

# Locating Filipino Pastoral Care Perspectives: *Bahala Na*, Ecclesiastes, and Psychological Flexibility

Fritz Gerald M. Melodi

## Introduction

In this essay, I will engage three sources of knowledge, and attempt to reflect pastorally on the wisdom that they share. These three are: the Filipino expression, “*bahala na*”, psychological flexibility, and the wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes. I propose that by engaging *bahala na* as an indigenous resource for resilience, resourced by Scripture and empirical evidence, I argue that *bahala na* can be a fertile source for understanding relevant Filipino pastoral caring.

In terms of method, by integrating these three knowledge domains, I wish to affirm that truth is found in both the general revelation of God revealed in the human sciences and experience and the special revelation of God, as revealed in Holy Scriptures. Both these modes of revelation reveal in varying degrees, the truth of God’s being and creation, truly but partially or seen in a limited way due to human weaknesses. The Bible itself affirms this approach of generating knowledge from both nature and Scripture through the example of the Old Testament sages. The wise men of ancient Israel observed and reflected on human life, their vices and virtues, including divine revelation in Scripture. They then proceeded to distill from them, wisdom and healthy prescriptions for living.<sup>1</sup>

More formal theories of integrating the human sciences, experience, and theology also affirm the approach above. Christian theories of integrating and reading “extra-biblical” sources are not only warranted but necessary.<sup>2</sup> This is grounded in the theological view of God’s common grace and general revelation, and as shown, is even the epistemic approach of some biblical writers. However, as Christians one must be mindful that the Scripture and its very best interpretation are still the normative guides in arriving at conclusions. This same theoretical framework is assumed in this essay, by which, experience and the human sciences are absorbed in the Scriptural

---

<sup>1</sup>John Coe and Todd W. Hall, “A Transformational Psychology Response to Christian Psychology” in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, Eric L. Johnson, ed. (Downer Groves, Illinois: IVP Press, 2010), 192.

<sup>2</sup>John David Trentham, “Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 2): Engaging the Appropriating Models of Human Development”, *Christian Education Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2019), 478-480, DOI: 10.1177/0739891319882699journals.sagepub.com/home/cej

rubric as “servants” that “clarify or explicate or confirm our best understandings” of the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup>

It is significant that Christian helping professionals and pastoral carers be serious students of culture. Uncritically importing psychological categories heavily formed in the West, without cultural sensitivity, may potentially erase and displace local traditions or misdiagnose locals due to “presumed psychological universals.”<sup>4</sup> By integrating cultural values, one practices a form of incarnational love in valuing people, by engaging them compassionately in their cultural thought-forms.

Therefore, in this essay, I will seek to develop pastoral insights that are Christian, Filipino, and are empirically sound. The usage of the term “Filipino” here does not presume a pure and novel cultural identity. Rather, “Filipino” here, refers to locale and community. With these objectives, an interdisciplinary and global approach is beneficial. This essay will largely form two parts: First, I will explore each knowledge domain separately; second, I will argue for their correlation by finding conceptual parallels from each. I will then proceed to propose sound Filipino pastoral insights that are contextually engaged, Scripturally rooted, and based on empirical evidence.

Filipino priest and psychologist Jaime Bulatao, attempting to develop a culturally-sensitive counseling approach, posits from research, that one feature of Filipino therapy is their ready acceptance of the way things are.<sup>5</sup> This “accepting” attitude is significantly encapsulated in the Filipino expression, “*bahala na!*” It is therefore fruitful to begin exploring *bahala na* as a pointer to possible insights for Filipino pastoral care.

## **Bahala Na as Confrontative Value**

“*Bahala na!*” can be heard among Filipino students anxiously reviewing before a critical exam. The same can be heard from a Filipino about to confess one’s love to a beloved. “*Bahala na!*” is also uttered by a Filipino picking up the parts of a burnt down house. The same is also uttered by a poor Filipino mother who embraces her children as her late husband’s coffin is lowered onto the ground. “*Bahala na*” is a linguistic staple among Filipinos faced with the harsh and uncontrollable realities of life. “*Bahala na*” has no direct translation in English. However, “*bahala na*” has been described as a Filipino attitude that expresses the notion, “whatever will be, will be” or “I leave everything to God”.

The notion of *bahala na* in popular Filipino usage has a morally ambivalent meaning. This ambivalence is rooted in how *bahala na* is used for certain situations. For instance, *bahala na* can be uttered by a farmer who gambles his earnings away,

---

<sup>3</sup>Steven L. Porter, “Wesleyan Theological Methodology as a Theory of Integration”, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (2004), 197, DOI: 10.1177/009164710403200304.

<sup>4</sup>Alvin Dueck and Kevin Reimer, *A Peaceable Psychology: Christian Therapy in a World of Many Cultures*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2009), 48.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Protacio-Marcelino, “Towards Understanding Filipino Psychology”, *Women and Therapy* Vol. 9, No. 1-2, (2008), 124, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J015v09n01\\_07](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J015v09n01_07).

not mindful of the future. In this negative usage of *bahala na*, it serves the purpose of condoning irresponsibility or a lack of preparation. However, it can also be used positively. For instance, it can be uttered by a single father, who is left to parent an infant when the wife leaves for work abroad. In this instance, *bahala na* is positively used as a courageous, even religious determination in the face of the uncontrollable and uncertain.<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of *bahala na* has been a matter of discussion in Filipino psychological literature. The study of Alfredo Lagmay on the Filipino experience of *bahala na* has provided a pioneering cultural insider's perspective on this cultural value. Responding to early Western studies on *bahala na* as mere fatalism and resignation, Lagmay has concluded that *bahala na* is not fatalistic resignation, but a form of Filipino "psychological ascendancy".<sup>7</sup> Using a qualitative thematic apperception analysis, Lagmay describes the features of *bahala na* as follows:

1. The one who utters *bahala na* stays committed to the problem. *Bahala na* therefore is not an avoidant nor escapist attitude.
2. The utterer recognizes one's "throwness into the future" and therefore creates the possibility of spontaneity, innovation, and flexibility.
3. The one who utters *bahala na* has learned to accept the situation, including one's deficiencies as he/she perceives it as of the moment, vis-à-vis the future.
4. This attitude creates a tolerance for mystery or ambiguity about the future.
5. *Bahala na* as an attitude carries with it a sense of trust in one's ability to face any contingency.<sup>8</sup>

Filipino Psychology pioneer Virgilio Enriquez, drawing from Lagmay's study, argues that early studies on *bahala na* has rendered this cultural value in a more negative light.<sup>9</sup> Enriquez however resists this outsider reading of *bahala na* as arising from a demeaning colonialist interpretation. The Filipino personality has been conceived by many Westerners as basically accommodative and servile. What Western researchers ignored however, is the confrontative dimension of the Filipino found in linguistic sources, in words such as *pakikibaka* (resistance), *lakas ng loob* (strength of will), and *bahala na*. Enriquez argues that *bahala na* is "risktaking (sic) in the face of the proverbial cloud of uncertainty and the possibility of failure."<sup>10</sup> It is clear, for Enriquez that *bahala na* functions in the Filipino as courage and confrontation. In constructing

---

<sup>6</sup>Vitaliano Gorospe, SJ, "Christian Renewal of Filipino Values", *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1966): 218-219, Ateneo Journals Online.

<sup>7</sup>Alfredo Lagmay, "Bahala Na!", *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (June 1993): 34, Philippine Social Science Council.

<sup>8</sup>Lagmay, "Bahala Na!", 33.

<sup>9</sup>Virgilio Enriquez, *From Colonial to Liberation Psychology: The Philippine Experience*, (Quezon City, Philippines: University of the Philippines Publishing, 1992), 88.

<sup>10</sup>Enriquez, *From Colonial*, 88.

his model of the Filipino personality, Enriquez places *bahala na* as a confrontative and creative behavior pattern that propels the Filipino into the unknown future.<sup>11</sup>

This conceptualization of *bahala na* is consistent with more recent empirical studies that seem to confirm the utilitarian ambivalence of *bahala na*, but overall leans towards a behavioral pattern of calculated risk-taking, many times with awareness of Divine providence.<sup>12</sup> The context of *bahala na* is often uttered during experiences where there are not enough options, or there is an overabundance of options, or all resources and efforts have been exhausted and therefore acceptance of the state of things ensues. From this acceptance however, emerges self-efficacy, hopefulness, and commitment towards action.

The awareness and reliance on the Divine is apparent in *bahala na*. The utterer shows dependence in the power of the Divine. While this may be construed negatively as fatalism and passivity, the phenomenology of *bahala na vis-à-vis* God, reveals calmness and resolve in the face of mystery, a reliance in God's superior knowledge and power, including tolerance of predetermined futures. *Bahala na vis-à-vis* God and belief in predetermination however, does not preclude belief in human action. The attitude is inclusive of rational deliberation of what is in the sphere of human control and what transcends it, as belonging to the will of the Divine.<sup>13</sup>

### **Psychological Flexibility: *To Accept is to Adapt***

A growing consensus on a fundamental component of health is psychological flexibility. Although definitions and emphases may vary, psychological flexibility refers to the adaptive ability of individuals to accept and adapt to present situations, without being defensive to one's thoughts and emotions or changing said situation.<sup>14</sup> Proponents of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) argue that conventional Western medical paradigms construe "healthy normality" as the absence or freedom from any physical or mental distress. This conception has led to the notion that all negative experiences need to be avoided. However, this overall paradigm is short-sighted. This paradigm has failed to acknowledge that somehow, suffering is a basic feature of human existence.<sup>15</sup> The psychiatric and psychological fields have been defined by this same medical approach, that focuses primarily on symptom reduction.

---

<sup>11</sup>Enriquez, *From Colonial*, 93.

<sup>12</sup>Ma. Ligaya Manuel Menguito and Mendiola Teng-Calleja, "Bahala Na as Expression of the Filipino's Courage, Hope, Optimism, Self-Efficacy, and Search for the Sacred", *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (2010): 22.

<sup>13</sup>Rolando M. Gripaldo, "Bahala Na: A Philosophical Analysis", in *Filipino Cultural Traits: Claro R. Ceniza Lectures*, Rolando M. Gripaldo, ed. (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005) 208.

<sup>14</sup>James J. Lucas, and Kathleen A. Moore, "Psychological Flexibility: Positive Implications for Mental Health and Life Situation", *Health Promotion International*, No. 1, Vol. 0 (2019):1, doi: 10.1093/heapro/daz036.

<sup>15</sup>Steven Hayes, Kirk D. Strosahl, and Kelly G. Wilson, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change, Second Edition*, (London: Guilford Press, 2012), 4.

There is a plethora of psychological diagnoses but for some ACT proponents, these so-called mental illnesses seem to lack clear warrant to be considered a “disease”.<sup>16</sup> ACT proponents contend that a change in approach is needed. First, there must be an acknowledgment that suffering in general is a basic feature of normal human existence.

For ACT proponents, one natural process that makes suffering “normal” is the human capacity for language. The capacity for words and symbols create internal states that can be difficult to disentangle from. Humans have internal dialogues that either limit or expand one’s horizons. Thus people with depression would have internal dialogues that often abide by very rigid self-imposed rules. Therefore, mental images and language are now *fused* with what is perceived as reality. Humans often fail to recognize that these are merely thoughts and not reality itself. ACT proponents call this process “cognitive fusion”.<sup>17</sup>

Another feature of human suffering from an ACT perspective is “experiential avoidance”. Avoidance is a result of the fusing processes highlighted above. Experiential avoidance happens when a person, led by one’s rigid mental monologues is then led to suppress, control, or eliminate stimuli that are perceived to cause distress. For ACT proponents, as one avoids and suppresses these experiences, paradoxically, the more one experiences said stimuli. One negative result of avoidance is that an individual’s life begins to shrink by avoiding certain situations, thoughts, and emotions.<sup>18</sup>

These processes of “cognitive fusion” and “experiential avoidance”, are components of psychological inflexibility. People can create entanglements with their own self-narratives. Individuals internalize these self-imposed rules with mastery, making it difficult to notice other possibilities that lay outside it. For instance, a person who dreads social interaction already thinks and imagines what a disaster it would be to join a co-worker’s birthday party, thus leading to avoid it. Although the situation has not yet occurred, a person can be so fused with his or her own thoughts that those same mental images are mistaken for reality. This cycle creates more inflexibility and more avoidance. Hayes and others describe this process in this way:

Unnecessary suffering occurs when verbal/ cognitive processes tend to narrow human repertoires in key areas through cognitive entanglement and experiential avoidance. When people over-identify, or “fuse,” with unworkable verbal rules, their behavioral repertoire becomes narrow, and they lose effective contact with the direct results of action. This response inhibits their ability to change course when existing strategies are not working.<sup>19</sup>

Psychological inflexibility has been shown to be correlated to forms of

---

<sup>16</sup>Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, *Acceptance*, 9.

<sup>17</sup>Patricia A. Bach, and Daniel J. Moran, *ACT in Practice: Case Conceptualization in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 2008), 8.

<sup>18</sup>Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, *Acceptance*, 22.

<sup>19</sup>Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, *Acceptance*, 64.

psychopathology such as depression and anxiety disorders. Both these diagnoses feature an experience of a narrow sameness and stereotypical appraisal of their experiences. Depressed individuals see the world as all empty and unprofitable, unable to construe positive experiences. Those with anxiety disorders, experience the world with avoidance, creating a stereotyped assessment and response to a variety of situations.<sup>20</sup>

Growing in psychological flexibility hence is related to health and well-being. Psychological flexibility is the ability to be mindful of the present, aware of one's thoughts and emotions, accepting them first without judgment, and then to engage them with curiosity and to learn from these thoughts and emotions. Drawing from empirical evidence, Kashdan and Rottenberg argue that fostering psychological flexibility, involve:<sup>21</sup>

1. Executive functioning: This refers to the ability to focus one's cognitive resources towards mental versatility, awareness of what a context demands, and awareness of one's mental processes. Executive functioning includes the cognitive skill to tolerate distress, openness and receptiveness to internal and external realities and possibilities.
2. Achieving balance: Psychological flexibility involves creating a balance between paying attention to current surroundings, while "conserving mental energy" to discern other possibilities. This involves the ability of the mind to suspend, reassess and reconfigure stereotypes and biases in judging situations and persons.
3. Personality configurations: Personality traits matter in fostering psychological flexibility. Those with high neuroticism, or those who tend to focus on and experience negative thoughts and emotions seem to reduce one's capacity to be more mentally versatile. Meanwhile, the presence of positive emotions tend to correlate with greater openness to other experiences and perspectives. Naturally, people who score high in openness to experience tend to be curious, willing to experience both negative and positive emotions, and versatile with other views. People who scored high in self-control also tended to be psychologically flexible, noting their ability to resist urges, suspend impulses, and consciously direct cognitive processes, instead of being controlled by environmental factors.

The ACT model however adds one more component aside from the major components of acceptance, mindfulness, and openness: values. For ACT proponents, while acceptance, mindfulness, and openness can make one psychologically flexible, commitment to one's values makes for a meaningful and fulfilling life that guides one towards action. Whereas psychological inflexibility tends to inhibit action or produce

---

<sup>20</sup>Todd B. Kashdan, and Jonathan Rottenberg, "Psychological Flexibility as a Fundamental Aspect of Health", *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 30, (2010), 869, doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.001.

<sup>21</sup>Kashdan and Rottenberg, *Fundamental Aspect*, 870.

impulsive and unhealthy ones, ACT sees psychological flexibility as resulting in “committed action”, that is, a day-by-day commitment to act and behave purposefully, guided and informed by one’s values.<sup>22</sup>

After exploring both the Filipino psychology of *bahala na* and psychological flexibility as a psychological construct of adaptive behavior, I shall now turn to exploring the ancient wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1-14: A Time For Everything**

Ecclesiastes has been a puzzling book for many readers, even among Christians for its seeming pessimistic outlook in life. However, upon deeper reading, Ecclesiastes presents to us an honest meditation on the often harsh realities of life, then afterwards, proposes a joyful, wise way forward.

A probable date for the book is post-Exile, during the 5th century Persian period. The evidence for this dating is the presence of Persian loan words in the text.<sup>23</sup> This implies that the direct author of Ecclesiastes most probably was not King Solomon, despite what has commonly been assumed. The text seems to have two voices: a Narrator and a character introduced by the Narrator as “The Preacher” or *Qoheleth* in Hebrew (e.g. vv. 1:1-2). The writer has adapted the character and voice of Solomon as a literary device to frame one’s reflection on life. Solomon was said to have been both wise and rich, who enjoyed all manner of worldly pleasures and pursuits (cf. 2 Chron. 9:13-29; 1 Kgs 10:14-29; 11:3). Adapting Solomon’s experience as a person of worldly successes, Qoheleth wishes to examine the meaning of existence.

Gerhard Von Rad rightly discerns at least three major themes throughout the text, namely: 1) life is full of meaningless pursuits; 2) God predetermines many if not every event; 3) as creatures, human beings do not have a “God’s eye-view” to discern what happens in the world.<sup>24</sup> The presence of death and decay, and therefore “time”, are impartial realities of human existence. Therefore, both the moral and immoral, the honorable and the criminal, the rich and poor, godly and ungodly, both human and animal are all subjected to its effects. The presence of death and decay, render many, if not all pursuits of wealth, education, and sex as “meaningless” in the end. Humans are subjected to transience, impermanence, and coincidence which they have no control over, and are therefore subjected to a seemingly, meaningless rat-race. A response to this, which is a thread running throughout Ecclesiastes, is the wisdom to live life with acceptance, along with the capacity for enjoyment, which is a gift of God. The poem in Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 is placed within this thematic milieu.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 is one of the book’s more popular passages. The main thesis of the poem is on the first line: “There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every matter under heaven” (3:1). Qoheleth observes that humans cannot

---

<sup>22</sup>Hayes, Strosahl, and Willson, *Acceptance*, 92-96.

<sup>23</sup>Choon-Leon Seow, *Ecclesiastes, Vol. 18C*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997), 128.

<sup>24</sup>Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1972), 227-228.



choose and determine what events happen to them. They are subjected to realities both happy and tragic: “there is a time for everything”. Thus, humans must be able to discern and accept which “time” or “season” they are in, so they can act appropriately. Von Rad writes:

Man can do nothing but yield to this fact, for it is certainly not susceptible of any alteration. If he has no alternative but to recognize this limitation as a given fact, he is not, however prevented from reflecting on it; he can go further and even attempt to derive some profit from it and to perceive in it some kind of mysterious order.<sup>25</sup>

For Qoheleth, it is therefore wise for humans to avoid denial and accept the event that they are in, in order to gain wisdom and healthily adapt. Life must be accepted as contingent to realities outside of one’s control. There is nothing absolute in life. The way to cope and respond wisely then must also involve some acceptance and flexibility over life’s contingencies.

Qoheleth then proceeds to list twenty-eight items, paired together as anti-theses to each other (vv.2-8). These 14 pairs is meant to describe the whole “gamut of human life and its activities”: birth and death, grief and celebration, love and hate, war and peace.<sup>26</sup> There seems to be no pattern to this list of experiences, except that the items are opposites of each other. The varieties of experiences listed by Qoheleth, depicting both hardship and pleasure are meant to describe their inevitability and proper timing. Here, Qoheleth accepts that life is not as ideal as one wants to imagine it to be. Qoheleth also recognizes the inscrutable divine activity and wisdom of God in ordering the world and God’s permission of times and seasons. Again, by listing them, one is encouraged to discern and accept what is the current occasion God has allowed and thus to flexibly ponder on a possible response.<sup>27</sup>

Qoheleth then proceeds to ask a rhetorical question: “What benefit *is there for the worker from that* in which he labors?” (v.9) The answer to this is in the negative. This means, for Qoheleth, no matter how hard a person works, the same person is still subject to the times and seasons of life that is beyond one’s control. God sovereignly determines and allows human beings, certain tasks to do and realities to experience. God has made every occasion “beautiful”, i.e. appropriate or proper in its own time and humans are merely subject to it (v.11). For Qoheleth, there is wisdom in accepting one’s limitations, in the midst of uncontrollable forces God has placed in Creation (vv. 10-11, 14). God has placed “eternity”, most probably an awareness of time, in the human soul, but does not fully know when these events arise and their full meaning in the grand scheme of things. Humans, as time-bounded creatures, also cannot hope to

---

<sup>25</sup>Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 139.

<sup>26</sup>Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction*, (Downer Groves, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011), 215.

<sup>27</sup>Bartholomew and O’Dowd, *Old Testament*, 218.



alter the times and activity God has appointed in eternity, unbounded by time.<sup>28</sup>

Faced with the uncontrollable, Qoheleth proposes that the wise attitude to life, is the enjoyment of life, which is also a gift from God (v. 12-13). This is prompted in v. 12 by “I know...” which indicates one’s human response. Commentator Choon-Leon Seow writes, “all people can do in the face of the inscrutability of the universe is to live life fully in the present.”<sup>29</sup> For Qoheleth, humans cannot alter what God has permitted and determined in the world. Therefore, wisdom lies in a mindful light-heartedness. To live wisely amidst what we cannot control, is to develop the skill of relinquishing control and be present, to do the good that one can and to enjoy what good there is. This ability and experience of enjoyment is also the will and gift of God (v.13. cf. 2:24). Therefore, humans must wisely be flexible and accepting to what time they are in their life, since this is beyond their control. Life is hard. Rigidity makes life harder. The sooner one accepts one’s “season”, the sooner they are able to develop an appropriate response. For Qoheleth, primarily this means openness and perseverance to do the good, to look for the good, and to be present, to enjoy fully what is good.

## Pastoral Integration

After discussing these three sources of knowledge, I want to propose a constructive engagement among them. Out from this interface, first, I will identify the parallels between, *bahala na*, psychological flexibility, and Ecclesiastes. Second, I wish to identify pastoral care perspectives from these three knowledge domains.

### 1. Discerning Parallels

From the discussion above, I propose three common themes that *bahala na*, psychological flexibility, and Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 share:

- a. These three knowledge domains share the principle of recognizing and accepting one’s current state or limitations. According to the pioneering research by Lagmay, the psychological attitude behind *bahala na* is the basic acceptance of one’s situation. The Filipino utterer has reached the recognition that a situation can no longer be altered, one’s resources has been depleted, or all possible help can no longer be perceived.<sup>30</sup> This same theme of acceptance is also present in psychological flexibility and in Qoheleth. For ACT proponents, acceptance means the psychological skill to welcome emotions and thoughts without defensiveness. The very theoretical paradigm of ACT grounds it in the acceptance that human suffering is a basic reality, that needs

---

<sup>28</sup>Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 172-173.

<sup>29</sup>Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.

<sup>30</sup>Lagmay, “Bahala Na!”, 32.

acceptance and not avoidance. For Qoheleth, this means the recognition and non-denial of what season of life one is currently in. Qoheleth's writings also intrinsically involves an acceptance that life is often an amalgam of both the tragic and the celebratory. Gaining wisdom first demands accepting reality. Accepting one's limitations is also thematically linked to the perception of determinism which both Qoheleth and *bahala na* as a Filipino attitude is heavily imbued with. Psychological flexibility does not explicitly articulate determinism as a philosophical foundation, but recognizes that resistance and avoidance creates more psychological suffering.

- b. Second, all three share an emphasis on being mindful of the present. The Filipino experience of uttering "*bahala na*" presupposes attentiveness to and non-denial of the present in order to calculate the risk of one's action. Likewise, psychological flexibility proposes that one ought to become attentive to one's present thoughts, emotions at the present moment without judgment, in order to reflect and learn from them. Being mindful of the present, including one's emotions and thoughts, have been shown to foster a self-awareness that disrupts and challenges depressive thought-processes.<sup>31</sup> Qoheleth likewise proposes that the only way one copes with life's uncontrollable realities is to be fully present, and not to worry about the past which can no longer be altered, or the future, which cannot be known. Everything will have its own season. This moment may be a time to dance, and tomorrow a time to mourn. Thus, Qoheleth counsels his readers to be fully present and enjoy life, which is also God's will for human creatures.
- c. Third, all three foster a sense of hopeful action. As noted above, contrary to more prejudiced readings of *bahala na* as passive resignation to one's fate, *bahala na* is a confrontative value, allowing the Filipino to be launched into an ambiguous future. By saying *bahala na*, the Filipino mentally calculates the risks, is open to extemporaneous and creative options, accepts one's situation, as beyond human control, and therefore takes a hopeful risk or gamble at life. For religious Filipinos, this is often done with a deep sense of faith in God's providence. Psychological flexibility likewise fosters "committed action" that are congruent to one's deeply held values. It is a daily commitment to act in more purposive ways that arise from a more flexible and disentangled cognitive process. For Qoheleth, as stated above, after reflecting on the realities of life as fleeting, contingent, and possibly deterministic, Qoheleth does not fall into suicidal despair. Rather, Qoheleth concludes that life can be lived with joy, light-heartedness, and gratitude.

---

<sup>31</sup>Laura R. Silberstein, et. al., "Mindfulness, Psychological Flexibility, and Emotional Schemas", *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy*, Vol. 5, No. 4, (2012): 408, 415, <https://doi.org/10.1521/ijct.2012.5.4.406>.

## 2. Filipino Pastoral Care Perspectives

Having discerned their agreements, I shall now turn to proposing contextual pastoral care perspectives. In this section, I will sketch some pastoral insights drawn from the study above. I will constructively engage Filipino thought along with Christian sources and empirical findings in developing these pastoral insights. The intention is not to describe techniques in detail, but to suggest an overview of pastoral caring principles. I propose three pastoral themes that emerge from this study: 1) Cultivating *pagdama* (“feeling”); 2) cultivating *pananampalataya* (“faith”); 3) cultivating *kaligayahan* (“joy” or “happiness”).

- a. Cultivating *Pagdama* (“*Hindi Pag-Walang Bahala*”): In Filipino, *pagdama* is to literally “feel”, “sense” or “perceive”. It is a Filipino way of knowing and interacting with the world and one’s self through one’s senses, not only with the intellect but also of feeling and emotion.<sup>32</sup> For Enriquez, *pagdama* in Filipino psychology involves both an internal and external movement. It is both to feel for and be sensitive towards (external) others and also, to *damdam*, that is, to feel one’s own emotions (internal).<sup>33</sup> From the study above, *pagdama* is thus important in caring for others and ourselves. For Qoheleth, one needs to rightly perceive (*pakiramdaman*) one’s season in life, in order to act with flexibility (external: *paki-dama*). Psychological flexibility also suggests that emotions and thoughts ought to be welcomed and felt (internal: *damdam*) as a means to adapt and cope. The Filipino notion of *bahala na*, likewise presupposes a feeling of one’s external and internal world in order to calculate the risks of one’s situation, and then to develop determination (“*lakas ng loob*”) to face the risk. Here, I suggest three pastoral care principles under *pagdama*: *i. empathy*; *ii. reflection*; *iii. advocacy*.
  - i. Empathy: A basic disposition in pastoral caring is the skill of empathy. To empathize in Filipino thought is to do *pakikiramdam* (feel) with one’s *kapwa* (“others”). Thus, to empathize is to step into a person’s world, including one’s thoughts, emotions, background, and motivation, while bracketing one’s own bias and judgment. This is done in order to understand a person’s thought and behavior, and not to lose objectivity in a client or parishioner.<sup>34</sup> Like Qoheleth, one must respect and recognize the time and season of life a person is in, especially the people we are tasked to care for, since all people go through tragedy and pain. Therefore, to empathize is to listen, deferring any judgment or prescription but allowing a person to first be understood and be authentic.

---

<sup>32</sup>José de Mesa, *José de Mesa: A Theological Reader*, (Manila: De La Salle University Publishing House, 2016), 490.

<sup>33</sup>Enriquez, *From Colonial*, 79.

<sup>34</sup>Elisabeth Sbanotto, Heather Davieduk GIngrich, and Fred C. Gingrich, *Skills for Effective Counseling: Faith Based Integration*, (Downer Groves, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2016), chap. 7, epub.

- ii. Reflection: To “reflect” here is to observe (*pagmamasid*) one’s inner world without judgment. Like the proponents of ACT, along with practices of mindfulness, in order for one to become aware and disempower certain critical-self talk as mere thoughts and not reality, one must be able to welcome and acknowledge these mental images, self-imposed rules, and internal monologues. This can be done through mindfulness exercises, such as slow breathing or through observing one’s thoughts, emotions, making room for them as they come and go without judgment.<sup>35</sup> The teachings of Qoheleth imply that we ought to be fully present in the moment, aware of our thoughts, emotions, and our bodies.<sup>36</sup>
  - iii. Advocacy: Pastorally caring for others, not only means caring for their inner worlds, but also to participate in advocating for social injustices that are detrimental to people’s well-being and flourishing. Howard Clinebell’s notion of holistic pastoral care involves “working against dominant cultural discourses that support unjust power arrangements in our world.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, pastoral care also involves *pakikisangkot* (participation), *pakikiisa* (solidarity), and *pakikibaka* (resistance). Integral to Filipino psychology is their capacity to be conscious of and be in cooperative struggle against exploitation of the *kapwa-tao* (fellow-human).<sup>38</sup> Advocacy is therefore a fruit of *pagdama*, to “feel” my fellow human’s oppression.
- b. Cultivating *Panamampalataya* (“*Bahala Na Ang Diyos*”): Filipinos have been shown to be a deeply religious cultural group.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, religion is a constant facet of life, both in private and in public. It is therefore vital that any therapeutic intervention among Filipinos be open to the presence of religiosity. The expression *bahala na*, although not linguistically rooted in “Bathala” (pre-Hispanic Filipino deity) has been shown to contain in it, faith in God’s providence. *Bahala na* can even be construed as “ordinary theology” among Filipinos, not produced by professional theologians in academia, but a theological confession by ordinary Filipino, especially the overseas Filipino worker (OFW) who daily risks the challenges of life.<sup>40</sup> *Bahala na*, can therefore be seen as confession of faith, a form

---

<sup>35</sup>Jason B. Luoma, Steven C. Hayes, Robyn D. Walser, *Learning ACT: An Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Skills Training Manual for Therapists, Second Edition*, (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 2017), chap. 4, epub.

<sup>36</sup>Bartholomew and O’Dowd, *Old Testament*, 227.

<sup>37</sup>Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for Ministry of Healing and Growth*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2011), chap. 2, epub.

<sup>38</sup>Enriquez, *From Colonial*, 90.

<sup>39</sup>Ricardo G. Abad, “Filipino Religiosity: Some International Comparisons,” *Philippine Studies* 43, no. 2 (1995): 211, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42634069>.

<sup>40</sup>Rowan Lopez Rebutillo, “BAHALA NA: In Search of an ‘Ordinary Theology’ for the Filipino Diaspora”, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, No. 22, Vol. 2, (2018): 241, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2016-0041>.

of risk-taking capacitated by either a latent or explicit faith. This aspect of risk-taking is encapsulated in the Filipino word for “faith”—*pananampalataya*. The word *pananampalataya* even contains in it the meaning of “*taya*”, i.e. literally, to “gamble” or take the risk. Faith is therefore a matter of leaping into the unknown with confidence in God’s wisdom. Thus, it is significant that pastoral care involves religious practices such as prayer, as an expression of *pananampalataya*.

- i. Contemplative Prayer (*Banal na Pagninilay-nilay*): Recently, the rise of meditation and mindfulness exercises in clinical practice has fostered the integration of the ancient Christian tradition of contemplative prayer as a therapeutic task. Integrated within clinical mindfulness approaches is the Christian practice of contemplative prayer of becoming aware of the God’s life-giving presence. Christian contemplative practices were not developed as stress-relieving strategies, although they may have been a by-product. Rather, contemplative prayer has long been practiced in the history of the church as a way of experiencing greater union with God in Christ. Contemplation is a spiritual discipline to become fully awake to God’s presence in daily life.<sup>41</sup> Recently, contemplative practices have been integrated with mindfulness approaches, as ways to help people in psychoemotional suffering.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Gregg Blanton use Thomas Keating’s “centering prayer” in his “contemplative-oriented approach”, along with “*lectio divina* (“spiritual reading”) in counseling.<sup>43</sup> Filipino counselor, Rolf Nolasco encapsulates this clinically-integrated contemplation in this way:

“The theory of change that undergirds this process is that the contemplative and mindful presence the counselor exhibits release [to the client] to become more aware and accepting, with compassion and non-judgment, of her own subjective and interior life. This creates the distance necessary for her to explore the myriad options available to her as she becomes more fully present and available to her own experience.”<sup>44</sup>

Both Nolasco and Blanton’s therapeutic contemplative practice attempts to be receptive to God’s compassionate presence through a non-judgmental and welcoming attitude to one’s thoughts, memories, and feelings.

---

<sup>41</sup>Rolf R. Nolasco, Jr. *The Contemplative Counselor: A Way of Being*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2011), 35.

<sup>42</sup>Robyn D. Walser, “Developing Awareness: Being Present and Self-as-Context”, in *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Bridge Psychological and Spiritual Care*, Jason A. Nieuwsma, Robyn D. Walser, Steven C. Hayes, eds. (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 2016), 70.

<sup>43</sup>P. Gregg Blanton, *Contemplation and Counseling: An Integrative Model for Practitioners*, (Downer Groves, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019), 35, 38.

<sup>44</sup>Nolasco, *The Contemplative*, 30.,

Evidence for the psychological benefit of contemplative prayer has been demonstrated in a recent longitudinal study among seminarians. In the study, meditative, colloquial, and liturgical (ritual) prayer has been shown to diminish experiential avoidance, which has been shown to foster unhealthy mental states. The researchers posit that these prayer types “help to remain engaged with the present moment in the face of adversity.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, practicing contemplative or meditative prayer over time, fosters psychospiritual resources that help a person downregulate anxiety and depression symptoms and grow in virtue and resilience. Through these contemplative and meditative practices, a person learns to accept a difficult situation (not deny or avoid it), and creatively engage it, while being aware of God’s abiding presence and providence.

- c. Cultivating *Kaligayahan* (“*Bahala Kayo Diyan*”): Qoheleth counsels his readers that enjoyment and light-heartedness is the wise way one responds and accepts the realities of life. This parallels with the sage advice from Proverbs 17:22 that observes how a “cheerful heart” is like good medicine to one’s being. This ancient wisdom is also confirmed by medical evidence which demonstrates how humor and laughter are physically beneficial as they release endorphins—brain chemicals that create feelings of pleasure and happiness, which in turn eases stress.<sup>46</sup> Studies show that humor as therapeutic intervention relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>47</sup> One caveat to humor is its potential use as a form of denial or as a way to escape reality. What this signals is perhaps a person’s unreadiness to come to terms with reality. However, even this humorous escapism can be considered as way to *initially* relieve anxiety and is perhaps a necessary step towards acceptance. When confronted with an unalterable crisis, humorous escapism may even be desirable and healthier compared to hopelessness and despair.

This propensity for the humorous has also been documented among Filipinos as a way of coping and interaction. For instance, Enriquez theorized that *biro* (“jokes”) in Filipino psychology are a way of easing tension in Filipino interaction or for establishing rapport (*pakikibagay*).<sup>48</sup> Humor is not limited only to building rapport, but is an expression of resilience.

---

<sup>45</sup>Gabriel B. Lowe, David C. Wang, Eu Gene Chine, “Experiential Avoidance Mediates the Relationship between Prayer Type and Mental Health Before and Through the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *Religions*, 13, 652 (2022), 17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070652>.

<sup>46</sup>Northwestern Medicine, “Healing through Humor”, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/emotional-health/healing-through-humor>.

<sup>47</sup>Ramesh Narula, et. al., “Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Reduction in Medical Education: Humor as Intervention”, *Online Journal of Health and Allied Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2011), 1, <http://www.ojhas.org/issue37/2011-1-7.htm>.

<sup>48</sup>Enriquez, *From Colonial*, 78.

- i. Humor as Resiliency: A running theme in this essay is the therapeutic and wise value of acceptance, of non-denial of reality, found in Qoheleth, *bahala na* attitude, and psychological flexibility. This finds agreement in the research on humor, as it functions as a means to deal with and accept what is real and suppressed, but in a way that diffuses anxiety and tense emotion. It is a release of relief about a subject matter that would otherwise have been hidden away or unacknowledged due to shame or the high tension it induces. Maria Rhodora Ancheta, studying Filipino humor-culture observes that Filipinos laugh as a way of releasing “pent-up feelings of powerlessness, otherwise unexpressed.”<sup>49</sup> Humor, functions as a way to build commonality, towards recognizing what is painful and uncontrollable. Therefore, to laugh (*halakhak*) is a means by which the Filipino adapts and negotiates one’s survival in difficult situations. Ancheta observes that “humor, is in fact, a Filipino weapon”, “a way to reclaim a space of power born of awareness”, “as a strategy to foreground the ways by which power could be recouped and reappropriated by its most ordinary citizens.”<sup>50</sup>

Cultural experience and mental health research seem to agree with Scriptural wisdom: to see and look for the humorous and light-hearted side is a healthy and helpful way to cope and survive. Hence, Qoheleth sees enjoyment and laughter as a grace of God in itself. To see the humorous is a way to accept reality, but likewise, to experience it as a grace from God. Laughter is thus a credible sign that divine grace is accepted.

## Conclusion<sup>51</sup>

What I sought to accomplish at the beginning is to develop Filipino pastoral insights that are Scriptural, empirically sound, and culturally engaged. The method I have utilized is the interface of the Filipino attitude of *bahala na*, psychological flexibility, and Qoheleth. I then proceeded by discerning their agreements, and sought conceptual parallels in Filipino thought, found in academic and ordinary circles, as categories for these Filipino pastorally caring insights. I then proposed, three themes, *pagdama*, *pananampalataya*, and *kaligayahan* as Filipino pastorally caring

---

<sup>49</sup>Maria Rhodora Ancheta, “Halakhak: Defining the ‘National’ in the Humor of Philippine Popular Culture” *Thammasat Review*, Vol 14, No. 1 ((2015), 55. <https://sc01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/tureview/article/view/40801>.

<sup>50</sup>Ancheta, “Halakhak”, 54-56.

<sup>51</sup>My very special thanks to partners in Christian soul-care, Dr. Bethel B. Webb, Dr. Irish T. Lopez, and Dr. David C. Wang for taking time to review an early draft of this essay. I have tried my best to incorporate their recommendations to further strengthen the essay. Any weaknesses however, are surely my own. I want to particularly acknowledge Dr. Wang’s positive feedback, whose own work and research in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, experiential avoidance, and spiritual practices, have been serendipitously relevant to the many points of this essay.



perspectives that emerge from the interface of *bahala na*, psychological flexibility, and Qoheleth.

From this study, *bahala na* as a cultural expression, appears to be a fertile linguistic resource by which to proceed in studying indigenous resources for spiritual care and resilience. As a cultural attitude, it has broad agreements with both research-based and biblical resources for fostering care. Thus, the Filipino propensity for acceptance, many times grounded in God's providence, as the preliminary attitude for creative action (*bahala na!*), is revelatory of where Filipino resilience seems to originate and emerge.

**Fritz Melodi** is currently serving as a Teaching Fellow at Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary (PBTS) in Baguio City. A Mindanawon and a native of Davao City, he is married to Joanna Mae Zambrano. He is also serving as assistant minister at La Trinidad Benguet International Baptist Church. He earned his Bachelors in Psychology from the Ateneo de Davao University, his Master of Divinity (MDiv) from PBTS. He earned his Doctor of Theology (ThD) at the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, studying the intersection of trauma, liturgy, and theology in the Filipino context. His research interests are interdisciplinary: engaging Filipino culture, liturgical theology and Christian soul care.