

philippine studies

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

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Philippine Studies vol. 40, no. 1 (1992): 111–120

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Split-Level Christianity in *The Praying Man*

Lorenzo Puente



In *The Praying Man*, Bienvenido N. Santos (1982, 5) attempted to explore "the dramatic possibilities of the idea of dwelling in the same man both the need to pray and the tendency to prey on others" [subsequent citations from the novel are indicated by the page numbers in parentheses]. His working title, *'Tis the Praying Man*, a pun on "the praying mantis," showed his intention of using the mantis as a primary symbol for the "idea" (p. 5). Santos's idea of the "man-mantis" corresponds to a type of personality called "split-level Christian." The term was coined by the Filipino psychologist, Jaime Bulatao, S.J. (1966, 2) and refers to a person in whom two or more thought-and-behavior systems which are inconsistent with each other coexist.

This note aims to show that Santos's characterization of Cris Magat as a "split-level Christian" succeeds in fleshing out "the dramatic possibilities of the idea." This characterization creates, and is consistent with, the principal symbol of the praying mantis, the praying and preying insect (p. 1). This note examines Santos's characterization of Cris Magat as a split-level Christian, and the nature, causes, and the dynamics of the split-leveling in his character.

The Praying/Preying Man

Cris Magat is "the praying man." He prays anywhere, at anytime. He feels the urge to pray during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new road in Sulucan (p. 13). He prays in his car while driving (p. 141), in an airplane (p. 141). He prays in the middle of the night after fire has gutted his property (p. 51). Cris continues praying even in his delirium (p. 154). We are told that "Cris had prayed thousands of times to the Virgin of Antipolo" (p. 45), and he always carried with him a medal of the Virgin of Antipolo which he holds on to in times of prayer (p. 45). Each May, Cris makes a pilgrim-

age to the Church of Antipolo (p. 45). He takes great pains not to let anyone know of his praying. He makes the pilgrimage seem a "purely social event, a picnic" (p. 45) and denies his praying even to Grace, his wife (p. 51).

Cris Magat is also "the preying man." C.M., as he is known in the world of high finance where he operates, is the "Most powerful man in the country. King maker. Sacred cow." (p. 29). He has built an empire on fake drugs, bribery, and corruption (p. 29). He is adviser to the president to whose election campaign C.M. was one of the biggest contributors (p. 15). As part of the spoils of the electoral victory, Cris was able to place his uncle as minister of health for his own ends (p. 15). Corruption and blackmail are the name of the game (p. 40) and, worst of all, Magat preys on the suffering poor for whom the medicines are intended. C.M. hides all this behind a public image as a philanthropist and friend of the masses (p. 39). He makes sure all contributions of his medicines to the Department of Welfare are photographed for the papers (p. 39). To carry on all these operations, C.M. keeps his stable of "boys" whom he pays well and almost all of whom "he had snatched from the gutter" (p. 36). In return he demands and preys on their loyalty.

Cris is also the king of predators on women. Before and after marriage there had always been his women. His need for sex becomes greater as he expends greater energy to expand his empire (p. 69). The depth of this depravity shows itself when Cris preys on the bar-girl who is the sweetheart of his own son (p. 78). We see in Cris both the need to pray and the tendency to prey on others. This inconsistency is represented by three things he always carries with him—the medal of the Virgin, a condom, and a crisp, new fifty-peso bill (p. 44). While Cris has a devotion to the Virgin—model of purity and self-giving—Cris lives a life of lust for sex and money.

Cris does not seem to be aware of any contradiction in himself. He goes on praying and preying and, apparently, lives at peace with himself. For Cris, corruption

was a natural phenomenon in most business enterprises, that honesty was outmoded in this age of cunning where you do unto others before they do unto you but at the same time you maintain the public image of dedication to public service, the public good. (p. 35)

He finds nothing wrong in adulterating drugs because this is widely done in the U.S. (p. 66). He knows that he can "be charged with

producing 'fake drugs,' tax evasion, and bribery" (p. 163). These are "legal" charges but he does not find anything intrinsically wrong in the things he does. Getting caught will bring shame but not necessarily guilt.

The sign of a glimmer of awareness of his sins against the country is his statement to Kosca, his bosom buddy: "... our country's too big, too strange for our kind of narrow, selfish love" (p. 96). Kosca's and Cris's laughter, however, makes one wonder whether or not they understand what they are talking about (p. 97). Cris does show more awareness of his shortcomings when it comes to his family, for he feels the pangs of conscience for neglecting his son, Junior (p. 45). But this does not deter him from preying on his son's girlfriend.

The Split-level Christian

The existence of such radical inconsistency within a person is called split-level Christianity. Jaime Bulatao, S.J. (1966, 2) coined the term some years back to refer to this phenomenon which is prevalent among Christian Filipinos. He notes that though the phenomenon is not limited to Filipinos, "the Philippines, with its history of simultaneous colonization and Christianization by an outside power, seems to lend it a special home."

Bulatao uses the image of two apartments at different levels with a family living in each but rarely talking to each other. He writes:

So it is with split-leveled person: at one level, he professes allegiance to ideas, attitudes, and ways of behaving which are mainly borrowed from the Christian West, at another level he holds convictions which are more properly his 'own' ways of living and believing which were handed down from his ancestors, which do not always find their way into an explicit philosophical system, but nevertheless now and then flow into action.⁵ (1966, 2)

The person remains unconscious of the inconsistency in himself. This is because the two mind sets are on different levels. The top or superficial level which is the "Christian" part, operates on the conceptual level. It comes from rules and beliefs taught in school or in Church. The deeper sublevel, which consists of rules, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of living picked up at home and in the streets, operates on the existential or day-to-day level (Bulatao 1966, 10).

Often, the Filipinos's acting out of the second level is rationalized as "human weakness," "ako'y tao lamang." But "human weakness" is different from split-leveling. "Human weakness" presumes allegiance to a single set of principles, and deviation from this will involve "a sense of guilt, a discomfort with oneself for loss of integrity" (Bulatao 1966, 5-6). On the other hand, split-leveling is characterized by the absence of this sense of guilt or by a minimal awareness of it. "There is a conviction 'in one's gut' that the thing one has done, while it is something to be shielded from society's gaze like defecation or urination, is nevertheless not wrong" (Bulatao 1966, 6). In fact, the split, or the fact that there are two levels of thought-and-behavior systems, is not perceived at all. The split-leveling is unconscious. Thus there is no feeling of hypocrisy. The person remains at peace with himself. However, "uncovering" of the split by an authority figure is "capable of arousing *hiya* to an intense degree, a calamity which must be avoided at all costs" (Bulatao 1966, 8). In cases where individuals become aware of their inconsistency and use this awareness to manipulate people around them, "One may debate whether to apply to such individuals the name 'split level Christians' or not to call them Christians at all" (Bulatao 1966, 8).

Dynamics of the Split-leveling in Cris Magat

Cristino Magat, as the name "Cristino" implies, is a baptized Christian (p. 13). (Magat might also hint at maggot—a worm or grub associated with corruption.) Although his father was a Protestant minister, Cris's religiosity shows greater influence from the folk Catholicism prevalent in Sulucan. He is devoted to the Virgin of Antipolo (p. 45) and has special regard for the Marian rites of May (p. 7). However, the everyday experience of struggle for survival must have made religion seem unreal for the young Cris. The father's talking religion never put food on the table or bought medicine for his father's tuberculosis and his mother's cancer. Cris had to work even during schooldays, catching and selling leeches or peddling ice-drops (p. 13). Cris "had prayed thousands of times to the Virgin of Antipolo. But there was no deliverance" (p. 68). What is real for Cris are things that get him what he wants. Cris "learned early that it was easy to get food, money, and sex with a shy smile, a soft voice, hunger in his eyes" (p. 68). What is real is

the "soft warmth of a woman" (p. 147). The children of Sulucan were reared on thievery (p. 22). They learned early that corruption gives power and money (p. 35). Cris tells Kosca, ". . . our country's too big, too strange for our kind of narrow, selfish love" (p. 96). What is real is "tayo-tayo," narrow and blind loyalties (p. 161). All the brave ones, all the heroes Cris knew were all dead—"and he had to live" (p. 147).

Survival—this is Cris's one real obsession in life. Though he had left Sulucan, "place of his birth, scene of deprivation" (p. 15), Sulucan continues to haunt him. Cris calls memory a "sadistic tyrant" (p. 15) which brings the "ghosts of the long dead and those who have strayed too far, too far away from home, who now walked other streets remembering too much or nothing at all" (p. 15). He himself has "strayed too far, too far away from home," trying to remember nothing, but in fact remembering too much. In Cris's delirium he hears his mother's anguished scream (p. 147): "*Cristino! Cristino!*" The wounds that the poverty of Sulucan inflicted on the young Cris were never really healed.

Instead of confronting his past in order to heal the wounds, Cris desperately tries to run away from it. "Poor friend, you're running away from something (p. 155)," Kosca says to the sleeping Cris. To escape the task of facing himself, Cris learned to turn to three things—the aspirin, the condom, and the medal of the Virgin of Antipolo.

In desperation, in panic, or out of simple need, he turned, always he turned, making no distinctions, to these objects, mythic or real, that had served all his life as dear devices that meant his survival, often his undoing (p. 170).

These mean his undoing, because the more he tries to run away by turning to these things, the more he sinks into the morass of his fear and loneliness.

Cris takes the aspirin to relieve the throbbing pain of his sickness (p. 162). The aspirin is symbol, too, of his multimillion drug business, which is his source of power and wealth. But like aspirin, power and wealth are mere pain relievers for the wounds of his poverty are never really healed by them. Cris is no different from the president's men—little men until they were given a title which "transformed them into something big which they themselves seem unable to believe" (p. 14). Like them, Cris is afraid, "always on the

watch for anyone who would try to snatch the glory away and make them puny again" (p. 14). The more he amasses wealth and power, the lonelier he becomes. Though he moves in the world of power and high finance, Cris can never really belong there (p. 47). He has no one to trust, no single friend. He is all alone in this world, with the loneliness of the living dead (p. 29).

"The busier he was and the more he engaged his energies in the expanding business enterprise, the greater was his need for sex" (p. 69). Cris uses women to relieve himself from pressures, not only from work but more so, from loneliness. In his delirium, he sees himself surrounded by a band of ice. To keep from freezing to death, he pines for "the soft warmth of a woman" (p. 147). Yet after so many women, Cris senses he is looking for someone else, "the woman he'd never find and wouldn't even recognize if he did find her" (p. 135). The condom symbolizes these relationships with women, most physical and sensual relationships, which only leave him more alone. But even his other relationships—with Grace, his wife, on whose lap he would throw himself and cry (p. 47); with Mila, his ever loyal secretary; and even with Kosca, dearer to him than his own brother (p. 13)—leave him lonely. In his delirium, Cris feels his aloneness, "not belonging to anything or anyone, unable to take himself away from the pain, pain, pain . . . (p. 147)."

The medal of the Virgin of Antipolo, like the aspirin and the condom, is a pain reliever. Cris prays to the Virgin when things go wrong, just as he did when times were unusually hard. Cris prays though "there had been no deliverance," (p. 68) going through the motions, moving his lips, fingering the medal. Perhaps he is looking for his mother whom he lost early in life, seeking in the Virgin maternal security and acceptance.

Cris prays to ease the pain of guilt, for being bad (p. 45).

Virgin Mother, I know I'm bad; I try not to be but I often fail. What should I do, dearest Mother? I do try hard. I don't want to displease you, but that's all I seem to do. You see how I turn to you in moments of need. I'm alone, Mother, alone without You. Forgive me. Continue being kind and save me from harm. One day you'll smile on me and I'll be worthy of your love. (p. 45)

Yet Cris never mends his ways. He prays for forgiveness for neglecting his son, but he goes ahead and preys on his son's girlfriend. Cris even uses prayer for his preying for he actually prays

to the Virgin to help him to escape undetected to the U.S. to stash his ill-gotten wealth in the Swiss banks (p. 140). Cris actually uses the Virgin for his own ends, just as he does everyone else.

The way Cris relates to the Virgin is captured by the comment of a Filipino theologian regarding the way an immature Filipino Catholic relates with God:

The immature Filipino Catholic tends to treat God as a *compadre* from whom he can obtain favor or as a policeman whom he can bribe by means of a novena. God is treated as an equal on a person to person basis by means of *smooth interpersonal relations*. The Filipino value of *reciprocity* or *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) in his relationship to God also comes into play. Many Filipino Catholics make novenas to obtain favors from God. They feel that they have done something for God and expect him in turn to reciprocate by granting their request. They feel that God is indebted to them and therefore if God does not answer their prayer, they sulk or make *tampo*. If ill fortune shall befall them, then they consider it as a punishment from God (*pinarurusahan ako ng Diyos*) as if God bore a grudge against them for making *tampo*. The thing then is to talk it over with God on a person to person basis (*pakikiusapan*). Exactly the same personalistic religious attitude obtains with respect to the *santos* or patronal saints in whom one has *connection* (whom I do know). One can approach the *santo* much like a *suki* whom one can bargain familiarly (Gorospe 1966, 43).

Cris treats the Virgin as a mother but also as a woman. He learned early in life to get his way with women by "a shy smile, a soft voice, and hunger in his eyes" (p. 68) and he similarly entreats the Virgin for his own ends with words of contrition and supplication. But does Cris really believe in the Virgin, or God, for that matter? He stares in surprise when Medio expresses faith in God despite his afflictions (p. 124) and his lifestyle belies genuine faith in the Virgin or in God.

It is ironic, though, that the past Cris desperately tries to leave behind is what, at the same time, he pines for. He longs for the Sulucan he has left and remembers vividly the people he knew there: his friend, Kosca, "dearer than his own brother" (p. 13), the Monteverdes (p. 16), and the others who lived in Sulucan (pp. 23-26). Cris becomes animated when talking with Kosca about Sulucan and Kosca calls Cris and himself "sentimental fools" (p. 96) for they keep on harking back to the Sulucan they have lost.

In the company of old friends from Sulucan, Cris's younger, truer

self comes through. He goes out of his way to bring home Mila, his secretary and daughter of his old friend Medio, and to visit Medio (pp. 120-26). With Kosca, Cris is even more generous. He buys Kosca's "masterpiece," which nobody else pays much attention to, for \$5,000 (p. 92) and patiently listens to and feels concern for Kosca (pp. 83-84).

Cris's plight is similar to the man who walked backwards in one of the parables of Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. In this parable, the man faces another person whom he assures that he is coming nearer to, but is actually stepping away from. Kierkegaard (1978, 71) says:

... so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and promises he maintains an orientation towards the good, and with this orientation towards the good he moves backward farther and farther away from it.¹²

Split-leveling causes the same inconsistency in Cris Magat. Cris intends to do good (his Christian level) but is actually driven to step back by his learned reflexes (his unconscious sublevel). He has walked backwards so far that he has become lost, even to himself. He no longer knows where he is going or what he wants. Things he always thought he wanted only leave him empty. Fruits growing on trees symbolize for Cris the things he always wanted. Now "they were . . . accessible and belong to him" (p. 135), yet he still looks for something or someone more, but he does not know what or who (p. 135).

The Possibility of Conversion

At the end of the novel, is Cris able to break free from this mantis syndrome?

Kierkegaard cites a Danish fairy tale to explain the process of conversion. In the tale, mermaids entice human beings into their power by means of music. The only way to break the enchantment is for the person under the spell to play the same music backwards without any mistake. A single mistake means that he has to start all over again (Kierkegaard 1959, 168-69).

Cris faces the same task in order to heal the split within him. He has to play the music of his life backward, to retrace and confront

himself. Only then can the healing of his wounds begin. Only then can he be free from being driven by his compulsions, free to live his life according to principles. The task is not easy. It means giving up many of the things he has been holding on to—his wealth, power, women, and a superstitious religiosity. But, even before Cris can “play the music backward,” he has to become aware that he is under a spell, that the radical split is in him. For this awareness at least opens the possibility of healing.

Cris goes through a “purgatory experience” while waiting and hiding in Kosca’s apartment. He becomes sick and delirious, and seems on the verge of a breakdown (p. 167). At times like these in a person’s life the unconscious often surfaces and confronts the person. So during Cris’s delirium, the fear and loneliness he has been running away from catch up with him. He is confronted by his fear and his obsession with survival.

What am I doing here? Have I taken the coward’s way? Run, run, run for your life. The boy can run. . . . Are we all cowards? Who are the brave ones? The heroes? But all the heroes he knew were dead. And he had to live. (p. 147)

He is confronted by his frailty and his loneliness. He does not belong “to anything or anyone, unable to take himself away from the pain, pain, pain . . .” (p. 147). His past catches up with him. He hears his mother cry in anguish: “*Cristino! Cristino!*” (p. 147).

Does the experience change Cris, or at least make him aware of his inconsistency? He does feel shame after he learns of Grace’s brave support for him (p. 148) for he sends a cable to her and ends it with “I’m really coming home to you” (p. 168). This indicates Cris’s intention to make it up to his wife. However, with his record of womanizing and repeated broken promises to change, one wonders if Cris can really change.

Regarding his sins against the country, there is no sign of guilt up to the very end. When he is recovering from his sickness, he tells Kosca, “I could be charged with producing ‘fake drugs,’ tax evasion, and bribery” (p. 163). He knows the charges against him, but there is no acknowledgment of having done anything really wrong. Even in his delirium, Cris rationalizes his drugs.

Gentlemen, gentlemen, listen; you should know these “new drugs” are produced in America and Europe, everywhere—in quantities that

overwhelm the imagination. They aren't really fake. Look at them, how they vary in size and color but they all do the same thing—they kill pain. Is it a crime to make them available to the poor? How do you know the more expensive drugs are different? (p. 154)

Cris tells Kosca, ". . . our country's too big, too strange for our kind of narrow, selfish love" (p. 96). Up to the end of the novel, Cris's love remain narrow and selfish.

There are no signs that Cris is going to change, even after having been confronted by the inconsistency of his life. There are no indications that he is turning away from his addictions—the aspirin, condom, and the medal (p. 170). Up to the end, he relies on his wealth and power to fight back. He does not budge from his original game-plan. "I'll come out of this yet, maybe a little battered but other heads will roll long before mine" (p. 159). Cris laughs quietly as he outlines his plans to Kosca (p. 159). "Don't worry, I got 'em by the balls," (p. 167), Cris says confidently. He has the video tapes he can use for blackmail against his enemies (p. 162). Cris prepares to return to Manila ready to fight, unbowed, maintaining his innocence. "I have nothing to declare," (p. 171) will be his answer to the customs inspector and to the whole Filipino public. He believes it too.

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