

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**RATIONALISTIC MIND-SET, ANIMISTIC WORLDVIEW,  
AND THE GOSPEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN FAITH  
IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION**

by

**Reuel U. Almocera**

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies  
Silang, Cavite, Philippines

**418-00 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

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### **Prologue**

The class was silent. Everybody seems hesitant to speak up. “Did you read the textbook?” scolded the teacher.

“Yes, ma’am,” chorused the children.

“How come you did not answer the question? Let me repeat the question. How do we get rain?”

Again there was silence. “Class,” continued the teacher. “The explanation is really simple. We get rain because of sunlight. You see, when the sun scorches hot, the heat of the sun causes the water on the surface of the earth to evaporate. These vapors eventually form into a cloud. When the clouds become heavy, water drops from the clouds as rain. That is how we get rain,” concluded the teacher.

“Do you really believe this theory, Ma’am?” asked one of the boys who normally was responsive when questions were asked by the teacher.

“Yes, of course. This explanation is scientific.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” answered the boy. “I did not answer the question immediately because I was confused. All the while I thought rain comes from God.”

The teacher went on with her class schedule for the day, seemingly satisfied that she succeeded in changing an aspect of at least one child’s worldview. The boy was of mixed feeling. He seems happy to have learned a new explanation about the rain. Yet, down deep inside he was sad. He was sad because the God whom he thought was active and benevolent enough to provide the needed rain, is not, after all, directly involved in the affairs of their farm life.

The dynamics of the scenario pictured above is duplicated again and again in the classrooms across the Asia-Pacific region. Was the answer of the teacher to the question about rain correct? Was it complete? What would have been the best answer to the question? Was it possible for the teacher to provide a scientifically correct answer without destroying the children’s concept about a supreme creator, God? The scenario pictured above captures in a nutshell the issues discussed in the following essay.

### **I. Introduction**

Asians<sup>1</sup> had religions and worldviews of their own long before Christianity

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<sup>1</sup>The continent of Asia is huge, including Russia and portions of the middle east. Asians in this paper refer to the people of Japan, Korea, Indo-China, Indonesia, Philippines, and the islands of the Pacific.

arrived in the region in the midsixteenth century. Buddhism and Confucianism were the dominant religions of the Japanese, Koreans, and Indo-Chinese. Islam was the religion of the Indonesians, Malaysians, and perhaps, the Filipinos. The Buddhists adhere to a pantheistic worldview. The Muslims are generally theistic. But there is one worldview which is common among the Asians. Asians believe in the spirit-world. Whether they call it Shintoism in Japan, shamanism in Korea, animism in the Philippines, or simply traditional beliefs, the core of this worldview is similar everywhere.<sup>1</sup> Asians believe that aside from their own social structure, there is an invisible society existing side by side with their own. This society was believed to be inhabited by dead ancestors, deities, and lesser gods. Asians respected these spirit-gods with a variety of rituals and feast days because these supernatural beings were considered to be able to preside over the whole gamut of life including birth, sickness, courtship, marriage, planting, harvesting, and death. Some of these spirits are considered friendly; others are believed as tyrannical enemies.

The Asians' encounter with Catholic Christianity which began in the sixteenth century did little to change this worldview. Among those who embraced Christianity, Christian beliefs were merely incorporated to the popular spirit-world beliefs. Father Vitaliano Gorospe, a respected Filipino scholar, admits that "even today, especially in the rural areas, we find merely the external trappings of Catholic belief and practice superimposed on the original pattern of pre-Christian superstitions and rituals."<sup>2</sup>

The age of enlightenment added another dimension to the Asian's encounter with Christianity. This happened almost exclusively with the introduction of Protestant Christianity, which came to Asia in the context of a scientifically influenced worldview of eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalism. This type of Christianity, with its heavy dependence on scientific explanations,<sup>3</sup> usually conflicts with, or ignores, the spirit-worldview as the Asians know it.

The result of the encounter between the Asian animistic worldview, Folk Catholicism, and rationalistic Protestantism is confusing and even alarming. Asians with more exposure to western education tend to supplant the traditional spirit-worldview with one that explains everything by natural and scientific means. On the other extreme, in certain aspects of an Asian's life, and among some segments of Asian society, scientific explanations are ignored in favor of the spirit-worldview explanations. But a large number of Asian Christians seem to accept scientific explanations as a supplement to traditional animistic beliefs. To some observers, this stance is even more disturbing because, "we have two theological systems, side by side the Christian and the pagan

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<sup>1</sup>For a very brief background of the traditional spirit-world beliefs of Asians, see Gil Fernandez, ed., *Light Dawns Over Asia* (Silang, Cavite, Philippines: AIIAS Publications, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Vitaliano R. Gorospe, *Christian Renewal of Filipino Values* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1966), 37.

<sup>3</sup>For a brief survey of Christian theologies made under the heavy influence of rationalism, see Morton T. Kalsey, *The Christian and the Supernatural* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1976), 17-21.

existing within one man.”<sup>1</sup> It is disturbing because “the notion of split-level Christianity is uncomfortably close to the theory of split-level personality, or a nation of schizophrenic people.”<sup>2</sup>

Hence, if authentic Christian faith is to be successfully developed in the hearts of Christian Asians, the foregoing dynamics should not be ignored. If Christianity—specifically Seventh-day Adventist Christianity—is able to provide a meaningful (contextualized)<sup>3</sup> Christian experience, a theological-pedagogical approach to this persistent spirit-world component of Asian popular religiosity should be provided.

What should be the shape of religious education<sup>4</sup> in the Asia-Pacific Region which will adequately address the dynamics mentioned above? To answer this main problem, several inquiries must be made: (1) What are the characteristics of the Asian spirit-world beliefs? (2) How does this worldview shape Christianity in Asia? (3) What is the best theological-pedagogical response to the Asian spirit-world beliefs?

The ultimate goal of this essay is to provide a theological-pedagogical framework by which Christian teachers may build an authentic, biblical faith among Asians. This effort is especially directed to Asian Christians who are caught in the continuing collision between the scientific-rationalistic worldview, the spirit-world beliefs, and the Christian-biblical worldview.

This paper is presented in three sections: (1) Firstly, there is a brief discussion on profiling the Asian animistic spirit-world beliefs and practices. It is obvious that it will be impossible to cover all aspects of Asian spirit-world beliefs in this paper. What is presented here is more or less the Filipino version. This is presented, however, with the assumption that the core beliefs are essentially similar with that of its Asian neighbors.

The second section describes how this animistic worldview shaped Christianity in Asia. The last section proposes a biblically-based response to the spirit-world beliefs. This section outlines a curricular framework for an adequate theological-pedagogical approach in building faith among Asian Christians in relation to their spirit-world beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup>Jaime Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1966), 7.

<sup>2</sup>Fe Susan Go, “Mother, Maids, and the Creatures of the Night: The Persistence of Philippine Folk Religion,” *Philippine Quarterly Journal of Culture and Society* 3 (Sept 1979): 186-203.

<sup>3</sup>The term “contextualization” is a subject of much theological debate. However, in this study the term reflects the “context-indigenization” model introduced by Bruce Fleming in his book *Contextualization of Theology*. Contextualization in this sense is a theological concept or process which is characterized by a healthy application of God’s revelation to the modern situation. The “implementation of this approach utilizes God’s word, the Bible, as the source of all theologizing. The practice of historical-grammatical exegesis in conjunction with context-indigenization allows the Bible to speak for itself, guarding against the imposition of certain motifs which contradict the teachings of the whole Scripture.” It must be made clear that this “approach also uses insights gained from anthropology and related social sciences and missiology” to indigenize the gospel in the modern context. See Bruce C. E. Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), 78.

<sup>4</sup>Religious education in this paper is employed to describe any teaching activity in all levels done by Christian teachers to facilitate the development of Christian faith.

## II. The Asian Spirit-world Beliefs

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

### Pre-Hispanic Anitism

The religious system practiced by pre-Hispanic Filipinos has been identified as “anitism.” Anitism was defined by Fernando Blumentritt as a “continued invocation and adoration of the *anitos*—the souls or spirits of the ancestors.”<sup>1</sup> But anitism is more than adoration and fear of ancestral spirits. Some major components of this religious belief include the concept of a supreme but an inaccessible God, the fear of other gods, and fear and worship of spirits.

Pre-Hispanic anitism involves a belief in a supreme God. The best proof of this is found in the records of Ferdinand Magellan’s discovery of the Philippine islands on March 17, 1521. The record shows that while Magellan’s retinue celebrated Easter on the island of Limasawa on March 31, 1521, Magellan asked the natives about their religious beliefs. Antonio Pigafetta, a chronicler of Magellan’s expedition, recorded the following account:

“The Captain General [Magellan] also had them asked whether they were Moros or heathen, or what was their belief. They replied that they worshiped nothing, but that they raised their clasped hands and their face to the sky; and they called their God “Abba.”<sup>2</sup>

This God called *Abba* by the Filipinos in Limasawa was called *Bathala* by the Tagalogs; those in Western Visayas called the supreme God *Laon*.<sup>3</sup> However, “there is no clue given to the form or appearance by which this supreme being was represented. The people, it would seem, troubled themselves very little about his worship.”<sup>4</sup> Sacrifices were not offered to *Bathala* but instead to the *anitos*. Miguel de Loarca writes that

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<sup>1</sup>Fernando Blumentritt, *Diccionario Mitologico de Filipinos*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (N.P., 1895), s.v. “Anitismo.”

<sup>2</sup>Antonio Pigafetta, “[First Voyage Around the World],” in *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898* edited by Emma Blair and James A. Robertson, 55 vols. (Mandaluyong, Rizal: Cachos Hermanos, 1973 reprint), 33:127.

<sup>3</sup>Peter G. Gowing, *Islands Under the Cross: The Story of the Church in the Philippines* (Manila: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1967), 9.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Silliman, “Religious Beliefs and Life at the Beginning of the Spanish Regime in the Philippines.” *Class Readings*, College of Theology, Silliman University, Dumaguete City, 1967, 92.

“When the natives were asked why the sacrifices were offered to the *anitos* and not to *Bathala*, they answered that the *Bathala* was a great Lord and no one could speak to Him. He lived in the sky, but the *anito* . . . came down here to talk with men, was to *Bathala* a minister and interceded for them.”<sup>1</sup>

Anitism also recognizes the existence of other gods. Writing in June of 1582, Miguel de Loarca mentioned nature gods such as *kaptan*, who dwelt in the sky and was believed to be lord of thunder that caused man’s diseases and plagues of nature. There is *sisiburanin*, who punished the souls presented to him unless the living offered a sacrifice on their behalf.<sup>2</sup> Loarca also mentioned the goddess *Lalahon* who ruled over harvest. She was believed to be able to provide good harvest to farmers, but could also send locusts to destroy crops when displeased.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, the gods were cruel and vindictive. They were appeased only by sacrificial gifts and offerings.<sup>4</sup> But there were gods who were able to deliver benefits if their favors were won. These gods protected the people on expeditions of plunder or when they went to war.<sup>5</sup> In addition, pre-Hispanic Filipinos consider these divinities as not purely spirits. They were believed to be able to appear in human form.<sup>6</sup>

Anitism as a religion derives its name from its fundamental belief about the spirits, called *anitos* by the Tagalogs and *diwatas* by the inhabitants of Southern Philippines. The spirits were classified as good and evil spirits. The good spirits provided good fortune, and the evil spirits brought maladies or death. Both were venerated and invoked: The former were served to win their goodwill and for the good that might be given; the latter were served out of a feeling of fear. Evil spirits were invoked to placate their anger so that they might do no harm.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Miguel de Loarca, “Relation of the Filipinas Islands,” *The Philippine Islands*, 5:173.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>4</sup>Pablo Fernandez, *History of the Church in the Philippines: 1521-1898* (Manila: National Book Store, 1979), 3.

<sup>5</sup>Loarca, 5:133.

<sup>6</sup>Fernandez, 3.

<sup>7</sup>Stephen K. Hislop, “Anitism: A Survey of Religious Beliefs Native to the Philippines,” *Asian Studies* 9 (Aug 1971): 149.

These spirits were thought to participate actively in all aspects of life. Further, the spirits were believed to dwell anywhere; they inhabited both animals and objects. Hence, Hislop concludes that to the animists there is no such thing as an inanimate object.<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, the Filipino animist believes in a supreme being, God. But this God is remote and inaccessible. He is not involved in the day-to-day affairs of human life. What is real and active in the daily affairs are the lesser gods and spirits. These are to be respected and feared. These spirits may be appeased or manipulated by appropriate rituals and ceremonies for favors and protection.

#### Spirit-World Beliefs and Catholic Christianity

Except for minor differences, Filipino Catholicism is largely similar to animism. We may even call it a Christianized version of animism. Its major teachings include the concept of a faraway God, worship of saints, and fear of evil spirits.

Filipino Folk Catholicism<sup>2</sup> believes in a supreme being or God. But like the god of the animists, their God is far removed. One needs intermediaries to reach him.

The ability to establish a relationship with God acquires added and favorable dimensions if prayers are first addressed to intermediaries rather than directly to the Almighty. This implied a belief that God is too removed from worldly affairs to take away specific interest in men but saints are almost human. They are close to the world. To God only saints can speak better.<sup>3</sup>

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

Closely related to the belief in a remote God is the rural people's view of themselves in relation to the world and the universe. Folk Catholics believe that the world of man is an extension of the spiritual and saintly world.<sup>4</sup> "The individual human being is but a small part of a wider natural-social universe inhabited largely by spirits and saints."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>2</sup>Scholars identified Catholicism in the Philippines as "Folk Catholicism" because of its close resemblance to animism. See F. Landa Jocano, *Folk Christianity* (Quezon City: Trinity Research Institute, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>F. Landa Jocano, "Filipino Folk Catholicism," *Philippine Educational Forum* 15 (Nov 1966): 46.

<sup>4</sup>F. Landa Jocano, "Conversion and the Patterning of Christian Experience in Malitbog, Central Panay, Philippines," in *Acculturation in the Philippines: Essays in Changing Society*, edited by Peter G. Gowing and William Henry Scott (Quezon City: New Day, 1971), 53.

<sup>5</sup>Jocano, "Filipino Folk," 59

But the most striking similarity to anitism in Folk Catholicism is manifested in its beliefs and practices related to the existence of good and evil spirits. This is not surprising to those who know Filipinos well, because “belief in good and evil spirits is a value orientation in Filipino culture.”<sup>1</sup> What is disturbing, however, is how Folk Catholics adapt the church’s teachings to their animistic mentality. Let us take the Christian teaching of veneration of the saints as a case in point.

To Folk Catholics, saints are just other personalities of the spirit-world. “Saints in many rural areas are conceived by farmers not as church personalities who have been canonized because of their good works and virtuous living, but as supernatural beings with powers similar to those of the environmental spirits.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Christian veneration of saints has become equivalent to the worship of *anitos* for Folk Catholics. Saints have somehow served as “substitute for the old pagan idolatry and polytheism.”<sup>3</sup>

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

Even the value given to religious festivals, rituals, and ceremonies has not changed. Although the animal sacrificial offerings characteristic of anitism’s festivals are not prominently featured, the motive and methods of performing the ceremonies are relatively similar. Perhaps a few examples will make this clear.

Donn Hart relates an incident in which a replica of a patron saint was washed in the sea to insure abundant rain.<sup>4</sup> Jocano also mentions the *caracol* festival in Bacoar, Cavite; the fluvial parade of San Vicente in Agono, Rizal; the river voyage of the image of San Pedro in Apalit, Pampanga, as festivals designed to manipulate the saints to give fishermen abundant catch.<sup>5</sup>

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

The practice of ancestor worship is quite evident in specific rituals observed by Folk Catholics. Nid Anima mentions a special festival called the *Kalag-kalag* (literally

<sup>1</sup>Douglas Elwood, “Varieties of Christianity in the Philippines,” in *Society, Culture and the Filipino*, edited by Mary Hollnsteiner (Quezon City: The Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1976), 385.

<sup>2</sup>Jocano, “Filipino Folk,” 46.

<sup>3</sup>Gowing, 55.

<sup>4</sup>Donn Hart, “The Filipino Villager and His Spirits,” *Solidarity* 1 (Oct-Dec 1966): 67.

<sup>5</sup>Jocano, *Folk Christianity*, 24-25.

soul-soul or ghost-ghost). On All Souls Day (November 1) and All Saints Day (November 2) many Catholics of northeastern Mindanao hold the *Kalag-kalag*<sup>1</sup> festival. People go to the graves of their relatives, offer food and drink, while the whole atmosphere in the community is filled with merrymaking. This festival is in honor of the dead ancestors, who are believed to have come back to the world of human beings during this season.

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

Like the anitists, Folk Catholics are fearful of evil spirits and their human agents. Folk Catholics believe that evil spirits come in many kinds, but all of them are generally considered harmful. Detailed description of the spirits is beyond the scope of this study. But mention of at least one should be made.

The *engkanto* is one of the most common forms of evil spirits.<sup>2</sup> It is recognized as *dili ingon nato* or *dili ta parehas* (people not like us or similar to us). Their dwelling places appear to most people as mere boulders, holes in the ground, mounds of

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<sup>1</sup>Nid Anima, *Childbirth and Burial Practices Among Philippine Tribes* (Quezon City: Omar Publications, 1978), 60.

<sup>2</sup>The other forms of the so-called evil spirits include the *aswang*, *ungo* or *unglu*, *witch*, *momo*, *multo*, *abat*, *manananggal*, ghost (usually of a known deceased person), *kapre*, *agta*, etc. Evil spirits also come in various kinds of supernatural animals and monsters such as *kalaskas*, *impakto*, *mantiyanak*, *sigbin*, *balbal*, *wakwak*, *kikik*, etc.

Short descriptions of some of these may be helpful in depicting a general picture of these so-called spirits:

The *agta* is a very large supernatural man usually living in trees, particularly mangroves, and in swampy places.

The *ungo* and *awok* are big muscular men. They are believed to be so powerful that they can cause serious sickness. The *sigbin*, on the other hand, is a goat-like animal and is usually invisible. The *sigbins* operate during the night and are specially attracted to the house of a dying person. Their bodies produce a very pungent and nauseating odor.

The *abat* is the most dangerous because it directly strikes to harm man. It has only the upper portion of its body. It has big, red, bulging and hungry eyes, disheveled hair and long, bony and clawed fingers. It can fly with only its head and hands. Its favorite food is small children. It is active only at night and can travel long distances. A close cousin of the *abat* is the *wakwak*, a flying witch. It is said to fly over nipa houses during the night wherein live pregnant women, sick persons, or newborn babies. It inflicts harm by sucking the victim's blood and eating their livers. For more details, see Richard Arens, "Witches and Witchcraft in Leyte and Samar Islands, Philippines," *Philippine Journal of Science* 85 (Dec 1956): 451-465; Richard Lieban, *Cebuano Sorcery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 65-79; Go, "Mothers, Maids," 186-203.

earth, or trees like the *balite*. But to the human friends of the *engkanto*, these dwelling places are magnificent palaces and mansions.<sup>1</sup>

The *engkantos* are said to be beautiful and fair skinned and are romantically attracted to a brown-skinned boy or girl. They are sometimes associated with souls of dead ancestors, and are therefore dreaded. They are also believed to possess power to inflict diseases.<sup>2</sup>

Folk Catholics also believe that evil spirits have human agents. The more prominent is the *barangan*.<sup>3</sup> The *barangan*'s magical powers were originally transmitted by cave or mountain spirits. The *barangan* has the ability to kill anyone by mere words of the so-called *oracion*. He can also cause deformation of the body. When this happens, the person afflicted usually loses either his nose or another part of his face.<sup>4</sup> The *barangan* usually makes services available to persons who want to harm their enemies. He has a supply of "invisible destroyers" in the form of germs or insects that may be commanded to attack intended victims. However, the *barangan* also possesses power to cure sickness caused by fairies and evil spirits.<sup>5</sup>

To protect against evil spirits or their human agents, one should possess amulets or charms that counteract the spirits' magic and power. These charms are generally called *anting-anting*. *Anting-anting* come in many forms, the most common, in the form of sacred coconut oil. This oil is prepared with specific rituals accompanied by solemn prayers. This oil is prepared and distributed only by *barangans* or *tambalans*.<sup>6</sup> The oil is placed in tiny bottles together with a small piece of paper on which a sentence or paragraph in Latin is inscribed. The *anting-anting* will only be effective if this is tied to the user's body and if he recites the daily prayers prescribed by the *tambalan*.

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

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Arens, "Witches and Witchcraft in Leyte and Samar Islands," *Philippine Journal of Science* 85 (Dec 1956): 451-465.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 453.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 439.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>*Tambalans* are the medicine men in rural Philippines.

*Anting-anting* may also come in the form of religious objects, such as a crucifix,<sup>1</sup> or *Agnus Dei* medal. In fact, almost all *anting-antings* have to be prepared on good Friday. Many Catholics who own *anting-antings* pray Christian prayers to give more power to the *anting-antings*.

The survey thus far reveals that Filipinos, although most are already Catholic Christians, still believe in the existence of unseen spirits. One writer's conclusion perhaps drives this truth more emphatically: "one thing cannot be denied: The belief in this spirit world persists among most Filipinos."<sup>2</sup> What is then the best theological response to this phenomenon? How to foster faith and learning among people with this worldview?

### III. The Proposed Theological Response

Three basic responses could be proposed. The first is to deny the reality of the spirits and categorically condemn the Filipino spirit-world beliefs simply as superstitious. This is the response of those who are of scientific-rationalistic orientation. This approach assumes that spirit-worldview is totally incompatible with Christian theology. It is then the duty of a Christian to liberate Filipinos, not from the spirit themselves, but from the belief in the existence of the spirits.<sup>3</sup>

Many Christian scholars who have tried to address problems related to the Filipino spirit-world beliefs argues that this is not the best response. Rodney Henry, one of the many who studied the Filipino spirit-world, observes that "when a person believes that he is being troubled by a spirit, a condemning word from a church leader will not stop him. Such a person will seek relief from his spirit problem in one way or another."<sup>4</sup> Ralph Toliver, in his discussion of syncretism in Filipino Protestant Christianity, concludes that "western missionaries must realize that merely to deny the existence of the spirit-world will neither commend him to the national church nor help to solve some of its nagging problems."<sup>5</sup> He further observes that

The belief in *aswang* [evil spirits] is deep-rooted, so much so in fact that a frontal attack against the belief would appear to be neither

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<sup>1</sup>Christian symbols such as the cross carry the same function as that of the talisman. See William and Corrine Nydegger, *Tarong: An Ilocos Barrio in the Philippines* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), 67-68.

<sup>2</sup>Go, "Mothers, Maids," 195.

<sup>3</sup>Maria G. Villegas, "Superstitious Beliefs and Practices in the Coastal Towns of Eastern Leyte," *Leyte-Samar Studies* 2 (1968): 232.

<sup>4</sup>Rodney L. Henry, *Filipino Spirit-World: A Challenge to the Church* (Manila: OMF, 1986), 94.

<sup>5</sup>Ralph Toliver, "Syncretism, a Specter Among Philippine Protestants," *Practical Anthropology* 17 (Sept-Oct 1970): 214.

honest nor good tactics on the part of the missionary—not honest, for the missionary might not know all that is involved in the *aswang* beliefs, and not good tactics, since the attack on the belief per se would be negative and not positive.<sup>1</sup>

The second response is to be theologically tolerant to the spirit-world beliefs hoping that it will eventually fade away. No theological value is given to spirit-world beliefs, but it is not to be discarded all together for its socio-psychological significance. Douglas Elwood, one of the Protestant scholars who does not believe in the spirits as part of the real world, opines that the Filipino spirit-world beliefs belong to the traditional man's conceptual view. It is part of the pre-scientific explanation of how the forces of nature are expressed through man's beliefs in spirits or personal supernatural beings.<sup>2</sup> For this reason Elwood advise that

spirit belief should not be treated as heresy to be condemned, but as an early stage in man's awareness, which can be nurtured and enlightened through increased scientific knowledge and maturing religious faith.<sup>3</sup>

Elwood, however, admits that belief and fear of spirits threatens the Christian teaching of God's absolute sovereignty. He writes:

If man can relate to God only through subordinates or intermediaries, God himself becomes less directly relevant to the life of man; and spirits, saints, demons and angels become more ultimate than God. The conviction of the biblical writers is that God is in the very midst of life and that we encounter him when we respond to the way life is. The mysterious power that surrounds us and that gives us life is none other than the spiritual presence and purposive activity of the one living God who, for us, was in Jesus as Christ and who deigns to dwell in our lives as well.

The supposed capacity of other anthropomorphic but supernatural beings to bless and to curse, to inflict injury, sickness or death and otherwise interfere with the on-going movement of human life, without the limitations of space and time, clearly detracts from the sovereignty of the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Douglas Elwood, "Are the Spirits Part of the Real World?" *Church and Community* 10 (Mar-Apr 1970): 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

one living God whose presence and activity are all-pervasive and who is the ultimate source of all power in the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Responding to the question on how should the documented manifestations of *engkantos*, etc., be explained, Elwood argues that they may be explained in terms of psychological and sociological imperatives. He suggests that these beliefs are mere products of wish fulfillment, suggestibility, unfulfilled sexual desire on the individual level, check on anti-social behavior, and influence of home environment in the social level, or mere coincidence.<sup>2</sup> Elwood seems to agree with social scientists that the main value of the spirit-world belief is related to social control or expressions of superior mental powers.<sup>3</sup>

The view that Filipino spirit-world belief is to be tolerated for its inherent value is also advocated by the Catholic scholar Francisco Demetrio. To him belief in the spirits has some value in that it supplies the people with a satisfaction of their "existential needs both material and psychic."<sup>4</sup> Thus, he says:

One cannot fully agree with the early Christian chroniclers who claimed that the religion of the early Filipinos was altogether diabolical. What had served the needs of the people for long centuries before the advent of Christianity cannot in fairness and truth be called the work of the devil pure and simple.<sup>5</sup>

The third response, the response which is proposed in this paper, is described in the following paragraphs. The basic concept of this theological response is that some aspects of the Filipino spirit-worldview are compatible with the biblical teachings.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the Filipino spirit-worldview has the potential of becoming a springboard, a vehicle in developing authentic Filipino Christianity without necessarily corrupting the gospel. How shall this be accomplished?

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 22

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>For example of social and psychological discussion on the spirit-world belief, see Jaime Bulatao, "Altered States of Consciousness in Philippine Religion," in *Filipino Religious Psychology*, edited by Leonardo N. Mercado (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1977), xx.

<sup>4</sup>Francisco Demetrio, "The *Engkanto* Belief: An Essay in Interpretation," *Philippine Studies* 17 (July 1969): 591.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>The discussion on the issue is not covered in this paper. However, basic arguments to support the concept are mentioned.

The general principles on how to deal with the Filipino spirit-world belief may be provided in two categories. The first involves basic Christian teachings related to the spirit world. This step is necessary. Because, as Gowing observes, “poor instruction in the tenets of the Christian faith accounts in part for the traces of animism, belief in demons or evil spirits and other aspects of pre-Christian paganism which linger in the thinking and even devotional practices of many Filipino Christians, Protestants as well as Roman Catholics.”<sup>1</sup> The second step involves structuring concrete pastoral-missiological rituals or practices.<sup>2</sup>

Many Christian scholars who have tried to address problems related to the Filipino spirit-world belief agree that the two elements mentioned above should go hand in hand. “Unless the church provides clear teaching on the subject of the spirit-world and its practitioners, as well as providing alternatives to going to such practitioners, the problem will continue as it has in the past.”<sup>3</sup>

We shall now outline basic truths that must be incorporated in the teachings regarding the spirit-world. A comprehensive Christian teaching that would sufficiently address the Filipino spirit-worldview is beyond the scope of this study. The following discussion of the basic themes should be regarded as only a preliminary outline. However, some themes emerge as basic for a contextualized Christian teaching that could directly relate to Filipino spirit-world beliefs. These themes include the existence of the supernatural, the immanence of God, the *Christus Victor* motif, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

#### The Belief in the Existence of Supernatural Beings Should be Affirmed

Filipinos in general, primitive and contemporary, are supernaturalistic. They believe in God (*Bathala*), as the Lord of the universe. They also believe that this Lord is the creator of the world. This concept should be affirmed and reinforced. “The ethics of rationality, of questioning, of independent thinking . . . is one of the most positive contributions of American Protestants to the Filipino mind.”<sup>4</sup> But, if this rationalism is carried to the extreme in such manner that it boldly denies or suggest doubt on the existence of supernatural spirit-beings, then it has to be condemned.

This approach finds support from the Bible. The Gospels record that Jesus believed in the reality of supernatural beings, angels and demons alike (Mt. 12:22-28; 25:41). St. Paul adopted the cosmology of the people to whom he preached (Col. 1:15-18). And there is no reason why Christians in the Philippines cannot use the cosmology

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<sup>1</sup>Gowing, 34.

<sup>2</sup>Constructing a pastoral-missiological response is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup>Henry, 94.

<sup>4</sup>Tomas Quintin Andres, *Understanding Filipino Values: A Management Approach* (Quezon City: New Day, 1981), 8.

of the Filipinos to reach the roots of the Filipino soul with the gospel. If properly placed in the right perspective, this approach will preserve the religious fervor of the Filipinos. Wayne Grudem, in his article "The Unseen World is Not a Myth,"<sup>1</sup> suggests that a healthy belief in the existence of the spirits may prove favorable in maintaining the spirituality of the people. Grudem writes, "if spirits are taken as real, it will quicken and intensify our prayer, it will deepen our worship, it will purify our speech, it will reform our conduct, it will deepen our love for our Lord Jesus."<sup>2</sup> John Carroll also points out that the denial of spirit-world belief may destroy or erode the interest of Filipinos in any religion. He says that

in the long run, with the rising level of education and the elimination by science of many of the areas of change and uncertainty in life, the magical elements in popular religion will decrease in significance. This could mean a great purification of religion and a more personal commitment to it, or it could mean a loss of interest in all religion, such as is now observed among certain intellectual groups in the Philippines and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason why this approach should be pursued is that it has proved effective among other peoples of the world, especially those who have worldview similar to that of the Filipinos. A quick survey of the African experience affirms this. In the introduction to the book of Emmanuel Milingo,<sup>4</sup> Mona Macmillan notes that the traditional Western approach of denying the existence of the spirits has proved unsuccessful in Africa. Macmillan observes that rationalistic missionaries told the people that the spirits did not exist, but to no avail. The people continued to believe in the spirits, even when they had accepted Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

A similar observation was made by John Ganly,<sup>6</sup> who reports that in the early part of his ministry he followed the approach of denying the existence of the spirits. Whenever the people came to him to talk about the spirits, he would say, "we Christians

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne Grudem, "The Unseen World is Not a Myth," *Christianity Today* 11 (July 1986): 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>3</sup>John J. Carroll and others, *Philippine Institutions* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1970), 60, 61.

<sup>4</sup>Emmanuel Milingo, *The World in Between: Christian Healing and the Struggle for Spiritual Revival*, edited by Mona Macmillan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>6</sup>John Ganly, "Evil Spirits in Pastoral Practice," *AFER* 27 (Dec 25, 1985): 345-356.

don't believe in them."<sup>1</sup> But soon people stopped consulting him. He became isolated from the people. This went on for years until he realized that missionaries should engage people on their own terms.<sup>2</sup> By this statement he implied that people's belief in the reality of spirits should be respected, instead of denied.

#### The Ancestor Worship Component Should Be Condemned

However, one aspect of the Filipino belief about the existence of the spirits should be carefully handled. This concerns the belief that spirits of ancestors are alive and can do favors. This belief should be gently and firmly corrected because, although it is in accord with platonic philosophy, it has no biblical support. The Bible clearly indicates that at death, man's body returns to dust from which it came (Gen 3:19, Eccl 12:7) and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccl 12:7). At death, man, the living soul, ceases to exist. The Scriptures clearly teach that the soul does not survive as a conscious entity after the body returns to dust (Eccl. 9:5, 6).

This reality made the author of Ecclesiastes add a very important advice. He says that "whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom" (Eccl 9:10). In view of this biblical truth, therefore, a contextualized biblical teaching on the nature of man is necessary. Otherwise Filipino Christianity, still adhering to belief in the existence of dead ancestors, would be susceptible to the errors of animism or to the danger of modern spiritism.

But the reality and power of the spirits should not be over-emphasized. Christianity is not a religion concerning spirits. It concerns God and, above all, Jesus Christ. Hence, a teaching on the sovereignty of God and the proper place of Christ in relation to the spirits should be prominent.

#### The Immanence of a Sovereign God Should Be Emphasized

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

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

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<sup>1</sup>Ganly, 345.

<sup>2</sup>Tbid., 346.

Further, a Filipinized Christian teaching on God should also emphasize God's sovereignty. This is important because, as mentioned earlier, the "immature" religious orientation of the Filipinos provides a concept that God can be manipulated, used, or controlled. This "immature" religious orientation seems to contradict the *bahala na*<sup>1</sup> attitude so evident among Filipinos. But many studies show that probably because of the long influence of animism, this religious orientation is prevalent, even among modern Filipino Christians. For example, Gorospe observes that "some Filipino Catholics use God or religion as a means to their own personal satisfaction or ends, such as to gain social acceptance or prestige, to enhance their business or their political ambitions. They are religiously immature."<sup>2</sup> In another statement Gorospe is even more specific.

The immature Filipino Catholic tends to treat God as a *compadre* from whom he can obtain favors or as a policeman whom he can bribe by means of a novena. . . . Many Filipino Catholics make novenas to obtain favors from God. They feel that they have done something for God and expect Him in turn to reciprocate by granting their request. They feel that God is indebted to them and therefore if God does not answer their prayer, they sulk or make *tampo*.<sup>3</sup>

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

#### The Christus Victor Motif Be Given Prominence

Another Christian teaching that should be emphasized in dealing with the Filipino spirit-world belief is the theme of the victorious Christ. There is too much emphasis on the *Santo Niño* (Holy Child) and the *Santo Entierro* (the tragic victim on the cross or in the tomb) views of Christ. Most Filipinos think of Christ as a baby and a martyr, not so much as a living person. But Christ lived a victorious life. He was a liberator. He was victorious over spirits. In fact, the New Testament views him as the end of demons. His kingdom overruns the kingdom of this world. Christ has decisively defeated the demonic powers. Demons have residual dominion over man only because mankind is still

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<sup>1</sup>The *bahala na* attitude is generally fatalistic. It rests on the belief that one can leave matters as they are, that one need not exert any effort because the supernatural spirits will take care of everything for everybody. See Felicidad V. Cordero and Isabel S. Panopio, *General Sociology: Focus on the Philippines* (Manila: College Professors Publishing, 1967), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Gorospe, 27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 37.

awaiting for the consummation of redemption. Thus, Filipinos should be taught that all spirits are subservient to Christ. Therefore, any piety, reverence, worship, or excessive fear of spirits must be deemed unchristian and misdirected.

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

Christians ought to recognize that there is witchcraft and that it is both a subjective and objective reality emanating from the Devil. But having recognized this, like Paul when combating the Colossian error, they must also proclaim the preeminence and uniqueness of Christ. His all-embracing love is able to draw all men to Himself and His infinite power can liberate all who are held in bondage of sin and Satan.<sup>1</sup>

There is danger, however, that Christian symbols such as the cross, holy water, or candles would be used as *anting-anting* because of the emphasis on the power of the victorious Christ. Thus Christian teachers should be careful on this matter, otherwise Christianity would become just another way of magic. This is affirmed by Henry, who notes that, "if the spirit-world is not placed in the context of all Christian doctrine and practices the church will become the place for 'Christian magic' and be obsessed with the spirit-world."<sup>2</sup>

#### The Reality of the Ministry of the Holy Spirit Be Given Prominence

Emphasis on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is also important. Filipinos must be taught that through the ministry of various divine agencies, especially through the Holy Spirit, man's needs in life may be provided by God. It must also be made clear that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are sufficient for the church to carry out its gospel commission. It seems that the lack of emphasis on the teaching about the Holy Spirit contributes to the absence of concrete alternatives to spirit-world beliefs and practices.

It must be made clear also, that the power of the Holy Spirit may not always be demonstrated in spectacular ways. Divine intervention can be demonstrated in ways which can be explained by science. The scientific way of doing things does not at all eliminate the influence of divine forces. To expect that the Holy Spirit will operate only in spectacular ways is dangerous because evil spirits can also perform what seems to be miracles.

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<sup>1</sup>Sam Erivwo, "Christian Attitude to Witchcraft," *AFER* 1 (1975): 31.

<sup>2</sup>Henry, 136.

## **Summary**

In varying degrees, Asian Christians are caught in a three-way confrontation of worldviews. This is particularly defined in the arena of spirit-world beliefs. The three views are the western-inspired rationalistic understanding of the supernatural, the nonrationalistic traditional beliefs, and the biblical understanding of the spirit-world. The tension created by this confrontation often results in a syncretistic split-level Christianity exemplified by Folk Catholicism in the Philippines. What should be the shape of the Christian response to this phenomenon?

This paper proposed that a two-fold approach is necessary. The first component is theological-pedagogical and the second is pastoral and missiological.

The theological-pedagogical response should emphasize the following themes:

(1) The ultimate reality is the supernatural. Behind the scenes of earthly affairs, invisible, supernatural forces, good and evil, are engaged in cosmic warfare for the control of every human being (Eph 6:12); (2) A literal devil called Satan exists and that he has direct control over the multitudes of fallen angels, who are allied with him, and share his destructive intentions; (3) God is active in the natural world. He intervenes in human affairs. Through the power of Jesus Christ who won a supreme victory over Satan at Calvary, Christians can have, not only eternal life in the hereafter, but also freedom from the control of Satan in this present temporal existence; and (4) through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, a Christian alternative to spirit-world practices can be provided.

The theological response stated above should be the basis for pastoral-missiological practice. Constructing a pastoral-missiological response to Filipino spirit-world beliefs is a good topic for another paper.