

Pagbabalik-Loob Sa Diyos:
Reexamining Repentance and Conversion in the Philippine Context

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2026

Abstract

This article reexamines Christian repentance and conversion through the Filipino concept of *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos*, arguing that the Western term “conversion,” shaped by colonial and English theological discourse, fails to reflect Filipino biblical and cultural understandings of salvation. Drawing on Scripture, Filipino theology, and anthropology, the study highlights *loob* as the center of personhood and spirituality. *Pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* is understood not as a change of religious affiliation but as a relational return and reconciliation with God that transforms the inner self. The article proposes *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* as a culturally grounded and pastorally faithful framework for salvation in the Philippine context.

Key Words: conversion, salvation, repentance, Filipino Christianity, *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos*, *loob*

Introduction

A popular quote often attributed to Nelson Mandela says, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

As a pastor’s kid, I grew up hearing that salvation means receiving Jesus into one’s heart. That became my understanding. The imagery closely related is of Jesus outside a dimly lit doorway, knocking, and saying, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone opens the door, I will enter.” From this image emerged the idea that opening the door of one’s heart and letting Jesus in is the primary act of receiving salvation. However, this imagery is not directly connected to salvation. The image is from Revelation 3:20, a verse addressed not to unbelievers or the lost but to believers, particularly the church of Laodicea. Yet, the image of Jesus knocking on the door has become one of the primary ways salvation in Jesus Christ is presented.

Humanity has a broken relationship with God as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin. Ever since, human beings have struggled to find their way back to him. God has provided a way back through his Son, Jesus Christ. This message must be proclaimed to all people: salvation from eternal damnation and reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ alone.

The most familiar way of salvation for many is through “conversion.” It is also the foremost English term for the act of receiving salvation and probably one of the most popular Christian clichés. This common usage is confirmed by the questions that believers ask each other to know how they came to faith, for example, “How were you converted?” “When were you converted?” and “What is your conversion story?” However, in Filipino or Tagalog, “conversion” is understood as *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos*. This translation, however, conveys the idea of spiritual conversion but is not a direct translation.

Furthermore, when *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* is translated back into English, the meaning becomes different. (Note: Filipino is the national language of the Philippines and is based primarily on Tagalog, a regional dialect. In this article, Filipino and Tagalog are used interchangeably.)

Growing up in a Christian, academic, and missionary-multilingual community, I understand the weight of the term “conversion” in a salvific context. Yet I wonder how other Filipinos, with no such background as mine, would understand “conversion.” This matter becomes especially interesting when we take into account the Philippines’ colonial history under Spain and the United States, including the aggressive mission efforts to “convert” the so-called “pagan” inhabitants of the islands. The notion of “conversion” may thus carry negative connotations for Filipinos because of limited understanding and an unconscious connection to their unpleasant colonial history.

Salvation Language in the Bible

In the Scriptures, two popular terms or languages for salvation are found in John 3 and Acts 16. In John 3:3, Jesus spoke extensively about salvation to Nicodemus in terms of *being born again*, and in 3:16 about *believing in the Son of God*. Acts 16:31 also uses the language of *belief* as part of salvation.

Moreover, the New Testament writers present salvation in various ways. For Luke, salvation is “present” salvation, something already at work in this life, emphasizing repentance and the forgiveness of sins, as well as salvation from not only spiritual but also economic, social, political, physical, and psychological suffering. By contrast, for Paul salvation begins in this life, in the present, but it is not completed here. For him, “salvation is a process initiated by one’s encounter with the living Christ, but complete salvation is still outstanding.” The Holy Spirit continues this work, and its completion comes with Christ’s return. The key concept in Paul is “reconciliation,” as seen in Romans 5:10 (Bosch, 2006, pp. 104, 393-394).

For its part, the English term “conversion” is mentioned only once in the Bible (and only in certain translations), in Acts 15:3 (e.g., NASB, KJV). The Greek word used is ἐπιστροφή (*epistrophe*), which means *a turning about* (Hill, n.d.).

In his book *The Languages of Salvation*, Victor Kuligin attempts to enumerate 13 terms used to define or describe the single concept of salvation, namely *regeneration, justification, adoption, redemption, citizenship, atonement, reconciliation, illumination, sanctification, fruitfulness, transformation, participation, and salvation* (Kuligin, 2015). Interestingly, “conversion” is not included.

Is it possible that the varied terms and theological ideas used to describe salvation in the Bible and throughout church and mission history contribute to confusion and result in nominal faith? This undesirable result can occur especially when people only act out salvific teachings primarily taught in a language or concept foreign to their culture. Suzanne Langer explains, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” (Faule & Alexander, 1978, p. 16), thus salvation conveyed in a language that is not one’s mother tongue can create gaps in understanding.

One example is the word *sin* (in Greek ἀμαρτία—*hamartia*). In Filipino, the equivalent is *kasalanan*, from the root word *sala*, which can be traced to when Spain conquered (and renamed) the Philippines. In their mission to “convert” the local inhabitants, they also changed the language. They introduced the term *sala* for *sin*, which means “off the mark,” a shallow term that does no justice to the depth and gravity of the word *sin* or its meaning. Filipinos would use *sala* in casual, everyday conversations, sometimes even in jest. By comparison, the word *sin* would never be used in the same manner. Melba Maggay observes that, “Centuries of using [sala] does not seem to have lent it the seriousness appropriate to our transgression against the laws of a righteous God” (Maggay, 2005, p. 42). Its casual usage suggests that Filipinos do not seem to sense sin as transgression against God and his absolute moral law. If this analysis is true of *sin* and *sala*, it is not far-fetched that something similar may be true of salvation, simply because of the language used.

The challenge of different languages is that the same words do not always carry the same meaning, therefore theological concepts must often be expressed through local linguistic equivalents that resonate with the particular culture. Jione Havea argues that “to change people’s imagination requires playing with and changing their language.... The imagination comes alive *if* the language used is different from the usual” (Havea, 2011, p. 43, emphasis mine). Language both reflects a people’s worldview and shapes culture and behavior (Maggay, 2005, p. 43).

Consequently, for God’s Word and theological ideas to make sense to Filipinos, they must connect with their lived experiences and employ familiar cultural idioms (Gener, 2001, p. 45). However, changing the language should not alter the intended meaning. As Whiteman asserts, “There are no sacred forms, only sacred meanings” (Whiteman, 2025, p. 122). Thus, while Scripture and theology must be translated into the local Filipino language, the original meaning of the message must remain faithfully preserved.

Cultural Understanding and Reexamining Conversion: *Pagbabalik-Loob sa Diyos*

Salvation is “a fundamental concern of every religion. [And] for Christians, the conviction that God has decisively wrought salvation for all in and through Jesus Christ stands at the very center of their lives” (Bosch, 2006, p. 393). Thus, believers must fully understand what salvation means and its role in their spiritual life. When their understanding is incomplete or inadequate, people cannot fully participate in Christ’s salvation. This limitation may result in people who are “willing to adapt but not ready to convert,” leading to accommodation rather than conversion (Maggay, 2005, p. 44). In this situation, people may accept the invitation to be saved through Jesus Christ as Savior but may not be fully surrendered to him.

In Filipino, salvation (in Greek σωτηρία—*soteria*) is translated as *kaligtasan*, while “conversion” is *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos*—which when literally translated back into English is the “return of the inner self to God.” With respect to the English term “conversion,” I have some concerns. First is its use in simple, everyday language, where “conversion” refers to foreign currency exchange to the Philippine peso or vice versa, or to the conversion of citizenship from Filipino to US-American. It is not immediately associated with spiritual salvation.

This disconnect between the everyday meaning of “conversion” and the term’s spiritual meaning leads to the second concern. “Conversion” may be understood in the context of spiritual salvation only by a section of the Christian community, such as those familiar with theology and fluent in English. However, Filipinos from the indigenous tribes, those with limited to no education, people with little English literacy, or those with limited or no theological exposure may not grasp “conversion” in the same manner. At face value, “conversion” simply means changing from one form to another, or one allegiance to another. This set of barriers to understanding “conversion” as spiritual salvation leads to my third concern: “conversion” as a change in religion or allegiance. Bosch defines “conversion” as a change in allegiance: It is “not the joining of a community in order to ‘procure salvation’; it is rather, a change in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and center of one’s life” (2006, p. 489). Conversion from Buddhism to Christianity, or from Islam to Christianity, or vice versa, would certainly involve a change of allegiance. But in a majority Roman Catholic country like the Philippines, is there a change of allegiance to the God worshipped? Both Roman Catholics and non-Catholic Christians read and follow the same Scripture. The liturgy and some of the sacraments are similar. Thus, would it be conversion for a Filipino when referring to a spiritual orientation within the same faith history?

A final concern is the nation’s long history of colonization spanning more than 400 years combined under Spain (1521-1898) and the United States (1898-1946). Would the term “conversion” provoke adverse reactions (whether overt or hidden) because of the negative connotations associated with the generally oppressive era of colonization? Gener points out that “the early translation of conversion was a totalizing attempt of a colonizing power to subjugate Filipinos—[thus, conversion] comes with an important caution for efforts at theological inculturation” (2001, p. 47). While “conversion” can be defined as “a particular event shaped by the experience of the convert” (Gener, 2001, p. 56, quoting Newbigen), when set alongside the instrumentalized and even coercive conversion mission of the Spanish mission or the US colonization of the Philippines, the notion of “conversion” may lead to internal confusion. As a result of these factors, the Philippine Church’s understanding of conversion has tended toward “be[ing] dualistic and other-worldly in orientation... supported by an ecclesiocentric, hierarchical (clergy-dominated) approach to Christian mission.... Hence, the ‘leavening’ influence of God’s people in the totality of the culture is stifled.” Insofar as “The gospel which the people received from the Americans was individualistic, other-worldly oriented, and tainted with American nationalism,” the problematic Filipino understanding of salvation and conversion has been compounded (Gener, 2001, pp. 56-57).

Understanding *Loob*

Filipino theologians Jose De Mesa (1984), Dionisio Miranda (1988), Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano (1991), Timoteo Gener (2001), Melba Maggay (2005), and Albert Alejo (2018) make references to the Filipino concept of *loob* and reflect on its role in Filipino spirituality, including *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* as the more appropriate term to use when referring to salvation, particularly “conversion”, in the Filipino context. Their reflections on *loob* and Filipino spirituality show a sharp difference between Filipino imagery and the Western concept of salvation, which is often framed in terms of “conversion.”

Loob, or “inner self,” according to de Mesa, is the core of one’s personhood and where the true worth of a person lies (Diesta Espiritu & Zosa, 2022, p. 3). It is “a Filipino’s inner person or self that constitutes his intellectual, volitional, emotional, and ethical life” (Miranda-Feliciano, 2001, pp. 69-70). *Loob* is also defined as one’s will, “dominating one’s psycho-moral reality” (Dionisio Miranda, 1988, p. 23). *Loob*, therefore, is a person’s core—what makes up a person, that from which ideas, feelings, and behavior emerge, and the place from which a personal relationship with others resonates. A Filipino’s way of relating is described according to their *loob*, like *kabutihang-loob* (kindness), *kababaang-loob* (humility), *mabuting loob* (goodness), or the opposites, like *masama ang loob* (hurt), *masamang loob* (referring to a person of bad character), even *walang utang na loob* (for one who has no sense of gratitude) (Pierse, 1999). *Loob* is also “aspired harmony with others and nature to be in union with God” (Ramos, 2017), so “[W]hen our *loob* undergoes a deeper experience, the more we become connected with each other and become sensible to nature and the creator” (SyGaco, 2009, p. 145).

The expanse of the use of *loob* in Filipino interrelationships, whether with oneself, others, or God, clearly indicates that it is an integral part of everyday life. *Loob* is perhaps even more noticeable in emotional and ethical life—it “covers the whole emotional-ethical range of mercy, charity, clemency, leniency, benevolence, and tolerance” (Miranda-Feliciano, 2001, pp. 69-71). Understanding the nature of *loob* as emotional is needed in connection with salvation “because people must see that repentance is the act by which humans turn their affections towards an ‘object worthy of love’ and so, away from sin” (Pesebre, 2005, p. 120).

Understanding *Balik-loob* and *Pagbabalik-loob*

The term *balik-loob* is a compound word, *balik* meaning “return” and *loob* referring to inner self. Combined it means “returning of self.” It is often used when Filipino rebel groups end their alliances and surrender to the government. The term is not to be interpreted, however, as a typical surrender without choice but as a voluntary process initiated by the Philippine government “by offering rebels and their family members reconciliation, a rehabilitation program and housing” (Pesebre, 2005, p. 117). *Balik-loob* is, of course, not limited to rebel soldiers. Pesebre suggests *balik-loob* as “contextualized repentance, [which] forces one to address [one’s *loob*]” (2005, p. 121).

The term *pagbabalik-loob*, as defined in the Babaylan dictionary, is “a return to the source” (Pesebre, 2005, p. 119). The literal translation means “return to,” “return,” or “come back to.” But in Filipino, *pagbabalik-loob* refers to “the return to one’s inmost being” (Maggay, 2005, p. 49). *Pagbabalik-loob* may have different reference points, such as that of a soul returning to the body in the case of illness, of a soul losing its way (Maggay, 2005, p. 49), or as related to returning to and reclaiming their ethnic self (Gener, 2001, p. 49; also Maggay, 1993, 2025 and Miranda, 1995), which Filipinos have lost as a result of colonization. Thus, *pagbabalik-loob* suggests “a restored relationship, forgetting the past, a new hope for the future or a new way of living” (Pesebre, 2005, p. 119).

Pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos

In the 1954 Filipino Bible, *Ang Biblia*, the term *pagbabalik-loob* or *magbalik-loob* is used for *epistréphō* (Greek, ἐπιστρέφω) or “return” [to God] in Matthew 13:15, Mark 4:12, Acts

28:27, James 5:19-20, Luke 22:32, and Acts 3:19, and for *stréphō* or “conversion” in John 12:40 and Acts 15:3. The one instance the original term is not translated as such is in Matthew 18:3, where *manumbalik* is used instead, which also means “to return.” *Magbabalik-loob* is also used in the 1980 Filipino Bible, *Magandang Balita Biblia*, referring to “a return to faith” (Luke 22:32). The more recent *Ang Bible Pinoy Version* qualifies *pagbabalik-loob* (“return to one’s innermost self”) with the addition of *sa Diyos* (“to God”), emphasizing “the transcendent dimension, the element of ‘self’ becoming passive in the act of returning to God” (Gener, 2001, p. 63), thus completing and clarifying the phrase to translate as “returning to God.” Thus, “*pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* is an effort toward a dynamic equivalence translation of conversion which struggles with the tension between the self and God, immanence and transcendence” (Gener, 2001, p. 62). This rendering of *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* is, in fact, an entry for “conversion” in one of the standard Tagalog-English dictionaries (English, 1986).

Translated into English, *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* is the “returning of self to God,” a meaning quite different from the salvific term “conversion.” Furthermore, Pesebre observes that instead of “conversion,” Filipinos often refer to the act of repentance (2005, p. 121) when discussing *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos*. This route of “repentance” would be clearer than that of “conversion,” and it aligns with Paul’s stance that *reconciliation* is the definition of salvation. Reconciliation is the act of returning to God or returning to a prior relationship his children had with him, but were led astray by sin.

Furthermore, for Filipinos, salvation also entails opening oneself to God, again connecting to *loob*. George Capaque further proposes Christian spiritual formation in the Filipino context as *pagbubukas-loob* (“opening oneself”), arguing that, because people are born into and live within a sinful condition (*karupukan ng loob at kapaligiran*—“a corrupted inner self and environment”), *pagbubukas-loob* happens only when people turn (*pagbabalik-loob*) to their true self, to their neighbor, and to God (2005, Abstract). Thus, *pagbubukas-loob* leads to *pagbabalik-loob*, which leads to *pagbabagong-loob* (“renewal of the whole”), an ongoing process toward becoming Christlike and the renewed self, formed through virtues, values, and spiritual disciplines consistent with the Filipino spirit or *kalooban* (Capaque, 2005).

***Pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* as the Filipino Framework for Repentance and Conversion**

The Filipino concept of *loob* is deeply affective. Filipinos are, by nature, emotional—feelings are important (Manalansan, 2016). Filipinos will respond to an offer of salvation not just cognitively, but more emotionally. To “communicate repentance successfully to Filipinos, one must work with the reality that the affective element is an important part of any Filipino’s learning process” (Pesebre, 2005, p. 121).

However, there are dangers in overemphasizing one over another. If conversion is treated as primarily cognitive, it will not become transformative to the affective Filipino, and repentance will be shallow. If treated as purely affective, conversion may become a series of penitent acts but without complete understanding of the weight of sin. Pesebre adds, “While sincerity may be elusive these days, *balik-loob* is really a sincere act” (2005, p. 127).

The consciousness of *pagbabalik-loob* helps overcome these two problems. “In *balik-loob*, there is sorrow—[like] a rebel soldier feeling remorse for the time spent fighting the government. But... there is also that strong element of hopeful anticipation” (Pesebre, 2005, p. 130) for a new future and a better life. *Pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* ensures sincerity in repentance, especially because it is God-centered. The notion goes beyond merely considering the destructive effects of sin and leads to the recognition that sin violates God’s character (Pesebre, 2005, pp. 127–128). As 1 Corinthians 7:10 reminds us, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation.”

Conclusion

In cross-cultural communication, the meaning of the gospel is ultimately determined by the listener, not solely by the messenger (D. Whiteman, personal communication, March 16, 2026). Thus, it is critical to communicate the gospel in a language the Filipino will understand. Ed Lapid, a well-known Filipino pastor, once suggested that in any attempt the Church makes at “evangelizing Filipinos, one must address the *kalooban*” (Pesebre, 2005, pp. 118-119). Communicating biblical repentance and salvation in the Philippine context requires more than just translating theological terms into Filipino; it requires engaging the Filipino worldview and their understanding of *loob*. Such an engagement provides a culturally meaningful lens through which Filipinos may understand repentance, conversion, and salvation as not just about changing allegiances but as a deep, inner transformation resulting from the return or realignment of one’s *loob* to God.

Pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos is God-centered and ultimately a return to God, whose grace initiates reconciliation and whose Spirit renews the whole person. In this sense, *pagbabalik loob* leads to *pagbabagong-loob* or inner transformation, an ongoing change expressed in new relationships, ethical living, spiritual formation, and participation in God’s mission. *Pagbabalik loob sa Diyos* more clearly communicates the biblical movement of turning from sin, returning to God, and being restored to relationship with him through Jesus Christ, preserving the affective and communal dimensions of repentance rather than reducing salvation to a merely cognitive decision or a change of religious affiliation. *Pagbabalik loob sa Diyos* is a contextual and dynamic-equivalence expression that enables the gospel to be heard within the Filipino world of meaning.

Ultimately, *pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos* may serve as a culturally grounded and biblically faithful paradigm for understanding repentance and conversion in the Philippines. In the *loob*, Filipinos return home—not to an isolated self, but to the God who receives, heals, reconciles, and renews. Here genuine repentance takes place, identity is recovered, and the gospel becomes rooted in the deep realities of Philippine history, language, and culture. It is in the place of home that we can finally be informed by the gospel, one that is shaped by the deep core of Philippine history and language (Maggay, 1993, p. 16).

Thus, more than just being simply about terminologies, the reexamining of *pagbabalik loob sa Diyos* as a framework for understanding repentance and salvation in the Philippine context is pastoral, missiological, and theological. If the Philippine Church is to move beyond nominal, individualistic, and other-worldly forms of Christianity, it must proclaim salvation in the language that reaches both the mind and the *loob* of the Filipino.

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