

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## A History of Christianity in the Philippines

Review Author: Henry S. Totanes

*Philippine Studies* vol. 34, no. 4 (1986) 543–545

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

**A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE PHILIPPINES: THE INITIAL ENCOUNTER.** Volume I. By T. Valentino Sitoy, Jr. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985. 384 pages.

If one tries to determine the most lasting contribution of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines, one must agree that it was the Christian faith. Christianity continued even with the arrival of the secular-minded Americans in 1898. It had become too deeply rooted in Philippine society to be eradicated with the departure of the Spaniards. It was, as Fr. Horacio de la Costa, S. J. said, "a social fact."

Many historians have tried to tell the story of the Christian faith in the Philippines. Sitoy's work is one more contribution to Christianity's history in the Philippines, a task spurred on by the fourth centennial celebrations of the Christianization of the country held in 1965. His work attempts to tell "not so much the story of the institutional Church itself as that of Christianity as a religion, and how the latter interacted with various areas of concern of the Filipino people" (p. iii).

This book is the first of a three-volume work which Sitoy hopes to complete. It covers only the initial encounter, from the establishment of a permanent settlement by Legazpi in 1565 until the year 1590. He claims that it is intended for students of church history, but may shed light on aspects of Philippine history which are of interest to the general reader.

Sitoy devotes the first chapter to an analysis of the animistic and polytheistic religion prevalent during pre-Hispanic times. He describes how Islam antedated Christianity in the Philippines by almost a century, and while noting that the evangelization of the Philippines was most successful in the parts of the country where Islam had not yet deeply penetrated or was newly introduced, suggests that the introduction by Islam of the "radical concept of monetheism may have prepared the Filipinos to accept more readily the equally monotheistic faith of Christianity" (p. 33). In the long run, however, the pre-Hispanic natives would discover that many elements in the Christian faith ran parallel to their traditional beliefs and practices, and at the same time, offered a more appealing alternative to the Islamic faith.

The next three chapters deal with the successive expeditions sent to the Philippines by the Spanish Crown: Magellan, Loaysa, Saavedra, Villalobos, and finally, Legazpi, the only one to establish a permanent foothold in the islands. The plight of these expeditions has been told and retold but Sitoy adds something new in that he mentions the native reaction to these expeditions. Most of the earlier accounts revolved around the Spanish accomplishments and failures but in this work there is a conscious effort to see how the natives were involved and how they reacted. The chieftains who rendered obedience to Humabon in the mass baptism conducted by Magellan in Cebu in 1521, and the Tagalogs who confronted Legazpi and Góiti in Maynila in 1570-71 are given some importance.

The last and the lengthiest chapter describes the Filipino responses to Spanish evangelization and colonization efforts. After Legazpi's death, the other religious orders—Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans—sent their missionaries to assist the Augustinians in the evangelization work. They spread to other parts of Luzon and the Visayas, and their total number increased from 13 in 1576 to about 103 in 1586. Sitoy chooses to end his narrative in 1590, an arbitrary date to mark the end of the early era of evangelization. It was just a few years after the successful suppression of the "Tondo Conspiracy," of 1587-88, an attempt by the Tagalog chieftains in Manila, led by Lakan-dula's grandson, Agustin de Legazpi, to seek foreign help from Japanese traders and the Borneans to oust the Spaniards from the islands. The plot failed and evangelization in the country took on a renewed spirit and direction.

Thus, Sitoy is able to re-tell, in vivid detail, Christianity's first twenty-five years in the country and the Filipino response. But since he claims that this story cannot be told apart from the other aspects of the natives' lives, the story sometimes gets lost in details far removed from religion, such as the exact number of days spent sailing on an expedition or the number of casualties in a battle. Some of the details are interesting, like the Tagalog custom of breaking an egg over an oath, to signify that they may suffer destruction like the egg, if they were untrue to their oaths (p. 252), but the others tend to be cumbersome.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that this is a well-researched work. Sitoy would not have arrived at these meticulous details without having gone through a careful reading of the sources in Spanish, Portuguese, and Tagalog. Many times, he foregoes translations and reads the documents in their original language, even quoting these originals when citing passages. The whole work then is solidly backed up by seventy pages of endnotes and references, which draw from extensive archival material from abroad and from secondary sources.

There are a number of interpretations made by Sitoy which may be worth of further discussion. One, which is contrary to certain claims, was that the "Filipinos did not immediately come in droves to be baptized by the friars" (p. 132). In fact, the early missionaries were initially discouraged by the slow pace of evangelization and the negligible increase in the number of converts. If the Augustinians are to be believed, there were only over 100 serious conversions in 1569, but in 1577, these increased to about 10,000.

Secondly, Sitoy asserts that the Philippines was "initially conquered more by force than persuasion, more by the brandishing of arms than by the sign of the Cross" (p. 267). He continues by saying that what the Spaniards had interpreted as submission on the part of the native chieftains, may have merely been a "temporary response," until they could muster enough force to oust the Spaniards. Unfortunately, the natives realized that Spanish might

was formidable and was there to stay. Only after this initial phase would the "sign of the cross rather than the sound of the arquebus" (p. 270) increasingly determine the pacification of the Philippines. What makes the issue critical is precisely because it was *the initial* encounter and what transpired there would have a serious bearing on the events to come.

These interpretations may be challenged and one wishes that Sitoy could have devoted part of his last chapter to discussing the interpretations made by historians writing on that era. Still, one must commend Sitoy for embarking on this extensive and quite comprehensive project. The sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Philippine history are anathema to some historians precisely because of lack of access to sources and more importantly, the difficulty of handling them. Sitoy's attempt to traverse this "road not (often) taken" in Philippine history is a valuable addition to the discipline.

Henry S. Totanes  
Department of History  
Ateneo de Manila University

AWAITING TRESPASS (A PASIÓN). By Linda Ty-Casper. New York and London: Readers International, Inc., 1985.

*Awaiting Trespass (A Pasión)* is Linda Ty-Casper's sixth novel, published in New York and London by Readers International. It couldn't be published here (in the Philippines), says the back of the jacket, "for political reasons." RI, says the jacket's inside back flap, "is a non-profit organization. . . . dedicated to making available in English the best recent works by writers from outside the developed West." Many of these works have suffered political censorship in their countries of origin because the censor knows that powerful and honest writing can be dangerous — literally. A selling point.

When Ms. Ty-Casper was fictionist-in-residence at the last UP Creative Writing Center Summer Writers Workshop in fiction, she was asked by the young fellows for advice on how to write *around* the Marcos regime to be able to get published. She said: you don't have to write ideology; just write honestly about what the regime is doing to the people; *that* can be more powerful than any ideological writing!

*Awaiting Trespass* tells what the Marcos misrule has done to the Filipino people; here particularized in the Gil clan. It has no ideology outside of the Christian human; it is not ideological writing.

Ms. Ty-Casper, who has been writing sustained Philippine historical fiction, here gives us a novel of contemporary Philippines in what has turned out to be the twilight of the Marcos era. It is a logical development in her declared art of fiction.