersion” with such organizations.

In retrospect, de la Torre (1986, 39), a chaplain with the FFF in the 1960s, suggests that for church people, joining such organizations was a gentle ingress into more radical forms of activism. The formation of social movements, through the utilization of established organizations, is “perhaps the single most successful strategy,” as it grants the emerging movement “the collective identity associated with them” (Friedman and McAdam 1992, 16). For a short period, that identity was steeped in Christianity. However, once in the field, a transformation occurred, which the Christian Churches were unable to control.

The story of an inspirational priest, Luis Jalandoni, reveals how this can actualize. Initially working with one of NASSA’s projects, a Social Action Center in Bacolod, he considered one of his tasks is to simply be with people in their struggle. As a result, he participated in strike action, pressed demands for a minimum wage and land reform, and generally supported the poor and the oppressed in whatever way he could (Jalandoni 1998). Witnessing cruel repression and facing bullets aimed at workers on a picket line, as well as delivering stirring sermons at the cathedral, he created awareness among church people in Negros at an unprecedented scale. However, frustrated by his lack of ability to achieve any change, he came to the belief that workers needed some kind of armed power and deemed the Christian response of seeking peaceful solutions to be untenable. Jalandoni left the Church to join the armed struggle, eventually becoming a leader of the National Democratic Front (NDF).

Religious women also offer stories that are as inspirational and they too have a distinct feature of homogeneity. Christine Tan (1998) asked permission to leave her convent and live in a place “closer to the Filipino reality,” and until her death a few years ago, she remained committed to that lifestyle. Her challenges to institutional Christianity illustrated another way forward. As chairperson of AMRSP in the early 1970s, she perceived the need for a “definite political stance” (Tan 1997, 98) and moved the AMRSP into a progressive and radical position. When martial law was declared in 1972, the AMRSP condemned the government and highlighted abuses that were occurring. It called on religious orders to read Vatican Council documents—to interpret the signs of the times—and respond with courage. Many described her as one of the most powerful forces in transforming the Catholic Church in the Philippines.

Tan, Jalandoni, and dela Torre² are among those well-known religious-turned-revolutionaries, but there were countless others whose stories followed a similar path. They left “safe” environs, were immersed in another Filipino reality, and were subsequently conscientized and empowered. Their self-identity changed, gradually merging into a collective identity. In the early days of the struggle, that collective identity was somewhat unexpected to those involved. In retrospect, however, this was inescapable due to the simultaneous revival of the CPP, which was developing similar links with underground groups.

Protests do not necessarily emerge out of clear structural positions, but often simply out of a shared vision (Jasper 1997, 89). Christians were initially hesitant in encounters with their traditional “enemy,” but paths crossed constantly. Religious activists began to question why Marxist ideology was considered subversive, and why Communists were “dangerous.” Indeed, by the early 1970s, many had adopted Marxist tools to analyze ongoing poverty and oppression. Networks between the “opposing” programs were in place. However, the official merging (when CNL was inaugurated) carried with it hazardous connotations because shortly after, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. In doing so, he closed all avenues of possible dissent and arrested anyone regarded as “opposition.” Those involved in the fledgling Christian organization were instantly labeled as opposition, a dangerous identity to hold at that time. In fact, before long, anyone engaged in work at the grassroots was characterized as “Leftist.” Perhaps naively, Christians perceived themselves as simply offering a Christian presence and perspective in the struggle.

HIGH-RISK COMMITMENT

In announcing its inauguration in 1972, leaders of CNL declared: This “ends our separate search for authentic service to our people and starts our organized struggle along the narrow path to national liberation and democracy” (quoted in Bolasco 1994, 100). CNL is crucial to comprehending the development of a Christian collective identity, but difficulties arise in researching its role. Those who worked at the grassroots, especially people following the political stance of the national democratic movement, did so in fear of their lives. Thus, much work took place “underground” and most information about CNL remains unwritten (Rocamora 1994, 14).

I was granted access to CNL documentation and congress materials from 1972 to 1996. I conducted a long interview with its current national chairperson, a man who calls himself Father Felipe Patricio, and spoke with many church people who were, or still are, members of CNL. The early leaders, Edicio dela Torre and Luis Jalandoni, are commonly named as two who launched CNL, but few publicly state their allegiance. Those who spoke to me of CNL’s endeavors and problems did so on the proviso that information remain “off the record.”

About two hundred people attended the initial CNL congress. Committed and enthusiastic, a fundamental task agreed upon was to recruit new members. The Churches offered large communities and organizations, therefore “mobilization potential” (Gamson 1988, 11) was excellent. It is widely acknowledged that social networks play a crucial role in the mobilization process (della Porta 1992, 8; Diani 1992, 8; Diani 2004, 342; Foweraker 1995, 16; Gamson 1988, 12; Klandermans 1997, 210; McAdam 1986, 76; Melucci 1988, 339; Rucht 1996, 190; Scott 1990, 125; Nepstad 1996, 15; Tarrow 1994, 136), and CNL members certainly personalized the plight of the poor and oppressed for others in their communities. However, being forced underground created a specific set of circumstances for recruitment (see della Porta 1992) and identity. Therefore, those deemed sympathetic had to be carefully targeted, a painstakingly slow and risky but crucial venture.

At the time, many religious congregations were deeply divided as to the role individuals and the congregation as a whole should play in the struggle. There was disagreement over the need for martial law and the call for political engagement. Florence (1995) rued, “We found ourselves fighting the dictatorship and also fighting issues inside the

congregation.” While these risks were life threatening, these also led to heightened political commitment and the creation of intense personal ties and loyalty. The highly motivated and passionate entreaties by activists overcame some resistance (see Gamson 1988, 12), but many potential recruits were disconcerted by media’s depiction of political violence and the collaboration of Christians and revolutionaries. A photograph showing a priest holding a high-powered weapon, for instance, was featured on the front page of national newspapers. In addition, articles linking Christians and Communists were regular fanfare (see critique by Durkheim and Weber 1978, 9). Such commentaries struck at the core of the issue—the acceptance of armed struggle as when CNL joined the national democratic movement (and later the NDF), that also included assenting to the use of arms.

The use of armed force is a divisive issue within theological circles, but church people who came to accept it, at least in principle, felt that all other avenues had been exhausted. From the onset of Martial Law in 1972, nonviolent tactics such as strikes, rallies, and legal avenues were met with resistance, often of a violent nature. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, landlords with large, well-armed security forces,³ along with the State, repressed all nonviolent forms of opposition, a situation that invariably induces the adoption of more violent tactics (Mason 1990, 43). Amnesty International and TFDP documented major abuses perpetrated, which included arbitrary arrest and detention (approximately one hundred thousand people incarcerated in the first year following the declaration of martial law) (see Youngblood 1990, 138), political killing or “salvaging,” the use of torture, and entire villages being forcibly relocated or isolated (Timberman 1991, 100). As a result of the escalating violence, religious activists asked the Church hierarchy: “Why does Christian moral theology tend to justify violence that emanates from the established power, even if it is unjust, oppressive and tyrannical, while tending to be so condemnatory of the revolutionary efforts to replace it with a more just society and government?” (Jacela 1988, 12). Failing to receive a reply from their leaders and facing heightened State repression, many, such as Jalandoni, joined the armed struggle.

Falk (1987, 175-76) regards the militancy of a movement as a “reflection of existing oppressive structures,” asserting that if people are seeking liberation, “they must act themselves on behalf of a liberating process; ... [with the] realization that conventional political options are not available.” The acceptance of armed struggle inevitably led to

conflict, but those who opted to remain attached to religious institutions came to understand and support it. In explaining why the religious may support armed struggle in principle, Ben Moraleda (1996), a Redemptorist priest, rhetorically remarked, “Who are we, as religious, to judge those who choose to take up arms?” Like the others that I have interviewed, Moraleda had witnessed or heard firsthand accounts of brutalities that forced him to rethink Church doctrines. “Right before the farmer’s eyes, his wife is raped, his sons are killed. Who am I to say [to him], ‘Don’t take up arms?’” (Moraleda 1996).

Hunt and Benford (2004, 443) suggest that those engaged in social movements not only have a sense of who they are; they also “construct a sense of who they are not.” As Christians moved from advocating nonviolent techniques to accepting armed struggle, they stressed that the decision did not necessarily mean that they, personally, would take up arms. They knew what they stood for but the heavily censored media and Church hierarchies ensured that others judged them harshly for their stance.⁴

Acting collectively, people have identities placed upon them by others. Such changes do not always sit comfortably as people constantly redefine themselves or, indeed, are labeled (often negatively) by those who view them from the fringes. This situation was faced by church people in the Philippines as soon as links were made with the broad Left. Thus, individuals “possess several different identities of varying degrees of complexity” (Melucci 1996, 33), an aspect too broad to study here (see Harris 2003). It is the *collective identity* with which Christian activists in the Philippines came to identify that is most significant.

STRATEGY AND IDENTITY

Throughout the Martial Law years, church people, especially those directly associated with CNL, maintained a dual persona, working with legal organizations while also participating in “underground” activities. In much of their undertakings, especially in the underground, Christians and Communists worked as one. Their thrust was in five crucial areas, all of which were made easier by Catholicism’s vast network that offered tentacles reaching into almost every corner of Philippine society.

The first, transforming the Churches and their structures, as well as mobilizing key resources for the struggle, was accomplished through

the strategic placement of CNL people in decisive positions within various Church agencies. I was informed that groups such as AMRSP and its task forces, especially the TFDP, NASSA—particularly its Social Action Centers with their various programs, trade unions, and other movements working among the poor—were successfully targeted (Patricio 1995). The second was CNL's mobilization and ongoing utilization of various institutional resources, especially schools and convents with their comprehensive infrastructures and support systems. Joel Rocamora (1994, 25), a lecturer in political science at the University of the Philippines in the early 1970s, before being forced into exile, assesses the role of CNL in the broad struggle in the 1970s as "the single most important source of support." He points out that "the radical Christian movement provided an institutional base which literally and figuratively sheltered the national democratic movement especially after the declaration of Martial Law in 1972" (*ibid.*, 14). In fact, utilizing their diverse resources, CNL members assisted in building an underground network that saved many activists from arrest (Jones 1989, 209).

The third major activity was the development of BCCs. In one NASSA initiative in 1977, the more progressive of these communities merged with community organizations (COs), many of which were communist-led, thus creating BCC-COs. This development clearly linked the endeavors of Christians with Communists.

The fourth, and most controversial achievement, made possible by the intertwining of religious and secular endeavors, was the ability to channel Church funds to areas most in need—a situation that led to conflict, as the CPP was accused of misusing international financial aid. Just how much money reached the CPP in this way will never be known, but Rosenberg (1990, 173) notes that "substantial amounts of money [were] channelled through church social action programs to the NDF until a crackdown by church authorities." The fifth area was engagement in mobilizing collective action, perhaps the most visible face of Christians in the struggle. In all of these undertakings, a multitude of church people were linked, either knowingly or unknowingly, to the broad Leftist movement.⁵

The latter task, collective action, attracted the majority of participants. But it was not until 1975 that protest activity significantly escalated. The turning point was on October 24, 1975, when leaders of the union at the La Tondeña distillery called workers to join the strike. Strikes were prohibited by law, so a number of priests and nuns,

along with people from the Tondo foreshore, arrived to try to stop police arrests and physical abuse. Mary John Mananzan (1995), in recounting her involvement, called it her “baptism of fire.” For a number of religious, it led to increased support and commitment. The La Tondeña event inspired a hundred more strikes in the ensuing period (Mananzan 1989, 421).

Mobilization is obviously the major means available to social movements to press their claims, but those participating believe in a greater mission, that they can “change people’s lives . . . while fighting for more general changes in society” (Melucci 1985, 797). Indeed, participation in collective action is not only politicizing, but potentially empowering and radicalizing (Tarrow 1994, 174). The strikes certainly politicized church people as they recognized that, by their presence, they could shelter workers from certain abuses. Most of them also appreciated that their task was far greater. Being at the strikes helped church people “get into the whole movement” (Mananzan 1995), thrusting them deeply into the broad struggles of diverse groups and engendering new understandings of identity.

Impermanent and ever changing, collective identity is created and recreated according to both internal and external influences. New definitions of self are produced with the integration of past and present. Networks play an important role and, once established, ensure a degree of continuity. Impressions of unity may be given, but great diversity underlies any collective identity. Every action brought increased numbers, whether at the level of support or total involvement to the cause, both of which are important to social movements.

Melucci (1984, 829; 1985, 800; 1989, 70; 1996, 115) believes that movements generally consist of small groups or networks that tend to remain submerged, appearing only for specific issues (see also Escobar 1992, 83). In fact, it is only in collective action that the movement (or the networks that constitute the movement) becomes visible (Melucci 1989, 71). Collective action is the most powerful vehicle in developing a collective identity. In turn, collective identity is “strengthened in the course of engaging in risky . . . activities” (Hunt and Benford 2004, 448), creates “consensus,” and brings together participants and sympathetic spectators (Klandermans 1992, 92). Church people discussed their experiences, convincing others to participate. “The more costly and dangerous the collective action, the stronger and more numerous the ties ha[ve] to be in order to support decisions to participate” (Diani 2004, 342). Encouraging those who

are less committed, large crowds and the accompanying pathos made change appear possible. Mananzan (1995) was just one of many who discovered profound meaning and personal identity in such exploits, saying, "You get a spiritual, religious experience in a strike."

In reality, church people, religious and lay alike, faced difficult conditions. They worked long hours for seemingly little reward, invariably faced hostility from their institutions or families, carried dangerous labels such as "subversive" or "Communist," risked their lives, and mourned colleagues who paid the ultimate price. How does one make sense of such a commitment? They held "intense feelings about their cause" (Brand 1990, 7), feelings that are "all part of a body acting collectively" (Melucci 1996, 71). For church people in the Philippines, there was the addition of a strong and explicit moral system. The 1960s and the 1970s was a time of "great days to be church" for Helen Graham, a religious sister. "In those days, it seemed possible that 'action on behalf of justice' (1971 Synod of Bishops) could really bring about genuine change—or at least move in that direction" (H. Graham, pers. comm.).

Indeed, Jasper (1998, 401) indicates that emotions are "tied to moral values." If such a system is violated, anger and outrage are often generated. Once activated, there is a power in shared emotion that assists in creating solidarity. "High-risk activism" (McAdam 1986) yielded no material benefits, demanded severe sacrifices, and brought with it repressive action from the Church as well as the State. But rather than being a deterrent, group cohesiveness and close affective ties of friendship and loyalty resulted. Many spoke of a sense of responsibility, believing that if they failed to act, they were not living their Christian faith with integrity. Engagement in the struggle, as stressed earlier, was an *ethical imperative* (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2004, 422).

Polletta and Jasper (2001) question the choice of strategies, tactics, and organizational forms of the struggle. Christians and Communists worked as one throughout the 1970s. In the underground, Church people came under the leadership of the CPP. But while most embraced different areas of revolutionary work, few committed themselves to CPP membership. Some of those who did join the underground on a full-time capacity, attracted vast media coverage despite being relatively few in number. There was certainly friendship and loyalty on an individual level, but from the interviews, it was clear that few desired joining the CPP. That may appear to be contradictory, but the main reason that church people articulated for linking with the

NDF was generally similar: "The support for NDF was a result of its being the only movement in the country which had a program that really responded to the agenda of the oppressed and exploited peoples of the country" (Florence 1995). There were no other available options and, for some time, dissimilarities in belief systems were forgotten as the struggle deepened. Differences within movements are often submerged in times of crisis (Hirsch 1990, 245) and a person may embrace the collective identity offered by a movement while feeling alienated from its major organizational carrier (Gamson 1992, 61; Diani 1992, 112). Melucci (1996, 74) declares that people form a close bond "in order to make sense of what they are doing." By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of church people had broken away from overt Communist control but maintained a close bond with other Christians in the struggle. Despite its links to the CPP, they also continued to identify with CNL as an organization.

By 1981, CNL as an organization had lost its specific Christian identity (Graham 1996), being judged by outsiders as a CPP tool. For those involved, Marxist-Christian dialogue was necessary, but many felt alienated by the CPP whose members, they believed, lacked respect for their religiosity. This driving force for church people was often scorned. They were told that religion itself was an oppressive force and if they, as religious activists, maintained their faith, they could never be true revolutionaries.

In many respects, CNL members had to prove to the CPP that they were worthy of being in the revolutionary struggle. To stress this, the current leader of CNL quoted a statement attributed to dela Torre (Patricio 1995): "How is it that Christians are looked upon as simply moderates, whereas Marxists are looked upon as radicals? Is there no possibility of being a Christian while at the same time being radical in one's politics?" To their Communist cadres, they were too religious; to other Christians they had lost their faith. "Actions and the choice of tactics send all sorts of signals; they tell an outsider as much about a group as its explicit arguments do" (Jasper 1997, 242). This proved to be an obstacle as the message outsiders received was that of armed church people, leading or at least engaging in, revolutionary struggle. One document, produced for the State in 1975 by the Ministry of Labor, reveals this clearly. Phrases such as church people "agitating for social reform," "joint actions by Maoist-dominated and Church-led organizations," and "political intervention by the Church" (Institute

of Labor and Manpower Studies 1975) suggested vague associations and unspecified actions.

Strategic choices and questions of identity are clearly linked. In analyzing social movements, such interrelations may create difficulty. The most visible face of radical action and the most alienating for many in the Philippines was the CPP. Looking at Latin America, Foweraker (1995, 84) found that political party activity is potentially divisive for social movements. Part of the problem lies in the lack of societal acceptance of Communism. Foweraker (1995) reveals that, in Chile, movements under the auspices of the Communist Party were successful while the Party emphasized grassroots organization and the education of popular leaders, but once Party activists “began to organize cultural centers and human rights groups as political fronts for their own project, grassroots support declined” (Foweraker 1995). Rutten (1996, 125) found a similar situation in Negros, that when activists recruited on behalf of the New People’s Army (NPA), they avoided any mention of the Communist Party.

For CNL, strategic choices brought unwelcome societal recognition. Opposition and extensive persecution were unleashed by the Church and the State, as early as the late 1960s, and continued unabated for two decades.⁶ This, coupled with a lack of autonomy in the broad movement, compelled many church people to reassess their role and place in the struggle. Melucci (1996, 50; emphasis mine) recognizes this possibility and suggests that what is needed is “a passionate capacity *to change form*, to redefine ourselves in the present, to render choices and decisions reversible.” There is no doubt that the relationship between Christians and Communists was crucial to the development of a collective identity, but as “boundaries” disappeared, it was severely tested.

RECAPTURING THEIR ESSENCE

By the early 1980s, a new and distinctive urgency prevailed among religious activists who wanted to remain both in the struggle and in the Church. Mananzan (1989, 429) recognized this experience as a “spiritual crisis.” Producing a theological response to the struggle, always perceived as essential, was now viewed as indispensable. A small group of theologians began to take the task more seriously. They studied the theology of liberation from Latin America and analyzed Church documents of previous decades but conceded that if any real progress was to be made, they needed to verbalize something of *their*

witness and experience (dela Torre 1998). Louie Hechanova (1998) summed up the prevailing situation this way: “It corresponds more to *struggle* toward liberation than liberation.” In 1982, he declared: “We should call our theology *the theology of struggle*.” Thus, the theology of struggle was born.

Despite being a misnomer of sorts—no systematic theology existed as such—the theology of struggle, as a name for their ongoing theological reflections, served an important function. Christians wanted autonomy—a collective identity—within the broad Leftist movement. A name, self-chosen, helps in creating that (Jasper 1997, 85; Jenson 1995). For those involved in the struggle, it was a political act, an exercise of power as they regrouped with a name that was considered neutral (Jenson 1995, 115). It informed both insiders and outsiders of the attempt to link theology and activism in a tangible way. It was different from CNL as it suggested independence, whatever its true status.

Attempts to distance themselves were timely, as dissension was not just between religious and secular factions in the revolutionary struggle. Initial rumblings of contention within the CPP itself began in the late 1970s. With major events invariably bringing fragilities to the surface, events from 1983 to 1986 were decisive.

The year 1983 was a watershed year in the Philippines, particularly for opposition forces. Returning from exile, the charismatic member of the Liberal Party, Benigno Aquino Jr., was murdered as he stepped off the aircraft in Manila. Three years later, following a massive display of what was dubbed “People Power” by the international media or by others as the “EDSA event” (after Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, where the event took place), his widow, Corazon Aquino, was sworn in as president of the Philippines. Corazon Aquino’s speeches spoke of miracles and God’s intervention; in the eyes of a vast portion of the population, she was close to sainthood.

Aquino’s ascendancy and the aura surrounding the EDSA event combined to blind people to the lack of social transformation. Within social movements, it is clear that when the conditions that give rise to a movement change, the social movement will tend to disappear (Frank and Fuentes 1987, 1503). In fact, even if people *believe* that a social movement’s demands have been met, it tends to lose its potency (Frank and Fuentes 1987, 1505).

For some, there was a perception that conditions had changed, that democracy had finally been restored, and that justice prevailed. In fact, unabated violence and relentless poverty endured but organizations

that were most active in the years prior to the change of government were depoliticized. Factionalism in the Left came to the fore and bitter debate ensued. With “respect and trust” described as “crucial factors in politics” (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2004, 419), difficulties were imminent and, by 1993, the Left eventually admitted a split.

As an integral component, Christians were affected despite earlier attempts to distance themselves. Reverberations were felt in every Leftist organization—both legal and underground. At its most simplistic formulation, the split in the CPP and NPA was between those who assumed a “reaffirmist” stance, supporting the CPP’s leader, Jose Maria Sison, who called for the Party to “reaffirm” its basic principles in line with Marxism/Leninism; and those who called themselves “rejectionists,” rejecting that call (Rocamora 1994, 108-38). The CNL, as part of the NDF, could not but be entangled in the fracas and it forced a thorough analysis of its role in the struggle. CNL’s close affiliation with the CPP was a necessity and, at times, an encumbrance.

CNL finally acknowledged that the alliance was becoming unmistakably oppressive and burdensome, lacking any real respect. At its 1990 National Congress, it recognized two pressing needs: to build itself up again “as an independent organization, conscious of its Christian roots” (Patricio 1995), and to give greater attention to work within the institutional churches (Christians for National Liberation 1994a, 5). In subsequent congresses, CNL described its position as one of “integrity,” not wishing to take sides with either faction. But by 1994, CNL was, in reality, polarized (Christians for National Liberation 1994a, 6; Christians for National Liberation 1994b, 1). By this time, division in all organizations associated with the struggle was making work increasingly difficult.

There is no doubt that social movements “easily fracture” due to the “range of outlooks among their adherents” (Falk 1987, 176). If collective identities are “nothing more or less than affective loyalties” (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2004, 419), permanent coalitions “are the exception rather than the rule . . . [while] ad hoc, short-lasting alliances are much more likely to occur” (Diani 1992, 110).

In the context of the theology of struggle, the post-Marcos era is also remembered as a time when significant and enduring written works were produced. This written component sent a message nationally and internationally that there was a movement in the Philippines linking ecumenical Christianity and revolutionary struggle in a unique manner.

Those involved always stressed the practical, rather than the academic nature of the struggle. However, as the written material provided a rationale for active resistance and promoted solidarity among Christians in the struggle, a brief note is essential. Ad hoc material had long been available for people at the grassroots and some of that was collected in a text released in 1988, called *Religion and Society: Towards a Theology of Struggle, Book 1* (Battung, Bautista, Lizares-Bodegon, and Guillermo 1988). The second book in this series, *Witness and Hope Amid Struggle: Towards a Theology and Spirituality of Struggle, Book 2* (Narciso-Apaun, Battung, and Bautista 1991), was the result of a 1990 “consultation” on the theology and spirituality of struggle sponsored by the Forum for Interdisciplinary Endeavors and Studies (FIDES) and the Ecumenical Bishops’ Forum (EBF), as well as the Christian Conference of Asia. Drawing on earlier material, the theology of struggle was succinctly described in this manner:

The theology of struggle is not about theology as such. Its primary concern is the Philippine struggle itself: how to participate in that struggle as Christians, how to make available in that struggle the resources of the Christian life and tradition, and how to make alive Christian spirituality in that struggle The theology of struggle is about immersion in the primary reality of Philippine society: the reality of millions and millions of people who suffer, who are oppressed, who are deprived, who are victims—but have not lost hope, who are not passive—but who struggle, who fight not only for their liberty but our liberty as well, and for the building of a more just, free and compassionate society. (Cariño 1991, 13)

Numerous other publications appeared after 1986, most of which were published by Claretian Publications, the Socio-Pastoral Institute, or associations of various organizations.⁷ A cursory list of titles—*How Long?; Revolution from the Heart; With Raging Hope; We Did Not Learn Human Rights from Books; Those Who Would Give Light Must Endure Burning; The Unfinished Revolution; Whatever May Happen to Me; Revolution and the Church of the Poor; Moving Heaven and Earth*, to name a few—reveals a significant feature of the theology of struggle and shows the emotive aspect of its literature.

PASSIONATE POLITICS

The twenty years leading up to Aquino’s assassination and those that followed were years of deep emotion. By the late 1980s, church people

were clearly exhausted, disillusioned, and hurt. Given that engagement in collective action in the Philippines led, for many, to ostracism from a community, imprisonment, torture, or death, discussion on the role of emotion is clearly warranted.

Both Melucci (1989, 82) and Jasper (1997, 15) speak of social movements as offering channels for “moral utopianism” (Melucci 1989, 82). They also recognize how movements come to be “seamlessly interwoven with [participants’] lives” (Jasper 1997, 83; see Melucci 1989, 71). Noting a crucial difference in research emanating from America and Europe compared with Latin America, Foweraker (1995, 4) concludes, “Social movement activity . . . is rarely for the faint-hearted, and often demands a special resilience which can be called heroic.” The theology of struggle, emerging under remarkably similar conditions as those movements studied by Foweraker (1995), certainly called for courageous and resolute commitment. The theology of struggle was not a detached or “weekend” interest.

Yet Polletta and Jasper (2001, 299) acknowledge: “We know little about the emotions that accompany and shape collective identity.” That said, we can only understand what might be described as “passionate politics” with the inclusion of the study of emotions (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). The success of the movement, the fourth phase of collective identity raised by Polletta and Jasper (2001), is therefore difficult to assess. The authors ask how social movements affect people, groups, and social structures (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 296), but measuring success within social movement theory is problematical at the best of times.

While the written component is the most visible legacy of the theology of struggle, the efforts, invariably underground, of empowerment and transformation are more difficult to examine. The best way to demonstrate these aspects is to allow those who formed part of the movement, the theology of struggle, to speak for themselves. The theology of struggle “was a clearly identifiable movement . . . that assisted people within communities by acting as a motivational force As a result, people [were] more involved in the life struggle” (Cabazares 1996). The theology of struggle’s “practical and non-clerical focus” helped “people who [were] practising and trying to evolve this theology—lay people . . . people at the base, in touch with people in their issues [and] struggles for life” (Aguilar 1996). Also engaged at the grassroots, Gaspar (1996) was one of many who spoke of the theology of struggle as “empowering the people as they directly confront the

given injustices on a day-to-day basis.” More important, the theology of struggle moved people from “passivity” to “protesting” and “criticizing,” while also “helping people to work together in a strong, alive, popular movement” (Hechanova 1998; dela Torre 1996; Gaspar 1996). Also significant were the various movements it spawned around the Philippines that can be “traced back . . . to radical church initiatives in the 1970s (Cacayan 1996; Gaspar 1996). For example, transformative BCCs were “the wellspring of the theology of struggle” (Cacayan 1996). Interestingly, the theology of struggle also affected some academic settings with faculties such as the Loyola School of Theology “paying homage to liberation” while the bishops “[came] out with good statements on land, elections, PCP II to a degree. The Federation of Asian Bishops also produced forward-thinking documents as a result of the theology of struggle” (Abesamis 1996).

The most difficult aspect to evaluate is actual change and who brought it about. Analysis of the 1986 EDSA event reveals this quandary. Descriptions in the proceeding years perceived it in diverse ways depending upon affiliation and previous experiences. Boudreau (2004, 176) correctly indicates that many descriptions neglected the role of the “organized political struggle.” While quantitative data may be lacking, the success of the movement can be stated thus: “Many of the ideas from the theology of struggle were co-opted . . . resulting in new initiatives within religious orders, communities, and the institutional Church. Many things that are happening now can be traced back to influences” (dela Torre 1998). These linkages are paramount and impossible to evaluate as separate entities. Moraleda (1998) adds a stark reality: “The process is slow and frustrating.” Indeed, the “political impact of social movements is understood to be gradual and cumulative” (Foweraker 1995, 112).

Clearly, what began as individuals seeking alternative experiences of “being church” eventually developed into a collective identity. A gradual transition for most, individuals underwent personal transformation, forged new connections, and sought increased engagement in the struggle. The establishment of CNL in 1972 and the strategic utilization of networks and affiliations brought others into the struggle. Indicating that, as a group, power and influence were achieved (see Meyer and Tarrow 1998, 1630; Polletta and Jasper 2001, 297), the Church and State mobilized against them and church people were persecuted and harassed. Throughout all this, Christians did much to legitimize the struggle for people at the grassroots even

though, in retrospect, some lament a failure to exert greater religious influence. Over time, sensing a loss of identity, Christians regrouped as a community of people involved in the struggle as a result of their faith commitment. In 1982, the theology of struggle was born, giving a name to a movement of progressive church people that had, in reality, prevailed in the Philippines for some time.

Following the demise of Marcos in 1986, along with the subsequent split in the Leftist movement, the nature of work undertaken in the name of the theology of struggle changed. More reflective and less active, thoughts of “revolutionary” change were abandoned, but work for social justice continues through nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and grassroots involvement. A small collective identity of progressive church people, albeit an aging one, is still evident today in the Philippines. Noting that “the core collective identity continues to shape an individual’s sense of self” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 296) and that “the effects of protest cycles go well beyond a movement’s visible actions” (Tarrow 1994, 8), this quiet conscientization that endures may one day be judged as significant.

Given that collective action and public recognition are important to a movement’s survival (Munck 1990), it is doubtful whether the theology of struggle could still be termed a social movement, as initially posited by the study. At the end of 2003, a small group met to reminisce about the history and the outcomes of their collective struggle. Older and less active, they were among the most dynamic church people engaged in revolutionary struggle from the outset. As discussion rapidly turned to the present-day situation, one religious sister lamented, “We risked our lives for *this*?” By this, she meant the unchanged condition of the current leadership, the enduring poverty and oppression, and something not witnessed in the years from 1972 to 1986: the apathy of the general population.

CONCLUSION

The convergence of Christians and Communists into a social movement striving for transformation in the Philippines demonstrated that these apparently antithetical forces could not only learn from each other, but that they could achieve much through solidarity and commitment. Through the interrelationship, church people learned new ways of operating, embraced fresh tools of analysis, and engaged with unfamiliar groups, all necessary for their development. On the other hand, church

people opened networks that may otherwise not have become available to the struggle, sheltered the movement from the worst excesses of martial law, and projected an alternative social order. Often regarded simply as “Leftists,” they were initially known as CNL, an organization that remains perhaps the only Christian movement globally ever to *overtly* join with Communist forces. However, in neglecting to appreciate the depth of Philippine religiosity, members of the CPP failed to value church peoples’ driving force—their faith. Later renaming themselves the “theology of struggle,” church people extended their work to the production of written material that outlined their vision, making their fight for social justice known internationally. This fight for social justice was particularly prevalent from 1972 to 1986, and encompassed dedicated and courageous church people who left their mark on social, political, and religious life in the Philippines. ❀

NOTES

1. The 1960s is renowned for the emergence of increasing collective actions on a global scale. Taking different forms and stressing diverse interests, students, religious, minority groups, workers, nationalists, and others called for social, political, religious and/or economic transformation. Believing in organized protest and their own power, people were empowered to act in solidarity. This well-known period reached its peak in 1968.
2. Until the late 1980s, dela Torre is published as de la Torre. Since then, he has used dela Torre, which is his preferred spelling.
3. One example highlights how these repressive actions took place. In 1982, Roberto Benedicto, one of the richest people in the world, took over Hacienda Consuelo on Negros Island. Twelve families lived on site and labored long hours for little reward. For years, they endured the hardship, but during the 1970s and 1980s, sugar workers throughout Negros were being informed of their rights through the endeavors of the National Federation of Sugar Workers. They were supposed to receive a set wage, rice allowance, and various supplies, but few landlords honored the agreement established by the government. By the time Benedicto arrived, allowances had not been paid. In any case, they were receiving only half the minimum wage and that dropped again with his arrival. Unable to survive on the meagre wage, they went on strike. Benedicto responded by locking out his workers and hiring *sacadas*, itinerant workers from neighboring districts. Rather than capitulate, the families on the hacienda chose to resist and as a group, they resolved to fight the injustices. Management retaliated by demanding that the families leave the hacienda since they were not working. In an effort to dislodge the families, Benedicto ordered his private army to demolish the houses. They brought in bulldozers and flattened over half of them when the children lay down in front of the massive machines, halting their progress. Just after this incident, Marcos was deposed and Benedicto fled to Hawaii. That did not change the situation as his private army continued to repress any efforts for reform. In addition, one of their leaders, Elma, was twice imprisoned.

4. The entire issue of control of mass media in the Philippines during Martial Law is an interesting study in itself (see for example, Youngblood 1990, 47-51; Dresang 1985; Durkheim and Weber 1978; and others who painstakingly address the government control of mass media). Religious activists however, ensured that their struggle was represented. Defying censorship laws, numerous Church-based publications were produced during the Martial Law years. They were constantly targeted by the State. As a result, a number of Church publications were closed after the mid-1970s. Among those targeted were AMRSP's the *Signs of the Times*; a Jesuit publication, the *Communicator*; and Bishop Claver's *Ang Bandilyo*, a newsletter of the Prelature of Malaybalay in Mindanao. Far from being deterred, AMRSP began publishing again soon after, simply changing the name of its periodical to *Ichthys*. Bishop Claver replaced *Ang Bandilyo* with a series of pastoral letters. Mimeographed articles from numerous sources constantly appeared, untraceable and unstoppable due to lack of knowledge of authors or sources. Gestetner machines housed in unexpected and unidentified places worked overtime.
5. These last two issues—financial aid and unwitting engagement by some church people—are complex matters as much work at the grassroots was interrelated. Rutten (1996), analyzing the revolutionary movement in Negros from the late 1970s, noted close linkages between the CPP-NPA and the social networks of the Church. In fact, she discovered that workers viewed their organization by church people, the union, and the military arm of the Communist Party, the New People's Army (NPA), as interrelated. To them, the messages were broadly similar and the social networks clearly overlapped. As a result, if money were to reach where it was most needed, there was no choice but to send it into regions where CPP activity was present. In addition, when religious took up work placements in Church-based institutions, many did so without knowing that they were established and subsequently run by the broad Leftist movement.
6. Religious activists faced persecution and harassment on two fronts—from their own Churches, and from the State. Harassment by the Church hierarchy took many forms: isolation of leaders, especially of priests; “black propaganda” involving the labeling of organizations, people and, sometimes, entire villages; sabotage of programs or organizations, either through withholding funds, establishing opposition groups, or moving key personnel; silencing the religious by placing them in “exile” or threatening lack of promotion or dismissal; and banning the use of certain liturgical celebrations. The State also applied techniques like black propaganda and general harassment, but was also responsible for many arrests, tortures, disappearances, and deaths. It mattered little what position was occupied as individuals and organizations, leaders and supporters, were targeted. Repressive action began in the 1960s and, while never subsiding, peaked during the mid-1970s and again in the early 1980s. Documentation from human rights sources indicates that it continues to this day (see Task Force for Detainees in the Philippines documentation). The situation in the 1970s was meticulously chronicled for an AMRSP publication by two authors who called themselves Emily Durkheim and Felix Weber (1978). They then rewrote the article for an academic journal, adopting the names of two saints, Goretti and Sale (1979). Another publication painstakingly documented responses by individual bishops and was published under the name of Casalmo (1980). A Jesuit priest, who used the name McCloskey for “contentious” articles, systemically summarized the situation concerning

harassment of AMRSP and the various divisions within the Church (1977). Roekaerts also delved into division in the Church (1977). Yu and Bolasco (1981) scrupulously detailed harassment of the progressive Church sector at the hands of the State and their hierarchy. There were also numerous reports and publications of the continuing harassment and oppression that continued through the 1980s (see Harris 2003, 109-16, for full details).

7. Once again, the list is too extensive to include here (see Harris 2003, 186-90).

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