DIALOGUE ON DIFFERING ASIAN SPIRITUALITIES: FILIPINOS AND THAIS

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When I finished writing my recent book, *A History of Canadian Catholics*, I discovered few references to Asians or Asian spirituality and was immediately spurred on to begin working on a sequel about Asians in Canada. Thus conceived in my mind was the outline of *The New Faces of Canadian Catholics: the Asians*. There is a need for this volume in Canada because since 1970 Asians have come in great numbers. Asian Catholics are filling Canadian churches, supplying Canadian clergy and seminarians, and exerting strong influence on Canadians and Canadian parishes. Asians come to the Canadian Church with strong families, accomplished professional skills, and committed faith. Asians are suitable candidates for the Canadian nation and desirable parishioners for the Canadian churches.

My projected volume, *The New Faces of Canadian Catholics: the Asians*, demands not only a study of Asian Canadian Catholics, but also a study of their spiritual source, namely, Asian spiritualities. An examination of the matrix of Asian spirituality, which undergirds the Asian Canadian religious experience, is now timely. This investigation begins with a pioneering study of Asian Canadian Catholics, and at this time, there is no comparable study attempting such an academic enterprise. My study employs the techniques of narrative analysis² and traditional historiography. It seeks the foundation of Asian Canadian spirituality in a deeper understanding of Asian spiritualities. This year my research was expanded to Asian Catholics in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Mumbai, and now Bangkok. I share with you some of my interviews with Filipinos and Thais, whom I look upon as analogues for Asian spirituality.

I would like to divide this study, first, into the personal religious experience of Filipino Asians, second institutional changes, and third, the responses of Thai religionists to these experiences. I am taking Filipino

Catholics to be somewhat typical of Asian religionists and will discuss their religious experience in historical context. This means that Catholics and their post-Vatican II institutions, such as the Federation of the Asian Bishops Conference, local dioceses, and religious orders, while at the same time preserving the core of Christian values, are inculturating themselves to the Asian environment. As Asian Catholics, they express themselves in ways they feel suitable for Asians, in Asian song, language, vestment, and symbol.

Let me now share with you some of the stories I have heard from Asian Catholics since my arrival in the Philippines in September. Professor Maria Elena Samson was born in the Philippines and geared for studies from an early age. Elena's grandmother, who cared for her during the week when she was at school, would not let her go outside to play for fear that she would mix with children beneath her station. Nor was Elena allowed to look out of the window, as this would be a violation of the modesty expected for young women. Elena proved to be a good student, did well in the lower schools, and earned a master's degree in psychology from Indiana University and a master's degree in sociology from the Asian Social Institute in Manila. Professor Samson is currently involved in a doctoral program in applied cosmic anthropology at the Asian Social Institute. She has visited American, Australian, Asian, and European nations for study, business, and family reasons.³³ Interview with Maria Elena C. Samson, Asian Social Institute, Manila, 13 September 2004.

To her daughter and her students, Professor Samson communicates the values of family solidarity, love for people, involvement in the Filipino commonweal, and love for their Catholic faith. She finds that family solidarity and the love for their religion burn brightly in the hearts of young Filipinos who are sorting out their lives and value systems. In her view, generational conflict arises during the adolescent period when the young are striving to establish their own boundaries. Yet she admits that chaperons and group dating can still be the norm for teenage women in the Philippines dating the opposite sex. More leeway is given to 25-year olds in serious relationships. Marriage for her is best restricted within the categories of similar religion, ethnicity, and class. Inter-racial and inter-faith marriages, which do happen, are frowned upon by Filipino and Asian communities as they are often seen as being unsuccessful.⁴

Professor Samson is content to continue her work in the Philippines, but would accept a call to carry the ideals of ASI to other communities. As she has a medical plan connected with her work, she is comfortable with the protection she has. In many ways, like other Asians, she also appreciates the faith healers and herbal cures for minor health problems. But most of all, she believes Filipinos enjoy the help of support groups – groups of extended family and close friends with whom they feel "simpático." Suicides are minimal in the Philippines. But were psychiatric help necessary for herself or her daughter, she would not hesitate to employ its assistance. She believes in utilizing Western science and not regressing to antiquated customs. Elena Samson has no intention of leaving the Philippines, but if she were to send a family member to explore another nation for immigration, she would send as her pathfinder the best-educated member of her family. She shares decision making with her daughter, and they encourage each other in their careers.⁵

For inspiration, Professor Samson utilizes meditation, reflection, and contemplation but also employs some formula prayers, such as the rosary and novenas. She finds the Catholic Church leads her to spiritual growth and is her primary source of spiritual nourishment. She finds the church is very supportive in the care of ordinary people and in social justice. The Filipinos as a people, she believes, are naturally concerned with the care and well being of others. Filipinos are people who love to celebrate with others and incorporate good fellowship and music into their festivals.⁶

Other Asian Catholics may not always have the same buoyant hopes as Filipinos, or their need for communal celebrations. Yet like many Asians, Filipinos are reluctant to accept western psychiatry as an assist to a healthier life. They will seek a guidance counsellor readily, but are slow to go to a psychiatrist. Elena Samson is a strong woman mentally and physically and has been able to pursue her academic career unimpeded. She is a loyal Asian and is content to live the remainder of her life in the Philippines, but she would also be open to extend her career to other nations for altruistic reasons. Enjoying academic enlightenment, she still remains loyal to the Gospel of Jesus as found in the Catholic Church.

As director of Couples for Christ (CFC) and its *Gawad Kalinga* program, **Tony Meloto** was appointed by the Philippine government in

December 2004 to "lead the rehabilitation effort" in conjunction with other agencies of the "typhoon affected areas." Consultant to rice and the sugar cane workers, Tony Meloto works to defuse labour strife and bring the different sides toward a peaceful resolution of their dispute. He admits his service as conciliator is not always appreciated and that he has been derisively called "the deodorizer." Yet when he negotiates, he is aware that the wealthy farm owners are able to send their sons and daughters to quality universities, such as Ateneo de Manila and La Salle, while the labourers on their farms receive barely enough for existence.

Tony Meloto has been the Director of Gawad Kalinga 777 since 2000, a program which is building 700,000 homes in 7000 regions of the country in 7 years. He states that building houses for the poor is not about houses so much as it is about building community. It is a question of regaining productivity, which is needed for the maintenance of Filipino families. There is not enough work in the Philippines, and men do not have adequate work to support their family. Without work, the male loses his sense of being a son of God having inherent dignity as the provider, protector, and pastor of his family. Lacking work for their hands, many of the male population are humiliated when they find themselves irrelevant to their family and society. They become isolated, losing the sense of family and community, and are reduced to the animal level of survival. Their animal instincts dominate and turn them into predators for their own survival. Building homes, according to Tony Meloto, is a way to lead men into productive work to regain their humanity and Christian dignity. They learn to transform slum shanties into family homes, and their family into a warm and human resource for them.9

Tony Meloto has been a member of Couples for Christ since 1985. He worked in the biggest slum in the Philippines at Bagong Silang, to the east of Manila from 1995 to 2000. He worked with 2000 youths and their families and tried to understand the relationship of poverty and criminality. From his experience and observations, he learned that husbands, lacking work, are surplused in Filipino society. They are deprived of their rightful role as provider, protector, and pastor of their home community. The restoration of Filipino manhood became the priority of Couples for Christ to find ways to assist husbands to be responsible before God and their family. ¹⁰

Gawad Kalinga 777 co-opts men into house building and organizes them into neighbourhood associations to take leadership in their communities. Many men suffered from social alienation, were violent abusers or former prisoners whom Couples for Christ restored by using their model of productive work, family dialogue, and being concerned first for others before oneself. By drawing these men toward this model, CFC restores them to their dignity as sons of God and providers of their family. Builders and tradesmen, who know plumbing, electronics, and carpentry, work with the GK 777 men giving them on-the-job training. Professional workers give up Saturday golf to help the renewal of their GK 777 brothers by assisting them to be productive. Men work to restore men, and the affluent and the poor join together in the genuine communion of building homes for the needy. The spirit of CFC is to create harmony among the needy and to assuage their anger. Their overall motto is "less for self, more for others, and enough for all." They form a partnership with the schools, the needy, and the corporations to regain productivity for the good of all.11

According to Tony Meloto, the poor pray well because they are in pain most of the time and need God's help to make it through the day. They pray because they believe in the after life and want to be part of it. They go to Mass to get help to hold their marriage together and to continue the self-sacrifice for their spouse and family. In adversity, they pray for the strength to hold onto their family. Couples for Christ gather the new homeowners into households of 5-7 families who meet periodically to talk of their faith and support their neighbours. As a matter of fact, when the poor have food, they do not eat it all, but take some to those who have less. *Gawad Kalinga* 777 is designed to rehabilitate the husband's dignity and to renew the family by his presence. ¹²

Professor John Schumacher recognizes that the Filipino family, as other Asian families, is ambiguous and has both strengths and weaknesses. The family protects is members and makes sure they have jobs. Eldest daughters will sacrifice marriage to work and send their younger siblings to school, or to take care of their elders. On the other hand, family ties are strong factors in the graft and corruption which have hurt the Philippine economy and made it among the worst in Asia. For instance, Schumacher warns that "Fictive kinship by which sponsors at baptism and marriage

are bound by strong ties includes not only the sponsor and god-children but also the sponsors and the parents of the god-children. Family ties likewise lead to family dynasties by which high political office in the provinces is occupied by members of the same families over several generations."¹³

Religion is a great inspiration for Filipinos and keeps them in harmony with each other over the long term. Republican leaders, such as Jose Rizal, who were heroes who fought for Philippine independence, were more concerned with national political gain than religion exercises. Yet before they died, many republicans and Freemasons came back to the church to be buried in the Catholic cemetery with their family and relatives.¹⁴

For some Filipinos, devotions and pilgrimages are seeping back because for the young, they seem the right thing to do. While the cursillos are dying out, the charismatic movement is growing in strength. The Spanish friars after 1836 had taught a romantic loyalty both to cross and crown. Being docile students with good memories, the Filipinos continued European religious and civil loyalty throughout the American colonial regime. In recent years, with the death or withdrawal of foreign clergy, Filipinos have taken charge of their own religious orders.

The young people, observes Professor Schumacher, increasingly date as they like, and many imitate the American way of doing things and dress according to American fashions. Parents have generally given up on the old Asian ideal of arranged marriages, and let the young marry when and whom they wish. Affluent Filipinos accept psychological help, but most Filipinos find these services too expensive. Families have a balance between the authority of the husband as the head of the family, and the power of his wife as the treasurer of the family goods. This can occasionally lead in poorer families to wife beating by the husband demanding more access to the very limited family funds. Prayer groups educate young Filipino couples to initiate regular family discussion and share family decisions with family members. In the Philippines, the careers of professional women are built upon having the ready services of domestics who keep their family going. Filipino domestics who go abroad are educated women who provide financial support for their families and are also greatly appreciated in Hong Kong, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. ¹⁵ Ten percent,

or eight million Filipinos, work outside the country and are away from their families. Men hire onto ships, and women go to work in others' homes.

Religion is important to Filipinos both at home and abroad. They form prayer groups to deepen their spirituality and assuage their loneliness. In rural areas, basic ecclesial communities are common, and in the urban areas, Marriage Encounter and Couples for Christ are popular. Christian Life Communities and Bible Study groups are equally important. Prayer groups among Filipinos at home and abroad are more and more popular and growing in number and size. In the Philippines, adult catechism is becoming more popular, and catechists are being theologically trained to undertake full time paid positions to teach after hours in public schools. Filipino spirituality is alive and well in the Philippines and wherever Filipinos settle around the world. ¹⁶

Exposed to various nations of the world through travel, Professor Randolf David and his family have elected to remain in the Philippines where their ethnicity is solidly rooted. Philippine ethnicity for the Davids stresses close family ties, love of country, personal freedom, and excellence in professional performance. Randolf and and his wife Karina David during their university years were student activists, whereas their children were not. Randolf and Karina David are educated and spiritual people but do not go to church for various reasons, whereas the children are educated and spiritual people who go to church. Family dialogue and responsibility for actions have always been stressed in the family. Through discussion, the family comes to consensual decisions on schools, which children are to travel with them on vacation, or who might live abroad for a time. The children are well educated and trained to be assertive. The eldest son, Carlos, earned his doctorate at an American university. The eldest daughter, Kara, works in communications and had a child before marriage but did not marry while she raised her child because she did not feel ready for marriage. The second daughter, Nadya, designs book covers. The youngest daughter, Jovita, passed up an MBA degree and a lucrative profession to work as a Jesuit volunteer teaching mathematics in Palawan Island.¹⁷

A family consensus takes a positive stand for inter-ethnic and interfaith marriages. It is the family belief that openness is preferable to bigotry. Health care plans are modest for family members, and they are composed

of the University of the Philippines system and the national health system. Although the family would welcome psychiatric treatment were it necessary, it is expensive and avoided by most Filipinos for reason of cost. The David family believes that the best health care system is their own family.¹⁸

Randolf David has never needed a pathfinder in his immediate family, but in the family from which he sprung, one of his younger sisters was the pathfinder. She went as a nurse to San Diego where she has worked as a senior coronary nurse. She was followed by a second sister who is a medical technologist, and a third sibling who had completed law in the Philippines and migrated to the United States to manage a small printing company. Randolf David's youngest brother completed his bachelor's degree in economics at the University of the Philippines and moved to Los Angeles and works for an air freight company. Randolf David's siblings are all married and active in their American parishes. The Couples for Christ is a prayer group of choice for one of his American siblings.¹⁹

The David family is principled, highly responsible, and committed to spiritual authenticity. Professor David is a private person and needs time alone to pray in his own way. He is concerned with the issues of social justice in the Philippines and the world. He is a committed Filipino nationalist and wants by his presence to improve life in the Philippines.

One of the constant interests of sociologist John Carroll has been the 300,000 people living at Payatas, the garbage dump site near Manila. Many of the people came from the countryside to Manila looking for work, and unable to find it, went to the dump to become squatters and work at sorting garbage. Having no other place to go, those at Payatas marry and settle down in squatters' shanties and raise a family. They sort the garbage to make money selling glass, paper, metal and plastics for recycling. While the minimum wage in the Philippines is 300 pesos a day, they can make perhaps 200 pesos as scavengers. Others can make one hundred pesos daily weaving plastic doormats. Some of the people are construction workers, security guards, taxi, tricycle, and jeepney drivers. Many are people without skills who cannot find work, and others, over 50 years of age, who are too old to do heavy work.²⁰

Professor Carroll started a feeding program of supplying milk for over 500 "third-degree malnourished infants." His aim was to give them

adequate weight to avoid mental deficiencies later in life. The Jesuit order and American friends supplied the program money. "The weighing of children and distribution of the powdered milk was handled by Celing, a local volunteer and mother of four." Smart and capable, Celing proved to be "a paramedic and an all-purpose social worker in the community, assisting in the clinics, getting people into hospitals and watching by them at night, bringing in doctors from the Department of Health when there is an outbreak of cholera, and being called to intervene in cases of child abuse, rape, and incest in the community." Her own children, inspired by her service to others, became respectively nutritionist, social worker, and instructor in the Billings Method of Fertility Care. With the Don Bosco Brothers and Sisters, Carroll initiated a scholarship program for fifty students to enable them to take vocational courses, while others go on to community college. Some children at the city dump have become professional workers, such as Juliet who became chief of operations at a fast-food firm, and others who got into plumbing, electro-mechanics, and electronics. Transportation back and forth to the city schools is the major cost of this apostolate.21

The religion of the people, according to John Carroll, is folk religion. It consists mainly in baptism of infants and the family rosary. On major holidays, the new babies are lined up, baptized, and celebrated. Willing parents are offered instruction on the meaning of baptism for the lives of their children. The values that the children learn are respect and support of parents, and beyond their "face-to-face family," they have "little sense" of the larger community or nation. When Filipinos go abroad, interestingly observes Carroll, they settle more with language and regional groups than among Filipinos as a nation.²²

The parents do not find they are able to control their teens any longer. The young people want to go out at night and mix with their peers, and only recently has the community experienced adolescent pregnancies. Sometimes there is a marriage following the pregnancy, but often the couple will wait until next year. There has been considerable success with the Billings Method of Fertility Care in that over one hundred couples are practising it and having good success. The cost of "the pill" would be inhibiting to the people of Payatas. They are not shocked by inter-racial or inter-faith marriages among them, but they would avoid marrying a

bumbai, that is an East Indian moneylender, many of whom are looked upon as being aggressive and rough. Some of the brighter young women living at the dump would hope to be health workers or teachers, and go abroad, but their language skills are limited. Some of the men hire onto ships as seamen. Health care is fragile for most of the inhabitants. A German Doctors' Foundation sponsors a clinic, and two Jesuit doctors visit another clinic built by the German Augustinian Sisters. Psychiatric services would not be available except for extreme cases that are taken to the National Mental Hospital.²³

Earlier John Carroll mentioned that religious practices at Payatas were mainly folk religion. For some the church is "a place where one can cry, ask for help in trouble, tell God our sins, ask forgiveness, and come away feeling better." The churchgoers would believe that "Jesus is my friend who understands me and keeps me from committing suicide." Only a small percent of the inhabitants would attend Sunday Mass or know the responses and songs at Mass. The prayer groups which Carroll's associates animate include born-again Christians and at least one member of an indigenous sect. They appreciate the Bible study and mutual support, which they receive in the group. The Catholics would know the basic prayers like Our Father and Hail Mary. As a long-term chaplain, Carroll would feel that the gift that Filipinos have to give the world is their joy of celebration. This is demonstrated in the novena of pre-dawn Masses before Christmas which draw more people than any other religious occasion of the year and are celebrated as anticipated Christmas Masses, with many candles and bells, sung Gloria, white vestments, Christmas carols, and often afterwards, a "noche buena" of ginger tea and hot pastries.²⁴

I would like to point out some institutional bright spots in the Filipino and Asian spiritual environment which are religiously inspired, such as, the success of microfinancing in South and South East Asia in stimulating home industry, basic ecclesial communities in animating social justice ministries, and Searsolin working in South East Asia to renew agriculture among rural communities. In Mumbai, India, sixteen homes for street children were established over the last thirty-five years and 30,000 children have benefited and become productive citizens and some homeowners. Many of these programs are employed in countries throughout Asia to help low income people and are committed to a better economic, political, and

religious future for all. The concern that Asians show for one another is a manifestation of a number of very powerful spiritualities at work.

These signs, we have seen, reveal that the post-modern period is arriving in Filipino spirituality. Women become autonomous such as Elena Sampson. Self-styled spirituality as that fashioned by Randolf David is being lived. Secularizing of the university life and Catholic piety is proceeding apace. Couples for Christ direct their own ministries and build homes for the homeless. Volunteers following their own conscience take care of the inhabitants of Payatas. These self-directed laity have learned to discern the will of God for their communities, and they reveal the spiritualities of Asia as less static and more dynamic toward the future. They believe that conflicting interpretations of life will be resolved in the transcendent ²⁵

As part of the dialogue on Asian spirituality, I asked the Thais present at the talk to assist me draw conclusions appropriate for the Asian spirituality. The respondents included representatives of the Christian, Buddhist, Muslim faiths, and those with no particular affiliation. They responded to questions in regard to family customs, religious ideals, religious practices, national loyalties, and ethnic gifts. The respondents shared a traditional vision of family values which included solidarity with and care for the elders. These values they hoped to pass onto their children. Some included among their family values that they should live within their means, never borrow, and give generously to those in need. Sharing meals together and contributions to the family by one's work were also considered important. In contrast to these signs indicating that the Filipinos were entering into a period of postmodern change, the Thais in their responses to the questionnaire revealed a belief in unchanging traditional values which continue to guide their society.

Religious values which the respondents hoped to passed to their progeny included "the middle path" of insight, honesty, knowledge, contemplation, harmony, temperance, generosity, and enlightenment leading toward nirvana. A number of responses referred to "The Five Precepts" as a suitable code of conduct. The precepts teach disciples to avoid killing, stealing, lying, alcohol, drugs, or sexual misconduct. Positively, they asked disciples to think, speak, and do good things. The query on religious practice elicited similar responses. For some, going with one's family to a place

of worship weekly was an important exercise, while for others giving alms was more significant. Religious people related by their questionnaires that listening to God's voice in the Scriptures, the Ten Commandments, the Five Precepts, and prayer is important. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving in Asian spirituality continue to be meaningful exercises.

National values are part of the Asian value system. For example, many Thais have a strong loyalty to the royal family and to their country, and the young studying abroad return quickly to Thailand after finishing their studies. Thais in general do not seek work abroad or settle in foreign countries. As a nation, the Thais believe in their special national gifts which include the welcome of visitors with delicious food, human kindness, tolerance, and generosity. Love of family and elders, hospitality and peacefulness, religious values and Buddhist culture are the Thai manifestations of a traditional Asian spirituality. Dominated by a national commitment to Buddhism and in contrast to a more flexible Filipino spirituality, Thai spirituality looks upon itself as traditional and unchanging. Filipino Catholic spirituality, in contrast to Thais spirituality, shows the manifestations of change in response to the breakup of the modern world.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴ Interview with Maria Elena C. Samson, Asian Social Institute, Manila, 13 September 2004.
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- ⁷ *The Philippine Star* Metro, "Gawad Kalinga Leads Typhoon Rehab Effort," by Perseus Echeminada, 12 December 2004.
- ⁸ Interview with Antonio P. Meloto, Executive Director of Gawad Kalinga, Couples for Christ Office, Manila, 25 November 2004.
- ⁹ Interview with Antonio P. Meloto, Executive Director of Gawad Kalinga, Couples for Christ Office, Manila, 25 November 2004.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Antonio P. Meloto, Executive Director of Gawad Kalinga, Couples for Christ Office, Manila, 25 November 2004.
- ¹¹ Interview with Antonio P. Meloto, Executive Director of Gawad Kalinga, Couples for Christ Office, Manila, 25 November 2004.
- ¹² Interview with Antonio P. Meloto, Executive Director of Gawad Kalinga, Couples for Christ Office, Manila, 25 November 2004.
- $^{\rm 13}$ Interview with John Schumacher SJ, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, 19 September 2004.
- $^{\rm 14}$ Interview with John Schumacher SJ, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, 19 September 2004.
- ¹⁵ Interview with John Schumacher SJ, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, 19 September 2004.
- ¹⁶ Interview with John Schumacher SJ, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, 19 September 2004.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Randolf David, University of the Philippines, Manila, 17 September 2004.

- ¹⁸ Interview with Randolf David, University of the Philippines, Manila, 17 September 2004.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Randolf David, University of the Philippines, Manila, 17 September 2004.
- ²⁰ Interview with John J. Carroll SJ, Institute for Church and Social Issues, Ateneo de Manila University, 25 November 2004.
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- ²³ Interview with John J. Carroll SJ, Institute for Church and Social Issues, Ateneo de Manila University, 25 November 2004.
- ²⁴ Interview with John J. Carroll SJ, Institute for Church and Social Issues, Ateneo de Manila University, 25 November 2004.
- ²⁵ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 165.
- ²⁶ Kenneth W. Morgan, *The Path of Buddha: The Buddhism Interpreted by Buddhists* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), 103-7, 165-6, 372-4; Nolan P Jacobson, *Buddhism: The Religion of Analysis* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 38-39.
 - ²⁷ The Path of Buddha, 108-9, 134, 233, 370, and 390; Buddhism, 38-39.