

## BOOK REVIEW

**Julius J. Bautista (2010). *Figuring Catholicism: An ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University.**

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Let me begin with a confession—I am a novice to Philippines Studies. However, long before stepping foot in the Philippines (in 2006), I have been intrigued by the seemingly pervasive presence of Roman Catholicism in party politics, popular culture and the everyday religiosity of Philippine society as gleaned through my sporadic forays into Filipino scholarly literature (and movies) from afar.

In addition, like so many other non-Filipinos not intimately familiar with the regional diversities and nuances of this expansive country, my abiding vision of the Philippines has been framed by iconic media images of the EDSA Revolution—where in addition to courageous nuns holding rosaries, small figurines carried by ordinary Filipinos faced off with the military forces of the Marcos Administration on the streets of Manila. Reading *Figuring Catholicism*, which focuses on one of the most popular Filipino Catholic icons—the Santo Niño de Cebu—has deepened my appreciation of the power of religious iconography and discourse in the Philippines.

Indeed, as a scholarly exposition on a devotional ‘tangible object’ of huge religious and political significance, the book *Figuring Catholicism* is arguably controversial, compounded by the positionality of the author who, although born in Cebu, was raised in Manila and Sydney. But Bautista self-consciously problematizes the stance of diasporic Filipino scholars based in Western countries who conduct research in their ‘home countries’. By comparison, Bautista’s strategy is to partake of an ‘alternative discourse’, mediated by migratory scholarship, of Asian social sciences that is neither mimetically Eurocentric nor essentialist and nativist in its theoretical treatment of the subject matter.

More specifically, Bautista sets out to “understand how icons have provided for Filipinos a means of negotiating the various social, political, and

even economic challenges that beset them” (p. 2). He deploys to good theoretical effect the double entrée suggested in the title of his book. In the first more evident sense, Bautista draws our attention to the materiality of the figurine of the Santo Niño de Cebu so as to bring into relief differently positioned religiosities which are nevertheless undergirded by the strong tactile sensibility of Filipino religious belief and practice.

Much more elaborated is the second sense where the “image is imagined as metaphorically, sentimentally, and discursively entwined in Filipino understandings of their own faith” (p. 2). For this latter trajectory, Bautista deploys a critical reading of the episodic (rather than epic) history of both the Christ child figurine—popularly believed to have been first brought to Cebu by Ferdinand Magellan (in 1521) in his world voyage of discovery and later miraculously re-discovered by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi (in 1565)—and the stock of overlapping official and popular discourses that have grown around its enduring life-giving properties. In part, this historiographical approach is informed by Reynaldo Ileto’s (1997) prescription for a ‘non-linear emplotment of Philippine history’.

Bautista begins *Figuring Catholicism* (Chapter 1: The ‘Ins’ and ‘Outs’ of the Santo Niño de Cebu) by giving close ethnographic attention to the materiality of the Santo Niño de Cebu, both as found inside the sacred space of the basilica in Cebu and outside in the mundane spaces of homes and local businesses. He examines the facial features, hand gestures, and accessories and vestments worn by the Santo Niño. His key, counter-intuitive, point is to argue that ‘things’ make people in the sense that religious materials themselves constitute belief and faith rather than the converse.

Inside the basilica, Bautista describes the rituals and ceremonies that inscribe the Santo Niño de Cebu as an institutional object of devotion and the institutions set up to act as its custodians. What is salient is the structuring of a mode of devotion according to ‘acceptable’ forms and meanings. Outside the bounds of the basilica, Bautista portrays the accessibility and “transportability of [the] spiritual energy” (p. 38) through the myriad variety and mass replicas of the Santo Niño whether produced as souvenirs or as objects of veneration and talismanic power.

Having intimated at the ‘divergent religious sensibilities’ in ethnographic evidence at the basilica, the following three chapters retrace selected historical episodes of the progressive elevation and centrality of the Santo Niño de Cebu, first as an object of veneration and later as a national allegory of the Christianization of the country. In Chapter 2 (An Archipelago Twice

‘Discovered’), Bautista argues that the trope of the rediscovery of the figurine after a 30-year gap in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is regarded not only as divinely providential but as resulting from the intercession of the Santo Niño itself “in facilitating the productive interaction between conqueror and conquered” (p. 70). Similarly, during early American colonial rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the convergence of agenda between the American government and the Roman Catholic hierarchy despite Protestant Christian theological onslaughts on ‘idolatrous’ or ‘grotesque’ Christianity is attributed to the icon’s enduring power, and lend further credence to its promotion and endorsement (Chapter 3: The Icon Survives).

Chapter 4 (The Philippines for Christ) moves the narrative forward to the fourth centennial of the Christianization of the Philippines in 1965 which provided an opportune occasion for the “transcendence of the icon beyond the confines of its provincial environment” (p. 98) with Cebu portrayed as the super-national “cradle of Christianity,” and concerted efforts in catalysing the “nationalization of the Santo Niño” (p. 100). Bautista claims that this ‘symbolic anchoring’ and ‘national patron-hood’ intertwining closely the history of the nation with the icon’s own biography was supported unequivocally by the highest levels of religious and secular authorities.

While the preceding chapters were largely ‘historical’ in tone, the next four chapters shift focus to more substantive thematic matters. Chapter 5 (The Syncretic Santo Niño) draws from the initial mutual ‘figuring’ of the Santo Niño between native Filipinos and Spanish colonialists during the colonial encounter to problematize academic and religious categories of ‘syncretism’, and the oft-cited observation that a distinctive feature of Filipino Christianity is the ‘congruence of *anitismo* and Roman Catholicism’ (p. 139). Belief in the Santo Niño, Bautista argues, must be evaluated within this changing historical field of practice. Chapter 6 (The Rebellion and the Icon) is the section that resonates most with my early mediated impressions of the Philippines. It looks at the “discursive politics of use and misuse of religious iconography in the context of popular uprisings in the country” (p. 153). Juxtaposed with official doctrinal interpretations of the Santo Niño, folk Catholicism illuminates the idiosyncratic creativity of the faithful in struggling for change. Nevertheless, Bautista suggests that it is at these emancipative moments of ‘holy revolutions’ that the Roman Catholic Church assumes the most relevance in the lives of Filipinos (p. 177).

Chapter 7 (The Prodigious Child and Bata Nga Allah) returns to the broader epistemological concerns of identity-making signalled at the beginning of the book. Negotiations between Filipino national ‘soul searching’ vis-à-vis regional priorities come to the fore in examining the body of literary and

revisionist historiographical works debating over the origins and relevance of the Santo Niño. Alternative readings of the Santo Niño as an indigenized local deity—as a ‘Prodigious Child’ (*Bata nga Allah*)—in effect signals a “discourse of identity that domesticates otherness in favour of a more acute sense of civilizational or regional consciousness” (p. 180).

*Figuring Catholicism* is an engaging and finely balanced book, well-written with clear and lucid prose. While theoretically sophisticated—for instance, the imprints of Michel Foucault are discernible—the author’s claims are judiciously supported by an array of ethnographic and empirical details gleaned from a close textual analysis of historical records and literary works. For this reviewer, reading *Figuring Catholicism* was akin to *déjà vu* with an enlightening twist.

### Reference

- Ileto, R. (1997). Outlines of a non-linear emplotment of Philippine history. In L. Lowe & D. Lloyd, *The politics of culture in the shadow of capital* (pp. 98-131). Durnham and London: Duke University Press.

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