

**Pastor Jonathan V. Exiomo**  
**A JOURNEY THROUGH DOUBT**  
*Jophen Bauí*

*Pastor Jonathan Exiomo is a student of Theology, Scriptures and Philosophy. He has been President-CEO of the Alliance Graduate School since 2003. AGS, a graduate evangelical seminary founded by the Christian and Missionary Alliance Churches of the Philippines, trains men and women for the ministry and missions of the church. Hence, he sees the Seminary as Theological Education for National Transformation. The Seminary is recognized by the Commission on Higher Education of the Philippine Government (CHED) and accredited by the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA), the Asia Theological Association (ATA), and a member of the International Christian Higher Education (ICHE).*

Born to poverty of tenant parents, Jonathan started asking deep questions about life at a very young age. “Why are we poor? Is there more to this life than what is apparent?” He found all his answers in the Scriptures – or so he thought.

In senior high, he had a subject called Character Education. The textbook they were using was the Bible. This started his love for reading Bible stories especially Genesis. Eventually in college, he took up Pastoral Studies. This general course opened his heart and mind to one special interest – the language of the Scriptures. Biblical studies introduced him to Greek and Hebrew, and eventually towards a life-long passion for hermeneutics.

“The Word of God is written in the language of human beings in time and space. Thus, when I read the bible ...I reflect on it in three levels: (1) study what is said –the text or passage and its context (2) how is it said—I study what the writer did to what he/she said (structure, style and literary form or genre) (3) why did he/she say what he/she said in how he said it—referring to the reason for communicating such to the recipient. My purpose is to get the theological statement which the text affirms so I could use it as guide or influence for my decision making in areas of life like conflict resolution, attitudes, and other content issues like doctrines....”

Such passionate involvement with the Word of God came about as a result of a long and arduous struggle with doubt. For a while, Pastor Jonathan doubted the significance and necessity of his calling, or whether that calling was worth pursuing at all. He suspected the Word of God itself.

In the first place, frustration towards people was one of those things that drove him towards unbelief. He had once measured his sense of self against what he thought he could do well – teaching. Yet, he got fired in one important teaching job. Along with that loss, his sense of significance also diminished.

Part of his quest to recover what was lost made him turn to *more* education. At one time, he got himself enrolled in two institutions. While doing his masters in Scriptures at the Mary Hill School of Theology, he did his preparatory PhD at the Ateneo de Manila towards philosophical hermeneutics. In the course of his studies at the Ateneo, he got acquainted with the “masters of suspicions”: Marx<sup>1</sup>, Nietzsche,<sup>1</sup> and Freud.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Nietzsche dissected Christianity and Socialism as faiths of the "little men," where excuses for weakness paraded as moral principles.

“I was an agnostic during the years 1993-1997. Back then, I didn’t care. I was a pastor of a church but I did not even believe in prayer. After I got removed from an institution where I was a teacher, that’s when I got into all these philosophers. I wrestled with these guys intellectually, philosophically....”

Yet, as he read these philosophers, he felt very much alone; he had nobody to share his struggles with. These men questioned the existence of God, and as he got deeper and deeper into their philosophies, he too, asked more questions even about the validity of his calling.

He realized then that education is not pure content. He longed for moral support, social, and emotional back up. He was becoming more and more an agnostic and he could feel a sense of deep loss.

“I am a product of my context and so is everybody. My experience in the context affects the way I read life’s experiences and that includes the Bible. When I was young and Sunday school was the only recourse to the study of the Bible, I believed the Bible literally. For instance one reads, ‘And God said...’ so I really believed that God said it literally with a human voice. Whether that voice was baritone or tenor, who knows, but it should be one of the above.

“Then ... in Seminary, I was introduced to study the Bible like any other science would do in its discipline. Sometimes, doubts came as we in the seminary explored the sources the alleged “writers” used, the theology behind the editorial intent, etcetera. That approach led me to see more of the human side of the pendulum that I started to doubt the Scriptures’ divinity. This critical approach is at the same time a moment of abandonment of my literal belief of the Scripture which I gained from my Sunday School days. Confusion abound as I lost the options on how to approach the Bible where edification was the result...”

Pastor Jonathan wanted to turn to somebody who could understand his dilemma. Then in his search, he discovered the works of the French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

“Paul Ricoeur was a philosopher and a prolific writer. His [project](#) is essentially concerned with that grand theme of philosophy: meaning and existence. He focused on the tensions running through the very structure of human being. He constantly inquired on the hermeneutic of the self, fundamental to which is our need to understand our own life. A well-known and highly respected Christian philosopher, his philosophical writings do not rely upon theological concepts, and are appreciated by non-Christians and Christians alike.” Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical writings helped Pastor Jonathan uncover what was hidden to him about his own life.

Meanwhile, at the Catholic Mary Hill School of Theology, Pastor Jonathan “...had a professor who was very passionate with reduction criticism.” As these German and European scholars of Scriptures engaged him in critical debates and suppositions, he also began to be critical about apparent contradictions in the Bible.

“I remember that Father Hermann [Hendrickx](#), a Belgian New Testament scholar helped me process my disbelief in a way that led me back to belief. So with Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical backing and Mary Hill’s integrated critical approach, I regained my respect for Scriptures.”

About this time, at a conference in the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, he happened to sit with the speaker who spoke on selected passages from Ephesians. His impression of the man steered him towards his next direction. “I got very attracted to the spirituality that this

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<sup>2</sup> Freud believed that humans were driven by two conflicting central desires: the life drive ([libido](#)) (survival, propagation, hunger, thirst, and sex) and the death drive ([Thanatos](#)).

man tried to project. In his talk, he was able to integrate psychology, philosophy and exegesis. So I asked where he was coming from, and he was a professor and Dean at the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary.”

I asked, “Do you study Paul Ricoeur?”

“Paul Ricoeur is one of our required readings,” he said.

I got excited, “If I transfer to your seminary, will you accept my dissertation on Paul Ricoeur?”

He said, “Well, you have to go through the academic requirements, the specialization in Philosophy of religion, religious language- Hermeneutics.”

“So I finally found a place where my academic expectations could be met, but not only that. I also found an environment where I had a support group with whom I could share my struggles as I analyzed Scriptures. I believe that a seminary should be able not only to address the academic needs of the students but it should also enhance their appreciation of the local community—a church. A seminary should prepare them to interact with the common people’s issues. I was also looking for that and I found it.”

After he finished his doctorate in philosophical hermeneutics in 2002, he was lost as to where to spend the next five years of his life. “I could not decide on whether to accept a teaching opportunity at a prestigious University in Metro Manila or accept the challenge of presidency of a seminary. Dr. Tereso Casino, my mentor and adviser, emailed me when I sought his opinion:

*... from a missiological . . . standpoint. That which gives you opportunities to maximize your influence as a Christian scholar and that would result in the optimum fulfillment of the Great Commission ought to be pursued. Any place that lessens the degree of your influence . . . should be avoided . . . the Great Commission is not simply a task that needs fulfilling; it is also a matter of stewardship that needs creative maximizing. . . . we should be careful about SELECTING not PREFERRING our ministry opportunities. Biblical stewardship dictates that we should take ministry functions that are STRATEGIC ENOUGH to impact more lives not few.”*

Today, as President of AGS, Pastor Jonathan Exiomo has a cleared perspective of his calling. But his journey continues, and the questions still evolve.

A book he was reading, a book on *Hermeneutics as Theology* says that “gone are those days when the framework of modernity becomes the dominant method for doing theology, the framework of post modernity is now coming in . . . .

“Modernist theology have been very concerned about the result . . . there is a certain accuracy . . . it uses scientific method, totalizing observation. But post modernity says, unless you include the human experience . . . it is not really that objective. You look at an object from your perspective; I look at it from where I am coming from; others look at it with their own life’s questions and expectations. So with all these perspectives how do you handle truth?<sup>3</sup> In hermeneutics we do not deal with human beings in the same way that we deal with a tree. With human beings there should be dialogue . . . .”

Pastor Jonathan Exiomo’s interests include talking to children and simple folks or watching local movies. He is able to affirm many truths from Scriptures through the given texts of interaction with the obvious. A lot of times, he needs to break away from uncertainties and conquer doubt as it tries to assault him. But he is past the deep decline. He knows fully well that God’s thoughts are higher, and His love, deeper.

<sup>3</sup> Pastor Jonathan Exiomo touches on “truth” in postmodern context in his book in *Interpreting the Text* launched on September 12, 2008.

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<sup>i</sup> Marx's approach to history and politics is indicated by the opening line of the first chapter of [\*The Communist Manifesto\*](#) (1848): “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of [class struggles](#)”.