

philippine studies

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

The Anthropology of Christianity
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Philippine Studies vol. 55, no. 3 (2007): 395–398

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Book Reviews

FENELLA CANNELL, ED.

The Anthropology of Christianity

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. 373 pages.

The relevance of Fenella Cannell's edited volume, *The Anthropology of Christianity*, is immense for more reasons than the fact that its editor happens to be heavily invested in the study of Filipino Christianity herself. This is an elegantly written and thoughtfully put-together volume that highlights the potential of "local" ethnography as a source of metatheoretical insight into the discipline, rather than just offering empirical validation of preexisting (Western) theories and methodologies.

The volume contains eleven essays, each of which engages in historically specific ethnographies of Christianity in the Pacific, Asia, Europe, and Latin America (the absence of Africa is notable, although the volume makes no claim for completeness). The papers can be broadly divided into their focus on Catholic or Protestant denominations of the faith. The first three essays on Roman Catholicism mainly describe the localization of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The overall thrust here is a familiar one—that, in spite of the centralized authority of the Vatican or missionary orders, throughout history Catholicism has been consumed and articulated in ways that manifest local agency. The essays by David Mosse on exorcism in Tamil South India, Cecilia Busby on Catholic fishing households in Kerala, and Olivia Harris on popular religion in the Bolivian highlands are demonstrative of how local expressions of religiosity often outstrip the intentions of its missionary purveyors. The latter seven essays manifest the breadth of Protes-

tantism's ecclesiastical reach. Simon Coleman writes on the Word of Life Bible Group in Sweden, Christina Toren on Fijian Methodism, Peter Gow on the Summer Institute of Linguistics Mission in the Peruvian Amazon, Eva Keller on Seventh-Day Adventists in Madagascar, and Harvey Whitehouse on appropriated and monolithic Christianity in Melanesia. Both Danilyn Rutherford's essay and Webb Keane's foreword offer insightful accounts of Protestant conversion in Indonesia.

Filipino anthropologists will be interested particularly in Cannell's own contribution to the volume, an essay entitled "Reading as Gift and Writing as Theft." Here she argues that Bicolano Catholics articulate their faith in ways that do not center particularly on Christian soteriology, but upon their continuing belief in the intervention of the spirit world. This belief is particularly manifested in their use of *libritos*, which are compilations of spells and incantations. Cannell's analysis of the performance and production of these texts brings to light how the elusiveness of untranslated Latin words and scriptures evokes a kind of arcane power that is so efficacious for Bicolanos as to exceed what Catholic missionaries had intended for them. This idea in itself is not new. After all, historians before Cannell—notably Reynaldo Ileto and Vicente Rafael—have each made elegant arguments about the subversive potential engendered by the gaps between the intention and interpretation of religious meanings. What is significant about Cannell's take on the issue is that it demonstrates how an ethnographic analysis can complement and, indeed, enhance historical research. By adding this nuance to Rafael's discussion with an ethnography of the technology of the performance of the *pasion* in Bicol—that is, in observing the act of reading, writing, or "singing" it—Cannell focuses on that "something extra" that is interjected in the religious consumption and deployment of Hispanic Roman Catholicism.

In insightful as the individual essays are, one's investment in the volume is justified almost single-handedly by Cannell's introduction. Of her many thought-provoking observations, most striking is the argument that it is not possible to think of anthropology outside of its Christian heritage. As such this book is an invitation for anthropologists to confront the notion that "anthropology has on the whole been less successful at considering Christianity as an ethnographic object than at considering any other religion in this way" (39). In this respect, Christianity is the Freudian "repressed" of anthropology—the uncomfortable and even traumatic birth inheritance that continues to exert its influence on its contemporary praxis. As a result of its baggage, Cannell

argues, it is “impossible for anthropology to step outside its [Christian] theological inheritance entirely, even in the process of critiquing it” (50, note 33)—a point Cannell made in her Malinowski lecture at the London School of Economics and published as “The Christianisation of Anthropology” in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 2005 (vol. 11, 335–56).

A review essay would be a more suitable place to discuss fully Cannell’s arguments than this review. However, it is important to note that Cannell is contributing to a vibrant discussion within an emergent field in which the context of anthropology’s post-Enlightenment beginnings in the West is recognized and interrogated. In this regard, insightful contributions have been made by anthropologists such as Talal Asad who, in *Genealogies of Religion: Reasons for Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), has suggested that the very concept of “religion” was produced from historically specific *epistemes*, thus pointing out the dubiousness of the universality of its use. Meanwhile, Jean Comaroff (“Defying Disenchantment: Reflections on Ritual, Power and History,” in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre, 301–14; University of Hawai’i Press, 1994) has argued that the very concept of “ritual” is “resolutely Durkheimian” in its tendency toward functionalist orientations and in its placing primacy on the socially cohesive aspects of the ritual process. Cannell contributes to this field by suggesting that “modernity” needs to be seen as a trope embedded in Christian notions of the “unrepeatable event” of conversion that profoundly realigns the convert’s concept of time—that “the notion of the event after which nothing is ever the same again has become annexed by the ideology of modernity” (44). Cannell’s volume is a valuable addition to ethnographies that consider the terms many of us take as given—such as modernity, religion, ritual—and subject them to broader, intellectual scrutiny. In their interrogation of these terms, one is forced to ponder the notion that perhaps the Christian lineage that foregrounds their use is as inescapable as Cannell and others suggest.

This volume is valuable because it encourages local anthropologists to consider the breadth of the Freudian metaphor, which is central to Cannell’s argument. Has the baggage of anthropology’s Christian inheritance exerted significant “trauma” on the production of local ethnography, many of which are about Christian life worlds that Cannell describes? Do Filipino anthropologists who study Christianity reflect on the production of the discipline and its

uneasy relationship with Christianity? *The Anthropology of Christianity* serves to encourage anthropologists to consider ethnography as a vehicle toward re-considering the often taken-for-granted concepts of the discipline, rather than merely as a presentation of empirical data. If, as Cannell has shown, such metatheoretical insight can be made through the study of Filipino Christian life worlds, we should feel compelled to interrogate the conditions by which anthropology in the Philippines has been conceptualized and deployed.

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FR. PAOLO NICELLI, P.I.M.E.

The First Islamization of the Philippines (From the 13th Century up to the 19th Century)

Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publications, 2003. 162 pages.

Many writings on the history of Muslim Mindanao hinge on the notion that centuries of enmity between Christians and Muslims shape their current relations. This book is no exception. Fr. Nicelli's account briefly reiterates the three most popular accounts on the early methods of propagating Islam in the Philippines, namely: through Muslim traders in the course of peaceful trade; through missionaries who traveled with traders from Arabia and India; and through the waging of war against non-Muslims. He discusses the third method in the context of the confrontation between Southeast Asian Muslim polities and Christian colonial powers. In the concluding paragraphs of the book, the author affirms that a "spirit of holy war" and the feeling of "anti-crusade" have led Muslims in both the past and the present "to defend Islam bravely and stubbornly from the aggressors, and to create a sense of unity among all the Muslim groups" (138).

In both the line of argumentation and data used, the book borrows, perhaps too excessively, from only a handful of authors, most notably Cesar Majul. Majority of the sections summarize data from Majul's *Muslims in the Philippines*, while other sections primarily cite Hilarion Gomez's work on Muslim-Christian relations, and Peter Gowing's work on Muslim Filipinos. Those in search of detailed explanations would be better off consulting the