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The Tagalog “Loob” in Oliver’s *Doctrina Christiana*

Jose Mario C. Francisco, S.J.



This note on Juan de Oliver’s sixteenth-century Tagalog catechism, *Doctrina Christiana*, is a textual analysis focused on its understanding of the body (*cataoan*) and other related concepts. In the course of the analysis, references will be made to similar medieval views to illustrate the medieval legacy that shaped the catechism. The last section of the study, however, suggests that in spite of the extensive medieval influence on its understanding of the body, this very legacy is subverted through the use of Tagalog.

The Body in Oliver’s Catechism

Many references to the human body in the entire catechism show Oliver’s keen awareness of the human body and its functions. Most of these references deal with common experiences related to the senses such as sight and smell or to bodily sensations like hunger and the need to sleep. There are also some references to more technical biological matters. Oliver, for instance, mentions the medieval understanding of conception which holds that a child’s body is formed from its mother’s blood, and its soul from its father’s seed, and that a male takes longer than a female to be formed.

Oliver’s references to the body, however, were not intended to call attention to the body as such. If importance was attached to the body, it was because of its relation to the soul (*caloloua*). This relation may be described in terms of (a) the body is an analogue of the soul, and (b) it is through the body that access to the soul is possible.

Many references describe the body as an analogue to the soul. For instance, Oliver uses concrete details in pointing out that just as there exist conditions or realities that can harm the body such as extreme pain, poison and wild animals, so too for the soul which can be

harmed by sin. One gets the impression from these passages that body and soul exist in parallel within the person.

This impression is somewhat modified by the second aspect of the body-soul relation found in the catechism. While analogous to each other, the soul which is referred to as "Godlike" is therefore infinitely more important. Nevertheless, the body is important as the access to the human soul.

In the first section of the catechism, Oliver deals with the Sign of the Cross and its importance in Christian life. Here the human body is described as something to be protected with weaponry such as armor and shield, because it under attack by the devil, and the way to defeat the devil is through making the sign of the cross in the different parts of the body.

The logic of such a practice is that the devil uses the body, especially the parts that need to be marked with the cross, as access to the soul. Temptation takes place in this way, and as soon as one lets down one's guard over one's senses one commits sin, which is described as dirt on the soul. In such a state of sin, the devil takes possession of one's soul, and when one dies in such a captured state, then one goes to hell.

It is in this context that Oliver refers to sexual matters. He criticizes the natives for their apparent preoccupation with sex; he mentions lewd songs that they sing while boating, and calls the adults to task for initiating the young in sexual matters. The sin most frequently alluded to is adultery, and women, not men, are called "*malilibog*." This may be related to his references to abortion among women.

Oliver's description of the torment in hell also indicates the same close connection between body and soul. At the Last Judgment, God metes out punishment for both body and soul. The torment involves bodily pain rendered eternal. Moreover, there is even correspondence between the bodily punishment and the kind of sin committed. For instance, the rust which destroys all material wealth will be the same that will eat up the body of the avaricious.

This kind of abject human condition can only be changed through redemption, and Oliver's main message in the catechism is that this redemption took place in and through Jesus Christ. And just as total human perdition is closely related to the body, this redemption is similarly expressed in ways dealing with the bodily. This is initially evident in the catechism's description of the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

both states, coming similarly from God, are equal, and yet the higher valuation for virginity is unmistakable.

To begin with, the prominent stature accorded Mary as virgin is clear. This stature is reflected in the state of her body, which at her birth, did not inherit Adam's sin, and at the birth of her Son, did not lose its integrity. Mention is made of the virginity of Jesus, John the Baptist, and the numerous virgin-martyrs of the early centuries.

Oliver takes great pains to emphasize the prominence of virginity, because he notes that the natives do not have a word for virgin. He narrates several lengthy stories from Scripture and church lore, all illustrating the stature of virginity. One tells of a young man who died right after the wedding ceremony because he had asked Mary to preserve his virginity.

His few references to marriage as such, not adultery, consist in reminding husbands and wives to respect each other, especially enjoining husbands not to physically abuse their wives. In one interesting instance, Oliver mentions in passing how spouses woo one another after a quarrel by giving a goat, for instance, as peace-offering.

Medieval Roots: Pervasive yet Subverted

It is obvious from the above explication of Oliver's understanding of the body and other related concepts how pervasive its medieval roots are. In a sense, this is not surprising as one may presume that the theological mindset that formed Oliver in Europe and which he used in writing the catechism was itself shaped by medieval thought.

This medieval heritage is present on many levels in Oliver's catechism. Many of the materials that Oliver used, like the stories, come from medieval sources. His discussion on human conception owes its background to the medieval appropriation of Aristotelian biology (Bynum 1992, 214).

Aside from the use of sources or background material, Oliver's views were in substantial agreement with commonly held positions during the Middle Ages. For instance, his views on virginity and marriage are of a piece with the medieval exultation of virginity—perhaps the one single thread running through the entire period, though particular pastors and theologians differed in their explanations (Brown 1988).

But of greater interest than these particular points of intersection is the medieval lineage of the wider conceptual structure governing

his understanding of the body-soul relation. As mentioned above, he described this relation in terms of (a) the body and the soul being unequal analogues of each other, with the soul being more important, and (b) the body providing access to the soul.

Both propositions as well as the related illustrations that Oliver uses find a firm foundation in the medieval discussions and practices regarding the body-soul relation (Bynum 1992, 222–35; 253–97). These discussions often involved diverse and even esoteric theories about the nature of both entities, which also found expression in various pious practices, like the veneration of relics. But, at least among those not condemned as heretical, they centered not so much on the contrast between the body and the soul, but on the bodily continuity. Nevertheless, the higher stature accorded virginity and the constant call to vigilance regarding the body indicated some kind of dualism but one within the person. This dualism did not identify the person with either the body or the soul exclusively; rather the greater focus of the discussion lay in the concern for personal identity through changes in the body.

As in the medieval discussion, one finds in Oliver the same focus in his treatment of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, and their repercussions for life of the Christian on earth and in heaven. Oliver's insistence on the union of Christ's human body and divine soul at his conception, rising to life, and even in the Eucharistic host is thoroughly medieval. The same may be said of his discussion of Christian earthly existence in terms of his use of the body as analogue, though unequal, of the soul. In his description of the glory that awaits the redeemed in heaven, he explicitly points out the reunion of soul with the person's material body which will now be transformed, rid of all imperfections and fully whole.

This—more than his use of medieval sources and background, and the congruence on particular points—indicates the pervasive influence of the medieval heritage in Oliver's catechism. However, his work is not simply an exact replica in sixteenth-century Tagalog of some medieval catechism. (Such would be theoretically impossible on account of the very nature of language.)

What one discovers in his description of the body-soul relation using borrowed medieval concepts is a native concept which alters, if not subverts, the medieval framework which he employs. This concept is "loob" which literally means "inside" and can therefore be applied to both body and soul.

Oliver himself defines "loob" as "that which is deepest within a person, which cannot be satisfied by all that the body experiences or by the whole world." Understood as such and applied extensively to both body and soul, this Tagalog concept provides a bridge between the medieval distinction between body and soul.

This is evident in reference to both the states of sin and grace. In a section exhorting the Christian to go to Confession, Oliver says that "the sinner's body will be eaten like wood eaten by *bocboc*, and his/her *loob* will suffer." If, however, the Christian repents and goes to receive Communion, "Christ will rejoice since he desires to dwell in the Christian's loob, and that is why he puts his body in us, [which] becomes food for our souls." Here one discovers in one passage—body, soul, and loob, all together used to express the unity of the Christian with Christ. These references are typical in that their use of loob allows for an interpretation that pertains to both the body and soul.

The ability of this Tagalog concept to act as bridge is further enhanced by Oliver's use of the word in relation to God. For instance, in describing the resurrection of the body, Oliver writes that "like the grain which is crushed underneath the earth and then suddenly grows and lives, so too with our body, though it has become earth, will someday live again, *palibhasa, y ang Dios ang maglolooob*." The italicized phrase means "since God desires and/or grants it." In this use of the same word to refer to both human and divine subjects, the relation between the human and the divine somehow appears closer.

These various uses of loob in Oliver's catechism and its function in bridging the body and soul, the human and God, show that his catechism is more than simply a rendering into Tagalog of an already fully-conceived medieval world. Herein lies the value of tracing the medieval legacy in Philippine texts. It may not only show the pervasiveness of this legacy, but also reveal how it has been changed, if not subverted, by the native.

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