

# Cultural Dynamics and the Church in the Philippines

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By Kenneth D. Mulzac

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The Philippines consist of 7,250 islands. About 700 of these are populated with about 89.5 million people, at an average population growth rate of 1.8%. These citizens represent a unique blend of diversity (in languages, ethnicity, and cultures) and homogeneity. Despite this diversity, one common element that characterizes Filipinos is a deep abiding interest in religion that permeates all strata of society: Christianity 92.5%, (comprised of Roman Catholics 80.9%, Evangelicals 2.8%, Iglesia ni Cristo [Church of Christ] 2.3%, Philippine Independent or Aglipayan 2%, other Christians 4.5%,); Islam 5%; other 1.8%; unspecified 0.6%; none 0.1% (*World Factbook* 2006).



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The overwhelming Christian majority makes the Philippines the only country that is predominantly Christian in Asia. Christian behavior, however, is influenced not only by the convictions of the respective faith communities but also by certain unique values held in common by the Filipino people. In order to understand the Filipino Christian, these values must be acknowledged and appreciated (Jocano 1966b). This is especially true as has been noted by one Filipino thinker, who believes that we must “know the sociological and psychological traits and values that govern Filipino life. Together, these traits and values contribute to the development of the typical Filipino personality” (Castillo 1982:106, 107).

Since I came from the USA, a highly individualistic society, I wanted to understand at least some of those values that affect behavior among people in a collectivistic society, such as the Philippines, where the emphasis is not so much on personal traits but more on contextual factors. Therefore, the purposes of this investigation are: (1) to introduce a few select Filipino cultural values and traits in or-

der to facilitate Filipino non-Filipino intercultural relations and avoid “a clash of cultural values” (Williams 1994:3). Such cross-cultural conflicts may be precluded when “developing cultural awareness by acquiring a broad knowledge of values and beliefs of other cultures” (Glaser). (2) Since the “Church has helped in the maturation of traditional Filipino values and in the integration of faith and culture” (Quisumbing 1987:216), this article also suggests some proposals on how the church may interface with the Filipino culture.

Since the above issues have not largely been applied to mission, this becomes a necessary

*utang na loob* (debt of the heart, debt of gratitude), *hiya* (shame), *pakikisama* (relationships), and *paniniwala sa mga espiritu* (belief in the spirit world) (Church and Katigbak 2000:75). No particular preference or philosophy governs the choice or order of these four values. They simply function as an introductory sampling to help outsiders gain an understanding of such an intriguing and interesting cultural environment. Since Filipinos use these “to describe, evaluate and understand others and their behavior” (87) Christian witnesses must respectfully pay attention. Each of the four values will be described and then a Christian

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task. Further, I discovered that this is a wide field, and though well documented, the pieces are somewhat scattered. This investigation brings together several concepts from the wider body of knowledge. Hence, my observations are made in dialogue with a rich supply of sources written by both Filipinos and non-Filipinos. Overall, my intent is to indicate that mission must be aware of the cultural assumptions and characteristics of people, in this case, Filipinos.

In light of this, four significant Filipino values are studied:

response will be given. An Adventist perspective rounds out the discussion.

### *Utang na Loob*

Authority figures in the Philippines enjoy great respect and adulation. An American teacher had befriended a Filipina and apparently, the bond was perceived by the latter to be that of a mother-daughter relationship. As a matter of course, she started calling the senior “mom.” Although the American “mom” was not comfortable with this, she extended herself by giving

gifts, paying tuition, and so forth. “Mom” soon felt that the situation was getting out of hand, because she felt that the younger woman was invading her privacy by constantly trying to be with her and bombarding her with small gifts and tokens, as well as unsolicited acts of service. She wanted to be just a teacher, nothing else. The Filipina, however, felt that she was showing gratitude by her gifts and gestures of deference. This sense of obligation where people feel that they owe others but can never completely repay them but “which they would acknowledge through constantly repeated little acts of deference” (Cannell 1999:104) reflects *utang na loob*.

This concept is derived from two Tagalog words: *utang* (“debt”) and *loob* (“inside”). It literally means “debt in the inside.” In a meaningful way, it speaks about a sense of being obligated to a benefactor, owing a “debt of gratitude” (Kaut 1961:257-272) but even this “fails to impart the feeling and commitment that a Filipino with his deep colonial, feudal and religious background puts into exercise of such value” (Andes and Ilado-Andes 1986:32). This is part of the very psyche of every Filipino. It is an interior law that constitutes “the most authentic self of the Filipino; that is what he is in his innermost reality” (de Mesa 1988:24). As such, it dictates the behavior of a recipient to a generous benefactor. Of course, the value placed on the gift or deed

qualifies the debt. For example, being a parent, saving one’s life, “pulling strings” for someone to get a job, or paying for a person’s education are far more valuable than paying the fare for the jeepney. Some things can incur a sense of life-long indebtedness.

Leonardo N. Mercado translates the concept as follows, “A debt of volition no matter how small remains a debt even if repaid. It is an expression of humaneness and right sentiment, and no amount of money can ever fully repay it” (Mercado 1975:116). Local proverbs embrace the idea succinctly, “There is no measure to repayment in kind.” Again, “Financial indebtedness is easily paid but not a debt of kindness.” One social observer contends that any gift or service, whether offered by a friend or stranger, if accepted, places the recipient in the position of returning a debt of gratitude equal to, or superseding, that which s/he received. Hence, “For every free service received, whether requested or not, the recipient contracts a debt of honor towards his benefactor” (Eggan 1971:15). It must be understood that “the benefactor does not set any conditions, or ask for an expression of gratitude. All depends on the inventive generosity of the recipients, a generosity which can last for a lifetime” (Mercado 1975:117).

*Utang na loob* is closely related to the strong family ties that are part and parcel of the Philippine cultural context. Indeed, this is

an essential component of the collectivistic construct. The family is central and quite extensive, reaching back several generations. The history and traditions, ethics and ideals, morals and principles of the extended family help shape the individual. This has prompted Theodore Gochenour, former director of Southeast Asian Refugee Center in Bataan, Philippines, to comment, "No other single aspect of life is likely to be as important, lasting or influential on choices and decisions from childhood to old age" (1990:18). In fact, the

In the context of the church three observations may be made concerning *utang na loob*, one of the most significant moral values that undergirds Filipino society (Enriquez 1980:8). First, this value can be easily misplaced, exaggerated, or exploited. Hence, one has to be careful in the dispensing of services and gifts so as not to have people in a state of constant indebtedness. Therefore, respect for the individual, both within and without the group confines, is of principal worth. Each person must be

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family concept is so deeply rooted in the Philippine cultural milieu that nothing is as important to a Filipino citizen as family. A Filipino "exists first and foremost as a member of a family and looks to the family as the only reliable protection against the uncertainties of life" (18). Chan rightfully summarizes the effect and extent of this. He writes, "This sense of family obligation begins early on when children are conditioned to be grateful to their parents for their birth. A lifelong debt of gratitude or *utang na loob* (debt that is inside) thereby creates binding relationships of love, respect and obedience" (1992:272).

seen and treated as the creation of God, made in his image and likeness (Gen 1:27).<sup>1</sup>

Second, if care is not exercised then *utang na loob* can lead to an abuse of authority by the power holders who can foster an oppressive patron-client atmosphere. Christians, regardless of their different positions accorded due to wealth, profession, education, or family background, and so forth, must not (even by their acts of kindness), cause anyone to grovel in "gratitude." Christians must seek to avoid any kind of dependency or mendicancy that reduces the true freedom or self-respect of the individual and/or

the group. Christians must practice the biblical way of life: “freely you have received, freely give” (Matt 10:8); “let us not become weary in doing good . . . let us do good to all people” (Gal 6:9-10).

Third, we can emphasize that because Jesus Christ has died to save us from our sins, then *utang na loob* can be appropriately directed to him. It may serve the church well to consistently forward the idea that everyone has a “debt of gratitude” to God as their Creator and Savior (Ps 34, 95, 100, 103; John 3:16; Gal 2:20). Since Filipinos are collectivistic, creativity and innovation may be well utilized, using a group system approach, to effect this. Certainly, the church must attend to this internalized value that makes the Filipino “aware of his obligation to those from whom he receives favors” (Hollnsteiner 1961:16). In this context, favor should be presented in terms of divine grace or unmerited kindness given by God to the undeserving. Nothing recommends us to God. It is in response to this grace that the debt of gratitude becomes viable and expressive. The ecclesiastic and social scientist Mercado rightly observes, “The Filipino’s concrete thinking and personalism is also applied to Christ. He has an *utang na loob* to Christ for saving him from eternal death or for redeeming him” (1975:117). This is certainly a biblical principle as observed in the words of the apostle Paul. In Romans 1:14 he wrote, “I am debtor both to the Greeks and to

the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.” The Amplified Bible puts it: “I have an obligation to discharge and a duty to perform and a debt to pay.” Paul could never repay what Christ had done for him but his gratitude is seen in his untiring efforts to preach and live the gospel to whomever he met and wherever he lived. This sense of obligation, of *utang na loob*, was the motivating factor in Paul’s life.

The church should exercise care, however, that *utang na loob* not be presented as an obligation that brings slavish subservience to make God look like a paternalistic tyrant. Rather, it is to be understood in terms of a developing relationship with Christ. The church must present the gospel in such a way that people experience the joy of true forgiveness and freedom in Christ, and out of a heart of gratitude, enjoin in fellowship and communion with God and other people. This has lead Myrna Tordilla to remark, “What this value demands is a reciprocity from Christians, that is, to love God and neighbor in action” (Tordilla).

### **Hiya**

About a month after arriving in the Philippines my family invited a Filipino to lunch. He accepted, but did not show up at the appointed time. Several days later, I saw him and inquired if he had had an emergency, thinking that this had preempted his coming to eat with us. I was surprised when he said that all was well. Upon

further inquiry as to why he did not show up he smiled and said, "Shame." On another occasion, a young person and his friend came to our home to request a scholarship for university studies. Curiously, he avoided making a direct appeal and we engaged in conversation, which as far as I was concerned was just "beating around the bush." I was bidding them goodbye, when the friend, realizing my ignorance in the matter spoke precisely on behalf of the student. Such is a case of *hiya* where the person utilizes an intermediary "to cushion the transaction and escape the em-

ing self assertion in a situation which is perceived as dangerous to one's ego. It is a kind of anxiety, a fear of being left exposed" (1964:428).

Maybe it is this "fear of being left exposed" that allows the word "shame" to be most frequently used when referring to *hiya*. This is especially so since "the Filipino has a shame culture" (Mercado 1975:79, 80). In fact, shame is inculcated in the Filipino from childhood (Guthrie and Jacobs 1967:190, 91). The home or family is the central place where *hiya* is taught and appropriated. Again, Chan is very instructive:

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barrassment that might result from presenting the matter face-to-face with the other person" (Gochenour 1990:50).

Commonly translated as "shame" *hiya* may be understood in a variety of ways: "embarrassment," "modesty," "shyness," "feeling inferior," "losing face," or "shame." No single choice exactly captures its meaning. Hence, all the nuances must be kept in mind when dealing with *hiya*. Jaime Bulatao, a Filipino scientist defines it this way: "A painful emotion arising from a relationship with an authority figure or with society, inhibit-

*Hiya* is inculcated as a necessary part of a child's development and used as a means to shape approved or desired behaviors. Thus, an individual's capacity for appropriate behavior with authority figures is a reflection of one's family and upbringing and the fear of "losing face" (1992:274).

Judy Patacsil and Gemma Dolorosa Skillman, Filipino social scientists, connect *utang na loob* and *hiya* within the context of the Filipino family.

*Utang na loob* is a form of social control that works most strongly within the family unit. Failure to meet this debt or reciprocal obliga-

tion within the family results in feelings of shame (*hiya*) (2006:217).

A corollary to *hiya* is the related value called *amor propio*. It originates from Spanish and means “self-love,” “self-respect,” or “self-esteem.” In practical terms, it is the Filipino’s defense of his ego, his personal pride and dignity. To be sure, “his dignity and honor are everything to him, so that the wounding of them, whether real or imagined becomes a challenge to his manhood” (Andres 1981:8). Hence, the Filipino is extremely sensitive to any kind of personal affront such as being criticized publicly, shouted at, berated, derided, humiliated, or any form of adverse confrontation. Such disrespect affects the person’s self-respect (*amor propio*) and causes him or her to suffer shame and “lose face” (*hiya*). In fact, both parties are shamed. Indeed, the offending person may be described as *walang hiya*, that is, having no shame. This is the ultimate insult. In the Filipino cultural context, “One who is insensitive to others is said to lack a sense of shame and embarrassment, the principal sanction against improper behavior” (Dolan 1993:88; see also Roces and Roces 1989:30).

F. Landa Jocano is highly instructive, therefore, in his commentary that *hiya* is “put into practice when what is infringed upon deals with relationships pertaining to (1) personal dignity or honor of the individual;

(2) the status or position of the principal actor relative to other people; (3) the internal cohesion of the family as a unit; and (4) the reputation of the entire kin or group relative to the outside world” (1969:98).

An illustration of numbers three and four above may be observed when a third person intervenes between quarreling parties hushing them with the words, “Stop! It’s embarrassing!” The major concern is that the neighbors may have a bad impression of the family and not that the confrontation may threaten potential violence. *Hiya* is so deep-seated that Mercado comments, “When faced with the choice of being put to ‘shame’ and committing sin, the typical Filipino chooses the lesser ‘evil’ of committing sin” (1975:79).

How then can the church be responsive to this matter of *hiya*? Here are some suggestions:

First, in order for Christians to successfully attract others to their respective faith communities, their behavior and lifestyle must accord with the ethics of the Kingdom of God and not merely with winning the applause of the group. The biblical injunctions, “Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16) and “we must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:30) are quite weighty. It is this ethic that Vitaliano R. Gorospe calls for in his scathing condemnation of what he calls “split-level Christianity

or double-standard morality” that in effect comes down to hypocrisy (Gorospe). The church as a community must live according to what it teaches. Such is the goal of values education in the contemporary faith community. Dealing with this from the perspective of inculturation, the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of the Philippines points out that although Filipinos value group identity persons should not abdicate “responsibility for moral decision-making in favor of group expectations” (Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Culture).

Second, the church may also indicate the relationship between shame and sin. Sin also incurs

One has to approach this with sensitivity since the group ideal is an important issue in the collectivistic worldview and losing face is so demeaning. Perhaps one way is to show how one’s sin or wrongdoing can have adverse effects on the group. Since Filipinos see themselves as individuals within dynamic and widening circles of associations, then sensitivity to the group may have an authorizing effect. Since Filipinos “tend to see authority as something to be dealt with personally as best one can” (Gochenour 1990:20) then this may be useful in dealing with sin and shame.

Third, the church must teach that repentance can help people

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condemnation by both God and humankind. One writer insists,

We Filipinos should hone our sensitivities to sin—for all its lure and guile—in order to deepen our sense of shame. We should rather be more careful about not losing face before God than saving face before men. For God’s eyes penetrate through and beyond what is culturally acceptable. . . . Our sense of *hiya* must be rooted in the ethical and moral standards of the Bible to show just how different we are from the world (Miranda-Feliciano 1990:45, 46).

deal with feelings of shame. When we acknowledge our transgressions (Ps 51) God willingly forgives and cleanses us from sin (1 John 1:9), including our shame. One example of this is the woman taken in adultery that Jesus forgave (John 8:1-11). From this perspective, the church can be very influential in moving people beyond the shame incurred because of sin.



### ***Pakikisama***

One day I observed a Filipina berated by an employer. Although this behavior was totally unjustified and unprovoked, the young woman retained her composure, refusing to respond in kind. Everything in me was screaming, “Defend yourself. Stand up for your rights.” Her calmness was stunning in the face of such a personal affront. This behavior of maintaining relationships and good feelings between people defines *pakikisama*. For example, when a Filipino smiles even when things are wrong, hides feelings despite being hurt, refuses to convey or articulate anger, and

person’s individuality to some extent becomes merged with those of others” (Miranda-Feliciano 1990:21). In short, the emphasis is placed on getting along with others and making concessions to them, being sensitive to their feelings and making every effort to be agreeable in the face of difficult circumstances, even to the hurt of oneself. It assures that positive feelings and cooperation are maintained among families and members of the group (Patacsil and Skillman 2006:217). This has led to the concept of Smooth Interpersonal Relations (SIR). This term was coined by F. Lynch who defined it as “a facil-

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refrains from losing his or her temper, he or she is maintaining relationships (Chan 1992:273). As such, *pakikisama* deals with harmony among people in the context of social acceptance (Andres 1981:75).

This is of such signal importance to Filipinos, who operate in a relationship-based society, that a person prefers to submit to the group ethos than to stand out as being outspoken or independent-minded and run the risk of being labeled as *walang pakikisama*, that is, anti-social. In short, *pakikisama* means conformity to the group where “a

ity of getting along with others in such a way as to avoid outward signs of conflict” (1973:10). SIR is maintained through the practice of *pakikisama*.

*Pakikisama* is manifested in many ways: (1) indirect communication or use of euphemisms so that the group, not the individual, reaps the best results; (2) generous praise for others; (3) refusal to show negativity or depression; (4) refusal to show anger or lose one’s temper; (5) smiling even when things go wrong; (6) and using a go-between or intermediary—someone respected by both parties—when

there is a rift in the group. “This ensures that nobody is put to shame and that everyone’s self-esteem remains intact”(10).

Virgilio G. Enriquez, a Filipino psychologist, has propounded that *pakikisama* is one value among several layers of social interaction in Filipino culture. A more intrinsic value is *kapwa*—a shared identity with others—that motivates one to treat others with dignity because they are accepted and dealt with as equals. *Kapwa* is the core value that influences interpersonal behavior among Filipinos (Enriquez 1977:29-34). Sam Chan reports on a 1988 study commissioned by the Philippine Senate dealing with the strengths of the Filipino character. Among the strengths were family orientation, work ethic, religion and faith, adaptability, and *pakikipagkapwatao*, having regard for the basic dignity and being of people. He summarizes the report on the latter in this manner:

*Pakikipagkapwatao* is manifested among Pilipinos in their basic sense of fairness and justice and concern for others’ well-being. Pilipinos recognize the essential humanity of all people and regard others with respect and empathy. This orientation instills a heightened sensitivity to the nature and quality of interpersonal relationships, which are the principal core of security and happiness (1992:275).

Obviously, *pakikisama* has several implications in the practices of the church. However, I will make mention of only a select few:

First, it is important to pay attention to the “group think” (Andres and Ilado-Andres 1987:74, 76). This is not the place to push Western idealism of individualism and self-centered opinion. Missionaries have been accused of doing just that. Family is more important to win the confidence of the group, perhaps especially so in terms of public evangelism. This is especially true for the family, which is perhaps the most valued reference group in Philippine society. Family tends to be large, extending several generations, and highly influential in terms of decision making among its members.

Second, *pakikisama* could also have a negative influence. A weak-willed person may subsume himself or herself to a group that practices poor behavior or involves itself in illegal activity (gangs). The church must be aware of this as it delivers its message. But beyond that, the church may develop the *pakikisama* construct into an operative vehicle for developing effective teamwork and group cooperation to achieve the goal of promulgating the gospel.

Third, the church today is plagued with many of the problems experienced by the first-century believers: jealousy, discrimination, gossiping, backbiting, arguments and in-house fighting. Therefore, in order to maintain smooth interpersonal relationships, the biblical counsel is still appropriate: “Carry each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2); “be patient,

bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2-3). Indeed, “Within the church, Christians need genuine *pakikisama* that stands on biblical principles, not on superficial unity, personalities, or expediency” (Miranda-Feliciano 1990:27).

Fourth, the idea of God’s justice and fairness in dealing with people may resonate deeply with the Filipino concept of *kapwa*. God’s love is the controlling influence in the world and it is all-inclusive, enveloping those who are hurt and disenfranchised. Further, the church should be quite expressive in demonstrating concern for others as part of Christian discipleship. In addition, *kapwa*’s priority on justice and fairness may be a useful instrument for promoting non-violence, solidarity, a heightened sense for human rights, religious tolerance, civic consciousness, and peace. The value of *kapwa*, in the context of Christian religious faith is powerful to motivate change, not only on a personal level but also on a corporate, social level as observed in the EDSA revolution. According to Christina A. Astorga, chair of the theology department of the Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, this shared identity “galvanize[d] us into oneness of purpose, resolve, and action. In the EDSA revolution, we discovered . . . the experience of sharing communion in one faith” (Astorga).

Fifth, given that the family is of such vital significance in Filipino culture in all of the above values, having been described as “the core of all social, cultural, and economic activity” (Quisumbing 1963:137) then the importance of developing strong family life programs is imperative. Further, Filipinos must take the lead in establishing these programs using illustrations and models that are familiar and readily understood by them. Western constructs are not necessarily the blueprint. I have seen where missionary zeal imposed an American imprint on such programs with little effect.

### ***Paniniwala sa mga espiritu***

Despite great efforts to convince a Filipina to receive medical attention for what appeared to be a viral infection, she politely refused. She limped home languidly on Friday but returned on Monday whistling and in high spirits. She reported that while working in her garden several days before a mean spirit had invaded her body. No amount of pharmaceuticals could help. Only a visit to the local “doctor” and taking his prescriptions could bring relief. I was surprised since this person was a Christian. This was not an isolated incident. *Paniniwala sa mga espiritu* or belief in the spirit world is not absent in the Philippines. This phenomenon arises as Christian adherents seek additional power to deal with their difficulties, thereby “creating problems of syncretism and dual

allegiance” (Bauer 2002:72). In fact, early ethnographic studies indicate that there is a remarkable degree of fusion between Christian and traditional beliefs about supernatural spirits and their involvement in daily Filipino life (see Jocano 1966a:41-60; Galvez-Tan 1977; Bulatao 1986). Long before colonizers set foot on Philippine soil, there was an established culture with written laws and social order (Sitoy 1985:1-20).

The common belief is that the individual is part of a wider social universe under the control of supernatural beings (Elesterio 1989:4-12). Records of early Spanish contact with inhabitants of the Philippines indicate that

gods. The second category of gods was the *Pandague* or *Sumpay*. They were connected with death and the underworld. The perception was that when a person died, the soul was delivered to the underworld by one of the gods of the high heaven. The third category consists of gods of the earth. Offenses against these resulted in natural calamities that demonstrate divine displeasure.

Beneath the gods were environmental spirits or suprahuman beings that share the space and environs of human beings. The most widespread group is the *anito*. Though some are good (until offended by people), the majority are evil and may

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Filipinos believed in many gods. They were classified into three main categories. The highest order was the *Bathala* or *Captan*, gods that occupied high heaven (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1977:50). Since they were the source or creators of the things in the world, they were responsible for all events in the world: life, suffering and death; rain and drought; thunder and lightning. Direct access to these gods was impossible. One could channel petitions and offerings only through lesser

be appeased by gifts and sacrifices from devotees (Fernandez 1979:3). The *anitos* act as agents of the highest gods.

In this milieu, human beings are minor players, if not pawns, in a world dominated by the spirits, both good and bad. Such ideas have been melded with Christian thinking among Filipinos because, then, as now, for Filipinos “all of life is in the realm of the sacred” (Black 1998:74).

Four decades ago a Catholic authority lamented that “es-

pecially in rural areas, we find merely the external trappings of Catholic belief and practice superimposed on the original pattern of pre-Christian superstitions and beliefs” (Gorospe 1966:37). In some ways, such beliefs still provide the Filipino, especially those in rural areas, with an understanding of “existential needs both material and psychic” (Demetrio 1969:591). Such is the case because “these beliefs, religious or otherwise, were not eradicated with the coming of Western civilization” (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1977:53). In 1987, Lourdes R. Quisumbing, past president of the Asia Pacific Network for International Educa-

tion that important events like success or failure, health or sickness, life or death, a good or bad harvest, are interpreted, reveals a belief in the supernatural (1987:221).

More recently, Filipino theologian Reuel U. Almocera declared, “This syncretistic form of Christianity continues until the present” (2000:3) and “the persistence of the spirit-world beliefs creates a theological problem for Philippine Christianity” (23).

Speaking of Filipinos in general and Bicolanos in particular, Fenella Cannell comments that people are “constantly working out the relative legitimacy of dealing with diverse kinds of spirits” (1999:229). Such spirits

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tion and Values Education, and former Secretary for Education in the Philippines, spoke with an authoritative voice on the influence of the supernatural in Philippine culture, especially in the rural setting where the majority of people live.

In spite of modern influences, many rural Filipinos still look at the world and nature as peopled and governed by supernatural beings and/or forces beyond their control. The Filipino world-view is personalistic and the explanation of reality is religious or metaphysical. The way

are generally perceived as hostile and vindictive, ready to pounce on anyone who violates a taboo. Punishment could be in the form of ailments and disease, business failure, loss of crops and property, and even death. This is the essence of the following penetrating commentary, “The Filipinos’ world at present, as in the past, is permeated with the religious element. Suprahuman beings inhabit the environment in which he lives. Illnesses and even death are attributed to the suprahumans. Man in his activi-

ties will experience success only if the deities and suprahumans . . . are pleased” (Elesterio 1989:11).

In this vein, Melba P. Maggay, a Filipina social anthropologist specializing in culture and development, comments that religion in the Philippine archipelago “is bent towards the more pragmatic problem of appeasing and having access to the powers” (1999:22). “Filipino religion remains primarily a transaction with the powers” (23). Hence, in an attempt to relieve fear of the spirit world, placate the wrath of the spirits, and protect oneself, people wear amulets called *anting-anting* or *pangontra*. These charms supposedly possess the power to ward off evil and danger and provide protection to the person. Filipinos today, particularly urban dwellers, are sophisticated, educated, and professional; nevertheless, features of a supernatural orientation found mostly in rural areas that “have characterized Philippine traditional culture, have remained in contemporary Filipino life” (Quisumbing 1987:215). Hence, even some educated, urban, Filipino professionals wear amulets.

The *anting-anting* is generally worn on the body as jewelry (necklace, earring, and bracelet) or clothing, or placed in some prominent part of the house or building. Different kinds of amulets provide benefits for the person processing it. For example,

The *anting-anting* or *agimat* insured a man against weapons of

every kind. The *gayuma* made a man lovable to all ladies, the *odom* . . . made the Bicolano invincible. The *Visayan uriga* and the *Tagalog sagbe* could make the possessor of this charm walk in a storm or swim in a river without getting wet, and the *Bicolano tagahpa* was mixed in a drink and made the unfortunate drinker a sort of vassal to the man with the magic portion (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1977:9).

The amulet is worn especially for warding off sickness and insuring protection from disease. Diseases are so widespread that the traditional healers (*Tambalans* or *Mananambal*) who practice folk medicine have formed themselves into an organization called the Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association (PBMA). These folk healers are the ones whom most often “prescribe” the *anting-anting* to be worn as well as the daily prayers, which are to be recited by the wearers (Galvez-Tan 1977:15).

The church’s response has been to condemn belief in the spirit-world as being mere superstition (Villegas 1968:232). A long-time missionary to the Philippines, Rodney L. Henry opines that this was the mindset of Western missionaries who emphasized the “ultimate things,” such as being saved and going to heaven, but did little to attend to the phenomenon of belief in the spirit world which led to a kind of folk Protestantism (1986:5-35). This way of thinking hopes that such beliefs will just disappear because they have little

or no theological value (Elwood 1970:16). Reuel U. Almocera argues, however, “that the Filipino spirit-worldview has the potential of becoming a springboard, a vehicle in developing authentic Filipino Christianity without necessarily corrupting the gospel” (2000:16). To this end, Christianity can appeal to the general Filipino belief in the supernatural by demonstrating that the Bible speaks extensively about spirit beings or angels, both good and bad (Toliver 1970:214). This is common ground between the church and the Filipino and provides a safe ground for discussion.

powers” (27). The gospel imperative urges the church to demonstrate that Christ has absolute control over all of creation. He is sovereign and reigns supremely. As *Christus Victor*, Christ has won the cosmic battle over the forces of all satanic agencies. He wields universal power in His reign over everything (Wan 1988:8-15). He “has decisively defeated the demonic powers (Col 2:15) and has given believers authority over demons (Luke 9:1; 10:17)” (Almocera 2000:21). “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)

**As *Christus Victor*, Christ has won the cosmic battle over the forces of all satanic agencies.**

Challenging the prevailing image of a suffering Christ with a crown of thorns lying supine on the cross, Maggay forcefully contends that emphasis must be placed on *Christus Victor*, the risen Christ who has conquered death. Such is “a counterpoint to the feeling of helplessness and powerlessness fostered by images” (1999:27) of the dying or dead Christ. She continues, “The gospel may need to be recentered on Jesus as ‘Lord of the spirits’, and on his redemptive work as the regaining of creation, the buying back of wretched earth once under the clutches of evil

views of Christ. Most Filipinos think of Christ either as a baby or as a martyr, not so much as a living person” (21). Finally, one may agree with Almocera, “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)” (22).

### **An Adventist Perspective**

The Adventist perspective of the Great Controversy—the battle between the forces of good and evil—provides some interesting responses to the above values.

When Lucifer, God's archenemy rebelled and caused the fall of humanity, people came into conflict with God too. This effected a distortion of the image of God in human beings, leading to depravity and ultimately, a death sentence (Rom 6:23a). However, in his great love (John 3:16) God did not leave his creation to languish in the throes of deception and separation from God. Jesus Christ came to earth and by His righteous life and substitutionary death, he conquered Satan. Humans who believe on him and receive him as Savior and Lord have victorious power over the evil one (John 1:12). He opened the possibility of new life in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-33). This brings forgiveness of sin, the writing of God's law in the heart, and the restoration of the repentant into the image of God. Such transformation brings the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-23) in its wake. In addition, in the end God's people are assured of eternal life as a gift from God (Rom 6:23b) which awakens a sense of gratitude. Perhaps this will resonate with the *utang na loob* value with the added understanding that the "acts of repayment" may be in terms of service to others on behalf of our loving benefactor for prime obligation is now to God.

Corollary to this is the fact that sin has brought shame both on an individual and corporate level. Since Jesus Christ has borne our sins (Isa 53) that shame is removed. Besides that, he has become our go-between, the media-

tor between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5). Since humans are not expected to have a reciprocal obligation then freedom from shame is the result. Moreover, this liberty in Christ's victory builds self worth and esteem (*amor proprio*) because it affords the realization that Christ has won on behalf of humanity. This may lead to the rejoicing anthem, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16).

In addition, because of Christ's victory, God has reconciled humanity unto himself (2 Cor 5:18-21). This provides a sense of wholeness both within oneself and among members of the group. It also has potential to promote healing in broken relationships and hence, make the group stronger and more secure. This resonates with the Filipino value of *pakikisama* as it enhances harmony within oneself and the group. Furthermore, the church as the family of God heightens the sense of *kapwa* in that it becomes a group of people with a shared identity. Barriers of distinction are broken down and people may be treated with dignity and respect. The church itself becomes an extension, as it were, of the family that is such an invaluable component in Filipino socialization. Therefore, those who share in Christ's victory have a dynamic, ever widening circle of support: spiritually, socially, and psychologically. The church in Acts as a community engaged in activities of helping, sharing,



caring, cooperating, and reciprocating, becomes a suitable model. This is the essence of loving God and neighbors as oneself (Lev 19:18; Luke 10:27). It is the spiritual imperative of the Filipino social value of maintaining good relationships among people.

Finally, the Adventist worldview of the Great Controversy promotes a view that Christ is not merely a martyr, as Filipinos are prone to think. In His conflict with fallen angels and demons, he emerged as the conqueror of all evil powers. The “inestimable greatness” of his resurrection power is now accessible to all believers (Eph 1:19). All hostile forces have been subsumed before Christ and he is now “seated at the right hand in the heavenly places far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (Eph 1:20-22 NKJV). Jesus has defeated Satan’s kingdom. Satan is a fallen enemy. Hence, in the Christian’s daily struggles against principalities and powers and the rulers of darkness (Gal 6:12), he or she is not to fear these evil spirits. This is because God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power (2 Tim 1:7); further “greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). The Filipino Christian does not have to resort to charms and amulets. God is love and does not need to be appeased. His Spirit and holy angels fulfill his promises to care and protect his people.

In the final analysis, this Adventist worldview addresses the culmination of the world, in an exciting theology of eschatology. All evil and demonic forces will be completely annihilated. The consummation of such means an end of shame in all forms and perfect harmony throughout the illimitable universe.

## Conclusion

The Filipino people have a rich cultural heritage. Indeed, the words of missiologist Stephen Neill still ring true, “There has never yet been a great religion which did not find its expression in a great culture. There has never yet been a great culture which did not have deep roots in a religion” (1979:1). Filipinos are very religious and their religion does not exist in a vacuum; it is closely linked to their cultural values. Social observers have not overlooked this closeness. Reflecting on several characteristics in the Filipino culture, Chan notes that they “cluster around distinctly religious beliefs and a deep faith in God” (1992:275). Only four of these, among many, have been discussed in this paper: *utang na loob*, *hiya*, *pakikisama*, and *paniniwala sa mga espiritu*. The church cannot afford to ignore such matters. To do so will be detrimental.

Furthermore, it is of absolute necessity for missionaries, and in fact, all foreigners who come to work on Philippine soil, to apprise themselves of such values. This will save numerous

headaches and embarrassing moments, to put it mildly. Undoubtedly, such knowledge is imperative to an ongoing learning experience. It will foster better working and interpersonal relationships between the Filipinos and non-Filipino counterparts.

To be certain, the observations made in this paper are not exhaustive by any means. Mine is another voice in the ongoing conversation of the emerging discipline of missions in the Philippines. More work can be done in discussion between practitioners in the field and academics on the myriad values that Filipinos use to define themselves and practice religion. This will continue to raise awareness and sensitivity especially in light of the tremendous amount of intercultural contact between Filipinos and the rest of the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

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