On February 18, 1987, the Maryhill School of Theology presented a public defense of a masteral dissertation about the activities of a small prayer-group in a suburban barrio. The defending theologian, Ferdinand D. Dagmang, was awarded a rating of *magna cum laude* by the board of examiners that included the eminent anthropologist Dr. Prospero Covar of the University of the Philippines.

Dagmang deserved this high praise. It was suggested that the thesis be published. However one difficulty would be the impropriety of publicizing the private lives of living persons whose identities can no longer be disguised.

Three points mentioned by Dagmang excited some interest. Formally in the auditorium and then informally in the subsequent merienda, these became the subject of lively exchanges. In turn these exchanges provide us with grounds for further reflections, and highlight the importance and relevance of this dissertation. These three topics are: (1) an intersubjective approach to this type of research; (2) a reinterpretation of Pigafetta's account about Queen Humabon; and (3) the problem of trance phenomena or *sapi*.

**INTERSUBJECTIVE APPROACH**

An intersubjective approach is in contrast to the objective reporting hitherto required in the western tradition of academic non-involvement. Wilfred Cantwell Smith\(^1\) suggests that "personalization" or a "face-to-face meeting" may now be supplementing

\(^1\) Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa, eds., *History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973) 34 and passim.
the non-involved posture demanded by scientific objectivity. The scientist in his laboratory has no difficulty in being objective towards his guinea pigs. But to treat human beings as guinea pigs can seriously distort the interpretation of religious behavior. This is especially true of the study of the religious devotion of a community whose meanings and values may differ from the meanings and values of the researcher.

The use of the first person singular pronoun, for example, is generally avoided in "non-involved" dissertations. In classical Tagalog, referring to one's self in the third person is allowed, e.g. "ang inyong lingkod." But Dagmang does not bind himself to this mode and betrays no feelings of guilt about it. I personally do not fault him for this. Although he is not exactly "in love" with this particular community, his sympathy for their indigenous meanings and values is quite obvious. This sympathy provides a healthy and much needed compensation for the unsympathetic treatment of indigenous religiosity in many studies made before the Second Vatican Council.

QUEEN HUMABON

Very much to the point is Pigafetta's account of Magellan's gift of an image of the Santo Niño to Queen Humabon. Dagmang discusses the historical origins of Filipino devotion to the Santo Niño and briefly analyzes Pigafetta's account. The Italian original and the English and French translations may or may not be accurate in interpreting Queen Humabon's tears as a sign of "contrition" when she received the statuette. All that Pigafetta saw were the tears. To say that these were tears of contrition implied that the queen was led to believe that her anito symbolism was evil. The European missionaries of 1521 were not yet familiar with the distinction between cultural values and a theological position. They could not have appreciated the insight articulated 459 years later by Pope John Paul II, urging the African youth to "keep your African roots. Safeguard the values of your culture."² Pre-Vatican II missionaries were culturally conditioned to regard anito culture as idolatrous.

In blind obedience to this teaching, the *ilustrado* elite among the Filipinos of the nineteenth century, who had acquired European tastes, also came to "despise" (to use the expression in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*) the *anito* culture of the lowly *plebe*. (Although there were *mestizos* among these *ilustrados*, there was no evidence of a mixing stage that resembled the "cultural *mestizaje*" observed in Latin American religiosity by Scannone.) Culturally, the *anito* symbolism may have temporarily gone underground in Filipino society for a few centuries.

It is now permissible to propose an alternative interpretation of the tears of Queen Humabon: her tears were a sign of spiritual consolation coming from the Holy Spirit: in a moment of ecstasy, the Spirit was revealing to her the identity of the unknown God that she was interiorly seeking and exteriorly symbolizing in her *anitos*. At present, historical documentation cannot decide between these two alternatives. But insights into cultural pluralism in decrees of Vatican II and subsequent documents like *Evangelii Nuntiandi* would favor the second alternative as a "rediscovery." Such rediscovery can better reveal the beauty of Christian inculturation as including both unity and pluriformity.

**TRANCE PHENOMENA OR SAPI**

How does Christian inculturation approach the problem of trance phenomena or *sapi*? Dagmang's dissertation is basically an attempt to answer this question. Its importance is recently evidenced by the increasing frequency of such phenomena in many Philippine parishes. Dagmang traces these to the altered states of consciousness in the liturgical dramas conducted by *babaylans* in pre-hispanic times. Through the centuries these have been driven underground by the culture of the *ilustrado* elite.

The resulting feeling of persecution was bound to provoke a chain reaction of pathologies that now afflict an otherwise neutral or healthy behavior in indigenous culture. Because of these pathologies, the Manila archdiocese felt it necessary to issue pastoral guidelines to leaders of prayer groups: "They should promptly act and stop any person, who seems to be possessed, supposedly
by a Saint, the Sto. Niño e.g., etc. Any trance-like or hysterical behavior should be dealt with and corrected.\textsuperscript{4} It is of course morally incorrect to disclaim responsibility and control over one’s behavior under the pretext or illusion of possession by an alien spirit. Such an interpretation is easily verified in many cases, especially where there are worldly gains. But it cannot be antecedently affirmed in every possible case.

It is possible in principle to use Lonergan’s distinction between an intentional \textit{and} objectified behavior on the one hand, and on the other hand, an intentional \textit{but not} objectified behavior.\textsuperscript{5} The subject is responsible and in control in both cases. But a non-objectified behavior cannot be verbally described by the subject and thus arouses the suspicion that the subject disclaims responsibility and control. To a scientific analyst unfamiliar with Lonergan’s “dramatic pattern” of religious experience,\textsuperscript{6} such a suspicion is understandable or even pastorally justifiable; is it therefore infallible? Lonergan’s insights are perfectly valid. But to apply it in concrete situations requires intersubjective intimacy between a pastor and his flock. Ideally, this would require that pastoral formation be enriched not only by elitist culture but also by the indigenous culture of the religious underground. The failure of established structures to respond to this ideal of pastoral formation is being exploited quite successfully by unscrupulous and occultist syndicates. Indeed the success of the latter is proportional to the failure of the former. This structural limitation is now in process of being transcended.

From the good fruits seen in the spirituality of one prayer group, Dagmang sees pastoral advantages in \textit{sapi}. Admittedly, there is need for further growth. Healthy growth can be promoted by pastors gifted with cultural sensitivity and theological creativity.

Both Dagmang and the Maryhill School of Theology deserve a \textit{magna cum laude} for this achievement.