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POPULAR FILIPINO SPIRIT-WORLD BELIEFS, WITH A PROPOSED THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

REUEL U. ALMOCERA

Filipinos had a worldview and a religion of their own even before Spanish-Catholic Christianity came to the Philippines in the mid-sixteenth century.[1] They believed in the existence of a supreme creator being, whom they called *Bathala.*[2] Aside from their own social structure, they also believed in an invisible society coexisting with their own. This society was believed to be inhabited by spirits which included dead ancestors, deities, and lesser gods. Pre-Hispanic Filipinos respected these spirits with rituals and feast days, because these supernatural beings were considered able to preside over the whole gamut of life, including birth, sickness, death, courtship, marriage, planting, harvesting, and death. Some of these spirits were considered friendly; others were viewed as tyrannical enemies.[3]

The encounter with Spanish-Catholic Christianity did little to change the worldview held by pre-Hispanic Filipinos.[4] It resulted in the formation of a folk religion, namely Filipino "Folk Catholicism."[5] This syncretistic form of Christianity continues until the present. Catholic scholar, Father Vitaliano R. Gorospe, admits that "even today, especially in the rural areas, we find merely the

[1]For a larger treatment of the fundamental Filipino worldview, see T. Valentino Sitoy, Jr., *A History of Christianity in the Philippines*, vol. 1, *The Initial Encounter* (Quezon City: New Day, 1985), 1-22.

[2]Teodoro Agoncillo and Milagros C. Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garcia, 1977), 50.

[3]Jose Vicente Braganza, *The Encounter* (Manila: Catholic Trade School, 1965), 51-52.

[4]F. Landa Jocano, ed., *The Philippines at the Spanish Contact* (Manila: MCS Enterprises, 1975), 2.

[5]F. Landa Jocano, "Filipino Folk Catholicism," *Philippine Educational Forum* 15 (November 1966): 41-60.

external trappings of Catholic belief and practice superimposed on the original pattern of pre-Christian superstitions and rituals."[6]

The age of Enlightenment added another dimension to the Filipino's encounter with Christianity. This happened almost exclusively with the introduction of Protestant Christianity, which came to the Philippines in the context of a scientifically influenced worldview of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalism. This type of Christianity, with its heavy dependence on scientific explanations,[7] usually conflicts with or ignores the Filipino traditional beliefs about the spirit world. As a matter of fact, this type of Christianity essentially denies the spirit world as Filipinos know it.[8]

The result of the confrontation between Filipino "anitism,"[9] Philippine Folk Catholicism, and rationalistic Protestantism is confusing and even alarming. Filipinos with more exposure to western education tend to supplant the traditional spirit-worldview with one that explains everything by natural and scientific means. In certain aspects of Filipino life and among some small segments of Filipino society, scientific explanations are rejected altogether in favor of the spirit-worldview explanations. But the majority of Filipinos seem to accept scientific explanations as a supplement to traditional animistic beliefs. Many observers find this stance disturbing because, as Jaime Bulatao puts it, "We have two theological systems, side by side the Christian and the pagan existing within one man."[10] It is also disturbing because "the notion of split-level Christianity is uncomfortably close to the theory of split-level Filipino personality or a nation of schizophrenic people."[11]

Hence, if the Christian gospel is to be successfully transplanted into the hearts of Filipinos, the foregoing dynamics should not be ignored. If Christianity seeks

[6]Vitaliano R. Gorospe, *Christian Renewal of Filipino Values* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1966), 37.

[7]For a brief survey of Christian theologies under the heavy influence of rationalism, see Morton T. Kalsey, *The Christian and the Supernatural* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 17-21.

[8]Rodney L. Henry, *Filipino Spirit World: A Challenge to the Church* (Manila: OMF, 1986), 17-35.

[9]The term is Stephen Hislop's adaptation into English of the Hispano-Filipino word *anitismo*. Hislop argues that the word "anitism" is appropriate to describe the original religious system of primitive Filipinos. Stephen K. Hislop, "Anitism: A Survey of Religious Beliefs Native to the Philippines," *Asian Studies* 9 (August 1971): 144-56.

[10]Jaime Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1966), 7.

[11]Fe Susan Go, "Mothers, Maids, and the Creatures of the Night: The Persistence of Philippine Folk Religion," *Philippine Quarterly Journal of Culture and Society* 3 (1979): 186-203.

to provide Filipinos with a "contextualized"[12] Christian experience, a legitimate theological response to the persistent spirit-world component of Philippine "popular religiosity"[13] not only is a necessity but is mandatory.

The Popular Filipino Understanding of the Spirit World

The contemporary Filipino understanding of the spirit world may be defined by a brief discussion of the influence of pre-Hispanic anitism and Filipino Folk Catholicism.

Pre-Hispanic Anitism

As mentioned earlier, the religious system practiced by pre-Hispanic Filipinos has been identified as "anitism." Anitism was defined by Fernando Blumentritt as a "continued invocation and adoration of the *anitos*—the souls or spirits of the ancestors."[14] But anitism is more than adoration and fear of ancestral spirits. Some major components of this religious belief include the concept of a supreme but inaccessible God, the fear of other gods, and the fear and worship of spirits.

A Supreme but Inaccessible God

Pre-Hispanic anitism involves a belief in a supreme God. The best proof of this is found in the records of Ferdinand Magellan's discovery of the Philippine

[12]The term "contextualization" is a subject of much theological debate. However, in this study the term reflects the "context-indigenization" model introduced by Bruce Fleming in his book *Contextualization of Theology*. Contextualization in this sense is a theological concept or process which is characterized by a healthy application of God's revelation to the modern situation. The "implementation of this approach utilizes God's word, the Bible, as the source of all theologizing. The practice of historical-grammatical exegesis in conjunction with context-indigenization allows the Bible to speak for itself, guarding against the imposition of certain motifs which contradict the teachings of the whole Scripture." It must be made clear that this "approach also uses insights gained from anthropology and related social sciences and missiology" to indigenize the gospel in the modern context. See Bruce C. E. Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), 78.

[13]Filipino historians Teodoro Agoncillo and Milagros Guerrero observe that Western civilization failed to eradicate pagan beliefs from among the Filipinos. In fact, they note that paganism "penetrated Philippine Christianity" (Agoncillo and Guerrero, 53). The co-existence of Christian theology and animistic beliefs in the same Filipino Christian has been described by Bulatao as "split-level Christianity." Jaime Bulatao, "When Roman Theology Meets an Animistic Culture: Mysticism in Present-Day Philippines," *Kinaadman* 6 (First Semester 1984), 103.

[14]Fernando Blumentritt, *Diccionario Mitologico de Filipinos*, 2d ed. (1895), s.v. "*Anitismo.*" (Translation mine.)

Islands on 17 March 1521. The record shows that while Magellan's retinue celebrated Easter on the island of Limasawa on 31 March 1521, Magellan asked the natives about their religious beliefs. Antonio Pigafetta, a chronicler of Magellan's expedition, recorded the following account:

> The Captain General [Magellan] also had them asked whether they were Moros or heathen, or what was their belief. They replied that they worshiped nothing, but that they raised their clasped hands and their face to the sky, and they called their God "Abba."[15]

This God called *Abba* by the Filipinos in Limasawa was called *Bathala* by the Tagalogs; those in the Western Visayas called the supreme God *Laon*.[16] However, "there is no clue given to the form or appearance by which this supreme being was represented. The people, it would seem, troubled themselves very little about his worship."[17] Sacrifices were offered not to *Bathala* but instead to the *anitos*. Miguel de Loarca writes that

> when the natives were asked why the sacrifices were offered to the *anitos* and not to *Bathala*, they answered that the *Bathala* was a great Lord and no one could speak to Him. He lived in the sky, but the *anito* . . . came down here to talk with men, was to *Bathala* a minister and interceded for them.[18]

Fear of Other Gods

Anitism also recognizes the existence of other gods. Writing in June of 1582, de Loarca mentioned nature gods such as *Kaptan*, who dwelt in the sky and was believed to be the lord of thunder that caused man's diseases and plagues of nature. Then there is *Sisiburanin*, who punished the souls presented to him unless the living offered a sacrifice on their behalf.[19] De Loarca also mentioned the goddess *Lalahon*, who ruled over the harvest. She was believed to be able to provide a

[15]Antonio Pigafetta, "First Voyage Around the World," in *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*, ed. Emma Blair and James A. Robertson (Mandaluyong, Rizal: Cachos Hermaños, 1973 reprint), 33:127.

[16]Peter G. Gowing, *Islands Under the Cross: The Story of the Church in the Philippines* (Manila: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1967), 9.

[17]Robert Silliman, "Religious Beliefs and Life at the Beginning of the Spanish Regime in the Philippines," Class Readings, College of Theology, Silliman University, Dumaguete City, 1967, 92.

[18]Miguel de Loarca, "Relation of the Filipinas Islands," in *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*, ed. Emma Blair and James A. Robertson (Mandaluyong, Rizal: Cachos Hermaños, 1973 reprint), 5:173.

[19]Ibid.

good harvest to farmers, but could also send locusts to destroy crops when displeased.[20]

Generally, the gods were cruel and vindictive. They were appeased only by sacrificial gifts and offerings.[21] But there were gods who were able to deliver benefits if their favors were won. These gods protected the people on expeditions of plunder or when they went to war.[22] Pre-Hispanic Filipinos considered these divinities as not purely spirits. They were believed to be able to appear in human form.[23]

Fear of Spirits

Anitism as a religion derives its name from its fundamental belief about the spirits, called *anitos* by the Tagalogs and *diwatas* by the inhabitants of the Southern Philippines. The spirits were classified as good and evil spirits. The good spirits provided good fortune, and the evil spirits brought maladies or death. Both were venerated and invoked: the former were served to win their goodwill and for the good that might be given; the latter were served out of a feeling of fear. Evil spirits were invoked to placate their anger so that they might do no harm.[24]

These spirits were thought to participate actively in all aspects of life. Further, the spirits were believed to dwell anywhere; they inhabited both animals and objects. Hence, Hislop concludes that to the anitists there is no such thing as an inanimate object.[25]

To summarize, the Filipino anitist believes in a supreme Being, God. But this God is remote and inaccessible. He is not worshiped, nor is He involved in the day-to-day affairs of human life. What are real and active in the daily affairs are the lesser gods and spirits. These are to be respected and feared. These spirits may be appeased or manipulated by appropriate rituals and ceremonies for favors and protection.

Filipino Folk Catholicism

The pre-Hispanic era is far removed from our times. Hence, it does not make sense to conclude that the spirit-world beliefs of present-day Filipinos are the same with those of anitism. It is therefore necessary to discuss the Filipino spirit-world

[20]Ibid., 5:135.

[21]Pablo Fernandez, *History of the Church in the Philippines: 1521-1898* (Manila: National Book Store, 1979), 3.

[22]De Loarca, 5:133.

[23]Fernandez, 3.

[24]Hislop, 149.

[25]Ibid., 148.

beliefs in the contemporary religious movements in the Philippines, which are predominantly influenced by Catholic faith.

Catholicism, as it exists today in the Philippines, has two major variant forms.

> One is rural catholicism, in which Catholic beliefs are attenuated in terms of locally sanctioned practices. The other is urban Catholicism, in which indigenous beliefs are attenuated in terms of church-allowed-though-not-sanctioned rites.[26]

"Catholic concepts in the rural areas are often articulated with the people's way of life, in urban areas with ritual performances."[27] To understand these dynamics better, a brief historical background in the Christianization process of the Philippines is necessary.

The Spanish conquerors and Catholic missionaries found a scattered population in the Philippines in the mid-sixteenth century. This situation made the initial conquest relatively easy. Yet, it was not ideal for the governance and control of the newly conquered people. "In order to facilitate the process of conversion and to effect administrative control over the people, a policy of regrouping scattered settlements into compact villages, known as *cabeceras,* was adopted."[28] In these resettlements the church became the center of socio-religious activities.

Initially, the people resisted this scheme. However, the missionaries initiated elaborate religious festivals to attract the people into the *cabeceras.*[29] This plan was partially effective. People began building houses in the *cabeceras*, which they occupied mostly during the numerous religious festivals. But since their farms were located far from the *cabeceras,* many of them vacated these houses after the festival seasons were over.

The missionaries recognized this problem. To solve it, they introduced the *cabecera-visita* system. The *cabecera* remained the center of religious activities. Religious functions were frequent and regular in the *cabeceras.* On the other hand, religious functions were occasionally performed in the *ermita* (chapel) built near the farm settlements of the people who were reluctant to move to the *cabecera.*

In later years, the *cabeceras* became the towns and the *visitas* became the *barangays* (villages). The *cabecera-visita* system became the pattern of modern community Filipino organization. It also became the ancestor of rural and urban Catholicism.

[26]Jocano, 43.

[27]Ibid., 44.

[28]F. Landa Jocano, *Folk Christianity* (Quezon City: Trinity Research Institute, 1981), 18.

[29]Gowing, 40.

The urban Catholics are of the *cabecera* strain. Since religious education and other ecclesiastical functions have been readily accessible to them, urban Catholics are more informed about Catholic beliefs. Urban Catholics "can argue intelligently about the doctrine, ritual, and administrative organization of the church."[30] They are well instructed through elaborate liturgical symbolism. But as Landa Jocano explains, although the form of expressing faith in urban areas differs from the 'touch of magic'[31] that characterizes rural Catholicism, the underlying principle that guided the ritual drama in both cases is the same.[32] Therefore, a careful analysis of either of the variant forms may give substantial understanding of the religious dynamics of folk Catholicism. We will analyze the rural Catholicism strain, as this is the Catholicism that is practiced by most Filipinos.[33]

Rural Catholicism has been heavily influenced by anitism. Jocano admits that the official doctrine and practices of the Catholic Church have been modified heavily in rural areas to suit local cultural practices.[34] Peter Gowing adds that the "pre-Christian belief in magic and superstition is carried over into the popular Catholicism of the Philippines."[35] Worse yet, the traditional, pre-Christian belief system has been enlarged more than modified through its contact with Christianity. In fact, rural Filipinos "more often than not, still feel it more important to pay one's respect to the inhabitants of the spirit world, rather than to the spiritual Father of all."[36]

Many theories have been offered to explain these phenomena. One explains that the repressive authoritarian approach of the Spaniards in converting Filipinos into Christians resulted in folk Catholicism. Vicente Braganza seems to support this theory. He writes:

> In the period of strongest repression under the beneficent rule of the *Pax Hispanica*, there was complete ritual and institutional adoption of the new religion. But in the dark, lower regions of the Filipino people, there still ruled the

[30]Jocano, "Filipino Folk Catholicism," 53.

[31]Ibid., 56.

[32]Ibid.

[33]The majority of Filipinos reside in rural areas, not to mention those who have migrated to urban areas yet have maintained a rural community orientation. See *1997 Philippine Yearbook* (Manila: Republic of the Philippines, National Statistics Office, 1997), 302.

[34]F. Landa Jocano, "Conversion and the Patterning of Christian Experience in Malitbog, Central Panay, Philippines," in *Acculturation in the Philippines: Essays in Changing Society*, ed. Peter G. Gowing and William Henry Scott (Quezon City: New Day, 1971), 54.

[35]Gowing, 55.

[36]Hislop, 154.

> *"aswang"* [evil spirits] and the pagan gods, the superstitious lore of the grandmother, the value system of the old familiar barangays.[37]

Another theory suggests that the adulterated quality of Christianity brought by the Spaniards in the mid-sixteenth century is itself the root cause of the folk Catholicism that still exists in the Philippines today. Douglas Elwood contends that the Christianity introduced by the Spaniards to the Philippines was itself a type of folk Christianity. He argues that the domination of Spain by the Moors for nearly eight hundred years (711-1492) had resulted in the incorporation of many North African animistic beliefs into Spanish Catholicism.[38] The fact that Magellan arrived in the Philippines only twenty-nine years after Spain freed itself completely from the Moors makes this theory quite plausible.

The most common explanation identifies the cause of folk Catholicism as poor instruction on the tenets of Christianity received by the Filipinos from early Christian missionaries.[39]

Identifying the real cause of folk Catholicism in the Philippines is not very important for this study. What concerns us most in this analysis are the beliefs and practices of rural Catholicism.

Except for minor differences, rural Catholicism is largely similar to anitism. We may even call it a Christianized version of anitism. Its belief system includes the concept of a faraway God, the worship of saints, and the fear of evil spirits.

The Faraway God

No doubt, rural Catholics believe in a supreme Being, or God. But like the God of the anitists, their God is far removed. One needs intermediaries to reach Him.

> The ability to establish a relationship with God acquires added and favorable dimensions if prayers are first addressed to intermediaries rather than directly to the Almighty. This implies a belief that God is too removed from worldly affairs to take any specific interest in men, but saints are almost human. They are close to the world. To God only saints can speak better.[40]

Theoretically, the God of rural Catholics is recognized as omnipotent. But in real practice, especially in the daily affairs of life, God is of little importance. He is too remote to be involved. He is associated with the big cathedral in the

[37]Braganza, 203.
[38]Douglas Elwood, *Christ in Philippine Context* (Quezon City: New Day, 1971), 2.
[39]Gowing, 234-35.
[40]Jocano, "Filipino Folk Catholicism," 46.

poblacion, which the *barangay* people rarely enter.[41] What are real and active in the daily surroundings of rural people are the spirits of the field, of the stream, and so forth.

Closely related to the belief in a remote God is the rural people's view of themselves in relation to the world and the universe. Rural folks tend to believe that the world of man is an extension of the spiritual and saintly world.[42] "The individual human being is but a small part of a wider natural-social universe inhabited largely by spirits and saints."[43]

The most striking similarity to anitism in rural Catholicism, however, is manifested in its beliefs and practices related to the existence of good and evil spirits. This is not surprising to those who know Filipinos well, because "belief in good and evil spirits is a value orientation in Filipino culture."[44] What is disturbing, however, is how rural Catholics adapt the church's teachings to their animistic mentality. Let us take the Roman Catholic teaching of the veneration of saints as a case in point.

Veneration of the Saints

To rural Catholics, saints are just other personalities of the spirit world. "Saints in many rural areas are conceived by farmers not as church personalities who have been canonized because of their good works and virtuous living, but as supernatural beings with powers similar to those of the environmental spirits or *engkantu*."[45] Thus, the veneration of saints has become equivalent to the worship of *anitos* for rural Catholics. Saints have somehow served as a "substitute for the old pagan idolatry and polytheism."[46]

Anitists consider those who control the daily affairs of men on earth to be gods and spirits. Rural Catholics consider saints as spiritual partners in the pursuit of life's goals. Saints are not adored, but are appealed to for health, good harvests, long life, or safe voyages. The images of saints in rural homes have replaced the statues of the *anitos* of the pre-Hispanic era, but their function in relation to human existence is practically the same.

Even the value given to religious festivals, rituals, and ceremonies has not changed. Although the sacrificial offering of animals characteristic of anitism's

[41]John Carroll et al., *Philippine Institutions* (Manila: Solidaridad, 1970), 42.

[42]Jocano, "Conversion," 53.

[43]Jocano, "Filipino Folk Catholicism," 59.

[44]Douglas Elwood, "Varieties of Christianity in the Philippines," in *Society, Culture and the Filipino,* ed. Mary Hollnsteiner (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1976), 385.

[45]Jocano, "Filipino Folk Catholicism," 46.

[46]Gowing, 55.

festivals is not prominently featured, the motive and methods of performing the ceremonies are relatively similar. Perhaps a few examples will make this clear.

Donn Hart relates an incident in which a replica of a patron saint was washed in the sea to insure abundant rain.[47] Jocano also mentions the *caracol* festival in Bacoor, Cavite; the fluvial parade of San Vicente in Agono, Rizal; and the river voyage of the image of San Pedro in Apalit, Pampanga, as festivals designed to manipulate the saints to give fishermen an abundant catch.[48]

From the examples given above, it is clear that the saints have been considered by rural Catholics as good spirits. But there is another group of spirits that are not saints. These are the dead ancestors. In fact, as it was in anitism, there is a form of ancestor worship among rural Catholics. Regarding this, Jocano comments:

> Spirits are not remote and alien beings, but rather they are grandparents and great-grandparents of the people; local rituals therefore are not demonic performances of a superstitious people but forms of respect, of paying homage to older kinsmen, of interacting with relatives.
>
> Most of the spirits invoked by the people during ceremonies—be it a ceremony connected with planting, harvesting or building a house—are spirits of their departed ancestors.[49]

The practice of ancestor worship is very evident in Cebuano-speaking areas, especially in Northern Mindanao. Nid Anima mentions a special festival called the *Kalag-kalag* (literally, Soul-soul or Ghost-ghost). On All Souls Day (November 1) and All Saints Day (November 2) many Catholics of Northeastern Mindanao hold the *Kalag-kalag* festival.[50] People go to the graves of their relatives and offer food and drink, while the whole atmosphere in the community is filled with merrymaking. This festival is in honor of the dead ancestors, who are believed to have come back to the world of human beings during this season.

Fear of Evil Spirits

The point on which pre-Hispanic Filipinos and rural Catholics agree completely, however, involves the belief and practices regarding evil spirits. There seems to be no modification of this belief. What was written four centuries ago is practically the same today, except in the names given to evil spirits.

Like the anitists, rural Catholics are fearful of evil spirits and their human agents. Rural Catholics believe that evil spirits are of many varieties, but all of

[47]Donn Hart, "The Filipino Villager and His Spirits," *Solidarity* 1 (October-December 1966): 67.

[48]Jocano, *Folk Christianity*, 24-25.

[49]Jocano, "Conversion," 67.

[50]Nid Anima, *Childbirth and Burial Practices among Philippine Tribes* (Quezon City: Omar, 1978), 60.

them are generally considered harmful. Detailed description of the spirits is beyond the scope of this study, but a brief discussion of at least one should be made.[51]

The *engkanto* is one of the most common forms of evil spirits. It is recognized as *dili ingon nato* (people not like us) or *dili ta parehas* (people not similar to us). Their dwelling places appear to most people as mere boulders, holes in the ground, mounds of earth, or trees like the *balete.* But to the human friends of the *engkanto,* these dwelling places are magnificent palaces and mansions.[52]

The *engkantos* are said to be beautiful and fair skinned, and are romantically attracted to brown-skinned boys or girls. They are sometimes associated with souls of dead ancestors, and are therefore dreaded. They are also believed to possess power to inflict diseases.[53]

Rural Catholics also believe that evil spirits have human agents. The most prominent of these agents is the *barangan.*[54] The *barangan's* magical powers were originally transmitted by cave or mountain spirits. The *barangan* has the ability to kill anyone by mere words of the so-called *oracion,* or curse. He can also cause deformation of the body. When this happens, the person afflicted usually loses either his nose or another part of his face.[55] The *barangan* usually makes services available to persons who want to harm their enemies. He or she has a supply of "invisible destroyers" in the form of germs or insects that may be commanded to attack intended victims. However, the *barangan* also possesses power to cure sickness caused by fairies and evil spirits.[56]

To protect against evil spirits or their human agents, one should possess amulets or charms that counteract the spirits' magic and power. These charms are generally called *anting-anting. Anting-anting* come in many forms, most commonly in the form of sacred coconut oil. It is prepared with specific rituals accompanied by solemn prayers. This oil is prepared and distributed only by *barangans* or *tambalans.*[57] The oil is placed in tiny bottles together with a small piece of paper on which a sentence or paragraph is inscribed in Latin. The *anting-*

[51]The other forms of the so-called evil spirits include the *aswang, ungo* or *unglu,* witch, *momo, multo, abat, manananggal,* ghost (usually of a known deceased person), *kapre, agta,* etc. Evil spirits also come in various kinds of supernatural animals and monsters such as *kalaskas, impakto, mantiyanak, sigbin, balbal, wakwak, kikik,* etc. For more details, see Richard Arens, "Witches and Witchcraft in Leyte and Samar Islands, Philippines," *Philippine Journal of Science* 85 (December 1956): 451-65; Richard Lieban, *Cebuano Sorcery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 65-79; and Go, "Mothers, Maids," 186-203.

[52]Arens, 451-65.

[53]Ibid., 453.

[54]Ibid., 439.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid.

[57]*Tambalans* are the medicine men in the rural Philippines.

anting will only be effective if this is tied to the user's body and if he recites the daily prayers prescribed by the *tambalan.*

For less religious persons, the *anting-anting* could come in the form of a bullet casing or a crocodile's tooth. The tooth or empty bullet casing is filled with a certain concoction made by boiling roots of trees or herbs in the blood of a white chicken. These are sealed with melted lead and tied around the neck or waist.

For rural, uneducated Catholics, *anting-anting* may also come in the form of religious objects, such as a crucifix[58] or *Agnus Dei* medal. In fact, almost all *anting-anting* have to be prepared on Good Friday. Many Catholics who own *anting-anting* pray Christian prayers to give more power to the *anting-anting.*

This assessment reveals that, although most are Catholic Christians, Filipinos still believe in the existence of unseen spirits. One writer's conclusion expresses this truth emphatically: "One thing cannot be denied: the belief in this spirit world persists among most Filipinos."[59] What, then, is the best theological response to this phenomenon?

A Proposed Theological Response

Three basic responses have been proposed. The first would be to deny the reality of the spirits and categorically condemn the Filipino spirit-world beliefs as mere superstitions. This approach would assume that a spirit-worldview is totally incompatible with Christian theology. It would then be the duty of a Christian to liberate Filipinos not from the spirits themselves but from their belief in the existence of the spirits.[60]

Many Christian scholars who have tried to address problems related to the Filipino spirit-world beliefs argue that this is not the best response. Rodney Henry, one of the many who have studied the Filipino spirit-world beliefs, observes that, "when a person believes that he is being troubled by a spirit, a condemning word from a church leader will not stop him. Such a person will seek relief from his spirit problem in one way or another."[61] Ralph Toliver, in his discussion of syncretism in Filipino Protestant Christianity, concludes that "Western missionaries must realize that merely to deny the existence of the spirit world will

[58]Catholic symbols such as the crucifix carry the same function as that of the talisman. See William and Corrine Nydegger, *Tarong: An Ilocos Barrio in the Philippines* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), 67-68.

[59]Go, 195.

[60]Maria G. Villegas, "Superstitious Beliefs and Practices in the Coastal Towns of Eastern Leyte," *Leyte-Samar Studies* 2 (1968): 232.

[61]Henry, 94.

neither commend him to the national church nor help to solve some of its nagging problems."[62] He further observes,

> The belief in *aswang* is deep-rooted, so much so in fact that a frontal attack against the belief would appear to be neither honest nor good tactics on the part of the missionary—not honest, for the missionary might not know all that is involved in the *aswang* beliefs, and not good tactics, since the attack on the belief per se would be negative and not positive.[63]

The second response would be to be theologically tolerant of the spirit-world beliefs, hoping that they will eventually fade away. No theological value is given to spirit-world beliefs, but they are not to be discarded altogether, for they have socio-psychological significance. Elwood, a Protestant scholar who does not believe in spirits as part of the real world, opines that the Filipino spirit-world beliefs belong to the traditional man's conceptual view. It is part of the pre-scientific explanation of how the forces of nature are expressed through man's beliefs in spirits or personal supernatural beings.[64] For this reason he advises, "Spirit belief should not be treated as heresy to be condemned, but as an early stage in man's awareness, which can be nurtured and enlightened through increased scientific knowledge and maturing religious faith."[65] He admits, however, that belief in and fear of spirits threatens the Christian teaching of God's absolute sovereignty.

> If man can relate to God only through subordinates or intermediaries, God himself becomes less directly relevant to the life of man; and spirits, saints, demons and angels become more ultimate than God. The conviction of the biblical writers is that God is in the very midst of life and that we encounter him when we respond to the way life is. The mysterious power that surrounds us and that gives us life is none other than the spiritual presence and purposive activity of the one living God who, for us, was in Jesus as Christ and who deigns to dwell in our lives as well.
>
> The supposed capacity of other anthropomorphic but supernatural beings to bless and to curse, to inflict injury, sickness or death and otherwise interfere with the on-going movement of human life, without the limitations of space and time, clearly detracts from the sovereignty of the one living God whose presence and activity are all-pervasive and who is the ultimate source of all power in the universe.[66]

[62]Ralph Toliver, "Syncretism, a Specter among Philippine Protestants," *Practical Anthropology* 17 (September-October 1970): 214.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Douglas Elwood, "Are the Spirits Part of the Real World?" *Church and Community* 10 (March-April 1970): 16.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid., 22.

Responding to the question of how the documented manifestations of the spirits should be explained, Elwood argues that they may be explained in terms of psychological and sociological imperatives. He suggests that these beliefs are mere products of wish fulfillment, suggestibility, unfulfilled sexual desire on the individual level, checks on anti-social behavior, the influence of the home environment at the social level, or mere coincidence.[67] Elwood seems to agree with social scientists that the main value of the spirit-world beliefs is related to social control or expressions of superior mental powers.[68]

The view that Filipino spirit-world beliefs are to be tolerated for their inherent value is also advocated by the Catholic scholar Francisco Demetrio. To him, belief in the spirits has some value in that it supplies the people with satisfaction of their "existential needs both material and psychic."[69] Thus, he says,

> One cannot fully agree with the early Christian chroniclers who claimed that the religion of the early Filipinos was altogether diabolical. What had served the needs of the people for long centuries before the advent of Christianity cannot in fairness and truth be called the work of the devil pure and simple.[70]

Valuing a religious belief for its psychological and sociological significance alone does not make good sense. Thus the second response is not acceptable.

The third response, the one which is supported by this paper, holds that some aspects of the Filipino spirit-worldview are compatible with biblical teachings. Further, it sees that the Filipino spirit-worldview has the potential of becoming a springboard, a vehicle in developing authentic Filipino Christianity without necessarily corrupting the gospel. How shall this be accomplished?

The general strategy of how to deal with the Filipino spirit-world beliefs may be provided in two stages. The first involves Christian teachings related to the spirit world. This is necessary because, as Gowing observes, "poor instruction in the tenets of the Christian faith accounts in part for the traces of animism, belief in demons or evil spirits and other aspects of pre-Christian paganism which linger in the thinking and even devotional practices of many Filipino Christians, Protestants as well as Roman Catholics."[71]

The second stage involves structuring concrete pastoral-missiological rituals or practices. Rodney L. Henry insists that the two stages should go hand in hand:

[67]Ibid.

[68]For an example of a social and psychological discussion of spirit-world beliefs, see Jaime Bulatao, "Altered States of Consciousness in Philippine Religion," in *Filipino Religious Psychology,* ed. Leonardo N. Marcado (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1977), xx.

[69]Francisco Demetrio, "The *Engkanto* Belief: An Essay in Interpretation," *Philippine Studies* 17 (July 1969): 591.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Gowing, 34.

"Unless the church provides clear teaching on the subject of the spirit world and its practitioners, as well as providing alternatives to going to such practitioners, the problem will continue as it has in the past."[72]

Constructing a pastoral-missiological response is outside the scope of this paper and will have to be left for a future study. This study will address only the first stage, that of Christian teachings. At the same time, a comprehensive Christian teaching that would adequately address the Filipino spirit-worldview would also necessarily go beyond the scope of this study. The following discussion of the basic themes should be regarded as only a preliminary outline. Some themes emerge as essential for a contextualized Christian teaching that would directly relate to Filipino spirit-world beliefs. These themes include the existence of the spirit world; the immanence, jealousy, and sovereignty of God; the *Christus Victor* motif; and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The Existence of the Spirit World

Filipinos in general, whether primitive or contemporary, are supernaturalistic. They believe in God (*Bathala*), as the Lord of the universe. They also believe that this Lord is the creator of the world. The name *Laon* also suggests that Filipinos know God as the Eternal one. This concept should be affirmed and reinforced. According to Tomas Quintin Andres, "The ethics of rationality, of questioning, of independent thinking . . . is one of the most positive contributions of American Protestants to the Filipino mind."[73] However, if this rationalism is carried to the extreme in such manner that it boldly denies the existence of supernatural spirit beings, then it has to be condemned.

A rationalistic Protestant Christian who is confronted by the traditional spirit-worldview of a struggling Filipino Christian could follow the advice of Ralph Toliver:

> We have found that a more pragmatic approach—and one more fruitful of result—is to say "Well, the Bible speaks of evil spirits, and what God had power to do in the past we can also do today.[74]

A biblical approach affirms the belief in both good and evil spirits. There is no reason why Christians in the Philippines cannot use biblical cosmology to reach the roots of the Filipino soul with the gospel. If placed in the right perspective, this approach will preserve the religious fervor of the Filipinos while maintaining a biblical theology.

[72]Henry, 94.

[73]Tomas Quintin Andres, *Understanding Filipino Values: A Management Approach* (Quezon City: New Day, 1981), 8.

[74]Toliver, 214.

The existence of spirit beings is an established biblical fact. The integrity of the Bible would be diminished if this concept as presented in the Bible is to be discounted. Speaking about the account of angels in the NT, Fred Dickason admits that

> if there are no such beings as angels, then we must doubt some direct revelations and attestations of truth presented as coming through angels in the New Testament. We must then also doubt the miraculous deliverance and interventions by angels in Acts and consider that the Epistles are pure imagination or accommodation to ignorance when they speak of Christ's superiority and victory over angels. We must ignore any reference to supernatural enemies and spiritual warfare in Christian life. We must also regard the book of Revelation as either a fictional masterpiece of deception or a figurative mass of incoherent revelations.[75]

A detailed description of the biblical arguments that prove the existence of spirit beings is beyond the scope of this study. Mention of a few cases is necessary, however.

Angels

The Scriptures teach that God created angels (Ps 148:2-5). Angels are described as creatures more elevated than humans (Ps 8:5; Heb 2:6,7,9; 2 Pet 2:11), yet different from and much inferior to God (Heb 2:13-14; Rev 19:10; 22:9). They are spirits, immaterial and incorporeal (Heb 1:14).[76] Thus, angels are generally considered invisible to humans. Yet angels can and do appear to people in human form (e.g., Gen 18:1-16; 19:1-21; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; Acts 1:10).

Angels are personal beings and possess intelligence, emotion, and will (e.g., 1 Pet 1:12; Matt 28:5-7). They also possess great power (2 Chr 32:21; Ps 103:20; 2 Kgs 19:35; Acts 12:7-11; 2 Thess 1:7). The Bible also indicates that angels may inflict bodily harm (2 Kgs 19:35; Acts 12:23), or may even control elements of nature (Rev 7:2-3).

Through the angels' personal choice the angelic world was divided into two major categories. The first group are called the angels of God (John 1:51), holy angels (Mark 8:38), angels of light (2 Cor 11:14), or the "elect angels" (1 Tim 5:21). The second group are called fallen angels, or the angels who sinned (2 Pet

[75]C. Fred Dickason, *Angels: Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 19.

[76]A great deal of discussion has gone on for centuries as to whether they are purely spirits or whether they have bodies different from that of human beings. At the Second Council of Niceaea in A.D. 784, it was decided that angels had bodies either of ether or light. This idea seems to prevail until the present. Louis Berkhof observes that even after the church of the Middle Ages came to the conclusion that angels are pure spiritual beings, some theologians continued to assign some corporeity to angels. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 144.

2:4; Jude 6). These are the angels loyal to Satan, the devil (Matt 25:41; Rev 12:7-9).

Angels, both good and evil, exist. They are pictured by the Bible as powerful and personal spirit beings. Thus the Filipino belief in spirit beings has a solid biblical basis. Now let us specifically discuss demons and evil spirits to see if the Filipino spirit-world beliefs find additional biblical support.

Demons and Evil Spirits

Old Testament teachings about demons and evil spirits are not well developed. Yet OT writers never questioned the existence of demons and evil spirits. In fact, some writers suggest that malevolent spirits even came directly from God (1 Sam 16:14-15,23; 18:10; 19:9; 2 Chr 18:20-23; 1 Kgs 22:21-22). The clearest understanding of the reality and activities of evil spirits, however, is found in the NT. In fact, all NT writers mention demons or evil angels. The most important record provided by the NT regarding demons and evil spirits deals with Jesus' encounter with them.[77] Yet even if the records about demons in the Gospels are excluded, the NT teaching about them is still clear. The apostles recognized the existence of evil spirits (Acts 10:38; 1 Cor 10:20-22; Gal 4:3,9; Rev 9:20) and added that these spirits work diligently against the followers of Christ (Rom 8:38-39; Eph 6:12).

The Bible clearly supports the existence of demons and spirit beings. Therefore, the Filipino belief in the reality of such spirits should be respected instead of denied.

One aspect of the Filipino belief in the existence of spirits should be handled with special biblical attention. This concerns the belief that spirits of ancestors are alive and can do favors. This belief should be gently and firmly corrected because, although it is in accord with Platonic philosophy, it has no biblical support. The Bible clearly indicates that at death, man's body returns to dust, from which it came, and the breath returns to God who gave it (Gen 2:7; 3:19; Job 34:14-15; Ps 104:29; Eccl 3:19-21; 12:7). At death, man, the living soul, ceases to exist (Ps 146:3-4; Ezek 18:4). The Scriptures clearly teach that the soul does not survive as a conscious entity after the body returns to dust. Eccl 9:5-6 says,

> For the living know that they will die,
> but the dead know nothing;
> they have no further reward,
> and even the memory of them is forgotten.
> Their love, their hate and their jealousy
> have long since vanished;

[77]See Matt 8:28-34; Mark 1:21-28; 5:1-20; Luke 4:31-37; 8:26-39; etc.

> never again will they have a part
> in anything that happens under the sun.[78]

This reality made the author of Ecclesiastes add a very important piece of advice. He says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom" (9:10). In view of this biblical truth, therefore, a contextualized biblical teaching on the nature of man is also necessary. Otherwise Filipino Christianity, still adhering to belief in the existence of dead ancestors, would be susceptible to the errors of animism or to the dangers of spiritism, against which God has given strict warning (Lev 19:31; 20:6,27; Deut 18:10-12; Isa 8:19).

But the reality and power of the spirits should not be over-emphasized. Christianity is not a religion concerned with spirits; rather, it is concerned with the sovereign God and His Son, Jesus Christ, before whom spirits tremble and flee. Hence, teachings on the sovereignty of God and the proper place of Christ in relation to the spirits should be prominent.

The Immanence, Jealousy, and Sovereignty of God

One important Christian doctrine that should be emphasized to provide the necessary link between Christianity and Filipino spirit-world beliefs is the doctrine of God. The Filipino concept of God as remote and distant must be addressed. Christian theology admits that God is transcendent. But He is also an immanent God. Filipinos should be taught that there is no dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. God and Satan are actively interacting in all that goes on in this world. Filipinos must be made aware of and sensitive to the divine powers, not just the powers of evil spirits. In this way trust in God may be developed.

God should also be presented to the Filipinos as a jealous God. It should be made clear that God does not allow His people to share loyalty with other spirits. This truth is clearly stated in Exod 20:2-5:

> I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

Further, a Filipinized Christian teaching about God should also emphasize God's sovereignty. This is important because the above analysis indicates that the

[78]All Bible quotations in this article are from the NIV.

"immature" religious orientation of the Filipinos includes the concept that God can be manipulated, used, or controlled. For example, Gorospe observes that

> some Filipino Catholics use God or religion as a means to their own personal satisfaction or ends, such as to gain social acceptance or prestige, to enhance their business or their political ambitions. They are religiously immature.[79]

In another statement Gorospe is even more specific:

> The immature Filipino Catholic tends to treat God as a *compadre* from whom he can obtain favors or as a policeman whom he can bribe by means of a novena. . . . Many Filipino Catholics make novenas to obtain favors from God. They feel that they have done something for God and expect Him in turn to reciprocate by granting their request. They feel that God is indebted to them and therefore if God does not answer their prayer, they sulk or make *tampo*.[80]

In view of this, God should be introduced as sovereign over nature, over the spirit world, and over man. Filipinos should be taught that submission to God's will, not attempting to control God through religious rituals or devotions is the proper way of approaching God. In this connection, practical teachings on the proper attitude toward prayer and worship must also be provided. In this way the egocentric religious personality of the Filipinos may be corrected.

The *Christus Victor* Motif

Another Christian teaching that should be emphasized in dealing with Filipino spirit-world beliefs is the theme of the victorious Christ. There is too much emphasis on the *Santo Niño* (Holy Child) and the *Santo Entierro* (the tragic Victim on the cross or in the tomb) views of Christ. Most Filipinos think of Christ either as a baby or as a martyr, not so much as a living person. But Christ lived a victorious life. He was a liberator. He was victorious over evil spirits (Matt 8:16; Mark 3:11). His kingdom prevails over the kingdoms and powers of this world (Rev 11:15). In fact, the NT views Him as the destroyer of demons (Heb 2:14-15). Christ has decisively defeated the demonic powers (Col 2:15), and has given believers authority over demons (Luke 9:1; 10:17). Demons have residual dominion over humans only because mankind is still waiting for the consummation of redemption. Thus, Filipinos should be taught that all spirits are subservient to Christ (1 Pet 3:22) and can be overcome by the power of God (Eph 6:10-13). Therefore, any reverence, worship, or excessive fear of spirits must be deemed unchristian and misdirected (Rom 8:15-17; Col 2:18; 1Pet 5:8-9).

[79]Gorospe, 27.
[80]Ibid., 37.

This emphasis would make Christianity more attractive to Filipinos. It would show that Christianity is superior to spirit-world beliefs. This strategy was successful in the NT era. It is also successful in modern times. One modern Christian worker who found this emphasis successful in Africa gives this advice:

> Christians ought to recognize that there is witchcraft and that it is both a subjective and objective reality emanating from the Devil. But having recognized this, like Paul when combating the Colossian error, they must also proclaim the pre-eminence and uniqueness of Christ. His all-embracing love is able to draw all men to Himself and His infinite power can liberate all who are held in bondage of sin and Satan.[81]

There is a danger, however, that Christian symbols such as the crucifix, holy water, or candles may be used as *anting-anting* because of the emphasis on the power of the victorious Christ. Thus, Christian teachers should avoid encouraging their use, lest Christianity become just another way of exercising magic. This is affirmed by Henry, who notes that, "if the spirit world is not placed in the context of all Christian doctrine and practices, the church will become the place for 'Christian magic' and be obsessed with the spirit world."[82]

Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Emphasis on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is also important. Filipinos must be taught that through the ministry of various divine agencies, especially through the Holy Spirit, man's needs in life can be provided by God (Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 12:7-11; 2 Pet 1:3). It must also be made clear that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are sufficient for the church to carry out its gospel commission (Eph 4:7-8,11-13). Hence, there is no reason why people who profess to be Christians should go to spirit-world practitioners. It seems that the lack of emphasis on teachings about the Holy Spirit contributes to the absence of concrete alternatives to spirit-world beliefs and practices.

It must be made clear that the power of the Holy Spirit may not always be demonstrated in spectacular ways. It should be remembered also that the scientific way of doing things does not at all eliminate the influence of divine forces. To expect that the Holy Spirit will operate only in spectacular ways is dangerous, because evil spirits may also perform perceived miracles (1 Tim 4:1; Rev 16:14). Hence, the biblical advice of testing every spirit (1 John 4:1-3) should be observed.

[81]Sam Erivwo, "Christian Attitude to Witchcraft," *The African Ecclesial Review* 1 (1975): 31.

[82]Henry, 136.

Summary

Filipinos are supernaturalists. They believe that supernatural beings coexist with them in an invisible society similar to their own. They also believe that these beings are able to affect the whole gamut of their lives, including birth, sickness, business, planting, harvesting, and death.

The persistence of these spirit-world beliefs creates a theological problem for Philippine Christianity. The situation can easily lead to less authentic Christianity or syncretistic religion. As has been pointed out in this article, Folk Catholicism teaches that God is a far-away God. Thus, there is a need for dead saints to care for the day-to-day affairs of human beings. Besides, there is a constant fear of evil spirits which moves people to rely on spirit mediums or talismans when trouble comes. What is the best theological response to this phenomenon?

The theological response that can relate properly to the Filipino spirit-world beliefs should teach the following themes: (1) The God of the universe is a God who is involved in the day-to-day affairs of humanity. He is a jealous God and demands loyalty. He is sovereign, so he can meet all human needs. (2) Invisible supernatural forces, both good and evil, exist and have power to affect one's life, depending on his/her choices. (3) Spirits of ancestors do not exist, but evil angels are able to deceptively impersonate them. (4) Through the power of Jesus Christ, Christians can have not only eternal life in the hereafter but also freedom from the forces of evil in this present temporal existence. (5) Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, man's needs in life may be sufficiently provided.

The theological response stated above should be the basis for pastoral-missiological practice. Constructing a pastoral-missiological response to Filipino spirit-world beliefs remains a subject for a future study.