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WRITING THE DISASTER: A PHILIPPINE CASE STUDY OF THE CHALLENGE TO TRADITIONAL THEODICY IN POPULAR MEDIA

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Abstract: The question initially raised in this paper was on how one's religious sensibility affects one's response to suffering. Focusing on three particular disasters that hit the Philippines, we look at the various media sources: the writing about the rains and flooding found in broadsheets and online media, and some ethnographic descriptions coming from the social sciences; we also look at experiential or anecdotal sources. All this provides us with material to establish certain traits and topics that come to fore in times of disaster, including such concerns as the lessons learned during disaster, the wrath of God, and points of cultural pride such as notions of solidarity and resilience. A significant upshot of this study has been the recognition of epistemic and methodological reevaluations that had to constantly be taken. This concludes in a retrieval of the contextuality of suffering (the historic, socio-economic – in addition to the religious – contexts of one who has been through disaster), a redefinition of what it means to say that the response is a Christian one, and finally a proposal that paying closer attention to these points, in addition to non-philosophical sources, might be a way of rethinking the problem of suffering beyond the scope of traditional theodicies.

Key Words: disaster; suffering; evil; religion; theodicy; Filipino; Christian; Catholic; media; ethnography.

False starts

A motoring journalist worries about how one's insurance coverage might not include damages due to so-called "acts of God,"¹ and from this concern he moves on to surmise on our propensity to place blame on God for misfortune that comes our way². I scanned this page with a smile, ready to scroll on to other pages that would serve me better in thinking about the topic of religious response to suffering; but then I paused, wondering, why is *this* not a viable starting point to philosophically discuss the question of the religious person's response in the face of disaster?

These were the questions that I had wanted to consider: what happens in the religious person's confrontation with disaster? Is a person's belief significant in the way he or she copes with the devastating reality of disaster? Is this person's belief affected – perhaps weakened or challenged – by the encounter with disaster? Will we find some dialectical dynamic between one's religious sensibility and how one deals with catastrophic events?

I first had thought that in trying to find some avenue within which to navigate these concerns, perhaps I should try to explore the philosophical discussion on the question of God and the presence of evil. And so I looked at the literature and found myself embroiled within diverse and difficult discussions of logical versus evidential arguments, of skeptical theism versus friendly atheism, on questions of the attributes of the divine, such as omniscience and omnipotence and omnibenevolence, and on the possibilities of possible worlds, and the question of whether among these there would be a best one.

"Evil and Omnipotence"³ is seminal in this discussion, giving rise to a number of debates that have continued in the literature, and which might be found in any of a number of compilations of philosophical essays. One then can look to Peterson⁴ or Reichenbach⁵ or Howard-Snyder⁶ or Van Inwagen⁷ as providing venues wherein one might immerse one's self into such discussions as have just been mentioned.⁸ It seemed then that engaging in the philosophical discourse on the subject required one to first look closely at Mackie's challenge of the irrationality of religious belief in the face of evil, and to then follow some strand of this debate and then perhaps to ultimately side with one camp or the other, of either accepting or rejecting the theist's claim that the existence of evil need not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle to belief in a God.

A problem that I had with these works and with this approach – apart from the intractable difficulties inherent to this debate – was the question of how this scholarly discussion is related to the religious response to disaster. Is there still any taking into account the particularity of the suffering confronted by those who have been affected by disaster? Is the

abstract discussion of the concept of “suffering” still connected to the particularity of the suffering that is experienced in the face of real disaster?

I had been hoping to write of the religious sensibility’s response to disaster; that is my own general statement. But perhaps I should now clarify that I was actually thinking more specifically: I had been wondering about my home country, the Philippines, which is often beset with all sorts of natural calamities. I am interested in the question: how do a people – one that generally would describe its members as being predominantly religious – deal with the reality of disaster?

Even that statement, of course, can be too broad. In a country beset by various natural calamities every year, it is easy to speak of a general proneness to disaster, and a general vulnerability of people. The sheer frequency of natural catastrophes besetting the country seems to be a matter of common knowledge; although one can, of course, refer to studies made on this, detailing the number of storms that hit the country in a given year, and other similar data.⁹ And in addition to there being such studies giving us such information and speaking of a general condition, it is likely to find also attempts at defining a general response.

One might take a poll and find that as of 2010, twenty-one percent of adults in the Philippines believe that God is unleashing his wrath with landslides, typhoons, and disasters, as reported by Bonabente¹⁰. Or one might find the happy assertion that: “Filipinos are basically a prayerful people. Their prayers express their faith and belief that God is constantly with them even in times of crises”¹¹. Or yet again, for instance, one might find a study like that of Bankoff¹² hypothesizing that the previous animist beliefs had given way to the notion of a Christian God who is understood as a force present in the natural world, one who dispenses favors but also punishes unacceptable behaviour; this would allow for two apparently contradictory responses common to the Filipino: that of prayer in an attempt to possibly avert disaster, and that of resignation in the face of forces that are beyond one’s control, or fatalism.

It seems, then, that we have already found the answer to the question I had earlier raised. There are, however, a couple of methodological considerations that must be addressed. First, we might ask the question: what role does this kind of socio-cultural description play in a philosophical discussion of the problem of suffering? Second, while some move had been made from a broad statement to specificity – that is to say, from, “suffering in general,” to, “Philippines in times of disaster” – we might ask the question of whether this suffices, or could we get even more particular.

We could, for instance, pinpoint certain disasters to focus on, limiting our discussion to three specific events.

In September 2006, a storm dubbed Typhoon Milenyo (international name: Xangsane) whipped across the greater Manila area and other

regions in Luzon, causing significant structural damage. One report emphasizes how the storm caused trees and billboards to topple and also triggered flash floods and landslides¹³; meanwhile another news article quotes a report from the National Disaster Coordinating Council stating that 114,000 families had been affected¹⁴. Another article gives more numbers coming from the Office of Civil Defense: 185,000 families displaced, 90,000 people housed in government evacuation centers, total damage to 9,149 houses and partial damage to 3,923 houses, and an estimated total property damage of 389 million pesos¹⁵.

And then one Saturday morning in September 2009, a storm that became popularly known as Typhoon Ondoy (international name: Ketsana) dumped record-level rainfall over a period of six short hours. Almost a month's average worth of rain within this six-hour span resulted in massive flooding, according to some, the worst in the past forty years¹⁶. In terms of numbers, Evangelista¹⁷ gives us the following: at least 73 killed, 70,000 families displaced, 9,600 of these in evacuation shelters, 300,000 people affected, and an estimated hundred million pesos in crop damage in the Calabarzon region alone. Meanwhile, De Los Santos¹⁸ ignores the numbers but instead speaks more qualitatively of the effect of experiencing the storm, focusing on the loss of life, the loss of property, on victims being traumatized, and on the struggle to cope, on the difficulties that attend meeting basic necessities and hygiene and communication, and the torment of being uncertain about the condition of loved ones.

And finally in August 2012, monsoon rains continuously falling over several days also caused flooding within the Metro Manila area, and in some of the surrounding provinces. Accustomed to associating bad rains and flooding with anticipated and thus "named" or "identified" typhoons, people were caught flat-footed that something that was "just" the monsoon rains could have this calamitous effect. People took to calling it Typhoon "Habagat," thereby referring to the monsoon as if it was a storm, perhaps to allow people to give some kind of name to this new nemesis. This widespread flooding in Metro Manila and nearby provinces would be seen by some as reminiscent of Ondoy¹⁹, and perhaps that is understandable in the face of its devastating effect. Whaley²⁰ reports more than 50 deaths and at least 250,000 evacuated in the span of several days, while Malig²¹ later updates us on the figures: at least 95 dead, more than 100,000 housed in evacuation centers, 3.4 million affected, and an estimated 2.26 billion pesos damage to infrastructure.

There have, of course, been many other natural disasters, some of even greater intensity and wreaking even greater damage, but these three mentioned here are of interest to us insofar as each one of them entered uniquely into popular discourse, the importance of which I hope to present shortly.

In talking of these events, we perhaps will recognize that the facts and figures, while significant, do not tell the whole story. The journalistic literature is not just all about dispassionately reporting what had taken place; the writing reflects the thinking, reflecting and opining that such calamitous events can bring about. And so maybe one consideration for us to ask could be: what are people saying not just *about* but *in response* to this disaster with which they are confronted?

Ready to pursue this approach, a new question now troubled me. I had looked at the philosophical debate on the problem of evil, but I then had refused to simply allow myself to get caught up within that; in other words, I refused to take the philosophers at their implied word that *this* must be the way to engage in the problem. I also looked at what we might call sociological attempts at cultural descriptions, but then likewise refused to simply take *their* word on the supposed general Filipino response to disasters, and instead wanted to look at three particular storms. Now looking at what various journalists have had to say about specific events, the question is: why now should I take these journalists at *their* word with regard to their opinion of these storms? Or should there not be some other interlocutor, some other participant in the discussion to temper what the journalistic literature gives me?

That is when I decided to fly down to the city of Legazpi. An hour away or so by plane from Manila, one arrives at Legazpi City, lying on the storm swept western Pacific, and under the shadow of majestic Mayon volcano. This is an area that is continuously beset by disasters: storms and the resulting floods and mudslides, an active volcano, intermittent earthquakes. These are the conditions that the people of Legazpi have had to learn to deal with, and various initiatives have been set up in aid of this. One of these is the Social Action Center (hereafter referred to as SAC), an office instituted and maintained by the Diocese of Legazpi. The SAC has various important concerns, including poverty alleviation and agricultural development; but one of their most urgent responsibilities is that of rapid response during and immediately after disasters. It occurred to me that maybe these people would be able to give me a more grounded sense of how real people responded to actual disasters.

I was very kindly and graciously received by their then-Director, who gathered a number of members of her staff for an extensive focused group discussion wherein I asked them of their thoughts, not about disasters *per se*, but what they would take to be popular ways of thinking about or responding to disaster, given all their experience of dealing with people who have actually experienced such calamitous events.

The idea was that I could then have these two sources in my trying to think of the religious response to suffering within the specific context of Filipinos given three particular storms. The first source could be called "literary," focusing on the writing that could be found in various media (broadsheet and online) at the times of these events; the second perhaps

could be called “experiential”, deriving from the SAC people reporting what they observe when on the field. What follows then can be described as some kind of going back and forth between these two sources – literary and experiential – as I try to find some answers to the question on the religious response to suffering. It might be pointed out that there is something random, anecdotal, perhaps even idiosyncratic about what I am doing. This is all true and would be a valid point of criticism if I had been pretending to make some universal and definitive claim about the response to disaster. But all that I am putting forward here is exploring avenues to philosophical reflection, and I hope to be able to show that with this modest aspiration, the effort has been justified.

Signs of the times

The connection that one can most easily make between the news publication texts and the possible presence of a religious sensibility lies in the use of biblical allegory to describe the current phenomenon. Understandably, we will find that the most common allusion associated to flooding caused by heavy rains is the story of Noah and the Great Flood in the book of Genesis; in one form or another – through mention of “Noah,” or “Flood,” or the sense of a “cleansing,” or even “ark,” – many writers incorporate the story of the deluge to the flooding being experienced²².

Other biblical references revealed a particular slant a journalist takes in understanding the phenomenon. And so one might see already a perspective of viewing disaster as a matter of God’s punishment when the flood is compared to the plagues sent against the Egyptian Pharaoh to bend his hard heart, as recounted by N. Cruz²³, or a comparison of the stricken populace to a sinful Sodom and Gomorrah²⁴. Another view focuses on the assistance provided by others, generously calling such people “good Samaritans,” recalling the Gospel story²⁵; finally, it might as well be added that some writers simply employ the adjective “biblical” in referring to the phenomenon – that is, of severe flooding – without further explication²⁶.

It is possible to see these literary connections as nothing more than the unthinking application of cultural baggage, and so must not be given undue weight in our consideration. The use of biblical language may be used by us as a marker of the specific Christian background that most of these writers are coming from, but the actual consideration of the Christian context in the face of disaster surely is not to be found there just yet.

The SAC people generally agreed that it is common for people to engage in thinking and questioning in the face of disaster. There are a number of possibilities we can point to with regard the question of what form this thinking might take.

One idea put forward is that a time of difficulty can be seen as a time of trial, in the sense that one's faith in God is being tested; and so, a priest is reported as having said, "...these trials are challenges that will make us all the more cling to God..."²⁷. Another idea put forward is that through the disaster, the divine is sending a message; one woman reflects on the damage and losses her family suffered, and concludes, "...maybe this was God's way of telling us it's time to clear the decks, to start again and build anew"²⁸.

By way of modulating on the idea of a divine message, a common theme is that the disaster provides an opportunity for *learning*. If one were to look across the board at the sources, it seems that every time a disaster strikes, people are ready to think positively in terms of a lesson learned. But an occasion to learn what exactly?

Many people point out the practical things, and provide an enumeration of what we now ought to know in terms of readiness for disasters that might come in the future. Some emphasized learning readiness in terms of making sure to have ready to hand such items as food, water, medicines, lighting (candles or lamps), an emergency kit, facilities for cooking, and provisions for personal hygiene²⁹. Another writer reminds us of the value of securing important documents³⁰.

Going beyond the personal preparation, it is also suggested that local government units consider suspending classes earlier than usual³¹, while the SAC people reported that the people of Legazpi, generally speaking, have learned the value of complying with rules and regulations set by the local government and the various NGOs that are concerned with disaster-readiness. And going beyond the immediate to more long-term preparedness, various writers opine that authorities ought to have learned at this point that stop-gap measures are insufficient, but that more systematic and sustainable solutions need to be found, particularly to the chronic problem of flooding³².

We will find that the idea of learning practical matters will be found in the discussion every time a disaster takes place. However, we will also find that at times, specific lessons to be learned will be put forward uniquely, as a response to a unique situation.

In 2006, the issue was billboards. One of the effects of Typhoon Milenyo was the damage done to huge billboards and tarpaulins in the city and along the highways. These signs being ripped from their moorings resulted in havoc on motor traffic, damage on vehicles and other property, and even fatalities. This led to a kind of questioning of this advertising practice by some authors³³ on whether more stringent measures should be in place with regard the permit for such signage. Almost immediately, politicians will make this one of their talking points. It can then be implied that the lesson supposedly to be learned concerned these capitalist advertising strategies that perhaps ought to be curbed.

Meanwhile, it seems as if all journalists and policy-makers in 2009 latched on to the issue of global warming, placing the blame for Typhoon Ondoy on irresponsible human behaviour that has contributed to acrimonious climate change. The surprising amount of rainfall dumped by Ondoy in a short period of time was taken as an indicator of how the “normal” way weather usually “behaves” has now been disrupted by human carelessness and disregard for nature, and so what we need to learn is becoming more environmentally conscious.³⁴

How do we make sense of this way that a certain issue can occupy the writing and thinking done in the face of natural disaster? At the simplest, and perhaps most obvious level, it can be said that perhaps we naturally respond to specific incidents and particular developments at the time they occur. If one wished it, one could view this in a cynical way and accuse such authors of near-sightedness and topicality, maybe even of journalistic pandering, or the unthinking regurgitation of popular views. But one need not look at it in this way, but perhaps in a more neutral or even positive light, we can appreciate how the thinking that takes place at a time of disaster is always contextual, is always in response to specificities that cannot be simply predicted or universalized.

The more significant point then is not that there are lessons learned in a time of disaster, but to understand that the specificity within that response of learning (or any other response, for that matter) involves recognizing the particular time and place in which disaster occurs, with the attending circumstances, not only of the disaster but of those who confront it.

In 2012, a particularly controversial context will animate the discussion of disaster.

The Wrath of God?

It seems to be a common reaction to see natural disasters as the result of divine wrath, as a matter of God imposing retribution in the face of human sinfulness. Pascual³⁵ opines: “It must have been God at work when Milenyo’s thundering winds shattered the glass windows of the condominiums of some big grafters ensconced on upscale floors of luxurious residential towers.” Three years later, De Quiros³⁶, without quite saying the floods were God’s punishment, tied up the occurrence of disaster with wrongdoing, considering the flooding caused by Ondoy as a direct result of governmental corruption and misappropriation of funds. Meanwhile, Macabale³⁷ gives the divine a more active role in inflicting suffering as a matter of punishment for sin, writing, “God sent the killer flood and only those who believed in Him were saved. Today, the same story has been repeated because people tend to forget their Creator while busily enriching themselves, engaging in social networking, or prematurely campaigning for a position.”

In 2012, there was a particular issue that would again open up the question concerning God's wrath: the passage into law of the Reproductive Health Bill.

For many years, a stiff debate had occupied legislators and policy-makers, as some had been pushing for legislation that would address concerns on reproductive health and sex education, and which in turn was met with great resistance from others who saw in the provisions material that was unacceptable from their religious perspective.³⁸

As Alave³⁹ recounts, on the day before the rainfall, discussion and debate on the bill had ended with the majority decision being to pass on the bill to the next stage of legislation. She reports how one opponent of the bill opined on social media that "heaven must be crying" and another commented that the bad weather was a "direct message from God", notions that, as she also reports, someone else will describe as "dumb."

Representing the "anti-RH bill" writers, we can put forward Sison⁴⁰ who writes that the flooding caused by both Ondoy and Habagat were "heaven's response" against progress being won by proponents of the RH Bill, and he further remarks that being part of the unpopular minority that is against the bill is analogous to being one of the steadfast early disciples who had faced persecution, and indeed those who are for the bill are then comparable to the mob who had demanded that Christ be crucified.

Many more authors disagree with this assessment; without necessarily being for the RH Bill, they are critical of the idea of seeing in the disaster the wrath of the divine at work⁴¹. Their rhetoric range from the simple exhortation, "Do not equate disasters or any tragedy, whether man-made or natural, with the wrath of God,"⁴² to the more caustic commentary, "Stupidity knows no calamity – as with the case of RH bill detractors who used the incident to 'strengthen' their case and conclude (without reason or logic) that God sent the rains as punishment for the country for pushing the RH bill".⁴³

In addition to the recognition of the contextuality of response to disaster, this particular debate allows us to also realize two more important points: first, that there can be contending opinions in response to a disaster (making one call into question the idea of a "general" Filipino response; second, there can be a thinking and re-thinking of these ideas which is reflected in the literature.

An interesting observation I derived during the SAC discussion was when I asked about this idea of punishment. All the participants answered affirmatively when I asked them if it was common to see disaster as a matter of divine punishment; however, when I asked if it was believed that the punishment was deserved, only half of them concurred. How then do we account for this apparent discrepancy?

Again, a negative and cynical perspective will interpret this as just another symptom of a lack of thought among the *hoi polloi* wherein one

easily accepts the idea my suffering as God punishing me for something without really considering just why exactly or for what reason. But, then again, if one tries to look at this in a more positive light, instead of a mere dismissal, the question can be asked: is it possible that the way of thinking that simply equates punishment with dessert has been somehow transcended?

We will return to this point later.

Rapidly, responses

In addition to the themes presented above, a few more ideas had been put forward and also called into question; let us discuss in turn the topics of equality, solidarity, and resilience.

On equality

One idea put forward is that the disaster serves as an equalizer, insofar as people both rich and poor could be adversely affected. Some news writers, noting how different people within the socio-economic stratum in different locations of the metropolis had been similarly affected by flooding, spoke of the disaster in terms of an equalizer. And so for instance, we read in Andrade et al⁴⁴: “The floods made no distinction between the rich and the poor. All suffered in the latest natural disaster to hit the country. Similarly, we also read, “The epic flood caused by Typhoon Ondoy in Metro Manila became the great equalizer as rich and middle-class residents fled their homes for safety, turning into ‘evacuees’ themselves”⁴⁵. The implication at work here is that everyone is accustomed to hearing of how poorer people in less stable living spaces have to seek shelter in evacuation centers, but now, in the face of a particularly surprising and devastating storm like Ondoy, even those who are generally better off are likewise reduced. To summarize this point, we can quote N. Cruz: “Storm ‘Ondoy’ was a great equalizer. The flood treated everybody, rich and poor, equally. It didn’t play favorites, exempting no one. It made everyone miserable”⁴⁶.

The SAC people challenged this way of thinking, with half of the respondents concurring with the idea and the other half resisting it. In the course of our discussion, they revealed a penetrating insight that maybe such comments on equality are easily made by people who are generally well-off and are surprised by how a storm could easily deprive them of accustomed comforts; however, those less well-off are painfully conscious of how a disaster severely affects them and actually widens the gap between the have’s and the have-not’s. The immediacy of the hardship at the very moment of disaster seems to make of it an equalizing agent, but the presence or absence of resources that will allow one to recover in the aftermath of disaster is quickly brought into stark relief.

In the literature, we have a senator quoted as saying, “We should also find a way to solve the vicious cycle of poverty and disaster wherein every time there is a disaster, these poor people suffer and they lose their properties, they lose their livelihoods and as a result they become even poorer”⁴⁷. Also we have Gulle⁴⁸ writing about the rains in a way that questions not only the supposed justice of a disaster punishing those who approve the RH bill, but also the supposed equalizing the storm has effected on people: “The people most affected by the ‘Great Flood’ in Metro Manila and nearby provinces were neither supporters nor detractors of the RH Bill, who are mostly middle class; the flood victims were mostly among the poorest, most disadvantaged members of our society.”

On solidarity

Some writers speak positively about how a catastrophe can sometimes promote a sense of solidarity. The Filipino term is “*bayanihan*”, and this can be read as a form of social or communal involvement most evident at a time assistance would be needed and appreciated. As one book puts it: “The ‘*bayanihan*’ (mutual assistance) spirit is considered part of the *pakikipagkapwa-tao* trait which refers to the Filipino’s natural openness to others and feeling of oneness with others. It is also shown through the ability to empathize through helpfulness and generosity in times of need”⁴⁹.

In the time of these rains and floods, some writers find occasion to once again laud this communal spirit. So for instance we have Tan opining: “The worst of crises, of disasters, always brings out the best in people,”⁵⁰ as he observes that despite slow government reaction, things are getting done on the local level, thanks to community effort and people’s charity and volunteerism. Such statements seem to corroborate the idea found in the literature on the description of Filipino generosity, particularly during troubled times.

Other writers, however, have proven critical about the idea. In the aftermath of Ondoy, one will find in the article of Braid⁵¹ a concern that while there is much to be admired in the stories that retell how people can be capable of sometimes small and sometimes heroic generosity, there perhaps is a need to get out of a mindset that inclines to revel in such reactions and concomitantly to breed a sense of complacency. As one writer put it, “...this outpouring of generosity affirms the good side of the Filipino. The better side has to appear: the sense of direction, the sense of determination...”⁵².

An ambivalence is thus disclosed concerning the idea of generosity as a Filipino characteristic exhibited during – or in the aftermath of – a disaster. It is not rejected, although its status as an unqualified good is called into question.

On resilience

Another idea called into question is the supposed resilience of the Filipino at times of difficulty. It is also sometimes taken as a given that one commendable trait of the Filipino is his good cheer and stout heart even when confronted by difficulty, loss, even tragedy.

One way that this is contested is, again, like the topic of generosity, not to question the existence of the trait, but to problematize its status. It is suggested that it is a fine Filipino tradition to organize quickly and efficiently to provide relief, although this way of thinking sadly also reflects a culture of complacency that makes itself more prone to calamities⁵³. Or as Obiena⁵⁴ puts it, there is a need to go beyond the rethink passivity of endurance to something much more active and prepared. Or, as put more pessimistically, “What is both sad and scary is that there seems to be no visible ray of light as of the moment. Not until the government develops a better strategy than relief operations. Not until we demand more from government officials. Not until we demand more responsibility and accountability from ourselves, as well. Until then, the future remains cloudy for Metro Manila.”⁵⁵

Another complication of this idea is the common identification or association of this resilience with religious faith. And so we find it given as a general statement describing the Filipino: “Faith is the Filipino’s source of courage, daring optimism, inner peace, and ability to accept tragedy and bear grief”⁵⁶; and we find it mentioned specifically during the habagat: “Come to think of it, [Filipinos] are a resilient lot. Their ability to bounce back to consolation from desolation is uniquely a blessing. Faith sees them through any dark situation. Faith conquers their fears. God to them is bigger than any problem that comes their way.”⁵⁷ But can one simply presuppose this connection?

This problematic became a point of debate, or at least considerable discussion among the SAC respondents. They had answered affirmatively when asked if at time of disaster, the Filipino character is revealed. When asked to explain this, they agreed with the sentiment that it is a matter of resilience and the capacity to cope in the face of adversity. When I further asked whether this is connected to religious faith, the seeming unanimity was troubled, as some wanted to attribute resilience to a strong religiosity while others seemed more willing to concede that maybe this resilience is not necessarily a matter of faith.

I hope that I had been able to put forward not only that there are these ways Filipinos have characterized and continue to characterize themselves, but that it should also be recognized that none of these descriptions are set in stone but are becoming increasingly critiqued and contested.

Conclusions

I deliberately pluralize the heading, as there were a number of related and yet different realizations I had in the course of this project.

There were some answers found to the initial question raised on the religious response to suffering; the literary and experiential sources got us to see how in three disasters, Filipino Christians could be said to respond as possibly having in mind such notions as that of divine punishment, and possibly associating their resilience in the face of disaster to their Christian faith

And yet the process of arriving at those observations seems to have disclosed ideas that might have more far-reaching repercussions in a discussion of philosophy of religion. And so, without setting aside my earlier question, but seeing the attempt to struggle with it as a case study, I will end this paper by turning to these ideas. In a nutshell, these have to do with respecting the contextuality behind any attempt to speak of disaster, with considering and reconsidering a specific Christian sensibility that is responsive to the disaster, and finally it has to do with forging – or at least foreseeing – new paths that might be taken within philosophy of religion.

Contextuality

Perhaps it is necessary to recall that in trying to think about the religious response to suffering, first and foremost it would be wise to keep in mind that all such discussions are worthless if not rooted in the very real suffering that real people undergo, and with a view also of not simply describing but of better comprehending, and thus in some sense also responding to that real suffering. This sentiment – or perhaps we ought to say conviction – is eloquently put by Mostert: “The stories of suffering must be in our ears whenever we attempt to speak theologically of evil and suffering, and our speech must be such as to engage us more tenaciously in the struggle against evil, whatever its form, and in action to alleviate suffering”⁵⁸.

To listen to stories of suffering, to look at the reality of people who suffer, is to pay attention to the particularities that attend an instance of suffering. We are speaking to the wind when we speak of suffering only in general terms of something like “a universal part of the human condition,” but suffering happened to this person, to these people, at this time, at this place. It happened to persons having a unique historical, social, and economic contexts that inform the way they respond to a disaster.

And yet there is also a need to recognize that the response is never simply static. The work of sociological and anthropological description is valuable but also unending; the responses that are identified can be fluid, in the process of being critiqued and contested, not just by outside

observers, but at times even by the very people involved.

Christianity

It is not surprising that the religious context within which much of the discussion had taken place had been a Christian one. It can be said that at the simplest level, the people we had been talking about (and to) would mostly call themselves Christian. But that apparently simple fact is one that actually requires further elaboration: in *what way* can the response be properly called a Christian one?

It perhaps can be easily restated that the use of biblical language as we might find in the literature does not translate into doctrinal reflection. And so we will not find in the popular thinking of disaster some theological reformulations, such as can be found in Adams⁵⁹ where an understanding of suffering as redemptive might be part of a new Christology, or the presentation in Wenham⁶⁰ of a God beyond us. Neither will we see some theoretical attempt at theodicy, either of the free-will variety of Plantinga⁶¹, or the soul-building variety of Hick⁶², or the process variety of Griffin⁶³. This might come as a surprise, because, going back to what I stated at the onset, the debate on suffering stemming from Mackie seems to almost always come around to a discussion of the merits (or lack thereof) of one theodicy or another.

An interesting discovery I had when talking to SAC people: they were unanimous in claiming that the existence of God is never called into question at least within their experience of people faced with disaster. There is bitterness, they said, and there is questioning of why such things are happening, but this questioning never translates into a wonder about whether or not God exists. I will suggest later what we might make of this apparently unphilosophical stance. For the moment, we can put forward that the absence of that particular question requires us to rethink the idea of religious response, that perhaps it takes on a form to which those of us in philosophy are unaccustomed.

For instance, the question may be raised on whether only a theoretic or intellectual response is possible and whether such a response is even desirable. In discussing theodicy, Surin⁶⁴ and Swinton⁶⁵ in their works separately although similarly criticize the sort of theoretic or intellectual theodicy that satisfies itself with the logical coherence of its notions of the divine, whereas perhaps we should have a more practical orientation that would focus on the actual suffering of persons, of victims, and would concentrate on consolation for suffering undergone and on resistance to continuing evil. Or perhaps there is good reason to accept Long's statement that, "Christians approach deep issues in life, such as the theodicy question, with logic, honest questions, and clear thinking, but they also probe mysteries through praying, singing hymns, participating in worship, and engaging in bold service"⁶⁶.

And yet how, the philosopher might ask in indignant perplexity, how could we proceed without bringing the discussion around to the question of God's existence, to the question of whether or not religious belief makes sense? Would he allow himself to accept and be satisfied with Adams' posited image of a Christian when she writes: "The Christian may come away deeply convinced of God's goodness and saving power without being able to articulate any clear recipe for predicting his behavior in future situations"⁶⁷? Or, to bring us back to a Filipino context, what would he make of a statement that puts forward: "The intimate relationship that Filipinos have with their religion allows them to accept reality in the context that all events are within God's will and plan for the world"⁶⁸? Would he allow for a different perspective, a different preoccupation, a different kind of philosophizing?

Directions

In the Introduction to his book on various essays on the problem of evil, Van Inwagen writes: "This problem, the philosopher's problem, is only one of the many problems that belong to the complex called the problem of evil"⁶⁹. I agree with the statement, but at the same time would want to go further: not only, I think, should there be an acknowledgement of other problems apart from the issues often discussed by the philosophers, but maybe philosophers ought to start thinking about questions other than those which they are so used to asking.

And so again, given our focus on the religious response to suffering, I had thought that this would be about theodicies and their validity and use, but then the idea – common to the literature – of thinking of suffering as a matter of divine punishment, was given a different twist. Let us go back to the conundrum of how we might speak of one's being punished without quite acknowledging one's deserving of any punishment. Perhaps the philosopher will simply suppose that this could only be a result of a lack of logical scrutiny. Or could the philosopher take the trouble to think *with* this line of thinking, to try to *see* how it might make sense? Might it be possible to accept that one might think of punishment as shared equally between those deserving and those who are not? Is Bankoff on to something that might be of philosophical significance when he presents the idea that Filipinos perhaps maintain a concept of a shared burden⁷⁰? Could one accept that maybe one is responsible even when one is not at fault, and thus be accepting of the consequences of another's actions? Could responsibility then be re-thought, not as a matter of culpability, but as a different kind of responsiveness?

Or, again, let us return to the question of the relation of religion and ethics. Will the philosopher confine himself to a Kantian or Lewisian moral argument for the existence of God, or will he be open to the idea that it is through the generosity of others that one might become more thankful of the goodness of God? Running at cross-angles (although not contrary) to

the idea of a sense of moral obligation as one's ground for presuming God's existence, maybe one can become conscious of – and appreciative of – God's grace all the more at the time of disaster because of the moral goodness exhibited by others. The SAC people suggested to me an interesting dynamic, something a philosopher might refer to as a dialectic: that it is the generous response of others to me in my need which reinforces my faith; and also my faith in turn compels within me an ethical call to respond to the needs of another. Is this perhaps a good reason for the philosopher of religion to be interested in solidarity?

These topics will be happily and assiduously discussed in later work; for the moment, I am happy to open them up as potential topics that were brought to light by the twistings and turnings of trying to figure out how to think of the religious response to suffering, by the consideration of various texts, and perhaps most significantly, by talking to actual people who had something significant to say, acquainted as they are with suffering in ways a sheltered philosopher cannot fully grasp.

If the philosopher cannot fully grasp it, could he appreciate it? My hope then is that this paper would be read not simply as some quaint exercise in ethnographic description, but as an invitation to proceed in new and diverse directions: to widen the scope of what is traditionally considered as belonging to philosophy of religion, to explore – if not necessarily embrace – unorthodox methodologies, and to consider sources often ignored in academic philosophizing. Maybe it is not only possible but also necessary as a philosopher of religion to engage with religion as it is thought and practiced, and this means listening – carefully and critically – to what people have to say, and examining one's own hermeneutic lens in viewing what he hears and sees, and finally, and perhaps most difficultly, in losing the arrogant presumption that he and his fellow philosophers alone are the ones engaged in critical thought.

Notes

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