

How did Spanish Catholicism develop to become the Philippines' own unique form of Catholicism?

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Rationale and preliminary research

I have many friends that are Filipino Catholics and during History of Europe, I learned that Catholicism was introduced to the Philippines under the rule of Spanish Colonialism. I noticed that my Filipino friends were very religious, inculcating their faith into their everyday routine, as well as relying on their faith in their lord to make sense of the world around them. After further research, I found it interesting that though Catholicism was introduced by the colonizers, more than 86% of the Philippines follow the Catholic religion ¹. I wondered how Catholicism managed to earn faith from the people despite its colonial origin. Would Catholicism not face more rejection from the people when it was introduced by their Spanish colonizers and when the people of the Philippines already had their own religious beliefs? Moreover, Filipino Catholicism has many differences from Spanish Catholicism in terms of practices, and many Filipino Catholics use their faith and devotion to fuel their participation in these practices condemned by the Catholic church. Perhaps there is an underlying question on how the same belief can be manifested in various ways when placed under different circumstances. Thus, my topic of research is: How did Spanish Catholicism develop to become the Philippines' own unique form of Catholicism?

For my internal assessment, I will write about the integration of Catholicism into Filipino culture and the eventual syncretism of both to create Filipino Catholicism to develop something entirely new. I will also touch upon Catholic practices that are unique to the Philippines but frowned upon by the Pope. I will start off by conducting research on the presence of Spanish missionaries and their work in the Philippines through mostly journal articles like "Catholicism in the Philippine Islands" by James Alexander Robertson, "Philippine Fiesta and Colonial structure" and "Religion in the Philippines" by Jack Miller, news that "Philippines Tradition of Easter Crucifixion lives on", a letter by a Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino, and a CNA documentary: "Crossroads of Faith". What I look for when delving into these sources is how the Spanish settled into the Philippines, the methods in which these people utilized to spread the idea of Catholicism, as well as the discrepancies between both forms of Catholicism. Some other sources I will use is an interview with a Catholic Priest from the Philippines about the current practices they hold in the Philippines and how it differs from Spanish Catholicism.

Plan for study

To understand how Spanish Catholicism evolved in the Philippines to form a new version of Catholicism, I plan to focus my initial study on the research of the introduction of Catholicism

¹ Miller, Jack. "Religion in the Philippines." *Asia Society* (2014). 1

into the Philippines, and how those new Catholic ideas merged with the already existing Tagalog tradition of Anitism.²

My next step in research would be focused on comparing the similarities and differences between Spanish Catholicism and Filipino Catholicism. Through observing these differences, I will be able to deduce if Filipino Catholicism is indeed different from Spanish Catholicism. To further understand the state of Filipino Catholicism, I plan to interview a Filipino Catholic priest.³ Through asking a Filipino priest, I will be able to better understand Filipino Catholicism from a Filipino perspective, generating a more authentic response to my research. I will also interview some regular Filipino Catholics to see if there are any discrepancies in the thoughts about Catholicism between authority figures in the church and normal followers.⁴ I intend to compare the results of my interview to the findings from my research to piece a narrative that offers answers to my research question.

Summary of significant findings

Some significant findings are that Spanish Catholicism and Filipino Catholicism are not different in terms of the texts they study or the beliefs they hold, but more in terms of the practices they have according to Parish Priest, Fr. Alan Castillo.⁵ He supported his statement by informing me that they taught the same teachings from the same Bible.⁶ However, regular Filipino Catholics have stated otherwise. According to Mheann Tejero, “Catholicism varies per region.”⁷ On the topic of the evolution of a Filipino version of Catholicism, both sides remarked that differences were apparent when a fusion of indigenous culture occurred.⁸ However, the

² Hislop, Stephen K. "Anitism: a survey of religious beliefs native to the Philippines" (1971). *Asian Studies*. 144–156.: meaning the belief in spirits.

³ The questions I prepared for the priest are as follows: What is your name and what is your position in the church? Do you think there is a difference between Spanish Catholicism and Filipino Catholicism? If yes, why do you think these differences arise? Can you elaborate on specific practices that stand out to you and are different from the ones in Spain? What is your view on the Filipino Easter re-enactment of the crucifixion?

⁴ The other set of questions I prepared for regular followers of Catholicism were: What do you feel about Filipino Catholicism? Do you think there is a difference between that and Spanish/ Roman Catholicism? Are there any special prayer books used within the religion that is uniquely Filipino? What do you think about Easter Crucifixions actually nailing people to the cross?

⁵ Castillo, Alan. "Questions about Filipino and Spanish Catholicism"

Fr. Castillo stated that both Spanish and Filipino Catholicism all “obey and adhere to the Pope and the magistrate (Teaching Authority) of the Roman Catholic church.” Thus there are no differences between what it taught in either country.

⁶ Fr. Castillo says that although the Filipino Bible was translated from English to Tagalog, it is still the same version as the English King James bible

⁷ Tejero, Mheann. “Filipino Catholicism from a layperson’s perspective”

⁸ Castillo highlighted that differences only arise when Filipinos “insert or add their indigenous culture and religious practice in the formal rite and rubrics of the Catholic church.”

regular followers do not see this as a bad thing and are instead very proud of their own religiosity.⁹

Many examples of indigenous spirituality lie in Filipino practices.¹⁰ A prime example is the reenactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Easter. The Filipino Catholics take their worship to the extreme, actually nailing their hands and feet to the cross.¹¹ This practice is called “The way of the Cross” and has been publicly condemned by the Catholic church as the commercialization of the crucifixions in addition to the Filipinos’ superstitious beliefs do not coincide with the Catholic respect for one’s body.¹² However, Ruben Enaje, a man who has been crucified 27 times, justifies their practice by announcing that the people have their own pledge to God and it is too late for the church to tell them to stop.¹³ It can be observed that some Filipino Catholics do not devote themselves fully to the same laws as Spanish Catholicism and tend to fall back on their spiritual roots when it comes to superstition. Fr. Castillo commented that the Filipinos are not deterred by the disapproval and the crucifixions are still a joyful occasion.¹⁴ He sees Filipinos as being devout and religious people who “connect and develop an affection to a certain image of Jesus or the saints and become a devotee.”¹⁵ Explaining the practice of crucifixion, Mheann reveals that some people try to take in the actions of Christ in the Bible.¹⁶ It is through experiences such as this that Filipinos establish a connection to God, and experience the might of the Lord and the power of their faith through their personal means, portraying the personal and cultural traits of a Filipino. However, Beatrice Lizardo, another regular believer remarks that the crucifixions are just an expression of folk Catholicism.¹⁷

Critical reflection and evaluation

⁹ Tejero on the other hand claimed that “Filipino Catholicism best suits the Filipino people and Filipino culture”, emphasizing that she is proud of the “OFWs (Catholics) that bring the culture of *simbang gabi* (Filipino for night mass) around the world”. However, she did state that she would be unable to further elaborate on the differences between Spanish and Filipino Catholicism as she is unfamiliar with Spanish culture.

¹⁰ Lizardo, Beatrice. “Filipino Catholicism from a layperson’s perspective”: some examples being *Traslación, Flores de Mayo, and Simbang Gabi*.

Beatrice elaborated that these practices serve to highlight a Filipino Catholic’s devotion.

¹¹ *Philippines Tradition of Easter Crucifixion Lives On*, accessed January 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I62M6JJKadA>.

¹² *Philippines Tradition of Easter Crucifixion Lives On*.

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Castillo

¹⁵ Castillo

¹⁶ Tejero explains that the practice of self-harm or any kind of “*panata*” (vows) have different meanings to the people who participate in them. For the people such as herself who do not possess the same fearlessness to inflict self-harm, they have their own sacrifices as they reflect on their actions as a member of the Catholic community.

¹⁷ Lizardo says that not all Filipinos agree with this practice and that “The Way of the Cross” has nothing to do with the teachings of the church and claims that there are other ways that people can ask for forgiveness and express their gratitude instead.

Searching for an answer to my research question has led to the development of further insight on my topic. Contrary to my belief that people living under colonialism would be oppressed and rebel against their colonizers, the method in which the Spanish colonizers took in subjugating the Philippines was not that of a militaristic approach, but one of peace, fueled by their wish to spread Catholicism.¹⁸ The Spanish began to organize extravagant fiestas to attract the attention of local people.¹⁹ As the people of the Philippines were “impressionable” and moved by “various kinds of incantations, offerings and sacrifices”, they were awed by the great sacrifices portrayed in the Bible and readily converted to Catholicism.²⁰ Their readiness was also observed by a Spanish explorer in his letter to the King stating that the Filipinos “[could] be brought readily within the fold of the holy gospel”.²¹

To make the Filipinos more readily accept their faith, the Spanish clergy helped “built roads and bridges, convents and churches, and engaged in various industrial activities” that helped improve the livelihoods of many Filipinos.²² The acceptance of Spaniards and Catholicism can be observed through the celebration of Sinulog, an annual festival celebrating Ferdinand Magellan’s planting of the first cross in the Philippines.²³ The reenactment of the arrival of Catholicism is highlighted by the gifting of the Santo Niño, the oldest Catholic relic from 1521. In attempting to demonstrate their reverence and acceptance of Catholicism, many Filipinos follow the practice of idolatry which is actually prohibited in Catholicism by worshipping and praying to the Santo Niño as if it were God. This practice demonstrates the integration of Filipino traditional superstition with the introduced Spanish Catholicism as indigenous Filipinos “worship[ed] different idols”.²⁴ Another distinct difference in the practices of Filipino Catholicism is their use of anting-anting, protective amulets that grant their wearers powers.²⁵ The integration of protective amulets in Catholicism align with Fr. Castillo’s explanation on how indigenous spiritual practices have been absorbed into mainstream Catholicism. Despite the differences, some similarities between Spanish Catholicism and

¹⁸ Reinhard Wendt, “Philippine Fiesta and Colonial Culture,” *Philippine Studies* 46, no. 1 (1998): 4.

¹⁹ Wendt. 5: The missionaries were able to inculcate their messages and teachings of faith “in the processions, songs, dance or plays”

²⁰ James Alexander Robertson, “Catholicism in the Philippine Islands,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 3, no. 4 (1918): 391.

²¹ GEO. BUTLER GRIFFIN and Sebastian Vizcaino, “[Letter of Sebastian Vizcaino to the King of Spain, Announcing His Return from the Exploration of the Coast of the Californias, as Far as the Forty-Second Degree of North Latitude—Dated 23d May, 1603],” *Publications of the Historical Society of Southern California* 2, no. 1 (1891): 68–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41215039>.

²² “Catholicism in the Philippine Islands,” 381-382.

²³ “Crossroads of Faith,” CNA, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/video-on-demand/deciphering-philippines/crossroads-of-faith-11633894>.

²⁴ “[Letter of Sebastian Vizcaino to the King of Spain, Announcing His Return from the Exploration of the Coast of the Californias, as Far as the Forty-Second Degree of North Latitude—Dated 23d May, 1603],” 71

²⁵ “Crossroads of Faith.”

Filipino Catholicism that I found in my research other than their bibles is their condemnation of abortion and divorce. The Philippines is now the only country apart from the Vatican where divorce is illegal.²⁶ Other similarities included the practice of mass, communion and church services. Therefore, I can conclude that there are not many differences in Filipino Catholicism from Spanish Catholicism in sacred texts or teachings, but due to the syncretism of spirituality and superstitious practices from Filipino tradition into Catholicism, a new unique form of Filipino Catholicism has emerged.

During my research process, some misconceptions that I had prior to this research was that there was bound to be hostility between colonizers and the colonized based on previous knowledge from history classes. I also had the misgiving that there would be obvious differences between Filipino and Spanish Catholicism that were not limited to just practices. On the contrary, there were not many differences stemming from text and rituals, only practices. I noticed that there were some inconsistencies within my interview results. While Fr. Castillo did state that Filipino Catholicism is the same as Spanish Catholicism, the results I got from my research as well as his opinions on Easter crucifixions do not convey that idea.²⁷ The regular believers of Filipino Catholicism have different viewpoints within themselves as well as with the clergy, suggesting a lack of clarity on what the exact teachings and practices of Filipino Catholicism are, and perhaps there are multiple versions of Filipino Catholicism.

If I were to improve my research, I would have interviewed more figures in the Filipino Catholic community to broaden my sample size and gather more responses to my question. I understand that by having only a few interview responses, there could be a generalization of the view of Filipino Catholics and cannot be used to represent all Filipino Catholics. Similarly, I could only rely on a letter from a Spanish explorer to the King to obtain hints of Filipino religion as a primary text. As many of my sources were from a non-Filipino point of view, they were written through the lens of colonizers and will no doubt have some bias involved in their description of the Filipinos and their country. To improve my research, it would have been better if I could find sacred texts about traditional Tagalog religion before Spanish colonization. However, Filipino mythology has mostly been passed down orally and there has been a lack of documentation as there was no previous interest in the history of Filipino religions. Furthermore, Filipinos do not have their own version of the bible or specific prayer books that are uniquely Filipino. Thus, if further investigation were possible, I would expand research into indigenous Filipino religions as well as interview more members of the Filipino Catholic society.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Castillo: Instead of condemning bodily harm like the Catholic church, Fr. Castillo praises the event as a show of devotion and faith.

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