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The pandemic and spiritual capital: Re-reading faith through human pain, anxiety, and meaninglessness in the Philippines

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Abstract: The suppression of traditional religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed new forms of spiritual disciplines. To understand this phenomenal shift, we use spiritual capital as an explanatory concept to describe emerging spiritual resources in a state of international health crises. We investigate how forms of spiritual capital keep individuals and religious communities in the Philippines afloat to face daily threats to health. We structure our analysis through Robert Putnam's categories of bonding and bridging capital transposed as forms of spiritual resources. We used Paul Tillich's ideas of courage and the Ultimate and Victor Frankl's insights on meaning making as spiritual resources. This paper shows how spiritual capital has been heavily invested at the height of the pandemic lockdowns in the Philippines and various parts of the world. Filipinos demonstrate spiritual resilience in bridging and bonding forms of spiritual capital. These manifestations affirm religion's normative function and practical value of religious support for communities.

Key words: spiritual capital, pandemic, religion, existentialism, meaning making.

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1. Introduction

For an extended period, the world's economy suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic's prolonged impact on the world shrunk national economies due to repeated and prolonged lockdowns triggering extended economic inactivity. This rendered many people less productive while their lifestyle and daily routine was altered. The situation placed Filipinos in an endless routine of uncertainty, immobility, and anxiety. This familiar situation estimates the philosopher Albert Camus' sense of life's absurdity. Humanity is locked in a repetitive struggle to find meaning in an utterly meaningless and distressful episode of life.

Before the arrival of vaccine doses, infected people with co-morbidities were resigned to the certainty of death. During this fight to make sense of life's troubles, people dug deep into their available material and non-material resources to survive the test. The collapse of businesses and end of traditional activities prior to the pandemic opened new opportunities and creative ways to deal with the health crises. In this light, religion has proven to be one example of a recalcitrant institution standing behind dedicated religious leaders and committed devotees who dig into their spiritual reserves to sustain their faith.

Previous studies investigating health matters during the COVID-19 pandemic leaned toward the impact or mediation of religious practices and spiritual beliefs upon people's overall health. Frankl (2010) referred to "spiritual resources" that positively contribute toward stabilizing inner dispositions of individuals. These resources consistently show favorable impact on human disposition. "For Frankl the quest for human liberation from extreme neurosis typifies the persistence of human freedom that upholds the spirit's defiance of overwhelming odds". A similar unlikely impression was expressed by Camus, known for his pessimistic evaluation of life. From our review of Camus' literature, he believes that beyond every despair, there will come joy and liberation of the spirit (Baring and Salcedo 2020).

Spiritual capital is offered in a variety of definitions. Some authors cluster it with social and religious capital as an interlocking interchangeable concept. Iannaccone and Klick (2003) list five capitals, which include religious and spiritual capitals. The literature review conducted by Seryczynska and others (2021) sees spiritual capital obviously associated with resources and helpful experiences tied to accessing religion or some form of de-institutionalized belief. Thus far, spiritual capital is conceptually located within traditional discourse on social capital.

Several authors employ varied definitions of the concept of spiritual capital. These varieties of definitions offer practical meanings applicable to the context of the study. Spiritual capital is generally applied in health sciences, especially mental health, business, and work. It is also in-

vestigated in entrepreneurship in the study of Neubert and others (2017), using data from Kenya and Indonesia that show how spiritual capital is a significant factor in innovations and entrepreneurship. Another empirical study uses spiritual capital to mean personal well-being, spirituality, and religiosity (Veerasamy et al. 2014). This empirical sense clearly looks at spiritual capital as a coping resource for mental and physical dispositions. Similarly, it is widely associated with predicting life satisfaction ratings (Esteban et al. 2021) in instances of emotional distress.

Given these varied presentations of meanings and associations, we are interested in determining what forms of spiritual capital can be described from current literature and observations in the Philippines and in other places during the pandemic. We investigate these forms following Putnam's (2000) categories of bonding and bridging social capital (Baker & Miles-Watson 2010). Putnam's (2000) proposed Bonding and Bridging social capital highlights relational opportunities that support meaning making activities between individuals and communities as well as volunteering efforts. Our selection of Putnam's categories is in consonance with Baker and Miles-Watson's review highlighting the strategic grounding of spiritual capital on the concept of social capital. These concepts have overlapping meanings. Transposing from Putnam's view, we see how bonding capital corresponds to the inner life of faith communities, while bridging capital refers to inter-faith and experiential exchanges of individuals and communities.

To analyze forms of spiritual capital in terms of bonding and bridging meanings, our paper considers an essentialist and functional view of religion. Following the essentialist view, we highlight individual traditional and non-traditional views of the sacred or the ultimate and intra-personal views following Paul Tillich's ideas of the ultimate as bonding factors in a state of health crises. From a functionalist point of view, we investigate inter-personal and meaning-making spiritual practices of individuals and communities using Frankl's ideas of the will to meaning.

By analyzing insights through Tillich and Frankl's ideas, we move from social capital to forms of spiritual experience. For our intent, spiritual capital includes knowledge, capacities and experiences in traditional and non-traditional senses either facilitated by institutional religion or inspired by personal belief. When we factor in the pandemic as the context of inquiry, what manifestations of these spiritual resources can be found in institutional and individual responses and behavior? Hence, we investigate the turn toward spiritual capital to understand trajectories of human behavior and mindset reflecting organized and individual responses or reactions to the health crises.

2. Spiritual capital, human anxiety, and pain

For Filipino believers, religion is a resource of hope. Through religion, local devotees seek consolation from divine providence for resolution of their personal issues and problems. Prayers often express deep sentiments manifesting aspirations and plans. In the Philippines, these aspirations reflect hope for the outpouring of divine gifts. As we dig into human experiences during a time of crises, we note Paul Tillich's view that human experience leads toward spirituality (Deurzen 2010). Even as a theologian, Tillich's ideas on the significant place of courage and anxiety fits our preliminary intent to describe the basic human disposition when a person is faced with an inner crisis. Paul Tillich reached out to a world ravaged by emotional crises and misery, and spoke with conviction over the spiritual and mental crises confronting people of faith. Anxiety, in Tillich's mind, opens a moment of courage instead of being overwhelmed by it (Deurzen 2010), or else despair may overturn the human spirit. Deurzen identifies three threats that humans contend within Tillich's work: "anxiety of death, of meaninglessness, and of guilt or self-condemnation" (Deurzen 2010, 100).

In a time of crisis, anxieties are inevitable. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the anxiety of death and meaninglessness dominated people's preoccupation. Filipino family members left behind bore the stigma and wounds of losing a beloved without being at the dying patient's bedside during the final moment. In Deurzen's analysis, emptiness and meaninglessness constitute aspects of a spiritual sense of crisis in life. Belief in the ultimate, beyond religious categories, somehow cushions the impact of the crisis, and hence leads the person to courage.

We proceed from Tillich's non-categorical reference of the ultimate to religion, by showing how the sense of the "ultimate" is appreciated within personal religious circumstances, and constitutes the core object and subject of the individual's religious imagination and resource. For Tillich, "Religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion" (Tillich 1987, 103). The ultimate is conveniently expressed by symbolic language, since symbols are the best expressions of concerns beyond life. In this regard, cultural expressions manifested in codes and accepted norms bear rich meanings to articulate what Deurzen calls a new spirituality for our time.

Viktor Frankl's works represented the shift from self toward meaning making to overcoming despair (Wong 2014). Like Tillich's work on human anxiety, Viktor Frankl's ideas ran deep into the human spirit's inner dispositions. By working into the depths of personal negative experiences, Tillich's and Frankl's insights appear to overlap. Frankl's work came at a time when the world is beset with war and meaninglessness brought about

by the senseless death of thousands throughout the world. Now we speak of Frankl in a time of international torment caused by viral infections. Frankl focused on the quest for meaning as the key to dealing with a crisis. Meaning making and being religious are factors known to aid recovery and to influence individual resilience after a crisis (Park 2016).

Variant notions about meaning in life abound in literature (Ivtzan et al. 2016). Martela and Steger (2016) identify coherence, purpose, and significance as three underlying senses for meaning in life. In practical respects these three senses guide the human spirit toward appreciating the value of life itself. Losing one's grip on life is practically a loss of meaning. People who are saddened by existential and psychological concerns are the primary subjects of this interest. For our paper we highlight spiritual, purposive, and value-oriented notions as component feeders of meaning in life to understand the inner human struggle to make sense of the ugly experience of meaninglessness and anxiety. Hence, we interpret meaninglessness in different gradations of the lack or absence of spiritual senses, purpose, and value. We use ideas about meaning-making, the ultimate, and courage to explain how the human spirit can rise above crisis situations through the suggestive power of the will to affect the meaning and grandeur of something ultimate beyond traditional religious categories.

Tillich's and Frankl's ideas point to a spiritually oriented mindset. Tillich's notion of the ultimate fires up human imagination, probing deep human longings that go beyond experiences of loss, detachment, and uncertainty. Similarly, Frankl's insights drive us to understand how the quest for meaning bridges the gaps between uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. From these trajectories, we describe the markers that represent spiritual resources, and identify the forms of spiritual capital that lay beneath people's behavior and beliefs during the pandemic.

3. The pandemic and brewing spiritual life

Religious communities and faith-based organizations are named by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a "source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve" (WHO 2020 1). Much is expected from these communities to help in the massive drive to contain the infections and accompany distressed individuals. Indeed, faith-based organizations do their share in dealing with viral infections. Spiritual accompaniment is the main capacity of religious communities to cushion the impact of human pain and the isolation generated by the pandemic. While religious communities try to keep up with the challenges it has posed, individual initiatives of devotees and non-devotees alike show recalcitrant emerging religious

behaviors.

Shifting spiritual attitudes triggered by restrictions from holding religious mass gatherings in temples, mosques and churches stimulate creative and more imaginative personal interpretations of worship and faith beyond sacred places. In the silence of their homes, believers look for spiritual connections and dig deep into their confidence in the sacred. Instead of complaining to God, the health crises have stimulated a unique longing for divine consolation. The shift toward spiritual resources is the consequence of the inner human drive to try to find answers and assurances while enduring pain. More than anything, the pandemic has triggered a hunger for meaning and need for faith. The ensuing struggle during the health crises projects a brewing spiritual life where individuals resort to spiritual resources while struggling between uncertainty, anxiety, and imminent loss. In the Philippines, makeshift altars fill the void among devotees who are not used to skipping religious worship. Online religious sites gradually formed new habits for those who seek spiritual consolation. The unique experiences of individuals from different parts of the world indicate that spiritual capital is an active element of spiritual resilience.

At the height of hard lockdowns throughout the Philippines, churches, mosques and temples were prohibited from operating and holding religious activities. Religious communities were quick to shift to online modes. Religious rituals are now beamed through media platforms as digitized activities. Regular daily fellowships have turned virtual. Dedicated video cameras are focused on the presiding minister in each ritual and activity beamed through social media platforms. Empty pews seem to echo the longing of devotees who have felt the impact of deprivation. Religious communities find time to celebrate their fellowship in virtual meets. Suddenly, individuals have experienced a growing thirst for spiritual nourishment while isolated in their homes.

Contrary to speculations, religious faith has held its ground throughout the transition to virtual assemblies. Faith seems to carry them toward hope in a desperate situation. Religion appears driven to maintain its traditional hold as a "... potent cultural resource or form which may act as the vehicle of change, challenge or conservation..." (Beckford 1989 170).

4. Bonding and bridging capitals

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, scholarly consensus has regarded religion as one of the influential institutions in society. In the context of bereavement, religious meaning can assist individuals' coping processes (Park 2005). Among Muslim academics, religious coping plays a significant role in confronting issues of anxiety (Achour et al. 2021).

Religious coping (Harrison et al. 2009) as shown among other religious denominations is known to have generated consistent results for health and wellness with respect to individual and social factors in several regions. Conversely, a decrease in meaning-making processes during the pandemic is associated with greater depression and anxiety (Milman et al. 2020). Our recourse to the functional role of religion toward society (Baker & Miles-Watson 2010) presents religion's influence on social life and ability to inspire individuals to cope with life. Tillich sees religion inherently intertwined with culture. This seamless relationship leads others (Guest 2007) to view spiritual capital as a cultural resource.

Many researchers including Seryczynska and others (2021) have cited religion's impact among respondents at the height of the pandemic. Here, we investigate the forms of spiritual capital by first describing manifestations of bonding and bridging capitals, and second analyzing these forms by reading how they reflect the inner and outer life of individuals and the community. Putnam's sense of bonding capital refers to "dense layering of norms and trust that is found in homogenous groups and tends to reinforce exclusivity and homogeneity..." (Baker & Miles-Watson 2010, 26). Such description overlaps with inward and outward life experiences of religious communities. Bridging capital, on the other hand, tells how communities "...manage to form linkages with groups different from themselves (i.e., heterogeneous relationships), thus creating new spaces where power, information and communication can be shared" (Baker & Miles-Watson 2010, 26).

In addressing the inner life of communities, bonding spiritual capital involves internal faith discipline and norms promoting individual and communal religious identity and spiritual life. Frankl fundamentally sees the person as a "spiritual entity" and views spiritual acts as "volitional in essence... directed toward transcendental goals and thus have, themselves, an object" (Frankl 2018, 8). As such, Frankl cautions against a reductionist treatment when persons are treated like a thing. The individual holds a natural spiritual orientation to celebrate life and its gifts. In pandemic times, several studies have observed the articulation of prayer life and faith commitments largely within the purview of the sacred, perceived to be near and faithful to their pleadings. Muslims are personally oriented toward the cultivation of prayer life and ritual observances in the face of the health crises (Achour et al. 2021). In addition, communities organize themselves to dispense religious services in non-traditional ways. Contrary to perceptions in which the pandemic lockdowns were considered threats, religious communities have found the opportunity to shift to online or hybrid modes. More than the deprivation that resulted, the pandemic restrictions in the United Kingdom were also a time to "reflect and connect more with God and via the establishment of 'Ramadan corners' in home..." (Jones-Ahmed 2022, 1).

Indeed, this worldwide crisis spurred deeper religious behavior

(Bentzen 2021). Despite hard lockdowns, some Muslim communities in southern Philippines flocked to the front side of closed mosques to pray while religious leaders led them inside the enclosed building through a public address system installed outside. Limited capacities in churches defined by political leaders did not dampen the spirit of devotees. These experiences reveal how the dispositions of devotees remain unperturbed, as creative spiritual resources were made manifest in "material, embodied, aesthetic and emotive practices..." (Jones-Ahmed 2022, 1).

Like devotees, local frontliners involved in medical and non-medical services also found themselves digging into their store of spiritual resources for comfort and consolation. Confronted by an increasing volume of COVID patients, medical frontliners in the Philippines have also had their share of burdens and personal stresses. To understand the daily struggles of medical frontliners, Tarroja and others (2022) investigated the personal coping mechanisms shown by frontliners. One of the coping strategies described is "acknowledging daily blessings, recognizing one's and other's limitations" (Tarroja et al. 2022, 69). This strategy reflects a spiritually charged view of life implying the goodness of life and dynamics of relations. The inner resolve of the individual to connect with the sacred manifest several advantages to the devotees. The study of Hu and others (2022) affirmed how "religious involvement and religious commitment significantly and positively predicted post-pandemic well-being" (Hu, Cheng, Lai 2022, 221).

From these experiences the threat of meaninglessness during isolation and threat of death through possible infection are paramount in people's imaginations. For Tillich, these threats typify levels of anxiety (Tillich, 1952). Tillich sees that the way to address these threats is by submitting to an ultimate reality or meaning, by surrendering "... to what is inevitable" (Deurzen 2010, 102) beyond the typical definitions of institutional religion. Crisis in this regard is an opportunity to see faith in a new light, in new imaginations.

Bridging capitals reflects inter-group commitments between devotees and communities. Established groups within churches continue to live their faith commitments in alternate ways such as online assemblies. For Zohar and Marshall (2004), "spiritual capital adds the dimension of our shared meanings and values and ultimate purposes. It addresses those concerns we have about what it means to be human and the ultimate meaning and purpose of human life" (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 19). In Europe, religious coping of individuals is enhanced by communal affiliation (Seryczynska et al. 2021). The link between the individual and religious institutions provides venues for meaning making and reinforcing optimism during hard lockdowns. One's link with the religious community shields the self from complete despair.

Seryczynska and others' (2021) data reveal how religious coping is

effective when individuals remain in touch with their respective religious community. Clearly, religion's prescription serves to support the individual's need for direction and meaning. Kimanen (2019) cited how the word "jin" is applied to religion as a normative lifestyle. Kimanen's young Muslim participants took note of religion's prescriptions and their emotional disposition toward faith. Rituals, eschatological views, and sense of belonging in religion are also prominent among children (understandably as explained by Lawrence Kohlberg's moral theory, where children in the early stage are tagged by the reward and punishment preoccupation).

Among Muslim respondents in the UK, religious identification and beliefs mattered most during the pandemic (Hassan et al. 2021), and the impact is deeply felt in missing religious interactions. Overall, the lockdowns affected their well-being, since the community served as their spiritual, emotional, and financial support. There is personal guilt in not being able to help others in their time of need due to restrictions. In Ahmad et al.'s study (2022), Muslim participants in Japan claimed a similar impact of the restrictions on them. Usual community rituals like shaking hands and giving hugs are to be avoided, while big observances like Ramadan are suspended and offered instead in online sessions. There is this sense of obligation to the State to avoid infections, which is considered a commitment to their faith as well, since Islam strongly sees the link between health and faith. This is supported by the way Muslims are expected to observe ritual cleansings before engaging in worship.

The restrictions made by Muslim leaders at the height of the pandemic are indicative of the clear resolve of Islam to deal with the pandemic decisively. Unfortunately, as a result, many Muslim devotees have felt sad for being deprived of the opportunity to travel to Mecca and Medina to fulfill their traditional religious obligations (Piwko 2021). The notion that these health protocols have reinforced the religious commitment of Muslims is also raised in Ahmad and Ahad's study (2021). In their review, religious sources point to the link between pandemics and divine wrath.

Alternately, faith-based communities (FBOs) do their share in looking after the needs of community members and serving as support organizations (Rachmawati et al. 2022) or mediating institutions to bridge the gap between public health authorities and religious institutions (El-Majzoub et al. 2021). Because of their wide reach, the confidence they enjoy from individuals, and their being well-organized, FBOs serve to stimulate growth in local communities as well. Their programs can elicit participation from the members. FBO engagements with the community even extend to its economic life. While we acknowledge the significant role of these FBOs, we observe how individual believers creatively find their pacing and desired dispositions when institutional functions become limited due to government restrictions. Berger and Redding (2010) see

spiritual capital as an active stimulant in economic life in hidden forms. The discussions on conversations between religion and economic issues in economic summits are an affirmation of religion's contribution to national economic development.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we have shown how spiritual capital is invested during a health crisis. Against a backdraft of suspicion in religious metanarratives, transcendent values, and discontentment with reason in postmodern times, the intense spiritual response during the COVID- 19 pandemic has disrupted the gloomy dominance of meaninglessness, fear, and anxiety. From COVID-19 pandemic experiences, we see the meaning of spiritual capital as a religious tool exposed through the bonding and bridging that has taken place across selected cultural contexts. It is high time to consider systematically the significant place of spirituality in health interventions today (Hall & Powell 2021).

The turn to spiritual capital through this work manifests the spiritual resilience of community members to connect with the sacred, with their inner selves, with fellow believers, and with other communities. We specifically see bonding forms of spiritual capital expressed in the individual's persistent relations with the sacred, captured in symbolic forms or personal narratives. Their hunger for the divine presence or the sacred in non-traditional categories has remained in intense fashion throughout the crises. It is the bridging forms of capital that help individuals and communities reach out to others in either organized or personal initiatives.

Through these forms of capital, we see both the sustained normative view of religion and its capacity to provide support mechanisms in personal and communal modes. Overall, this paper affirms spiritual personal and communal experiences seen in religious institutional or non-traditional ways as anchors of hope in difficult times.

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