God and the Concept of Death and Suffering in the Philippine Context

Prof. Fr. Rodel E. Aligan, O.P.
(Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines)

1. Pre-Hispanic Religiosity
2. Hispanic Religiosity
3. Protestant Religiosity
4. Contemporary Religiosity

1. Pre-Hispanic Religiosity

The early Filipinos were genuinely religious. They had a religious relationship with the Holy, day in and day out. The Holy, in what is often called a theophany, communicated with the pre-Hispanic Filipinos through different aspects of nature. The response of these ancient people was ex-
pressed in meaningful rites.\textsuperscript{1}

The Filipinos had a cosmic or nature religion wherein hierophanies (or paleophanies) and myths shaped the people’s daily behavior in reference to the Holy. Hierophanies were the divinity’s self-manifestation to the people through nature, while myths offered them the reasons for many things such as customs and practices. These myths speak of the creation of the world, the beginning of the human race, the reward of glory, punishment and other invisible things. The Boxer Codex\textsuperscript{2} appears to give us a version of the Filipino myths of origins which were in common circulation at the time of writing. Loarca’s “Relacion” carries two versions of the myths of origin: the “Yliugeynes” version from the coastal people and the “Tinguian” version from the mountain people.\textsuperscript{3} Colin’s version came much later and is quite possibly a hybrid of both myths.\textsuperscript{4} Aside from these there are other versions of creation from the Ifugaos, the Subanuns, and the Bagobos.\textsuperscript{5}

The centre of the mythology which guided and organized the life and society of early Filipinos was the idea of a God whom they named, \textit{Batala}. They worshipped \textit{Batala} because he was the lord of all and created all peoples. It is said that this \textit{Batala} had many ministers whom he sent to this world to bring about by their intervention whatever happened there.\textsuperscript{6}

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{1} Rodel Aligan, \textit{The End as the Beginning: the Filipino View on Death}, Manila: UST Publishing House, 200, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{2} Boxer Codex, “The Manners, Customs and Beliefs of the Philippines Inhabitants of Long Ago, Being a Chapter of a Late 16\textsuperscript{th} Century Manuscript”, ed. Landa Jocano, \textit{The Philippines at the Spanish Contact}, Manila: MCS Enterprises, 1975.
\textsuperscript{3} Miguel de Loarca, “Relacion de las Islas Filipinas”, \textit{Blair and Robertson’s the Philippine Islands (BRPI)} 5, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{4} Francisco Colin, S.J., “Native Races and their Customs”, \textit{BRPI} 40, p. 161.
\end{flushright}
These beings they call the *anitos* and each of them had its own office. Some were *anitos* of the fields, others of the sailors, others of those who went to war, others of sickness. People made sacrifice to these *anitos* when they wanted something from each one of them according to their office.\(^7\)

The ancient people sacrificed to the *anito* and not to *Batala* because *Batala* was a great lord in heaven to whom no one could speak and the *anito*, as ministers of *Batala*, were in the world and able to intercede for the people.

These hierophanies, myth and beliefs generated among native Filipinos the religious conviction that ‘God’s will’ must be strictly followed. They became the pattern which shaped the religious behavior of the early Filipinos. They lie at the heart of Filipino pre-Christian religion and help explain ancient responses to the experience of the Holy.

### 1.1. God and the Reality of Death and Suffering in Pre-Hispanic Times

Even before the Spaniards came to the Philippines, the different tribal groups in the country have long recognized the reality of death. For the early Filipinos death was a mystery. They perceived death as something beyond the ordinary experience of life. The reality of god and death are intertwined.

The earliest myths provided by the “Boxer Codex” and in the writings of Colin and Loarca tells us that the early Visayans believed that men were immortal from the beginning and that their ancestors were the gods who helped them in their needs and gave, or even deprived, them of

\(^7\) Ibid.
health. Later men became mortal because of the mistakes of their ancestors, Pandaguan. The first human death was caused by a thunderbolt and was a punishment for bringing a shark alive to shore and thereby causing it to die and thus paying obsequies to it. When the man died the gods took pity on him. This is the reason why the Visayans believe that a person could return to earth on the third, seventh, or thirtieth day following his death.

Death is also a journey to the afterlife. The journey can be a long one over the waters or by descent to the bowels of the earth. The same journey might be symbolized by a tree, mountain or woods.

The dead are also rendered judgment. The great difference between death and life is accentuated in the act of judgment which, it is believed, the dead undergo once they arrived at their destination. Judgment brings separation of the good and the bad. The good are sent up to the summit of the high mountains. The wicked are made to fetch water endlessly or are pitched into the fire.

The life hereafter is different, yet strangely somewhat similar, to life here; and this is attested by many tribal groups who share similar beliefs and experiences. For the Bontocs, the dead continue to exist as an unseen but powerful population on earth. The Ifugaos go to Kadungayan, Mappolwa, or Tulpukan, a place where the ancestors live and where all go after death, the place where the dead’s ancestors are also supposed to exist. The Bontocs say that during daytime there is nothing extraordinary about these

---

8 Boxer Codex, 219-221.
9 Ibid.
10 Miguel de Loarca, “Relacion”, BRPI, p. 131.
places just seeing trees and stone. At night the trees and stones become houses again and the spirits come and live in them just like any ordinary beings. For the Apayao and the Isneg, the realm of the dead is a happy place where the activities are similar with those on earth. However, everything is finer. Houses, for instance, are made of gold and silver.\footnote{Lourdes Dulawan, “The Ifugaos”, \textit{UNITAS} 50, 1957, p. 401.}

Death and dying, moreover, signify the power of the gods and the spirits of the dead over the living. For the early inhabitants of the country, the absence of scientific knowledge to explain the causes of death led people to posit supernatural causes. They were always caused by gods and spirits. For example, the early Visayans believe the god \textit{Macaptan} brings death and the divinity \textit{Lalahon}, who dwells in a volcano on Negros Island, hurls fire and causes death.\footnote{M. Loarca, “Relacion”, p. 85.}

Ancestor worship emerged as the basic response of the pre-Hispanic Filipinos to the paleophanies and the reality of death, a response which was performed through some rites, primarily through the \textit{Pasing-tabi sa Nono} and the \textit{pag-aanito}.\footnote{Francisco Colin, S.J., “Native Races and Their Customs”, \textit{BRPI}, pp. 170-172.} The \textit{anitos} were the spirits of the dead ancestors whom the natives invoked. The \textit{anito} of the household were the spirits of the parents and grandparents, who during their earthly existence exercised authority in the family affairs.\footnote{M. Loarca, pp. 123-125.} For the Bontocs, there were two kinds of \textit{anitos}. The “away” was the spirit who died a natural death and the “pinteg” was the spirit of the beheaded man. The latter was the people’s favorite because they believed that, on account of the violent nature of its death, this \textit{anito} would be vengeful against enemies.\footnote{Carmencita Cawed, \textit{The Culture of the Bontoc Igorot}, ed. Ernesto Bhagwani, Communications Foundation of Asia, 1980, p. 34.}

For most of the early Filipinos, the \textit{anitos} were believed as other-
worldly but are still active and very much part of the present world. At the same time, they had contact with the Supreme Being and shared many characteristics of being with the ultimate divinity. The anitos became intermediaries between the living and the Holy One because, despite belonging to the spirit world, they still maintained an active influence in the lives of Filipinos. In consequence, the ancestral spirits called anitos held power to make people happy or unhappy, lucky or unlucky in life; they held the key to good health, success and prosperity. “Pag-aanito” presided over by the “catalonans” “sonat” or “babaylans” (shamans) were the most solemn rites of pre-Christian indigenous religion.\textsuperscript{18} Sacrifices to the spirits of the dead are an important part of these rites. Through them, the people hoped to gain goodwill or placate the wraths of the spirits.

Even today, a look at the oral traditions of the ethnic tribes, the Ifugaos or the Negritos for example, show that the whole of life — from birth to death, from morning till night, from the sorting of the rice to the highest “canao” (ritual of rebirth) — is imbued with religious meaning. People are in constant communication with the anitos, enlivened by the invisible presence of their ancestors.

2. Hispanic Religiosity

In the accounts of the chronicler, Antonio Pigafetta,\textsuperscript{19} the Spanish conquistador Ferdinand Magellan is said to have started the Christianization of the Philippines with the following teaching to the Cebuanos: “God made the sky, the earth, the sea and everything else, and that he had com-

\textsuperscript{18} Fr. Jesus Merino, O.P., “Religiosity and Nationalism Among Filipinos”, \textit{Unitas Quarterly Review}, December 1965, p. 543.

\textsuperscript{19} Antonio Pigafetta, “Primo viaggio intorno al mondo”, \textit{BRPI} 33, pp. 142-145.
manded us to honor our fathers and mothers and that whoever did otherwise was condemned to eternal fire”. This is reported as the beginning of the evangelization of the country.20

The Spanish missionaries, in their attempts to evangelize the Philippines, found in folk tradition both an obstacle and an instrument for the achievement of their goals.21 By learning the native languages, preaching through the vernacular, introducing the printing press, and various religious and devotional practices they made sure that Christianity would be introduced to the early Filipinos in a manner which was similar to the existing religious practices. It is true that the people had their own beliefs which were henotheistic and tribalistic in nature. However, they did believe in a supreme being called: “Bathalang Maykapal or Batala” (Tagalog), “Laon” (Visayas), and “Kabunian” (Ilokano).22 Thus, to teach about the one true God the missionaries translated the catechisms, printed in the Philippines, into various local languages which encouraged a wide spread of their message.23 Moreover, it was through these written catechisms that the Philippine dialects were regularized and developed into a more pliant vehicle of communication through which the local populace came into contact with the Greco-Roman culture brought by Christianity.24

Through the vernacular the pre-Christian cult of the gods and the anito among the natives predisposed them to accept with ease the God of Catholicism and the Christian form of worship. The pre-Hispanic Filipinos accepted the faith without much resistance because they had no need to change their general attitude. No violence was done to their

---

20 Ibid.
23 Aligan, p. 25.
religious psychological constitution.

With the fostering of the sacramental life of the Church, as a way of teaching the God of Christianity, most of the ancient inhabitants became Catholics through baptism. But with so little instructions however, some of the baptized returned to their previous practices, while others presented themselves as Christians to suit their interest. Abuses started to surface by the 18th century and errors also became widespread. Some people professed the Catholic faith but their practices remained deeply rooted on the habits of indigenous religion.25

Liturgy was generally understood as the administration of the sacraments and celebration of Holy Mass. In simple terms, to become a Christian meant to receive the sacraments and to attend at Mass.26 Religious and devotional practices proved to be a principal factor in attracting the native Filipinos to the faith. Thus, they have devotions to our Lord, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the saints and the veneration of images.27 The Filipino houses were filled with statues and paintings of the saints and of the child Jesus. These images generally small, and richly colored with hands and face of ivory, were adorned with vigil lamps.28

Through the principle of substitution Christian saints took over the role of the anito. Christian spirituality at that time favored the tendency to invoke the saints in order to obtain spiritual as well as material aids and deliverance from eternal and temporal evils, such as death.

27 Fernandez, pp. 84-88.
The God of Christianity introduced by the missionaries was Jesus Christ. But the first thing that strikes us about the Filipino Christ — that is, the view of Christ most commonly held in the Philippines — is its similarity to the traditional Spanish Christ, and therefore also to the Latin American Christ.\textsuperscript{29} He appears exclusively in two dramatic roles: as the “Santo Nino” (Holy Child) and the “Santo Entierro” (Christ Interred) — the tragic victim on the cross or in the tomb.\textsuperscript{30} This traditional imagery unconsciously conveys a message of a Christ who was born and died but never really lived.\textsuperscript{31} The great formative and decisive years of Jesus’ life — the years between helpless infancy and his determination to die in order that others may live — are strangely passed over. Jesus Christ, as an historical individual, is virtually unknown or else disregarded. This de-emphasis on the life of the adult Jesus leads to what the Filipino philosopher-poet Benito Reyes has called “seasonal Christianity”.\textsuperscript{32} Just as the Santo Niño never grows up, the Santo Entierro never lives again. The Christ of the Filipinos is pre-eminently a suffering Christ. He is the beaten, scourged, humiliated, and defeated Christ. Filipinos, particularly the men, readily identify themselves with this kind of Christ.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, during Holy Week people are crucified, and the “flagelantes” practiced in some areas is related to this same devotion. It would seem, therefore, from these devotional practices that disproportionate significance is given to the suffering and death of Christ over that of his life and teaching.

As devotion to the dead and dying Christ suggests, Filipinos were not mere passive recipients of the culture brought with the Spanish conquest.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
Circumstances gave them considerable freedom in selecting their responses to Hispanization. Their responses varied all the way from acceptance to indifference and rejection. The capacity of Filipinos for creative social adjustment is attested by the manner in which they adapted Hispanic features to their own indigenous culture.\textsuperscript{34}

2.1. The God-Jesus and the Reality of Death and Suffering during the Hispanic Times

According to the Council of Trent the origin of death is the sin of Adam. He transgressed the Divine Commandment and he was threatened with death and that he transmitted death to the whole of humankind. Death is a consequence of original sin.\textsuperscript{35}

Death is also universal. All people are in original sin and subject to the law of death.\textsuperscript{36} With death the possibility of merit or demerit or conversion ceases. With death one’s individual history finally ends. Thus, humans should make use of life on earth to win everlasting life.\textsuperscript{37}

Immediately after death the particular judgment takes place in which by a Divine Sentence of Judgment the eternal destiny of the deceased person is decided.\textsuperscript{38} The souls of the just, which in the moment of death are free of guilt and punishment for sin, enter heaven.\textsuperscript{39} The souls of those who die in the condition of personal grievous sin go to hell. The souls of the just which in the moment of death are burdened with venial

\textsuperscript{34} Phelan, p. viii.
\textsuperscript{35} Denz. 101, 109a, Denz. 788.
\textsuperscript{36} Denz. 789.
\textsuperscript{37} Denz. 211, 778, 530, 693.
\textsuperscript{38} Denz. 193.
\textsuperscript{39} Denz. 475.
sins or temporal punishment due to sin enter Purgatory.\textsuperscript{40}

The missionaries therefore taught that the souls of the dead no longer inhabit the world but the other world. Those who die as Christians go to heaven but non-Christians go to hell as well as Christians who die with mortal sin.\textsuperscript{41}

For those living and dying they were advised to make an Act of Faith, recite the Creed, if possible, or compensate with devotion to the name of Jesus. They were also told to seek recourse from the Blessed Virgin Mary, the saints and their guardian angels.\textsuperscript{42}

All the dead will rise again on the last day with their bodies. They will rise again with the same body they had on earth. The bodies of the just will be remodeled and transfigured to the pattern of the Risen Christ.\textsuperscript{43}

Nowadays, the majority of Christians in the urban areas accepted the Christian teaching on death and even of the Christian practices prescribed by the Church. In the rural areas, moreover, the influence of pre-Hispanic practices still persists. Most believe that the relationship between the living and the dead continues after death. A great deal of attention is given to the return of the souls of the dead. Considerable devotion was extended to the dead to avoid any harm they might, if displeased, inflict on the living. This is especially seen in their celebration of the All Saints and All Souls Day, where many Filipinos think of these days primarily as an opportunity to strengthen ties with the dead. Very few are conscious of the fact that these celebrations are primarily invitation to pray for the souls in Purgatory.

\textsuperscript{40} De fide.
\textsuperscript{41} Aligan, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Denz. 249, 16, 40, 287, 347, 427, 464, 531.
3. Protestant Religiosity

Protestantism was introduced by the American missionaries at the turn of last century. The studies of Gerald H. Anderson\(^\text{44}\) shows the existence of “American-Protestant Imperialism” making the Protestant evangelization of the Philippines appear as a nationalistic, messianic, even an anti-Catholic endeavor proclaiming America as the evangelist of the world.

These missionaries were infused with the idea of “Manifest Destiny”\(^\text{45}\) with its theological rationale that destiny arose out of the common doctrine of providence: a conviction that God works through nations to accomplish his purpose, and an assumption that the United States was the primary agent of God’s meaningful activity in history.

For the Protestant clergy during this period, there was a profound and pervasive idea of mission for their country — that America had special work to do in history. The faith that America’s course of action had the approval of divine providence seemed to be confirmed by the swift and complete triumphs of the country especially in the American-Spanish War.

As to the fate of the Philippines in the hands of the Americans, the missionary element in the country was so farsighted about the possibility of new openings, and so active in preparing itself for the contingency of imperialism that the cumulative effect of their words and deeds weighed heavily on the side of expansionism.\(^\text{46}\)


\(^{45}\) Until the 1890’s the Manifest Destiny was thought primarily in terms of continental expansion, the absorption of North America, with the consent of the people about to be absorbed and with a view toward their admission to citizenship and statehood. Many Protestant clergymen when faced with the issue and opportunity of American expansion into Asia attempted to justify it in terms of historic destiny and ethical obligation.

Kenneth Mackenzie in his study shows that one of the strongest supporters of American acquisition of the Philippines was Bishop James M. Thoburn, an advocate of American possession from the very commencement of the war.\textsuperscript{47} The Presbyterians were the first to take action in endorsing the opening of mission work in the Philippines. The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the American Baptist Society indicated their intention to open missionary work in the Philippines. While the Baptists and the Methodists delayed their engagement with the country because of financial reasons, the Presbyterians were prepared and transferred Rev. and Mrs. Rogers from their Southern Brazil mission to Manila. The couple arrived on April 21, 1899.\textsuperscript{48}

3.1. American Influences on God and Filipino Attitudes toward Death and Suffering

Even if Protestantism was not readily accepted in the Philippines, they slowly captured the attention of Filipinos. Many Protestant groups were undertaking socio-cultural and economic projects especially in rural communities. In terms of cultural orientation many Filipinos interpreted these projects as a favor to be reciprocated. Often, they conformed to what the Protestants required: to read the bible and attend prayer meetings. However, when they feel they have already paid their dues, they gradually become less interested in church activities and finally returned to their usual patterns of religious expression.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Smylie, op. cit., p. 489.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
The difficulty for Protestantism to establish deep roots in the Philippines is its failure to develop a strong sense of religious conviction which was able to withstand the stresses of local loyalties. Traditional religion is clearly interwoven with the local kinship system. Filipino relationships are primarily based on kinship where respect for the elder is the dominant theme. There is a very close affinity between members of the family — living or dead. This is the reason why ethnic communities and even people from rural areas continue to invoke spirits of their departed ancestors for protection just as they have invoked them in ceremonies with planting, harvesting, or building a house. The same expression can be seen in Christian communities where a novena is said for the repose of the soul of the departed. Other prayers begin on the twelfth day. Then a novena is again said on the fortieth day. The reason for this sequence is that the soul remains on earth, as it is believed, for forty days and is expected to visit the family three days after death.\textsuperscript{50} All these are community or family affairs that Protestant ministers find hard to understand or incorporate in their liturgical practice.

Another reason for Protestantism’s struggle is the inconsistency of behavior in relations to local sentiments, beliefs and values. Although the Protestants tried to speak in the vernacular, it was not accepted by the Filipinos because it was not grounded in their culture. For the Filipinos, Protestant tenets seemed incompatible with their daily lives. Why not drink wine to enjoy sometimes? What’s wrong with celebrating a “fiesta”? Why not a novena for the dead? What’s wrong with praying for the souls in purgatory? In other words, the new religious philosophy set rules of behavior which were inconsistent with the people’s culture and religious

sentiments.

The oversimplification of religious rituals by Protestants, like replacing the Mass with Protestant rites, revoked the sentiment-evoking touch of mysticism. The indiscriminate use of the vernacular in worship took away the aura of magic, mystery and the subjective appeal of the unknown so characteristic of Roman Catholicism. The simplification of rituals of worship in Protestant rites did not structure its drama in terms of people's cultural experiences: elaborate rituals associated with folk medicine, planting and harvesting crops, building a house and other group and individual activities. Truly, a Christian concept of God detached from the long strands of tradition, customs and beliefs are strange for Filipinos who are in constant contact with the deity, personally and experientially, in their daily lives.

The resurgence of such Protestantism and of being “born again” in contemporary times seem not to solve these problems of estrangement. It is not common for ordinary Filipinos to see religious preachers in coat and ties or in western clothes preaching on street corners or even inside commuter buses. This American-type of revivalism often shocks the sensitivities of ordinary worshippers in terms of clapping, dancing, and even shouting. Many attempts have been made by these revivals to draw away Filipino Catholics from the Church’s fold but they have failed. The Bible, without being connected to tradition, seems remote to many Filipinos who love a religion that offers unique Filipino worship and way of life. The way of inculturation or indigenization seems not to have been learned by bible-toting pastors who want people to adopt their ways and alien religious culture. Seldom do they touch the Filipino soul in search of peace and tranquility. Such peace can only be attained by going deep into the identity and religiosity of the Filipino learned and imbibed through the
4. Contemporary Religiosity

The concept of God of the 20th century Filipinos has been a product of the Philippine Church’s quest for the Filipino soul and identity. It is nowadays aside from inherited religious traditions, it is borne out of the Second Vatican Council and the Plenary Council of the Philippines. As family-centered Filipinos, we have a God whom we can easily talk to through His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. Encountering God in the Eucharist, Filipinos find meaning to their lives and learn to face the hunger and poverty around us. Having met Christ, the Suffering Servant in his Passion, the Filipinos can pray about sin and forgiveness, about justice and reconciliation, about the suffering and passion of Filipino people today.

True, though 90% of Filipino Christians believe that God the creator is almighty, omnipotent, good and merciful yet he cannot stop Typhoon Yolanda (Hainan) which hit Leyte causing more than 4,000 lives and extensively damaging property. The Filipino faith is strong and the spirit is unshakable yet one cannot be blamed why many Filipino Christians cannot comprehend the reason why God allows this horrible thing to happen. Yet, a picture on the internet of a Filipino Christian holding a cross amidst the wind and the rain tell the story of a Filipino Christian’s indomitable spirit and faith in the face of suffering.

This faith of ordinary Filipino’s is profoundly evoked in the symbol of “Juan de la Cruz” or John who bears the cross. This imagery does not

[^51: Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, n. 49.]
refer to St. John of the Cross, the Mystic but, instead, promotes the imitation of Christ who carried the cross. The ordinary Juan de la Cruz is a Filipino who bears the daily hardship which life offers: including low wages, the daily traffic congestion, the high cost of education, forced immigration, and rural rising poverty. This acceptance would include major calamities.

The ordinary Juan de la Cruz can identify more with Good Friday than Easter Sunday. This identification, which reflects the Filipinos’ daily struggles in life, is because a more central place has been given in Catholic devotion to the suffering and death of Christ than to his resurrection. The Black Nazarene to be found in what is colloquially known as Quiapo Church is a black wooden image of Christ in three different postures. Every week, thousands of worshipers are drawn to this Manila Church. On the occasion of the Feast of the Black Nazarene (January 9) there is a day-long procession in which many worshippers squeeze their ways through the crowd in order to get close to the statue. Devotees believe that if they are able to touch the Black Nazarene, or even just the rope used to pull the effigy around, their prayers will be heard and a miracle will happen in their lives. Each with a different story, people from all walks of life, the rich and the poor, the educated and the unschooled, traditional Catholics and the superstitious attend such gatherings in the hope of blessings and healings.

Yet, for Filipinos such devotions have posed no threats to the worship of the one true God that is Jesus Christ. He is still the post-resurrection Christ who is the victor over sin and death and believers are called to share that victory. The gloom of Good Friday is replaced by the joy of Easter celebrations like the “Salubong” which is a reenactment of the post-Resurrection encounter between the Risen Christ and the Blessed
Virgin Mary.

Filipino devotion to Christ would not be possible without including Mary, the Mother of God. Filipino Christians are often described as a people in love with Mary.\(^5^2\) Even before the coming of the Spanish missionaries, there was a small a dark image of the Blessed Virgin, known only as “coming from the sea” venerated on the shores of Manila bay. Thus originated the devotion to “Nuestra Senora de Guia” (Our Lady of the Way) the oldest extant image of Mary in the Philippines.\(^5^3\)

Marian devotion and piety seem natural to Filipino Christians. Mary is deeply connected to the exigencies of the Filipino home. She is intimately tied to the idea of the Filipino family. Mary’s month of May is noted for the “fiestas” and pilgrimages in her honor. And, as if to complement the “Jesus Nazareno”, Filipinos also identify in the suffering of Mary and venerate hers as both “Mater Dolorosa” (Sorrowful Mother) and the “Mother of Perpetual Help”. In popular novenas and devotions, these devotions evoke Mary’s compassion and love. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin has greatly helped many simple Filipinos to remain Catholics. Their devotion to the Mother of God has been the strongest force keeping their faith alive. Mary has been, and remains so, the central inspiring force in bringing about a deeper evangelization of the Filipino masses. The many Lourdes “grottos” in the country whether it be in public places or private homes testify to the importance of the place of Mary in the faith of Filipinos.

Yet, at the present moment, in a country torn by politics and issues of human rights, the image of Christ has dramatically reappeared in the form of a “disturbing Christ”.\(^5^4\) This Christ is the true Christ of the Gospels

\(^{5^2}\) CFC, n. 45.
\(^{5^3}\) PCP, n. 153.
who disturbs the status quo, who stands in judgment over the idols of our own making. Even today, the authentic Christ is a disturber of the easy conscience and the corrupt minds of the leaders in the country.

For the Filipinos, elections are an occasion when prospective leaders are challenged by many religious groups and NGOs. They raise serious questions about social issues including, poverty, marginalization, human rights and ecological issues. In Church terms, elections bring about a heightened awareness of the teachings of Christ and His Church.

Many Filipino Christians and theologians do not totally agree with the kind of liberation theology which permeated much of the Latin American Church. However, the social situation of the Philippines demands a response from the Church. Authentic Christianity must strive for an integral liberation: not only from personal sin but from sinful structures. Christ is not simply an ivory icon like “Santo Niño” or the Black Nazarene who becomes an object of devotions. Rather, Christ is alive and working in the Church through His Spirit, and this Christ demands a preferential love for the poor. In this aspect, Filipinos see Christ as the hero-king, and in deep gratitude for the gift of faith and for being Filipino they have committed themselves to Him. As Christ is the Savior of humanity, Filipinos have, in their commitment to this Christ, become beacons of the Faith in Asia.

4.1. God and the Filipino Youth

Seemingly, the Filipino Catholic youth of today have remained firmly rooted in their Catholic religious tradition. They seem to accept most of the Church’s teaching about faith and morals, actively participate in its religious services and, in their individual lives, have sought to establish a
personal relation with God.\textsuperscript{55}

It is therefore safe to say that Catholicism, as an organized community, has steadily provided its young members identity, meaning, values and purpose in life. It is very likely, therefore, that Catholic education and youth ministry, for the most part, appeared very responsive to the integral needs and concerns of their target beneficiaries.

Based on the National Filipino Catholic Youth Study 2014, commissioned by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and the Catholic Education Association of the Philippines (CEAP) which is a group of 1,400 schools nationwide, the great majority of Filipinos aged 13 to 39 put great value on religion.

The Filipino Catholic youth show strong faith in core doctrines: including, God creating the universe, the Paschal Mystery of Christ, His Ascension, His divine and human nature, the Blessed Trinity, the Bible as the inspired Word of God, the Holy Spirit empowering the Church and the Sacraments. They also express agreement with the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the Last Judgment, the forgiveness of sins through confession, the need for Church membership to be saved, and papal infallibility in faith and morals. Concerning the moral precepts, they agree with the Church’s prohibition against abortion, artificial contraception, euthanasia, pre-marital sex, and homosexual acts. The current issues on LGBT and same sex marriage seemingly pose no problem for Filipino Catholic youth: they are obedient to the teaching of the Church. No wonder a large majority of those who flock to Catholic churches on Sundays are these Filipino Catholic teenagers.

Even with the advent of the social media, such platforms are used for religious profession and propagation for the youth. One has just to look at

\textsuperscript{55} National Filipino Catholic Youth Study, 2014.
Facebook or Twitter to find regular postings of religious and biblical quotations by young people. Instagram has been used on many occasions to showcase religious youth gatherings and prayer meetings as well as youth encounters.

Such faith may explain why the incidence of suicide is lower amongst Filipinos than the rates that have been reported in other modern countries in Asia. The same is true in terms of teenage pregnancies and the use of illegal drugs.

The impact of postmodernism, which has been severely felt by youth in Western countries, does not seem to have had the same effect on Filipino youths whom seem to have maintained a personal relationship with God and appear secure in their Catholic identity.

5. The Concept of God and of Death and Suffering:
The Challenge of Religious Movements and Renewal in the Philippines

5.1. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Philippines

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal has helped many Christians to rediscover the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit; and this discovery has awakened in them a faith in Christ filled with joy.\(^{56}\) Since 1967, Charismatic Renewal, which has engaged with more than one hundred million Catholics around the world, has received papal and hierarchial approval.\(^{57}\)


All true renewal is characterized by a return to the source. That is, a return to the very beginning of the Church: Pentecost. The heart of this renewal is baptism in the Holy Spirit. This kind of baptism is not, however, a substitute for the sacrament itself. Being baptized in the Holy Spirit is seeing God, particularly Jesus in a new way, to experientially walk in a faith filled with joy. This renewal is an experience of the fullness of this sacrament working in a new way to empower us in our Christian lives and in our service to others. The charismatic gifts are experienced as ways in which the Holy Spirit enables us to yield ourselves more to God’s direction and power.

The vision of Charismatic renewal is the renewal of the face of the earth through the renewal of the Church, which is the body of Christ. As each member of the body is renewed and takes a more active role in the church, the church itself becomes more effective in its mission. Clearly, the Charismatic Renewal has as its goal the transformation of all the members of the People of God.

In the Philippines, the ascent of popular Catholic charismatic groups like El Shaddai, along with scores of breakaway Protestant ones, is shaping aspects of Filipino religious life. Protestants are flocking to them, but so are an increasing number of Roman Catholics.58 They are increasing in size and power in a country where religion and politics have been intermingled since Spanish colonialism.

The lay Catholic group, El Shaddai — God in Hebrew — is among the largest of the new-generation Christian movements in the Philippines. El Shaddai claims a fast-growing membership of more than eight million, including many Filipinos working overseas in locales as diverse as Hong

Mike Velarde, a real estate magnate, founded El Shaddai in 1984. The group “tapped into several social undercurrents. Such as longing for a more clear-cut moral universe and a more emotionally engaging and intimate religious experience”. Part of El Shaddai’s draw is its ability to reconcile a more socially conservative message with the materialistic desires and possibilities inherent in a modern capitalistic society.

The personality of its founder plays no small part. Velarde, now more than 70 years old, is the best known televangelist in the Philippines. Often dressed in a bow tie, white shoes and wearing a gold chain around his neck, he is a multimedia magnate who dabbles in real estate.

He has built a worship complex, whose altar is built on Noah’s ark and can accommodate at least 35,000 worshippers and an overflow on its grounds of more than 200,000. The group’s weekly Saturday worship service runs for a marathon 11 hours, and is broadcast directly on El Shaddai’s DWXI-PPFI as well as being streamed live online.

Initially only the poorest of the poor came to El Shaddai services. The car parks were filled with tricycles and jeepneys. Today most believers are not only coming in tricycles and jeepneys but have their own cars and SUVs.

5.2. The Concept of God for the El Shaddai Charismatic Movement

For the El Shaddai charismatics, El Shaddai is the “God who has

---

59 Ibid.
61 Emma-Kate Symons, “Preacher Power”.
enough”. He is a sufficient God and is a great provider. El Shaddai’s prosperity theology teaches that God wants faithful individuals to prosper, that economic striving can be godly and that upward mobility may be God’s reward to the faithful.

Such belief manifested in prayer meetings incorporates the pageantry of Pentecostal churches, including speaking in tongues, a prosperity gospel mixed with more traditional Catholic practices. Rituals invoking pagan or sacramentals like believers holding up white handkerchiefs, bankbooks, wallets, passports and foodstuffs give the services an air of folk Christianity which collapses into a modern pop concert.

El Shaddai teaches the giving of miracle seed-of-faith offerings to God. They emphasize the importance of giving because it is in giving that one receives. The worship gatherings are full of testimonies from members who grow in their business on the back of their generosity in giving. El Shaddai strongly encourages followers to tithe or contribute 10% of their income. In return they write down their prayer requests for wealth, health and fortune.

For El Shaddai members, God is not only a God of blessings but is also a God of healings. Countless members attest to the fact that at certain points in their life God has healed them especially from grave sickness and even life-threatening diseases. The belief in God, All Powerful and as the Great Provider drives them to be more faithful in the attendance of prayer meetings especially on Saturdays which they call “Gawain” (apostolate) or Family Appointments with YHWH, El Shaddai. It is therefore uncommon to meet El Shaddai members not endowed with faith to the point of fanaticism. In joy and sadness, in sickness or in health even in death we find them accepting life with joy and with faith.
5.2.1. The Iglesia ni Cristo (INC)

The Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) is an international Christian denomination that originated in the Philippines and was founded by Felix Manalo in 1914. The Church believes itself to be the true church established by Jesus Christ in the first century and that its registration in the Philippines is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies that Christ’s church would re-emerge in the Far East.\(^{62}\) They believe that the first church founded by Christ is the Catholic Church. Since this church became unfaithful to the teaching of Christ, this church vanished and was resurrected by another name: the Iglesia ni Cristo.

5.3. The Concept of God and of Suffering and Death

The Iglesia ni Cristo believes that God the Father is the creator deity and the only true God. They reject the traditional Christian belief in the Trinity as heresy.\(^{63}\) They believe that this position is attested by Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Christ and the Apostles are united in teaching how many and who is the real God. Similar to other true Christians, there is only one God, the Father — not the Son and more so not the Spirit. The Apostles did not also teach that there is one God who has three persons who are also Gods.\(^{64}\)

The Church believes that Jesus is the Son of God and the mediator between God the Father and humanity and was created by God the

---


\(^{64}\) *PASUGO*, November 1968.
God sanctified him to be without sin and bestowed upon him the titles “Lord” and “Son of God”. The Church sees Jesus as God’s highest creation and denies the deity of Jesus. They profess Jesus’ substitutionary role in the redemption of humankind. He is believed to have been “foreordained before the foundation of the world” and sent by God to deal with sin. Members are “saved by Christ’s blood” who died because of his self-sacrificing love.

The members believe that Iglesia ni Cristo is the one true church. Outside of the Iglesia ni Cristo there is no salvation. Members who are not living in accordance with the doctrines taught in the INC are admonished. Those who continue in violation of INC doctrines, after being admonished, are excommunicated or expelled from the INC and thus lose salvation.

INC believes that a person is composed of a body (vehicle), soul (individual) and spirit (life or fuel). Members believe that when a person dies their body and soul both die and go into the grave where both will remain until the Second Coming of Christ, whereas the spirit will go back to God. Upon Christ’s return all dead servants of God, from the time of the patriarchs up to the last days, would be resurrected to join living faithful and loyal INC members. They will be rewarded by living in the Holy City or New Jerusalem, together with God the Father and Jesus Christ. After 1,000 years, a second resurrection would occur, and non-INC members will experience a second death which is the Lake of Fire (Hell). The church believes that God set a day where He will judge all the people. They believe that this day is also the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

65 Ibid.
INC divides time into three eras: the era of the Patriarchs from creation to the birth of Moses, the era of the Prophets from the birth of Moses to the birth of Christ, and the Christian era from the birth of Jesus to the Last Judgment. Adherents believe Felix Manalo to be the last messenger of God in the Christian era.

INC has been very aggressive in its evangelistic activities especially in the area of televangelism and the mass media. The Christian Era Broadcasting Service International Incorporated (CEBSI Incorporated) broadcast programs that discuss Bible teachings over radio and television. These programs are aired by about 60 other radio stations all over the Philippines and several more in the United States and Australia. These programs can also be seen in the Internet via INC websites.

Faced with all these challenges both from the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and of the aggressive evangelistic activities of the INC, Filipino Catholicism should always look up to the first century of the coming millennium that will mark the 500th year since Filipinos as a people accepted the Faith. It makes the Philippines as the only Christian nation among the Asian neighbors. There are deep affinities between Christ’s message and most Filipinos’ ways of thinking and acting etched from pre-Spanish, Spanish, preserved during the American occupation until now. Much of the Gospel has become part of Filipino life — com-passion, forgiveness, piety, caring making the Filipinos a basically decent people. Through the past centuries, right up to our present critical times growing more mature in the following of Christ has meant more truly and authentically Filipino.

The Filipino Christian’s understanding and love of God and Jesus

---

69 PCP II, n. 3.
70 PCP II, n. 15.
71 *Cathechism for Filipino Catholics*, n. 28.
Christ has been colored by their personal and national historical experiences of pain and struggle, of victory and celebration. Faith in Jesus is marked by the Filipino’s deep devotion to Mary, Christ’s mother, and the Filipino’s Model and Mother. All these experiences have somehow defined and clarified the Filipino Christian’s unique identity as persons, as Catholics, as a nation.

However, Vatican II teaches that Catholics must give expression to this newness of Christian life in their own society and culture and in a manner that is in keeping with the traditions of their own land.\textsuperscript{72} The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines also insisted on the interaction between Christian Faith and Filipino culture. Hence, in this article we had taken a closer look at how the values that Filipinos have from our Christian Faith through the study of the Filipino concept of God and of death and suffering can strengthen the good in the Filipino’s cultural values and correct what is excessive in them and supply for their deficiencies.

\textsuperscript{72} AD GENTES, n. 21.
Bibliography

Church Documents


Books


__________________________, *Myths and Symbols Philippines*, Manila: National Book Store,
1978.
Reyes, Benito, Christianizing Christians, Manila, 1969.
Tanco, Rodrigo, Theology in the Philippine Setting, Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1981.
Schumacher, John, Readings in Philippine History, Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 1987.
Worcester, Dean Conent, The Philippine Islands and Their People, Manila, 1910.

Articles

Schumacher, John, “Recent Historical Writings on the Philippines Abroad”, Philippine Studies, 9, 1, January 1961.
Villegas, Maria Sr., “Superstitions and Religious Practices in the Coastal Towns of


**Other Sources**


The article traces the historical development of ‘religiosity in the Philippines’. It began with a description of the people’s faith expression in the pre-Hispanic times, and proceeded to discuss how those expressions were influenced and reshaped by the entry of Christianity to the country through the efforts of Spanish missionaries. But, the more than three hundred years rule of the Spaniards was also followed by the Americans who in turn brought with them the ‘protestant faith’, which has also contributed to the emergence of Catholic religious movements and renewal in the contemporary times. As it unfolds the contours of this historical development, the article also attempts to discuss the evolution that the concepts of death and suffering had to undergo vis-à-vis the transformation of the consciousness of the people as it has been formed and reformed by the emergence of several religions and faith-expressions.

Key Words: God, Christ, Filipino, Death, Suffering, Religion.
필리핀 맥락에서의 하느님 그리고
죽음과 고통의 개념

로델 E. 알리건 신부
[필리핀 교황청립 성 토마스대학교 신학대학 교수]

본고는 ‘필리핀의 종교성’의 역사적 발전 과정을 살펴보고 있다. 스페인에 정복당하기 이전 필리핀 사람들의 신앙 표현에 대한 설명으로 시작해, 스페인 선교사들의 노력으로 그리스도교가 유입되면서 그러한 표현들이 어떤 영향을 받고 어떻게 변형되었는지에 대한 논의로 진행된다. 300년이 넘는 스페인의 식민 지배 시절 이후 필리핀에 또 다시 미국인들이 들어오면서 ‘개신교’가 유입되었고 이는 동시대 가톨릭의 종교운동과 쇠퇴가 발발하는 데 영향을 미쳤다. 이러한 종교의 역사적 발달 과정의 윤곽을 살펴보면서, 본고는 여러 종교와 신앙 표현의 출현으로 인해 형성 혹은 재형성된 사람들의 양심의 변형에 직면해 죽음과 고통의 개념이 겪어야만 했던 그 변혁에 대해 논의하고자 한다.

주제어: 하느님, 그리스도, 필리핀, 죽음, 고통, 종교.