

Establishing “Mordor” in God’s Creation: Natural Disasters, Barth’s “Lordless Powers,” and Filipino Indigenous Beliefs¹

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Introduction

From power outages to strong winds, heavy rains, landslides, floods, and more, it is no exaggeration to say that the Philippines is plagued by yearly disasters. Filipina psychologist Violeta Villaroman-Bautista narrates the experience of a fifteen-year-old survivor of a landslide: “I felt it was the end of the world. I was crying, in shock— Saying let it not be the end of the world. I still have my dreams . . .”² A lot of complex factors contribute to these unfortunate events, and I do not claim to be an expert on the ecological condition of the country. Nonetheless, theology is a response to God’s triune communicative act³ that necessitates an engagement with the ephemerality and finitude of this world. I bring Karl Barth (1886-1968) as an interlocutor as I reflect on natural disasters, particularly in my context in the Philippines.

In this essay, I argue that Barth’s concepts of “lordless powers” can contribute to Christian reflection and praxis concerning natural disasters and environmental care. In a country that suffers greatly from natural calamities, it is inevitable to conclude that these disasters are a bane of our existence. However, by bringing Barth’s “lordless powers” to bear, I challenge the concept that environmental disasters are absolutely “natural” evil. In this work, I use Mordor as a metaphor for humans’ destruction of nature in the name of progress, or to show how we “murder” the environment for the sake of “progress” seen in machines and other technology.⁴ I use this metaphor to connote how we continue to desire sophisticated technology and machine advancement

¹I want to thank my superiors in the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, Dr. Bruce Barron and Rei Crizaldo, for critiquing the earlier draft of this manuscript. I also prefer to use the first-person pronoun in this article to appreciate my situatedness in this manuscript. The claim of “full objectivity” in writing is a modern epistemology, which I do not embrace.

²Violeta Villaroman-Bautista, “Spirituality and Resilience in Disaster Situations: Sources of Life and Strength in Critical Times,” in *Walking with God: Christian Spirituality in the Asian Context*, ed. Charles R. Ringma and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Manila: OMF Literature Inc., 2014), 168.

³See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 74-85.

⁴According to Michael N. Stanton, Mordor may have derived from the word “morthor,” which is “murder” in old English. That word is always associated with negative labels such as morbid or Modred in the Arthurian legend. Michael N. Stanton, *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards: Exploring the Wonders and Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Palgrave, 2021), 20.

at the expense of natural habitat,⁵ but I do not claim that human activity somehow causes typhoons and earthquakes. First, I will demonstrate that natural disasters are connected to the “lordless powers” within us. Second, I will then argue for a recovery of eco-theology that posits the world as sacred and nature as an integral part of our existence. Third, I will assert that drawing on the ancient wisdom of the Filipino worldview helps in the recovery of eco-theology.

Bringing Barth into this issue does not mean he is the point of reference. I have learned from him that engaging with the spirit of our time and the pressing issues of our cultures is possible because God, in his freedom, has given his “Yes” to humanity. And his full engagement with human beings is rooted in the election of Jesus Christ.⁶ I use Barth’s *The Christian Life*⁷ to glance at his perspective of “lordless powers” while conversing with some Asian theologians and Filipino literature.

Is “Natural” Evil a Bane of Humans’ Existence?

Natural disasters are ubiquitous in Asia, and “[s]ixty percent of the major natural disasters reported in the world occur in this region.”⁸ From super typhoons to volcanic eruptions to earthquakes to tsunamis, these have caused enormous loss of life.⁹ In 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami killed thousands of people in India, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other countries. In 2009, earthquakes occurred in Sichuan province; a year later, another earth tremor transpired in southern Qinghai in China.¹⁰ This year, Turkey and Syria suffered deadly earthquakes.¹¹ The Philippines has had its share of such unfortunate events. On November 7-8, 2013, Yolanda (Haiyan internationally), one of the strongest typhoons, hit the country, especially the

⁵I do not claim that taking care of the environment opposes progress. Humanity’s well-being, however, should not only focus on consumerism and individualism but also on the welfare of the planet. See Rei Crizaldo, “Biblical and Theological Response: Our Beautiful Dwelling Place,” in *God’s Heart for Children: Practical Theology from Global Perspectives*, ed. Rosalind Tan, Nativity A. Petallar, and Lucy A. Hefford (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2022), 238.

⁶Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume II, part 2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 33, 163. For an exhaustive account of Barth’s life, scholars draw on this indispensable writing: Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans., John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), <https://archive.org/details/karlb Barthhislife0000busc/page/n9/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁷Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

⁸Ian Davis and Satyendra P. Gupta, “Technical Background Paper,” *Disaster Mitigation in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1991), 25.

⁹Terence E. Fretheim, “The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters,” in *Why, O God: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Mandaluyong, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2017), 9.

¹⁰Hyung-Won Lee, “Biblical Understanding of Natural Disasters and Applications for the Christian Ministry,” *Torch Trinity Journal* 14, no. 1 (2011): 38.

¹¹UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency)/ Asia Pacific, February 7, 2023, “UNHCR responds to deadly earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria,” <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2023/2/63e225324/unhcr-responds-deadly-earthquakes-turkiye-syria.html>.

central Visayas, resulting in the death of thousands of people.¹² Yearly, at least twenty typhoons pass through the country.¹³ With such a geographical condition, I suspect that Filipinos perceive natural disasters as part of their lives.

According to Filipino theologian Rodrigo Tano, nature is not self-ordered or autonomous from the Creator. Its sustenance is upheld by a sovereign God. Nonetheless, nature could be hostile and brutal to human beings.¹⁴ Tano's explanation tells us that although God sustains creation, nature can be unfriendly to humanity. Although he did not elaborate on his assertion, one may learn from Rabbi Harold Kushner's observation that these catastrophes happen at random. For example, if there is a movement of tectonic plates, an earthquake happens. And when it occurs in an inhabited place, people are miserable.¹⁵ Thus, taking life and destroying property is evil since these tragedies could hinder people from believing in God's omnipotence and omnipresence. But I do not mean that it is evil for people to question God.

Natural evil refers to disasters that are not caused by moral agents. These include hurricanes, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, and other environmental disasters. Hugh Silvester divides natural evil into two groups: catastrophic events and human disabilities (including animal pain).¹⁶ Generally, theologians and philosophers recognize two types of evil: moral and natural. On one hand, moral evil, such as crimes, social struggles, racism, and injustice, has human perpetrators. Glaring examples are the holocaust and the killing of thousands of Khmer people by Pol Pot in Cambodia. On the other hand, natural evil is not directly associated with human free will. For example, the free will defense cannot explain why tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and typhoons kill innocent people. It cannot give a sufficient justification for how innocent children are born with disabilities. However, Norman Geisler categorizes evil into three kinds: metaphysical, moral, and physical. Moral evil relates to murder, theft, and other crimes. Metaphysical evil comprises

¹²DJ Yap and Nikko Dizon, November 11, 2013, "Worst disaster to hit PH: Thousands feared dead amid looting," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/524763/worst-disaster-to-hit-ph>.

¹³GOVPH, 23, 2023, "Tropical Cyclone Information," <https://bagong.pagasa.dost.gov.ph/climate/tropical-cyclone-information>. See also Federico G. Villanueva, "My God, Why? Natural Disasters and Lament in the Philippine Context," in *Why, O God: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God* (Mandaluyong, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2017), 87.

¹⁴Rodrigo Tano, *This Complicated and Risky Task: Selected Essays on Doing Contextual Theology from a Filipino Evangelical Perspective*, ed. Romel Regalado Bagares (Quezon City, Philippines: Central books, 2006), 30-31.

¹⁵Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), 52. Christopher Southgate promotes another belief which is evolutionary theodicy. First, he affirms the goodness of creation, but it is not yet finished. Second, creation is in the process of evolution as God uses this process to beautify and diversify his handiwork. Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 16.

¹⁶Hugh Silvester, *Arguing with God: The Problem of Evil* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 29.

physical disabilities, especially inborn “diseases.” Physical evil is synonymous with natural evil.¹⁷

There is a theory that these natural disasters come from God to punish the wicked. This idea is closely related to the belief that ecological disaster exists due to the Fall. Since humanity’s first parents (Adam and Eve) have sinned against God, their progeny inherited sin and were thus inclined to rebel against their Creator.¹⁸ In his article, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering,” Alfredo Saure, uses the term retributive or punitive. Though this is not his theological position, he mentions that this is one of the solutions evangelicals have presented. This punitive theory can be a disciplinarian perspective where one experiences suffering for correction. Therefore, environmental catastrophes are tools to rebuke human rebellion. Such is a common belief among Filipinos.¹⁹ It can also be probationary, where one’s faith is tested through suffering and endurance. Or it may be perceived as revelational, substitutionary, and testimonial.²⁰

Natural evil is no respecter of human status. The recurring tsunamis, earthquakes, super typhoons, and the like may imply that God has forgotten his creation. Centuries ago, Job, who was labeled righteous in the Old Testament, was not exempted from the sting of ecological calamities and other catastrophes. These unfortunate events led him to utter, “Do not condemn me, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?” (Job 10:2-3). Conundrums such as the presence of “natural” evil and the existence of a good God are deemed incompatible.²¹

Although these catastrophes are seen as evil since they seem to exist as slayers of life, we should be careful to conclude rashly that these calamities are God’s undertakers.

¹⁷Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 349.

¹⁸This posit that natural disaster is a direct result of sin (Genesis 3; Romans 8), and as a ramification, humans deserve death (Romans 5:12 and 6:23). While creation was created with no defect, the present perils and the untamed nature are punishment, which humans have brought to themselves. Donald Borchert, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2006), 475.

¹⁹Alfredo G. Saure, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering,” *Philippine Journal of Religious Studies* 2, (1996): 73-74. Interestingly, even some Western evangelicals believe that natural disasters can serve as God’s punishment. See Tobin Grant, “Polling Evangelicals: God Causes Disasters, U.S. Should Help Victims,” *Christianity Today*, March 31, 2011, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2011/march/polling-evangelicals-god-causes-disasters-us-should-help.html>.

²⁰See Saure, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering,” 73-74. The punitive theory also exists in some African Worldviews. For example, when lightning kills a person, that individual may have done wicked things. Supposed that person is a good human being, s/he may have done awful actions unknowingly, which causes evil spirits to retaliate. Silvester, *Arguing with God*, 4.

²¹The presence of evil that challenges the goodness and power of God engenders *theodicy*. That term pertains to the defense of God in the midst of the presence of evil. I do not attempt to rehash this discussion since there is a plethora of literature, particularly in the area of apologetics. I also believe that propositions are not enough to explain the ontology of God and understand the presence of environmental catastrophes. As Stanley Grenz opines, “We must make room for the concept of ‘mystery’—not as irrational complement to the rational but a reminder that the fundamental reality of God transcends human rationality.” Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 170.

We can rather see them as part of God's design that has gone wild due to the Fall,²² and aggravated by "lordless powers," which we will discuss later. Though creation has gone wild, God has not left it on its own. For example, "The sea, which was a symbol of chaos in many cultures in ancient Near East, is not destroyed; it is born, and God has a very important role in its birth. God restrains the sea and gives it a place in the created order. Chaos is not eliminated, but confined."²³ Due to our selfishness and false assumption that we are the absolute powers over the environment, we generate disorder in the natural habitat. As Christopher Wright writes, "What's gone wrong? (Why is the world in such a mess?) Answer: Through rebellion and disobedience against our Creator God, we have generated the mess that we now see around us at every level of our lives, relationships and environment."²⁴ Our relationship with the animal kingdom and natural environment is in a mess. The COVID-19 pandemic is further evidence of this. I will explain this further when we get to the discussion of "lordless powers."

Ecological Disasters and "Lordless Powers"

Christians cannot conclude that ecological disasters are the absolute product of the Fall because humans also have some share in destroying the natural environment. Our destruction of the natural habitat is manifested in our abuse of freedom. In our assertion that we are the masters of the universe, "lordless powers" are born. I add that we are establishing a "Mordor" in God's good creation because while we recognize global warming, the spread of deadly diseases, the depletion of the ozone layer, and others as serious problems, Filipino evangelicals are more focused on evangelism. Such is clear in the "escapist mentality wherein hope is pinned on abandoning earth and looking elsewhere to secure humanity's salvation."²⁵ Thus, Barth's view of "lordless powers" is relevant to this discussion. This concept is related to our alienation from the Creator—with the desire to live on our own, rebelling against God's authority, and becoming "lords" of our lives.

Concerning "lordless powers," Barth believes that our rebellion against God results in separation from the Creator and self-alienation. Originally, we belong to God and serve him as our Lord. But following our desires and relying on our powers resulted in denaturalizing our existence, disregarding our bond with others, and disrupting the natural balance of creation. Therefore, we are in love with our powers and abilities.²⁶ Barth thinks that unrighteousness and disorder destroy life and our fellowship with

²²I am referring to Genesis 3.

²³Noli P. Mendoza, "The Voice from the Whirlwind: Creation, Disasters, and Character Transformation in Job 38-41," in *Why, O God: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Mandaluyong, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2017), 59.

²⁴Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 55.

²⁵Crizaldo, "Biblical and Theological Response: Our Beautiful Dwelling Place," 239.

²⁶Barth, *The Christian Life*, 299, 301.

other humans. Our rebellion against God has unleashed desires to idolize our abilities and exalt ourselves. But these desires rebound adversely on us.²⁷ The result of our desire to live autonomously apart from God's lordship leads us to serve ourselves instead of the Creator and our fellow humans. Thus, we do not merely continue to rebel against our God, but we fail to live for the sake of other creatures. However, our capacities and abilities become powers that do not serve and empower us; instead, they become "authorities" that provide false assumptions that we are in charge. In our belief that we are lords, we continue to destroy creation, other people, and even ourselves.²⁸ Enjoying the rapid pace of technological advancement without care for growing things (plants, trees, and living species) shows that we may be increasing our authority over creation, but such power leaves us hungry for more.²⁹ The "lordless powers" within us intensify the groaning of creation, and therefore "nature became frustrated in its purposes and can no longer be all it was created to be."³⁰

Another name for Barth's concept of "lordless powers" is found in the New Testament: Mammon. While the origin of this term is vague and mythological, it pertains to things that people treat as "lords," such as money, material possessions, resources, and others.³¹ This shows our tendency to make anything an idol when we intend to live as the point of reference for everything. When we try to reject God's lordship over our lives, put our identity with our resources, trust our capabilities, and rely on our connections with human authorities, they become "lordless powers." Such is evident in Barth's argument:

Who ensures or guarantees what resources are now in play? His own? Or, apart from him, the power of his resources, the means which is supposed to guarantee and secure his livelihood but which now confronts him with imperious claims in its tendency to become an end, the thing which has accrued to him or been created and won by him, but which now has its own weight, majesty, and worth, the great or little barns, with the great or little that is stored up in them for the future (Lk. 12:16ff.), which profoundly disturb him because they promise, but only promise, that he may be at rest and of good courage? Can he trust their promises? Does he really own what

²⁷Barth, *The Christian Life*, 301.

²⁸Hannah Reichel, "The Political Theology of the Surveillance Society: Lordless Powers, Drones, and the Eye of God," in *Theo-Politics? Conversing with Barth in Western and Asian Contexts*, ed. Markus Höfner (London, UK: Lexington Books, 2022), 169-170. Our rebellion against God begets destruction as Barth comments: "[t]he lordship of these powers, which are all of them no more than exponents of the rebellion that separates man from God, is synonymous with the destruction and ruin of both the individual and society." Barth, *The Christian Life*, 327.

²⁹Joseph Loconte, *A Hobbit, A Wardrobe, and A Great War: How J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-1918* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 7.

³⁰Harry Alan Hahne, "The Whole Creation has been Groaning," Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University (2010): 21, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/106707.pdf>.

³¹Barth, *The Christian Life*, 311.

he has? . . . If his resources are to be faithful to him, to serve him and give him comfort, does he not have to be faithful to them and serve them? When he perceives this and acts accordingly, then in a very harmless form here or in greater measure there they acquire power over him. Mammon, the close relative of Leviathan, is born. It mounts its throne.³²

By emancipating ourselves from God and trusting in our own powers, we live a "lordless life," which results in disorder in our world as seen in creation, politics, and other areas.³³ Barthian theologian Paul Dafydd Jones describes such a condition: "Barth acknowledges that there is a pantheon of hypostasized 'gods' that human beings have generated and sustain, and which corrupt our every thought, word, and deed."³⁴ Thus, our love for human autonomy has backfired against us.

I assert, then, that sin corrupts creation and is worsened by our actions ("lordless powers within us") due to our love of money, power, and possessions, disguised in the name of "progress." Our hunger for domination becomes the bane of creation's existence. For instance, in our desire to become sophisticated, we continue to establish "Mordor" in God's creation. One can see this in J.R.R. Tolkien's work as noted by Joseph Loconte: "Tolkien viewed the overreliance on technology, 'the Machine,' as a step toward dominating others. . . . Hence, the hateful realm of Mordor is sustained by its black engines and factories, which Sauron introduces as his forces invade the Shire."³⁵ Such is not far from reality. For example, climate change and other disasters are worsened by humans. In the Philippines, abusing natural resources such as forests diminishes our protection from strong rains, winds, and waves. Cutting trees and burning the mountains leaves us with no roots to keep the soil in place. As such, we experience flash floods and landslides during typhoons or monsoon rains.³⁶ When people used face masks during the pandemic, a study shows that 1.6 billion of these used masks were found in the ocean, killing marine life.³⁷

Again, the disorder in our environment is our fault. We have released "powers" that are "lordless," and which may destroy us.³⁸ As we become sophisticated in terms of technology, we should "note the devastation of the countryside as freeways cut ruthlessly through arable land, pastures, and whole villages. We ask whether the speed that motorized man is allowed is not bought too dearly in view of its obvious hostility

³²Barth, *The Christian Life*, 311.

³³Reichel, "The Political Theology of the Surveillance Society," 173-174.

³⁴Paul Dafydd Jones, "Karl Barth's *The Christian Life and the Task of Political Theology*," in *Theo-Politics? Conversing with Barth in Western and Asian Contexts*, ed. Markus Höfner (London, UK: Lexington Books, 2022), 349.

³⁵Loconte, *A Hobbit, A Wardrobe, and A Great War*, 7.

³⁶William Holden Kathleen Nadeau Emma Porio, *Ecological Liberation Theology Faith-Based Approaches to Poverty and Climate Change in the Philippines* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 5.

³⁷Bevan Hurly, July 30, 2021, "1.6 billion disposable masks entered the ocean in 2020 and will take 450 years to biodegrade," *Independent Asia Edition*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/masks-ocean-covid-plastic-b1893830.html>.

³⁸Barth, *The Christian Life*, 326.

to life.”³⁹ For emphasis’ sake, we become the bane of the environment’s existence—tantamount to establishing a “Mordor” in God’s good creation.

According to Pope Francis, it is imperative to understand that the earth is our common home, and since we are living at a critical moment in history where we see the devastation in the forests, mountains, rivers, and seas, we must address this issue now and not leave it to future generations.⁴⁰ Our failures as Filipino evangelicals to take seriously (in academia and in daily living) the challenge of climate change and our responsibility towards creation shows a theological deficit concerning eco-theology.⁴¹ Since we know that creation is groaning due to the Fall and we continue to destroy nature due to the “lordless powers” inside us, the need to rethink how we perceive our relationship with the earth is imperative. Drawing on Asian thinkers and Barth’s belief that Christians in Asia may provide a solution to this dilemma, I assert the importance of believing that there are “wonders in this world.”⁴²

Re-enchanting the Universe: Recovering a Robust Eco-theology

Barth is right that Asians have something to contribute to this dilemma. In his own words, “A magical picture of the world? Might it be that our fellow Christians from the younger churches of Asia and Africa, who come with a fresher outlook in this regard, can help us here? We hope at least that they will not be too impressed by our view of the world and thus be afflicted by the eye disease from which we ourselves suffer in this matter.”⁴³ Perhaps Barth is correct for two reasons. First, many in the West have thought of the “magical” aspects of the world as fairy tales. Some have lost their connection to the sacredness of the earth. The world is no longer valued as sacred, and the earth is reduced to a tool for economic and technological progress.⁴⁴ Second, indigenous beliefs in Asia may help recover a robust eco-theology. It is worth noting that Barth may have failed to understand that “the magical picture of the world” is already embedded in the worldviews of the people in Asia and Africa.⁴⁵ For Asians, the line between natural and supernatural intersects. Asian worldviews maintain that the world is both for the living and the dead; natural and supernatural are one. This

³⁹Barth, *The Christian Life*, 325.

⁴⁰Russell L. Meyer, “Time for leaders to make moral choice on climate change,” YALE Forum on Religion and Ecology (January 2, 2016), accessed December 21, 2022, <http://fore.yale.edu/news/item/time-for-leaders-to-make-moral-choice-on-climate-change/>.

⁴¹See Crizaldo, “Biblical and Theological Response: Our Beautiful Dwelling Place,” 38-40.

⁴²The quotation above is borrowed from a Harfoot Hobbit, Elanor ‘Nori’ Brandyfoot, of the Amazon’s TV Series, “The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power.”

⁴³Barth, *The Christian Life*, 307.

⁴⁴Thomas Berry, “The World of Wonder,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, second edition, ed. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (Point Reyes, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2016), 22.

⁴⁵See Melba Padilla Maggay, “A Religion of Guilt Encounters a Religion of Power: Missiological Implications and Consequences,” in *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Issues through Asian Eyes*, ed. Melba Padilla Maggay (Manila: OMF, 2013), 26-27.

belief remains strong in Filipino spirituality.⁴⁶ Thus, Western churches need to listen to the ancient wisdom of indigenous people from the Majority World.⁴⁷

Sacred World: The Earth is Part of "Us"

In Asia, where primal religions are pervasive,⁴⁸ we can recover some of our ancient beliefs. For example, reducing living creatures and the environment to mere products for the consumption of human beings is problematic to the ancient Filipino worldviews. The Filipinos' inclusion of "kalikasan" (nature) and other people as part of their "pagkatao" (personhood) is encapsulated in the word "kapwa" (the extension of the self to others).⁴⁹ This "kapwa" appears in the way people from different walks of life help victims of disasters by marshaling various resources (money, human resources, prayer, and others).⁵⁰ The "kapwa culture" is important in our discussion because when a person values her/his neighbors and serves as a sojourner to others, particularly the victims of catastrophic events, one does not focus on him/herself. Thus, such an action rejects the power of "lordless powers," like selfishness, destruction, and others. Moreover, "kapwa" includes the environment and animals because they are "kapwa nilalang" (fellow-creatures).

Filipino theologian Leonardo Mercado notes that the Cartesian system has demythologized nature's dynamic and mystic aspects. The power of mathematics and science in studying the natural world removes the deity and the supernatural from the scene.⁵¹ I do not mean that science and mathematics are enemies of God. Yes, mathematics may confirm the amazing genius of the Creator, but romanticizing the power of science and mathematics is problematic. Anglican priest and author Myron Bradley Penner believes that "[m]odern consciousness, however, conceives

⁴⁶Melba Padilla Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures: Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness* (Manila: Anvil, 2011), xii.

⁴⁷In India, particularly in the Khasi community, nature is perceived as sacred. Nature is God's creation and a Mother who nourishes humankind. Nature is a holy sanctuary where God resides and interacts with human beings. Such is also the same with the Filipino worldviews where rivers, mountains, trees, and the like are seen as sacred. One example is the Cordilleran worldview. See Francis Jr. S. Samdao, "What Has Cordilleran Spirituality to Do with Evangelicals?" *Asia Journal of Theology* 35, no. 2 (October 2021): 238-255, <https://ajt.atesea.net/index.php/ajt/article/view/13/18>.

⁴⁸See Simon Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality in Primal Religious Contexts," in *Walking with God: Christian Spirituality in the Asian Context*, ed. Charles R. Ringma and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Manila: OMF Literature Inc., 2014), 32-52.

⁴⁹Violeta and Lorenzo Bautista write that accompanying someone in need recognizes shared dignity, intrinsic value, and oneness. Violeta Villaroman-Bautista & Lorenzo C. Bautista, "Pagsama, Ginhawa, at Pananalig: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Among Disaster Survivors with Attention to Culture and Theodicy," in *Why, O God: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Mandaluyong, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2017), 233.

⁵⁰Violeta Villaroman-Bautista, "Urabayan: Bringing Wellness and Wholeness to Communities Under Crisis," in *The Church and Poverty in Asia*, ed. Lee Wanak (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2008), 197-198.

⁵¹Leonardo N. Mercado, *Filipino Thought* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2000), 119.

of the world as a machine, and it thinks of the human person (more or less) as a disembodied mind that is the free and unencumbered center of rational thought.”⁵² This Cartesianism is quite different from the worldviews of the people in Asia. Once again, the cosmology of the primal religion of the indigenous people in the Philippines includes a realm full of spirits. The influence of unseen beings permeates the universe. These spirits may inhabit trees, clouds, rivers, and mountains; and use stones, fires, lands, and others if they want to.⁵³

For a Filipino, it is part of the daily activities to be attuned to the melody of the different forces and even to the “inanimate” objects of the earth. It is crucial to be intimate with spiritual beings not primarily to beg for forgiveness but to strengthen the “loob” (authentic relational self) of a person.⁵⁴ All parts of nature (the natural world) are not considered static. They are “buhay” (alive). Therefore, they were given “bisa” (life force).⁵⁵ That is why “Before the Spanish and American colonizers came to the Philippines, the typical Filipino also respected creation. Before anybody cut a tree, he asked the permission of the tree guardian.”⁵⁶ Even now, when indigenous people (especially in the provinces) look at the mountains and seas, they see not only the waves and trees but understand that there are unseen beings who inhabit these places. This kind of worldview connotes the vital relationship of a Filipino towards unseen beings and nature. The natural world is not autonomous from the supernatural realm. Such an understanding of reality may also explain why many Filipino tribes in the country have no problem cohabiting with the dead. For example, caves are utilized as burial places, while at the same time available as dwelling spaces for the living.⁵⁷ In the primal religion of the Filipino, sickness, failed crops, misfortune, and calamities, occur due to the imbalance between the system of the supernatural and natural realms.⁵⁸

For educated modern people, the existence of the supernatural is an illusion and a bedtime story for children because science cannot verify such belief. However, despite our immense use of technology and skepticism about the supernatural and

⁵²Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 30.

⁵³Leonardo N. Mercado, *The Filipino Mind: Philippine Philosophical Studies II* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994), 103-104.

⁵⁴Maggay, “A Religion of Guilt Encounters a Religion of Power,” 35-37.

⁵⁵F. Landa Jocano, *Filipino Worldview: Ethnography of Local Knowledge* (Manila: PUNLAD Research House, 2001), 24.

⁵⁶Mercado, *Filipino Thought*, 123.

⁵⁷Alfredo E. Evangelista, *Soul Boats: A Filipino Journey of Self-Discovery* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and Arts, 2001), 30. I have expounded on an aspect of Cordilleran spirituality to critique some modern views that penetrated the evangelical household. See Samdao, “What Has Cordilleran Spirituality to Do with Evangelicals?” 238–255.

⁵⁸Maggay, “A Religion of Guilt Encounters a Religion of Power,” 37. To understand more about the spirituality of the indigenous people, see Leah Abayao, “Spirituality and the (Re) constructions of Indigenous Traditions,” in *Unsettling Discourses: The Theory and Practice of Indigenous Studies*, ed. Darius Letigio Martinez and Ma. Paula Luz Pamintuan-Riva (Baguio City, Philippines: Cordillera Studies Center, University of the Philippines Baguio, 2014), 127.

extraordinary, I find it interesting that many are still fascinated by fairy, fantasy, and adventure stories in books and movies. Also, the primal religion of the Filipino is not far from the world of the church fathers who perceived the universe as a place for the seen and the unseen beings. The premodern understanding of the universe was sacred, enchanted, and porous.⁵⁹ For example, in her description of the world of the church father Chrysostom, Samantha Miller writes, "The ancient world . . . was populated with spirits: some good, some evil, some indifferent or even ambiguous."⁶⁰ But this understanding of the world was changed when modern Enlightenment reduced the dynamic and animated world of premodern thought into a mathematical and cold planet. Modernism diminished the understanding of the world into the parameter of "natural laws" and put it under the mastery of reason and empirical observation.⁶¹ It is a process of "disenchanting" the universe so to speak.

This negation of sacred or spiritual had been reinforced by modernity's⁶² advancements and technology. There is also predatory capitalism that focuses on profit at the expense of our ecosystem and the condition of people.⁶³ We have arrived at a point where machines are already part of our daily lives. Our technology is superior compared to the machines of the Dwarves at the Lonely Mountain in Tolkien's Middle-earth. Decades ago, telephones were stationary in our homes; now they are not just inside our pockets but glued to our hands. Laptops and iPads are indispensable during business meetings, church retreats, school planning, and other conferences. But we are not yet done; Elon Musk is showing us the way to conquer planet Mars!⁶⁴ These developments are helpful, but they easily mislead us into the illusion that we are the masters of the universe.

⁵⁹James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 30.

⁶⁰Samantha L. Miller, *Chrysostom's Devil: Demons, the Will, and Virtue in Patristic Soteriology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 1.

⁶¹James K. A. Smith, "Is There Room for Surprise in the Natural World? Naturalism, the Supernatural, and Pentecostal Spirituality," in *Science and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Engagement with the Sciences*, ed. James K. A. and Amos Yong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010). 36; James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Relativism? Community, Contingency, and Creaturehood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 109.

⁶²Modernity is a secular and cultural movement that rejects moral principles, religion, and God as vital components to understanding reality. It emphasizes the importance of reason (rationalism), the human five senses (empiricism), individual contribution (individualism), and cultural progress. The modern world, then, "seeks to become the master and possessor of nature by the application of a new science and its attendant technology." Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), xi.

⁶³See Eleazar S. Fernandez, "Disciples of the Green Spirit: Eco-Justice Spirituality in the Critical Asian Context," *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (April 2024): 17-32, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.126>.

⁶⁴See Michael Sheetz, April 23, 2021, "Elon Musk wants SpaceX to reach Mars so humanity is not a 'single-planet species,'" CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/23/elon-musk-aiming-for-mars-so-humanity-is-not-a-single-planet-species.html>.

Going back to the Filipino ancient worldviews, natives in the provinces believe that their daily lives are connected to the skies, the mountains, the seas, and natural phenomena. For instance, “takipsilim” (dusk), “dilig” (darkness), “umaga” (morning), “hapon” (afternoon), and “gabi” (night), are not merely transitions of time but are related to the appearances of spiritual beings, such as “lamang-lupa” (creatures of the earth), “tikbalang” (half-men and half-horses), and “mangkukulam” (sorcerers).⁶⁵ Primal religions of the country have a concept of general revelation. Their ancient worldviews upholds the importance of being in tune with the ecosystem—creating a “sacramental” perspective. “Sacramental” in the sense that the presence of God manifests in creation or nature can be a venue by which people can communicate to a deity.⁶⁶ Thus, since God created the world, nature should be perceived as an integral part in the world in which we inhabit. We are not the masters but stewards. Thus, respecting nature is imperative. Perhaps we should remove the extreme line of separation between the secular and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural because God is moving within both of these “realms” since he created them. This implies that whatever Christians practice and do outside the four corners of the worship building are still connected to spirituality. In short, the daily and mundane activities are still spiritual.

Using Lewis’s Narnia, Alister McGrath critiques modernity’s assumption that humans can control nature: “Lewis’s portrayal of animal characters in Narnia is partly a protest against shallow assertions of humanity’s right to do what it pleases with nature.”⁶⁷ Such a belief is quite different from modernity’s view of “progress,” which promotes the industrialized abuse of nature and emphasizes technology at the expense of growing things. Using *The Lord of the Rings* as an example, our “lordless powers” make us like Saruman who became an evil wizard of Middle-earth, and “has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.”⁶⁸ In the Philippines, for example, we continue to destroy the Sierra Madre mountain range that protects us from natural disasters. Generally, there are two reasons for the deforestation of the Sierra Madre: selfish economic gain and the idea that we are the center of the universe entitled to “dominion” over creation.⁶⁹ Such action and belief come from our “lordless powers.”

⁶⁵Jocano, *Filipino Worldview*, 20-21.

⁶⁶See C. R. Moss, *Nabaloi Law and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1920), 273, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044041907890&view=1up&seq=14>.

⁶⁷Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013), 276.

⁶⁸J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 473.

⁶⁹Aldrin M. Peñamora, “Kapwa Ethics: Christ-Centered Ethics of Responsibility Towards the Earth, Our Neighbor,” in *Why, O God: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Mandaluyong, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2017), 120.

Taking Creation Seriously

It is also helpful for Christians to go beyond the assumption that all ecological disasters are consequences of the Fall. Concluding that all catastrophes are results of original sin may tempt us to disregard our human responsibilities to care for our environment. As I mentioned earlier, while sin has a role in the groaning of creation, humans' irresponsibility due to our "lordless powers" make creation cry more for its original design. But as it screeches, we suffer from the repercussions of our negligence and imprudence towards our nature.

From 2019 until the present, people at the lower echelon of our society have suffered much from COVID-19, typhoons, and earthquakes. Thus, Christians are challenged to participate in taking care of the earth. Filipina scholar Athena Gorospe is right to assert that "we must also consider how to prevent disasters, since the human cost of natural disasters is often exacerbated by our lack of care for the environment. For example, illegal logging results in flash floods; poor garbage collection and segregation, and the use of plastics leads to clogged sewers, which in turn further intensify flooding."⁷⁰ I am aware that such an argument or proposal is not new, but I hope to reiterate the reality that many Filipino evangelicals have focused much on "saving souls," while our forests and rivers are being abused and ravaged.⁷¹ We should lament such irresponsibility. William Dyrness observes such a popular Christian concept where they live in macro and micro realms. The former relates to the public, while the latter refers to the private circle. Discipleship is focused on the private aspect while neglecting the importance of faith and practice in the public arena.⁷² Awareness of the "lordless powers" within us and the result of sin is not enough. Christians' active participation is necessary. Strong typhoons have brought catastrophes, inflicted deaths, and damaged billions of pesos of properties in Asia. These calamities could serve as a challenge for Filipino evangelicals to take care of their environment; and for the national and local governments to continue striving for strategic planning and development. Moreover, since I mentioned the Filipino primal religion earlier, I propose that taking the environment seriously includes the recovery and respect of the beliefs of the indigenous people.

As Christians, part of our sanctification is having a renewed perspective on how we could take care of God's creation and turn our back on "lordless powers." Also, Christian spirituality takes the earth seriously and appreciates God's creation because Jesus Christ is making all things new through the Holy Spirit. Creation is not just a

⁷⁰Athena E. Gorospe, "Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God," in *Why, O God: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Mandaluyong, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2017), 5.

⁷¹I want to acknowledge the existence of WEA's Sustainability Center. This center encourages individual Christians and Evangelical churches for a broader engagement toward care for creation. See the World Evangelical Alliance Sustainability Center. <https://wea-sc.org/en/home>.

⁷²William A. Dyrness, *Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 11-12.

tool but crucial to God's revelation.⁷³ Harry Alan Hahne is right in arguing that "since God plans to redeem the damaged material creation (Romans 8:19, 21) and not simply dispose of it at the end of the age, God's redeemed children ought to show a strong concern for the care of nature."⁷⁴ While creation is groaning, eschatological perfection of the material world and liberation from sin will occur.

Conclusion

In this essay, we discussed natural disasters and "lordless powers." And in our attempt to stay away from God and trust our strength, power, resources, and influences, we create "lordless powers" that do not serve us, instead distorting our desires. The repercussions are manifested in how we perceive, value, and handle God's creation. Thus, recovery of eco-theology by appreciating indigenous Filipino wisdom is helpful.

Although the culmination of God's creation is humanity (Genesis 1:26-27; Job 7:17; Psalm 8:4), our uniqueness does not give us a license to shatter the natural environment.⁷⁵ Our consumerist mentality feeds the "lordless powers" within us must be combated with the truth that creation can serve as God's pedagogical tool to teach us to appreciate his wisdom as the author of all.⁷⁶

Also, I desire to challenge our human pride and mindset believing that with our technology, we are in control of our environment and are the captain of our ships. I also hope that I have pointed out to the readers the creativity of God. That is to say, the world is more than just a machine; it is dynamic and full of wonders. The world is sacramental in nature in the sense that it showcases the glory of God. The Psalmists capture this essence in these declarations:

¹ Lord, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
 You have set your glory
 in the heavens.

³ When I consider your heavens,
 the work of your fingers,

⁷³Gordon T. Smith, "Spirituality that Takes Creation Seriously," in *Walking with God: Christian Spirituality in the Asian Context*, ed. Charles R. Ringma and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Manila: OMF Literature Inc., 2014), 102-103. Moreover, creation has life. Filipino scholar Athena Gorospe has discussed eco-theology on the lens of theology of life. See Athena Gorospe, "God's Story of Life: Themes for an Asian Creation Care Ethics," in *Asian Christian Ethics: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Aldrin M Peñamora and Bernard K. Wong (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2022), 191-295.

⁷⁴Hahne, "The Whole Creation has been Groaning," 23. Reflecting on Romans 8: 19-23, Hahne writes, "The damage that the Fall caused to nature will be reversed and nature will be perfected, so that it shares in the glory of the resurrected children of God." Hahne, "The Whole Creation has been Groaning," 20.

⁷⁵Kang Hack Lee, "Jonathan Edwards on Nature: An Example for Christian Ecospirituality," *Torch Trinity Journal* 14, no. 2 (November 30, 2021): 134.

⁷⁶See Michael Jin Choi, "Creation in the Development of the Human Person according to Irenaeus," *Torch Trinity Journal* 14, no. 2 (November 30, 2021): 121.

the moon and the stars,
 which you have set in place,
4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
 human beings that you care for them?
9 Lord, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!

(Psalm 8:1, 3-4, 9).

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