

Book Reviews

Cornelio, Jayeel Serrano. *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young People Interpreting Religion*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 186 pp.

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Cornelio's book is a significant contribution to sociological scholarship on the intersections of youth and religion in contemporary Philippines. It is based on the author's dissertation at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and is composed of nine chapters. The first three chapters define the context and purpose of the study, the research methodology, and foundational concepts. The substantive discussions begin in Chapter 4 and conclude in Chapter 9.

While the book builds on complex sociological concepts like self, identity, institution, and modernity, the writing style is mostly simple and accessible to general readership.

The methodology of the research is qualitative, which enabled an extensive and deep probing of the different

facets of young people's beliefs, values, and practices pertaining to religiosity and spirituality. Focus group discussions (FGDs) complemented the interviews and worked in "diversifying subjectivities" (p. 46). The selection of respondents for both in-depth interviews and FGDs is based on *theoretical sampling*, a key feature of grounded theory and methodology.¹ The use of qualitative methodologies in researching on youth and religion is a welcome move to demonstrate the rich panoply of perspectives that do justice to the complexity of the issues explored in the course of the book.

The substantive chapters mainly deal with what Cornelio refers to as "creative Catholics"—a terminology that he culled from the experiences and perspectives of a significant number of his respondents. Based on subsequent discussions, it is the creative Catholics that exemplify most clearly the emerging trend of a type of religious experience among contemporary young Filipino Catholics. Creative Catholics rely on what Cornelio labels as "reflexive spirituality," which is hinged on self-fulfillment, the critique of the institutional Church and its representatives, and action-orientedness (p. 81). Despite the dominant attitude of critique and self-fulfillment, however, creative Catholics remain within the boundaries of institutional Catholicism

¹ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Jersey: Aldine Transactions, 1967), 45.

and hence do not undergo religious conversion. They also rely on “self-authorizing morality,” which is explained in terms of deinstitutionalization of individuals from the overarching influence of organized religion (p. 115). This is consistent with a third dimension of the experience of creative Catholics, that of “indwelt individualization.” As explained by Cornelio, indwelt individualization is premised on the self as the locus of both *tradition maintenance* and *tradition construction* (p. 127). In this sense, any form of resource from within and outside the confines of institutional Catholicism is appropriated by individual believers into their own religious practice, with the self as the arbiter of logic and consistency.

The book concludes with some interesting questions for further reflection. Particularly intriguing is the question of the present generation of young people as “the isolated generation,” which Cornelio answers in the affirmative. This means that the youth’s personal experiences lean toward atomization, which, for me, is quite like the ontological insecurity of the “pure relationship” where a relationship is entered into for its own sake and thus without the “cement” of social convention.² The book also concludes with a reflection on the role of youth in religious organizations (particularly Catholicism), which Cornelio says is a key

² Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 43.

sector that is missed in usual analyses of the trajectory and future of global Christianity. The ontological insecurity of the younger generations today, argues the author, provides a clear reference point for institutional Christianity to craft their continuing relevance.

The main contribution of Cornelio's scholarship as epitomized in this book is his successful "pluralizing of the typical": it provides a nuanced account of younger generations of Filipino Catholics by convincingly demonstrating that they are not all the same. At this point the categories of "cultural Catholics," "orthodox Catholics," and "creative Catholics" matter significantly in the discussion. It shows how such differences among young Catholics today are rooted not only in the complex nature of institutional Catholicism itself, but also in the complex relationship of the contemporary Catholic Church to modernity as the "cultural moment" of our time. The complexity of this relationship is what foregrounds the ontological anxiety that Cornelio points out in the lives of the young people he interviewed. What is interesting is that such feelings of ontological insecurity have not been stemmed by Catholicism's strong predilection for collectivist and "ecclesial" modes of religious identity (which, for instance, St. Ignatius of Loyola's notion of *sentire cum ecclesia* exemplifies). I think this puzzle is best explained by looking not to the internal dynamics of the Catholic Church alone, but to the nature of modernity itself as well, which prioritizes identity constitution over acceptance of

what was passed on (*traditio*) from previous generations. This characteristic of modernity is the defining feature of the seeming generational isolation of today's young people. Their subject position is not an easy one, because they find themselves at the crossroads of innovation and tradition not only in their individual lives, but more significantly, in their life in society.

That the bulk of Cornelio's discussion in the book gravitated toward "creative Catholics" is, however, quite intriguing. At the book's conclusion, the author hints that the primary reason for such emphasis is that creative Catholics comprise the most number of respondents in his sample. Personally, I think that the dynamics of meaning-making among creative Catholics is one of the most theoretically potent in the context of Cornelio's study. I would, however, be interested in seeing how he argues this choice of emphasis on theoretical grounds; otherwise, readers are left to speculate whether these "creative Catholics" represent most of the young Filipino Catholics, and whether they represent contemporary Philippine Catholicism's *modus vivendi*. I suspect that this speculation rests on the belief that it is among creative Catholics that questions of identity matter most significantly. At the same time, I am aware that sociological studies of religious traditionalism and fundamentalism equally highlight that questions of identity also foreground the choice to limit religious creativity and stick to established religious

principles.³ Thus, in a sociologically counterintuitive fashion, both “creative” and “orthodox” Catholics reinterpret religion, albeit in different directions and priorities. It is in this context that I find the nearly-exclusive emphasis on creative Catholics enigmatic. If pushed too far, the use of “creative Catholics” may appear as the *only* reference point in reinterpreting religion and may obstruct a fuller understanding of the complex relationship of young people with their respective religious organizations.

I also followed closely how Cornelio introduced “hybrid concepts” in this book—hybrid in the sense that there is an attempt to combine, for instance, sociological and theological ideas in one compound concept. Examples of this would be “indwelt individualization” and “reflexive spirituality.” In both instances, the notions of “indwelt” and “spirituality” are drawn from the Christian theological lexicon, where they have their respective definitions. I think that it is necessary for sociology to expand its own disciplinal lexicon by incorporating new terminologies. The

³ See William D. Dinges and James Hitchcock, “Roman Catholic Traditionalism and Activist Conservatism in the United States,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed: The Fundamentalist Project* 1, 66-141, eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michael Hill, “Tradition as a Resource: A Personal Trajectory,” *Australian Religion Studies Review* 20 (2007): 27-43; Alberto Melucci, “The Process of Collective Identity,” in *Social Movements, Protest, and Contention* 4, eds. Hank Johnson and Bert Klandermans, 41-63 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

use of emic concepts from a particular religion, however, deserves a more nuanced process of theoretical appropriation. Several commentators have demonstrated how classical sociology of religion turned out to be too “Christian-centric” because of uncritical appropriation of concepts from Western Christianity.⁴

While I commend Cornelio’s resourceful appropriation of theological vocabulary into sociological discourse, I would like to see how such an endeavor will not repeat the mistakes of our forebears in the discipline. I see nothing amiss in recognizing the limitations that go with accentuating religious experiences that are particular to Christianity. Given this limitation, however, the challenge for Cornelio is to craft a mode of engagement, through his “sociology of Christianity,” with an increasingly pluralist religious (and secularist) landscapes, where multiplicity of faith traditions face-off with expressed commitments to secular worldviews and moralities.

These finer points of contention notwithstanding, I can say that, on the whole, Cornelio’s book is a timely and relevant piece of scholarship that deserves a place in research and theoretical reflection. Its piercing analysis of Filipino youth at the throes of immense change is a welcome

⁴See Syed Hussein Alatas, “Problems in the Definition of Religion,” *International Social Science Journal* 29.2 (1977): 213-34; Joachim Matthes, “Religion in the Social Sciences: A Socio-Epistemological Critique,” *Akademika* 56 (2000): 85-105.

contribution to the sociology of the youth, the sociology of religion, and the sociology of modernity in the Philippine context. I am quite confident that the gains of Cornelio's book will be an impetus for deeper and more sustained engagements in contemporary Philippine sociology.

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