

A RESPONSE TO ANTOON POSTMA'S PAPER

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As I went through the pages of the paper, I cannot help but feel a debt of gratitude for having been privileged to read its content. It is, indeed, worthy of thanksgiving that we have in our midst Antoon Postma whose dedication to the study of Hanunoo-Mangyan culture has given us an access to the rich and thought provoking material and data.

Let me begin my response to the paper by focussing on a particular issue which to my mind is significant enough to merit immediate attention. To a predominantly Christian country such as the Philippines, there abound enormous amount of indigenous material for theologizing. Each tribal group treasures beliefs, rituals and concepts that are not only unique but theologically provoking to discuss as well. On the one hand, there are those sources of information for indigenisation, inculturation and other terminologies whose primary objective is the use of native resources in the formulation of living theology. On the other hand, others are rather skeptical because they perceive in these type of data elements of paganism, of superstitions which will only lead us astray in our search for authentic faith.

Antoon Postma mentioned in his paper a yearly report written in 1634 by the Jesuits to their General in Rome. The report included an account of how missionaries told the Mangyans to burn down a small hut believed to be the habitation of a company of spirits who were recognized by the latter as guardians of the rice fields. The report did not state the reason for doing so. Evidently such belief was considered by the missionaries to be inimical to the Christian faith.

One likely cause of such negative attitude is the reading of the Old Testament. As Christians, we look at the canonical books of O.T. as sources of the word of God. The God we read about there is one. Calling this God, Yahweh the Israelites considered other

gods as no god at all but idols. The prophets, particularly those who prophesied in 8th century B.C. were very strong in their condemnation of the other gods. Amos 5:26 reads:

You shall take up Lakkuth your king and Kaiwan your star-god, your images which you made for yourselves, therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord.

Lakkuth and Kaiwan were Assyrian deities with which the Israelites came into contact after they settled in the land of Canaan. In the book of Amos, they were condemned as false gods. At best they were images made by human hands. Of particular interest to us who are now focussing our attention to Antoon Postma's paper is Jeremiah 2:26-28, The RSC reads thus:

As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed; they, their kings, their princes, their priests and their prophets, who say to a tree, "You are my father, and to a stone, "You gave me birth! For they have turned their back to me, and not their face. But in times of their trouble they say "Arise and save us! But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you in your time of trouble; for as many are your cities are your gods, O Judah."

Here the kings, the princes and the priests are judged to have committed shameful acts: the worship of trees and of stone. Instead of turning to Yahweh for help they addressed the tree as father and the stone as the one who gave them birth, Nena the creator. In the book of Jeremiah, such worship was judged to be useless. It cannot help them nor save them in time of trouble. Only Yahweh, the monotheistic God can.

As we turn to Antoon Postma's paper, our attention is necessarily drawn to the mention of stone as residence of spirit. The *pamara*-spirit, for example, is perceived by the Mangyans to reside in a special stone called *bugso* or *mutya*. This spirit is believed to have the ability to remove obstacles that the evil spirit (*labang*) has planted in the human body. The stone is rubbed over the painful spot. Afterwards blood is poured over it as the shaman prays for deliverance from the illness.

To us who profess ourselves Christians and who look at the Old Testament as part and parcel of God's revelation, it is not easy to ignore the prophetic condemnation of the worship of trees and stones. And yet the beliefs, practices and rituals that we encounter among tribal Filipinos involve elements that are similar to those that were attacked and rejected by the prophets.

As already mentioned, stones are believed to be abodes of spirits, water sources are owned and inhabited by spirits to whom offerings of food are ritually made to activate their function. Of course, one can always insist that these tribal beliefs are unique in themselves. As such, it's unfair to compare them or to liken them with those we find in the Old Testament. Their uniqueness cannot be questioned. As indigenous expressions, they necessarily contain their own peculiarities and idiosyncracies. But the point is that viewed from the angle of Christian interpretation or perspective, the two are likely to be seen with bias and prejudice that result from our reading of prophetic condemnation.

This prejudice is, I think, a major stumbling block in our effort to discover the role of tribal experiences in the construction of Filipino living theology. To eliminate such a stumbling block, the first step is to expose it as it is, that is to say, to recognize its prejudicial character. As we examine, for example, those passages in the Old Testament, that were not influenced by those who were responsible for prophetic writings, we can cite instances where other gods were mentioned, believed and embraced by the patriarchs. El Bethel (God of Bethel), El Elyon (God Most High), El Olam (Everlasting God), El Roi (God of Seeing) and El Shaddai. We do not know much about these gods but we are aware that El was the supreme father-God of the Canaanite pantheon. Here we find an instance where the patriarchs adopted for their own use an existing belief of God by the Canaanites. In other words, there was a recognition prior to the coming of the prophetic writers of other gods. As the early Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, they borrowed the Canaanite nation of God and appropriated it to their own religion.

This contact point with Canaanite religion was ignored by the prophets. Without explaining to their audience the mythological background and the other aspects of the belief they attacked and

condemned, they drew attention to its idolatrous character. Again and again they declared that the baals were false gods, their images were made by hands and they could not really help human beings. But they never went into any kind of in-depth analysis or explanation as to why such belief was embraced and perpetuated by the Canaanites. They never explained the rationale for their objections and in the process denied their readers or audience an opportunity to learn something about the beliefs under attack.

As we turn to Antoon Postma's paper, Christians should be warned to avoid falling into the same trap present in the Old Testament. Instead of outright rejection, we shall assume the posture of open-mindedness, a pre-requisite for fruitful dialogue. One inescapable observation that can be made about the paper is a particular view of man. As we read through the description of rituals, the different spirits that inhabit the stones, watersources and rivers and what they can do, we can discern an understanding of man as a needy being.

The first need that comes time and again as the object of ritual to satisfy is healing. The *daniw*, a spirit familiar has the function — of healing the sick. It drives the *labang* away so that the soul of the sick could return to the body and thus restore it to health. The *Pagawa*, a spirit possessor protects the shaman and his family against sickness. It is interesting that the Mangyan's conception of life after death, when the soul gets to *karadwahan*, includes the absence of sickness. What we Christians consider heaven or eternal life is defined by the Mangyan in terms of health.

Man's creatureliness, his limitation is most acutely felt in time of sickness. This is the moment when help is really needed, when salvation is defined. Salvation as read in the Old Testament is pictured in terms of human oppression. The Hebrews were oppressed by the Egyptians, man doing inhumanity to man. Salvation comes when Yahweh, the God intervenes by sending Moses to liberate the Hebrews from oppression.

But in the Mangyan's experience salvation is described not in terms of man's inhumanity to man but in terms of the spirits' inhumanity to man. Ultimately, the cause of Mangyan's suffering is the evil spirit called *labang*. It is the cause of serious sickness

and of death. Minor illness does not bother the Mangyan very much because it can be cured by medicinal plants. Here we can see that for the Mangyan, the environment is a source of help. It provides them the medicine to cure minor illness. The environment for them is like one huge pharmacy, or drug store. The only difference is that while medicine in drugstores is expensive, the environment gives it to them for free. I do not know how the Mangyan express the sense of gratitude and the feeling of respect for the sources of help the environment provides them.

But the attribution of the source of human suffering to the evil spirit rather than to fellow human beings is worth considering. To the Mangyan, poor harvest, the coming of destructive typhoons, the drying up of rivers and other water sources, all of which cause suffering to them are to be attributed to the workings of the evil spirit. Even wicked human beings who committed serious crimes and all sorts of sin have souls that turn into *labang* when they died. Pursued to its logical conclusion, this would mean that human beings or the Mangyan have very little responsibility if there is any, to what is going on around us. The heinous crimes that Hitler committed against the Jews, the killing of the Christians by Emperor Nero of Rome were really not their own doing but the doing of the *labang* whose field of expertise has to do with these crimes. Human responsibility as understood by the Mangyan lies in the correct performance of rituals, in the faithful adherence to the traditional procedure of offering to ensure the cooperation of the spirits. But insofar as the final outcome and consequence are concerned, man has very little role to play.

DISCUSSION OF ANTOON POSTMA'S PAPER

As in "The Mamanua" by Dr. Maceda, the belief system of the Hanunuo Mangyan was again taken to task on the following issues:

- a. The attribution of the source of human suffering to evil spirits appears to relieve man of responsibility.
- b. Human responsibility as understood by the Mangyan lies in the correct performance of rituals, in the faithful adherence to the ceremonial procedures to ensure the cooperation of the spirits.
- c. To what extent is man responsible for his actions?

Dr. Postma explained that not everything evil or bad is blamed on spirits. Human beings have a share in the responsibility for wrongdoings committed to one another and are answerable for the state of things in this world. When one Mangyan wrongs another, they also heap curses on each other just like other people. Mangyans have their own customary laws and when someone is accused of *ni-rian*, the accused has the right to prove himself innocent by requesting the elders to form a council of "judges" who will investigate the case and provide judgment. As regard natural calamities such as floods whose immediate cause could be attributed to man's abuse of nature e.g. illegal logging, the Mangyan say that when the taboo against certain vines like the *balete* is violated, floods will occur. In this case, the flood is the direct consequence of a human action - cutting a *balete* vine.

The symbolism of the stone as a metaphor for a sick (i.e. spiritless or dispirited) person pertains to the ecosystem of the spirit. When the blood of the chicken signifying life is poured on a stone or a sick person, it is to bring life or the spirit back to where it is absent or wanting. Thus even an inanimate object like the stone comes to life, i.e. becomes the seat of the spirit or in the case of the sick person the pouring of blood brings back life and resuscitation.

Modern day Christians have made a mistake of denying the spirits, which value is found in non-biblical revelations. Non-biblical revelation is not only a revelation from God, but a revelation of what is existing. On the other hand, biblical revelation looks to the Judeo-Christian experience for contextualization. However, biblical writers appropriated or adapted historical elements of ancient history to give it meaning from the perspective of salvation history. Thus, the sacred places, which were ancient residences of older gods or deities when adapted into the history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, became "points of itinerary towards the sacred land."