MUDDY FOOTPRINTS IN THE IVORY TOWER: Missiological Reflections on Language and Localized Theology

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Introduction

I was raised on a farm and would regularly come into the house with shoes muddied from the garden, field, stream, and swamp. I would have to immediately change to my indoor shoes. In the Philippines, it is common to require people to leave their shoes at the door and switch to indoor slippers. It is fairly universal for people to seek to ensure that dirt and mud of the outside stays outside. This is part of why the imagery of an ivory tower with muddy footprints grabs attention. The tower is a symbol of power, and ivory suggests both opulence and purity. Muddy footprints seem wrong—a desecration. However, this is not the case if the gates to the tower are open and the guards are welcoming all in.

Theology has often been seen as an exercise of trained specialists, carried out in hallowed halls in language and jargon far removed from the common people. But what if those barriers were removed? Would this be of benefit to the broader church? Would this be good for theological academia as well?

Background

On October 10, 2022, a theological gathering was held at Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary entitled "Dalamhati at Luwalhati," with Federico Villanueva as the lead presenter. The primary topic was the important role of lament in the Christian life, and this has served as the theme for the journal in which this article is contained.[1] Two other concerns, however, were brought up by the presenter. The first was the need for Filipinos theologizing within their local context. The second issue, not unrelated, was that Filipinos needed to do theological work in their heart language(s). Anecdotally, I can say that there seems to be a lack of Filipino theological writing and an even greater lack of theological works in local languages—at least in proportion to the population of Christians in the country. Nearly 90% of the population would describe themselves as Christian of some form or another. During the "Question and Answer" time at the aforementioned gathering, I asked a question of the speaker to the effect of,

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[1]The presentation by Dr. Villanueva is the first chapter of this book, with the formal responses to the paper following.

"I do believe the use of local languages benefits developing a strong localized theology. Additionally, local theology is strengthened through dialogue with the global church--- challenging and being challenged by other theological perspectives. But having local theology in a local language hinders this dialogue. How does one find a balance that strengthens local theology?"[2]

The presenter responded, as I remember it, that he agreed that there was a need for balance. However, with things so unbalanced in the Philippine context, having so little local theology in local languages, promoting local language in Filipino theology is part of the process to bring balance.

I don't believe I could come up with a better answer. That being said, upon further reflection, I would like to at least explore the question through the lens of theology of missions. Key issues of concern in Christian missions include culture, communication, and contextualization. All of these have bearing on localization of theology. I must note that some may feel it ironic that a foreigner is writing in English about the importance of Filipinos developing localized theology in local languages. I hope the ideas hold merit independent of the source.

The Process of Localization

I will use a very simple framework that is tied to, curiously enough, the localization of video games. The steps are:

- Internationalization
- Translation
- Cultural Adaptation
- Quality Control[3]

While shown as a linear process, it is more accurate to show it as iterative with all sorts of feedback loops. However, ultimately, the process is to take a game that is embedded naturally in Culture A, and move it gradually through these steps to where it is at home in Culture B.

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[2]While most Filipino theological works have traditionally been by Roman Catholic theologians (most famously, Jose de Mesa), that is not to say that there are no Evangelical theologians in the Philippines who produce theological works informed by the Filipino context. Beyond some of the writers in this book, there are Evangelical theologians who specifically promote contextualized and applied theology, such as Rodrigo Tano, Timoteo Gener, and Melba Padilla Maggay.

[3]There are many different descriptions of the process. This is a simple one guided, in part, by an article: Daria Andronova, "Video Game Localization: Make Your Game Shine Globally," August 19, 2022, online at https://www.smartcat.com/blog/game-localization/. The process shown in this article had six steps rather than four. However, the two additional steps, "Marketing" and "Setting up the localization workflow," I felt did not need to be emphasized here.

Imagine a game that is made by Chinese developers for a Chinese audience. Now imagine the company that owns the rights to the video game seeks to make it marketable for a different context such as the Philippines. The first step is **Internationalization**. This is the process of identifying what are the core elements of a video game, such as gameplay, that must not be damaged in the localization process. Some internationalization should occur from the very beginning of development. For example, the programming should be structured so that text and audio can be easily swapped out when configuring for a new language. Some internationalization will happen later as it becomes clear what can change and what cannot. If there is eating and drinking in the game, is it important to make the menu changeable for different cultures or not? In the life of the church a similar thing comes up with the Lord's Supper, as one example. Should the elements of the Lord's Supper be internationalized and then localized or should they be kept the same everywhere? Does it matter?

Translation is the most intuitive of these steps. Both the text printed on the screens and the audio files need to be translated so that the meaning is maintained. The goal is not a wooden literalism, but to carry the meaning and feel of the original. The translated text must be formatted to fit in the allotted space, and the audio files must be redone with a similar tone and emotive quality that generally fits the visuals. There are still questions. Does music need to be redone with translated lyrics? Or is it acceptable to subtitle the lyrics or even for the music to stay unchanged and untranslated? Does every road sign, grave marker, storefront name need to be translated? Is there a risk of overdoing translation to the point where it no longer "feels" like the original game?

Cultural Adaptation seeks to ensure that the game makes sense to an audience in the new culture. This is subtle. Humor and word play get lost in normal translation. Many visual cues may be lost as well. Conversations should not only be understandable—they should feel natural. Sometimes, conflicts or motivations that make sense in one culture may be confusing in another. Will these need to be exposited or left unexplained? Like in translation, there is a risk not only of underdoing this,[4] but overdoing it as well.[5] In our example, if the game is supposed to take place in a mythical world that is reminiscent of some of the kingdoms of Central Asia centuries

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[4]As an example, a few years ago, a Filipino movie came out named "Sukob." It was a horror movie whose plot was driven by the local belief that it is bad luck, even dangerous, if two siblings marry during the same year. The movie did explain this cultural belief for those who did not know it. In this sense, the movie was already, to some extent, internationalized. If the original form of the movie did not explain this, then translating would not be enough. Perhaps captioning on a black screen at the beginning of the film would be needed. Otherwise, translation of the dialogue would simply not be enough to make sense. *Sukob*, directed by Chito S. Roño, featuring Kris Aquino and Claudine Barretto (Star Cinema, 2006).

[5]One of the most well-known misfires in this was in the localization of the television show "Pokemon." The American release of the show was handled by "4 Kids Entertainment." In one episode, Brock is holding sushi in his hand, and is talking about how much he likes "rice balls." Brock's lines were changed to him explaining how much he likes jelly doughnuts. Many found this funny since it did not line up with the visuals, and most American viewers would have no problem with Brock liking sushi. Satoshi Tajiri, Pokemon, Nintendo Creatures Game Freak,1996, The official Pokémon Website (portal-pokemon. com).

ago, adapting it to the Philippine setting should not involve moving the world of the game to tribes in pre-Magellanic Philippines. A successful cultural adaptation doesn't mean moving everything of the game into a new culture, but rather making it feel like the game was made by local designers for local users, rather than by foreign designers for foreign users.

Quality Control involves reviews and testing. The success of the effort to localize is in its game-play by players in the new setting and, eventually, sales figures. Of course, the process is continuous as new problems will be identified based on feedback from testers and actual end users. Ultimately, no matter how good the process may appear, if the potential users in the new market do not like playing the game, the process has failed.

Localization of Theology in the Early Church

Consider bringing the example of localization for video games to the early decades of the church. Jesus of Nazareth established the church completely embedded in Judean culture—Judean in membership, language, and style. While I have heard the argument made that Jesus considered himself to be a Jewish prophet called to reform Judaism and never saw himself as having any cross-cultural or international purpose, it seems clear that Jesus was **internationalizing** the movement from the start. He saw himself as inaugurating the Kingdom of God—a movement not tied to nations or national boundaries, as a king who is not in competition with civil rulers (John 18:35-36). The worship of God would have no geographical center (John 4:19-24). Jesus trained his disciples to think in a new way about non-Jews—Roman soldiers, Canaanites, Samaritans, among others—far different from the views of typical Jewish adherents. He intentionally went into non-Jewish areas—Samaria, Phoenicia, Decapolis—and trained his disciples to minister to non-Jews. He taught his followers to focus on the core of the law (the Great Commandment) above the rabbinical innovations that had become part of the local religious culture. He probably preached in Aramaic, the language used by people well beyond the borders of Judea and Galilee. The call of Jesus shortly before his ascension to go into all the world is hardly a surprise ending. His message was already prepared to be adapted to and adopted by the world.

Translation of the message started from the very beginning of the church. The Pentecost event more than simply demonstrated the movement of the Holy Spirit, and the inauguration of the church. The sign occurred in Jerusalem on a day when the relatively monocultural city would be the most diverse. The sign itself was a gift of spontaneous translation—crossing the linguistic barriers of the crowd. As Patrick Johnstone stated, "*What was the Holy Spirit wanting to say? He was showing that ethnicity and language are both God-created and vital to God's global plan. This Pentecost event was a challenge to the Church: use of local heart languages to*

communicate the Gospel!"[6] At the same time trade or international languages were also valued in the early church. The four Gospels of the life of Jesus were all written in Greek, the most international language of the lands in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.[7] The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was the Bible of the 1st century church. Even more, the form of Greek used by the early church was more in line with the conversation of the people than that of the scholars.

Cultural Adaptation was a concern early on. In fact, the first major controversy was between two cultures in the Church of Jerusalem—the Greek-speaking and the Hebrew-speaking church members (Acts 6). Soon the church spread into Samaria, and into more diverse regions. This led to the first big theological issue of the church. Do those who are culturally Greek need to become culturally Jewish to be part of the church. The Jerusalem council (Acts 15) was established to address this vital concern. However, the answer was already made clear in the patterns established by Jesus, and works of the Holy Spirit. Jesus focused on principles that were not limited to culture and the Holy Spirit made it clear that the message of God and His favor was bound neither by language nor lineage.

Quality Control is seen in the church lived out. By the second century the church was not seen as linked to a single culture. Aristides described Christians as a separate people group—one that does not exist based on region, ethnicity, or culture. However, this people group comes from the other people groups listed.[8] The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus[9] describes Christians as living embedded in diverse cultures and in many ways indistinguishable from their neighbors. In other ways, however, they were wholly unique. This sort of counter-cultural stance has been a challenge over the centuries with Christian groups regularly trying to link Christianity to a specific culture or language.

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[6]Patrick Johnstone, "Affinity Blocs and People Clusters: An Approach Toward Strategic Insight and Mission Partnership" Mission Frontiers, 29:2 (Mar-Apr 2007), 8.

[7]Eusebius of Antioch stated that Matthew wrote a Gospel in Hebrew (Church History, 3:39). This was supported by Irenaeus and Origen. Since there is definitely a Jewish flavor to the gospel, it seems reasonable that it would be written in the Hebrew language. In evidence against this, however, the similarity in wording of so many passages in Greek with the Gospels of Mark and Luke, it is pretty clear the work was initially in Greek. Of course, it is possible that there is a completely lost Gospel by Matthew. Alternatively, one or more of the synoptics may be based, loosely or otherwise, from the Hebrew language gospel.

[8]*Apology of Aristides.* Apparently written in the early 2nd century. The work describes several peoples—Barbarians, Jews, Egyptians, Greeks, and Christians. The work was addressed to a Roman emperor, perhaps Hadrian, so presumably Aristides considered Romans to be a sixth group, but not want to speak negatively about them. "The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher: Translated from the Syriac," *The Apology of Aristides: Texts and Studies 1 (1891); 35-51.* Translation from Syriac, transcribed by Roger Pearse, 2004 https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/aristides_05_trans.htm.

[9]Rick Brannan, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2011). Read Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus Chapter 5.

Language and the Philippine Context

The Philippines is a land of many languages. There are over 100 languages in the Philippines. Most of them are from the Malayo-Polynesian language family. However, some regions do have Spanish creoles ("Chabacano"). There are also some languages that are tied to ethnicity rather than region, such as some Chinese languages that are spoken within sub-cultures. [10] English is used throughout the Philippines, but not commonly as a language of the home. More commonly, it is the language of education and certain professions.

The EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale)[11] was established to understand the relationship between language and culture change. In the Philippines there are two national languages—English and Pilipino. On the EGIDS, English is Level 0. That is, it is considered an International language—one of only a few languages that are used regularly for international discourse. Pilipino is Level 1, as a national language. Both are used for official use and for communication across regions. Pilipino is based heavily on Tagalog, such that the names are sometimes used interchangeably. Tagalog is one of several major regional languages. Other languages like Ilocano, Bicolano, and Cebuano are Provincial (Level 2) or Whole Community (Level 3). Many other languages vary in usage, including some that are primarily spoken only by elders (Level 8). When a language nears Level 8 or beyond, it is reaching a point where it is questionable whether the language has use except for linguists, anthropologists, and historians.

An obvious question is "Why would the church care about strengthening a local language? Isn't the multiplicity of languages an impediment to overcome, not a gift to utilize?" Perhaps if language was only a tool to carry information from one person to another, that would be true; but that is not the case. Roman Jakobson describes six functions for language. Transfer of information, the referential function, is important, but only one of the functions. One of these is "emotive" for expressing emotion, and the language of spirituality is very much tied to the language of emotion. The language of one's childhood and home tends be most effective in expressing emotions. Another role is "phatic,' relating to belongingness. Language is used to bring people together and help establish the "we" versus "they."[12] Noam Chomsky speaks of language as

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[10]Exact numbers are difficult since the line between language and dialect is not always clear-cut. Years ago Ethnologue had around 120 languages identified in the Philippines. Now the number is shown in the vicinity of 170. See David M. Eberhard, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig. "Republic of the Philippines," *Ethnologues: Languages of the World: Twenty Sixth edition* (Dallas, TX: SIL Online), 2023, https://www.ethnologue.com/country/PH.

[11]EGIDS was developed for Ethnologue. For a quick review, see Ethnos Project, "Ethnologue Expanded Graded Intrgenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), accessed date June 2023, https://www.ethnosproject.org/expanded-graded-intergener ational-disruption-scale/. Additionally, one can refer to Robert H. Munson, *Cultural Anthropology and Christian Missions: Ministering to a Multicultural World*, 2023.

[12]Roman Jakobson spoke of six functions of language—referential, emotive, phatic, conative, poetic, and metalingual. Elmar Holenstein, *Roman Jakobson's Approach to Language: Phenomenological*

creating social space.[13] Language, dialect, jargon, and accent speak to one's community and one's place in it.

On a functional level, a language might allow effective communication of facts, without much in terms of emotion or social belongingness. Such a language may function as a trade language or a pidgin—one not deeply embedded in the social fabric of a community but useful for communicating facts with outsiders. This is different from "heart languages," the language of the household. Heart language has emotive strength and deeply rich interconnections inside the person and the community. The heart language is the language of emotions and spirituality. It establishes and maintains social bonds within the group.[14]

Christian theological writing has historically been done mostly in international or trade languages (such as Greek, Latin, German, or English). This is in line with a common trait worldwide where the language of the scholar is different from the language of the people. The language that connects more theologians together becomes the language of choice. It becomes the language of academia, the language of education, and the language of publishing and formal discourse. Such a language develops jargon, or technical language, to deal with academic topics. This jargon helps to narrowly define concepts that are not the concern of the typical local church or community. In fact, throughout the history of the church this cycle has perpetuated a language's use for theology and liturgy long after it had fallen out of favor (or even out of use) in common society. Latin, for example, was used long after the language ceased to be used in the home.[15] Is this a good thing or bad? If theological discussion is done in a language that is available to the seminarian alone, this takes theology away from the masses—and that can be a loss for the church. On the other hand, theology that is only comprehensible on one side of a river or a national border (because it utilizes a regional language) also has some inherent limitations.

Structuralism (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976). Or consider Ruth Heckman, "Roman Jakobson's Six Functions of Language." Prezi, Jan 15, 2013, https://prezi.com/aejmchywvlzn/roman-jakobsons-six-functions-of-language.

[13]Wiktor Osiatynski, "Language and Culture" in *Contrasts: Soviet and American Thinkers Discuss the Future* (New York: MacMillan, 1984), 95-101, https://chomsky.info/1984____/.

[14]In support of the importance of heart language—a friend of my wife and I was born and raised in Japan but had lived in the United States for decades. Many times she had heard the gospel message. She would say that she understands it (pointing to her head) but not here (placing her hand over her heart). One day, she was introduced to another friend of ours who was also born in Japan, had lived in the US for many years, and was a devout Christian. Minutes after meeting, our friend became a follower of Christ. She needed the message shared in her heart language.

[15]Christianity is not alone in this. Hebrew was used for theological work in Rabbinical Judaism long after it ceased to be a language of the people. In Islam, with a few exceptions, the language of theological discourse is Arabic, even in areas where it has ceased to be, or never was, the language of the people.

Target and Audience of Theology

The language chosen for theology must consider at least two things—who is the target, and who is the audience? In the Bible, both target and audience were seen as important. In Acts 2, the gift of tongues (languages) had a target, the diverse language speakers in Jerusalem at Pentecost. However, this sign was done before a larger audience as well. The listening public thought that many of the Christians were speaking incoherently like drunkards. That is why Peter ended up speaking to this secondary audience in a language they were comfortable with (perhaps Aramaic) and explained what was going on. A similar thing comes up in the early church where Paul said that the gift of tongues should not be done without an interpreter. The gift was not simply done for the benefit of the primary target—the one who understood that language—but also for the greater audience. Ignoring one of the two audiences was not acceptable.[16]

Who is the target of theological works? Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson list five types of theology based on three groups of people in the church. The types are Folk, Lay, Ministerial, Professional, and Academic Theologies.[17] Folk and Lay theologies are for the same group, except that folk theology is the inadequate theology of unreflective laity, while lay theology is that of the theologically reflective. In like manner, Grenz and Olson see professional and academic theologies aimed at the same group— professional theologians. However, professional theology addresses matters that are relevant to the church, while academic theology does not. Therefore, one can see three target audiences—**laity, ministers,** and **professionals**—and two benchmarks for good theology: reflection and relevance. According to Judith Thompson, theological reflection is "*The habitual, conscious, methodical, and purposeful correlation of some of the insights and resources of the theological tradition with contemporary situation and practice, resulting in a continuous process of critical awareness, transformation, and action.*"[18] Failure to do this is a failure to be truly theological. For relevance, theology is supposed to bridge divine revelation and human need, especially the needs of the church. If theology is too abstract, or fails to inform regarding God's revelation, it lacks relevance and becomes more of a "theistic philosophy" or idle speculation than theology. Such a theology speaks neither to the needs of the body of Christ, nor broader society.

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[16]There is considerable controversy today as to whether the gift of tongues (glossalalia) was of spontaneous translation or of non-linguistic ecstatic speech, as practiced today by many Christians. Obviously, this goes well beyond this paper, only noting that the text of the narrative, and its setting (particularly in Acts 2), appears to suggest spontaneous untrained translation. In like manner, the gift of interpretation would be spontaneous untrained translation. If this is mistaken, then I am not sure what if anything, spontaneous ecstatic speech would tell us regarding theology and language. Still from Genesis 11 until Revelation 7, it is clear that diversity of language is very much within God's will.

[17]Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology: An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996). ch. 2.

[18]Judith Thompson, Theological Reflection (London: SCM Press, 2008), 28.

This leaves three "good" theologies based on their primary target: **Lay Theology** (for laypeople), **Ministerial Theology** (for church and ministry leaders), and **Professional Theology** (professional theologians and educators). These, however, are overlapping groups. In fact, Grenz and Olson simplified targets further to theology for Lay Theologians and Professional Theologians. However, it seems reasonable to think that ministers (pastors, missionaries, and so forth) not only should have qualities of both groups, but should serve as a social bridge between those two groups. I would like to propose a simplified structure of two basic theologies as shown in Figure 1. Additionally, drawing from the conversation earlier, if Lay Theology targets laity, its potential audience is much broader—bridging geography and different roles in the church. The same can be said for Ministerial and Professional Theologies. The audience is bigger than the target. How does one ensure that theology reaches beyond one target in terms of geographic location or group in the church?

Local theologies are tied to local churches—members and ministers. Professional theologies can be thought of as intercultural theologies, as they are for professionals (theologians and theological educators) as well as ministers in multiple contexts. Intercultural does not mean supracultural (having cultural elements removed). Indeed, all theology is contextual, but some theology is developed to be presented to a diverse audience. Professional theologians interact within their profession across cultures sharing international language(s) and jargon. Church leaders, missionaries, pastoral counselors, and other 'hands-on' ministers serve as a bridge as they have a role both locally and cross-culturally. This is part of the reason for showing an overlap in Figure 1. Both forms of theology should be theologically reflective and ministerially relevant.

Figure 1
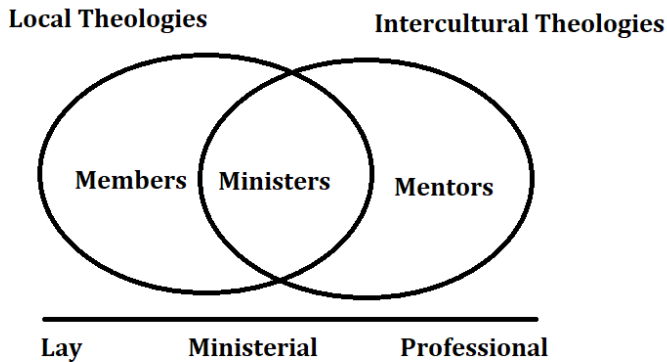
What languages are the best for these two types of theology? Local theologies ideally are in the languages of the people. Intercultural theologies ideally should be in a language (or at least translated into a language) that allows it access to those of other cultures. As noted previously, in addition to the target audience there is also a

broader audience. Jesus preached primarily to the "common people" but made no effort to wall himself off from those he was not specifically targeting. In fact, the challenges from the religious leaders became part of the learning process for his disciples such that many of these conversations made it into the gospel record. On at least one occasion, Jesus spoke separately and privately with a religious leader (John 3) who had questions based on the words of Jesus to the people. Paul, when speaking to the common people of Athens in the public market was overheard by philosophers who gave him an opportunity to talk about their concerns (Acts 17). Both Jesus and Paul had to be ready to speak not only to the laity (their primary targets), but also to professionals (who were potentially always part of the audience, whether intended or not).

Today, knowing who is one's target as well as (potential) audience is more important than ever. As an example, there is a video online of a somewhat famous evangelical missionary who was speaking to an American audience in the late 1970s or early 1980s. He served as a missionary to a (then) recently reached tribal group in Southeast Asia.[19] The missionary was a gifted storyteller and knew what his targeted group of listeners would appreciate. However, four decades later, his talk has not aged well. At best, it sounds very ethnocentric. At worst, it could be interpreted as racist and insulting. Today, the video is available online worldwide, and members of that tribe now have access to the Internet. It is highly likely that members of this tribe have seen the video, and would thus be well aware of his views regarding their cleanliness and moral character. I assume that the missionary never thought of the presentation ever going beyond the target listeners to whom he spoke. He, perhaps, would have changed his presentation if he knew of his unintended audience.[20]

The example above points out the challenge of the unintended audience. However, robust theology does not come from "preaching to the choir," and nuanced reflective thought does not come from sharing thoughts in an "echo chamber" chatroom. Thoughts that go unchallenged rarely are well-developed. This suggests that not only is the unintended audience valuable, but that no potential audience should be completely ignored. One's words should be ready for scrutiny from many audiences.[21]

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[19]For those who want to view the video and decide for yourselves, watch Otto Koning, "The Pineapple Story," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nt23gnwjdsU.

[20]The story linked to the video, "The Pineapple Story" is built on the principle that the locals were thieves, and could only be stopped from doing this if they could be convinced that the pineapples were actually God's rather than the missionary.'s However, the argument could be made that according to the tribe's view of property, what is grown in the village is the property of the village, so the missionary was the thief, not the villagers. The argument could be made either way and would have made a worthwhile theological discussion.

[21]Almost too numerous to name, have been pastors who have put outrageous statements to their congregations or their online audiences, only to be shocked that their words were heard by a broader audience who took offense. Some preachers have apologized, while others have "doubled-down" saying that they were "just telling the truth." However, commonly the issue wasn't about truth but perception. What they said may have been ill-informed, lacking nuance, or open to misinterpretation. These deserve a heart-felt apology from the preacher. A reminder for preachers today is the example of Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19). His intended audience, after speaking to Hellenistic Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue,

If this is true, that the unintended (or at least the non-primary) audience is valuable to act as "iron sharpening iron" to improve one's presentation and theology, what language is best? The best language is **still** the language preferred by the target audience, but language of the unintended audience cannot be ignored. Hesselgrave speaks of cultural distance as distorting communication between two people or two cultures. He describes seven dimensions that come together into causing cultural distance. One of those is linguistic distance. Others involve other aspects of culture including: Worldview, cognitive processes, behavioral patterns, social structures, media influence, and motivational resources.[22] While language is only one of these dimensions, it is the one that is most easily identified, and so most easily addressed.

Local theologies should use local languages, while intercultural (international) theological discourse should use international, or perhaps national languages. If, however, the other members of a non-primary audience are valued, as they should be, there needs to be a way that the theological spheres can speak to each other. One thing needed is translation between the languages. Translation is the linguistic bridge. Another, suggested by Figure 1, is that ministers (pastors, missionaries, etc.) should be that human bridge.[23] See Figure 2. They need to be familiar with and active with both theological spheres, and active in keeping discourse going between local and intercultural theological work.

Good Versus Bad Theological Localization

When does good localization of theology become bad? Stephen Bevans compiled a list of several tentative tests for a local theology.[24] These are benchmarks to be evaluated as part of quality control. Two benchmarks have already been addressed. A local theology should be **theologically reflective**. One way reflection is demonstrated is that it opens itself up to critique from outside. Another is that it is **culturally relevant**. It does not exist as an abstract idea but is put to use in the local context.

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was typical Gentiles in the public market. However, he had the unintended audience of those involved in the business of the Artemis cult, as well as government officials. When brought to be charged and perhaps killed, the town clerk stepped in and noted that Paul, despite calling people to follow Jesus the Christ, never disparaged or blasphemed the local gods (including Artemis). Paul's words were chosen with wisdom.

[22]David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally.* (Grad Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 163-168.

[23]Barry Phillips, a missionary serving in Aurora Province, Philippines, has noted having to guide short-term lay missionaries to avoid using illustrations that are not adapted to the Aurora context, like owning and driving cars, using air conditioning, going to the movie theater. Recommended reading: Barry D. Phillips, *I Planted the Seed (and Wood Squashed It)* (Savannah, GA: GlobalWarmth, 2011).

[24]Stephen B. Bevans. *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), 53-58.

Figure 2

Ministerial Bridge

Local Communities	(Pastors, Missionaries, Counselors, etc.)	Theological Academia
(Laity)		(Theologians, Educators)

Bevans suggests that a local community of faith has certain relationships with a good localized theology. First, he suggests that the local theology should utilize simple language and is understood by the local community. This alone almost requires the local theology to be in the heart language of the people. Second, the local theology should be used by the community. This brings back the idea of relevance. If the theology is local but has no bearing on thoughts, actions, relationships, or identity of the community of faith, it is not a good local theology. Referencing local characteristics may make a theology sound local, but if it doesn't "scratch where it itches," it is likely little more than an interesting observation or illustration.[25]

Third, ideally the local theology should come from the people, as opposed to a single person. On a practical level this point recognizes the tendency of some people to control and manipulate by claiming unique revelation or a "better theology." While missionaries often fear syncretism, perhaps an even more likely problem is theological hijacking, where a charismatic individual arises in the community with a divergent message. Theologically speaking, recognizing that every believer has direct access to God (priesthood of the believer) and is illumined by the Spirit of God supports what Bevans calls, "The God of the Gathering."[26] God often speaks corporately rather than through a single individual. And even when God appears to speak through one individual, it is the responsibility of the community to test and evaluate (as a gathering of those guided by the Spirit with direct access to God). Further, if good theology is reflective, then developing organically through the interactions of local people led by God is more likely to produce good theology.

Fourth, the local community sharing the local theology should be willing to accept critique from the broader church. The catholicity of the body of Christ is critical here. The local church is part of something far bigger than its region, people

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[25]Mike Arauz. "Difference Between Relevance and Resonance," http://www.mikearauz.com /2009/02/difference-between-relevanceand.html. Further discussion on this issue at Robert H. Munson, *Theo-Storying: Reflections on God, Narrative, and Culture* (Baguio City, Philippines: MM-Musings, 2019), ch. 4.

[26]Bevans gets the term, "God of the Gathering" from Mary Benet McKinney, *Shared Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making* (Valencia, CA: Tabor, 1987).

group, or denomination. The fifth benchmark is a willingness to challenge the rest of the church as well. The goal is a dialectic. That is, it is a debate without conflict, both sides sharing the same goal—to discover what is good and true. If one has theology that is built on conversations within the community, and honed through conversations outside of the community, the theology is built on a healthy amount of reflection and is likely to be more robust and, I believe, more harmonious with the mind of God.

Theological Conversation as Dialectic[27]

Considering the last paragraph, good theology comes from a "friendly conflict" between the theologies that are contextual and inter-contextual. This can be described as a dialectic, or utilization of the dialectical method. It utilizes a conflict or debate between two opposing viewpoints. However, it differs considerably from typical debate. Firstly, the goals of debate and dialectics are different. In debate the goal is to win, while in dialectics the goal is (hopefully) to discover truth. In a debate between viewpoints "A" and "C" the ideal ending is an agreement that one wins and the other loses. In dialectics, the presumption is that neither side has full grasp of truth, so the ideal result is "B," a synthesis of "A" and "C" (or perhaps two groups still holding to their positions, but each modified through the interaction). Secondly, debate uses a broader arsenal of tools to win the argument. Debate places more value on emotional arguments ("pulling at the heartstrings") and rhetorical skills than does dialectics. Dialectics values these as long as they are used not to manipulate or confuse, but to lead to truth and mutual understanding.[28] This is not implying that emotions are unimportant, but their role is to support rather than obscure values and meaning.

Debate versus Dialectics can be seen as relating to Interreligious Dialogue (IRD). Conversations between proponents of two different Christian theologies is (or should be) far different from conversations between adherents to two different religions. Still, the strategies involved in IRD should make sense between two Christian perspectives as well. In IRD, three strategies generally considered are didactic, dialectic, and dialogic.[29] Didactic strategies are those that focus on one side teaching the other side. As such, the presumption of each side is they have the truth and must impart their truth to the other side. Implied in this is that the other side has nothing to offer back. Preaching, lecturing, and debate all fall into this category since the focus is on changing the other side while remaining essentially unchanged. Emphasis is given to differences between the two positions, while similarities are often glossed over.

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[27]I want to make it clear that I am not seeking to use the term here in terms according to its formal roots in Greek philosophy. The term is here used in a broader sense of two sides joining together to seek truth and mutual understanding through verbal discourse.

[28]I will make no attempt here to explore the question of whether emotions explore a form of truth. It is, however, worth exploration.

[29]More discussion of this is in Robert H. Munson, *Dialogue in Diversity: Christians in Conversation with a Multi-faith World,* Rev. A. (Baguio City, Philippines: MM-Musings, 2019), ch. 11.

Dialogic strategies, at the other extreme, are those that focus excessively on belongingness or social connectedness. It is in some ways the opposite of didactic strategies in that it seeks to avoid conflict. Emphasis is placed on the similarities of the groups ("common ground"), while differences are given little attention. While the ideal of the didactic strategies is that one admits defeat and joins the other side, in dialogic the ideal is that the two groups have little effect on each other. Beliefs tend to be relativized.

Dialectic strategies are a mix of the two previous strategies. Dialects values both the similarities and differences between the two groups. As such, much of the activity involves mutual learning and clarification of views. One might be reminded of the interaction between the Apostle Peter and the Roman centurion, Cornelius.[30] While one may assume a disciple of Peter would have nothing to learn from a Gentile, the truth is that both of them learned and gained from the interaction. It could be argued that what Peter learned was no more than what he already had been told by Jesus or by a vision previously. However, God used Cornelius to drive that point home. The openness of both Peter and Cornelius to learn from each other meant that both were humble enough to recognize that they had something important to learn from God, through the other person.

Dialectic strategies should apply to interactions between local theologies, and the theologies of the broader church as well. Both sides should, first of all, enter into conversation. Both should enter with respect, and an openness not only to share but also to gain insight. At the same time, the presumption is not that both would leave with the same beliefs. The ideal is unity with diversity. One may be reminded of Revelation 7:9 with different languages and ethnicities (and one must presume different theologies) joined together in their diversity, but with common identity and common purpose (as demonstrated by having the same clothes and common object of worship).

Muddy Footprints in Ivory Towers

Local theologies should come from the people, and should be in the language of the local people. Interaction between theologies in the broader church will, of a necessity, occur in international and national languages. There is benefit in mutual critique, occurring in a process of dialectics. This requires a continuous process of translation between these two realms of theology.

If local theologies are theologies of the people and of the land, then the theologies of professionals are somewhat distanced from these. This realm of the professionals is sometimes jokingly perhaps, and sometimes disparagingly, called the "Ivory Tower." Ideally, the professionals, the residents of the Ivory Tower, should interact with the church at the grassroots level. Still, it is likely that cultural distance will create barriers difficult to completely break down. As such, there should be people who

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[30]Read about this in Acts Chapter 10. Try to look at it from the standpoint of two people with different beliefs, that God brought together to learn something important from each other.

regularly interact with both the theologies of the land and people, and the theologies of professional theologians and academia. The Ivory Tower should be full of muddy footprints. Most of these footprints would be from the ministers (especially local pastors and other local leaders) who interact at the grassroots level with the land and people.

Implications for Local Leaders and Language

Although this paper is ostensibly about the use of local languages and the localization of theology, the clearest implications relate to the theological importance of local leaders, such as pastors and missionaries, who serve in a local context. In localization, these people are needed in every step of the process. Missionaries, especially, need to internationalize theology—helping the community understand that the theology of the missionary is not beyond challenge. As such, missionaries need to focus less on indoctrination and more on developing lay theologians. Missionaries can also be involved in translation and cultural adaptation, but locals need to take a greater role in this. Missionaries will never be as in tune with the culture and language as local ministers.

Following the suggestion of Bevans, local religious leaders should not be creating localized theologies, or at least not alone. Rather they should help give a voice, in the native language, to the theology that comes from the local priesthood of believers. Additionally, these local religious leaders need to act as a bridge to the larger theological landscape in the body of Christ, maintaining a dialectic with the professional sphere of theology as well as other local theologies. This places a lot of importance and burden on local religious leaders. They help maintain both the unity and diversity of the church, and need to embrace a role as translators in terms of theological conversation. This translation is not just between languages but also between the jargon of the professionals and that of the people. Clearly not all local religious leaders can embrace this role. Not all have the theological acumen. Not all have the multilingual and multicultural skills. There needs, however, to be some who embrace this role.

Final Thought

The theological symposium that inspired this chapter actually was an example of this interaction between the Professional, Ministerial, and Lay realms of theology. The theological gathering was held at an international, English language seminary, and was led by theologians educated in international English language schools. However, the presentation, and most of the discussion was done in Pilipino. The local churches were invited to both listen and discuss the topics, again mostly in Pilipino. Many of those who participated were local ministers and laity who sought to learn and discuss the topics shared. The participants were encouraged to increase these activities in part through writing and publishing in local languages.

The seminary where the event was held may not fit the general image of an ivory tower, and none of the guests from the community had muddy shoes. Still, the interaction between professional theologians, local ministers, and local church members in a local/national language with the goal of increasing such events certainly is a step in the right direction.

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