

DECOLONIZING SOCIAL SALVATION: SHAMANIC AND SPIRIT-BASED  
PRACTICES FOR COMMUNAL HEALING – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Decolonizing Social Salvation  
 Convener: Shannon M. McAlister, Fordham University  
 Moderator: M. Katie Mahowski Mylroie, Boston College  
 Presenters: Cristina Lledo Gomez, BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education  
 Shannon M. McAlister, Fordham University  
 Respondent: Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

This session challenged the colonially imposed demonization and pathologization of experiences of spirits or extraordinary phenomena, promoting a reevaluation of Indigenous beliefs and amplifying Indigenous and decolonizing practices for communal well-being. Two presentations were followed by a formal response and then robust conversation between attendees and panelists.

Cristina Lledo Gomez presented a paper entitled “‘Believing in the Spirits is not ‘woo woo’: Christian and Philippine Indigenous Anitist Belief.” She described contemporary Philippine anitist belief in spirits and spirit-based healing practices as coexisting in tension with Christian beliefs and a scientific worldview in the lives of Filipino/as. Contemporary Filipino/as believe in the spirits of God as a father, Jesus, and the saints—and also in ancestor spirits, the calm spirit that sits with someone who patiently weaves cloth by hand, and elemental spirits in nature, e.g., in rivers or trees. Filipino/as rely upon Indigenous, spirit-based healing practices but also tend to view spirits as evil, reflecting historical demonization by Christian missionaries. Gomez argued that anitist beliefs and Christian beliefs should be put into a deeper, more appreciative dialogue with one another. She drew on biblical scholarship, Greco-Roman Christianity, the history of Christianity in Ireland, and medieval beliefs and practices to argue that there is precedent for a positive evaluation of anitist belief in spirits and of the healing work of the *babaylan* (“healer/sage”). She also acknowledged the need for a “discernment of spirits” and a careful assessment of the intentions of any individual *babaylan*.

Shannon McAlister offered a presentation on “Spiritual Direction and Social Well-Being: A Decolonizing Theology.” She argued that the contemporary practice of “spiritual direction,” as a non-directive listening ministry, can provide a supportive environment for exploring spiritual experiences and beliefs that have been pathologized in settings dominated by the materialist philosophy of the European Enlightenment to the exclusion of other worldviews. In *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran contended that Indigenous ways of knowing and healing should not be criticized in the name of so-called scientific objectivity, and they called for a new diagnostic system respectful of Indigenous perspectives. McAlister argued that internationally deployed diagnostic manuals have exhibited internal tension by encouraging respect for cultural and religious expressions, while simultaneously pathologizing—on the basis of *a priori* materialist philosophical assumptions—the actual phenomena subscribed to and valued within those cultures

and religions. In contrast, experienced spiritual directors such as psychiatrist Gerald May allow space for exploring spiritual experiences and extraordinary phenomena characteristic of both Indigenous spirit-based healing practices and also Christian mystical traditions. Instead of pathologizing such phenomena, they determine when a referral to a mental health professional is needed on the basis of other criteria, e.g., functionality. This can support a decolonizing movement that resists the pathologization of experiences valued in Indigenous settings.

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator offered a response, highlighting three main themes to consider when examining the topic of this session more broadly. First, he pointed toward historical context, noting that historical conflict is the background for epistemological violence toward Indigenous beliefs and practices. Academics can either promote this epistemological violence or approach Indigenous beliefs and practices with intellectual humility. Second, he pointed toward inculturation, observing that the two foregoing papers “propose a model of inculturation.” Relationality is key in Indigenous cultures and religiosity; this resonates with Pope Francis’s view that “‘Everything is connected’ and ‘No one is saved alone’” (*Laudate Deum*, § 19). This is relevant to both social salvation and ecological wellbeing. Third, from an Indigenous perspective, he highlighted the importance of self-criticism for scholars working from that point of view. He cautioned against replacing Western hubris with a romanticization of Indigenous beliefs and practices: there can be deficiencies in Indigenous beliefs and practices, such as those that demean women; and some human experiences termed “spiritual” may include pathological traits that can be responded to with various resources. Indigenous beliefs and practices should be carefully assessed by different means, including Ignatian discernment.

The subsequent conversation between attendees and panelists touched on such topics as the need for discernment; the past and present incorporation of Indigenous elements into Filipino/a Christianity; the need for further inculturation in regard to belief in spirits; the role of a therapist’s culture in the evaluation of reported spiritual experiences; the influence of fundamentalist religious culture on spiritual experience and mental health; cognitive dissonance felt by Indigenous persons studying scientific methods in academia; and scientific studies that support Indigenous perspectives on traditional healing and nonlocal interpersonal relationality.

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