

philippine studies

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

The Asian Religious Sensibility and Christian Spirituality

Review Authro: Eduardo P. Hontivos, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 33, no. 1 (1985): 131–133

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.

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

THE ASIAN RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY. by Susana Jose. Quezon City: Carmelite Monastery of St. Therese, 1983. xxvii, 1126 pages (two volumes).

"Susana Jose" is a pseudonym, but let's call her that (or SJ for short) in the course of this review. Actually Susana is the name of the author's mother; Jose is the name of her father. And SJ makes no effort to hide the fact that she is really Sister Teresa Joseph Patrick of Jesus and Mary, O.C.D., of the Manila Carmel — alias Josefina D. Constantino (JD to her friends), former professor of English and the Humanities at the University of the Philippines.

The inside cover warns us that the book is more like a collection of nine paperbacks, a "fascinating mosaic of varied forms of exposition." The first part is a "Dedicatory Letter in Four Parts"— actually four long letters (a total of 107 pages) written to St. Teresa of Avila. These letters are the introduction to the new 1983 edition. The first letter tells us how the book came to be written— and how the footnotes were lost! (I can easily imagine some pious nun scraping up those bits of "scratch paper" and bundling them off to the kitchen as kindling material.) SJ goes on to explain Teresa's mysticism to the Asians, and the Asian contemplative spirit to Teresa and the western Carmelites. The second letter focuses on the FABC (Calcutta) Assembly on Prayer; and here SJ highlights the deep similarity and yet the deep contrast between Asian (Buddhist, Zen, Hindu) mysticism and the Christian's immersion in the Word, Christ. The third letter is a really heart-warming narration of SJ's journey to Communist Canton in 1980, in her Carmelite habit. The fourth letter speaks from the experience of St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and SJ herself: how the wordless prayer and imageless contemplation of the Christian contemplative is filled with the Sacred Humanity of the Risen Christ, a reality much richer than the presence of the Absolute in Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist mysticism.

The Introduction to the book itself (the original 1978 opus) is found on pages 109 to 195— and here we begin to feel the thorough dedication with which SJ approaches her task. The professor of humanities emerges in the abundance of authors SJ cites to propose her understanding of "religious sensibility". Here too we read a clear proposal of the specific objectives of this study:

1. The encouragement and systematization of study and research efforts directed at the *lived* experiences of contemplative Carmelite nuns all over Asia
2. To take advantage of, and in turn, to contribute to the growing scholarship, research and testimonial literatures on Eastern and Western spirituality, prayer and faith-life of the universal human person of the 20th and 21st centuries.

3. To provide the material and physical conditions and atmosphere necessary towards a fuller integration of "outside" and "inside" prayer and faith-life experiences in an effort to contribute to a more positive and dynamic culture-consciousness of the Faithful.

Part I of this study is an imaginary dialog among representatives of five religious systems: Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Zen-Buddhism, and Christianity. I feel it is in this dialog technique that the author is at her best. The deep understanding and empathy that she has for the various religions of Asia simply oozes out of the participants' words and interventions. And SJ's wide reading experience emerges almost unobtrusively in the interchange of insights. The conversation brings out effectively the striking similarity and almost oneness of the religious experiences described by the mystics of various religious traditions; but also the stark differences in explaining these experiences— the Hindu's insistence that the ultimate reality of our being is identity with Brahman, the universal Being; the Buddhist view that Absolute Reality is the Void; the Taoist's absolute self-surrender to what is; the Zen-Buddhist's self-giving to the quality of each moment; and the Christian's surrender to the personal God.

Part II of the study revolves around "The Asian and Filipino Religious Sensibilities." It is a random series of studies on Filipino attitudes, values and history that help explain the Filipino's attitudes towards religion and prayer. The series of studies, shifting from one aspect to another of Filipino (and Asian) sensibilities, begins to weigh on one's attention span (at least this is the reaction of this reviewer), and the loss of those precious footnotes is most felt in this section of the book, with its profusion of citations which are not identified by pages, or sometimes even by book titles. I guess this section is necessary as background material for understanding the study itself— but perhaps the information is superfluous for the Filipino reader.

Part III is a position paper on "The Filipino Religious Sensibility and Carmelite Spirituality"— written by "Sister Francis Xavier, O.C.D." (SJ herself) to the Prioresses and Novice Mistresses of the Philippines and Asia. It is a reflection on the novitiate programs actually existent in the Philippines and some Asian Carmels, with a view to bringing them into closer relevance with the Asian cultures of the novices. Much of this study revolves around the Filipina's capability for Carmelite prayer and abnegation.

Part IV is an imaginary dialog among Prioresses and Novice Mistresses of Philippine and Asian Carmels, centering on the position paper of part III. Parts III and IV call on all the resources at SJ's command: her wide reading and study, her experience of Carmelite prayer both before she entered Carmel and after she entered the monastery, the questionnaires she sent to Carmelites all over the Philippines and Asia, the interviews she had with novices and superiors. Again my interest perked up markedly with the per-

sonal style of SJ's reflection, especially in the imaginary dialog among Prioresses and Novice Mistresses.

Part V consists of Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations— 140 pages of them. Most interesting and informative are the author's insights and suggestions regarding the formation of Carmelite novices towards Carmelite contemplative life within the context of their Filipino culture. In a letter to this reviewer, she expressed her amazement at her own temerity in giving pointers to the formators on how to run the novitiate, since she was only a novice herself when she began writing this book. She was in effect "advising my Superiors and formators on how to form me!" SJ was herself appointed Mistress of Novices shortly after she finished this book— perhaps a concrete confirmation of the wisdom of her insights.

*Eduardo P. Hontiveros, S.J.
Loyola School of Theology
Ateneo de Manila University*