

# MYTH, SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

## THE THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY

### OF JIMMY BELITA, C.M.

DANIEL FRANKLIN PILARIO

*This article is a description of Jimmy Belita's contribution to the theological field. His ground-breaking books spanning the whole of his career can be divided into four categories: the relationship between myth and science in his sacramental-liturgical studies; the role of theology in religious education; the relation between myths and theology in popular religions; and the interaction between science and theology in his evolutionary studies. Behind these this great theological oeuvre is a prolific but self-effacing theologian doing self-reflexive theology in front of so great a mystery we call God.*

#### INTRODUCTION

It is a great honor and privilege to reflect on the contributions my confrere, Jimmy Belita, made (and continues to make) in the Philippine theological field. But this is also a very difficult undertaking especially when the person whose works one is trying to read and interpret is very much alive. I once did the same act in front of the great proponent of the Church of the poor, Bishop Julio Labayan. I was asked to deliver a paper on his theological directions, with him in the audience. After the session, I asked him if my reading of his theology was right. He replied: "Maybe". Several months later, Bishop Labayan died.

The French philosopher Roland Barthes once wrote an essay entitled "The Death of the Author"<sup>1</sup> and argues that as soon as the author starts writing, he has started to die. His authorial intention has no more authority; he is at the mercy of his reader's

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," accessed 8 June 2020, [http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death\\_authorbarthes.pdf](http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf).

interpretations. This landmark essay became the foundation of contemporary hermeneutics and deconstruction – from Gadamer to Ricoeur, from Foucault to Derrida. I suggest that Barthes’ “death of the author” theory be suspended here. For Jimmy is very much alive. His theology still continues to develop. He continues to teach and write. And he will speak right after me.

I would like to divide this article into four sections as a way of reading Jimmy Belita’s work: (1) the opposition between myths and science in his liturgical and sacramental studies; (2) his works on theology and religious education; (3) the uses of myths in theology in popular religious studies; (4) the convergence of science and theology in his evolutionary studies. For me, these are the phases that compose the whole range of Belita’s work.

## MYTHS VS. SCIENCE: LITURGICAL-SACRAMENTAL STUDIES

Not known to many, Jimmy Belita could have been a present disciple of the great Filipino liturgist, Anscar Chupungco (1939-2013). His dissertation in Leuven (1979) was entitled “A Filipino Eucharist: A Theological Reflection on the *Misa ng Bayang Pilipino* in the Light of a Tillichian Sacramentology.”<sup>2</sup> It is a thick two-volume work written in the time when laptop computers did not yet exist, and dissertation writing also meant dealing with “snow flakes” and carbon papers to make sure an extra copy existed when you lost the original manuscript.

Though generally appreciative of the work of Chupungco in liturgical indigenization (“inculturation” was still not born in the theological world), Belita uses Tillich’s theology in order to critique some of its problematic directions. While many were euphoric about the innovations made by Chupungco’s *Misa ng Bayan*,<sup>3</sup> he critiques it for using indigenous elements in the liturgy with the conscious purpose of contributing to “the nation’s search for cultural identity,” as Chupungco wrote in his objectives. Written

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Belita, “A Filipino Eucharist: A Theological Reflection on the *Misa ng Bayang Pilipino* in the Light of a Tillichian Sacramentology” (PhD Diss., Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> A. Chupungco, “A Filipino Attempt at Liturgical Indigenization,” *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 91, 4-5 (1977): 370-376.

in the time of Martial Law (1979), Belita's dissertation already sensed the ambiguity of this direction. He sensed a certain temptation toward cultural romanticism which was in danger of being politically instrumentalized, not quite different from the *Bagong Lipunan* ideology where Marcos used the "*malakas at maganda*" myth in order to advance his political dream that later turned into nightmare within his so-called New Society.

Already in this first work, Belita, also following Paul Tillich, defends the paradoxical character of symbols and rituals as productive of future theological innovations. What he calls the "magico-religious" world of symbols "safeguards the horizon of the mysterious and the sacred, making possible in consequence man's limit-experience which is open to religious sentiment."<sup>4</sup> The erasure of the magical, by objectivizing them in rigid liturgies, spells a serious impairment of spiritual and religious life. There is one crucial observation I would make in this seminal work: the dichotomy and opposition he establishes between science and myths; between the world of scientific inquiry and the world of rituals. While science works with abstract data; symbolic universes operate in the level of sense intuition. "In this sense," he argues, "the magico-religious mentality liberates men from the domination of scientific and positive culture."<sup>5</sup> When science has turned positivistic, theology as science loses its taste, thus, the need for the culture's mythical and symbolic universes. I will come back to this observation at the end of this paper.

### THEOLOGY AND EDUCATION: STUDIES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The second landmark in Belita's theological endeavor was on the field of theology and religious education. Assigned to teach in different seminaries, schools of theology and religious education departments in universities, the first monograph that he published was an unpretentious synthesis of graduate theological researches

---

<sup>4</sup> J. Belita, "A Filipino Eucharist," 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

that charted the history of theological education in the Philippines. In the book entitled *From Logos to Diwa: A Synthesis of Theological Research in Catholic Graduate Schools in the Philippines (1965-1985)*<sup>6</sup> that came out in 1986, Belita gave an exhaustive annotation and commentary of theological publications and researches in the twenty years following Vatican II. Anyone who would like to write on the developments of Catholic theology in the Philippines in some future time would have his or her work made easier, thanks to this synthesis.

As Belita was immersed in the world of education (Professor and Rector of Seminario Mayor de San Carlos in Cebu, Chair of the TRED of DLSU and President of Adamson University for nine years), the theologian in him prompted him to write *Teaching and Being-A-Church: Towards an Ecclesiology of Education* (1997).<sup>7</sup> In the first part of the book, he presented education as an essential and integrated ministry of an *ecclesia* in its being a *koinonia* (fellowship) and *diakonia* (ministry). He also tried to reflect as faithfully as possible what the Church expected of educational institutions of higher learning. In the second part, he brought up the main concern of the Church in the Philippines, that is, the empowerment of the poor through access to education. In general, some Catholic schools owned by big religious congregations were commonly perceived as elitist and, therefore, not poor-friendly. But he was also aware that in some provinces, struggling Catholic schools run by small religious communities were the only accessible spaces where the poor could achieve their hopes of a better life.

In 2001, Belita came up with a collection of essays and monographs on religious education and formation, a festschrift in honor of Brother Andrew Gonzalez, FSC, entitled *Quest for Insights into Faith* which he co-edited with Sr. Corazon Manalo, DC.<sup>8</sup> Its subtitle expressed clearly what it was meant for: *Charting New Paths*

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Belita, *From Logos to Diwa: A Synthesis of Theological Research in Catholic Graduate Schools in the Philippines, 1965-1985* (Manila: De La Salle University, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> J. Belita, *Teaching and Being-A-Church: Towards an Ecclesiology of Education* (Manila: Adamson University, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> J. Belita and Corazon Manalo, eds., *Quest for Insights into Faith: Charting New Paths and Direction for Religious Education* (Manila: Adamson University, 2001).

*and Direction for Religious Education*. Why would one consider this a landmark in religious education? The words of the honoree (Bro. Andrew himself) gave the insight into the collection: “The meat of adult faith must be granted to adults; in the hands of a believer, no one needs to be protected from these issues, which are all manifestations of man’s groping for the truth and for the absolute. Dogma is developing, so are moral insights in the light of contemporary life and discoveries. While I have never advocated relativity in morals and in truth, I have always advocated the dynamic character of man’s consciousness and insights into the absolute.”<sup>9</sup>

In an act of honoring Bro. Andrew, the linguist, Belita—in his introduction—talks about the need to proclaim the faith not only through logical reason but also through the linguistic mechanisms of metaphors, analogies and paradigms. This is not only consistent with contemporary philosophical developments from Kuhn to Habermas but also with the classical uses of *analogia entis* in Aquinas and the use of models in Hans Kung and Avery Dulles, among others. In his contribution to this collection, he already talks of the “World Wide Web”—still in its initial developments—as the new paradigm of the web-structured Church.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, Belita is consistent with his earlier concerns in his dissertation on the need for linguistic metaphors in theology beyond logical understanding. On the other hand, he is pleading for a kind of religious education that goes beyond the pietistic and moralistic tendencies of past and present manualist theological curriculum in seminaries, schools, dioceses and parishes.

### MYTHS AND THEOLOGY: POPULAR RELIGIOSITY STUDIES

The third landmark of Belita’s theological career is a theological comeback to his initial reflections on myths and theology already present in his dissertation. Three publications can

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., backcover.

<sup>10</sup> J. Belita, “World-Wide Web: A New Church Paradigm,” in *Quest for Insights into Faith*, 130-143.

be mentioned under this heading: *The Way of Greater Self: Constructing A Theology Around A Filipino Mythos* (1991); *And God Said Hala! Studies in Popular Religiosity in the Philippines* (1991); *Cast into the Deep: Shaping the Filipino Moral Imagination for Social Change* (1994).<sup>11</sup>

The Preface of *The Way of Greater Self* reads: "Dear to the Filipinos' psyche is the root paradigm of the *Greater Self*; there is always a greater entity for which they can afford to suffer inconveniences and even make sacrifices. Whether it is a more embracing Self or a "tribal" one, still it is a greater self for better or for worse, for the right or wrong reason. This mythos of the *Greater Self* is that towards which spiral the other peculiarly Filipino root paradigms of *bahala na* (givenness) and *utang na loob* (reciprocity)."<sup>12</sup>

For the author, this work is a modest contribution to doing theology in the Philippines. Though many other socio-theological issues abound in the Filipino context—e.g., class struggle, *kagandahang loob*, *bahala na*, providence, social justice—the view of the *Greater Self* intends to be "a modest contribution to the cause of inculturating theology in the Philippines."<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, Belita wants to distinguish his systematic theological project from the medieval framework of *homo rationalis* in Thomas Aquinas, for instance, where the metaphysical being proceeds from and returns to God (*exitus-reditus*). On the other hand, he also intends to go beyond the emphasis of the Latin American liberation theology where the *homo oppressus* conditioned by socio-economic inequalities makes the establishment of God's kingdom of justice into some sort of social project. What Belita wants to contribute is the sense of the "Greater Self" which he argues as the Filipino dynamic equivalent of the Kingdom of God. It is an attempt to do theology from the context of two Filipino existential structures—gratuity (*bahala na*) and reciprocity (*utang na loob*). These are the two

---

<sup>11</sup> J. Belita, *The Way of Greater Self: Constructing a Theology around a Filipino Mythos* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991); idem, ed., *And God Said Hala! Studies in Popular Religiosity in the Philippines* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991); idem, *Cast into the Deep: Shaping the Filipino Moral Imagination for Social Change* (Manila: Congregation of the Mission, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., ii.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., iii.

dynamics “that keep the journey of the Greater Self moving just as the Greater Self is the horizon or telos for the observable petty selves that still abound in our society.”<sup>14</sup>

In the same year, Belita published a collection of essays and researches on popular religiosity in the book entitled *And God Said Hala! Studies in Popular Religiosity in the Philippines*. There have been many publications on popular religions in the past but mostly done from the anthropological perspective. What this collection purported to do, besides being a synthetical work on popular religions, was to critically assess religious phenomena from a theological perspective. In the introduction of the book, he already has a premonition of the impending grave ecological problems that could not just be solved by individualistic liberal minds. He found the solution to this ecological disaster in popular religions. Our ancestors’ religions are most sensitive to nature and cosmic harmony quite opposite to the dominant iconoclastic approaches to social change. Belita drives home his point through childhood reminiscence: “As a “participant-observer” in the spirit world where we, as kids, used to invoke the deities when walking through the woods, I still have a high regard for non-exploitative relations with nature.”<sup>15</sup> The whole collection includes articles from several authors on the relationship between popular religions and Christianity, the ambivalence of religious symbols, studies on Banahaw indigenous religions—*Tatlong Persona Solo Dios* and *Watawat ng Lahi*, etc. Belita’s contributions includes two articles: “The Nono and the Niño: A Development of Folk Catholicism in Hiligaynon Poetry” and “Let us Through: Multidisciplinary Reflections on Popular Catholicism in the Philippines”.<sup>16</sup> “*Hala*” is the Filipino word every child hears as he or she is introduced into the moral and spiritual world—a word of caution as one enters the world of spirits who can be the source of both curse and blessing. Approaching nature, like entering the spirit world, thus invites both wonder and caution. “There is a dynamic tension,” he argues,

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 153-164, 165-182.

“between the *tremendum* and the *fascinans* in the mystery, between the *hala* experience and the *salamat* experience.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1994, Belita published a book, *Cast into the Deep: Shaping the Filipino Moral Imagination for Social Change*, a work in response to the challenge of PCP-II to become agents of social transformation. He argues for the use of our imagination to envision what we would want to become and how. The arguments in the book follow related reflections on “moral imagination” in different fields, e.g., the role of moral imagination within the Filipino ethos, in moral theology itself, in moral education, within the Jesus story, in the sacramental system and liturgy, among others. Continuing on his previous work on the Greater Self, Belita now argues that the Greater Self and the Deepest Self constitute the Filipino “mythos” which calls for a corresponding “ethos”—both of which constitute what we usually call spirituality. Heeding Gustavo Gutierrez’s paradigm of spirituality as “drinking from our own wells,” Belita challenges us to cast our buckets deep into the well of our collective self. If we are fishers of humanity, we would cast our net deep into the sea of God’s mercy. The “deep” is an image that runs through different settings. The “deep” suggests the person’s interiority. For Filipinos, this depth is the “*loob*”—the center of the human being in and through which we share humanity. The Filipino imagination is in touch with this interiority. The image of a fuller life wells up from this depth where dreams and aspirations are formed. The Filipino is told, “Draw from this depth and you may live.”

### SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: STUDIES ON EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

The last landmark in Belita’s theological career is the dialogue he establishes between theology and science, in particular, with evolutionary theory. In his latest article, Belita describes this direction. Beyond narrative–philosophical and sociological approaches—that proliferates in theology, “I have opted to take off from another discipline: science or, to be more specific,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., viii.



evolutionary psychology. Personally, I see the limitation of this approach, but so are the others. If theology has at its sight not only the perfect God but also the perfectible people, then, it has as its concern the human flourishing. In this area, natural science is an indispensable factor either as a tool or as a system.”<sup>18</sup> We can refer to two published books along this line thus far: *God Was Not In The Wind: An Evolutionary Understanding of Popular Religion in the Philippines* (2006); and *Release for Wholeness* and the subtitle is, *A Study of Healing Where Faith and Science Converge and Grace in Nature Revealed* (2015).<sup>19</sup>

*God Was Not in The Wind* was intended as a contribution to a scanty pool of biology-based theological reflections on popular religion in the Philippines. In this work, the dynamics of popular religion expressed in religious and moral practices is interpreted according to evolutionary principles. Not different from his earlier concerns with models, metaphors and analogies, Belita this time argues for the theory of evolution as one paradigm that theology can use especially in its attempt to understand the faith of ordinary people in popular religions. “Popular religions in the Philippines,” he writes, “has done all kinds of things to the Story [story of salvation]: dance It, heal with It, sing It, cleanse with It, flagellate for It, and even suffer in behalf of It. As long as the Story keeps on

---

<sup>18</sup> J. Belita, “What is Theology for Me, Its How and Wherefore,” *Hapag* 12, no. 2 (2015): 33. He describes further this search for a theological uncharted territory: “There is no doubt that philosophy and sociology provide good categories and models in providing explanation for the mystery of sin. Philosophical categories, however, like nature, essence, being, etc., are really too abstract and even irrelevant for our modern readers. Liberation theology has aptly used sociological categories... Its methodological arm, ‘see-judge-act’ has been overused by theology students, thus making social issues trite and less contributive to new knowledge. This is not to question the valuable contribution of sociology to theology; only that there is a need to look for uncharted areas. In a rather congested territory of philosophical and sociological theologians, we venture forth to theologize in an area not so frequently trodden by traditional theologians: the world of science. It is like being the primordial fish, that, sensing the congestion and competition in the sea, ventured forth to dry land in order to survive (evolving into reptiles and, later, into mammals including you and me!) and survive it did, and the rest is history in the evolutionary world” (Ibid., 39).

<sup>19</sup> J. Belita, *God Was Not in The Wind: An Evolutionary Understanding of Popular Religion in the Philippines* (Manila: Adamson University Press, 2006); idem, *Release for Wholeness: A Study of Healing Where Faith and Science Converge and Grace in Nature Revealed* (Capiz: St. Anthony College, 2015).

being told, the people will keep on living, living to the full in their own simple way towards the grand design of the Kingdom of their Father.”<sup>20</sup>

It was, perhaps, the novelty of this approach that convinced the honorable judges of a committee (Manila Critics Circle and National Book Development Board) to declare this book the “Best Book of the Year on Religion and Theology” in 2007.<sup>21</sup> This book was followed by an article which he published in the DAKATEO compilation in *Hapag* in 2007 on the theme of *Interdisciplinarity in Theology*: “Value-Driven: The Grounding of Morals in Evolutionary and Religious Narrations.”<sup>22</sup> Here, he contends that evolutionary view of cosmos as paradigm gives rise to aesthetic-axiological hermeneutics, in short, beauty and value can actually be basis for morals. “In just contemplating the mysterious universe, we may surmise that beside their scientific logic, Newton and Einstein possessed too an aesthetic sense that translated to ‘superpersonal ethical values’ that indicate life is meaningful as well for them. Was not this aesthetic sense that made him express to an American president his misgivings about the atomic bomb?”<sup>23</sup>

In the same direction, Belita published the book, *Release for Wholeness* in 2015. The thinking of this book logically followed the previous one on the evolutionary view of religion. In the book *God Was Not in the Wind*, science and religion were initially linked. In this latest publication on healing, science and religion were made to converge, through new physics and new biology, on one hand, and a new way of doing theology, on the other. Many believers in God have recourse to religion-related healing or faith healing: some out of belief for its efficacy, others for its being an alternative to mainstream or conventional medicine. Some in the health industry, especially medical doctors, look at faith healing as a quackery, at worst; or a placebo equivalent, at best. However, there

---

<sup>20</sup> J. Belita, *God Was Not in The Wind*, 216.

<sup>21</sup> National Book Development Board, “Bookwatch,” accessed 8 June 2020, [https://issuu.com/nationalbookdevelopmentboard/docs/book\\_watch\\_\\_4th\\_quarter\\_2007\\_\\_insid](https://issuu.com/nationalbookdevelopmentboard/docs/book_watch__4th_quarter_2007__insid).

<sup>22</sup> J. Belita, “Value-Driven: The Grounding of Morals in Evolutionary and Religious Narrations,” *Hapag* 4, no. 1 (2007): 61-79.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

are now new developments that can reconcile science and faith. Modern science, like quantum physics and neuroscience, has begun to recognize the scientific basis of faith healing, prayer and spirituality. The quest for wholeness, the emphasis on mindfulness and the recognition of Oriental approaches to health permeate contemporary popular cultures. No wonder, in the midst of scientific advancement, Belita argues, “God won’t go away.” The reason is simple: religion is good for the health!

Let me go back to an earlier observation. In the first part of his career, Belita placed a wedge between the symbolic world of faith and the positivist world of science, favoring symbols and rituals as valuable to faith. At the twilight of his career, he has already come full circle for he has come to realize that science has long passed its positivist stage and now presents itself as symbols in the form of “scientific stories” and “scientific narrations.” New science now asks humanity’s ultimate questions which traditionally was theology’s lone domain.

### **“SELF-EFFACING THEOLOGY”: A SENSE OF REFLEXIVITY**

I myself have personal reservations on making evolutionary psychology as a frame for theological reflection. But it will take me another book to prove these assertions. And this is not the place to discuss them. Here, I just would like to honor a courageous theologian who ventured into a territory few of us have trod. In the worldwide scene, he belongs to an honorable list of theologians dialoguing with science – like Ian G. Barbour, Arthur Peacock, Ted Peters, John Polkinghorne and others. But in the Philippine theological scene, Jimmy Belita is the only name in this field. He is the only theologian in our midst who can explain “original sin” not through the Genesis myth nor through sinful social structures but through our reverting back to the reptilian brains inside all of us.<sup>24</sup> For him, we should not be surprised by social exclusion, divisiveness and “turfig” even among academics. We are just like dogs urinating around a certain space to claim our territoriality; an area urinated by one is off-limits to another. That Archimedes

---

<sup>24</sup> J. Belita, “What Theology Is for Me?,” 29-52.

jumped out of his bathtub shouting “eureka” forgetting that he was naked was for Belita an instance of scientific discovery exploding toward the aesthetic and the ethical. It is only Jimmy among us who can deduce an ethical experience from a naked man!

In the end, let me say what for me is the measure of a theologian’s greatness. For someone who comes up with several books and articles almost every year, and for someone who can deliver an erudite lecture for hours without reading a manuscript or bringing notes with him, it is a refreshing experience to see a humble self-effacing theologian. What caught my attention in Jimmy’s contribution to theological knowledge is his sense of self-reflexivity. In his last article published by *Hapag*, he writes something I would like to quote in full:

Writing about how I do theology is both humbling and confidence-building. It is humbling because there are other local theologians who have already written and still write great theological stuff, better than I can. However, I begin to build confidence in what I do for I am simply sharing a personal narrative of what is theology for me and how I do it, no more no less. Acknowledging, beforehand, my fallibility and accepting my initial bias for certain ideas in the subject liberates me from presumptuous and pretentious claims. Any claim of contribution that my theology brings to society in general will be no more no less than what I give. In the final analysis, what my readers do with what they can possibly learn from how and why I do theology I might never know... Theology ultimately is a cause for humility, for one is confronted with so great a Mystery that any attempt to explain It seems so insolent... I would suppose at the end, my response will get the fate of St. Thomas’ “straw,” that is, it will be worth burning. Straw or not, it will be my modest share of this theological exercise. Henceforth, I commit myself, to a self-effacing theology, a theology

that can be discarded when it has outlived its purpose.<sup>25</sup>

**Daniel Franklin Pilario**  
*St. Vincent School of Theology-Adamson University*  
221 Tandang Sora Ave., Quezon City, Philippines  
*danielfranklinpilario@gmail.com*

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31-32.