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Laylayan theology and Rough Grounds: Theologies from and by the peripheries

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Authors:
Fides A. Del Castillo[1,2]
Stephen M. Cherry[3]
Jonathan J.O. Canete[4]
Daniel F. Pilario[5]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Theology and Religious Education, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

[2]Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

[3]Department of Sociology, Faculty of Communication and Social-Cultural Studies, University of Houston Clear Lake, Houston, Texas, United States

[4]Department of Innovation and Sustainability, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

[5]St. Vincent School of Theology, Adamson university, Manila, Philippines

Corresponding author:
Fides Del Castillo,
fides.delcastillo@dlsu.edu.ph

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This article examines two Filipino contextual theologies – Laylayan Theology and Rough Grounds – as frameworks addressing the realities of the oppressed and marginalised. Rooted in liberation and contextual theology, these models centre theological discourse on the lived experiences of those in society's peripheries. Daniel F. Pilario's Rough Grounds critiques traditional theology for exploiting marginalised narratives without granting them agency, and advocates a praxis-oriented approach grounded in 'real stories on the ground'. Fides A. Del Castillo's Laylayan Theology empowers marginalised communities to reclaim their voices and articulate their faith, emphasising inclusivity, solidarity and hope. 'Laylayan', meaning the fringes of society, reflects a theology by the marginalised rather than about them.

Contribution: Together, these models challenge the Church and theologians to reimagine God's presence amid struggles for justice and dignity, highlighting the transformative potential of contextual theology to foster liberation and empowerment.

Keywords: Asian theology; Rough Grounds; Laylayan Theology; lived theology; margins.

Introduction

Liberation theologies first emerged in the 1960s in Latin America with a novel approach to social justice that drew heavily from both Marxist social analysis and post-Second Vatican Council Catholicism (Boff 1987:xi; Gutierrez 1988:xlvi; ed. Smith 1996:xi). Although liberation theology did not adopt Marxism outright, it used concepts such as class struggle and a critique of global capitalism to motivate and agitate what people in the region saw as a Christian obligation to the poor and marginalised (Aristide 1990:xxiv; Boff 1997:xii). This obligation led to interpreting the gospel through the lens of the oppressed, recognising that religion is a force for social disruption, though not without controversy (Gutierrez 1988:264; ed. Smith 1996:236). Pope John Paul II criticised the movements for being overtly political and feared that aligning with communist ideologies would only further complicate their politicisation (Künkler & Stein 2020:243). Despite the Church's opposition or its well-documented concerns, liberation theology became the theological foundation that would spur several grassroots ecclesiastical movements across Latin America, including the rise and eventual martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero (2004:95; Nepstad 1996:125) in El Salvador.

These movements, and their widely covered opposition to military-backed regimes and human rights abuses reported by world news agencies, also helped to inspire the rise of other indigenous theologies of liberation around the world from both Catholics and Protestants, including nations in Asia (Boff 1987:46; eds. Cadorette et al. 1992:31). From the emergence of Third Eye theology to Minjung theology, to give just a few examples, Asian theologians have and continue to seek out ways to not only make the gospel relevant to their own social-cultural and geopolitical contexts but also find ways to place marginalised people at the centre of their own history and theologising (Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia 1983:15; Phan 2018:133; Ro 2020; Song 1991; Wielenga 2007:50). To further contribute in the Asian contextual theology discourse, this study offers the example of Layalyan Theology as the root of a new theology of liberation which seeks to create an avenue for marginalised Filipinos to raise the concerns of their contextual articulations of faith experiences in the Philippines or wherever they reside in the global diaspora (Anderson 1976:200).

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Liberation theology in Asia and the Philippine context

While all liberation theologies are inherently contextual, not all contextual theologies are liberationist. The latter are distinguished by their explicit orientation towards social transformation and the preferential option for the poor. Liberation theologies differ from other theologies in that they are centred on the context of people's suffering and on analysing how to liberate them from oppression (Wielenga 2007:42). Asian liberation theologies are no different. The socio-cultural and religious context is often what distinguishes Asian liberation theologies. Unlike Latin America, Asia is not relatively homogenous regarding its colonial histories, economic and political development, and the languages people speak (Boff 1997:47). Whereas Spanish unites much of Latin America across borders, there is no equivalent in Asia. Likewise, except for the Philippines, the majority of the poor and marginalised in Asia are not Christian. Until recently, the Philippines was the largest Catholic nation in Asia. Although Timor-Leste is now the most Catholic country in Asia, with 97% of its population identifying as Catholic, the Philippines still has the largest Catholic population by sheer numbers (Brown & Chambon 2022).

Across Asia, Catholicism remains a minority faith but is making gains. In South Korea, for example, the number of Catholics has doubled since the 1980s (Brown & Chambon 2022). In 2019, Catholicism also became the largest religious denomination in Vietnam, surpassing Buddhism for the first time (Quan 2019). There are now more than 151 million Catholics in these regions, yet the importance of Catholicism in Asia has largely been overlooked theologically when it comes to movements for social justice (Anderson 1976:150; Aristide 1990:20; Fides News Service 2022). Historically, the Church played a crucial role in the non-violent toppling of the Marcos regime in the Philippines during the People Power Movement opposition to martial law and structural oppression. The Church openly endorsed Corazon 'Cory' Aquino, the widow of slain Marcos opposition leader Benigno Aquino (Ackerman & Duvall 2000:100). Cardinal Sin, the Catholic archbishop of the Philippines at the time, called Cory a Filipina Joan of Arc and a messenger of God in the face of unjust rule (Cherry 2014:5; eds. Rodao & Rodriguez 2001:115).

The Catholic impact on the 1986 People Power Movement against Marcos, also known as the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) 1 revolution, was not just a matter of institutional support, but also an expression of faith and theology (Cherry 2014:17). As hundreds of thousands of Filipinos crowded the streets hoisting images of the Virgin Mary and Santo Nino, singing hymns, and praying the rosary, Marcos' troops were emotionally moved to join the crowd, and Marcos subsequently fled the country (Cherry 2014:25). Today, in part as a result of the EDSA 1 revolution, the Catholic Church plays just as vital a role in Philippine religious and community life as it did during the latter part of Spanish rule. As such, the Philippines has much in common with the Latin American case and the development of its own liberation theologies (Scapp 2020:151; Wielenga 2007:52).

The Filipino version of liberation theology, like those found in El Salvador and Nicaragua, emphasises an analysis of class struggle, critiquing traditional religion or its location in society, with a focus on biblical history and metaphor (parable) to challenge oppression and address the needs of the poor and marginalised (eds. Battung et al. 1988:21; Ligo 1993:117). Although it is beyond enumerating fully here, centuries of colonisation, first from Spain and then the United States (US), combined with continued economic stagnation, socio-economic inequalities, brain drain, a lack of political representation and other ecological concerns, still impact mass oppression and marginalisation in the Philippines today. In fact, the Philippines is considered the non-governmental organisation (NGO) capital of Asia, if not the world, with over 60 000 non-governmental agencies actively operating in the country to address its structural deficiencies – issues that were even further complicated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Philippine Council for NGO Certification 2008). Among the most impacted by these complicated dimensions of oppression and marginalisation are the indigenous people, urban poor, rural workers, women, youth, senior citizens and migrant workers.

Research methods and design

The need for contextual theologies that liberate the oppressed and marginalised

In the Philippine context, persistent systemic inequality, social exclusion and economic disparity continue to shape the lived realities of marginalised communities. These conditions foreground the limits of abstract theological formulations that remain detached from everyday experience. In this light, contextual theologies offer a framework that enables faith to be articulated in ways that engage directly with the struggles, hopes and aspirations of marginalised communities, providing a means for liberation and empowerment (Boeve 2014:365).

This study explores two Filipino theologies that emerge from and are crafted for the peripheries of society: (1) the Rough Grounds Model and (2) Laylayan Theology. These theologies not only reflect the voices of the marginalised but also reimagine the meaning of God's presence in their lives. By centring the experiences of those on the margins, these theological frameworks provide a pathway to understanding how God is actively present in the struggles for justice, dignity and inclusion (Canete 2024:20).

Through this exploration, it is hoped that these Filipino theologies will illuminate the transformative power of faith when it is grounded in the realities of the oppressed. Together, they serve as a testament to the enduring relevance of contextual theology in fostering liberation, solidarity, and hope for those silenced and sidelined by dominant systems.

The Rough Grounds: A theology from the peripheries

The Rough Grounds, developed by Daniel F. Pilario (2005:13), emerges as a critical response to centralist tendencies in

theology that often prioritise abstract doctrinal formulations over the lived realities of marginalised communities. Pilario critiques theological approaches that position the theologian as either: (1) the guardian of magisterial doctrines or (2) the producer of theological interpretations detached from the everyday struggles of the oppressed. Such approaches, Pilario (2014) observes, frequently exploit the faith experiences of marginalised groups as 'raw material' for theological production, without providing these communities the avenues to articulate their own narratives.

Pilario further develops this critique by examining how theological discourse exploits marginalised voices. He argues that this method reduces the voices of the oppressed to secondary constructs, failing to give them ownership over their lived faith experiences. By placing the theologian as the ultimate arbiter of theological meaning, this approach perpetuates a 'closed outlook' in theological methods, alienating the Church from the voices of the oppressed and rendering it deaf to the whispers of the Spirit. Pilario's (2015:79) insights resonate strongly with the broader theological discourse on liberation and contextual theology, which seeks to give precedence to the lived experiences of marginalised communities.

In response, Pilario proposes the Rough Grounds, which begins with 'real stories on the ground' rather than scholastic perspectives. This model emphasises the importance of listening to and amplifying the voices of those on the margins, recognising their suffering, aspirations and agency. Pilario describes this as a theology grounded in praxis, one that is deeply attuned to the signs of the times and the lived realities of the oppressed. This approach aligns with the broader call for a theology of solidarity, as articulated in the Medellin Document, which emphasises the Church's poverty as a reflection of its commitment to the poor and marginalised (Latin American Bishops 1968). It challenges the Church to embody solidarity by renouncing forms of power that distance it from marginalised communities. At the same time, this vision contrasts with interpretations that spiritualise poverty as an individual moral disposition. Liberation theology resists such reduction, insisting that poverty must also be understood as a social and structural condition requiring transformation.

Moreover, Pilario's theological method finds resonance in the reflections shared in Gratitude from the Rough Grounds, which underscores the importance of engaging with the peripheries as loci of theological reflection. This perspective is not only about listening to the stories of the oppressed but also about allowing their experiences to inform and transform the Church's theological, pastoral and social engagement (Pilario 2021).

Pilario's Rough Grounds offers a compelling framework for reimagining theology as a praxis-oriented discipline that centres the voices of the marginalised. By beginning with the 'real stories on the ground', this model challenges the centralist tendencies of traditional theological methods and calls for a Church that is truly attuned to the suffering and aspirations of the oppressed. However, as Pilario himself acknowledges, the model requires further development to ensure its systematic application. This is where complementary frameworks, such as Laylayan Theology and the lived experiences documented in works, can provide the Church with a more holistic and inclusive approach to theology.

Laylayan Theology: Listening to the voices from the margins

Laylayan Theology, as articulated by Fides A. Del Castillo, provides a theological framework that centres on the voices and lived experiences of marginalised communities. Rooted in the Filipino term 'Laylayan', meaning the fringes or peripheries of society, this theology emphasises inclusivity, agency and empowerment for those often excluded from traditional theological discourse. Del Castillo (2024:485) argues that Laylayan Theology is not merely a theology about the marginalised but a theology by the marginalised, allowing them to reclaim their voices and agency in theological reflection.

The theological foundation of Laylayan Theology is deeply rooted in scripture and Catholic teachings (Del Castillo 2024:487). For instance, the Parable of the Great Dinner (Lk 14:15–24) encapsulates the inclusivity of God's Kingdom, inviting those on the peripheries to partake in the divine banquet. Similarly, the story of the haemorrhaging female (Lk 8:44–48) highlights Jesus' engagement with the marginalised, amplifying their voices and validating their experiences of faith. Through these biblical narratives, Laylayan Theology affirms the dignity and worth of the '*anawim*' [the poor and marginalized] and calls for their active participation in the mission of the Church (Draper 2022:91). While Laylayan Theology draws from Scripture and Catholic Social Teachings, these sources are themselves shaped by longstanding doctrinal and hierarchical traditions. This raises a critical tension: Liberation theologies often emerge at the margins of institutional theology and are not always fully received within official Church structure. Rather than resolving this tension, Laylayan Theology inhabits it. It engages the resources of the tradition while simultaneously reinterpreting them from the standpoint of the marginalised, thereby participating in an ongoing negotiation between lived faith and institutional authority.

Laylayan Theology uses empirical data to foreground the perspectives and voices of marginalised communities. It is also shaped through dialogue with other scientific disciplines, such as the psychology of religion and social phenomenology. This interdisciplinary engagement provides 'renewed shape to the scientific character of theology [*and*] speaks from its theological critical consciousness to the university' (Boeve 2014:363). The lived experiences of those at the Laylayan offer a fresh interpretation of the gospel, re-contextualised within a unique cultural and societal framework.

Del Castillo emphasises that theology must remain contextual, responding to the 'signs of the times' and engaging with the lived realities of the marginalised. Drawing on the Catholic Church's preferential option for the poor, Laylayan Theology aligns with the Church's mission to 'go forth to the peripheries' and to witness to the Kingdom of God (Latin American Bishops 1968). Inspired by Pope Francis' (2021) call for synodality, this theology fosters a 'dialogical imagination', creating spaces for marginalised voices to be heard and integrated into theological discourse.

Theologically, Laylayan Theology critiques traditional approaches that often treat the marginalised as passive subjects of reflection. Instead, it envisions a participatory framework where the poor and oppressed are co-creators of theological knowledge. This approach aligns with other contextual theologies, such as Minjung [*the people's*] Theology in Korea, Black Theology in the US, and Dalit Theology in India, which similarly prioritise the voices and experiences of the oppressed.

Laylayan Theology has been applied in various contexts, including studies on indigenous Filipino Christians, grassroots female leaders and Basic Ecclesial Communities (Del Castillo 2021:63, 2022c:963). These studies reveal the transformative potential of Laylayan Theology in empowering marginalised communities to articulate their faith and engage in social transformation.

Ethical considerations

This article adhered to all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

The complementary relationship between the Rough Grounds and Laylayan Theology

The Rough Grounds and Laylayan Theology share a common commitment to centring the experiences of the marginalised in theological discourse. However, they approach this goal from complementary perspectives.

Starting point: Praxis and experience

The Rough Grounds emphasises the importance of starting with the 'real stories on the ground', drawing directly from the lived experiences of the oppressed. Similarly, Laylayan Theology begins with the contextual realities of marginalised communities, emphasising their agency in articulating their faith. Both reject purely scholastic approaches to theology, advocating instead for a praxis-oriented framework that prioritises the voices of the oppressed (Pilario 2015:85).

Theological ownership and agency

While the Rough Grounds critiques the exploitation of marginalised narratives in theological production, Laylayan Theology offers a concrete framework for addressing this issue. Laylayan Theology empowers the marginalised to take ownership of their faith experiences, providing them with the tools and platforms to articulate their theological insights (Del Castillo 2022b:539). This approach ensures that theology is not imposed on the marginalised but emerges from their lived realities.

Inclusivity and empathy

Both models call for an inclusive and empathetic approach to theology. Pilario's Rough Grounds critiques the Church's tendency to marginalise those who do not conform to its doctrinal norms, advocating for a more inclusive, listening Church. Similarly, Laylayan Theology envisions a Church that welcomes and learns from the faith narratives of the marginalised, fostering solidarity and mutual understanding.

Practical applications

Laylayan Theology complements the principles of the Rough Grounds by offering practical applications for fostering liberation and empowerment. For example, Del Castillo highlights the importance of using phenomenological and empirical methods to analyse the faith experiences of marginalised communities. These methods allow theologians to engage deeply with the contextual realities of the oppressed, uncovering the divine presence in their struggles for justice and dignity.

Theological praxis in action: The role of the Church

Both the Rough Grounds and Laylayan Theology challenge the Church to rethink its role in the lives of the marginalised. Pilario critiques the Church's tendency to adopt a centralist and legalistic approach, which often alienates those in the peripheries. When access to sacramental or communal spaces is governed by rigid norms or mediated through gatekeeping authorities, those in situations of trauma may be excluded rather than accompanied. Pilario's (2014:7) critique points to the need for a Church that reorients its structures towards hospitality, accompaniment and responsiveness to lived suffering.

Laylayan Theology echoes this critique, emphasising the need for the Church to become a listening, inclusive community. Del Castillo envisions a Church that not only welcomes the marginalised but also learns from their faith narratives. This requires a shift from a top-down approach to a dialogical and participatory model, in which the voices of the marginalised are recognised as valid sources of theological insight.

Pope Francis' (2013) concept of the 'peripheries' aligns with the principles of both the Rough Grounds and Laylayan Theology. Francis describes the peripheries as spaces of exclusion, alienation and expulsion, urging the Church to move beyond its comfort zones and engage directly with those

on the margins (Ferrara 2015:50). This vision calls for a radical reorientation of the Church's mission, placing the marginalised at the centre of its pastoral and theological efforts.

Conclusion

Towards a theology of liberation and empowerment

The Rough Grounds and Laylayan Theology together provide a powerful framework for contextual theology that seeks to liberate and empower the oppressed and marginalised. By centring on the lived experiences of those on the peripheries, these models challenge traditional theological methods and advocate for a more inclusive, empathetic and praxis-oriented approach to faith.

At the same time, their integration highlights a critical dynamic. While the Rough Grounds exposes the limits of centralist and abstract theological production, Laylayan Theology provides a constructive pathway by foregrounding the marginalised as agents of theological meaning-making. In this sense, they are not competing frameworks but complementary movements – one critically unsettling the dominant approach, the other articulating a participatory and dialogical vision of theology from the margins.

These theological models align with Pope Francis' call for synodality, advocating for a Church that listens to and includes the voices of all, especially those on the margins. Synodality fosters dialogue, collaboration and mutual empowerment, which are central to the vision of these frameworks.

Taken together, these models demonstrate that theology becomes most transformative when it listens to, learns from, and is shaped by those historically silenced or excluded. They call for a renewed theological imagination that is attentive to context, grounded in experience and oriented towards liberation. In doing so, they reframe the peripheries not as sites of absence or deficiency, but as vital loci of theological insight and renewal. They challenge the Church and theologians to move beyond abstract doctrines and engage directly with the struggles of the marginalised, reimagining God's presence in the peripheries of society.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Fides A. Del Castillo: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Stephen M. Cherry: Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Jonathan J.O. Canete: Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Daniel F. Pilario: Data curation, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Fides A. Del Castillo, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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