

March 2021

Catholics & Cultures: A Panoramic View in Search of Greater Understanding

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Recommended Citation

Wong, Stephanie M. (2021) "Catholics & Cultures: A Panoramic View in Search of Greater Understanding," *Journal of Global Catholicism: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7*. p.94-103.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1089

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol5/iss1/7>

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CATHOLICS & CULTURES

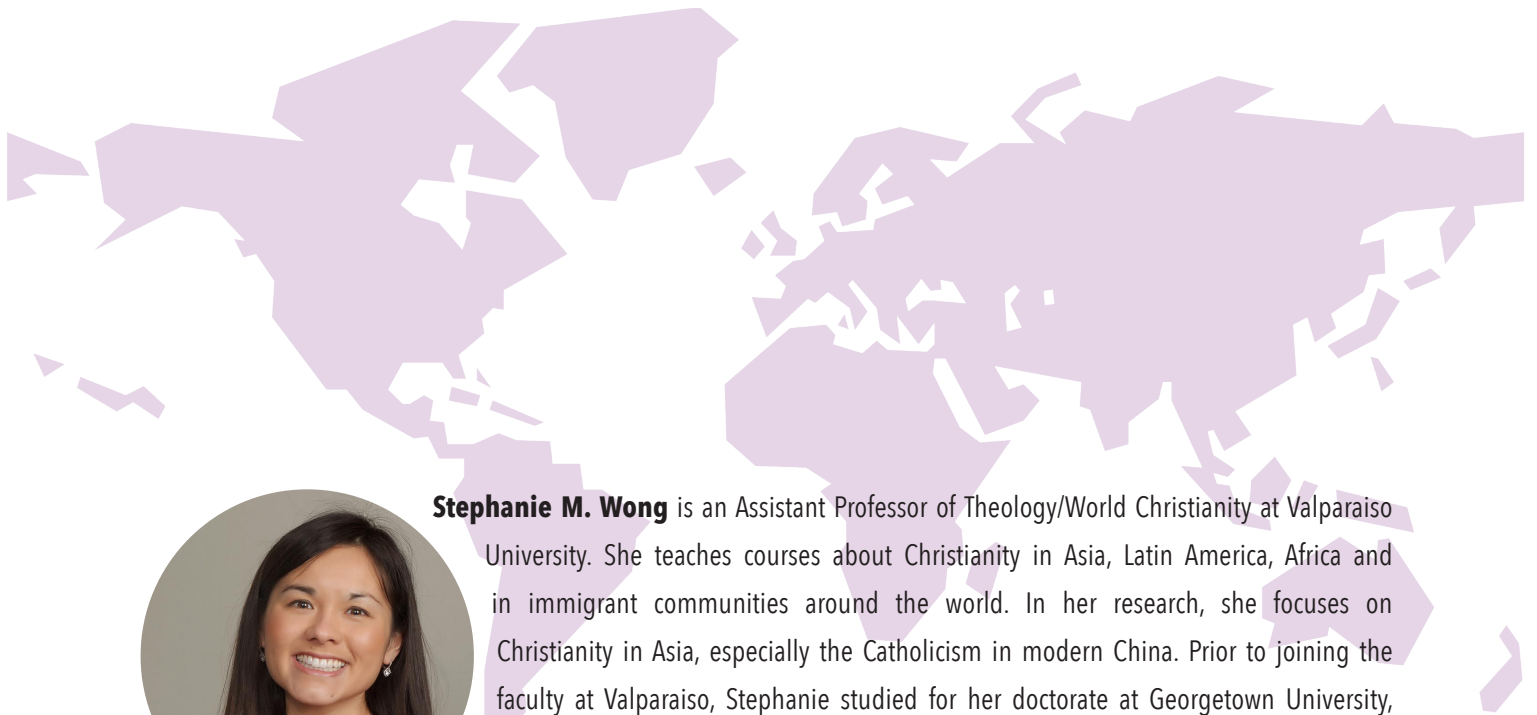
Scholarship for the Pedagogy of Global Catholicism

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Catholics & Cultures: A Panoramic View in Search of Greater Understanding



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The Catholics & Cultures initiative offers a much-needed panorama of the variety present in Catholic life around the globe. In an era when internet usage can reinforce siloed perceptions of the world and risks producing homogeneous echo chambers, the Catholics & Cultures website intentionally collates diverse snapshots of lived Catholicism. In this reflection, I offer some observations about how the website already serves this purpose and how it might also help viewers make sense of the dazzling array of case studies.

CATHOLICS & CULTURES: AN ONLINE PROJECT

In recent years, there has been much discussion about whether various internet-based technologies—for instance, online publishing, social media, and web search—have brought about a more open exchange of information or simply created more ideological distance between people groups.¹ Originally, early visionaries of the internet hoped it would serve as a connective cross-cultural tool. Tim Berners-Lee, the English engineer and computer scientist who invented the World Wide Web, explains, “I imagined the web as an open platform that would allow everyone, everywhere to share information, access opportunities, and collaborate across geographic and cultural boundaries.”² However, it has become apparent that these idealistic outcomes are not the only ones. We have seen how the internet can also erode our control over personal data, enable the spread of misinformation, and—perhaps most troublingly—give us the false impression of access to truth when in fact algorithms (such as Google’s historic PageRank or Facebook’s News Feed algorithms) narrow our information sources and thus shape our very perceptions of what is possible and reasonable.

In this context, the Catholics & Cultures website represents a valiant effort to make the internet work for, not against, greater understanding. After all, Catholicism is not immune to ideological battles. All across the World Wide Web and social media, Catholics can be seen arguing over Catholic identity. What does it

1 Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, Justin M. Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (Special Issue, 2016): 298-320.

2 Tim Berners-Lee, “I invented the web: Here are three things we need to change to save it,” *The Guardian*, March 11, 2017, accessed April 24 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/11/tim-berners-lee-web-inventor-save-internet>.

mean to be a Catholic, especially in relation to culturally inflected debates over hot-button issues: immigration, inter-religious encounters, the status of LGBTQ priests and laity, the rights and reparations owed to wronged minority groups, the proper response to sexual abuse in the Church, and so on? These are extremely important conversations to have, and yet so often they play out along predictable lines. Without a conscious effort to use the World Wide Web to hear a greater range of voices, Catholics' internet usage can simply reproduce the ideological echo-chambers of wider society within online Catholic circles.

The Catholics & Cultures project clearly aspires to break free of the ideological battle-lines that can become entrenched in any one society. It asks us to consider Catholics anew in a more diverse way: globally. Just as Jesus urges the disciples at the Sea of Galilee to throw their nets to the other side of the boat to catch a full load (John 21), so too the website seems to urge the observer to turn away from his or her familiar side of the boat and see what can be found, unexpectedly, in other waters.

STRUCTURAL CHOICES: 'COUNTRY' AND OTHER THEMES

If a more panoramic understanding of lived Catholicism is the goal, then the current website already does much to signal and achieve it. The "About This Site" section explains the hope of transcending any singular view of Catholicism:

Most Catholics experience the faith through a single cultural lens. Yet people all around the world live and imagine it in a rich diversity of ways. Catholics & Cultures widens the lens with a scholarly, vivid and accessible look at the religious lives and practices of contemporary Catholics in countries around the globe.³

The website's spotlighting of so many different communities and practices makes it hard to maintain the perception that one's own form of Catholic practice is the only one.

Structurally, the website organizes Catholics by “countries around the globe.”⁴ By adopting this geographic frame, the website avoids inadvertently reproducing ecclesial structures or importing a pre-conceived cultural sense of who Catholics are. For instance, the website does not have us first look to Rome or foreground the ecclesial headquarters of the Church in any structural way. (Though where it is included, it is listed as “Holy See” rather than “Vatican City State,” which does raise some confusion about whether the organizing principle is geographical territories or governing jurisdictions.⁵) Nor does the website suggest civilizational categories to us, like a “Catholic Europe” or a “Western Christendom.” In other words, the project does not seem to stand on any particular ecclesiology or church history.

Rather, the project aspires to an ostensibly more neutral frame. Catholic communities are listed simply by geographic country. The countries are organized alphabetically in English. Where this introduces geo-political complications (for instance, Hong Kong is listed separately from China but as “Hong Kong, China (SAR)” as an acknowledgement of Hong Kong’s status under the One Country Two Systems policy), there seems to be a good faith effort to acknowledge complexities. On the whole, the geographic organization does serve the goal of breaking the viewer out of any preconceived, singular definition of who counts as Catholic. When scrolling down the list of countries, the viewer must immediately choose, “Which one?”

In addition, the website offers two other avenues for perusing the site’s content: the tabs called “Feasts & Holy Days” and “Practices & Values.” These are crucial tools because they allow the viewer to consider the diversity of Catholicism through lenses that can see detail within a national community or see trends across borders. In “Feasts & Holy Days,” there are links for learning about idiosyncratic local celebrations that one might not know to look for on the country level. For instance, the Feast of the Three Saints is celebrated with dances of prayer for fertility in Obando, Philippines. This involves a pilgrimage to the particular Church of San Pascual Baylon and is not a practice of the Philippine nation as such.⁶

4 “About This Site.”

5 Editor’s note: A change was made on the site to Vatican City State in response to this feedback.

6 “Obando Feast of the Three Saints and Fertility,” Catholics & Cultures, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/feasts-holy-days/obando-feast-three-saints-philippines>.



Feast of the Three Saints, Obando, Philippines. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/catholicsandcultures.org.

In “Practices & Values,” there are topics like “Charismatic Practice” and “Migration & Immigration” which collate articles and videos from as widely ranging places as India, Romania, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.⁷ For instance, the page on “Death, Mourning & the Afterlife” pulls up spotlights on *animitas* (roadside shrines) of Chile and the burial practices of Chinese Catholics.⁸ Such juxtapositions invite cross-regional and cultural-cultural comparison. These functions help to liberate a passive viewer from thinking too much in terms of “country” and invite him or her to consider patterns across within and across different communities.

Since currently the “Feasts & Holy Days” and “Practices & Values” sections are still less developed than the more dominant “Country” frame, the project coordinators might do well to expand the opportunity for thematic searches. As an instructor of World/Global Christianity, I already find the website to be a useful pedagogical resource for introducing students to the fact of diversity within Catholicism or

7 “Charismatic Practice,” Catholics & Cultures, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/node/223/charismatic-practice>.
 8 “Death, Mourning & Afterlife,” Catholics and Cultures, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/practices-values/death-mourning-afterlife>.



Roadside shrines across Chile called *animitas* honor sites where the body and soul separated. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/ catholicsandcultures.org.

helping them research a community they are already aware of. For instance, if I have a Mexican-American student eager to understand the religiosity of her immigrant grandparents, it is easy enough to point her to the “Mexico” section as a good resource for basic statistics and articles of sample devotions.⁹ However, I am most eager for my students to think thematically about Christianity as a global phenomenon. For instance, immigration: how do religious networks shape immigrant communities, forging ties between those who move and those who stay behind? Or charismatic prayer and practices: to what extent does Charismatic Catholicism draw on or militate against folk or indigenous religious sensibilities? If viewers could search Catholics & Cultures by a more exhaustive set of themes to pull up all the tagged pictures, videos and articles pertaining to that theme, the website could serve as a rich research database indeed!

PEDAGOGICAL OPPORTUNITY: A HEURISTIC TOOLKIT

This call for more extensive thematization brings me to my final observation, namely that the Catholics & Cultures project could serve as a platform for ongoing conversation about how to understand lived Catholicism in all its global diversity. In its current form, the website undertakes the ambitious tasks of a) collecting information and audio-visual snapshots from communities around the world, and then b) making this accessible online. No doubt, the organizers and contributors have enough work cut out for them in simply continuing to create content. There

⁹ “Mexico,” Catholics and Cultures, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/mexico>.

are still numerous countries not yet covered (the United States, Canada, Russia, Indonesia, and others) and probably innumerable rituals and practices of interest still to feature. Nonetheless, if I might dream big for a moment, I can imagine a version of *Catholics & Cultures* that not only presents such data but gives the viewer some tools for understanding it.

The late Jonathan Z. Smith once challenged scholars of religion not to avoid the crucial task of interpretation. He was concerned that scholars too often research a case study and then simply present it, offering their data as though it stands representative of something without ever engaging the second-order question of what that might be. Smith urged scholars to make a heuristic contribution, to offer some way of thinking that takes a previously unintelligible subject and renders it more intelligible:

The cognitive power of any translation, model, map, generalization or re-description—as, for example, in the imagination of ‘religion’—is, by this understanding, a result of its difference from the subject matter in question and not its congruence... Too much work by scholars of religion takes the form of a paraphrase, our style of ritual repetition, which is a particularly weak mode of translation, insufficiently different from its subject matter for purposes of thought. To summarize: a theory, a model, a conceptual category, a generalization cannot be simply the data writ large.¹⁰

This challenge has often haunted my own research and writing in the area of Chinese Catholicism, as I agonize over how to both present the material in a responsibly accurate way and also re-present it with interpretive value added. Yet I take Smith’s challenge to heart because, on those occasions that I have come to greater clarity, that agonizing process is also the most satisfying. To the extent that we can gain an understanding of “Catholics and cultures” and work out what the meaning of that connective “and” might be, we will have learned something truly valuable.

Moreover, the task of interpretation may well be unavoidable—especially in the

¹⁰ J.Z. Smith, “A Twice-told Tale: The History of the History of Religion’s History,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 371-2.

classroom. Any project that sets out to teach about something so complex as lived religion on a global scale will have to adopt organizing principles for the sake of coherent communication. This quickly became apparent to me in my first semesters of teaching as a professor of global/world Christianity when drafting and testing out syllabi. The sheer variety of possible different case studies to include could seem delightful, colorful and patterned to me but overwhelming, chaotic and even disconcerting to my students. These were generally curious and open-minded students who could appreciate the intrinsic fascination of different Christian communities living out their faith in distinct ways. But they did not hesitate to ask, with a poignant sort of curiosity, what could be said in the midst of that diversity: was there was anything held in common by Christians around the world, did it make sense to talk of a singular Catholicism or Church at all, were there any patterns to be discerned in expressions of faith across cultures, and why or why not? While at first I was hesitant to tackle such large and loaded questions, I could not fault the students for asking them. Indeed, these were the sorts of questions that my syllabus, chock full of geographically far-flung and culturally defamiliarizing case studies, had implicitly begged them to ask.

I have come to believe that if I want my students to think critically about our material, it is not enough to show them interesting samples of Christianity around the world. My role also involves suggesting “translations, models, maps, generalizations or re-descriptions” that students might try as thinking tools for making sense of the data.¹¹ Of course, any such model or generalization is provisional, and some are more useful than others for purposes of thought. However, as the above discussion of the website’s structure shows, we can never get away from organizing frames entirely. We employ categorizing concepts like “country” because we have to think and communicate in terms of something.

As the project continues, the website would do well to host more explicit reflection on the diversity of lived Catholicism. What second-order heuristic tools might do the least obscuring and the most clarifying for our understanding of global Catholicism? What does the global scale gain for our view of global Catholicism that we

11 Smith, “A Twice-told Tale,” 371-372.

would not see on a smaller scale? Teachers of world/global Christianity must offer conceptual support for thinking about the diversity within our tradition, for exposure alone may not bring about appreciation. There is always the risk that when people apprehend something they do not recognize, they might view its difference as an automatic threat rather than a potential boon.

CONCLUSION

The Catholics & Cultures website currently offers an impressive array of snapshots of Catholics in different cultures. For those of us who would like to see the internet bring the world's people into greater connection and awareness of each other, this site exemplifies the internet at its best. Until the advent of the commercial airline flights and the World Wide Web, few Catholics in history had the opportunity to see any expression of Catholicism beyond that of their own local community. The Catholics & Cultures project has taken advantage of these modern capabilities to successfully “widen the lens.”

When viewers peruse the Catholics & Cultures site, they are likely to encounter something new—perhaps they will see countries listed that they had never even considered might have a Catholic presence, or watch videos of processions and dances of a sort they have never participated in, or hear the Mass with music in an unfamiliar style. This opportunity to experience something novel online is extremely valuable because it is rare. Search engines generate results based on what others have already clicked on or linked. Internet-based news sites often lead viewers to focus on the same sorts of political and economic events day after day. Social media platforms encourage the sound-biting and recycling of memes. These aspects of digital life threaten to close down our range of thought and limit us to familiar impressions and ideas. The Catholics & Cultures website, however, asks the viewer to consider new features of lived Catholicism and to embark on the brave journey of discerning what that diversity means for Catholic identity today.

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