

HEALING IN THE LOWLAND PHILIPPINES: SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

By Dave Johnson

Introduction

In a recent seminar that Debbie and I conducted for pastors and mature lay leaders in the Bicol region of the Philippines, I posed the following question: “Suppose you prayed for someone who came to you for healing and when they were not healed, they went to a witchdoctor down the street and were made completely well. Afterwards, they come back to you and asked ‘why could the witchdoctor heal me, but you could not?’ How would you respond?” While the responses were not recorded, all understood the importance of the question and the worldview questions that lay behind it. Can witchdoctors heal? What is the source of their healing? Does God heal? What are the implications of healing? These are some of the questions that must be answered because behind these questions is the cultural reality that one’s allegiance is given to whoever delivers the goods. How low-land Filipinos answer these questions, and many more like them, reveal a culture deeply rooted in animism and has enormous implications for Christian discipleship. This paper will attempt to at least outline answers to these questions from a biblical perspective and deal with the worldview issues that lay behind them.

While all of the field research used here, which was originally written up in my masters thesis and doctoral dissertation (Johnson 2000, 2004), was conducted among the Waray people of Leyte and Samar, every writer in the field accepts the premise that due to a similar cultural history and a common religion, Roman Catholicism, the cultural similarities of the lowland Filipino groups, including the Waray, far outweigh their differences (De Mesa 1987: Forward). Most

of the Filipino writers quoted in this study actually write from a pan-Filipino perspective.

The field research was limited to the Waray and thus, according to the standards of behavioral sciences research, technically can be generalizable only to them. However, due to the level of similarity in religious practices among lowland Filipinos, this research can be broadly used throughout the lowland cultures.

Since Catholicism did not impact the animistic mountain peoples of Northern Luzon to the same degree, and didn't even touch the folk Muslims in the south, the results of this study would be less true among these groups and are, therefore, beyond the scope of this paper.

The Basic Filipino Religious Worldview

Because all humans interpret the world and the Bible through their own cultural lenses, usually uncritically, it is vital for both Filipinos and foreigners who serve them to deeply analyze and understand Filipino culture, especially their religious worldview.¹ Since a comprehensive study of Filipino culture is well beyond the limitations of this study, focus will be given to their religious worldview with the understanding that worldview is the driving force behind the values and behavior of any culture.

Robert Schreiter (1985:130) gives an excellent description of the contours of an animist's worldview and belief system, which describes the Filipino situation well:

One cannot, of course, describe the view of the world underlying popular religion [animism] in any exhaustive manner. There are, however, some characteristics that deserve special mention: (a) the world is seen as an interconnected and controlled place. No bad deed goes unpunished, no good deed will be unrewarded, for God sees all. (b) Concerns are concrete, and requests for divine aid are usually directed at immediate needs.

Because the universe is an interconnected whole, the line between the natural and the supernatural is thin, and at times, non-existent. This interconnection, according to Gailyn Van Rheenen (1991:131), includes the extended family, supernatural powers, nature and other

¹I will use the term "Filipino culture" in the singular as a simple writing convention that actually refers to a composite of the lowland Filipino cultures.

humans. In Filipino thinking, the sacred and the secular are so blended that some anthropologists cannot differentiate between the two (Mercado 1975:25-26). If this is true, then it follows that living in close harmony with occupants of the other world would be critically important to Filipinos.

While most Filipino are Catholic, a closer look reveals many animistic practices that pre-date Catholicism and have become mixed with Catholic practices and teaching. Why is this so? Rodney Henry (1986:10) writes that while Catholicism dealt with the issues of ultimate concern, such as sin and salvation, it did not deal with issues of daily life such as sickness and healing, demon possession and a host of other things which affect Filipinos daily. They are aware that Nature plays by her own rules, and that these rules are handled by supernatural beings (Jocano 1981:25). Melba Maggay (1999:23) adds that "Filipino religion remains primarily a transaction of the powers." The average Filipino is at least as much concerned about these spirits as he is about salvation and sin. Thus these two religious systems have continued to co-exist, intermingled together, accurately described as folk Catholicism.

In the mind of the average Filipino, there appears to be little, if any, difference between Catholicism and folk practices. Jaime Bulatao (1992:6) admits in a non-critical way that after four centuries of Roman Catholicism, "The Filipino is still an animist at heart." According to Maggay (1999:14): "the liturgical synthesis between Catholicism and the indigenous consciousness was unaccompanied by shifts in religious paradigm. The indigenous mind, for the most part, simply assimilated the new elements within its own system."

This assimilation however, is selective. The Filipinos' inability to sharply distinguish between the elements of folk practices and formal Roman Catholic practices means that one cannot polarize these concepts as sacred and profane (Teloron 1972:134-135). Folk practices are adapted and modified according to what the average Catholic feels that he needs which suggests that these practices are anthropocentric rather than theocentric.

In order to make the the gospel understandable to the Filipino, these folk practices must be comprehended so that it can be communicated within their worldview. Since cosmology is an important part of worldview, the supernatural beings that make up that cosmology and how they interact with human beings must be understood.

Cosmology

Agaton Pal (1956:450-451), although his research on a rural Leyte community is dated, provides a useful, four tiered framework for conceptualizing the Filipino view of the spirit world. However, in the daily life of the average Filipino, these distinctions are often fuzzy or non-existent.

God

God, who created the world but is aloof and usually approached through a mediator, occupies the top tier. In many respects, the Filipino view of the spirit world is similar to the biblical view in that God alone is powerful and has no equal.

Benigno Beltran (1987:234) claims that Filipinos perceive God as merciful and feel that he is approachable but, for functional reasons, they defer to the Virgin Mary and the saints, reflecting the cultural norm that Filipinos with lower socioeconomic status use mediators to approach those of high status.

Looking closer, however, their view of God does not meet the biblical standard. Filipinos believe that the saints and other spirits work for God because, apparently, God needs help and may not have total control of the spirits, who require appeasement through sacrifice. God is therefore not perceived as being all powerful, although he is certainly more powerful than the rest. A major issue for the Filipinos is God's providence. Does he control the universe and the spirits that inhabit it? If so, does he do it alone? The complete answer to this question is well beyond the scope of this essay and will be confined here to the issue of healing.

Mary and the Catholic Saints

The second tier in Filipino cosmology consists of the Catholic patron saints who intercede before God on behalf of the people for the supply the people's felt needs. The Virgin Mary, though not mentioned by Pal, should also be placed here. She is widely considered to be the mother of all lowland, Catholic Filipinos and is believed to be more powerful than any spirit being except God himself. It would be difficult to overstate her role in the lives of the Filipino people. Both Mary and the saints are believed to control the weather, protect local communities from calamity, heal and help in many other ways. All town fiestas,

along with the religious processions and special masses that normally accompany them, are in honor of the saints, not God. As I will argue later, the Bible assigns these roles to God alone. If Mary and the saints are not who they claim to be, then their true identity must be unmasked, which will also be done in due course.

Other Spirits

Filipino cosmology's third tier is what may be referred to as this worldly spirit beings, of which there are legions, meaning that they are more likely to be involved in the affairs of people. Some spirits are considered always good and some are always evil, but the majority could be either, depending on the situation and whether or not they have been appeased through sacrifice.

Filipinos distinguish between demons and other spirits solely on the basis of what they do. Leonardo Mercado (1994:112) says that "the belief in good and bad spirits seems to reflect a dualistic paradigm of good and evil." If the spirit does something good, such as healing, it is assumed to be working for God. If a spirit inflicts someone with illness or even death, it is believed to be evil.

In one situation that I witnessed, a spiritist became possessed for a healing session.² When I asked another spiritist standing nearby what spirit had taken possession of her I was told that it was either the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Saint Peter, or the spirit of a local saint, and that this would not be revealed until the end of the session. When I asked whether or not the spirit might lie about its identity, my informant was adamant that it would tell the truth. But as long as the spirit brings healing to the sick, its actual identity is irrelevant to the Filipino.

In the Bible, two classes of spirit beings are identified, angels and demons, with Satan as the prince of the demons. The Scriptural basis of judgment as to whether spirits are good or not is their source, not their activities (cf. Lk. 11:14-28).

²Let me be quick to add that we only attended these sessions because the Lord has specifically led me to do this research for my masters thesis and assured my team and I that we were under a season of protection. During this season we requested a received a prayer covering from our supporters. I do not recommend doing this type of research without a specific word from the Lord. When I began to build on this research for my doctoral dissertation, the Spirit of the Lord made it clear that we did not have divine approval to do it again.

The Ancestors (*Anitos*)

The fourth tier are the *anitos*, the spirits of the ancestors, who are believed to live in unplowed fields and who must be appeased and coerced into leaving before any crops can be planted. Filipinos believe that they can either bless or curse the living. These are venerated on All-Saints Day, a national holiday where Filipinos flock to the cemeteries to leave food and lit candles on their graves, believing that the *anitos* return to earth and visit the graves on that day. The difference between these and the other classes of spirits is that the *anitos*, like the Virgin Mary and the saints, were once human, yet, because they have not been canonized by the Catholic Church, cannot be considered as saints.

Witchdoctors and Their Roles

Witchdoctors are believed to stand between the spirit world and the realm of humans. They can be described in two broad categories: herbalists and spiritists, known in Tagalog as *albularyo*, and *espiritista* respectively. Both are deeply connected to the spirit world through witchcraft and divination. However, there are a couple of notable differences. The herbalist, as the name implies, use herbs to bring healing while spiritists do not. Also, many spiritists testified to actually becoming possessed by a spirit, who performs the healing arts using the body and mouth of the spiritists, while this is not true of the herbalists. While we correctly state that these spirits are demons, the spiritists themselves do not, genuinely believing, in many cases, that the spirits are from God.

Theological Issues Related to the Religious Practitioners

Several worldview issues related to the religious practitioners were uncovered that must be analyzed in the light of biblical revelation. Here, however, our focus is limited to healing.

Spirit Possession or Altered States of Consciousness (ASC)

While doing the field work for my masters thesis research, several spiritists spoke of going into an altered state of consciousness (ASC) where they would become spirit possessed. On two separate occasions, my assistants and I were able to observe this phenomenon. Some

spiritists perform what I call physic surgery where they are actually able to put their hands inside a person's body and perform healing without the benefit of any medical instrument and without leaving a scar. This can only be done when a spirit has possessed a spiritist for that purpose.

Leonardo Mercado (1992:110) adds that after the medium returns to a normal state of consciousness, he or she cannot remember what they said or did while they were in the ASC, thus differing from the biblical prophets (i.e. Daniel, Ezekiel and John the Revelator) who always remembered what had happened, what the Lord had shown them or the message that they had been given. The same is true when the Holy Spirit came upon believers on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. All of this raises issues related to contextual theology that go far beyond the purposes of this paper.³ Where these spirits come from and who they work for are critical questions that must be raised and answered.

Supernatural Power

The most important issue in animism is supernatural power. Many of the spiritists who were interviewed in my thesis research indicated that the supernatural entity who called them, normally through a trance, dream or other esoteric experience, is also the one who empowers them for service. They maintain their power through rites, rituals and amulets. Many of them renew their powers annually by going to a mountain on Good Friday to practice their secret arts. That they can bring healing is too well documented and too widely believed to doubt, although the healings are not always permanent. If they can heal, where does this healing come from? From God? Is it demonic? Fortunately, the Scriptures have a great deal to say about these issues (Van Rheenen 1991:99).

Healing

The field research for my doctoral dissertation was conducted among two sample groups, the General Waray Population (GWP) of Leyte and Samar and the pastors, members and adherents (sympathizers in the Philippines) of the Assemblies of God (AG)

³For example, how would new Filipino believers understand the command to “be filled with the Spirit?” (Ephesians 5:18).

among the Waray. Respondents in both of these groups were chosen by random selection.

What Filipinos Believe About Who Can Heal

Their responses to the question of who can heal give some excellent insight into their worldview.

Table 1
WHO CAN HEAL PEOPLE?

	GWP (460 Resp)		AG (492 Resp)	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
1. A witchdoctor?	403 (87.6%)	57 (12.4%)	127 (25.9%)	363 (74.1%)
2. God or Jesus?	448 (97.4%)	12 (2.6%)	490 (99.6%)	2 (.4%)
3. A sorcerer?	141 (30.9%)	316 (69.1%)	45 (9.2%)	445 (90.8%)
4. A medical doctor?	453 (98.7%)	6 (1.3%)	473 (96.5%)	17 (3.5%)
5. The Santo Niño?	383 (83.4%)	76 (16.6%)	41 (8.4%)	450 (91.6%)
6. Other Saints?	380 (83%)	78 (17%)	41 (8.3%)	451 (91.7%)
7. The Virgin Mary?	382 (83.4%)	76 (16.6%)	51 (10.4%)	441 (89.6%)

Perhaps the differences in the worldview of these two groups are no more apparent than in their views of healing. Chi-square analysis, a statistical tool designed to compare similar sample populations, was used to determine whether the differences between the two groups was statistically significant. There were significant differences between the two groups on questions, one ($\chi^2=366.24$, $p < .001$), two ($\chi^2=7.86$, $p < .01$), three ($\chi^2=70.25$, $p < .001$), four ($\chi^2=4.64$, $p < .05$), five ($\chi^2=541.06$, $p < .001$), six ($\chi^2=535.24$, $p < .001$) and seven ($\chi^2=509.87$, $p < .001$), respectively.

To begin with, the vast majority of the GWP believe that witchdoctors can bring healing, while only about twenty-five percent of the AG people agree, signifying a great difference of opinion on this issue. In Filipino society, to say that one believes that the witchdoctor can bring healing normally means that one would go to a witchdoctor if

one became ill, which may explain the relatively low score in the Assemblies of God population.

Both groups exhibited a strong confidence in the power of God to heal. But does only God do this? About eighty-three percent of the GWP believe that healing can also be done by the Virgin Mary, the Santo Niño or the saints. A small percentage of the AG people agreed with them. This means that they do not see much difference between these spirit beings, and, as long as one gets healed, the identity of the supernatural entity is irrelevant. Additionally, both populations know that doctors can heal but often cannot afford to go to them.

The witchdoctor is believed to be able to harness these spiritual forces in order to gain healing for mankind through their rites, rituals, and incantations. On the other hand, the vast majority of the AG population rejects both the help of the witchdoctor and the power of the other spirits, believing that God alone heals.

What the Bible Teaches About Healing

The rites and rituals practiced by the witchdoctors clearly reveal their connection to occultic powers (I Ki 18:19-26). If their power is not from God, what is its source? Jaime Galvez-Tan, a Filipino medical doctor states (1977:19) that about seventy percent of the illnesses treated by witchdoctors are illnesses from which people would normally eventually recover from anyway, even if they were not treated. Also, some herbs used have real medicinal properties that actually bring relief. But all of this does not answer the question in every case.⁴ By what power, then, does the witchdoctor heal?

Since the witch doctors are not serving the one true God, the spirits with which they are in contact are demons (Deut. 32:17; cf. I Cor. 19:19-20). Can the powers of darkness heal? If so, what might be the devil's motive for healing?

In Exodus 7:8-24, the magicians in Pharaoh's court did imitate two of the miracles that were performed by God through Moses and Aaron. In Deuteronomy 13:1-3, Moses warns against following false prophets who are capable of doing signs and wonders. While healing is not mentioned here, the ability of the powers of darkness to do miracles, albeit with the intent to deceive, is real.

⁴For documented cases of healing through witchdoctors in the Philippines, the reader is referred to Jaime Licaucó's book *The Magicians of God*, (1982) although the book itself is deeply occultic and one should earnestly seek God's direction prior to reading it.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (cf. Rev. 13:12; 16:13-14), Paul ascribes to the Anti-Christ the power to do miracles. The Revelation passages reveal that the Beast was healed of a fatal wound. While it does not say conclusively that this was a miracle, that the second passage says that the Beast was given power to do signs and wonders certainly implies it. Gordon Wright (1984:19) regards these miracles and signs and wonders as counterfeit, and he is right in the sense that they are not performed by God. There is no reason to suggest, however, that the miracles themselves are not real.

In looking at these verses, the possibility that the powers of darkness can heal cannot be denied. What is also clear is that the miracles are intended to deceive people into following Satan rather than God.

Does God heal? If so, why? In the Old Testament, the issue of healing begins with Exodus 15:26, where God states that Israel will be spared the plagues visited upon the Egyptians if they will obey him. Michael Brown (1995:237) notes that the Mesopotamian region at the time was full of healing deities. He adds (1995:238):

In the ancient Near Eastern world, what distinguished the belief in Yahweh as Healer from the other purported healing deities was the OT's staunch monotheism. . . . emphasizing clearly that it was one God who both smote and healed, and he was anything but cavalier in his actions. Worship of any other so called god was not only forbidden, it was absolutely unnecessary. The Lord alone was sufficient. In fact, when Moses declared to this people that the Lord would be Israel's Healer [Exo. 15:26], he was not primarily turning his people away from human, medical help. . . . Rather he was cautioning them against looking to any other god for aid.

Only a few healings are mentioned in the Old Testament (i.e. 2 Kg. 5:3-14; 2 Kg. 20:1-7). By contrast, the New Testament records such occasions, the ministry of Jesus being replete with them. Michael Brown (1995:227) adds that Jesus' healing ministry was closely linked to the ministry of healing people from illnesses related to Satanic power and deliverance from demons (i.e. Lk. 13:10-17).

But why did Jesus heal? Matthew 9:35-38, for example, reveal that Jesus was motivated by love and compassion to respond to human need. But there is more. Colin Brown (1986:373) notes that the miracles of Jesus cannot be detached from His teaching or the course of

his ministry. Michael Brown (1995:225) adds that miracles validated Jesus' ministry:

[This] was in keeping with the pattern of miraculous confirmation found throughout the OT. In spite of the possibility of counterfeit signs, wonders, and miracles. . . . God backed up his servants with demonstrations of his power, thus attesting to the truthfulness of their missions and calling (e.g., Ex 4:1-9, 29-31; Nu 16:28-35; IKi 18:36-39), and at the same time, triumphing over idolatrous and counterfeit powers (e.g., Ex. 8:16-19).

Following his line of thinking, miracles are used to attest to the reality that God is the all-powerful, one and only God that he claims to be. The others are exposed as imposters and frauds.

In Matthew 10:5-8, healing is one of the signs mentioned as heralding the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Jesus called his disciples together and, in sending them out for ministry, told them to announce the arrival of the kingdom of heaven and to cast out demons and heal the sick and even raise the dead. It can be stated, then, that one of the purposes of divine healing is to reveal the power of God over sin and its results.

The purpose of healing may also be seen in an eschatological sense. Michael Brown (1995:218) notes that "the ministry of Jesus and his followers was a ministry of restoration and emancipation, to culminate ultimately in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Ro 8:19-23; 2 Co 5:1-5; Rev. 21:4; see Ac 3:19-21)." In divine healing, there is a sense of hope that the day will come when sin, sickness and evil will be no more!

The impartation of authority to the apostles in Matthew 10:1 has never been revoked. Healing is part of the ongoing ministry of the church. Donald Stamps (1991:1420) notes that:

After Pentecost, the early church carried on Jesus' healing ministry as part of preaching the gospel (Acts 3:1-10; 4:30; 5:16; 8:7; 9:34; 14:8-10; 19:11-12; cf. Mk 16:18; 1Co 12:9, 28, 30; Jas 5:14-16). The NT records three ways that God's healing power and faith were imparted through the church: (a) the laying on of hands (Mk 16:15-18; Ac 9:17), (b) confession of known sin, followed by anointing the sick with oil and the

prayer of faith (Jas 5:14-16), and (c) spiritual gifts of healings given to the church (1Co 12:9).

If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, then there is every reason to believe that God still heals today.

Implications for Discipleship

In looking back at Table One on page nine, a number of AG respondents indicated a belief that witchdoctors could heal people. In the dissertation, I manipulated the data again and discovered that the majority of these who held these believers were adherents, not members. Adherents are generally new believers who are attending evangelistic Bible studies. Throughout the research process their scores were consistently closer to the scores of the general population than that of the AG members, which is understandable given the newness of their faith. The scores, however, are different enough to suggest that a real paradigm shift in their thinking is taking place and that they are moving in the direction of a biblical worldview.

We also administered a second questionnaire to the AG population alone. One of the questions asked how many of them went to a witchdoctor before they came to know Christ and how many of them still go now that they know the Lord. Their responses were telling. Before they came to Christ, fifty-six point three percent went but only six point three percent continue to do so (Johnson 2013:173). This reveals that a radical paradigm shift has taken place in their worldview and suggests that the AG pastors have done a good job in discipling their people.

In the second questionnaire, the respondents were also asked what the key elements were in their coming to Christ.

Table 2
Key Elements in Conversion

Key Elements	YES	NO
Someone shared the gospel with you individually	397 (83.4%)	79 (16.6%)
You received Christ when you heard a sermon or attended a Bible study	431 (90.2%)	47 (9.8%)
You were healed	311 (65.8%)	162 (34.2%)
You were delivered from a demon	193 (40.4%)	295 (59.2%)
You experienced some other kind of miracle	321 (67.3%)	156 (32.7%)
Some demonstrated the love of God to you by helping you in practical ways	394 (83.5%)	78 (16.5%)

In analyzing the responses here, it must be considered that all of the 477 respondents gave more than one answer to this question, suggesting, perhaps, that they see salvation as a process more than as a single event.

The data reveals the need for a three point model of discipleship that focuses on power encounter through miracles, truth encounter through confrontation between the word of God and the Filipino's animistic worldview and a love encounter with God and his people for which animism provides no answer. Since Filipinos have a holistic view of life, every aspect of this model must be in operation in our local churches. A full description of this model and how the various points interact with each other is well beyond the limits of this article but power, truth and love encounters and are necessary to bring permanent change at the worldview level. This will not happen overnight. Biblical discipleship is a life-long process of discovering who God is and who we can become and must be thorough, requiring time, love and patience.

The application of this model, however, will not bring permanent change unless there is one more encounter—an allegiance encounter. The core issue of Christianity is allegiance. De Mesa (1987:192) states that allegiance to God must result in total transformation and that to hold back in any area is to short circuit the process. The Scriptures are clear that God demands total allegiance, whether he heals or not, and will tolerate no rivals (i.e. Exo. 20:4-6; Lk 14:25,26; Jn 14:6).

The good news is that no other gods are needed. All that we need can be found in Him. Not only is he our healer, he alone controls the

weather and he is absolute Lord of the spirits (Gen. 1-3; Phil. 2:9-10). While more elucidation is necessary to bring this out more fully, all of the Filipinos' felt needs, which are currently addressed through Catholic images and animistic practices, can be met through a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ, which is what appears to be happening among the AG population that was surveyed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the issues for Christian discipleship as it relates to healing in the animistic context of the lowland Philippines. A brief contour of an animistic worldview formed the backdrop of the study, which was also informed by actual field research. The answers to the questions as to whether God and witchdoctors can heal and what the source of their power is have been dealt with, as well as the need to answer God's call to give our allegiance to him whether he heals or not. Since God is all that the Bible says he is and to him alone is our worship, honor and allegiance due, the words of the apostle Paul provide a fitting conclusion to this study:

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him [Jesus] and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11 NKJV).

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