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## **BAHALA NA AND THE FILIPINO/A FAITH IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE**

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### **Abstract**

*Bahala na* is a Filipino/a value that is often interpreted within a worldview of fatalism and indolence. A hermeneutic of generosity can, however, offer an alternative understanding of this Filipino/a value as expressed in acts of resilience and risk-taking by people in life-defining situations. In the face of suffering, through the centuries of colonization and the onslaught of the forces of nature of their land, the Filipinos/as express their profound trust in the reliable and abiding love of God in *bahala na*. What is first misconstrued as resignation and powerlessness may actually be enablement and empowerment rooted in an indomitable faith in God, who is the final word in life.

**Keywords:** *Bahala Na*, Fatalism, Filipino/a Theology, Hermeneutic of Generosity, Resilience, Trust

The faith of Filipinos/as is beautiful and profound. I begin with this statement because it has taken me time to appreciate this faith. As a transnational Filipino-American Catholic, I have found myself quite critical of the ways of expression of faith of the Filipinos/as. I have, in the past, simply labelled what I observed as superstitious and fatalistic. It was only recently, as I have moved beyond my Euro-American theological formation, to learn more about the history of the Philippines, have I come to realize that colonial mentality or

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internalized oppression has informed the way I judge what is Filipino/a as inferior to the dominant foreign way of thinking. Not only did I view what I observed inferior, but its meaning to the people was virtually invisible as well. I went through a graduate theological education where nothing was said of the writings of Filipino/a theologians.

Many Filipinos/as do not know our story as a people. Those who may know have a version based on a historical revision of the abuses and exploitation of colonization that was the vehicle of our Christianization. The history that I and others have learned about the Philippines erases the atrocities committed against our people by those who claimed to be their liberators and saviours. Yet, there is something about the history of our subjugation that made possible a profound Christian faith to be born and to be borne, that is, carried. From within the soil of conversion through conquest grew a faith that sustained a people through great tragedies of life. It is a faith founded on a profound trust in God whose love is abiding in times of suffering and humiliation. This kind of faith is poignantly described in the book of Job, where the story of innocent suffering reveals profound faith. Such a faith enabled Latin American liberation theologians to rediscover the liberator God of Scripture in whom many oppressed people place their faith and hope. Contextual theology invites us to begin with the culture and lived faith of a people to encounter the God who is already there. The early Jesuits, like Matteo Ricci, understood that God precedes them in the cultures and peoples they sought to Christianize. In its 34<sup>th</sup> General Congregation, the Society of Jesus declared dialogue with cultures and religions as an essential element of its mission.<sup>1</sup> Such a dialogue is in the same spirit of the early Jesuit missionaries who looked for God present in cultures rather than assuming they bring God to cultures.<sup>2</sup> It is from an attention to God's abiding presence that we discover and share the Good News of Jesus in ways meaningful to people.

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<sup>1</sup>"Our service of the Christian faith must never disrupt the best impulses of the culture in which we work, nor can it be an alien imposition from outside. It is directed towards working in such a way that the line of development springing from the heart of a culture leads it to the Kingdom." General Congregation 34 of the Society of Jesus, "Decree 4: Our Mission and Culture," in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees & Accompanying Documents of the 31<sup>st</sup> -35<sup>th</sup> General Congregations of the Society of Jesus*, ed. John W. Padberg, SJ, St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009, 537.

<sup>2</sup>Adolfo Nicolas, "Interreligious Dialogue: The Experience of some Pioneer Jesuits in Asia," *The Way* 50, 4 (October 2011) 7-33.

In this essay, I examine the faith of the Filipino/a that is born of our history and shaped by our culture. I focus on the attitude of *bahala na* and argue that it is illustrative of a deep religious faith. *Bahala na*, however, can easily be judged as a negative cultural trait that encourages fatalism and indolence. Educated Filipinos/as tend to derogatorily dismiss, disregard, or devalue it. Alternatively, *bahala na* can be examined from a hermeneutic of generosity that can reveal the faith wisdom in its meaning. In the light of this hermeneutic, *bahala na* can be linguistically understood as an expression of faith in a providential God of love, compassion, and companionship.

I argue that the phrase *bahala na* is an expression of faith, which names what Filipinos/as believe, in whom they trust, and to what they are committed.<sup>3</sup> What appears initially as a throw away phrase is a glimpse of the *sensus fidelium*, the intuition of the faith of the Filipino/a that is shared with the whole church, that is, a belief in, trust in, and commitment to God, present and active in history and in our stories. Naming the distinctive elements of Filipino/a culture and ways of being that shape their identity as a people, particularly as a people of religious faith, is essential. *Bahala na* is a window to a shared Filipino/a intuition about God. A careful examination of the phrase and the context in which it is used can provide a nuanced understanding of the fatalism it seems to communicate and encourage. From a hermeneutic of generosity, *bahala na* reveals a capacity to trust in the providence of God when confronted by life challenges and a proclivity to express gratitude when life is well. Trust and gratitude are orientations of the heart of persons of religious faith.

### 1. *Bahala Na* and its Meaning for the People

Exploring the various meanings of *bahala na* and their potential theological implications opens up an understanding of *it* as an expression of *sensus fidelium*. Here I take a cue from Hispanic theologian, Orlando Espin. In reflecting on *sensus fidelium*, he turns to “the *living witness and faith* of the Christian people,”<sup>4</sup> particularly, as it is expressed in symbols of popular religion. For him, the *sensus fidelium* is the “faith-full” intuition that “makes real Christian people

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<sup>3</sup>Bradley Hanson, *Introducing Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997, 9-12.

<sup>4</sup>Orlando O. Espin, “Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. and intro. by Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992, 64.

sense that something is true or not vis-à-vis the gospel; that someone is acting in accordance with the Christian gospel or not; or that something important for Christianity is not being heard."<sup>5</sup> He notes that since "*sensus fidelium* is always expressed through symbols, language, and culture of the faithful, it is subject to intense interpretative processes and methods similar to those called for by the written texts of tradition and scripture."<sup>6</sup> To ascertain the authenticity of the intuitions, "their coherence and fundamental agreement with the other witnesses of revelation," he suggests that they should be brought into "confrontation" with the Bible, the written texts of tradition, and the historical and sociological context out of which these intuitions emerge.<sup>7</sup>

Filipino theologian Jose de Mesa states that contrary to popular belief, *bahala na* is not a derivative from *Bathala na*, where *Bathala* is one of the indigenous Tagalog names for the deity. The term does not in fact translate simply to "God's will be done."<sup>8</sup> At the same time, he notes that it is said to be "an encompassing concept to characterize the so-called Filipino (sic) fatalistic attitude or resigned acceptance of his [sic] life... the best symbol of the natural fatalism of the Filipino."<sup>9</sup> In attempting to find the roots of the phrase, Kevin L. Nadal suggests that it is not clear whether it is something that predates Spanish colonialism or a product of it but that "many Filipinos today can utilize the *bahala na* value in a Catholic context."<sup>10</sup> He identifies it as a "secondary Filipino value" that expresses "fatalistic passiveness."<sup>11</sup>

*Bahala na* has been translated in various ways, including: "let come what may," "never mind" or "it's up to God."<sup>12</sup> For example, the *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* connects the idea of *bahala na* to a fatalistic attitude rooted in the idea of a creator God who predestines

<sup>5</sup>Espin, "Tradition and Popular Religion," 64.

<sup>6</sup>Espin, "Tradition and Popular Religion," 65.

<sup>7</sup>Espin, "Tradition and Popular Religion," 65-66.

<sup>8</sup>Jose de Mesa, *And God said 'Bahala Na!': The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context*, Quezon City: Publisher Printing Press, 1979, 85.

<sup>9</sup>de Mesa, *And God said 'Bahala Na!'*, 84. The work looks particularly at the lives of low-land Filipinos/as and their limited agency due to the socio-political, economic reality of their lives.

<sup>10</sup>Kevin L. Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology: A Handbook of Theory, Research and Clinical Practice*, Forward by Derald Wing Sue, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011, 40.

<sup>11</sup>Kevin L. Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology*, 40.

<sup>12</sup>José M. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Rerooting*, Quezon City, Philippines: Maryhill, 1987, 148.

our future.<sup>13</sup> De Mesa looks into the various expressions of fatalism found in Philippine proverbs and sayings to determine whether or not *bahala na* is simply one expression among these. The cyclical idea of life as a wheel where at one time one is on top and another on the bottom (*gulong ng kapalaran*, literally wheel of fortune/fate) or the sense of that which is not meant for you will not come to you (*kung 'di uukol, di bubukol*, literally what is not meant for you will not rise) are commonly held by both rural and urban Filipino/as.<sup>14</sup>

Wilfredo Paguio claims that this fatalism “has stripped them [the Filipinos] of ambition in life, of any desire to uplift their living conditions.”<sup>15</sup> What is troubling in this understanding of the meaning of the phrase is not its inaccuracy but its incompleteness. The roots of the fatalism that is believed to be a Filipino/a characteristic as expressed in *bahala na* must be understood. In her essay on the legacy of colonialism, Nilda Remonte critiques the dominant reading of Philippine history that has “consistently represented the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Philippines as benevolent in intent and beneficial in effect.”<sup>16</sup> She looks to the writings of Jose Rizal, Philippine national hero, to argue that this lack of ambition is not a character of the Filipinos/as but is a consequence of colonization. She notes that:

Rizal acknowledged that indolence — the infamous Spanish malediction of the Filipinos — was a problem in his time. But he did not propose a “moral recovery program,” as the Manila orthodoxy did nearly a century later... as a cure to the country’s ills... Instead, he proposed cultivating a historical awareness... so that “instead of regarding [indolence] as the cause of the backwardness and disorder, we should regard it as the effect of disorder and backwardness.” He traced the so called Filipino inferiority to the “daily and constant plucking of the soul so that it [will] not fly to the religion of light, [which] drains the energies [and] paralyzes all tendency towards advancement,... [so that] at the least strife a man gives up without fighting.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, Manila: ECCCE: Word of Life Publication, 1997, 90.

<sup>14</sup>de Mesa, *And God said ‘Bahala Na!’*, 89-98.

<sup>15</sup>Wilfredo Paguio, *Filipino Cultural Values for the Apostolate: Utilization of Certain Traditional Filipino Values for the Apostolate*, Makati, Philippines: St Paul’s Publication, 1991, 135.

<sup>16</sup>Nilda Rimonte, “Colonialism’s Legacy: The Inferiorizing of the Filipino,” in *Filipino Americans: Transformation and Identity*, ed. Maria P.P. Root, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997, 39.

<sup>17</sup>Rimonte, “Colonialism’s Legacy,” 58 with quotes from Jose Rizal, “The Philippine Century Hence,” in *Political and Historical Writings*, Vol. 7, ed. National Historical Commission, Manila: National Historical Commission, 1972, 259.

A constant experience of disempowerment and inefficacy of one's actions and initiatives creates a sense of resignation. Such a response can be read as a kind of realism in the face of the social and cultural violence of colonialism.

De Mesa challenges the notion of *bahala na* as expression of fatalism, which he understands to mean a sense of "all things" being "unalterably predetermined from eternity."<sup>18</sup> Instead he describes it as "an optimistic fatalism (what will be, will be) that helps cushion the ego against failure and disappointment."<sup>19</sup> It is not only the Philippines' colonial past and the current circumstances of many Filipinos/as in conditions of poverty and marginalization, but also the country's vulnerability to nature that places many in situations of devastation beyond their control.

Historian Greg Bankoff notes that what is missing from a fatalistic interpretation of *bahala na* is the element of risk taking, of "courage and daring and a sense of finely calculated assessment of the odds."<sup>20</sup> De Mesa offers the translation of the phrase as "what the hell!" which he sees as being more open to both a positive and negative meaning. More importantly for him, insofar as there is an element of "risk taking" inherent in *bahala na*, it is not fatalism and powerlessness before one's circumstances in life. For the poor who were profoundly affected by the recent wave of natural disasters, *bahala na* was poignantly their way of coping in a death-dealing situation beyond their control. Their indomitable resilience is a powerful challenge to the reduction of *bahala na* to simple fatalism. Nevertheless, it is critical to discern between a situation that is genuinely beyond one's control and one in which one feels disempowered or resigned and yet can still exercise agency.

Whether one reaches back to the Philippine Spanish colonial past as Rimonte does or simply looks at the current onslaught of natural disasters on the country, one can easily appreciate the realistic assessment of many Filipinos/as of the extent of their control over their circumstances. And while this is not to discount the presence of a fatalistic attitude that can lead to inaction and even indolence, that is far from the whole story. The example of Rizal and other Philippine

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<sup>18</sup>Rimonte, "Colonialism's Legacy," 87.

<sup>19</sup>Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Maturing in the Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines*, Pasay City, Metro Manila: Daughters of St Paul, 1984, 40.

<sup>20</sup>Greg Bankoff, "In the Eye of the Storm: The Social Construction of the Forces of Nature and the Climatic and Seismic Construction of God in the Philippines," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, 1 (2004) 103.

revolutionaries in our past and the resilience of the survivors of Typhoon Haiyan suggest that *bahala na* is not necessarily a debilitating attitude. In the midst of their active struggle and rebuilding, *bahala na* expressed surrender of the outcomes of their human efforts to a higher power.

## 2. The Challenge and Invitation of *Bahala Na*

The context in which *bahala na* is spoken reveals its intent, that is, whether it is an expression of fatalism; a realistic assessment of lack of power in a situation; or an utterance of entrusting the final outcome of one's efforts to God's providence. *Bahala na* can indicate fatalism, realism, trust or a combination of all this. As a fatalistic attitude it expresses a sense of powerlessness. In such a case, it does not matter what course of action is taken in a situation. The outcome is already predetermined. As an expression of realism, it is an awareness of one's limited agency in the face of concrete circumstances. The farmer who plants, tills and tends his crops is aware that at the end of the day he cannot control the weather to guarantee his harvest. *Bahala na* may also indicate a fundamental trust in the providence of God. A student who has studied and prepared for her final exam walks into the classroom, concerned about the outcome of the exam yet feeling confident that she would make it with her resolute effort and her faith in a power beyond her. She exclaims "*bahala na.*" which expresses an acceptance of the boundaries of one's agency coupled with a confidence that amidst the exigencies of life there is divine providence.

However, when influenced by my more Enlightenment-inclined views, I struggle with *bahala na*. The feeling of powerlessness stands in stark contrast to human agency that comes with the scientific and technological culture of modernity. The social situations that disempower, whether these be socio-political and economic structures or patriarchal or hierarchical relationships, run counter to the belief in the autonomy of the individual and the capacity for self-determination, that are doggedly held values in the American culture. Whether due to the attachment to human agency and autonomy or simply the proclivity for "extreme rationalism typical of the dominant theological academy in the United States,"<sup>21</sup> the idea of turning to and trusting in a providential God has become particularly

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<sup>21</sup>Maria Pilar Aquino, "Theological Method in U.S. Latino/a Theology," *From the Heart of Our People*, ed. Orlando O. Espin and Miguel H. Diaz, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999, 16.

challenging to comprehend. Living in an American culture where self-determination is paramount, I am cognizant of the impact of *bahala na* on Fil-Americans. In my experience, friends and family who have been living in the United States say less frequently *bahala na*, or "*ipasadiyos mo na lang*" (leave it up to God) or "God willing" than those who come to visit from the Philippines. I am aware of my own internal discomfort when I hear these phrases uttered.

I am a product of my time and my Euro-American theological formation particularly in the area of religion and science. The doctrine of divine providence is probably one of the most difficult theological ideas to hold in the face of what the moderately scientifically literate person has come to know about the world over the last 150 years. The realities of pain, suffering, and death have always been theological challenges for the belief in a God of love who has sovereignty over human history. Modern cosmology and evolutionary biology have shown the breadth and depth of suffering beyond the space and time occupied by human beings. The problem of theodicy is beyond the purview of human freedom and its misuse. Contemporary science has discovered a historically long and spatially layered story of increasing attenuation of the experience of pain, suffering and death written into the very story of the evolution of the cosmos.<sup>22</sup> To conceive of a God who is somehow active and present in cosmic history as a God of love appears to the rational mind profoundly problematic. An attempt at rational approach to the reality of suffering does not appear reconcilable with the idea of a loving God, which is at the heart of the Christian narrative.<sup>23</sup> In an age and place where freedom, understood primarily as the capacity for choice and self-determination is paramount, the belief in divine providence is seen as irrelevant at best and detrimental at worst to the human person.

In this rationalist and scientific context, the wisdom of a people whose way of being is expressed in *bahala na* may, however, have something to offer. There is an intuition of the Filipino/a faithful captured in this cultural expression of faith that invites one to a humble acknowledgment that in the end everything is in the loving

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<sup>22</sup>The writings of the new atheists on this subject are particularly damning. See for example, Richard Dawkins, *A River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, London: Phoenix, 1996, 112, 154.

<sup>23</sup>At the same time, Darwin has led to deepened reflections on the problem of suffering that take seriously the reality of suffering within the context of the Christian narrative. See for example Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beast: Darwin and the God of Love*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, and John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, New York: Westview, 2001.



hands of God. When hearing Fil-Americans say *bahala na*, albeit infrequently, and perhaps with a fatalistic undertone, we must also listen for the trust and surrender that is implicit in the phrase. Such an attitude of trust and surrender is at the heart of faith in divine providence.

In many contexts, *bahala na* or *ipasdios mo na lang* (leave it up to God) are statements that accompany determined and committed action. It is not an expression that reflects the image of *Juan Tamad* (lazy John) who sits under the guava tree waiting for the fruit to fall rather than climbing the tree to get it. This classic image of Filipino/a indolence, a common way that *bahala na* is interpreted, hardly captures the often self-sacrificing risk-taking that the term includes. The hardworking Filipino/a who exclaims, "*Bahala na!*" at the end of extraneous efforts to achieve a goal has a sense of all things ultimately resting in God's hands.

There is much to be learned from attending to the lived faith of peoples whose stories and histories are like those to whom Jesus preached. Marginalized and silenced, they heard Jesus' proclamation of God's love for them and they believed. They somehow understood and believed in the good news even if their life circumstances were not immediately changed. The faith of individuals and communities in the Gospel gives substance to teachings that are difficult to comprehend for those of us who preach or do theology from the comforts of our lives of privilege.

### 3. Conclusion

It is not easy to overcome generations of internalized inferiority. Doubting about the value of what one has to offer, because it looks different from what the dominant culture presents as normative, can render one silent and invisible. When one's own fragmented and divided community reinforces this doubt, the situation is exacerbated. And yet, the time has come to look deeply into what is good in the shared experience of a culture. An examination of *bahala na* reminds us, that is, the Fil-American community, of a central tenant of our faith: God is a trustworthy God of history. Filipinos/as have come to believe this truth at their core amidst the struggles and uncertainties of life. *Bahala na* may not have in fact meant "God's will be done" in its original usage in the Philippines, but for many Filipinos/as today, that is what it has come to mean. It is an expression of deep trust and a profound belief that the final word in life is love — the abiding love of a faithful God.