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Notes and Comments

Religious Experience in the Philippines: From Mythos Through Logos to Kairos RAMON C. REYES

The precolonial religion of the Philippines, according to our archeologists, anthropologists and historians, was animism. Our ancestors believed that the fields, streams, mountains and the seas were inhabited by spirits (*diwata*, *anito*) more powerful than men. Some of these spirits were perceived to be good, others evil or unkind. In any case, all of them needed to be propitiated through the intermediary of the priest, man or woman (*babaylan*, *catalonan*), whose function it was to offer sacrifice and perform the appropriate rites as the occasion would demand, whether for healing sickness, seeking a bountiful harvest, or praying for safe sailing. The ancestors and the dead joined this company of spirits. They also needed to be propitiated.

The early Filipinos also believed in one great God (*Bathala Maykapal*) who created man and the world. This monotheistic element, it seems, may have been a borrowing from the Islamic religion, brought to the Philippines before the coming of the Spaniards by Malay traders, teachers and settlers who formed Muslim communities particularly in southern Philippines. No sacrifice was offered to this great God for He was viewed to be too far away in heaven. Hence, there were no great temples, no organized religion. Rites were performed by the priest on site and on the occasion when they had to reckon with a particular spirit, at home, in the fields, brooding over a mountain stream or the sea.

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There was belief in an after-life, a state seen to be very similar to life here and now except perhaps with greater leisure and contentment.

Describing an example of this primitive Filipino world-view, an anthropologist says,

. . . They see in the environment countless deities and potentially malign spirits, and interact with them daily. When a huge tree crashes on a person who is making a clearing, it is seen as the act of an angry spirit. In treating the environment as social, the people are provided with an ordered explanation of 'natural' phenomena. In sum, *one social and moral order encompasses the living, the dead, the deities and the spirits, and the total environment.*¹

If we take religion to mean that fundamental dimension of man whereby he relates to the sacred, to the "beyond," to that which provides the ground and ultimate meaning of his daily existence, then these animistic beliefs and practices of the early Filipinos would qualify as religion. Animism did serve for them as a general framework of meaning, providing an ultimate purpose to life. As a missionary-anthropologist describes the religion of one of the tribes of northern Philippines, as culled from oral tradition maintained intact even today:

The religion of the Ifugao is not in a compartment, isolated by walls, from other cultural traits. When the Ifugaos cultivate rice or sweet potatoes, build houses, sell their lands or valuable heirlooms; when they engage in anything that pertains to the ordinary life cycle of each one of them, as when they marry, give birth, raise children, celebrate feasts; when they settle their disputes or impose fines on the transgressors of their law of custom; when they pull their spears from under the thatch of their roofs, in order to wage war on their enemies or to hunt boar and deer; when they care for their sick or bury their dead; in a word, when they live their lives in accordance with the sacred traditions of their ancestors, at the same time they practice their religion . . .

Indeed, the whole Ifugao social order, including practical ways of life, social institutions and rules, morality and everything else, constitutes a unitary system; and it is looked upon as a religious phenomenon of supernatural origin. All of these phenomena are believed to have been revealed to their ancestors, some vaguely, others more clearly. They are embodied

1. Robert B. Fox, "The Function of Religion in Society," in *Acculturation in the Philippines*, eds. Peter G. Gowing and William Henry Scott (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1971), p. 8.

in tales which are retold during rituals; and, up to the present, they are believed to have peculiar magical powers. These revelations have been handed down to the present generation.²

One striking characteristic of such a form of religion is what might be called its immediacy. In other words, the "beyond" or the sacred is viewed and experienced as immediately present and intimately united with the rest of reality—man, nature, society, thus, all things constituting one undifferentiated whole. The man of such a world-view is referred to by Mircea Eliade as the archaic man or the man of myth. In this perspective, the cyclical rhythms of the cosmos are seen to be reflected in and continued through the static equilibrium of the social order and both are viewed to be foreordained by the gods from the very beginning and so they are as they always have been and as they shall be always.

Consequently, time for the man of myth is seen more as an eternal cycle than as a linear movement leading toward some better future. To him, past, present, future are not discrete categories. The future could never be any different, essentially, from what always has been. Time passes by, of course, but things remain as they are in one continuous eternal present, or so it seems. Human existence, thus, becomes one sacred ritual of repetition, commemorating and reliving the sacred original past from which man and all things have come and from which, in truth, they have never left.

It is in this perspective that the so-called *ancestor worship* must be viewed. Strictly speaking, it is not worship of one's forebears but rather a way by which, through the recall of one's predecessors or by the recitation of one's genealogy, the man of myth symbolically reascends all the way back to that time *ab origine*. Thus, Mircea Eliade, speaking of a similar *technique* in ancient India, explains this return of the man of myth to the Timeless.

The method is to cast off from a precise instant of Time, the nearest to the present moment, and to retrace the Time backward. . . in order to arrive *ad originem*, the point where existence first 'burst' into the world and unleashed Time. Then one rejoins that paradoxical instant before which Time was not, because nothing had been manifested. We can grasp the meaning and aim of this technique: to re-ascend the stream of Time

2. Francis Lambrecht, C.I.C.M., "Adoption of Ifugao Local Customs in Christianity," *Acculturation in the Philippines*, pp. 90-91.

would necessarily bring one back ultimately to the point of departure, which coincides with that of the cosmogony . . . But there is something of even greater importance: one attains to the beginning of Time and enters the Timeless—the eternal present which preceded the temporal experience inaugurated by the ‘fall’ into human existence. In other words, it is possible, starting from any moment of temporal duration, to exhaust that duration by retracing its course to the source and so come out into the Timeless, into eternity.³

SPANISH CHRISTIANITY

Christianity came to the Philippines in the sixteenth century, Spain’s *Ciglo de Oro*, during which, under Charles I and later under Philip II, the Iberian kingdom emerged as the greatest world power man had ever known to that time. Spain in this glorious age came to consider herself at the same time as the champion of the Catholic faith. She was God’s own providential instrument who had saved Europe from Muslim invasion and who was now destined to defend Europe against the Protestant Reformation as well as to bring the Gospel to the peoples of the New World. In such wise, the glory of God and the glory of Spain, at this time of her history, were fused into one crusading, messianic and conquering spirit.

The missionary priests who brought Christianity to the Philippines were therefore men of the Counter-Reformation, deeply concerned about keeping intact the “purity of faith.” By this was meant scripture and tradition as interpreted and bequeathed by the medieval scholars who, schooled in the Greco-Roman tradition, had achieved an elegant synthesis of Christian wisdom and Greco-Roman rationality.

The Spanish missionary came together with the Spanish *conquistador*. For the Philippines, the Catholic faith came with Spanish conquest and colonization. Yet, the Filipinos eventually took the Catholic religion as their own. There was not much difference, after all, between the great *Bathala Maykapal* and the Christian One, Almighty Creator God. And the shift from the rites of propitiation of animistic spirits to Catholic novenas, processions and

3. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963), p. 86.

devotions in honor of the saints was hardly felt as a major change. Catholicism transformed the social patterns of the Filipino community. Chattel slavery was abolished. Monogamous marriage became the established practice. The concentration of the semi-nomadic population into nuclear town and satellite villages, imposed by Spanish colonial authorities for purposes of evangelization and administrative control, gave rise to settled agriculture and eventually paved the way for a much broader political organization transcending mere blood ties of family, clan, and tribe.

As one Filipino historian says, Roman Catholicism became a *social fact* of community life.⁴ For most Filipinos, it was understood that one was baptized, married, and buried through the sacraments administered by the Church. Attendance at Mass and other devotions was expected at least on special feasts of the year. The Christian moral code governed individual and social life. The catechism of Christian doctrine provided the ultimate values by which the people lived.

More essentially, the Filipinos eventually imbibed the rationality and universality implicit in the Catholic faith. So God created man in His own image and likeness. All men are therefore created equal. The One, Transcendent, Loving God is the God of all peoples and nations. There is no necessary relation between being a Christian and being a subject of the Spanish crown. Christ was perceived as Savior and as model of morality. By His holy life, His suffering and death, He has saved the world from sin. He has also shown man that he must lead a moral life and that he must be prepared to undergo hardship and suffering before he may attain salvation and deliverance.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that recent literary and historical research on some aspects of folk Catholicism in the Philippines⁵ show the widespread influence among the common population at the time of passion plays (*sinakulo*) and chanted accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection (*pasyon*), which

4. Horacio de la Costa, S.J., "The Priest in Philippine Life and Society: A Historical Survey," in *The Filipino Clergy: Historical Studies and Future Perspectives* (Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1979), p. 9.

5. See, for example, Nicanor Tiongson, *Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Sinakulo at Ibang Dulang Panrelihiyon sa Malolos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1975) and Reynaldo Clemeña Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

were staged or performed during Holy Week and also on other special occasions. Being among those few literary works accessible to the rural folk, they became part of the traditional social epics of the community providing the people with images and symbols by which they eventually took cognizance of their human condition of misery and oppression and articulated their feelings for change and deliverance.

It was the Spanish colonization that unwittingly prepared the way for the emergence of the Filipino nation. The economic and administrative structures imposed by the colonial regime laid the material groundwork for the unification of the nation. But it was probably the Catholic religion that furnished the intellectual and moral framework and helped form the Filipino consciousness in its opposition against Spain. True enough, for the small, educated middle class that emerged with the transformation of the Philippine economy in the eighteenth century, the current of liberalism in Europe under the impulse of the English and French philosophers of the time as well as the Masonic movement, was probably the predominant and determining influence. However, for the majority of the Filipinos then, poor, uneducated, rural, it was this religious tradition which shaped the Filipino consciousness and provided the conceptual elements with which to articulate their aspirations and their demands for just reforms and ultimately for secession.

The Philippine Revolution against Spain in 1896, aided by the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, was successful but shortlived. With the end of hostilities between Spain and the United States, the young Philippine Republic was not to be allowed to prosper. The United States decided to claim the Philippines. The Filipinos now fought the Americans who had just recently helped them procure arms in their struggle against Spain. After two years the Fil-American War came to an end with the capture of the President of the Republic by the American Expeditionary Forces.

THE AMERICAN REGIME

The American Regime ushered in a new atmosphere for the Catholic Church in the Philippines. The Church and the State, so closely intermeshed during the Spanish period were now formally separate. A religiously-neutral public school system was

established. There was strong Protestant and Masonic influence in the government and in the public school system. And the local elite taken in by the American administrators to participate in the government in preparation for eventual self-rule and independence were, in general, bitterly anticlerical and suspicious of any Church influence in the community.

Under these conditions, the Church, though representing the great majority of the population, felt beleaguered. On the other hand, there was need of developing the native clergy, neglected for the most part of the three and a half centuries of Spanish rule due partly to ecclesiastical intramural conflicts between the secular and regular clergy, partly to Spanish political and cultural biases. In the meantime, with the massive departure of the Spanish friars, American bishops had to be appointed by the Vatican who in turn sought the help of missionary congregations from countries other than Spain. Furthermore, Catholic schools had to be strengthened in the face of the religiously-neutral public school system and the newly established Protestant schools. And there was need to shift from Spanish to English as medium of instruction.

In the course of this massive reorganization and restructuration, the Church developed a defensive, rationally founded theory of the faith. A pronounced apologetic attitude emerged, ever ready to prove that the faith is rational in nature and to demonstrate by historical reasoning that there is but one true, Roman, Catholic, Apostolic Church.

By virtue of its rational nature, faith could not conflict with science. On the contrary, through the doctrine of creation, it was Christianity that led to the desacralization of nature and allowed the emergence of the natural sciences. Similarly, there could be no conflict between being a Christian and being a good citizen, since it was the Christian doctrine to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. This ideal desacralized political power and led to the ideal of a just, free, democratic state. Man comes of age as he becomes aware of the immanent *Logos*, the rational principle governing the world and abiding in it since the moment of creation and ultimately becoming manifest and incarnate in Christ. Man then moves on from myth to *Logos*. What in myth were seen to be one, immediate, whole, man, nature, the social order, the deity, are now seen to be distinct realities to be unified only

through the mediation of rational discourse and rational voluntary action.

A distinction must be made between nature and grace, between reason and revelation. By natural reason alone, man can attain to the knowledge of certain religious truths such as the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. On the other hand, there are truths that can be had only by the grace of divine revelation, such as the truth of the Three Persons in one God. Admittedly then, there is a discontinuity between what man can know by unaided reason and what he accedes to by way of revelation. The transition from one to the other is not by the compelling force of reason alone. There is need of an act of the will abetted by divine grace. Nonetheless, the act of the will is not blind or arbitrary, for that would be fideism. There must be rational grounds for belief. Thus, the act of faith remains an intellectual act, more exactly, an obedient but intellectual assent. In brief, faith is seen as an intellectual assent by the rational creature man to the content of revelation, seen in turn as a body of the truths expressed in dogmatic propositions communicated by God.⁶

NEW DIRECTIONS

Recently, perhaps only within the last decade and a half or so, new directions have emerged in the Catholic Church in the Philippines, which would seem to indicate a new way of experiencing and living the faith, less reliant on reason and metaphysics; on the other hand, more aware of the historical nature of the Christian faith. Some signs of these new directions are: a keener attention and a more positive view of folk Christianity as lived by the common people; the perception of the close relationship between the task of evangelization, of bearing witness to the Lord, and that of communal service and liberation within the present context of an

6. It must be noted however that in speaking of the well-reasoned-out faith of this period, what is referred to is mainly the educated upper middle class population of the country, reflecting the official, orthodox position of the Church. There is however a difference between this official doctrine and the popular or folk Catholicism, the amalgam of residual animistic beliefs and the Christian faith, as practiced by common folk. This dualism in Philippine Christianity may perhaps be traced back to its origins in the colonial arrangement of nuclear town and satellite villages where the townfolk living in the vicinity of the parish church had maximum exposure to evangelization and the

underdeveloped country like the Philippines; a sense of community and participation as manifested in the formation of basic Christian communities in the rural areas; and the development of an indigenized theological reflection and liturgy.

There seems to be less stress on the rational and metaphysical underpinnings of the faith. The highly rationalistic assumption of having full possession of one's foundations and origins seems to have been relinquished in favor of a more situated, a more historically limited, or, to use the technical term, a more hermeneutical view of one's faith.

Faith is now seen primarily as the act of the community of the faithful believing in the divine event, the God-become-man. Faith is communal belief that God has come into the sphere of human events, and that He continues to disclose himself and act even now in and through human history until the consummation of the world. This communal faith is mediated through the Scriptures and tradition, which, in effect, constitute the testimonies of witnesses to the Christ-event. Formerly, from a less historical and a more rationalistic viewpoint, the Scriptures tended to be taken as the directly inspired words of God in their integrity and totality. Now, they are looked upon as the inspired testimonies and interpretations of the early Christian community from within their own historical, cultural context regarding the one, true Word of God. Hence, it falls upon the present community of the faithful, from within the hermeneutical situation as defined by these sacred testimonies accepted to be authentic, to reinterpret for its own time the Word of God and to discern for its present what might be the workings of divine action.

The distinction between the temporal and the eternal now tend to dissolve in this new perspective. By the Incarnation, the human and the divine are seen to have been involved together from the moment of creation. Thus, Creation, Incarnation, redemption and the Second Coming of Christ are seen as one continuum, as belonging to one history. Thus, the Christian perceives the period

villagers, especially those living in the outer fringes received only a smattering of religious instruction and thus soon evolved a syncretism of their own. See John Shumacher, S.J. *Philippine Studies* 32 (1984): 251-72.

Recently, there has been a more positive view taken by the official Church regarding at least some of the elements of folk Catholicism. This is probably one of the indications of a new turn that Catholicism in the Philippines has taken, described in the final part of this paper.

in which he lives his faith in the light of the first and the second coming of Christ. Christ has come and by His resurrection He has conquered sin and death. But sin is still at work among us in the various forms of human indifference, greed, structural poverty and injustice, national pride and aggrandizement sowing violence and hate. Thus, the course of time is not yet over. In the meantime, God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit is at work transforming the community of the faithful and the world as a whole, leading it to its final fulfillment. The Christian community then looks at the present time as *kairos*, the opportune, the decisive time in which God is at work. Each present time, each *kairos* is a re-memorization, a creative repetition, an interpretation of the past event, the Christ-event; at the same time each present is already a hopeful anticipation of the *eschaton*, the time to come, the second coming of Christ.

In summary, it may be said that a people undergoing social and historical change is not necessarily destined to abandon its religious beliefs. Indeed, there is no way of telling what the Filipino people will do in the future as it continues on the path of change and modernization that it has taken ever since the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan and his soldiers on Philippine shores. What has been shown is that while the country has undergone basic economic, social and political changes, it has held on to its religious attitudes and values even as it has changed its religious paradigms from myth through logos to history, from the deities viewed under the aspect of nature's forces and rhythms, to a transcendent God modeled after the human logos, and now more recently to God who manifests Himself and acts in the course of human events.