

FILIPINO RELIGIOUS PSYCHOLOGY: A COMMENTARY*

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Demystifying the Filipino's religious experience allows us to view it in at least two interrelated contexts, both within the realm of psychology, as an altered state of consciousness and as a social psychological phenomenon. The altered state of consciousness is induced by certain elements in the religious ritual and is characterized by changes in the devotee's internal-external environment, as well as in his perception of that environment. These changes facilitate healing, in the case of Filipino medico-religious therapies, and increased religious fervor (even conversion), in the case of popular devotions and practices. Also vital to the impact of the religious experience are the qualities of the healer or the leader of the religious sect, the interaction of the participants with each other during a rite or devotion, the degree of cognitive dissonance aroused, to name a few social psychological variables. The religious experience is also a mode of expression of the Filipino world view, which has been suggested to be a holistic one. One important implication of the studies is especially relevant to workers in rural and semi-rural areas; that Western biases and elitist attitudes must be discarded in favor of these indigenous practices and customs that have relevance and usefulness to the particular situation.

It is often claimed that Filipino Christianity is merely "folk Christianity," supposedly characterized by magical and animistic qualities that make it inferior to urbanized, rational religion. As such, certain religious and quasi-religious experiences of the common man are viewed skeptically (if not belittled, or even outrightly rejected) by the "better educated," "modern" city folk who think of these experiences as nothing more than fraud, myths, superstitions or imagination run wild typical of gullible, uneducated minds.

The papers compiled in *Filipino Religious Psychology*, however, hold implications which seem to belie this claim. Results from investigations in the three topic areas - (1) the psychology of Filipino medico-religious therapy and counselling (or folk medicine), (2) the psychology of religious experience in popular devotions, and (3) the psychology of religious

leaderships in locally founded sects - indicate that Filipino (folk) Christianity is definitely not inferior to urbanized religion and that the former may in fact have valuable contribution to make in understanding the psychology of the Filipino.

The first section of this volume deals with the psychological aspect of folk medicine; the religious elements in Samar-Leyte folk medicine, and the psychology of various folk healers; the *tambalan* in Leyte, the *arbularyo* in Batangas, and the *espiritistas* of Cebu. The writers in this chapter include a doctor of medicine and three social scientists.

The second chapter on religious experience in popular religious practices focuses on four devotions; to the Senor Santo Nino in Cebu; to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Santacruzian in particular; to the Lenten rites in Palo, Leyte; and to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. It is only fitting, perhaps, that the writers should include a lay socio-anthropologist and three members of different religious orders whose training is in both theology and psychology.

The psychology of the leaders of local sects

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is discussed in the third and last chapter, which describes the leadership systems of the Iglesia Watawat ng Lahi, the Iglesia ni Kristo, the Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association, Inc., and the Lapiang Malaya. The contributors to this section come from the interrelated fields of anthropology, psychology and history, as well as one rather daring clergyman.

DE-MYSTIFYING FILIPINO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

To discuss Filipino religious psychology, when he defines religion collectively as the age-old attempts of man "to bind himself to God and God to him, to enter into a union with the infinite and the almighty." In the process of these attempts, changes occur in man's external and internal environment; these he takes as signs of successful union with his God. The mechanisms of the internal changes — be they psychological, physiological, or phenomenological — have been studied only recently, however. Bulatao states

In (the) example of fasting we see how psychological changes bring about a change of consciousness and how at times a change of consciousness can be given a religious meaning, as in fasting to prepare for mystic prayer and union. But there are other ways besides the physical to effect a consciousness change, and Philippine religion is rich in these phenomena. Oftentimes they are not recognized as "change of consciousness" but are seen as direct workings of spirits or the Holy Spirit."

He then goes on to enumerate the more "traditional" forms of altered states of consciousness (abbreviated ASC, for convenience), as well as those everyday forms which one might not readily label as ASCs. In addition, the psychological dynamics of certain religious practices e.g., the Holy Week flagellantes, the *cur-sillo* experience, even "spirit of the glass" — are discussed in the light of altered states of consciousness.

We are thus given the contextual setting against which Filipino religious psychology is to be discussed by the various authors. That

is, "religion" does not refer merely to institutionalized Catholicism and its esoteric manifestations but, rather, embraces a wide variety of behaviors whose common goal is "union with the infinite" through transcendence of the finite." The religious practices of the so-called Filipino "folk Christianity" therefore hold as much religious meaning as traditional Christianity's own practices and devotions.

Bulatao's viewpoint, however, is not shared by (or at least is seemingly novel to) the greater body of local theologians and laity. The analysis of religious experience as an altered state of consciousness is, similarly, a new way of understanding the experience, representative of the "resurgence of the secular mind" in theology. Bulatao predicts that this sort of analysis will generate controversy as it becomes popularized.

But it is good to know that such feats have little that is mysterious or supernatural about them. They are within the ordinary repertoire of the human spirit, plain simple ASC... (And yet) when many religious phenomena are demythologized and are merely explained as altered states of consciousness, there is bound to be an outcry against the "new secularism."

THE FILIPINO AND HIS RELIGION

A common orientation shared by the various writers throughout this book expands on Bulatao's definition of religion, pointing out that the study of Filipino religious psychology should be a holistic one. They cite that Filipino religion, for instance, is not confined to attending Mass, receiving the sacraments, and certain devotions, but pervades the many aspects of the Filipino's life. Thus Macapagal notes that the *tambalan* is not a mere healer, but an excellent psychiatrist as well. Thus, too, the Filipino needs visible, tangible symbols as an expression/embodiment of his religion — whether they be *santos*, gestures, cryptic words, oil, water, herbs, amulets, rings, and so on. Quisumbing adds that religious practices — of which the *sinulog* is a clear example — involve the whole person, "hands and feet, head and face, limb, nerve, and sinew, body and soul." The Filipino furthermore tends to carry the "native cultural and psychological

mechanisms" that he uses with his fellowmen, over to his relationship with his God. The writers take note of folk beliefs that indicate the Filipino's ascription of human traits to a supernatural God, such that this God may be alternately threatened and thanked, called upon for mercy or forgiveness and appeased by pledges (*Panaad*), treated as a mischievous prankster of a child or as a Father, the Provider. Quisumbing, in her paper on the devotion to the Senor Santo Nino of Cebu explains

It is not difficult to see how the devotion of the Senor Santo Nino became intricately woven into the fabric of life itself — its dangers and challenges, its needs and problems, its trials and successes. Good became identified with blessing and mercy; want with displeasure or disgrace. Religion and life were inseparable. Religious myths, legends, and miracle stories assumed the continuity of faith and devotion, increased trust in the Holy Child, reinforced good behavior and genuine intentions, aroused concern in the common welfare, presented solutions to the problems of survival, strengthened the people's resistance to a danger and to a hostile environment, and united the group physically and morally. Social functions exercised in religious contexts and situations enhanced social cohesiveness and organization."

And because the holistic approach covers all activities of man, Filipino folk medicine is likewise more appropriately studied using this method. Holistically speaking, "everything is connected to everything," to paraphrase the Gestalt school. Galvez-Tan's investigation of Samar-Leyte folk medicine illustrates this principle: the folk healers he studies base their "paramedical" practices on certain religious elements (e.g., spirits whom the patient has displeased, the power of spells and incantations), thereby fusing science and religion. Furthermore, the healer assumes roles which may be only indirectly related to the disease he is treating, such as a confidant, adviser, mediator, teacher, social worker, etc. Galvez-Tan's article is espe-

cially significant in its treatment of medical service in the Philippine rural setting — not only is the approach he advocates holistic, "meaning we take care of the person as an individual in his entirety." It is also radical in comparison with prevalent thinking in medical circles. For Galvez-Tan (who seems to practice what he preaches), the only appropriate approach is to start with what the people know rather than what we know, building with what they have rather than what we have. This means that

"Professional health workers need to re-orient themselves to the rural culture and psychology, to radically change their values, to shed off elitist and Western attitudes, and to meet the people on their own cultural level irrespective of what bias and prejudices the medical profession has about peasant folk medical practices. Only in doing so can they succeed in truly serving the people."

His analyses of the reasons behind the local healer's successful treatments, the popularity of the healer in rural areas, and the implications of the healer's presence there for the medical profession, are especially keen and should generate further research.

A further observation obtained from reading the articles is that, as Bulatao earlier noted, Filipino religion is replete with instances of ASC. In folk medicine, a light to medium trance can be induced which, enhancing the patient's expectations of a cure, suggests that the evil spirit (the source of the disease) has left the patient's body or that the patient's lost soul has returned. The *espiritistas* or faith healers can "see" the solution to a problem, or can communicate with spirits, only while under deep trance. Religious devotions and practices can produce the same effect through extreme pain, as with the *penitentes* or flagellants of Holy Week, through the repetitive prayers of a large mass of people (e.g., the Black Nazarene devotion), with the aid of the rhythmic continuous beating of drums as in *sinulog*, or simply through the discipline and sacrifice required (e.g., fasting) on special occasions.

In a similar vein local religious sects, as described by the respective writers, are only as strong as the leader's personality, which has

been inadequately summarized in the four cases as "charismatic." This implies some sort of "magnetic" quality in the leader that draws his followers' attention, admiration, awe and reverence." It may be expressed through such traits as "shrewd, intelligent and clever", dynamic, aggressive, tactful, "compassionate and paternal, a legendary figure, holy or supernatural, and sincere" (Manalo). Ecleo, founder and head of the PBMA, is acknowledged to be a good speaker, actor, singer, and healer, who has the added talent of inducing mass hypnosis. Less aggressive but equally sincere, generous, and endowed with "supernatural" powers was Valentin de los Santos of the Lapiang Malaya. He was also said to own a magnet to explain the fact that at the mere sight of him, one could become an instant convert to the movement. Covar's article does not describe the personality traits of the leaders of the Iglesia Watawat ng Lahi, although we may assume that the *Banal na Tinig* had a sound basis for choosing these particular persons. All in all, we can say that the founders/leaders of indigenous organizations (like those of the great Western and other Eastern religions) had attractive, persuasive, compassionate and forceful personalities. Mercado describes their most outstanding quality as being "paternalistic" in the Filipino sense . . . (furthermore) leadership is holistic." The summary and synthesis at the end of the third section enumerates the leadership traits which characterized successful leaders; some of these qualities, however, are not sufficiently described in operational terms.

As is common perhaps to many other religious groups, local sects employ some amount of deception (whether subtle or overt) in attracting and maintaining their following. Leaders are also described as ascribing some sort of supernatural powers to themselves. This adds to the emotional fervor of the neophytes and reinforce the conviction of the already converted. The family background and origins of the founders are often undocumented, if not shrouded in mystery. In the larger, better organized sects the leaders have obviously benefitted from the material returns of their "mission" (e.g., in the form of luxurious homes and cars, powerful political connections, etc.) although this wealth has been accepted and even justified by their adherents.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF FILIPINO RELIGION

Tied up intimately with the psychology of medico-religious therapy is the social psychology of Filipino religion. The preceding paragraphs have not distinguished between the two aspects, and have thus mentioned briefly leadership traits, characteristics of a credible communicator, and the effects of the patient's expectations of therapy/therapist on his cure.

We can also mention other elements of Filipino religious psychology that may yield fruitful results for the social psychologist-researcher: the process of identification [e.g., with a healthy family (Galvez-Tan), with Mary (Mangulabnan), with the various heads of sects], characteristics and motivations of the faithful, a question suggested by Covar; reasons for persistence of belief in folk medicine (tentatively answered by Galvez-Tan, Tiston and Macalintal), cognitive dissonance (Velez, Pastores, Falcon), the personality/behavioral traits of the healer, and so on. In connection with the last, it is interesting to note that Prof. Herminia Alfonso of UP-IMC has recommended that familiar people (including the local tambalan or arbularyo) be employed in educating rural women about population control and contraceptive methods.

The Filipino personality as it interacts with religious, sociocultural and environmental influences can also be explored via Filipino religious devotions and practices. Because it comes into contact with a large number of people, the devotion (aside from its spiritual function) becomes an important vehicle for expressing a unique Filipino personality. It is also a vital means of reaching the people, within a devotion that is the Filipino: to be truly spiritual a devotion has to have meaning to the devotee, that is, one with which he can identify. Thus, the study of religious practices is also one way of contacting the Filipino's realities, values, belief systems, self-concept, and reinforcement contingencies.

The participants of this conference have given valuable recommendations as to further research topics as well as implication of the papers read. Of particular relevance is the suggestion that the rural worker — particularly the doctor and the priest, who are the traditional authority figures in the towns and barrios —

be re-educated in the sense of seeing his fellow Filipino from a Filipino's viewpoint, setting aside Western biases and habits in research and practical work. This would imply, among others, that whenever and wherever possible, these leaders should integrate those native practices and customs that have positive values with the information obtained from our Western-oriented formal education. What gives a practice positive value, however, is defined in slightly different ways from author to author. Professional medical practitioners and folk healers, for instance, have much to learn from each other. Eventually one's services need not be merely supplementary or complementary to the other's, but should rather be an integration of both approaches so as to effectively minister to the *whole* person. Too often and too long we have looked down upon indigenous religious beliefs and practices; perhaps it is now high time to re-examine and re-evaluate these for their intrinsic value and usefulness, and to discard our own irrelevant Western concepts, biases and attitudes.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

A few of the papers leave a number of the reader's questions unanswered, perhaps because of deletions during the editing process, or inadequate time to pull together research results. For instance: Are the particular *spiritistas* studied by Velez (characteristic of their kind, or are they a unique group because of their educational status, occupation, etc.? How did Jacob actually phrase her questions when interviewing devotees of the Black Nazarene; were the questions coherent to and understandable by the subjects? When Dr. Macapagal suggests (in a sort of pun) that the *tambalan* and the psychotherapist together could "get some kind of a happy medium, (sic), does she mean that they could reach an average of their methods, a compromise, an integration? Mangulabnan cites one unconscious motivation (the concept of motherhood) that may underlie the Filipinos' devotion to the Virgin Mary; could this motivation have been intermittently reinforced in history, thus maintaining and strengthening the devotion? Is the discipline inculcated in

the thoughts and behaviors of INK members brought about by pure faith in Manalo? Are there other external, natural, and social forces at work in keeping them faithful adherents? What is their concept of God, of the relationship between God and man, of the significance of Christ in the history of salvation? Would Pastores go as far as saying that the actuations of the Lapiang Malaya embodied true nationalism? Assuming that Messianic movement arise during periods of "economic, social, and spiritual dislocation," and that such a periods of deprivation *does* exist in the country today (as claimed by some quarters, is there any record of a new indigenous sect emerging in the recent past with Messianic overtones? These and other unanswered questions could be possible springboards for future researchers. One issue left to the reader to decide for himself was whether mystification of religious rites and devotions serves any useful purpose (yes, according to Mercado) or whether de-mystification would be a better approach (as forwarded by Bulatao).

Personally, I found the volume a revelation as I had never really thought about Filipino Christianity— with its unique flavor and manifestations — from the viewpoint of the authors. This seems rather ironic for someone whose grandfather has integrated an intense interest in the esoteric aspects of religion with formal Catholic rites and doctrines and counts as his personal friends, several *spiritistas*, faith healers, Moncadistas, *arbularyos*, etc. I was unfortunately, among the mis-educated Filipinos who thought of local religious leaders, sects and devotions as mere curiosities/oddities, even deceptions that should best be swept away by scientific methods. I strongly agree that there remains an extensive fertile area for research on this important aspect of Filipino life.

The descriptive and expository accounts are far from boring. I would suggest, however, that the appendices should include English-Filipino translations of Visayan terms, prayers, and especially the PBMA Constitution which, in its original Cebuano, is a reading experience by itself. Perhaps, too, the numerous distracting typographical and grammatical errors could

have been more efficiently proofread and edited. The comments and synthesis portions after each chapter are effective means of recapitulating the various points raised by the papers, the open forums, and the group discussions.

I noted that none of the references used by the authors included Dr. Jerome Frank's chapter on "Religious healing" from his book *Persuasion and Healing* (1961). His cross-cultural analysis touches on several points discussed during this conference, as seen from the following statements:

"In all cultures (religious healing's) chief realm of operation is in the treatment of illnesses that have important emotional components; that is, the conditions for which naturalistically based psychotherapies are also used."

Methods of supernatural healing highlight the close interplay of assumptive systems and emotional states and the intimate relation of both to health and illness. They also bring out the parallel between inner disorganization and disturbed relations with one's group, and indicate how patterned interaction of patient, healer and group within the framework of a self-consistent assumptive world can promote healing."

Using the curing methods of a Kwakiutl shaman, a Guatemalan healer, and the religious healing at Lourdes as examples, Frank enumerates several characteristics of primitive/religious healing, including a preparatory period that represents a dramatic break in the usual routine of daily activities; expression of concern i.e., all the participants of the ritual try to help the patient by performing parts of the ritual, interceding for him with the spirits he has offended, etc.; ceremonies that are highly charged emotionally and which make a strong aesthetic appeal, and so on.

"In short, methods of primitive healing [. . . like those of the healing ceremonies at Lourdes] involve an interplay between patient, healer, group, and the world of the supernatural which serves to raise the patient's expectancy of cure,

help him to harmonize his inner conflicts, reintegrate him with his group and the spirit world, supply a conceptual framework to aid this, and stir him emotionally. In the process they combat his anxiety and strengthen his sense of self-worth."

Like many of the various writers in *Filipino Religious Psychology*, Frank opts for a holistic approach, emphasizing the profound influence of emotions on health, and suggesting that anxiety and despair can be lethal, confidence and hope, life giving. The modern belief system of Western society, which includes mind-body dualism, has had difficulty incorporating these obvious facts and has thus tended to underemphasize it.

Unlike the Filipino researchers, however, Frank's analysis of the similarities between psychotherapeutic and religious healing elements does not go beyond enumeration, description, explanation. There is no attempt to integrate the role of the folk or faith healer (*tambalan*-shaman or religious leader) with the role of the "more scientific" medical doctor and/or psychotherapist. An integrated role, in rural areas especially, might be such that the *tambalan* could also provide the professional expertise of the doctor and conversely, the doctor also ministers to the emotional/spiritual needs of his patient — which is what the Filipino studies have been recommending.

Another book which might have provided additional insights to the authors is Lawrence LeShan's *The Medium, the Mystic and the Physicist*, which also points out commonalities in the conceptual systems of these three seemingly dissimilar personages.

In summary, the collection of fourteen papers in this volume represents a significant first attempt relating the Filipino's physiological-emotional-behavioral components with his belief system about the world-beyond-this. At the very least, they should make the reader aware (if he isn't yet) of the more esoteric elements in our culture, and generate further studies in this area, along the line suggested by Bulatao. We should note, however, the recommendations from the first chapter's discussion regarding the methodologies to be used in such further studies.

A final note of caution is, to my mind,

pertinent to Mercado's prefacing statement that, . . . because Western psychology has interpreted Filipino behavior from Western biases, the interpretation on (sic) the Filipino psychology has been partly wrong." A Filipino interpretation of Filipino behavior, even without Western biases, is still bound to be partly wrong as we are limited by our own biases about ourselves. A realistic examination of our unique cultural and psychological mechanisms would demand detachment from these biases, and ultimately perhaps, an integration of the Westerners' and our own understanding of Filipino psychology.



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