

AN EXAMINATION OF THE MEANINGS OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FILIPINO CONTEXT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING GOD'S GRACE

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Many contemporary writings on the concept of grace propose a return to the use of interpersonal relational imageries as offering the best insight into understanding God's posture and actions towards sinful humanity. In the Philippine context, using relational imageries is of great relevance, since Filipino culture focuses on relationships. The movement is from meanings in Filipino interpersonal relationships to teachings about God's grace.¹

Meaning structures come from previous experiences in the family, from the broader social environment, and also from culture and language.² The patterns that emerge from these experiences become the cultural postulates or assumptions about the nature of things such as relationships. Of the sources of meanings, the family relational pattern is the most significant for the person. Not only is the family the foundational unit of society and the prime agent of socializing the person, but also family patterns often become the prototype of all interpersonal patterns for the individual.³ As such, the meaning of relationships in other areas

¹"As the theological interpreter proceeds from human experiences to a conceptualization of God, he gives attention to emerging patterns or meanings. We move from the known to the unknown. One becomes aware of new patterns through prior understanding of more familiar patterns. To observe similarities, relationships, and equivalences is a kind of analogical reasoning in which meanings emerge through the use of models or metaphors." Harold H. Ditmason, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977), 30.

²Elizabeth Dreyer, *Manifestations of Grace* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1990), 16-17.

³George M. Guthrie and Pepita J. Jacobs, *Child Rearing and Personality Development in the Philippines* (Manila: Bookmark, 1967), 19-24.

of life will not be much different from the postulates about relationships arrived at from family relations.

The meanings of relationships that come from family socialization patterns may greatly shape people's initial understandings of God's grace. But the use of available meanings from experiences and culture is only one dimension toward a clearer explication of God's grace.

Another important dimension in teaching God's grace by using Filipino meanings is the critical examination of the meanings that go with the understanding of relationships in the Filipino setting. Often meanings remain unexamined, affecting the whole content of the doctrine without the communicator being aware of it. It is often true that

instead of the Christian message being understood and restated in cultural terms, the traditional culture has been, in the main, understood and restated in terms of the Christian message, leaving the religious context of the belief and value system largely unchanged.¹

This article examines the meanings that come from the Filipino understanding of relationships in the family, meanings that may serve as a background to understanding God's grace in the Filipino context. To realize this purpose, two steps need to be taken:

(1) It is important to identify tentative postulates or assumptions about the nature of relationships that arise from the socialization of the child in Filipino families.

(2) One needs to relate these meanings about relationships to the biblical understanding of grace, identifying positive and negative elements.

An exercise such as this will hopefully provide preliminary considerations as one presents God's grace in the Filipino context.

Meanings of Relationships in Filipino Family Socialization Patterns

The patterns of socialization in the Filipino family will be described first, then the meanings of relationships derived from it.

¹Douglas J. Elwood, "A Theological Approach to Some Traditional Filipino Beliefs about Man," *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 11, no. 2 (1970): 37.

Socialization Patterns

Filipino child-rearing practices have been characterized as “high nurturance, low independence training and low discipline.”¹ For Jaime Bulatao, however, *hiya* (shame) is the predominant pattern of socialization.² These two generalizations may not be contradictory but rather complementary. A brief study of Filipino child rearing practices will show the interrelationship between the three characteristics cited and Bulatao’s view.

High nurturance. The average Filipino grows up within a close-knit extended family. Fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents provide the child with enveloping affection. In such a nurturing context the child learns early the centrality of relationships. The child’s personality in its formation and structure is oriented to his relationship with others.³

Low independence. The Filipino family size also means that, with so many people willing to do things for him or her, the child gets low independence training.⁴ Giving and receiving help are important elements in interpersonal relationships.

Low discipline and “hiya.” Shame (*hiya*) is the primary way of disciplining the child within the context of enveloping emotional ties and dependency in the close-knit and extended Filipino family. Having so many people to please means that there are as many standards as there are significant people around. The expectations, sanctions, and restraints of the significant others in the child’s world become the external norm of behavior rather than a set of internal rules.⁵

Hiya means conformity to the desires of the significant others in the world of the child in specific situations. The child is predominantly disciplined by threats of rejection or punishment from other persons. The child learns very early that acceptance by and dependence on his or her family is a most important thing. Therefore, the threat of exclusion or the promise of inclusion in the web of relationships in the family motivates the child to conform. Having explored basic root patterns of socialization in the Filipino family, we now look into the meanings derived.

¹Leticia R. Shahani, *A Moral Recovery Program: Building a Nation, Inspiring Our People to Action*, Official Publication of the Senate of the Congress of the Philippines (Manila: Senate Publication and Editorial Division, 1988), 13.

²Jaime C. Bulatao, “The *Hiya* System in Filipino Culture,” in *Filipino Social Structure and Value Orientation*, Filipino Cultural Heritage, Lecture Series no. 2, ed. F. L. Jocano (Manila: Philippine Women’s University Press, 1966), 29-30.

³Guthrie and Jacobs, 201.

⁴*Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁵Yvonne Marie M. Asprer, “The Self-Concept as a Filipino Self-Social Construct: Exploration, Analysis, and Implications,” *St. Louis University Research Journal* (March-June 1980): 67-68.

Derived Meanings and Values

The centrality of relationships. Assumptions about the nature of relationships result from such patterns as described above. The first postulate is that a relationship with the significant others in one's life is the most important thing in life. "Emotional closeness and security in the family"¹ and "to be accepted by one's fellows for what one is, thinks oneself to be, or would like to be"² are the priorities in the Filipino hierarchy of values. Talk about the meaning of life to the Filipino, and acceptance in family relationships or by significant others will be the most probable association.

Intense need for acceptance. Secondly, though acceptance and love are freely given in relationships, there is the constant threat of rejection and exclusion. It is not that the child is actually expelled or rejected in the family, but the patterns of socialization accent the threat. Such is the situation that, after analyzing the major themes of Filipino values, Bulatao concludes that the unifying concept in Filipino behavior is an "ego highly in need of security and protection."³ He elsewhere also defined *hiya* as a "kind of anxiety; a fear of being left exposed, unprotected, and unaccepted."⁴ For George Guthrie and Pepita Jacobs, *hiya* is "a sanctioned pattern of insecurity."⁵

Egocentric motivations. Thirdly, because of the above factors, relationships are later contracted for egocentric and individualistic motivations. The *kanya-kanya* (literally, "mine-mine") syndrome, or the priority of individual or group interests over the common good, is often pointed out as a weakness in the Filipino personality.⁶ Lourdes Lapuz explains the development of this tendency in the following way: "The need to be loved is synonymous with the fear of rejection. . . . The need to be loved by others then becomes fused with the love for oneself."⁷ Despite the extended family and group-emphasis, the pattern of socialization makes the Filipino "narrowly construe the family and attach greater significance to the well-being of the individual."⁸ Therefore, though the Filipino is group-oriented on the surface, the underlying motivations are really individualistic and egocentric.

¹See Jaime Bulatao, "Philippine Values: The Manileños Mainsprings," in *Four Readings in Philippine Values*, ed. Frank Lynch and Alfonso de Guzman II, IPC Papers, no. 2 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1973), 97-102.

²Frank Lynch, "Social Acceptance Reconsidered," in *Four Readings in Philippine Values*, ed. Frank Lynch and Alfonso de Guzman II, IPC Papers, no. 2 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1973), 8.

³Bulatao, "Philippine Values," 116.

⁴Jaime C. Bulatao, "Hiya," *Philippine Studies* 12, no. 3 (1964): 428.

⁵Guthrie and Jacobs, 190.

⁶Shahani, 10.

⁷Lourdes V. Lapuz, *A Study of Psychopathology* (Quezon City: New Day, 1978), 244.

⁸Yashushi Kikuchi, *Uncrystallized Philippine Society: A Social Anthropological Analysis* (Quezon City: New Day, 1992), 21.

The major postulates about relationships derived from Filipino family socialization patterns have just been given. The question now is how these meanings shape, positively or negatively, a Filipino's understanding of God's dealings with humanity.

How Meanings Derived from Relationships Shape One's Understanding of Grace

Grace, as God's dealings with man, means that a correct understanding involves two dimensions. One dimension is what God is like and does. The other dimension is the understanding of man's condition in the context of God's grace. We will now explore the pre-understandings of the two dimensions that arise from Filipino family socialization patterns. Since most writings on Filipino contextual theology concentrate on the positive elements, I will point out the difficulties and differences, rather than just the similarities.

Understanding What God Is Like

The attempt to communicate an understanding of grace must first of all assert the supernatural nature of the relationship. The supernatural dimension of grace means that, in a sense, there is no comparison with anything in the human realm. On the other hand, God compares His attitudes and actions with those of man in human relationships. So the human experience of intimate relationships can become a stepping stone leading to an understanding of grace. We now turn to specific nuances, or meanings, that come from Filipinos' experiences, pre-understandings that need to be considered in communicating the teaching about grace.

God is loving. That God is loving finds resonance in the Filipino. The family socialization patterns of strong emotional ties make it easy to believe and trust a loving, merciful God. This might be the background of why, according to Vitaliano Gorospe, *Amang Maawain* (Merciful Father) is the most popular Filipino Christian concept of God.¹ Yet some dimensions of God's love may be difficult for Filipinos to understand.

¹Vitaliano Gorospe, "An Asian (Philippine) and Christian Concept of God (A Philosophical and Theological Perspective)," in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, ed. Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant (New York: Rose of Sharon, 1982), 102. Distinction is made between the Christian and the pre-Christian view of God, for the latter has a contrary concept of God. God is remote and unapproachable to the pre-Christian Filipino. Lonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Press, 1974), 41. To the animistic Filipino, the supernatural powers are hostile, or at least, unconcerned, about man. Jaime Bulatao, "Filipino Transpersonal World View," in *Philippine World Views*, ed. V. G. Enriquez (Manila: Philippine Psychology Research House, 1980), 265-68.

Grace is free. While picturing God as loving, God's grace as gratuitous may be difficult to grasp in view of the family socialization patterns. In the context of Filipino patterns, love, though offered freely, is not completely gratuitous. The price is conformity. It is an "I love you if . . ." sort of relationship. Therefore, the Filipino expects to reciprocate the love of God by obedience as a means of keeping the relationship intact. Of course there is some truth in this. Man must continually respond to God's free gift, or else there is no relationship. But to believe that God will not continue to love the person unless a person loves God in return is a misconception of the central truth in the doctrine of grace. God's love is absolutely free. Man does not need to earn God's love to deserve it or to continually be its recipient.

Grace characterizes all the Godhead. Socialization in an extended family in which all significant adults assume parental authority may bring a preunderstanding that is in tension with God's grace. The Triune God, God the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, calls men and women into an intimate relationship with Him.

Yet, in the context of the Filipino family socialization patterns, God's plurality in unity may connote division rather than the unity of purpose and will of the three divine Persons. In the Filipino family, the will of the father may not be the will of the mother or the aunts, uncles, and grandparents. The child learns early in life to go to another parent figure if what one parent wants does not agree with what the child desires.

The Filipino then must be aided here in examining his views about God, for the triuneness of God may come to mean division rather than three Persons working for one purpose. The popular view is that Christ should be the One to be approached, for He sympathizes with people and can be moved, whereas the Father, though loving, has fixed, unchangeable rules. The Father is indeed considered loving and merciful, but if one wants to get what one asks for, he or she should go to Christ, the mediator, not to the Father, the lawgiver. In truth, however, grace characterizes God the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Manipulation in the Filipino socialization patterns also means that values and desires change, depending on to whom you are relating and contingent also on the situation. But God's purposes and character are unchangeable. God calls men and women into a life that is not based on whims and situations, but into a new life, a life growing in the image of Christ. There is a definite end and purpose for the relationship with God which is more than merely relating in a specific situation. God's dealings with humanity are based on His unchanging character. We now go on to reflect on the understanding of the human situation to which the message of God's grace speaks.

God's Grace and the Human Situation

Teachings about God's grace are presented in the Bible to highlight God's attitude and actions against the backdrop of the human situation that resulted from sin. These teachings about God, of God loving and wanting to save all men despite their sinfulness, are usually presented in three biblically-rooted motifs or frameworks. These motifs are based on the human experiences that result from sin and the varied experiences of God's saving grace. The foci of presenting the human situation vis-a-vis God's grace are anxiety-punishment-security, shame-alienation-reconciliation/acceptance, and guilt-condemnation-forgiveness.¹ David Augsburger argues that all of the above motifs are found in the Bible.² However, theologians on God's grace have usually accented only one or two of the motifs.

Grace answers the need for acceptance. Based on the Filipino family socialization patterns, the shame-alienation-reconciliation/acceptance motif, and secondarily, the anxiety-punishment-security motif, will find deeper meaning in the Filipino context than the guilt-condemnation-forgiveness motif. The existential need of the Filipino is primarily acceptance, and then security. In dealing with patients, psychiatrist Lourdes Lapuz found a big difference between American and Filipino patients. The American would say, "I feel like a phony," whereas the Filipino laments, "I am not loved," or "They have rejected me; I am not in."³ It is not that the Filipino does not experience guilt. It is rather that in the socialization patterns discussed, anxiety and guilt are absorbed into the dominant dynamics of shame.⁴

This is where I think the Protestant presentation of grace needs contextualization to fit the Philippine context. The traditional Protestant presentation of God's grace in the Philippines is primarily in the guilt-condemnation-forgiveness framework. Such a framework fits and responds to the predominant guilt orientation of Northern European cultures, but not to the Filipino context. Presenting grace as forgiveness in the context of the problem of guilt and condemnation is oftentimes abstract and irrelevant, since the guilt-condemnation-forgiveness framework does not find much resonance in the Filipino. Shame-alienation, and secondarily, anxiety-punishment, in view of sin, are the dominant Filipino experiences rather than guilt.

¹I adapted these frameworks from David Augsburger's model of the human experiences that resulted from sin. See David Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 138, 122.

²Ibid.

³Lapuz, 263.

⁴"Where social controls of inclusion or exclusion provide the dominant inhibition and direction of behavior, the anxiety is absorbed into and utilized by the shame process as a primal source of energy. Guilt exists in internal self-judgment or moral choice, but as a secondary process, with shame being the effective coin of social transactions." Augsburger, 124.

I am not proposing that the guilt-condemnation-forgiveness motif be dropped. All three are equally scriptural and give different accents to the multifaceted need of sinful man. Forgiveness is integral to experiencing God's grace. However, in view of the patterns of relationships and interaction in Filipino culture, the deeper longing of the Filipino is for God's acceptance and for being secure in God's care. Making acceptance and reconciliation the primary theme in presenting God's grace will elicit a greater response in the Filipino experience.

God's grace is unconditional. I have argued for a greater emphasis on the themes of acceptance and security in presenting God's grace. However, there are also considerations that need to be made in using these themes. Though acceptance is a major theme in Filipino culture, there are dynamics in the culture that need to be modified to truly present God's grace.

While the desire to be accepted by God and to be reconciled to Him can become a powerful motivating force in the life of a Filipino Christian, the unconditional nature of God's grace must be stressed. God places a permanent worth on persons, whereas in many a Filipino relationship, worth is attributed at that specific time and situation when the relationship is doing well. For God, human worth is an ontological reality. For the Filipino, the acceptance of the person is dependent on how he or she reciprocates in a relationship. Grace is God's counting us of worth despite our sinfulness and even before we respond to Him in faith.

Thus the Filipino can easily accept the teaching of God as merciful and loving, and of God's desire to accept and reconcile sinners to Himself. However, if the difference is not pointed out between God's acceptance and that of the Filipino culture, the Filipino will naturally assume that one has to continually earn this acceptance. Filipinos can easily and naturally be legalistic in their understanding of salvation due to their cultural background.

Summary

To summarize, Filipino socialization patterns have been characterized as high nurturance, low independence training, and low discipline. Underlying and utilizing all these elements is the use of *hiya* (shame) as the main socialization pattern. From the above patterns, the Filipino learns from childhood the centrality of relationships in life. The most important thing in life is to be loved and accepted. From the same home environment the Filipino develops both an intense need for acceptance and the constant fear or threat of alienation. The meaning of all this is that he or she must always strive to maintain relationships to avoid the greatest misery of all, that of being rejected.

In this context, divine grace—God loving all men, unconditionally accepting them, considering them of infinite worth, and calling them into an intimate relationship with Him—speaks to the basic need of the Filipino. Filipinos can understand grace better if it is contextualized in the shame-alienation-

reconciliation/acceptance motif, or secondarily, in an anxiety-punishment-security motif. The usual Protestant presentation of grace in the guilt-condemnation forgiveness framework may not find much resonance in Filipino culture.

On the other hand, critical contextualization is needed, for the same cultural elements that enable Filipinos to find meaning in God's grace also carry obstacles to fully understanding and experiencing that grace. Having to earn acceptance by conformity may block seeing God's free grace. In misunderstanding the Trinity, Filipinos may attempt to manipulate the Godhead in the way that they manipulate members of the family. The Filipino has the tendency to receive the basis of worth as coming from social acceptance, rather than to rejoice in God's unconditional acceptance. A Christian teacher or preacher, then, has to both utilize and criticize Filipino cultural elements in order to clearly present God's grace.