

# The Filipino Transpersonal Worldview

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## Preliminary Note

Human cultures throughout the ages have always found a way to describe reality and express it in terms that explain their contexts, their practices and relationships. Besides, encounters with other cultures also contributed in some way to answering questions of humanity about what reality is all about:

Every culture out of its own experiences and its interaction with other cultures develops an answer to such a question. The answer comes in the form of a belief system, which may be handed down from one generation to the next or may attain written form. It may be slightly modified in the telling but on the whole remains stable and in turn shapes the thinking and the experiences of subsequent generations.<sup>2</sup>

Thus reality is understood and experienced by cultures not in an abstract manner, but in a contextual way colored by their belief system that determines their horizon of meaning or worldview.

The view of reality cannot be a question of who has the best view. No one can claim that one's worldview is the absolute truth and judge others' worldviews as less truthful. One needs to remember that a world view is not a fruit of an individual's reasoning but a natural consequence of a network of relationships where members of a human community locate meanings, judge actions as right or wrong, celebrate feasts and rituals, and allow what is transcendent to have a bearing on community and personal life.

In general, we can say that worldviews can be dualistic, materialistic or transpersonal. A dualistic worldview conceives reality in an analogical way or dual way. For example, the Catholic Tradition understands creation as *ex nihilo*, that is, there was nothing before God created anything. So here the underlying dualistic worldview is that God is infinite, eternal and pure spirit while creatures are limited, temporal and material.

A materialist or materialistic worldview conceives reality as the world (the only reality), which has length, breadth and height. Mechanical forces under the influence of time run the world in its linear progression of past, present, and

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<sup>2</sup> Jaime Bulatao, *Phenomena and their Interpretation* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1992), 49.

future. This concept of the world as a machine also influences the concept of the human person as not beyond one's own skin. Thus a human person cannot go transpersonal, that is, go beyond the limits of geographical space and time.

The transpersonal worldview conceives the world in inter-relationships of worlds and subjects. Jaime Bulatao enumerates what constitutes a transpersonal worldview:<sup>3</sup>

1. There is a reality or realities other than matter, such as "spirit" or "spirits."
2. All reality is somehow or the other all *present*, at least in God's mind. Past and future are human ways of representing reality little by little.
3. The world is ultimately run by Spirit (God, mind, providence, spirits, the Force).
4. The human mind is not limited by the brain and can even exist outside of it.
5. Knowledge can come in an extrasensory way, mind in direct contact with the objective reality (e.g., with collective unconscious).
6. The human person is part of a bigger collectivity and the ego can at times lower its barriers to fuse with the bigger reality.

The transpersonal worldview of a Filipino can be fundamentally located within the framework provided by Bulatao. Unlike other paradigms of transpersonal worldviews, the Filipino worldview belongs to the animist model. It sees the material world as "peopled" by a variety of spirits. The western mind, though, influenced by the Greek thought pattern does not find this new (cf. 2 Cor 4:88). However, for Filipinos:

The difference lies in conceiving these spirits as living normal, earthly lives of their own as they were a race of humans, unlike the Christian view of spirit which polarizes them into the totally good and totally bad. Thus animism conceives the earth as peopled by two kinds of beings, the seen and the unseen, occupying the same plots of ground, bathing in the same stream, moving through the same fields and forests.

Deep in the semiconscious regions of the modern Filipino psyche lurk the same spirits which inhabited his pre-Spanish ancestor, and which are likewise found today in modern Javanese, Sumatran, or Malaysian societies. Theologies and names of God and the spirits may have changed but the "realities" upon which these names are projected remain the same.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jaime Bulatao, 49. See also Jaime Bulatao, "When Roman Theology meets an Animistic Culture: Mysticism in Present Day Philippines" in *Kinaapman* 6/1 (1984): 102-111.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 50. An important article corroborates this observation: Francisco Demetrio, *Philippine Shamanism and Southeast Asian Parallels* (Cagayan de Oro: Xavier University Press, 1972), 679-716.

Among the less-educated classes one can see another psychic influence through the spiritualism of Allan Kardec with its belief in reincarnation that exerts a considerable influence on psychic healers or *Espiritistas* and the general perception of *sapi* or spirit possession.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the transpersonal worldview of the Filipinos today can be drawn from three sources: pre-Christian tribal religions, Spanish Catholicism, and Kardec spiritualism. However, it must be borne in mind that these three sources influence one another and their concrete expressions vary in different localities of the Philippines.

### The Anatomy of a Filipino Transpersonal World View

As an introduction to a detailed dissection of the Filipino transpersonal worldview, two examples would suffice to illustrate its dynamics.

The first example is the *negritos*<sup>6</sup> belief in a Great Creator and Numerous Spirits:

Through their contacts with the Malays, the Negritos came to know about the existence of a supreme and great Creator who ruled the world through different powers of spirits living in *balitè*<sup>7</sup> trees. These are called *Tigbalog*, the spirit of life and activity; *Lueve*, the spirit of production and growth; *Amas*, the spirit of love, pity, unity and peace of heart; *Binangewan*, the spirit of change, sickness, death and punishment. **Panizo 1967: 84-85.**<sup>8</sup>

This heightened sensitivity to the spirit world also becomes part of some customs wherein the spirits are invited to partake of offerings:

As soon as everything was ready for the offering, the whole family stayed on one side of the altar table while close relatives and friends stayed behind them. Then the head of the family would step forward, stretch out his arm, and invite all the spirits to come. His stretched arm was an invitation for the spirits to partake of the offering. Then he talked to them as if they were already there eating at table. He faced them and talked with them personally. It was very solemn. The participants kept absolutely quiet, fearful lest they hurt or disturb the spirits. To disturb, displease or hurt the spirits meant getting sick or courting calamity. After the offering was finished, the person offering would give a farewell talk to the spirits. Then the food was removed (to be eaten by the family

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Negritos are dark-skinned, short and curly haired tribal people that inhabit some mountainous regions of the Philippines. They are nomadic tribes and they live on the resources that they find in their temporary settlement.

<sup>7</sup> *Balitè* tree is a tree believed to be a favorite dwelling place of spirits.

<sup>8</sup> Francisco R. Demetrio, *Encyclopedia of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs* (Cagayan de Oro City: Xavier University, 1991, Revised Edition), 610.

and invited guests). **Gerlock n.d.:108-109.**<sup>9</sup>

These two examples illustrate the compenetration of the visible and invisible worlds in the Filipino transpersonal worldview. Everything is interconnected and humans exist side by side with the spirits that live in the visible world though they are invisible. The following elements comprise this indigenous worldview:

1. The invisible world is populated by *Bathalang Maykapal* (God the Maker), and the lesser invisibles called *diwata* and *anito*. The souls of the dead *ninuno* (ancestors) fall under the category of *anitos*.<sup>10</sup> Due to their existence as a group of spirits, they can be referred to as “worlds” and because they describe a condition of being, they can also be referred to as “states of being.”<sup>11</sup> Thus,

[t]he visible and invisible worlds interact continually because the invisible world is not out there and distant from one’s spatial location. The invisible is here and now. One must not say or do what the invisible beings disapprove of. They must be spoken to with respect, for they listen though unseen. To show reverence, their permission should be asked when one is about to do anything that might in any way be offensive to them: and when one is about to partake of the blessings of the land that used to belong to the dead ancestors, one must set apart a portion to be offered them as their share. This pleases them and is expected to bring to the offerer more blessings.<sup>12</sup>

2. The awareness of the influence of the spirits that inhabit the “worlds” in different “states of being” is the motivation for the customary rituals done in order to obtain favor, to express thanksgiving for the favors granted, to ward off misfortune and calamities. When the spirits are displeased or offended, the bad consequences fall not only on the individual concerned but also its repercussions extend to the community where the individual offender lives. The fact is that

[h]umans are not always careful and may offend the invisibles wittingly or unwittingly. Moral responsibility is not a matter of willful violation of taboos. The fact of violation alone is sufficient to bring punishment upon oneself. Thus, when sickness or misfortune strikes which is believed to be caused by the invisibles, appeasement and atonement must be done by prayer and sacrificial ritual.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 630.

<sup>10</sup> Florentino H. Hornedo, “Indigenous Aspects of Worship in the Church of the Philippines” in *Philippiniana Sacra* 37/106 (January-April 2001): 127-138.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* See also Fr. Emmanuel Nabayra “The Healing Ritual” in Alfredo R. Roces, ed., *The Filipino*

3. The asymmetrical compenetration of the invisible and visible worlds, where the invisible yields more power, structures the hierarchy of dignities and values in both worlds. Thus the dignity and value hierarchy forms the ethical and behavioral norms:

And because of the hierarchy of dignities and values, good and bad are found on either state. There are good invisibles just as there are bad ones. The same thing in the visible world. But the general tenor of the manner of interaction between the two worlds is premised on the behavior of the human world. The invisibles may be gracious or wicked depending on how humans relate to them: they bless the pious and punish the impious.<sup>14</sup>

This asymmetry of structure in the hierarchy of dignities engenders in the Filipino psyche attitudes of fear (*takot*) and shame (*hiya*). This psychic make up can be verified in the linguistic structure of native and religious language.

Where do we locate the place of God and Humans in this worldview? F. Hornedo explains clearly the illustration that we have above:

Living humans are on the visible state: God is in the invisible. The invisible is superior to the visible; and thus the invisibles are taken to be superior to the visible. God is the supreme invisible; and so great is his supremacy that he is remote, and he leaves the details of ordering and maintaining the universe to lesser, mostly invisible beings known as *diwata*.

In a way of looking, the *diwata* are not gods but inferior place or function spirits.... it is to the intermediate beings that traditional Filipinos relate directly rather than to the remote *Bathalang Maykapal*.

The place of God in this worldview is on the upper end of the invisible world, and below him in the invisible world, and closer to humans, are the myriad *diwata* and *anito*. Humans, being inferior, must relate with reverence and piety towards the invisibles. It is from these they expect favors and blessings, and to them, too, they owe thanksgiving and appeasement in case of transgression. It is to them that sacrificial offerings and the implicit worship it involves are given.<sup>15</sup>

The coming of the Christian faith did not remove this worldview. The animistic faith did not take the center stage but existed side by side with the newly embraced Catholicism:

In this first encounter between Spanish Catholicism and animistic faith,

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*Heritage: The Making of a Nation* (Manila: Lahing Pilipino Publishing, 1977), volume 2, 529-532.

<sup>14</sup> F. Hornedo, 128-129.

<sup>15</sup> F. Hornedo, 129.

the ensuing state of the consciousness of the new converts may well be illustrated by an incident in the account given by one of the early missionaries. The missionary observed that the people were making offerings to the spirits residing in a *balete* tree. He ordered them to cut the tree down. They did, but while doing so, they could be heard speaking to the spirits in the tree, "Spirits, forgive us for what we are doing to your house, but it is the Padre who is forcing us to cut it down against our will..." Thus, the Roman and the animistic theologians came to co-exist in the same Christian. The saints, the archangels and the angels are simply raised one rung higher than the nature spirits, the *lamang lupa*...in the cultural consciousness the two theologies assumed the "structure" of two levels, the Spanish-Roman theology on top and the animistic one below. This is the existing structure, which has been termed "Split-level Christianity."<sup>16</sup>

The upper level is a more explicitly verbalized system including the Apostles Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Five Precepts of the Church and a few things about the Mass and the Sacraments. The lower level is that which has been deposited by life itself, early-life conditionings, relationships, traditional myths and belief systems handed down from grandfather to grandson. This is the culture, which nourishes the consciousness of the child from the first years of his extra-uterine life like a kangaroo nourishes its child in its pouch...thus, did the two levels maintain their co-existence for the three hundred years of Spanish rule.<sup>17</sup>

The end of the Spanish rule and the coming of the Americans did not change the co-existence of these two levels. Democracy and science took the upper level of the nation's consciousness. But it must be noted that

Philippine animism, being part of the Filipino spirit, has been much more alive and resilient.... Not only do the old spirits of the trees, the fields and the rivers comeback once in a while to take possession of a 20<sup>th</sup> century body but when the possessing one is a canonized saint of the Catholic Church, the saint behaves in the same way as the old spirits of the land. If these saints thus find their niches in men's hearts and if men's consciousness is thus transformed towards a familiarity with the divine, who can in the over all view condemn the relics of animism as merely pagan or, even worse, as devilish, as the old missionaries did? Let theologians, if they insist, change the names and the formulas in prayer, but let them keep that divine-seeking process which was in the Filipino from ages ago and which his culture has kept till today.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jaime Bulatao, "When Roman Theology meets an Animistic Culture: Mysticism in Present Day Philippines" in *Kinaapman* 6/1 (1984): 103.

<sup>17</sup> Jaime Bulatao, *Theology Meets Animism*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

These are strongly worded statements but one can go beyond the formulation and understand the intention behind it. Of course there are excesses as there were in the time of St. Paul and that is why there is a need to set criteria of discernment. However, the fact remains that faith is always an inculturated faith.<sup>19</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher puts it rightly in quoting Cardinal Ratzinger, “faith itself is culture” and there is no such a thing as a pre-cultural or de-cultured Christianity. “In reality a pure encounter with a culture-free gospel is impossible. Some theologians...talk as if there were an ahistorical essence of Christianity waiting to be incarnated, which is to ignore the fact that Christianity never existed, not even in its first days, without being expressed in some cultural forms; instead the adventure of Church history always means a meeting of cultures in search of a new and original expression of the one faith.”<sup>20</sup>

The Church as a community needs to be aware of the fact that faith-experience does not exist in a vacuum. “What is at stake is each culture’s right and privilege to seek and find God.”<sup>21</sup>

### Concluding Notes: Synthesis and Prospect

The West is becoming more and more aware of a contemporary person’s search for a spirituality that goes beyond the traditional trimmings of religion. There is a turning towards the East for answers to questions of reality. The emergence of the New Age phenomenon and the conflicting orientations of post-modern culture indicate a restlessness of the human spirit to transcend the limits of time and space and connect with the beyond. The Filipino transpersonal worldview has always sustained Filipinos to remain resilient and serene in the midst of spiritual, economic and political upheavals. In other words, the Filipino psyche has always found the harmony of all creation, and human beings form part of this overarching harmony. Thus the impact of sects and cults, New Age groups as conflicting orientations that come to be presented and “marketed” even in the Philippines is in reality “strange” to the dominant worldview of average Filipinos, the majority of whom live in the countryside and are sensitive to the spirit world.

In a nutshell, in the Filipino transpersonal perspective, the world inhabited by spirits coexists side by side with the world of matter. The world of spirit and the world of matter make up the real world. God is seen as supreme and chief among the spirits. Jesus Christ, while a spirit, is assumed to have a definite form, usually as the *Sto. Niño* or as the *Nazareno*. The saints too assume definite forms through the statues, and each family feels that these saints are family

<sup>19</sup> See Mario De França Miranda, *Inculturazione della Fede: Un Approccio Teologico*, Roma 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1997), 103.

<sup>21</sup> Jaime Bulatao, *Theology Meets Animism*, 109.

members.<sup>22</sup> In fact, a young man once told me that in impossible cases many pray to Saint Jude to ask him to tell Jesus the case and once a prayer has been granted the gratitude is owed to St. Jude for the favor received. This concept of hierarchy of dignities and values is indeed *sui generis* and it can be assumed that an average Filipino Catholic does not find any conflict between daily spirit experience like asking permission from the elemental spirits when passing by or throwing something outside the window and the duties and obligations of a Catholic Christian. There is a split-level Christianity as indicated above but this is a mental distinction that only the “learned” ones were able to identify for in the concrete the split-level is never experienced as such.

A prospect for the future is well said in these words:

As they say, the best synthesis is that which is done under one skull. Until such a time as a Filipino theologian feels sufficiently free and confident to integrate his [*sic*] own mystic feelings with his theology, or as a Filipino mystic truly learns (not just rote) a Roman theology, the animistic consciousness of the Filipino will remain on the periphery of Roman theology. On the other hand, if the Filipino, being true to his own deep self, can discover God in his own way and is allowed to do so (within Pauline limits, of course), there can arise a flowering of Filipino spirituality.<sup>23</sup>

It is about time to go more deeply into the Filipino worldview and allow it to express itself in a positive way towards a new integration.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *The Phenomena of Religion*, 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> Jaime Bulatao, *Theology Meets Animism*, 110.

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