

Protagonist Corner

It's Painful to be in Pharaoh's Army - or Navy

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Many's the time I have over the last forty years preached sermons and taught Sunday School lessons dealing with the Exodus from Egypt. Many's the time I have affirmed Moses and the Israelites, identifying with them in their freedom movement - and generally feeling good about my efforts. But now, looking back at those times from my present vantage point, it seems rather remarkable to me that nobody laughed. I should have laughed myself, but I didn't. My blinders prevented me from discerning the irony of it. For considering who I was and who I am, considering what values and interests I represent and advance in much of my life, it is easy to see that my station in life is more compatible with Pharaoh and the Egyptians than with Moses and the Israelites. If "Moses and the Israelites" is the prime model for the liberation of the powerless in this world, "Pharaoh and the Egyptians" certainly stands out as the prototype of the powerful. Whenever and in whatever context "Pharaoh and the Egyptians" exist, they will usually be found resisting freedom movements by little people, holding on to captives, preserving the advantages afforded by others' subservience.

I have concluded that toward the Philippines the United States of America has been a Pharaoh of mean proportions. I learned this only late in life, and this itself makes for pain. By profession and commitment my primary citizenship is in Yahweh's kingdom; I am therefore inescapably biased toward the cause of the powerless. But I also happen to be one of Pharaoh's citizens, though not presently serving in his army. As a Pharaoh-onic citizen, I have benefitted substantially, even if indirectly, from what Stanley Karnow calls "the accidental colony." I feel I must share a portion of blame for the present plight of that country of many islands, halfway 'round the world.

Only twice have I been in the Philippines. I once served in Pharaoh's navy, having a minuscule role in the "Philippine Liberation" campaign of 1944-45. That was painful too, though in a different way. After it was all over, I felt good about my hitch in Pharaoh's navy. But a recent "study and exposure" visit on behalf of the PCUSA opened my eyes in a way my first visit forty-four years ago did not. It showed me that "Philippine liberation" is a desperate need today, even as it was in the days of the Japanese Pharaoh. Only this time it is liberation from U.S. domination. This time I found that Pharaoh's shoe was on my own foot. This time I learned surprising - and depressing - things about what my own Pharaoh has done in the Philippines. In my defense I can at least say that I am ashamed of his record there. But living with the splitness I now feel is painful in the extreme. Just as in the 1940's, I find I now cannot evade my responsibility to do what I can for Philippine liberation in the 1990's.

Learning the truth has been painful. Pharaoh's educational system and

Pharaoh's highly touted news media did not acquaint me with what has gone on in the Philippines in the last ninety-odd years and, shamefully, I have not thought it important enough to do my own investigating. In my high school history class long ago the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 (unofficially it lasted much longer), was billed as "the Philippine insurrection," giving the impression of only a minor, local skirmish. Admiral Dewey was depicted as the timely hero who happened into Manila Bay with his fleet at the strategic moment to deliver the islands from the hated Spanish. Taught to revere the heroes of my own country's struggle for liberation, I was not introduced to freedom fighters like Jose Rizal or Andres Bonafacio. I learned little or nothing about the successful revolt led by Emilio Aguinaldo (the last of over 200 revolts during the Spanish period) that had the Spanish on the ropes before Dewey ever got there. Absolutely nothing was conveyed of the way the U.S. crushed a genuine struggle for freedom by a brave, resourceful, and determined people. At that point in my life I frankly did not know the meaning of Manifest Destiny. Given the kind of world I knew in the thirties and forties, the rationale for Pharaoh becoming a world power seemed plausible enough. Now that I am accustomed to regarding the U.S. as a superpower with global reach, I hardly, if ever, bother to ask about how we began to be an imperial power in the first place. Learning the truth about all that has been, and still is, is painful.

It's painful to see how Pharaoh's colonial policy has operated in the Philippines. "Neo-colonialism" is the technical name given to it, and it's basically very simple: Give the Filipinos their political freedom - in time, after a period of apprenticeship - but forge the ties of economic and strategic dependency ever stronger. *By degrees* let them taste the heady wine of liberty, allow them to develop the institutions of a free society, let them become proficient in democracy, let them even become an "independent" nation - but *don't let them develop their own economic base*. Exploit their resources for our own use, give U.S. citizens and corporations the same right as Filipinos to develop their country, make social inequality a cornerstone of our policy, always be sure U.S. interests come first. The very best that can be said for such a policy is that it has had mixed results. More realistically its effects have been somewhat less than diabolical. It is painful to see how the present plight of the Philippines is due in great part to this colonial policy, a policy which still structures U.S.-Philippines relations.

It is painful to see how the sufferings of the Filipino people continue unabated. True, the Dictator was ousted by popular uprising and Cory Aquino brought the promise of a new day. But the changes she promised are coming very slowly, especially for the masses. Letters from friends in the Philippines, coupled with reports in the Philippine press (but not picked up in ours) and communications from church and "cause-oriented" groups continue to report atrocities and human rights violations with depressing frequency. It's painful to see how much misinformation about the Philippines is abroad in Pharaoh's land.

Many elements of the church in the Philippines are living under the cross. This is especially true of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines

(UCCP), which includes the Presbyterian branch of the Protestant tradition, to which I belong. Between June, 1988, and June, 1989, no fewer than fourteen UCCP leaders, clergy and lay, were assassinated - not by "insurgents," but by military and paramilitary bands bent on stopping "communism" (read "social and economic change") from coming. An especially gruesome incident happened just three days before we arrived last May: Rev. Vizminda Gran, a UCCP pastor and her husband Lovello, an active layman, were brutally shot to death in their home on the island of Mindanao in front of their two small children by members of a paramilitary band. Her only offense was that she had spoken out in support of human rights and had run for public office three years before. On the other side of the coin, an entire UCCP congregation of thirty-seven members - men, women, and children - were massacred by elements of the New People's Army one day last summer as they had gathered for worship. Confusion and cross-purposes abound, and the church is often caught in the middle.

I shall never forget meeting with a "Theology of Struggle" support-and-dialogue pastors' group one evening in Mindanao. Never have I been more moved by the raw courage of people in the front lines of faith's struggle. Never have I witnessed the singing of "Once to Every Man and Nation" with more fervor and power.

True liberation for the Philippines will be a difficult and painful process. Replacing policies, attitudes, and "givens" of nearly a century will meet much resistance. Transition to real independence will require time, sacrifice, and a generous measure of practical wisdom. But the conviction is growing that withdrawing American interventionism and domination is a fundamental necessity. More and more individuals and groups are taking that position. Recent votes in the Philippine Senate have shown strong support for it. Conversion of the U.S. military facilities at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base to civilian use will be an important first step. If that happens - and I pray that it will happen - Moses and his people will still not have crossed the Red Sea. Elements of Pharaoh's forces will still be on the loose, protecting the rights of the powerful, devising new stratagems (like the so-called Multilateral Aid Initiative or PAP) for holding on to privileges long enjoyed. It's painful to consider how decisive and how difficult will be the break that true freedom demands, *both* for Moses *and* for Pharaoh.

But the evidence is mounting that "letting the people go" will bring a larger measure of freedom for all parties concerned, including Pharaoh. "Letting the people go" will be the best way of redressing the wrongs of the last ninety years, the best way to enhance the good things Pharaoh has done (and there have been many), the best way to promote a secure future, the best way to build mutual security and respect, the best way to help in assuring the peace of the region.

Is it possible to reconcile Moses and Pharaoh? Must not a clear priority be established? Can we feel the pain, the splitness? Will Pharaoh and his subjects be willing at long last to grant freedom to a people who have fought and struggled for it for over 400 years? In this year's mission season and in the early

years of the 1990's our integrity as Christians and as U.S. citizens will be sorely tested. May we not be weighed in the balances and found wanting.