

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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## Guest Editor's Introduction

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# Guest Editor's Introduction

Catholicism is perhaps among the most discussed topics in Philippine studies. That this is the case is not surprising given the lasting Catholic influence that permeates not just popular religion but local and national politics too. Hence generations of scholars have given attention to a wide range of topics ranging from conversion accounts to the political involvement of religious leaders. At the turn of this century, scholarship on Filipino Catholicism has proceeded in different directions. It is now time to revisit them to reflect on their relevance and identify new questions that must be asked. This ethos—evident too in the discussions among members of the panel on Filipino Catholicism at the Asia Pacific Sociological Association (APSA) conference held in October 2012 at the Ateneo de Manila University—has brought together the contributors to this issue, some of whom first presented their papers at the APSA conference.

In this light, this special double issue on Filipino Catholicism attempts to (1) take stock of the literature on Filipino Catholicism by engaging some of its salient concepts, and (2) draw out the seminal questions these contemporary studies are now raising. Although the articles approach Catholicism from different angles, each of them tackles and brings up questions on a wider theme that matters to the study of Filipino Catholicism in particular and Philippine studies in general. The articles deal with three broad themes according to which these contributions have been arranged: the relationship between church and the nation-state, everyday religion, and reflections on theory and methodology. The first two themes are already salient in the literature, but the articles that deal with them advance the scholarship by looking at different units of analysis. The third theme is novel; the articles under this category offer critical reflections on the state of scholarship and the future of research on Filipino Catholicism.

The first theme recognizes that one of the most enduring facets of Filipino Catholicism is the question of politics, which is heavily informed by its dynamic view of the Philippines as a state and as a nation. Acknowledging

the secular character of the state, the Catholic Church, through its clergy and laity, enters the public sphere as a defender, for example, of the weak. Coeli Barry's work documents the changes that took place as a result of the Second Vatican Council in the lives of nuns, who are often marginalized in Catholic historiography and the institution itself. Influenced by conciliar documents on social action, women religious started to become involved with the protests of the marginalized, including women workers, despite prohibitions during the martial law period. In other cases, however, the church is triumphalist, one with a privileged—and peremptorily male—voice in a society where it is clearly the dominant religion. As such the Catholic Church in the Philippines is in a perennial democratic dilemma. For David Buckley, the dilemma has to do with how the church sees itself as having substantial influence over legislation and voting behavior, but is in no position to directly control the outcome of democratic politics; the church's influence may in fact be fleeting. Especially in relation to the reproductive health law, Catholic leaders resorted to a defensive stance to uphold “core values of life, family, and religious freedom,” which did not resonate with the general public. Perhaps underpinning the political behavior of the Catholic Church is its conviction that the Philippines is a “Catholic nation” with a divine destiny. What is intriguing about this view, as Fr. Jose Mario Francisco, SJ, recounts in his article, is that it has lacked consistency. By analyzing official documents of the Catholic Welfare Organization (CWO) and its successor organization the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), Francisco traces the genealogy of the idea of the Philippines as a Catholic nation, discusses its contradictions, and identifies the challenges to this discourse in the context of globalization.

Three contributions revolve around popular religion, a theme that remains important in Philippine studies since the publication of the seminal writings of Bulatao and Ileto in the 1960s and 1970s respectively. Drawing from different historical and ethnographic materials, the contributions in this section offer their respective engagement with the concept of popular religion. Manuel Sapitula's article confronts the supposed antithetical relationship between modernity and popular religion. To him popular religious forms such as the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Baclaran should be seen as modern because they undergo “creative refashioning” that meets the exigencies of the times. Sapitula looks at the changes that have taken shape in devotees' prayers, the urban landscape around the shrine, and the clergy's

regulative role that seeks to rationalize devotional practices. In the same vein Deirdre de la Cruz rethinks popular religion as connoting syncretic practices among the poor. In characterizing the events surrounding the reported miracle of rose petals in postwar Lipa, Batangas, De la Cruz observes that the circulation of interest, suspicion, and belief involved not just local residents but also national political elites. Wide media coverage gave these events a truly “public” character, calling into question the conceptual limits of popular religion. Josefina Tondo's contribution employs the concept of lived religion to refer to the continuities between the sociality, identity, and religious practice among Filipina domestic workers in a religious space in Malaysia. Her study brings her to St. John Cathedral in Kuala Lumpur, where domestic workers gather every Sunday to attend mass, pay their respects to the Virgin Mary, meet friends, and share a meal with one another. Tondo explains the migrant workers' need for a religious enclave and shows how the tensions that Filipinas confront as domestic workers strengthen their Catholic convictions.

The third theme gives this special issue a reflexive character with respect to, broadly speaking, doing studies on Filipino Catholicism. The theoretical and methodological essays point to new modes of thinking about this subject. My article maps the conceptual trajectory of popular religion as discussed by different generations of scholars. Starting out in the mid-twentieth century as a problematic among social scientists who were also members of the clergy, the view of popular religion as split-level Christianity issued from a pastoral concern. In recent years, sociologists and anthropologists have emphasized the assertive and subjective dimension of popular religious practices, a trend that I characterize as a “turn to everyday authenticity.” In their jointly authored piece, Peter Bräunlein and Julius Bautista offer reflections on ethnography as an “act of witnessing,” which renders the anthropologist both as spectator and spectacle at once. Coming from different generations and cultural backgrounds, the authors draw from their ethnography on crucifixion rituals in Bulacan and Pampanga and demonstrate their individual negotiation of the different roles their interlocutors assumed about them, including the possibility of their own crucifixion. Fascinating and highly personal, their accounts demonstrate that the desire to achieve ethnographic authenticity interfaces with personal and professional restrictions and the expectations of their respective communities. The article by Paul-François Tremlett, strategically located as the last article in this special issue, pushes for a

different approach to the study of Filipino Catholicism. Spatial analysis has become an increasingly important mode of inquiry in religious studies for assessing the role of religion in place making. Tremlett asks whether El Shaddai, through its prosperity-oriented activities in the metropolis, contributes to the “revitalization and reenchancement of the public spaces of the city.” He notes that neoliberal urbanization in Metro Manila fosters fragmentation and securitization, which religious gatherings as public events challenge. A spatial approach offers “structural explanations” that surveys or thick descriptions of lived religion may not be able to provide.

Apart from the wide range of themes and cases explored here, this issue is also special in a few other respects. Based in different parts of the world, the contributors are at different stages of their academic careers: some are established while others are emerging scholars in the study of Filipino Catholicism—indicative of the promising future of the field. Interestingly the contributors come from various disciplines: sociology, anthropology, history, and theology. This disciplinary diversity notwithstanding, all contributors have been willing to engage the wider scholarship on Catholicism, social theories, and Philippine studies. Although risky, such attempts have been fruitful in compelling reflections not just on concepts but also on the very practice of doing research on Filipino Catholicism. I thank the contributors for their patience and diligence and for seeing the value of this project.

Finally, I am thankful to the journal’s editorial team for their hard work in ensuring that this special issue comes together. Although it took two years to see this project come to fruition, this special double issue of *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* is a landmark contribution to the study of Filipino Catholicism. May the collective effort represented in this volume encourage more scholars to study Filipino Catholicism, the institutional and popular narratives of which remain as contested and multilayered as ever.

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