

Re-Placing Theology Amid Ecological Displacement: A Filipino Contextual Reflection

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Abstract: Ecological crises and forced displacement increasingly challenge traditional understandings of space and belonging, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions. This study examines the meaning of place within the context of environmental vulnerability and displacement in the Philippines, aiming to develop a context-specific theology of space. Utilizing a theological-hermeneutical and contextual approach, this study uses Walter Brueggemann's theology of land as a primary framework to analyze how ecological destruction fractures covenantal bonds between God, creation, and humanity. It puts Brueggemann's work into dialogue with John Inge's sacramental theology of place, Philip Sheldrake's theories on memory and identity, and Pope Francis' vision of integral ecology. These frameworks are critically engaged with Philippine realities, including typhoon-driven displacement, environmental degradation, ancestral land destruction, and indigenous cosmologies. The findings reveal that the Philippine experience offers a distinctive theological insight: place operates not merely as a covenant, sacrament, memory, or common home, but fundamentally as a site of resilient belonging. This belonging is actively and continuously recreated through localized practices of rebuilding, collective remembering, and ecological care. The study proposes a localized Filipino theology of place where salvation is materially and communally grounded. It concludes that acts of ecological restoration, cultural remembrance, and communal solidarity serve as sacramental signs of God's dwelling presence amid displacement.

Keywords: Theology of Place • Ecological Displacement • Walter Brueggemann • Integral Ecology • Filipino Contextual Theology • Indigenous Ecological Wisdom

Introduction

The ecological crises of the twenty-first century, marked by environmental degradation, climate-induced displacement, forced migration, and the fragmentation of

cultural identities, have renewed theological interest in the meaning of place.¹ Across the globe, many communities increasingly experience the loss of homes, livelihoods, and ancestral lands because of ecological destruction. In the Philippines, recurring typhoons, floods, landslides, and environmental degradation have displaced countless communities and disrupted enduring relationships between people and land.² Such experiences reveal that ecological crises are not merely environmental incidents but also crises of belonging, memory, and identity. They raise important theological questions regarding the relationship between land, community, and faith.

Within Christian theology, land and place have never been simply geographical realities. The biblical narrative discloses through places where God's presence, promise, and covenant are revealed. The significance of place thus extends beyond physical place to encompass identity, memory, worship, and communal belonging. Contemporary ecological displacement challenges Christians to reconsider how theology might respond to experiences of rootlessness, exile, and environmental loss while remaining attentive to concrete historical and cultural contexts. This challenge is particularly significant in the Philippines, where ecological vulnerability intersects with histories of colonialism, social inequality, and Indigenous struggles for land and cultural survival.

Theological reflection on place has developed significantly in recent decades as scholars have sought to

¹ National Catholic Reporter, *Vatican marks ecology saint's feast day with film premier, climate accords*, Retrieved on October 2, 2022, at <https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/faith/vatican-marks-ecology-saints-feast-day-film-premiere-climate-accords>

² Karl Gaspar, *Desperately Seeking God's Saving Action in the World Today: Yolanda Survivors' Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations*. Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2014.

recover dimensions of faith against modern tendencies toward abstraction and placelessness. Edward Casey argues that modernity has privileged abstract notions of space over concrete experiences of place, contributing to the erosion of embodied belonging and memory. For him, place is not merely a location but the fundamental context within which human experience, identity, and meaning are formed. Similarly, Yi-Fu Tuan emphasizes that place emerges when human beings invest space with value, attachment, and lived experience. Place becomes the repository of memory, identity, and cultural meaning, transforming physical environments into meaningful worlds.³

Building upon these insights, Christian theologians have increasingly explored the theological significance of place. Gorringer argues that the built environment reflects broader theological and ethical commitments, highlighting the relationship between justice, community, and spatial organization. Bartholomew further contends that Christian faith is inherently emplaced because God's redemptive activity unfolds within the material realities of creation.⁴ Likewise, Inge and Sheldrake emphasize that place functions sacramentally, mediating divine presence and shaping communal identity through

³ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), xiii–xv, 9–15; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6–12; Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 80–98; Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 12–25; John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 1–16.

⁴ Timothy Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–18; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 21–45.

memory, ritual, and belonging.

Among contemporary theologians, Brueggemann's theology of land remains one of the most influential contributions to the discourse. In *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*,⁵ Brueggemann presents land as a central theological category through which covenant, identity, justice, and divine promise are understood.⁶ His work provides a particularly fruitful framework for engaging ecological displacement because it interprets exile and loss of land not merely as political realities but as profound theological experiences. Complementing Brueggemann's insights, Pope Francis' vision of integral ecology in *Laudato Si'* expands the discussion by emphasizing the interconnectedness of environmental care, social justice, and human dignity. Together, these perspectives provide a rich theological foundation for examining contemporary ecological displacement and the meaning of place in the Philippine context.

This study seeks to explore the theological meaning of place amid ecological crises and displacement through a contextual engagement with the Philippine experience. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Examine Brueggemann's theology of land, particularly his understanding of land as gift, promise, and challenge.⁷
2. Analyze how the perspectives of John Inge,⁸ Philip

⁵ Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, (London: SPCK, 1978), 1

⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁷ Ibid., chapter 2.

⁸ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, Durham theses, Durham University, 2001 at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1235/>

Sheldrake,⁹ and Pope Francis¹⁰ expand contemporary theological understandings of place.

3. Investigate how ecological displacement in the Philippines explains the theological significance of land, memory, identity, and belonging.¹¹
4. Explore Indigenous perspective that contributes to a contextual understanding of place in the Philippine context.
5. Recommend a Filipino theology of place that responds to contemporary ecological crises and informs pastoral and ecclesial practice.

This study employs a theological-hermeneutical and contextual methodology that integrates textual analysis with contextual theological reflection. The first stage involves a close hermeneutical engagement with Brueggemann's theology of land, particularly his articulation of land as gift, promise, and challenge. These categories provide the primary interpretive framework for understanding the relationship between God, humanity, and creation.

The second stage places Brueggemann in dialogue with other significant voices in contemporary theology of place, particularly Inge's sacramental theology of place, Sheldrake's reflections on memory and identity, and Pope Francis' vision of integral ecology. This dialogical approach allows for a broader theological understanding of place that incorporates sacramental, communal, ecological, and ethical dimensions.

⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015); see Anthony J Kelly CSsR, *An Integral Ecology and The Catholic Vision* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2016), Ch. 1.

¹¹ NDRMMC Report, *Final Report on Tropical Storm Ondoy and Typhoon Pepeng* at <https://ndrrmc.gov.ph/2-uncategorised/1543-final-report-on-tropical-storm-ondoy-and-typhoon-pepeng>;

The third stage employs contextual theological analysis by situating these theoretical insights within the lived realities of ecological displacement in the Philippines. Attention is given to experiences of environmental degradation, climate-induced migration, disaster-related displacement, and Indigenous relationships with land. Through this contextual engagement, the study examines how theological understandings of place are challenged, enriched, and transformed by Filipino experiences.

The study develops a constructive theological synthesis that proposes a Filipino theology of place capable of addressing contemporary ecological crises. The goal is to identify pastoral, spiritual, and ecclesial responses that foster ecological justice, communal resilience, and renewed belonging in contexts of environmental vulnerability.

Brueggemann's Theology of Land

Brueggemann's theology of land represents one of the most influential contemporary theological reflections on place. In *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, he argues that land is not simply a geographical location or economic resource but a theological reality through which God establishes covenantal relationships with creation and humanity.¹² Land occupies a central place in biblical faith because it serves as the concrete arena where divine promise, communal identity, justice, and worship are embodied. Against modern tendencies to commodify land or reduce it to property, Brueggemann recovers the biblical understanding of land as a gift entrusted by God, a promise that

¹² Brueggeman, *The Land*.

shapes communal identity, and a challenge that demands faithfulness and responsibility.¹³

Land as Gift

Creation

Brueggemann begins with the biblical affirmation that land originates in God's creative activity.¹⁴ Creation is the very context in which human beings encounter God and one another. The Genesis account portrays humanity as formed from the soil (*adamah*) and entrusted with the vocation of cultivating and caring for the earth (Gen. 2:15).¹⁵ This intimate relationship between humanity and land reveals that human life is fundamentally ecological and relational. Land therefore possesses theological significance because it is part of God's good creation and participates in God's sustaining presence.

Covenant

Because land originates in divine creation, it is fundamentally a gift rather than a possession. Brueggemann emphasizes that Israel's relationship to the land is grounded in covenant rather than ownership.¹⁶ The land belongs to God, while human beings are recipients and caretakers of this divine gift. Covenant establishes a relationship of mutual responsibility among God, humanity, and creation. The land is thus never neutral territory but a sacred space where covenantal identity is lived and expressed.

¹³ Brueggeman, *The Land*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Stewardship

For Brueggemann, the gift of land carries ethical obligations.¹⁷ The land is never an object of unrestricted ownership but remains a covenantal reality entrusted by God. Consequently, human beings are called to exercise responsible stewardship that respects the integrity of creation. As Brueggemann observes, "land has its own rights over against us" and is "not totally at our disposal." The Sabbath traditions further remind Israel that both land and people belong to God and therefore cannot be reduced to commodities or instruments of exploitation. Stewardship thus entails honoring the land's limits, caring for the vulnerable who depend upon it, and maintaining just covenantal relationships within creation.

Land as Promise

Abrahamic Covenant

The theme of promise fills a principal place in Brueggemann's theology.¹⁸ Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the promise of land functions as a sign of God's faithfulness and covenantal commitment. Starting with Abraham, the gift of land becomes inseparable from God's promise to create a people and establish a future for them. The promised land is not merely a destination but a symbol of divine presence, blessing, and belonging.

Justice

For Brueggemann, the promise of land is inseparable from ethical responsibility. Possessing the land requires the practice of justice, particularly toward the poor, the stranger, and the vulnerable. The prophetic tradition

¹⁷ Brueggeman, *The Land*, 64.

¹⁸ Ibid., Chapter 1.

repeatedly warns that social oppression and economic exploitation threaten the covenantal order. Land cannot be separated from justice because covenantal life depends upon relationships marked by equity, compassion, and communal responsibility.

Sabbath

The theology of promise is further expressed through Sabbath practices. Sabbath reminds Israel that land is God's gift rather than human achievement.¹⁹ By allowing the land to rest and by resisting endless accumulation, the Sabbath embodies trust in God's provision and challenges economic systems based solely on productivity and control. Sabbath therefore functions as an ecological and theological practice that preserves the covenantal relationship between people and land.

Land as Challenge

Exile

The challenge of land becomes most evident in the biblical experience of exile. For Brueggemann, exile represents the rupture of covenantal relationships brought about by unfaithfulness and injustice. The loss of land is not simply a political catastrophe but a profound theological crisis because it disrupts identity, memory, and belonging. Exile reveals the fragility of human relationships with land when covenantal responsibilities are neglected.²⁰

Displacement

Brueggemann's reflections on exile speak powerfully to contemporary experiences of ecological displacement. Communities displaced by environmental destruction,

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 64-65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-191.

climate change, or economic exploitation often experience forms of rootlessness analogous to biblical exile. Displacement entails more than physical relocation; it involves the loss of memory, cultural continuity, and meaningful relationships with place. In this sense, exile remains a relevant theological category for interpreting contemporary ecological crises.

Restoration

Yet exile is never the final word in Brueggemann's theology. The biblical narrative consistently points toward restoration, renewal, and return. God's faithfulness persists even amid displacement and loss. Restoration involves rebuilding covenantal relationships with God, neighbor, and creation. It represents a renewed commitment to justice, stewardship, and belonging. Thus, land remains a source of hope because it continues to mediate God's promise of renewal and reconciliation.

From Placelessness to Prophetic Imagination

Brueggemann argues that contemporary society suffers from what may be described as *atopia*, a condition of placelessness that erodes meaning, belonging, and rooted identity.²¹ The influences of urbanization, consumerism, ecological degradation, and the commodification of land have disconnected individuals and communities from the places that once grounded their existence. As land becomes a commodity rather than a covenantal gift, people experience alienation not only from creation but also from God and one another.

Brueggemann's response to this crisis is the culture of a prophetic imagination. Prophetic imagination²²

²¹ Brueggemann, *The Land*, Chapter 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

insists that salvation is always located within concrete places and relationships. Theology must therefore be emplaced, rooted in the Incarnation where God enters human history within a particular land, culture, and community. The Eucharist further embodies this vision by connecting divine grace to the fruits of the earth, bread, and wine, thereby affirming the sacramental significance of creation.

Within this framework, faith communities are called to practices of memory, justice, and dwelling. Memory preserves the stories that connect people to place; justice challenges systems that exploit land and marginalize communities; and dwelling fosters covenantal relationships that sustain ecological and social flourishing. Prophetic imagination therefore becomes a theological response to placelessness, inviting communities to rediscover belonging, ecological responsibility, and hope. Rather than accepting alienation as inevitable, Brueggemann calls believers to imagine and embody alternative ways of inhabiting the earth that honor God's covenant with creation.

Inge, Sheldrake, and Pope Francis: Expanding the Theology of Place

While Brueggemann's theology of land provides a powerful biblical framework for understanding land as gift, promise, and challenge, contemporary theological reflection on place has expanded beyond covenantal and territorial concerns. Scholars such as John Inge and Philip Sheldrake, together with Pope Francis' integral ecological vision, deepen the discourse by highlighting the sacramental, formative, and ecological dimensions of place. Their contributions expand Brueggemann's theological insights and propose a broader theological understanding of how place shapes human identity,

spirituality, memory, and communal life. Together, these thinkers show that place is not merely a physical location but a locus of divine encounter, spiritual formation, and ecological responsibility.

John Inge: Place as Sacrament

Inge's theology of place broadens Brueggemann's concept of land by seeing place as a sacramental reality through which God's presence is encountered. For him, places mediate divine grace and serves as a locus for experiencing God's self-disclosure. While Brueggemann emphasizes land as covenantal gift, binding humanity to God through responsibility and justice, Inge enriches this perspective by highlighting the sacramental dimension of place. Place becomes a visible sign of an invisible reality, a medium through which God's presence is disclosed within the ordinary rhythms of human life.

Inge argues that places become sacred because they bear witness to encounters between God and humanity.²³ Churches, shrines, pilgrimage sites, homes, and communal spaces become repositories of memory and worship where groups experience continuity in faith. Place becomes a carrier of meaning, identity, and spiritual memory. Through liturgical practices, communal rituals, and acts of remembrance, places gain sacramental significance and reveal God's abiding presence within creation.

By incorporating sacramentality into the theology of place, Inge expands Brueggemann's emphasis on covenant and justice. His perspective reminds theologians that land is not only entrusted to humanity as a gift demanding ethical responsibility but is also a site where grace is encountered and celebrated. Theology of place

²³ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), x.

must therefore attend not only to questions of ownership and stewardship but also to worship, memory, and divine presence. In this way, Inge offers a richer account of place as covenant, sacrament, and dwelling, integrating responsibility with encounter and justice with grace.

Philip Shelldrake: Place as Memory and Spiritual Formation

Philip Shelldrake advances the theology of place by emphasizing its formative role in shaping spiritual identity and communal belonging. For Shelldrake, place is not merely a backdrop for religious experience but an active participant in the formation of human identity and spirituality. Places shape how communities remember, worship, narrate their histories, and understand themselves in relation to God and one another.

Central to Shelldrake's theology is the relationship between place, memory, and identity. Human beings develop a sense of belonging through their attachment to landscapes, neighborhoods, sacred sites, and communal spaces. These places preserve collective memory, connecting present generations with the experiences, stories, and traditions of the past. Through memory, place becomes a repository of meaning that sustains cultural and spiritual continuity across generations.

Shelldrake further argues that spiritual formation is inseparable from the places people inhabit. Christian faith is nurtured through embodied practices that occur within specific communities and environments. Places shape imagination, values, and patterns of discipleship. The stories embedded in landscapes, churches, cemeteries, pilgrimage routes, and ancestral homes contribute to the formation of communal identity and spiritual consciousness.

This perspective expands Brueggemann's theology by demonstrating that land and place are not only covenantal gifts requiring stewardship but also formative realities that shape how communities experience God. Sheldrake therefore challenges theology to move beyond abstraction and address the ways place nurtures belonging, memory, and discipleship. His work transforms the theology of land into a broader theology of place in which covenant, memory, identity, and spirituality are deeply interconnected.

Pope Francis: Place as Common Home

Pope Francis contributes a distinctive and urgently contemporary dimension to the theology of place through his vision of integral ecology articulated in *Laudato Si'*. While Brueggemann focuses primarily on covenantal relationships within biblical faith, Francis expands the discussion by situating place within a global ecological context. For Francis, the Earth is our "common home," a shared dwelling that links humanity, creation, culture, economy, and spirituality within a single interconnected reality.

A central theme of *Laudato Si'* is the conviction that "everything is connected" (LS 91). Ecological degradation cannot be separated from social injustice because environmental destruction disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable. Francis therefore rejects any separation between environmental concerns and human well-being. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable realities that demand a unified ethical response (LS 49).

Integral ecology broadens the meaning of place beyond geographical territory by emphasizing relationships. Place is understood as a web of interconnected relationships linking people, ecosystems, cultures, econo-

mies, and future generations. Consequently, care for place involves more than environmental protection; it requires ecological conversion, social responsibility, and solidarity with marginalized communities.

Pope Francis also challenges modern economic systems that commodify land and reduce creation to a resource for exploitation. He critiques consumerism, environmental neglect, and unsustainable models of development that undermine both ecological integrity and human dignity. In doing so, he extends Brueggemann's critique of land commodification into a broader global framework. The covenantal responsibility associated with land becomes a call to planetary solidarity and ecological stewardship, inviting humanity to care for creation as a shared gift entrusted by God.

Comparative Theological Insights

Taken together, the perspectives of Brueggemann, Inge, Sheldrake, and Francis offer a multidimensional theology of place that responds to the challenges of contemporary ecological displacement. Although each thinker approaches the question of place from a distinct perspective, their insights converge around the conviction that place is fundamental to human identity, spiritual formation, and faithful living.

Brueggemann highlights a critical issue of modernity: the rise of placelessness, or *atopia*, resulting from urbanization, commodification, and ecological destruction. His response is the cultivation of a prophetic imagination that reclaims covenantal belonging and ecological responsibility. Inge deepens this vision by emphasizing the sacramental character of place. For him, placelessness represents not only social alienation but also the loss of spaces through which divine presence is encountered and celebrated.

Sheldrake extends the discussion further by arguing that place shapes memory, identity, and spiritual formation. Prophetic imagination must therefore be rooted in practices of remembrance that reconnect communities with their histories, narratives, and sacred traditions. Without memory, communities risk losing the stories that sustain belonging and identity.

Pope Francis situates these concerns within the broader context of global ecological crisis. He insists that any theology of place must confront the political, economic, and environmental systems that contribute to ecological degradation and displacement. Prophetic imagination must therefore be ecological and social, challenging structures that exploit both people and the Earth.

Together, these perspectives expand Brueggemann's theology of land into a richer theology of place. Brueggemann contributes covenantal ethics; Inge highlights sacramental presence; Sheldrake emphasizes memory and spiritual formation; and Francis advances ecological solidarity and justice. Their combined insights suggest that place should be understood simultaneously as covenant, sacrament, memory, and common home. Such a multidimensional understanding provides a robust theological framework for engaging contemporary experiences of ecological displacement, particularly within contexts such as the Philippines where environmental vulnerability, cultural memory, and communal resilience remain deeply intertwined.

Ecological Displacement in the Philippines

As of the most vulnerable to ecological disruption and climate-related disasters, the Philippines provides a context for examining theology of place. Situated along the Pacific Ring of Fire and within the typhoon belt of the

Western Pacific, the country experiences frequent typhoons, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, and other environmental hazards that reshape human relationships with land and place. Ecological displacement is intensified by deforestation, large-scale mining operations, land conversion, and unsustainable forms of development that disrupt ecosystems and undermine local livelihoods.²⁴ These realities contributed to the forced migration of communities, the loss of ancestral territories, and the erosion of cultural and spiritual attachments to place. Ecological displacement in the Philippines extends beyond the loss of physical territory; it entails the fragmentation of memory, identity, livelihood, and belonging. In this context, the theology of place is a lived reality that shapes how communities understand suffering, resilience, and hope.²⁵

Typhoon Yolanda: Ecological Grief & Re-Placement

The devastation wrought by Super Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in November 2013 remains one of the most profound experiences of ecological displacement in contemporary Philippine history. Affecting millions of people across the Visayas region, Yolanda destroyed homes, schools, public infrastructure, and entire coastal communities. Yet beyond these material losses, the

²⁴ William N. Holden and R. Daniel Jacobson, *Mining Amid Armed Conflict: Nonferrous Metals Mining in the Philippines* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022), 89–112; Renato D. Lasco and Maria Victoria O. Espaldon, “Land Use Change, Forest Loss, and Environmental Vulnerability in the Philippines,” *Philippine Journal of Science* 151, no. 4 (2022): 1348–1354; United Nations Development Programme, *Philippines Climate and Disaster Risk Assessment Report* (Manila: UNDP Philippines, 2022), 34–41.

²⁵ Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 45–63; Francis, *Laudato Si'*, nos. 146–155.

disaster ruptured deeply rooted relationships between people and place. Villages that had served as homes for generations were erased by storm surges, while familiar landscapes that once anchored memory, identity, and livelihood were transformed into scenes of devastation.

Gaspar observes that survivors experienced not only material deprivation but also profound spiritual and existential disorientation as they struggled to interpret the scale of suffering that had engulfed their communities.²⁶ The destruction of churches, chapels, and religious landmarks intensified this experience of loss. In many communities, parish churches functioned not merely as places of worship but as repositories of collective memory, cultural identity, and social cohesion. Their destruction represented the loss of sacred spaces through which communities encountered God's presence and celebrated significant moments in communal life.

The aftermath of Yolanda, however, also revealed remarkable expressions of resilience and communal solidarity. Across affected regions, survivors gathered amidst the ruins to celebrate Masses in temporary shelters, evacuation centers, and makeshift chapels. Communities worked together to rebuild homes, churches, schools, and public spaces. These efforts represented more than practical reconstruction; they constituted acts of theological re-placement. Through rebuilding, communities sought to reclaim belonging, restore memory, and re-establish relationships with places that had been violently disrupted. Reconstruction became a sacramental practice through which survivors

²⁶ Karl M. Gaspar, *Desperately Seeking God's Saving Action in the World Today: Yolanda Survivors' Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2014), 15–32.

affirmed that God's presence remained active even amid devastation.²⁷

The Yolanda experience illustrates how ecological grief can become a site of theological renewal. While displacement generated profound experiences of loss and exile, communal reconstruction transformed these experiences into opportunities for renewed solidarity, faith, and belonging. The rebuilding of sacred and communal spaces demonstrated that place is not merely inherited but continually recreated through practices of memory, care, and hope.

Typhoon Ondoy: Urban Ecological Vulnerability

While Yolanda displayed the vulnerability of rural and coastal communities, Typhoon Ondoy (Ketsana) in 2009 revealed a different dimension of ecological displacement: urban vulnerability and environmental injustice. The unprecedented flooding that submerged large areas of Metro Manila displaced thousands of families, destroyed homes and livelihoods, and exposed the unequal distribution of environmental risks within urban settings.

Particularly affected were informal settlers located along rivers, waterways, and other flood-prone areas. These communities occupied environmentally vulnerable spaces brought by broader patterns of poverty, housing insecurity, and unequal access to urban resources. Their exposure to flooding reflected longstanding structural inequalities embedded within the urban landscape. Consequently, Ondoy revealed that ecological displacement is often linked to social and economic marginalization rather than merely to natural hazards.

²⁷ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 87–103.

Viewed through the lens of Pope Francis' (2015) integral ecology, Ondoy demonstrates that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable.²⁸ Environmental degradation disproportionately affects those who possess the fewest resources to respond and recover. The experience of informal settler communities illustrates how environmental injustice is often spatially expressed, with vulnerable populations concentrated in locations most exposed to ecological hazards. Consequently, any theology of place in the Philippine context must attend not only to ecological stewardship but also to questions of housing, urban planning, social justice, and equitable access to safe and dignified environments.

Ecological Displacement and Survival

The experiences of Yolanda and Ondoy are part of a broader national story of ecological displacement and survival. Across the Philippines, communities regularly confront the disruption of place caused by typhoons, flooding, mining activities, deforestation, and other environmental pressures. Such disruptions affect not only physical settlements but also the memories, identities, and cultural traditions that are embedded within landscapes. Ecological displacement therefore involves both material and symbolic loss—the loss of homes and livelihoods alongside the loss of stories, relationships, and forms of belonging that connect people to place.

For many displaced communities, survival involves more than securing shelter or rebuilding infrastructure. It also entails recovering meaning and re-establishing communal identity. In numerous disaster-affected areas, communities engage in acts of remembrance through

²⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 49.

commemorative liturgies, storytelling, memorial markers, and annual rituals that honor both loss and resilience. These practices help transform sites of devastation into spaces of memory and hope, allowing communities to reclaim their relationship with place even after profound disruption.

The role of churches and faith communities has been particularly significant in these processes of survival. Parishes often serve as centers of relief operations, evacuation sites, and spaces of communal healing. More importantly, they provide symbolic and spiritual resources through which communities interpret suffering and imagine possibilities for renewal. In many instances, pastoral leaders accompany displaced families throughout the lengthy process of rebuilding, helping them reconstruct not only physical dwellings but also communal relationships and collective identity.

The Philippine experience reveals that ecological displacement is not simply a story of vulnerability but also a story of resilience. Communities repeatedly demonstrate the capacity to rebuild homes, restore livelihoods, and recover a sense of belonging amid adversity. Their experiences suggest that place is not merely a fixed location, but a dynamic reality continually recreated through memory, solidarity, faith, and collective action. This capacity for re-placement—the rebuilding of relationships among people, land, and community—offers an important theological insight that will serve as a foundation for developing a distinctly Filipino theology of place in the succeeding sections.

Indigenous Ecologies of Place

Long before contemporary discussions of ecology emerged, Indigenous communities in the Philippines embodied relational understandings of land that reso-

nate strongly with contemporary theological concerns. For many Indigenous peoples, land is not merely a resource to be owned or exploited but a living reality that sustains relationships among human beings, ancestors, spirits, and the natural world. Place is therefore experienced not simply as territory but as a sacred network of relationships that shapes identity, memory, and communal life.

Among the Ayta communities of Central Luzon, ecological knowledge is deeply embedded within landscapes and cultural practices. As Apuan and Abansi observe, Indigenous ecological knowledge is inseparable from the environments in which it is cultivated and transmitted. Forests, rivers, mountains, and ancestral territories serve not only economic functions but also spiritual, cultural, and educational roles.²⁹ Ecological knowledge is passed from one generation to another through daily interaction with the land, enabling communities to maintain sustainable relationships with their environment. The land functions as both home and teacher, nurturing communal identity and cultural continuity.

The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991 dramatically disrupted these relationships. Thousands of Ayta families were displaced from ancestral territories, resulting in the loss of traditional livelihoods, ecological knowledge systems, and sacred relationships with place. While relocation programs addressed immediate physical needs, they often failed to recognize the deeper cultural

²⁹ Victoria Apuan and Maria Corazon Abansi, "Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Resource Management among the Ayta Communities of Central Luzon," in *Indigenous Peoples, Education and Sustainable Development in Asia*, ed. Roland G. Simbulan (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2011), 88.

and spiritual dimensions of displacement.³⁰ For many Indigenous communities, displacement involved more than relocation; it represented a rupture in relationships that had sustained communal identity for generations.

Indigenous perspectives therefore challenge dominant understandings of land as property or economic resource. Instead, they invite a relational understanding of place grounded in reciprocity, stewardship, and kinship. Such perspectives complement Brueggemann's covenantal vision while also extending it. Whereas Brueggemann emphasizes covenant between God, people, and land, Indigenous traditions highlight the interconnectedness of all living beings within a shared ecological community. These insights offer valuable resources for developing a contextual theology of place that is attentive to both ecological sustainability and cultural integrity.

Colonial Displacement and Alienation from Land

Contemporary experiences of ecological displacement in the Philippines is better understood in the historical legacy of colonialism where Spanish colonization deeply transformed Indigenous relationships with land through systems of territorial control, forced resettlement, and economic extraction.³¹ The establishment of the *reduccion* system relocated scattered Indigenous and rural populations into centralized settlements organized around church and state authority. While intended to facilitate governance and evangelization, these reloca-

³⁰ Victoria Apuan, *The Ayta of Floridablanca, Pampanga: Their Struggle for Identity, Land, and Justice* (Quezon City: Asian Social Institute, 2009). 1.

³¹ William Henry Scott, *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994), 121–145.

tions often disrupted longstanding relationships between communities and their ancestral lands.

The colonial period also introduced new legal and economic understandings of land. Traditional communal and relational notions of land stewardship gradually gave way to systems emphasizing private ownership, taxation, and agricultural production. The emergence of large estates and hacienda systems concentrated land ownership in the hands of elites while marginalizing many Indigenous and peasant communities. As a result, access to land increasingly became a source of inequality and social conflict.

These colonial transformations had not only economic consequences but also theological and cultural implications. The displacement of communities from ancestral territories contributed to forms of cultural alienation and the erosion of ecological knowledge. Relationships with place that had been sustained through generations were weakened as land became commodified and incorporated into colonial systems of governance and production. In this sense, ecological displacement in the Philippines possesses a deeper historical dimension that predates contemporary environmental crises.

Recognizing this history allows theology to move beyond viewing ecological displacement solely as the result of natural disasters or climate change. Instead, it highlights the structural and historical factors that continue to shape experiences of vulnerability and dispossession. The colonial legacy reminds us that place is never merely geographical; it is also political, cultural, and theological. Any meaningful theology of place in the Philippine context must therefore address not only ecological degradation but also the historical realities of dispossession, inequality, and cultural disruption.

Toward a Filipino Theology of Place: Critical Synthesis

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that contemporary theological reflections on place provide important resources for understanding ecological displacement, yet the Philippine experience contributes distinctive insights that both enrich and challenge existing frameworks. Brueggemann's theology of land emphasizes covenantal belonging, Inge highlights the sacramental nature of place, Sheldrake underscores the role of memory and identity, and Pope Francis expands the discussion through the lens of integral ecology and ecological justice. While each of these perspectives offers valuable theological insights, the realities of ecological displacement, Indigenous struggles, colonial histories, and community resilience in the Philippines suggest the need for a more contextual theological articulation of place. Such a theology must emerge not only from theological texts but also from the lived experiences of communities whose identities are continually shaped by ecological vulnerability and the struggle to remain rooted amid displacement.

Place as Covenantal Belonging

The first contribution of a Filipino theology of place is the recovery of land as a relationship of covenantal belonging. Brueggemann's understanding of land as gift, promise, and challenge resonates strongly within Philippine communities whose lives remain deeply connected to landscapes. Whether among farming communities, fishing villages, Indigenous peoples, or urban neighborhoods, place often functions as a source of identity, memory, and communal continuity. The repeated disruption of these relationships through

typhoons, flooding, environmental degradation, and forced migration reveals the profound significance of place for human flourishing.

However, the Philippine experience also extends Brueggemann's covenantal framework. In contexts where displacement has become a recurring reality, covenantal belonging is not merely inherited but continually re-established through communal acts of rebuilding and solidarity. Communities displaced by ecological disasters often rediscover belonging through mutual assistance, collective labor, and shared practices of remembrance. Covenant, therefore, becomes not simply a theological concept but a lived practice through which communities sustain relationships with one another and with the land despite repeated disruptions.

This insight broadens the theology of place by emphasizing that belonging is dynamic rather than static. Place remains significant not because it is immune from change or loss but because communities continually reaffirm their commitment to one another and to the spaces they inhabit. In this sense, covenantal belonging becomes an act of resilience that enables communities to endure and respond creatively to ecological uncertainty.

Place as Sacramental Presence

A second contribution emerges from the recognition of place as sacramental presence. Building on the insights of John Inge and Indigenous understandings of land, a Filipino theology of place affirms that God is encountered through the material realities of creation and community. Sacred places are not limited to churches and shrines but include rivers, forests, mountains, coastlines, farms, and ancestral territories that mediate experiences of divine presence and communal identity.

The experiences of communities recovering from ecological disasters illustrate this sacramental dimension. Following Typhoon Yolanda, temporary chapels, evacuation centers, and reconstructed homes became spaces where faith was expressed, and God's presence encountered. Similarly, Indigenous communities often understand landscapes as sites of memory, spiritual significance, and ecological wisdom. These examples suggest that place functions sacramentally because it mediates relationships among God, humanity, and creation.

This sacramental understanding challenges modern tendencies to separate spirituality from material reality. Instead, it affirms that salvation is experienced through concrete places and embodied relationships. Ecological destruction therefore carries theological implications because it damages not only ecosystems but also the sacramental spaces through which communities encounter God. A Filipino theology of place consequently calls for the protection and restoration of these sacred landscapes as expressions of both ecological responsibility and spiritual care.

Place as Resilient Belonging

The most distinctive contribution of the Philippine experience is the understanding of place as resilient belonging. The recurring experiences of typhoons, flooding, volcanic eruptions, and displacement reveal that place cannot be understood merely as a fixed geographical location. Rather, place emerges through the capacity of communities to sustain identity, memory, and hope amid disruption.

The stories of survivors of Yolanda, Ondoy, and other ecological disasters demonstrate that belonging persists even when physical environments are transformed or

destroyed. Communities rebuild homes, restore churches, commemorate losses, and create new spaces of gathering and worship.³² Through these practices, they reconstruct relationships that have been fractured by displacement. Place thus becomes an ongoing process of re-establishing connections among people, memory, land, and faith.

This perspective offers an important corrective to theological approaches that may inadvertently romanticize stability and permanence. While rootedness remains important, the Philippine experience reveals that communities often cultivate belonging precisely through experiences of movement, adaptation, and recovery. Resilience is not merely the ability to survive ecological crises but the capacity to recreate meaning and community in their aftermath. Consequently, place should be understood not only as inherited space but also as a continually renewed relationship sustained through collective memory and action.

Toward a Theology of Ecological Re-Placement

These insights culminate in what may be described as a theology of ecological re-placement. Ecological displacement is often interpreted primarily as loss, of homes, livelihoods, ecosystems, and cultural traditions. While these losses are real and significant, the Philippine experience demonstrates that displacement can also generate new forms of belonging, solidarity, and ecological consciousness.

Ecological re-placement refers to the processes through which communities rebuild relationships with

³² Karl M. Gaspar, *Desperately Seeking God's Saving Action in the World Today: Yolanda Survivors' Hope Beyond Heartbreaking Lamentations* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2014), 15–32.

land, memory, and one another after experiences of disruption. Such processes include reconstructing homes and places of worship, restoring damaged ecosystems, preserving cultural memory, and advocating for ecological justice. Re-placement is not simply a return to what existed before but a creative and transformative response that seeks new ways of inhabiting the world faithfully.

This concept resonates with Brueggemann's understanding of exile and restoration while also incorporating insights from Indigenous ecological wisdom and Pope Francis' integral ecology. Exile is not the end of the story; it becomes a space where communities discover new possibilities for covenantal life and ecological responsibility. Re-placement therefore represents a practical expression of hope grounded in concrete acts of rebuilding, healing, and renewal.

Filipino Contribution to the Theology of Place

The Philippine experience contributes a distinctive voice to contemporary theological discussions of place. While Brueggemann emphasizes covenant, Inge sacramentality, Sheldrake memory, and Pope Francis ecological solidarity, Filipino communities highlight the importance of resilience amid displacement. Their ecotheologies demonstrate that place is not only a gift to be received, but a sacrament also to be celebrated, a memory to be preserved, or a common home to be protected. It is also a reality continually reconstructed through faith, solidarity, and hope.

A Filipino theology of place, therefore, understands land as a relational and living reality where ecology, culture, spirituality, and memory converge. It insists that theological reflection must remain attentive to the experiences of communities living on the frontlines of

ecological crises. More importantly, it challenges the Church to accompany displaced peoples not merely through humanitarian assistance but through sustained efforts to nurture belonging, restore dignity, and promote ecological justice.

Such a theology offers a constructive response to contemporary ecological displacement by affirming that God remains present within wounded landscapes and vulnerable communities. Amid ecological uncertainty, place becomes a locus of encounter, resilience, and transformation where covenant, memory, sacramentality, and hope converge. Through this vision, theology is re-placed within the lived realities of the Filipino people and becomes a source of renewal for both communities and creation.

Pastoral and Ecclesial Implications

The theology of place developed in this study is not merely a theoretical framework for understanding ecological displacement; it also offers important pastoral and ecclesial implications for the Church in the Philippines. The experiences of ecological vulnerability, displacement, and community resilience reveal that ministry must be attentive not only to spiritual needs but also to the spatial, ecological, and cultural realities that shape people's lives. If place is understood as covenant, sacrament, memory, common home, and resilient belonging, then the Church's mission must likewise become deeply rooted in the protection, restoration, and celebration of place. In a nation increasingly affected by climate-related disasters and environmental degradation, pastoral ministry must accompany communities not only in moments of crisis but also in the ongoing work of ecological healing and communal renewal.

Pastoral Accompaniment in Contexts of Displacement

The experiences of ecological displacement in the Philippines call for a pastoral approach grounded in accompaniment. Displacement often results in more than material loss; it disrupts identity, memory, relationships, and a sense of belonging. Communities affected by typhoons, floods, mining activities, or forced relocation frequently experience grief associated with the loss of homes, sacred spaces, livelihoods, and familiar landscapes.

In this context, the Church is called to accompany displaced communities throughout the lengthy process of recovery and rebuilding. Pastoral care must extend beyond emergency relief efforts to include sustained support for emotional healing, communal rebuilding, and spiritual renewal. The presence of clergy, religious workers, and lay leaders in evacuation centers, resettlement sites, and disaster-affected communities embodies what Brueggemann describes as an emplaced theology—one that encounters people within the concrete realities of their suffering and hope.

Such accompaniment also involves listening to the stories of displaced persons and recognizing the spiritual significance of their experiences. Through pastoral presence, the Church affirms that displacement does not diminish human dignity or sever God's covenantal relationship with communities. Rather, it becomes a space where solidarity, compassion, and hope can be nurtured.

Liturgical and Sacramental Renewal

A theology of place invites the Church to reimagine its liturgical and sacramental practices in ways that

foster ecological consciousness and deeper connections with local environments. If creation mediates God's presence and place functions sacramentally, then liturgy should cultivate gratitude, responsibility, and care for the earth.

The celebration of the Season of Creation, ecological prayer services, blessings of rivers and watersheds, tree-planting rituals, and community environmental activities can become important expressions of ecological discipleship. Likewise, memorial liturgies for disaster victims provide opportunities for communities to remember loss, affirm resilience, and express hope in God's continuing presence amid suffering.

The Eucharist itself offers profound ecological significance. The bread and wine presented at the altar symbolize the fruits of the earth and human labor, reminding believers of their dependence upon creation and their responsibility to care for it. A renewed ecological spirituality within liturgical life can help faith communities recognize the intimate relationship between worship, justice, and stewardship.

Furthermore, churches damaged or rebuilt after disasters may themselves become symbols of ecological and spiritual resilience. The reconstruction of sacred spaces offers opportunities for communities to reflect on the meaning of place and to reaffirm their commitment to ecological responsibility.

Learning from Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities in the Philippines offer valuable insights for pastoral and ecclesial renewal. Their relational understanding of land challenges dominant cultural assumptions that treat nature primarily as a resource for economic development. Instead, Indigenous traditions emphasize reciprocity,

stewardship, communal responsibility, and respect for the interconnectedness of all life.

Pastoral leaders can learn from Indigenous ecological wisdom by fostering greater appreciation for local ecosystems, traditional ecological knowledge, and community-based approaches to environmental care. Such learning requires respectful dialogue and genuine recognition of Indigenous peoples as important conversation partners in theological and pastoral reflection.

The experiences of Indigenous communities also remind the Church that ecological concerns are inseparable from questions of cultural survival, social justice, and human dignity. Supporting Indigenous struggles for ancestral domain rights and environmental protection therefore becomes an expression of the Church's commitment to ecological justice and solidarity.

By integrating Indigenous insights into pastoral formation, ecological education, and community ministry, the Church can develop more contextual and culturally grounded responses to environmental challenges.

Prophetic Ecological Ministry

The theology of place also calls the Church to exercise a prophetic role in addressing the structural causes of ecological displacement. Following the insights of Brueggemann and Pope Francis, pastoral ministry cannot remain confined to charitable responses alone. It must also challenge social, political, and economic systems that contribute to environmental degradation, land dispossession, and climate vulnerability.

This prophetic ministry includes advocacy for environmental protection, sustainable development, climate justice, and equitable access to land and natural

resources. It involves supporting communities affected by destructive mining operations, deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable development projects. It also requires promoting policies that protect vulnerable populations from the impacts of climate change and environmental injustice.

The Philippine Church already possesses important resources for such engagement through Catholic Social Teaching and the ecological vision articulated in *Laudato Si'*. By integrating these teachings into parish programs, theological education, and social action ministries, the Church can contribute to the creation of more just and sustainable communities.

Prophetic ecological ministry seeks to transform both individual attitudes and societal structures. It recognizes that ecological crises are not merely environmental problems but moral and spiritual challenges that demand collective action and conversion.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the theology of place provides a meaningful framework for interpreting ecological displacement in the Philippine context. By bringing Walter Brueggemann's theology of land into dialogue with John Inge, Philip Sheldrake, Pope Francis, and Indigenous ecological perspectives, it argues that place is more than a geographical location; it is a theological reality where covenant, memory, identity, and ecological responsibility converge. The Philippine experience demonstrates that ecological displacement involves not only the loss of land but also the disruption of communal identity, cultural memory, and spiritual belonging. At the same time, the experiences of Typhoon Yolanda, Typhoon Ondoy, and Indigenous communities reveal that resilience is nurtured through rebuilding,

remembrance, ecological stewardship, and communal solidarity. These findings support the development of a Filipino theology of place grounded in ecological replacement, where relationships among God, people, culture, and creation are continually renewed through ecological care and shared responsibility.

The study also emphasized the pastoral significance of this theological vision. A Filipino theology of place calls the Church to accompany ecologically displaced communities, deepen ecological spirituality, engage Indigenous ecological wisdom, and strengthen its commitment to environmental justice. In this way, theology becomes an embodied and contextual response to the ecological realities confronting Filipino communities. Ultimately, re-placing theology affirms that God's presence continues to be encountered in the work of restoring relationships—with creation, with one another, and with God—offering a hopeful vision of Christian discipleship rooted in the care for our common home.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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