

Kierkegaard in Quiapo!: An Existential Look at the Quiapo Black Nazarene Popular Religious Experience

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“The first thing to understand is that you don’t understand”.

The aim of this essay is to philosophically understand the popular religious experience of the Black Nazarene devotees in the light of Soren Kierkegaard’s notion of faith. Among popular religious practices in the Philippines, it is the devotion to the *Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno* in Quiapo Manila that draws much attention not only to the devotees, but also those who intend to explore on the unique exhibition of Filipino faith. Jesuit Catalino Arevalo who is a pioneer in the study of popular religiosity in East Asia contends that despite immensity of its believers, there exist insufficient number of researches conducted and thus necessitates further studies.² Among the limited studies, if not by sociologists and historians, are written by anthropologists or theologians, but rarely viewed (or perhaps none!) in the philosophical standpoint.

It is in this noble attempt the 19th century existentialist Soren Kierkegaard shall be employed, particularly his notion of faith in coming up with a fresh understanding of the Quiapo religious phenomenon. The choice of framework is based in his comprehensive study of “faith” illustrated in the influential works *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). In *Fear and Trembling*, the pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio³ examines Biblical hero Abraham when confronted by a unique (or perhaps insane) divine ordeal of sacrificing his very own

¹Soren Kierkegaard, quoted by Paul Strathern. *Kierkegaard in 90 Minutes Audiobook* (Ivan Dee and Blackstone Audiobooks, 2003).

²Msgr. Jose Clemente F. Ignacio “Understanding the Devotion to the Black Nazarene” Paper Presented National Liturgical Congress (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, January 19, 2011). See also Msgr. Jose Clemente F. Ignacio “The Devotion to the Black Nazarene” *Windhover: The Philippine Jesuits* (March 2011).

³In the introduction by Alastair Hannay’s translation of *Fear and Trembling* he quotes Louis Mackey as regards Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms: “A Kierkegaardian pseudonym is a persona, an imaginary person created by the author for artistic purposes, not a nom de plume, a fictitious name used to protect his personal identity from the threats and embarrassments of publicity. When Kierkegaard signed his books with impossible names like Johannes de Silentio (John of Silence) and Vigilius Haufniensis (Watchman of Copenhagen), no one in the gossipy little world of Danish letters had any doubt about their origin. Nor did he mean they should; his purpose was not mystification but distance. By refusing to answer for his writings he detached them from his personality so as to let their form protect the freedom that was their theme.” Louis Mackey. *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 247.

and only son, Isaac. Through which, he is enthroned the “Knight of Faith” for trusting God with “faith by virtue of the absurd”, in which context is “inward”, “subjective” and “passionately” appropriated by himself.⁴ In such ludicrous moment of his existence, Abraham finds his meaning anew,⁵ gains back Isaac⁶ and realizes the world⁷ in a higher and new understanding. The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, through the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard provides important definition of faith characterized inwardness, passion and subjectivity.⁸ Both Kierkegaardian works illustrate the highest meaning an individual is capable of achieving in life. Paradoxically, this existential meaning is solely understood in the most absurd situation and perceived through the eyes of an irrational faith. This notion of belief is commonly interpreted in the English speaking world, as the “leap of faith”.

The choice of the locale of the study, Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila, is based on its geographical proximity and its famous (or perhaps infamous) practices of “sublime” religiosity, *vis-à-vis*, the charges of fanaticism,⁹ superstitions¹⁰ and idolatry¹¹ that leaves the historic church an epitome of “blind faith”.¹² Along with this paper’s aim is the hope of coming up with a secular understanding of “faith” perceived in the viewpoint of the popular or common people, opulent educated few consider as “marginalized” and “secondary”. The essay is, timely, as it partakes in the widespread commemoration of Kierkegaard’s bicentennial birth (1813-2013) and the Catholic Church’s declaration “Year of Faith” (2012-2013).

⁴Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*, ed., trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983) p. 35-36, 37, 50. (FT, hereafter).

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 69

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 37, 115.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* ed., trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 154. (CUP, hereafter.)

⁹Aguinaldo. *A Study on Filipino Culture: The Devotion to the Black Nazarene* (Quezon City: MMA Publications, 2002) p. 27.

¹⁰Eduardo Domingo. “Opium or Catalyst?: The Ambivalence of Religious Symbols in Social Change” *And God Said: HALA!* Ed., Jaime A. Belita, C.M., (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991) p. 56.

¹¹Ma. Carmen R. Gaerlan. “Hidden from the Clever: An Initial Study on Selected Religious Beliefs and Practice of Filipino Popular Catholicism” *And God Said: HALA!* Ed., Jaime A. Belita, C.M., (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991) pp. 137-148.

¹²Ignacio, “Understanding the Devotion to the Black Nazarene” n.p.

Religious Frenzy

Albeit Quiapo devotion involves numerous rites,¹³ the essay limits itself on the annual and grand procession called “Translación” (Spanish term for “passage”).¹⁴ It is held every 9th of January traversing the five-kilometer streets of Manila in commemoration of the 1787 transfer, of the life-size wooden image of the suffering Christ, from its original Augustinian church in Intramuros to its present basilica. The recent January 2013 procession amounts to nine million barefooted devotees (majority are men and few courageous women)¹⁵ all in unison desire to touch the statue, or at least, its garments. Devotees believe that the statue brings marvelous claims of healing, material and spiritual blessings. As such, this mute image of the Christ is a powerful relic to the devotee.¹⁶

One of the popular practices of Quiapo devotion is the “pamamasan”. This is done either by the actual carrying of the “andas” (platform without wheels) or through the pulling of the “carrozza” (platform with wheels) via pair of fifty-meter abaca rope attached to it. The rope serves as a “virtual cross” to the devotees who are not so fortunate to get near the statue.¹⁷ If the

¹³Examples of which are as follows: a.) Friday novenas, “pahalik” or kissing of statues, b.) “pamumunas” and “pahawak” or the wiping, touching, and kissing of the wooden cross or garments of the image, c.) “pamamasan” and “pag-aandas” or the pulling of the abaca rope attached to the carrozza and the carrying of the “andas”, d.) “pagyayapak”, or the barefoot walking throughout the procession, including the “to and from” devotee’s point of origin) “paglalakad ng paluhod” (moving from the church door towards the altar on bended knees), f.) “mandarasa” (group of women and few men performing prayers in favor of the petitioners), g.) “pasindi (lighting of candles of different shapes and colors depending on the intention)”, h.) “pag-aabito” (wearing of deep maroon tunic with gold tassel around the waist), i.) “pabihi” (changing of the Black Nazarene garments), and j.) “pabendisyon” (sprinkling of holy water on religious articles and items such as passport, ball pen, amulets, etc. Cf. Aguinaldo, pp. 33-45. See also Leonardo N. Mercado, S.V.D. ed., “Punas-punas: The Idea of the Holy” The Filipino Popular Devotions: The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion and Christianity ed., (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2000) pp. 43-79.

These popular religious practices are not exclusive to Quiapo devotion alone but also observed in many popular devotions locally and abroad. Cf., Leonardo N. Mercado, S.V.D., ed. Filipino Religious Psychology (Tacloban: Divine Word University Publications, 1977) p. 98; Fernando N. Zialcita The Filipino Popular Devotions, The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion and Christianity, p. 65; Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B. “Folklore and Christian Worship”. Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas vol. 47 no. 524 (March 1973) p. 167-171.

¹⁴The study further excludes the “hidden trades” on –going at the Quiapo church premises, e.g., pool of fortune tellers, commerce of “anting-anting” (amulets), underground transactions on herbal medicine, abortive pills and sexual enhancement instruments.

¹⁵Dennis Carcamo “9M Devotees Attended Black Nazarene Feast” Philipinestar.com January 10, 2013. Available: <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2013/01/10/895376/9m-devotees-attended-black-nazarene-feast>. Accessed: October 5, 2013.

¹⁶This leads to the formation of “Hijos de INazareno” or the “Sons of the Nazarene” in 1939 to secure from few die-hard devotees’ attempt to cut piece of the image, the cross or its garments during the procession.

¹⁷In an interview done May 20, 2013, a member of the Hijos (refused to be identified) admits that after procession, they cut the ropes to pieces and distribute among themselves. He adds that some consider a spiritual trophies, remembrance, healing amulets and even lucky charms to few.

mere touch of the rope already makes one a true “mamamasan”, then a few seconds of “*pamumunas*” (the touching or wiping towel to the image) is considered a “miracle” due the large probability of getting smashed up, trampled, suffocated and sometimes, be killed by the ocean of people pressing one body from all directions. A CNN correspondent narrates experience of the recent 2013 Translación:

“Even from our height, you can feel the lack of breathable air below, the parched sweats, the fury of cries, and almost the smell of fallen dead skins as bare feet scraped against hot pavement. The sight of the sea of devotees as they scampered, jostled, and struggled for a chance to pull the carroza or to touch the Black Nazarene can only be describe as one of “religious frenzy”¹⁸

Local reports state that from 2004 to 2012 alone, there are 1,588 people hurt and seven lives lost in the annual “*pamamanata*”.¹⁹ The longest duration is recorded in 2012 that lasts twenty-two hours.²⁰ The basilica Rector and Parish Priest, Msgr. Jose Clemente Ignacio acknowledges the existence of the blurry thin line that demarcates fanaticism and true faith during the Translación:

¹⁸“The Annual Feast of the Black Nazarene” CNN iReport January 9, 2013. Available: <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-907647>. Accessed: May 15, 2013.

¹⁹Based on the medical teams and local police districts assisted the annual Translación from 2004-2011:

“2004 – A man died while dozens were hurt after thousands of devotees scrambled to touch the 200-year-old image during the procession. At least 20 suffered cuts in different parts of the body out of the 100 devotees treated, according to the Western Police District-Tactical Operation Center.

2005 – The Fire Emergency and Paramedic Assistance Group tallied 16 injuries while an operations officer of the Quiapo Church reported 47 people wounded. There were no recorded deaths.

2006 – Two male devotees died while 15 others sustained injuries, according to the Philippine General Hospital. Four suffered from hypertension while 11 suffered bruises. The Manila Police District recorded 1,000 injured devotees.

2007 – The number of injured persons dropped to 284, according to the MPD. There were no fatalities recorded.

2008 – Two people died of heart attack and 50 others were hurt in the mad scramble of devotees jostling to touch the Black Nazarene.

2009 – At least 227 people were treated for afflictions including exhaustion, dehydration and hypertension, including a pregnant woman, according to the Philippine Red Cross (PRC).

2010 – Two people died and more than 450 were hurt in the crush of some two million devotees who took part in the procession, according to the PRC.

2011 – A total of 560 devotees sustained injuries including lacerations, abdominal pain, sprain, headache, dizziness, difficulty in breathing, hypertension and back pain during the procession that started at the Quirino Grandstand in Rizal Park’.

Cf. Charmie Joy Pagulong. “Timeline: Deaths, Injuries During Quiapo Procession” Philippine Daily Star January 8, 2012.

²⁰Jeannette Andrade and Matikas Santos “‘Longest Ever’ Black Nazarene Procession Ends” INQUIRER.net/January 10, 2012 Available: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/125633/longest-ever-black-nazarene-procession-ends#ixzz2lu9vJ7PR> Accessed: November 28, 2013.

"We admit that there were elements or excess of fanaticism that needs to be corrected but we also saw from them yesterday (Monday) the seed of their deepening devotion"...Ignacio said shortly after the procession ended at 6:11 a.m. Tuesday, more than 22 hours after it started inching its way through sea of devotees along a 5-kilometer route Monday morning. Ignacio equated fanaticism to irrationality, thinking only of one's self and not listening to others. As to the devotees' yearning to touch the miraculous image, Ignacio said... 'I understand their very strong desire to touch the Black Nazarene... that's their way of expressing their faith.'"²¹

Thus, one cannot but ask: what drives a devotee undergo such piety for an image of Christ? What are their intentions? Are they real and authentic? What are their thoughts in such practice of faith? Or, are they thinking in the first place? If so, can they be justified, or at least, be communicated for a scientific or philosophical inspection? Is there a philosophical method applicable in the understanding of the phenomenon? If so, is Kierkegaard's existentialist kind of "faith", a trustworthy means to comprehend the religious experience of the Quiapo devotion?

Some Perspectives

Historian-anthropologist Felipe Jocano asserts that Filipino popular religiosity is a result of intertwine between Western Hispanic Catholicism (beginning in 1521) and the indigenous animistic belief as expressed through home-grown rituals.²² Religious studies scholar J. De Mesa supports this claim when he

²¹Jocelyn R. Uy "Black Nazarene Devotees Displayed 'Excess Fanaticism,' Says Quiapo Priest" INQUIRER.net January 11, 2012. Available: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/125993/black-nazarene-devotees-displayed-%E2%80%98excess-fanaticism%E2%80%99-says-quiapo-priest>. Accessed: May 15, 2013.

²²Felipe LandaJocano. *Folk Christianity: A Preliminary Study of Conversion and Patterning of Christian Experiences in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Trinity Research Institute, 1981) p. iii. Cantwell-smith supports the same: "the history of religion teaches us that religion has a history. This is a fundamental; a fact of crucial, even evolutionary, significance. It is not tautologous because people have realized it at all in the most peripheral way". Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, "On the Comparative Study of Religion" *Ways of Understanding* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972) quoted in Teresita Obusan's "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios: A Study of Filipino Folk Religion" And God Said: HALA! ed. by Jaime A. Belita, C.M. (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991) p. 91. Cf., Palmo R. Ita "Jove Rex Al: The Making of Filipino Christ" Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy (Osaka: 2012) pp. 10-12 and Leonardo N. Mercado, S.V.D., "Indigenous Malay Influences in Filipino Christianity" *Dancing with the Music: Missionary Spirituality as Experienced with the Indigenous Peoples and Communities in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2008) pp. 153-179. See also Malcom Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*: New York: Little Brown and Co., 2001) pp. 50-51.

distinguishes the two kinds of Filipino religiosity: the Official Catholicism, the dissemination of Christian message through the culture of the European missionaries and Popular Catholicism, i.e., the active reception of Catholicism by the natives of the islands.²³

Jesuit psychologist, Jaime Bulatao (early part),²⁴ however, approach the phenomenon on the level of Filipino consciousness which he coins as the “split-level Christianity”, or the having of “two or more thought and behavior systems... inconsistent with each other coexisting in one person”,²⁵ as in the case of a pious devotee but never attended any Eucharistic celebration in his entire years of “pamamanata”.²⁶

Theologian and liturgy expert Anscar Chupungco contends that popular Catholicism is more comfortable to the common folks since “Filipinos go to church for mass and sacraments, but their interest as a community is focused on their folk ‘liturgies’... (where) they felt at home”.²⁷ Ignacio concurs “...in the past (popular religiosity) was considered ‘outside’ of the normally acceptable and universally approved church practices. It was not ‘encouragingly given’ its place in the approved cultic celebrations of our church... (yet) through Popular Religiosity, many families today encounter God and are enlivened in their faith”.²⁸ Theology and Filipino Philosophy expert Leonardo Mercado, explains that religion in the Filipino mindset can be described in the context of the idea of “sakop” or the culture of “being-with-others” i.e., interpersonal and at the same time hierarchic in nature.²⁹ This trait concretely manifests in the Filipino values of “utang-na-loob” or deep feeling

²³José M. de Mesa. “Primal Religion and Popular Religiosity” East Asian Pastoral Institute vol. 37 no. 1 (2000) Available: <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/content/primal-religions-and-popular-religiosity>. Accessed: May 15, 2013. See also, comprehensive discussion on Mercado, ed., *Filipino Popular Devotions: The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion and Christianity*, pp. 13-17.

²⁴Bulatao, however, made a transition in the more recent years, which Fr. Mercado coined as the transition from the “Pre-Vatican Bulatao” towards the “Post-Vatican Bulatao”, the latter as more acquiescent to the possibility of genuine faith via the popular religiosity. Leonardo N. Mercado, S.V.D. ed. *Filipino Religious Psychology* (Tacloban: Divine Word University Publications, 1977) pp. 183-184.

²⁵Jaime Bulatao, S.J. *Split-Level Christianity* (Ateneo University: Capitol Publishing House, Inc., 1966) pp. 1-18.

²⁶Rodolfo “Mang Rudy” G. Gaa. “Quiapo at ang Nazareno” Video Interview (Manila: VCM Batch VII Mapua Information Technology 2005).

²⁷Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B. *Towards the Filipino Liturgy* (Manila: Benedictine Abbey, 1976) pp. 1-2.

²⁸Jose Clemente F. Ignacio “Understanding the Devotion to the Black Nazarene” National Liturgical Congress Paper Presentation (Makati City: San Carlos Seminary, April 12, 2012).

²⁹Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD. *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Tacloban: Divine Word University Publications, 1975) p.119. See also, Florentino Hornedo *Culture and Community in the Philippine Fiesta and Other Celebrations* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2000) p. 45.

and responsibility of reciprocating gratitude out of great favor or wish.³⁰ Ethnologist Florentino Hornedo clarifies that “utang-na-loob” is “not an obligation to pay materially but of good will-benevolence”, thus, immaterial and perpetual.³¹ In the context of Quiapo religiosity, “utang-na-loob” is paid through an act of “pamamanata” or sacred devotion one avows to continue until his last strength (or to be passed on to the next generation).

Mercado explains that the “pahalik/pamumunas” devotion during Translación is a result of the concrete and intuitive way of Oriental thinking obverse with the binary and logical way of Westerners.³² Thus, when one touches the image (sign) one touches Christ (Signified).³³ He adds that faith in this level is “not only an intellectual assent to an impersonal religious truth... but a personal act of loyalty involving one’s entire self” and thus transcending and transformative.³⁴ A media anchor and devotee corroborates Mercado’s explanation when he remarks:

“Once makahawak ka na sa lubid napakasarap ng pakiramdam. Para kang...sabihin na nating umangat ang iyong personalidad... kasi, bilang tao napakarami mong problema... pero once makahawak ka na sa lubid o kahet anung parte ng Mahal na Poong Nazareno, nawawala lahat na ‘yon’.”³⁵

Sociologists and anthropologists more or less share similar views on the charisma of the Quiapo devotion as it draws much popularity to the ordinary people. First is the physical imagery pertaining to the dark tone of the statue attuning with the Filipino natural complexion,³⁶ and second, its psychological imagery

³⁰Ibid., p. 116-118.

³¹Florentino H. Hornedo. *The Favor of the Gods: Essays in Filipino Religious Thought and Behavior* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2001) pp. 154.

³²Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* pp. 161, 163.

³³A detailed account of this thinking vis-à-vis Filipino religiosity illustrated in Allan Cacho’s “Symbolism in Religion: Ricoeurian Hermeneutics and Filipino Philosophy of Religion” *KRITIKE* (December, 2007) pp. 122-131. Available: http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_2/cacho_december2007.pdf. Accessed: May15, 2013.

³⁴Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, p. 117.

³⁵“Once you get hold of the rope, the feeling is good.. It’s like... let’s say your personality is lifted... since, as a human person, you are filled with problems... But once you already touched the rope, or any part of the beloved Nazarene, all those are gone”. Kervy Cristobal. “Pistang Itim na Nazareno Coverage” PTV 4 January 9, 2012.

³⁶The darkened skin of the Nazarene image involves two theories: 1. an unknown Mexican sculptor mimicked the native Aztec’s complexion, and 2. the image miraculously survived the fire that engulfs the ship on its way to Manila from Acapulco (debate continues, however, since many images in the Philippines contemporary of the Black Nazarene share similar skin tone as in the case of Our Lady of Good Voyage in Antipolo, Sto. Nino of Cebu, Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Naga and others). See also Fernando N. Zialcita. “The Burnt Christ: The Filipinization of a Mexican Icon” Unpublished. Available in <http://www.yodisphere.com/2012/01/feast-of-black-nazarene-in-quiapo-faith.html>. Accessed: October 03, 2013.

associated with refuge from their sufferings living in a third world country.³⁷ In the study “Images of Christ in the Filipino Culture and Atonement Experiences”, D. Elwood, reveals that the image of the suffering Christ gains the most popular illustration of Christ Jesus among 78% of the Filipinos as they “attach great importance to the suffering and dying Christ more than to His life and teachings”³⁸ (the same reason, perhaps, people crowd churches during Good Fridays and less on Easter Sundays). Catholics, now and then, flock to Quiapo church asking courage and grace to carry on with the struggle against “suffering” caused by poverty, corruption, diseases, injustices, crime, among others.

In *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines 1840-1910*, historian Reynaldo Ileto discusses Filipino suffering in the concept of “Lakaran”³⁹ or the “journey on foot”. He associates the customary abuses of the Spanish colonization with Christ’s suffering on the road to Calvary, just as the lives of the Filipinos then, it is a “long and dangerous journey on foot inflicted with constant physical suffering”.⁴⁰ Mercado also uses the concept of “lakaran” as pilgrimage with special task, i.e., to proclaim the Gospel.⁴¹

Cultural anthropologist Milagros Aguinaldo, however, focuses on the strong hope amidst sufferings and the promise of the Señor Nazareno brings to its believers. As observed, the unique statue of a “half-knelt, half-standing” image of Christ, despite heavy burden on its shoulder, typifies Filipino’s optimism and resiliency amidst natural calamities, social, political and economic crises. Through Quiapo devotion, the believer is capable of standing once again every time he falls just as the promise of God to His people.⁴²

³⁷BennoTorgler. “It is About Believing: Superstitious and Religiosity” Center for Research in Economics, Management and the Arts (2003) pp. 1-24. See also, Delotavo, Allan J. “Images of Christ in Filipino Culture and Atonement Experience: A Case in the Contextualization of the Gospel” *Asia Journal of Theology*. no. 3 (n.d.) p. 142.

³⁸Elwood, Douglas J. “The Popular Filipino Christ” *Diwa6* (1981) p. 9 quoted by Allan J. Delotavo “Images of Christ in the Filipino Culture and Atonement Experiences: A Case in the Contextualization of the Gospel Message” *Asia Journal of Theology* (1989) p. 143.

³⁹Cf., Soon Chuan Yean Cf. “Politics from Below: Culture, Religion and Popular Politics in Tanauan City, Batangas” *Philippine Studies* vol. 56, no. 4(2008) pp. 420-421.

⁴⁰Reynaldo Ileto. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, Press 1979) p. 56. Mercado, further develop the same idea of “Lakaran” to explain Quiapo “Translación” as a symbolic method of evangelization.

⁴¹From the term “lakad” (“may lalakaran”) can also mean “a task” or “a mission” to fulfill. Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD. “Lakaran: A Filipino Way of Proclaiming Christ” *Studia Missionalia* vol. 51. (2002) pp. 301-332.

⁴²Aguinaldo, pp. 3-4. See also Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD. *Christ in the Philippines* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1982) p. 53-55.

Kierkegaard's Existentialist Faith

Kierkegaard's notion of existence gave birth to the philosophical movement known as "Existentialism" which concerns itself "with the understanding of human existence in its concreteness rather than as an object of understanding or theoretical abstraction".⁴³ For him, the term "existence" lost its meaning the moment man began to think of it. The Greek-medieval view of man's essence as "rational" left his meaning presupposed and pre-ordained. The question of "what" and "how" to exist has been presumed simply as "given truths" when thought turns its focus to its advancement. The existential deterioration of human person reaches its peak in Hegel's introduction of his universal idealism.⁴⁴ With Hegel's framework, the individual and his freedom succumb to the overarching reality of the Geist that permeates in the history of man's civilization.⁴⁵

Kierkegaard strongly reacts to this and asserts that meaning is a result of individual's choice situated in the moment of existence. One, thus, becomes a project in the continuous state of becoming through willing and living. Kierkegaard's preference with the use of the Danish "*forekomst*" in reference to existence is closer to "*livet*" or the "living" rather than being "is" (presence). The "how" of living is more fundamental to the "whatness" of being.⁴⁶ For him, the individual's concern is to discover truth meaningful to his existence when he says: "to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die".⁴⁷ Gaidenko, thus, reminds readers that Kierkegaard's writing must be understood "not (as) a philosophical dialogue but an existential drama".⁴⁸

⁴³R. J. ZwiWerblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., "Existentialism" The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 244.

⁴⁴Kierkegaard wittingly writes: "Hegel would be the greatest thinker who ever lived if he had constructed his whole systematic edifice, and then, at the end appended a footnote that the whole thing, after all, was only a 'thought experiment'; as it is, he is merely a comic". CUP p. 191

⁴⁵CUP, pp. 44, 47-48, 101, 103.

⁴⁶For a comprehensive and more recent survey of the development of Existentialist movement, see Thomas R. Flynn. "Existentialism: Toward the Concrete" Journal of Speculative Philosophy vol. 6. no. 2 (2012) pp. 247-255.

⁴⁷Soren Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong. (Indiana: Princeton University Press, 1967-78) vol. V, no. 5100.

⁴⁸P.P. Gaidenko. "Kierkegaard and the Philosophical-Esthetic Sources of Existentialism" Russian Studies in Philosophy, vol. 44, no. 4 (Spring 2005) pp. 5-33.

Dialectic of Existence

Man in search for meaning undergoes “dialectic of existence” via “stages in life’s way”. In his work *Either/Or*, pseudonymous author Victor Eremita discusses the first two spheres: the aesthetic and ethical. The aesthetic sphere is ruled by pleasure (Greek “*aesthetos*”=senses”) depicting life controlled by fleeting moments of joy. Here, the individual is a free-spirited man living his fullest since he considers himself as an end itself. However, the triviality of this stage makes him realize that external pleasure is ephemeral and desolating. Such emptiness brings him to a state of “despair” where the only solution is to be conscious and gain full control of his life. Hence, the individual is given a choice to remain in despair or to discover higher state of being.

The second dialectic of existence is the ethical stage, where man in his maturity is ruled by reason possessing freedom to change and create himself. He aims of becoming his “ideal” self directed towards elation to serve humanity. Man’s end at this stage is “duty”. This end is universal since all men will of doing good and avoid evil. However, in the performance duty, the individual experiences despair as he experiences failure and disenchantment in dealing with others. Such inadequacy results from the incessant experience of boredom and persistent emergence of one’s aesthetic past. Man at this level must choose either to remain in a life of disappointment or transcend towards another sphere.

The third and highest stage is the religious stage. In Kierkegaard’s influential work, *Fear and Trembling*, pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio analyses the story of the Biblical hero of faith, Abraham as “he left behind his worldly understanding, and he took along his faith”⁴⁹ to confront a divinely odd ordeal of sacrificing one’s son. Abraham’s obedience to God’s seemingly “insane command” can be only seen through the eyes of “faith by virtue of the absurd”.⁵⁰ The decision is founded on a belief that “... virtue of the absurd, (is) by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible”.⁵¹

⁴⁹FT, p. 17.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 35-36, 37, 50.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 46.

The “*Aqedah*”⁵² or “the binding of Isaac” signifies the existential transcendence from the ethical towards the religious stage. The act of killing Isaac, offers no ethical principle that justifies an atrocity commanded by the omnibenevolent God. Silentio deals with the quandary through the “teleological suspension of the ethical”⁵³ where the individual “maintains his true faith and called upon to set aside normal canons of morality in order to obey Divine will despite of the act, i.e., clearly immoral”.⁵⁴ This “suspension” is the unique test⁵⁵ that appears incomprehensible and irrational to the eyes of all, save the believer. It is an ordeal that leaves reason behoove to “silence”⁵⁶ along with a wisdom which secret is “foolishness”.⁵⁷ This “paradox of faith” made Abraham the “Knight” above all rest. Silentio writes:

⁵²Jewish scholars such as Ze'ev Levy, contends that the “Aqedah” is grossly misinterpreted by Kierkegaard since suspension of morality inevitably lead to relativism, immorality, and sacrilege. Levy quoting Milton Steinberg’s *Anatomy of Faith* “From the Jewish viewpoint... the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstance, and not for anyone, not even for God. Especially not for God... What Kierkegaard asserts to be the Glory of God is Jewishly regarded as unmitigated sacrilege. Which indeed is the true point of the Aqedah, missed so perversely by Kierkegaard”. Ze'ev Levy “On the Aqedah in Modern Philosophy” *Journal of Jewish Thoughts and Philosophy* (2012) p. 106. Martin Buber anticipated the same decades earlier with his “On the Suspension of the Ethical” that appeared in *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press 1988) pp. 113-120.

However, Alastair Hannay in his introduction clarifies that Kierkegaard must not be identified with his pseudonymous authorships (i.e., Johannes de Silentio) to avoid such misapprehension of the Aqedahas committed by Emanuel Levinas’ *The Genealogy of Ethics* (1995) and Theodore Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1989). Alastair Hannay “Introduction” CUP, p. xxvi.

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 54-67.

⁵⁴Robert Gordis. “The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard’s “Teleological Suspension of the Ethical” *Judaism* (2001) p. 414.

⁵⁵Simon Podmore distinguishes two kinds of “tests” based on Kierkegaard’s usage of Danish terms “*Anfægtelse*” and “*Prøvelse*” in *Fear and Trembling*. The former is a “spiritual trial” communicable to the universal and resolvable by Resignation and the latter refers to the “ordeal” of Abraham, or the inexpressible paradox experience of faith that appears absurd to others. Podmore concludes that Johannes de Silentio’s “*Prøvelse*” is much proper to the case of Abraham since it is “evocative the way in which gold is refined in fire and, thus, deeper than ‘*Anfægtelse*.’” Simon D. Podmore “The Sacrifice of Silence: Fear and Trembling and the Secret of Faith” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol. 14 no. 1 (2012) p. 71.

⁵⁶Johannes de Silentio writes: “In ‘silence’, as he (Abraham) left his home with Isaac and said nothing to Sarah, nothing to Eliezer—who, after all, could understand him?” FT, p. 62. There are numerous studies on what Kierkegaard truly meant by “silence” beginning with the pseudonym “Silentio”, critic of solipsism, to the incommunicability of the truth of faith. Simon Podmore explains the twofold meaning of “silence” in the context of sacrifice: first is silence of Abraham before God when he trusted that in Him all things are possible, and second, the silence before the other due to aporia brought by the incommunicability of such heinous act. Podmore, pp. 70-71. For more aspects of “silence” in Kierkegaard’s works see also Olivia Blanchette, “The Silencing of Philosophy” *International Kierkegaard Commentary* Vol.6 – Fear and Trembling and Repetition. ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993) 29-64. See also Robert L. Perkins. “Abraham’s Silence Aesthetically Considered.” *International Kierkegaard Commentary* vol.6 – Fear and Trembling and Repetition. ed. R. L. Perkins. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993) pp. 155-179.

⁵⁷Kierkegaard’s reflections on absurd and polemic attack against rationalism are commonly misunderstood and easily rejected the difficult philosopher as irrationalist, subjectivist or relativist. Cf. David J. Gowens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 10. However, it must be understood that Kierkegaard is not against objective truth, but in the manner how

"Abraham was the greatest of all, great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by that hope whose form is madness, great by the love that is hatred to oneself".⁵⁸

The "paradox" lies in the possibility of the impossible; Christ is God-man in time and space yet magnanimous in potentialities; meaning understood in absurdity; unethical command from a Being whom all ethics proceed; passionate individuality superseding universal rationality.⁵⁹ The paradox can only be grasped by a kind of "leap" into the abyss of faith that reveals meaning to one's existence.

The dialectic in the religious stage illustrates another important existential tension experienced through the "double movement of faith". Man in his resignation lost his whole self when his unintelligible trust "made by virtue of the absurd" returns favor to the believer and "gains the finite, whole and intact".⁶⁰ Through the "inscrutable will of the Almighty",⁶¹ Abraham, regains himself, only son Isaac and even fathered all nations.⁶² Thus, the paradox rests in the losing all, one gains everything.

Freedom and Dread

The paradox of faith is rooted from the paradoxical nature of freedom. In his work *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis illustrates that the awareness of freedom produces dread. The individual is constantly dreaded by the truth that one has the infinite capacity to choose every possible option including the "unchoosable" ones. This anxiety, or the indeterminate fear towards something is describe in the "dizziness" when man stands at the edge of the abyss and the fact that pushing oneself is part of the reality of his inherent freedom. This thought

rationality attempts to understand realms of faith and existence that are supra-rational and not antithetical to reason itself. Kierkegaard's main concern is that Christianity is personal involvement and not mere acceptance of intellectual truths. Cf. C. Stephen Evans, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith" in *Religious Studies* (1989) 25, 347-362.

⁵⁸FT, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁹For Silentio, "faith is ... this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal... so that after having been in the universal...the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal". Ibid., p. 55.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 37.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 21.

⁶²Ibid., p. 36.

becomes an incomprehensible reality and can only be appreciated when one takes the risk of plunging himself into the immensity of existence. He writes:

"One may liken dread to dizziness down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy...In this, dizziness freedom succumbs. Further than this psychology cannot go and will not. That very start everything is changed, and when freedom rises again it sees that it is guilty. Between these two lies the 'leap' which no science has explained or can explain".⁶³

If the plethora of choices in reality is beyond reflection and impenetrable to the science and logic, how, then, can the individual account truths of his existence?

Subjectivity is the Truth

Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus replies to this when he made distinction between two kinds of truth: the objective and subjective.⁶⁴ Objective truth is abstract, rational, universal and certain as provided by mathematics, history and natural sciences, whereas, subjective truth, is the manner towards these objective truths must be approached.

"Existence" is a truth belonging to the subjective realm since it can only be dealt by actual living (*"forekomst"*) and not through reflecting. In reality, existence is an aporia which is unraveled in the course of time though acting, feeling, believing, willing, hoping, etc.⁶⁵ Truths of existence are appropriated by an active engagement of oneself, no matter how dreadful and confusing they might appear to be, as in the case of "truth of faith" by the Christian martyrs.⁶⁶ Thus, it is only through "inward" and "personal" appropriation of

⁶³Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread* trans., Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974)pp. 54-55.

⁶⁴CUP, pp. 200-204.

⁶⁵Climacus explains that the actual is a product of "to be". However, "to be" undergoes change and thus cannot be a matter of necessity. Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* trans. Howard and Edna Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) p. 71.

⁶⁶Kierkegaard clarifies, however, that act of sacrifice by martyr saints is different from the martyrdom of heroes, since the latter is based on some noble reasons such dignity, honor and love of one's country, whereas saints, may not necessarily contain justifications proper to reason. Cf., FT, pp. 56ff, 115. The difficulty arises, however, when one objectifies the truth appropriated only subjectively, such as truths of faith. Climacus says: "existence itself... holds the two factors apart, and reflection marks out two relations. For objective reflection the truth becomes something objective, an object, and the thing is to disregard the subject". CUP, p. 161.

the individual one can understand existence, since for Kierkegaard, “subjectivity is the truth and truth is subjectivity”.⁶⁷

Suffering

Kierkegaard in his later works openly attacks Danish local Church with its bourgeoisie kind of living and its idealistic tendencies (particularly Hegelianism) towards faith. The systematic intellectualization of religion through its scholar-preachers⁶⁸ made individual’s faith a matter of objective truth. This is manifested when religion becomes a matter of routine: He writes:

“How can you not be a Christian? You are Danish, aren’t you? Doesn’t the geography book say that the predominant religion in Denmark is Lutheran Christian... Don’t you tend to work in the office as a good civil servant; aren’t you a good subject in Christian nation, in Lutheran-Christian state? So of course you are a Christian...All are Christian in a matter of course...to avoid the many annoyances and difficulties that will confront the child, if he is not baptized, in view of the existing police regulations”.⁶⁹

This reified form of faith resulting to depersonalization, hypocrisy and irresponsibility is what Kierkegaard means by “Christendom”, i.e., when one becomes a Christian by mere obligation and less of devotion.⁷⁰ To accuse, therefore, a Dane of not being Christian is tantamount to highest insult. Being a Christian without test of hardship makes his faith detached from truth and thus inauthentic making religiosity a “Sunday Christianity”.⁷¹

To become an authentic Christian is to be a witness of truth defined by “suffering” in the constant state of “fear and trembling”.⁷² Faith is focused in the individual imitation of Christ’s suffering which is “meant to separate oneself from the crowd and to do what was

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 212, 226, 233-236, 251.

⁶⁸It must be understood, that he is not against Christianity per se, but with the people governing it, particularly, the local Church of Copenhagen headed by a Hegelian Bishop J. P. Mynster, Theologian H. L. Martensen and with pastor politician N.F.S. Grundtvig, as they, for Kierkegaard, deliberately adulterated the interpretation of the Gospel. Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon Christendom* trans., Walter Lowrie (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944) pp. 34-35.

⁶⁹FT, p. 50-51.

⁷⁰Soren Kierkegaard. *Training in Christianity* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) p. 79.

⁷¹Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon Christendom*, p. 122.

⁷²Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*. 88.

not easy to do, humanly speaking”.⁷³ Kierkegaard’s faith demands submission of self subjectively to a truth even it appears insanity to the eyes of the objective world. In the early days of Christianity, one’s faith is identified with sufferings and persecution. Contrary to the contemporary kind of life, true Christianity is a mode of living that goes against what is pleasant and convenient in life and renounces affluence contained in it. He writes:

*“What Christianity wants is...the following of Christ. What man does not want is suffering, least of all the kind of suffering which is properly the Christian spirit, suffering at the hands of men.”*⁷⁴

Christian life also indicates a life time commitment to the witnessing of truth. One needs to persevere zealously from beginning to last amidst isolation, persecution and mockery from prevailing authority. Thus, true faith is an unending trust to God manifested in suffering. Kierkegaard writes:

*“A truth-witness is a person whose life from first to last is unfamiliar with everything called enjoyment – ah, whether much or little is granted you, you know how much good is done by what is called enjoyment – but his [Jesus’] life from first to last was unfamiliar with everything called enjoyment; on the contrary, from first to last it was initiated into everything called suffering.”*⁷⁵

Faith

In Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard, through Johannes Climacus, defines faith as:

*“... the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which precisely is the relation of inwardness raised to the highest power.”*⁷⁶

⁷³CUP, p. 272.

⁷⁴Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong.

⁷⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) p. 5 (emphasis mine). Martens and Millay concludes from the same quotation: “poverty, loneliness, lowliness, abasement, earnestness, anxiety, torment, persecution, mistreatment – this is, from beginning to end, the life of suffering.” Paul Martens and tom Millay, “The Changelessness of God’ as Kierkegaard’s Final Theodicy: God and the Gift of Suffering” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol. 13 no. 2 (April 2011) p. 173.

⁷⁶CUP, p. 514.

The definition involves three elements:

1. ***objective uncertainty*** - refers to the object of faith which is "God in existence"⁷⁷ whose ways are absurd. God's absurdity is the paradoxicality of Christ being Divine yet fully and concrete human, eternal yet temporal, infinite yet finite.⁷⁸ This absurdity is subjectively grasped by the individual since it is through "contradiction that is the absurd in which alone one can have faith".⁷⁹ God is Subject and hence He must be approached beyond science of reason.⁸⁰
2. ***held fast in the passion of inwardness*** - refers to the inward principle where subjectivity of oneself proceeds. This is realized through the individual's actual existence and experience of strong passion⁸¹ in meeting God. The inward passion is really distinct from emotions stimulated by the external world because "faith is indeed the highest passion of subjectivity".⁸²
3. ***repulsion of the absurd*** - refers to the response of God to the believer's subjective trust in Him when revealed as the Absurd.

The third element of the definition is significantly illustrates the process of Kierkegaard's "double movement of faith" where God reveals his concrete and real presence to the individual. The case of Abraham illustrates this when the highest meaning of existence is granted to the one whose faith is "by virtue of the absurd." The first phase is when the individual surrenders his whole life to a Being whose ways are absurd (murder of one's first born and only son is not only repugnant to himself but abominable to whole tribe). Through "repulsion of the absurd" he wins back his finitude intact but in an entirely new level of being.⁸³

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 273.

⁷⁸"The absurd is that the eternal truth has come about in time, that God has come about, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come about just as the single human being, indistinguishable from any other, since all immediate recognisability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view idolatry". Ibid., p. 127.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 178.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 168.

⁸¹Climacus explains: "Inwardness at its highest in an existing subject is passion; to passion there corresponds truth as a paradox; and the fact that truth becomes the paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject. This is how the one corresponds to the other. Through forgetting that one is an existing subject, passion dies out and the truth in return no longer becomes something paradoxical, but the knowing subject, from being a human being, becomes a fantastic something, and truth a fantastic object for its knowing." Ibid., p. 167.

⁸²Ibid., p. 110.

⁸³"And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd." FT, p. 41.

Kierkegaardian Faith in Quiapo

In an important essay “Devotion to the Black Nazarene as an Aesthetic Experience”,⁸⁴ that appeared in the multi-disciplinary commissioned work *Quiapo: Heart of Manila* in 2006, Anthropologist Celia Bonilla studies the expressions of faith in Quiapo devotion. She confirms the existence of the distance between popular and formal Catholicism (shared by De Mesa, Bulatao, Chupungco, Mercado, Arevalo, et.al) as she notes that the building structure is directly administered by the Catholic Church, “individual devotees, however, ...have their own ways of actualizing these meanings and their own explanations”.⁸⁵ In the same manner when all priests in their homilies make their caveat that the Black Nazarene wooden statue is a mere representation of the real person of Christ; and that processions and devotions are less important form of prayers, it remains a common scenario to witness church officers halting devotees walk in their knees during the consecration. Bonilla documents her interview with a professor-devotee as the latter was looking at young couple (wife pregnant) accompanying a toddler in a Nazareno maroon habit, in January 9, 1970 procession (the same time violent demonstration against former President Marcos erupted): “Kung sila hindi takot, may dala pang toddler, bakit ako matatakot? Parang hinahabol kami ng Molotov cocktail at armalite. We were in the San Sebastian area coming from Quiapo. On that day, Plaza Fair had just been set on fire. All of the establishments in Quiapo and Sta. Cruz districts suffered power failure due to arson. What seemed to move us was faith in the Nazarene that defied the odds. We went through the same route, through a candlelit procession punctuated by explosions and staccato shooting”.⁸⁶ It is in these contexts Bonilla defines “panata” when she says:

“The panata, or vow, is an internal force that propels the deboto (devotees) to come to the shrines and express their feelings in various ways.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴Celia M. Bonilla “Devotion to the Black Nazarene” *Quiapo: Heart of Manila* ed., Fernando N. Zialcita (Quezon City: The Cultural Heritage Studies Program, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ateneo de Manila University and Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 2006) pp. 96-124.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 108

Kierkegaard's faith emphasized by "passion of inwardness" is manifested as well in the Quiapo religiosity when devotees manifest emotive assertions as they personally approach the object of faith. The devotion is not only shown coming from within but expressed intensely "to the highest power",⁸⁸ because, "panata" according to Bonilla is motivated by an "internal force that propels the deboto".⁸⁹ Reminiscent of Mercado's concept of "loob" (heart) and "kalooban" (will), Quiapo believers point their devotion as external manifestation of one's interiority.

The "various ways" in the definition corresponds to Kierkegaard's stress on "subjectivity" when the believer attempts to conceive the Paradox of Christ through personal and even peculiar way via odd rituals (e.g., "pahalik", "pamumunas", "paglalakad ng paluhod", "pagyayapak", etc.). Hornedo explains this when he observes a town procession in Batanes: "They started cutting with a nail clipper the hair of the Nazareno. After the procession, they can cut with scissors parts of the robe of the statues. They are not vandals. It is just a part of their belief. Things associated with the holy become holy".⁹⁰ A devotee's faith is based on the personal and ardent hope that their individual "loob" (heart) shall be united with the kalooban"(will) of Goddespite earthly limitations (or the impossibility⁹¹) of their needs.

In an essay "Kierkegaard and the Metaphysics of Hope", Roe Fremsteda illustrates Kierkegaard's emphasis on "hope" as an important element of faith.⁹² The believer "hopes against hope" when he wish to make the impossible possible. Faith in this context is a task" against understanding...and is at odds with hope that is based on calculation and probability".⁹³ In the same way, the Quiapo religious devotion is an experience of "hope against hope" as the devotee "perceives his powerlessness without giving up his enthusiasm".⁹⁴ For Kierkegaard, this special kind of "hope" saves

⁸⁸CUP, p. 154.

⁸⁹Bonilla, p. 108.

⁹⁰Hornedo, "Punas-Punas: The Idea of the Holy" *The Filipino Popular Devotions*, p. 51

⁹¹Kierkegaard holds the same when he says: "by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one's desire totally and completely—that is over and beyond human powers, that is a marvel. But this I can perceive: that the young girl's assurance is nothing but rashness compared with the unshakability of faith in the full recognition of the impossibility." FT,p. 48. (italics mine).

⁹²Roe Fremsteda, "Kierkegaard and the Metaphysics of Hope" *Heythrop Journal* vol. LIII (2012) p. 54.

⁹³FT, pp. 16ff.Fremsteda, p. 54.

⁹⁴Soren Kierkegaard. *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasion*, trans., ed., Howard Hong and Edna Hong. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 52. Fremsteda, *ibid*.

one from “despair by means of an ‘open-hearted courage’ that only comprehends the mercy of God”.⁹⁵ The subjective “hope” present in Abraham’s faith and in Quiapo devotion signifies the personal surrender to God as individual discards his, thoughts, position, social status, educational attainment, belongings, etc. Bonilla describes this when she notes:

*“Everyone comes similarly attired: barefoot, without watches, rings, or anything else that might hurt the next devotee. Only towels over their shoulders and stuck into their T-shirts to cushion the force of the bodies pressing on all sides. Here, there are no corporate executives, surgeons, lawyers, janitors, criminals, labourers, or farmers. Lawyers pull the rope together with ex-convicts; doctors with hospital janitors allow themselves to be stepped on by devotees seeking to touch the Señor. An old boxing coach stays under float with bank executive and some carpenters. Together with politicians and media stars, they take turns hauling the float. Differences brought about by education and profession dissolve in a momentary feeling...”*⁹⁶

“Passionate Inwardness” of the Quiapo Faith

The “Translación” devotion which serves as the most popular exhibition of Quiapo faith and Filipino spirituality is rooted from one’s desire to commune with the divine in the most passionate and inward way. A devotee, consciously or unconsciously, creates a personal meaning having the absurd as his object of faith. Bonilla’s anthropological observation also affirms this when she says: “devotee produces additional meaning to the Quiapo Basilica”.⁹⁷ She added that it “flows from the wellsprings of feeling that enable them to perform and externalize their devotion”.⁹⁸ This private and inward nature of devotion appears “true” to the actor and “over

⁹⁵Soren Kierkegaard. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* (Princeton University Press, 1990p. 249. Fremsteda, *ibid.* This is evident in one of the local news documenting the devotion of a 56-year-old widower and a jeepney driver Nestor delaFuente: “‘I know in my heart God will make a way for my daughter to survive her ordeal. He will make a miracle for us,’ Despite his asthma, he squeezed himself through a thick crowd to hear the hourly Mass being shown on a giant screen outside Quiapo Church. Dela Fuente said he had been attending the procession since his teenage daughter was afflicted with a deadly respiratory disease five years ago. He could not give the specific name of the malady. ‘Millions Escort Black Nazarene’ Philippine Daily Inquirer Marlon Ramos, et.al January 10, 2011. Available in www.inquirer.net. Accessed: October 20, 2013.

⁹⁶Bonilla, p. 121.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁹⁹Hermel O. Pama, O.P. “Punas-Punas: The Idea of the Holy” *Filipino Popular Devotions*, p. 44.

reacting” to his spectators. Anthropologist Hermel Pama remarks: “Quite, paradoxically, this idea of the holy is not conceptual” and become incommunicable to others.⁹⁹

Bonilla’s work aims to, she writes, “seek an understanding of the aesthetics of experience of Quiapo devotion” which is an “interpretation as performance”.¹⁰⁰ Yet, who shall serve as spectator if the Quiapo devotion is a matter of private signification? Could it be the watchful eyes of the media; the theoretical social scientists; or perhaps, the doctrinal theologians? Kierkegaard, replies: “the individual’s ethical development is the little private theatre where God certainly is the spectator”.¹⁰¹

The secular rituals of Quiapo devotion are meaningful exclusively to the believer, albeit appear foolish and unethical, is for Kierkegaard, the “wisdom” of a true Christian! He explains: “no great genius exists without some madness. This is the secular expression for the religious thesis: one whom God blesses religiously he eo ipso execrates in a secular way”.¹⁰² Abraham’s special kind of “silence”¹⁰³ corroborates what Mercado explains when he narrates Bulatao’s personal Quiapo story:

“I’d like to begin with a story. You know Fr. Jaime Bulatao, the priest-psychologist. He told this story himself in 1977. One day he had a headache and went to Quiapo church. He saw the people queuing before the statue of Christ the Nazareno and doing their punas-punas... a manang got Fr. Bulatao’s handkerchief, he wiped his forehead with it. He became well. His headache disappeared. ‘Who is the better Christian—the one who uses handkerchiefs in order to contact Christ or the one who uses concepts in order to contact Christ? ...majority of the people think with the heart...on the other hand, the elite are more rational and away from the people whose form theologizing is different, often non-verbal...”¹⁰⁴

Kierkegaard’s “objective uncertainty” in his notion of faith is applicable to Quiapo religiosity that despite peculiarity and oddity of reasons, people in all walks of life, flock to Plaza Miranda and find a certain kind of “visceral meaning”, Bonilla describes as,

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹CUP, pp. 157-158, quoted in GeniaSchönbaumsfeld. A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 24.

¹⁰²Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers vol. I, no. 1029.Fremsteda, ibid.

¹⁰³FT, pp. 16, 35-37, 40, 46, 48.

¹⁰⁴Mercado, “Punas-Punas: The Idea of the Holy”. Filipino Popular Devotions, p. 70

“emotionally satisfying encounter with the divine”.¹⁰⁵ This meaning is what drives their “passion of inwardness to the highest power”¹⁰⁶ amidst great risk of suffocation, being squashed, wounded or killed by the 9 million oceans of people; they insist to dose the Plaza instead of hearing the same liturgy in a much less crowded, more hygienic and well-ventilated neighbouring churches and yet all promise to keep until their physical strength allow them so.¹⁰⁷ It is in this regard, elite educated few, foreign media and critics, easily terminate devotees as “fanatical” and “idolatrous” and to some, a plain drama of religious “madness”. Here, Kierkegaard replies:

*“With the solely subjective definition of truth, madness and truth become ultimately indistinguishable, since they could both have inwardness. But by becoming objective one does not become mad. Here I might make a small observation that in an objective age is not entirely beside the point. Absence of inwardness is also madness”.*¹⁰⁸

He traces this origin in the early days of Christianity when one wishes to be a Christian; he becomes foolish and faces the persecution of the state. Climacus remarks, “now that everyone is a Christian, he becomes a fool all the same, in the eyes of Christians”.¹⁰⁹

Suffering and the “Repulsion of the Absurd”

Central to the Quiapo religiosity is the suffering of Christ.¹¹⁰ Delotavo in his study reveals that 78% of Filipinos prefer the suffering Christ over the resurrected one. In an interview to a group of young men who walked barefoot from Antipolo City to Quiapo church, one uttered: “kahit dito man lang eh, nakaramay ako sa paghihirap Nya”.¹¹¹ Devotees appropriate their faith through a personalized sufferings in *imitatio Christi* through “pag-aabito”,

¹⁰⁵Bonilla, p. 112.

¹⁰⁶CUP, p. 514.

¹⁰⁷“I will keep doing this while I still have the strength, like my father did when he was still alive”. Josefino Quintero (64 years old). “Millions Escort Black Nazarene” Philippine Daily Inquirer Marlon Ramos, et.al January 10, 2011. Available in www.inquirer.net. Accessed: October 20, 2013.

¹⁰⁸CUP, p. 168.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 182.

¹¹⁰Delotavo, p. 143.

¹¹¹“At least through this, I can share with His hardships”. Unnamed. Interview conducted May 10,

“pagyayapak”, “pamumunas / pahalik” etc., and culminates in the “pamamasan” during its annual feast—all in one hope that their prayers shall be answered as they partake in the sufferings of Poon Nazareno. Thus, suffering is an integral part of devotion, without which, one is not a true Nazarene devotee. Johannes Climacus in Concluding Unscientific Postscript holds the same when he says: “Suffering is the expression for the relationship with God... so that to be without suffering indicates that one is not religious”.¹¹² Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham’s “faith by virtue of the absurd” emphasizes the experience of terrible suffering when he was called to sacrifice Isaac and, thereby, lost his whole being (wealth, respect, authority, reason, morality and life).¹¹³

In the famous quotation by Johannes de Silentio, however, we find how God “repulses” and return meaning to those whose faith are defined by suffering:

*“By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything... it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith. By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac... By virtue of the absurd, you will get every penny back again—believe it!...Temporality, finitude—that is what it is all about. I can resign everything by my own strength and find peace and rest in the pain...even if that dreadful demon... one who terrifies men, even if madness held its fool’s costume before my eyes...I can still save my soul as long as my concern that my love of God conquer within me is greater than my concern that I achieve earthly happiness.”*¹¹⁴

The total loss is superseded by blessing as he receives back everything as “Abraham’s life acquires a new level of meaning when used in the elaboration of faith”.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the Quiapo religiosity’s high regard on suffering represents only one side of the story of faith. Observable at a distance, the life-sized statue of the Black

¹¹²CUP, p. 363.

¹¹³Johannes de Silentio describes: “All was lost! Seventy years of trusting expectancy, the brief joy over the fulfilment of faith. Who is this who seizes the staff from the old man, who is this who demands that he himself shall break it! Who is this who makes a man’s gray hairs disconsolate, who is this who demands that he himself shall do it! Is there no sympathy for this venerable old man, none for the innocent child?” FT, p. 19.

¹¹⁴FT, pp. 48-49.

¹¹⁵Edward Mooney “Art, Deed, and System: The Prefaces to Fear and Trembling.” International Kierkegaard Commentary vol. 6 – Fear and Trembling and Repetition. Edited by Robert L. Perkins. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993) p. 93.

Nazarene is a unique version of the suffering Christ.¹¹⁶ The statue genuflects on the left knee while the right arm single handedly supports the shoulder bearing a huge cross (interestingly, the left hand is free!). Bonilla (together with other anthropologists, like Aguinaldo, Obusan, et. al.) notes that this posture of Christ is “not all” suffering but also a concrete display of Filipino “resiliency” and inner strength. She asserts the reason why majority of the devotees are men during the annual Translación is due to the peculiar “stance” of the image that attracts male devotees as they “find this pose very ‘macho’ and want to identify with it”.¹¹⁷ Reynaldo Ileto’s Pasyon at Reboluyon further associates the suffering Christ in the “Pasyon” (oral tradition during Lent) as a vehicle of emancipation that fuelled peasant uprisings in the country against the Spaniards that lead to national independence during the late 19th century.¹¹⁸ The presence of suffering in the Quiapo devotion is, therefore, half of the façade in the edifice of faith. The whole becomes complete when the devotee’s fervent “pamamanata” defined by suffering is returned in “the repulsion of the absurd”.

How, then this “repulsion of the absurd” experienced in the level of the individual Quiapo devotee?

Miracles, “*Utang na Loob*” and the Double Movement of Faith

The “*repulsion of the absurd*” is intensely felt through the gift of “miracle” personalized to the needs of the individual devotees. The “gift” ranges from petty to magnanimous; from lottery jackpot, successful visa application, finding a partner, conversion of a drunkard husband, passing a licensure exam, up to the cure of a terminal disease.¹¹⁹

In an entry to his Journals Kierkegaard explains that man experiences God through miracles. He notes: “God can appear to man only in the miracle...and as soon as he sees God he sees a miracle”.¹²⁰ However, why it is it is impossible for man to see God

¹¹⁶Basilio Balajadia. “Mass Mediums: An Initial Study of Spirit Possession Groups as Popular Church in the Making” And God Said: HALA! ed., Jaime A. Belita, C.M., (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991) p. 126

¹¹⁷Bonilla, p. 107.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 102. See also, Ileto, pp. 56, 70.

¹¹⁹Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers vol.I, no. 6.

¹²⁰Ibid.

and miracles through his own faculty. The impossibility lies in his intelligence since for Kierkegaard, “to see God or to see the miracle is by virtue of the absurd, for understanding must step aside”.¹²¹

The double-movement of faith developed in Fear and Trembling “acknowledges the impossibility, and in the very same moment believes the absurd”.¹²² Miracle becomes real when man abandons his “earthly calculation”¹²³ and receives God’s grace as in the case of “Sarah, (that) although well advanced in years, was young enough to desire the pleasure of motherhood, and Abraham with his gray hairs was young enough to wish to be a father...and all the generations of the earth would be blessed”.¹²⁴

As noted by sociological studies, one important reasons of Quiapo “pamamanata” is the idea of “utangna loob” out of “miracles” believed to be granted out of devotion to the Nazarene.¹²⁵ Bonilla explains this when she documents the four cases of personal “miracles”: first, the 81 year-old lone survivor of a train accident and attributed to her unusual providence from her devotion to Señor; second, a 57 year-old sculptor who made the replica body (used during the Translación) and head (located at the altar) of the Black Nazarene images whose shop in Evangelista Street prospered abundantly; third, a sacristan-mayor whose hospital bills were paid (by a Hong Kong-based devotee who attributes her own fortune to the Nazarene) when his children were inflicted with serious ailment; and fourth, a 46 year-old Atenean business management consultant whose childhood asthma believed to be healed through his father’s fervent devotion.¹²⁶

In the “double movement of faith”, God grants “miracles” in return to the unwavering faith of the suffering believer. As per “*utang na loob*”, a devotee promise to continue the annual “pamamanata” until their last and if possible, to be passed on to the next kin, which shall last in perpetuity.

¹²¹FT, p. 47.

¹²²Ibid., pp. 35-37.

¹²³Ibid., p. 18.

¹²⁴Hornedo, *The Favor of the Gods: Essays in Filipino Religious Thought and Behavior*, p. 154. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology*;p. 116-118, Aguinaldo, p. 28-29, Obusan, *Mystic or Mistake: Exploring Filipino Mysticism in Quiapo*, pp. 134-136.

¹²⁵Bonilla, p. 120.

¹²⁶FT, p. 48.

¹²⁷Ibid.,pp. 57, 99.

Conclusion: Quiapo Devotion and the Leap of Faith

Among Filipino popular devotions, it is the Quiapo religiosity that exhibits the most profound and at the same time, the most strange. Following Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, the whole tribe and Abraham's household deemed his ordeal immorally unthinkable. Even to its author, Johannes de Silentio¹²⁷ who cannot but behoove to silence for he himself could not understand the thoughts of "the knight of faith".¹²⁸ Every year, foreign and local observers, social scientists and scholars or even the Quiapo clergy would not understand why their Catechism could not halt the "fanatical" stunts of the believers. The local government's helpless attitude towards the frenzy faithful is "let it be" and patiently hopes and prays that this year is just "a minor casualty".

In the same manner that the theology and philosophy of the Quiapo devotees remain marginal to its observers, Kierkegaard's works were never celebrated in his lifetime (and even decades after his death!). It only reaches its present worth during the second half of the 20th century when his writings become available to the English speaking world. His highly favored character "Knight of Faith" suffers the same predicament, of not being understood by his contemporaries, but pleased by God when he discovers a special kind of wisdom at the heart of foolishness when he took the "leap" into the abyss of the faith.¹²⁹

The Kierkegaardian labyrinthine opus through its pseudonymous authorship and polemic lyrics, particularly *Fear and Trembling* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, develop a concrete understanding of life, which the 19th century Denmark dismissed swiftly as highest taboo. The same forbidden thoughts, however, germinated in a way, the intellectual seeds of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Paul Ricoeur, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Emmanuel Levinas, and Theodor Adorno to cite a few.

Likewise, a devotee in the Plaza Miranda, amidst risks of injury, fatality and stigma of idolatry, shall always create his meaning as he takes the "leap" into the carroza of faith. He, firmly and

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. 16. 35.

¹²⁹Paul Martens and Tom Millay, "The Changelessness of God' as Kierkegaard's Final Theodicy: God and the Gift of Suffering" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol. 13, no. 2 (April 2011) pp. 179-181.

irrationally, believes that someday, he shall get back his strength, his job, his wife, or even his own sanity! And for those some, whom who have witnessed the miracle, shall continue the “pamamanata” until their very last as his perpetual gratitude of “utang-na-loob”.

Central to this claim is the “double-movement of faith”, where a devotee at first performs an *imitatio Christi* defined by the experience by “suffering” and in turn receives back the gift of “meaning”, which is itself, a “miracle” wrapped in “absurdity” for “the gift of faith is always coupled with the gift of suffering”.¹³⁰

Indeed, Quiapo devotion experiences the existentialist paradoxicality of faith, which neither this paper nor any studies written about it, can truly elucidate without being caught into the traps of ambiguity and illogicality. Whether the Quiapo religious phenomenon is a mystery, mystique, or a mistake? Such is possibly grasped through Kierkegaard’s “faith by virtue of the absurd”. As then, Manila Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle, remarks: “To understand it, you need to be a devotee (because) outsiders do not understand”.

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¹³⁰Jeannette Andrade, et al., “Millions Defy Terror Alert” INQUIRER.net January 10, 2012 Available: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/125277/millions-defy-terror-alert#ixzz2lu8W4VO8> Philippine Daily Inquirer. Accessed: November 28, 2013.

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