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**Jayeel Serrano Cornelio's**

*Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines:  
Young People Reinterpreting Religion*

Review Author: Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.

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authors have also stressed the multifarious ways by which natives, migrants, and settlers have negotiated their positions in the transpacific milieu and/or have selected certain American or Western standards to survive or prevail in such a highly racialized and gendered context.

The result of these interactions is a cultural hybrid that is both conflicting and compatible. There are clashes here and there, but also reconciliation and compromise hither and thither, all in an effort to reassert a people's need for identity and autonomy. The authors show that the transpacific world is a convoluted social space with schizophrenic qualities that can only be understood by paying close attention to the processes that have produced, sometimes simultaneously, moments of tension and peace. These processes are not only manifested in the larger social, political, and economic forces unfolding in the transpacific world, but are also shown in peoples' relationships, emotions, and cultural experiences.

**Mary Donna Grace Cuenca**

Political Science and History Department, Ateneo de Davao University  
<mdgjcuenca@addu.edu.ph>

JAYEEL SERRANO CORNELIO

## **Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young People Reinterpreting Religion**

London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 186 pages.

Stemming from Jayeel Cornelio's doctoral thesis at the National University of Singapore, *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young People Reinterpreting Religion* is a serious and incisive study by a sociologist of religion. It bears the marks of the author's visiting studentship in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University and postdoctoral fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen. Although the book is about religious youth in the Philippines, it engages with the global scholarship on religious identity, which is laid out in chapters 1 and 2.

The first chapter underscores the study's significance in terms of the expansion and vibrancy of Christianity in the Global South. "As Christianity

continues to spread and evolve around the world, young people cannot be expected to be passive recipients of a unified set of beliefs and practices. They have their own generational contexts and influences that allow them to ‘create new forms of Christianity with new markers of fluency and authenticity’” (5). How young people “*create* new forms” of religiosity—“create” is a keyword—underlies the study’s main question: “What does being Catholic mean to Filipino youth today?” (8).

This question requires an examination of religious identity, which the author explains in the second chapter as referring to “personal religious meanings, or how one sees and understands the self as having or identifying with a religion” (16). Cornelio asserts that, in contrast to the checklist approach used in quantitative studies, a narrative approach enables the study of “identity construction as a continuous process” (23). He claims that “the centrality of personal meaning . . . distinguishes [his] approach” from other studies (24). Cornelio justifies the focus on religious self-understanding based on three considerations: the hybridity of everyday religion, the susceptibility of religious institutions to change by ordinary believers, and the instability of religious authority in modern societies.

At the outset, Cornelio posits a caveat that, given the fluidity of identity, “The personal attributes of my informants’ religious identity may be taken to be the inevitable consequence of the very question this book is asking” (27). In other words, the study’s findings may be an artifact of its methodology: adopt a different approach, and other elements of identity may surface. Cornelio dismisses this hazard (27–28) in view of the divergent responses his study generated.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the study’s “theoretical sampling” (38) strategy: the selection of sixty-two Metro Manila university students, who are active participants in students’ religious organizations, in a manner that captures the range of institutions, academic disciplines, and organizational orientations (e.g., liturgical, Charismatic, outreach oriented), in addition to class and gender. This chapter also specifies the themes the author pursued in his one-on-one interview of informants. It includes a refreshingly frank discussion about the interview process, which evolved as the study progressed, and about the author’s role as researcher, who was born to a Catholic family, giving him “empirical literacy” in Catholicism (49; cf. 169), but moved on “to what is known as Born Again Christianity in the Philippines during [his] adolescence,” affording him “considerable distance as an academic researcher” (49).

What Cornelio does not address are the limitations of the narrative approach and the possibility that interviewee statements may or may not jibe with their everyday practices. The study's focus may not have been on lived religion, but the rich description of the Taizé worship (75–76) and other anecdotes (144–45) give the impression that in his fieldwork Cornelio went beyond the narrative approach to engage in participant observation. The deliberate collection of such ethnographic data could have complemented narrative research.

Provocatively titled “Will the real Catholic please stand up?,” chapter 4 presents biographical notes on three students who “exemplify the richness of Catholic identity among young people today” (71). The first student represents orthodox youths, who value the sacraments and church doctrine. But they are a “rare breed” (63). A second student calls himself a “practical Catholic” (64), who is more concerned about “right living than right believing” (65). Cornelio calls this type “creative Catholics, [who] while they do not find going to church and confession objectionable, are more interested in developing a spirituality that is focused on doing good and character formation” (67). The third student belongs to the type of those who “have either abandoned the basic rituals of the Catholic Church or they are simply irregular” but their self-understanding is that they are “in a personal relationship with God” (69). Although there is no statement on the number of informants who fall into each of these three types, students of the third type are said to “comprise less than a quarter” of all informants (70). However, Cornelio lumps the second and third types under the umbrella of “creative Catholics,” and if one is not attentive this sentence in chapter 1 is easy to miss: “All but four of my interviewees are creative Catholics” (10), although it is repeated in the conclusion (171). This aggregation is rather unfortunate. What is the point of discussing the second and third types separately when the end result is their subsumption under one label? Could important differences among “creative Catholics” have been disregarded?

Dealing with what is now the predominant type—an artifact of aggregation—Cornelio argues in the fifth chapter that “contemporary Catholic identity is being recast as a reflexive spirituality whose elements include a personal and experiential relationship with God [*type three*], an action-oriented relationality [*type two*], and a critique of the Catholic leadership [for their political statements] and their peers [for their insincerity with the faith] [*types two and three?*]” (76). This chapter points out that

creative Catholics are “spiritual, but not religious,” but “the self or the individual” is the “authorising entity”; indeed, the self is the “unique source of significance, meaning and authority” and “the self becomes sacralised” (77–78). How is it possible to reconcile a self-authorizing spirituality with the informants’ claim of “having a personal relationship with God” (82)? Although Cornelio elucidates this relationship as emotional, like a friendship, one wonders—what then is the status of God as authority? Or is this a Durkheimian variant in which the youth worships itself? Cornelio clarifies: “The main idea is that the self, and not the religious institution, becomes the final arbiter of authentic religious experience” (88), making the church virtually irrelevant. Still, these students retain their religious affiliation with the Catholic Church, as the option of leaving it “formally entails burdensome social transitions” (90). Remaining Catholic, therefore, is the self’s comfort zone.

Yet this self has also been socialized into Filipino cultural norms so that its moral principles are “not necessarily arbitrary” (99) and seem aligned to those of the Catholic Church. As shown in chapter 6, the moral views of creative Catholics “are generally conservative” (98) in relation to premarital sex, divorce, homosexuality, and reproductive health, but the justifications for their attitudes are “paradoxically liberal” (111) based on the “humanistic or human-oriented” commitment to traditional family relationships “instead of a close understanding of morality from a theological perspective” (112). Theirs is a “self-authorising morality,” given “the primary role of the self in governing one’s views” (114–15).

Cornelio makes the case in chapter 7 that “religion does not fade away” amid modernity; rather, a process of “religious individualisation within Philippine Catholicism” is occurring (121). The self is “the main authority in the construction of religious identity” (127) as they draw upon people, popular culture, and experiences—which Cornelio calls the “emotional anthology of resources” (128) edited by the self—in the maintenance and invention of tradition. As Cornelio puts it eloquently, “To be authentic and Catholic means that it must all resonate within” (130). As such, in their reflexive spirituality and morality there is no theological discourse on sin and the need for forgiveness. Also remarkable is “the absence of certain elements or figures of institutional Catholicism: the Vatican, doctrine and sacraments” (138). Cornelio calls this phenomenon “indwelt individualisation” (126),

which may be a sociological argot but a confusing one, given the theological resonance of the term “indwelt.”

The wider context for the phenomenon of creative Catholic youths is explained in chapter 8 in terms of their distinctive generational experience characterized by economic vulnerability, family transformation especially in light of overseas migration, and political detachment. These social conditions engender autonomy insofar as the traditional institutions of family, market, state, and church fail to provide a solid anchor for navigating everyday life. Cornelio observes that “beneath the compelling emotional atmosphere of care lie anxieties of loneliness” (153). This “isolated generation” (151) thus suffers from “ontological insecurity” (159): God is merely immanent, but risks are everywhere imminent, and the “self is rendered alone” (160). In this context, Cornelio explains that creative Catholics have made “lifestyle choices” (153)—a claim requiring validation beyond narrativity—to see them through the travails of their generation. At the end of this chapter the author admits that he has “taken the risk” of discussing an entire generation despite the “methodological limitation” of having “focused only on creative Catholics” (164) and only among Metro Manila’s youth.

The summary found in the final chapter is useful, although Cornelio has ably made recurring summaries at different points in the book. He concludes, “In the end, my informants have become more committed to the Catholic faith” (172)—an evidently partial statement, given the principal reference point emphasized repeatedly: the self. Amid the creative reinterpretation of religion, which is not “necessarily antagonistic to the Church”—but, in my view, also not favorable—Cornelio asserts that “The future, therefore, is not entirely bleak for the Catholic Church in the Philippines” (176). Yet, these creative Catholics do not find nurturance in the formal community constituted by the parish. Cornelio is cognizant that his study raises not only intellectual but also pastoral issues (177). This is an indispensable book that church people as well as scholars who seek to understand the youth, Catholicism, or both must read and ponder.

**Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.**

Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University  
<fvaguilar@ateneo.edu>