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# On the Anthropology and Theology of Roman Catholic Rituals in the Philippines

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## Abstract

The topic of this paper is the dynamics of clerical and public attitudes pertaining to the continued performance of Passion rituals of self-mortification among Roman Catholics in the Philippines. I examine discourses of official clerical disavowal of Passion rituals as well as the seemingly contrasting attitudes of accommodation and tacit encouragement from clerics 'on the ground'. I argue that the diversity of perspectives on Passion rituals are not contradictions per se, but they are facets of the theological notion of inculturation, which espouses cultural porosity and diversity as elements of spiritual formation. In so doing, I discuss how scholars can come to a better appreciation of the analytical utility of inculturation by pursuing the disciplinary convergence between theology and anthropology. I submit that this anthro-theology does not only involve anthropologists expanding their conceptual range to include theological concepts but also making adjustments to the way we think about the epistemological subject positions of clerics and theologians, particularly as they are encountered in the process of ethnographic fieldwork.

## Keywords

passion rituals – inculturation – Roman Catholicism – Philippines – anthropology – theology

The Philippine province of Pampanga is known for the Passion rituals that are held there every year on Good Friday. In these rituals, scores of avowed Roman Catholics voluntarily subject themselves to varying degrees of pain in

ways that correspond with their commemoration of Jesus Christ's own agony, torment, and crucifixion. Two rituals in particular stand out: *pagdarame* ('to empathize'), in which hundreds of people flagellate themselves as they go on a walking journey around the province; and *pamamaku king krus* ('nailing on the cross'), in which steel nails are driven through the palms and feet of ritual practitioners as part of a scripted Passion play.<sup>1</sup>

Although these kinds of embodied acts can be traced to the historical and doctrinal legacy of Roman Catholicism, Passion rituals are officially discouraged by the Filipino religious hierarchy, many of whom disavow them as archaic ways of practicing the faith. My own survey of how various media outlets have depicted these rituals over the past few decades corroborate longitudinal studies conducted by scholars such as Peter Bräunlein and Nicholas Barker: that, by and large, these rituals are not considered pious acts per se but anachronistic and misguided attempts at mimicking Christ that go too far in actualizing his physical suffering.<sup>2</sup> These disavowals feed into a prevalent public discourse, both in the Philippines and beyond, that depict Passion rituals as 'radical' or 'fanatic' expressions of 'folk piety'. The questions that typically arise about these rituals focus not on trying to understand their religious motivations but express an innate aversion to the pain that they involve: Why do people who claim to be 'normal' Catholics see it necessary to inflict pain upon themselves? How could they be so misguided in their interpretation of Christ's Passion?

The generally pejorative tone of clerical and public media depictions seems at odds with the ethnographic landscape in which one can find many instances of tolerance of Passion ritual practices, even from clerics themselves. While these relatively positive attitudes do not endorse a contravention of official church policy, they do exhibit a level of sympathy and even admiration for

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1 For a description and analysis of these rituals, see Julius Bautista, 'Rituals of Pain and the Limits of the Biomedical Paradigm: Self-Mortification in the Catholic Philippines', in Hans T. Sternudd, ed, *Painful Conversations: Making Pain Sens(e)ible* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), pp. 79–94; Julius Bautista, 'The Localization of Radical Transcendence in a Philippine Town', in Bryan S Turner and Oscar Salemink, eds, *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 96–109; Peter J. Bräunlein, *Passion/Pasyon: Rituale des Schmerzes im europäischen und philippinischen Christentum* (Germany: Fink Wilhelm GmbH, 2010); Anril S. Tiatco and Amihan Bonifacio-Ramolete, 'Cutud's Ritual of Nailing on the Cross: Performance of Pain and Suffering', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 25 (2008), 58–76; Nicholas H. Barker, 'The Revival of Ritual Self-Flagellation and the Birth of Crucifixion in Lowland Christian Philippines', *Discussion Paper #63*, Nagoya University Graduate School of International Development, 1998.

2 Bräunlein, *Passion/Pasyon*; Barker, 'The Revival of Ritual'.

the sentimental intent of ritual agents, which are often the basis for clerical actions that accommodate and even encourage them. I discuss both aspects of clerical attitudes to Passion rituals as this essay unfolds, in a way mindful of a particular problematic: How can we reconcile the attitudes of condemnation that dismiss Passion rituals as ‘wrong’ with those others which see them as manifestations of a strong, even impressive, pious ritual agency?

The main premise from which this essay builds is that the diversity of perspectives on Passion rituals are not contradictions per se but are facets of the critical encounter between Gospel and culture. This entails a discussion of how the theological concept of inculturation considers cultural porosity and diversity as elements of spiritual formation. Scholars can come to a better appreciation of the analytical utility of inculturation by pursuing the disciplinary convergence between theology and anthropology. One way in which this can be done is for anthropologists to facilitate a shift in their empirical practices such that clerics are ‘re-classified’ as knowledge collaborators in the enterprise of ethnographic investigation. As the anthropologist Joel Robbins suggests, this is an epistemological approach that ‘renders religious practitioners as being as fully intellectually involved with the world as are those of us who study them’.<sup>3</sup> In response to the call made to develop what anthropologists such as Philip Fountain have described as a ‘postsecular anthropology’, I submit that a productive anthro-theology does not only involve anthropologists expanding their conceptual range to include theological concepts, but also making adjustments to the way we think about the empirical subject positions of clerics and theologians.<sup>4</sup> It is in this way that we may come to think more substantively about how epistemological and ontological systems of value are ordered and reordered in the context of on-the-ground experiences in the field.

### Discourses of Clerical Proscriptions

The anthropologist Nicholas Barker has observed that there have been numerous references to Passion rituals in the Philippine popular media from as early 1950s, coinciding with a ‘nonparticipatory revival’ of the rituals from around that time.<sup>5</sup> Even from a cursory survey of newspaper editorials and articles,

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3 Joel Robbins, ‘Afterword: Let’s Keep It Awkward: Anthropology, Theology, and Otherness’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 24:3 (2013), 329–37.

4 Philip Fountain, ‘Toward a Post-Secular Anthropology’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 24:3 (2013), 310–28.

5 Barker, ‘The Revival of Ritual’, 11.

one is likely to encounter a priest or cleric declaring publicly that Passion rituals are practices that they 'discourage', 'frown upon', or 'disapprove of'. Even from the highest levels of church hierarchy, Passion ritual practitioners are commonly depicted as overly consumed with various degrees of misdirected emotions and sentiments, which lead them towards 'impure' modes of piety. This is a position that is conveyed by a cardinal in the Archdiocese of Manila, who in 2009 said about devotees to the Black Nazarene in Manila who are known to be so vehement in their desire to celebrate their Patron's feast that they had incited a commotion in the Church premises:

Actually, these are the fanatics. That's exactly the devotion we want to purify. Sometimes, the strong emotion of people takes over reason. The emotions take over the holiness of the Church, the emotions take over the devotion. The emotions, the fanaticism, they should not be there and that is exactly what we are trying to tell the people. We still have a long way to go.<sup>6</sup>

By the way the cardinal describes it, a fanatic is someone who is filled with an obsessive interest in a specific religious interpretation or cause, which is then manifested in the single-minded pursuit of its corresponding ends. The religious fanatic is not driven by a scripturalism which leads to an idiosyncratic interpretation of doctrine but rather is consumed by gut-feelings, emotions, sentimentality, and intuitive sensation. The cardinal's statement, and many others like it, posits 'emotions' as a corollary of 'holiness' in describing a piety that has a corrosive effect that tarnishes 'proper' devotion. In this regard, clerics have 'a long way to go' in addressing these issues because their voices of reason are drowned out by the very fanaticism that they seek to 'purify'. Yet rather than condemn the 'fanatics' as beyond salvation, critical statements such as these serve to emphasize the continuing mandate of the church and its leaders in guiding ritual practitioners on how to reorient their practice in the right direction. This reorientation begins with an elaboration on why these rituals are problematic from the point of view of religious orthodoxy in the Philippines.

The problematic nature of Passion rituals stem from the way they are thought to undermine some of the most fundamental beliefs and practices of Roman

6 Evelyn Macarain, 'Nazarene March: 227 Hurt', *The Philippine Star*, 10 January 2009, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/430180/nazarene-march-227-hurt> [accessed 07 March 2017]; cited from S. Anril Tiatco, 'Libad Nang Apung Iru and Pamamaku King Krus: Performances of Ambivalence in Kapampangan Cultural Spectacles', *TDR: The Drama Review* 54:2 (2010), 91–102.

Catholicism. The most commonly cited aspect is that Passion rituals adversely affect the frequency of participating in the sacraments. A 2006 article in the *Manila Bulletin* quotes a high-ranking Monsignor from Manila who, speaking on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), went as far as to question the veracity of the faith of Passion ritual practitioners, declaring that flagellants and those who nail themselves onto crosses '... are not Catholics[because] they are not church-goers.'<sup>7</sup> In a 2013 address to the church-run Radio Veritas, a Cebu archbishop who was then the President of the CBCP responded in a similar fashion by stating that instead of corporeal rituals that involve pain infliction, true Catholics should 'emphasize more the spirit of prayer... Beginning Holy Thursday with the washing of the feet and the Visita Iglesia, these are two wonderful ways of celebrating Holy Week.'<sup>8</sup> A few of the clerics I spoke with identified this sacramental dereliction as a problem of sacerdotalism. While self-flagellants may engage more corporeally and viscerally with Christ's passion, the absence of the consecrating power of the priest renders their physical engagement with the divine impotent and, in the end, illegitimate.

Another very prominent theme that characterizes the problematic nature of Passion rituals concerns the fundamental misunderstanding and underappreciation of Christ's message of salvation, particularly when it comes to the Paschal Mystery. An article by one of the Philippines's most renowned journalists, Letty Magsanoc, expresses a prevalent public discourse that laments at the soteriological redundancy of ritual nailing:

It is as though Christ stayed nailed on the cross and was never heard from again. Christ on the cross is a synthesis of man's suffering. For indeed man's way is the way of the cross. In all other days of our lives, you and I don't want for crosses to bear. Of that, we have plenty. So who needs to look for crosses?<sup>9</sup>

Such statements effectively demarcate the boundary between proper, reasonable, and logical Catholicism and the extreme, fanatic, and 'delirious' rendition manifested in Passion rituals.

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7 Leslie Ann Aquino, 'Cardinal Rosales Leads Chrism Mass at Cathedral Today', *Manila Bulletin*, 13 April 2006, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-144421569.html> [accessed 07 March 2017].

8 P.C. Tubeza, 'No Crucifixions Please—Prelate', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 27 March 2013, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/380591/no-crucifixions-please-prelate> [accessed 07 March 2017].

9 Letty J. Magsanoc, 'Lent's Delirium', *Bulletin Today*, 08 April 1977.

In another sense, the problematic nature of Passion rituals relates to what is perceived to be an underestimation of the importance of Easter Sunday in favour of the 'drama' of suffering. This is a sentiment that has been echoed by no less than the Philippines's National Artist for literature, Nick Joachin, who observed in 1987 that '...it's clear that the Filipino feels more drawn to Christ the Suffering Victim than to Christ the Risen Victor'.<sup>10</sup> This notion has held throughout the decades since. We find it again, for example, in a 1991 article entitled 'Easter? What Easter?' which states: 'Perhaps Filipinos are not interested in the Resurrection because they are hooked on tragedy, addicted to defeat. They practice the cult of the martyr, which as [Filipino patriot Jose Rizal] said, had made his countrymen think that the greatest virtue is to suffer and endure'.<sup>11</sup>

These two forms of 'misunderstanding' the nature of Roman Catholic belief effectively depict the practitioners of Passion rituals as driven by a misdirected, redundant, and overtly sensual and emotional (rather than logical and rational) attachment to suffering. This depiction has been the central theme that characterizes public discourse towards Passion rituals as they have been promulgated in mainstream media publications. While they paint a pejorative portrait of ritual agency in Pampanga, what it also amounts to is a reductive caricature of the Philippine church's official prohibitions against the practice, suggesting that the institution of the religious hierarchy is monolithic and inflexible.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in spite of very definitive official proscriptions against Passion rituals, many priests and clerics 'on the ground' do express a sense of sympathy and even admiration for those who conduct them. There have been several instances in which these more positive sentiments are manifested in clerical actions, which provide at least tacit encouragement for the continuance of the

10 Nick Joachin, 'The Native Good Friday: Why It Outranks Easter', *Manila Times*, 17 April 1987.

11 Aurora Cruz, 'Easter? What Easter?' *Malaya Newspaper*, 31 March 1991.

12 These depictions are evocative of broader debates in the anthropology of Christianity, which discusses the problems that arise from the interiorization of certain (Protestant) beliefs, systems of value, and 'semiotic ideologies' (discussed in the works of Talal Asad and Webb Keane respectively), as well as of the 'problem of presence' in the attempt to reconcile materiality with spirituality (as described in Matthew Engelke's work). See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); and Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

practice. How can we make sense of the multifaceted nature of these perspectives? It is to the task of conveying the multiplicity of views regarding Passion rituals that we shall now turn.

### Clerical Insiders and the Discourses of Accommodation

In an interview with the National Geographic Channel program aired in 2002, a priest in Pampanga pointed to a religiosity among self-flagellants that is commendable for channelling a 'very deep sense of suffering [that is] an expression of the Filipino's measuring himself, how far he could go'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in a widely read blog called 'The Faith of a Centurion', a Jesuit priest expresses his admiration for the 'laudable and personally humbling' motivation of self-mortifiers: 'Compared to them, I may indeed be a lesser Christian. If I can't do what they do on Good Friday or on any Fridays in the season of Lent, then there is more to it than what I see'.<sup>14</sup>

On a superficial level, it might seem that these clerics are making declarations that run counter to the disavowals promulgated by Philippine church hierarchy in its official publications and in declarations of its spokespersons. A more nuanced consideration, however, would show that these more tolerant and accommodating attitudes manifest the complexity of clerical perspectives on Passion rituals and of the ritual agencies that motivate those who practice them.

My contention in considering these seemingly contrasting perspectives is to echo the call for a mode of inquiry that channels a convergence of the disciplinary and empirical inclinations of theologians and anthropologists. Although there have already been a few works that have advocated this approach, fresh conceptual momentum has recently been generated in productively harnessing the 'awkwardness' that has conventionally existed between the two disciplinary traditions.<sup>15</sup> The motivation for this approach is not simply to facilitate a kind of symmetry between theology and anthropology, wherein both

13 Morris Abraham, 'Taboo, Season 1 Episode 11: Tests of Faith', National Geographic TV, aired 23 December 2002.

14 Fr Jboy Gonzalez SJ, 'The Flagellants and Kristos of Lent: Simple Folks Keep the Faith', *Faith of a Centurion: Homilies for Believers Willing to Take Risks*, 01 April 2010, <http://faithofacenturion.blogspot.com/2010/04/flagellants-kristos-of-lent-simple.html> [accessed 06 November 2012].

15 Joel Robbins, 'Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?' *Anthropological Quarterly* 79:2 (2006), 285–94.

are brought together under a common analytical rubric. Fountain and Lau argue persuasively for an ‘anthropological theology’ which calls for *both* argument and rapprochement inherent in each of the disciplines taking each other seriously.<sup>16</sup> Robbins, meanwhile, advocates for an ontological-analytical move to hold two contradictory impulses in suspension (that is, ‘keeping it awkward’) rather than trying to encompass them within a single rational framework.<sup>17</sup> There is a lot of merit to these approaches, primarily because they are conceived in the spirit of open dialogue and mutual disciplinary intersubjectivity. What I examine here is the practical ramifications of that spirit. As it pertains to Passion rituals, I advocate a way of expanding our empirical repertoire through a shift in the way we categorize our research interlocutors, particularly clerics, as potential sources of anthropological insight. This shift, in turn, conditions a new way of listening, which enables us to expand the range of concepts from which we can draw for anthropological insight.

An ethnographic vignette from my own fieldwork among Passion ritual practitioners in Pampanga might enable us to trace this expanded epistemological and conceptual range. For the past few years, I have been invited to participate in one of Pampanga’s Passion plays as an ‘embedded’ observer.<sup>18</sup> This meant that I would be able to be on stage with the cast during the play, for which I was required to wear a simple white tunic that would enable me to ‘blend in’ among the performers. On more than one occasion, as I interacted with members of the cast and audience, I soon discovered that many assumed that I was a priest who was attending the rituals. This realization was slightly disconcerting at first. Given the heavy emphasis on the church’s denouncement of the rituals in the popular media, I thought that ritual practitioners would respond to clerics with trepidation or even a sense of resentment. I was surprised to find, however, that relatives and friends of the cast would take my hand and press it upon their foreheads in the gesture of *pagmamamo*, a traditional sign of respect shown to elders or to revered members of the community. Contrary to my intuitive assumptions, my presence in the play did not cause any hesitation on the part of passing self-flagellants, who would acknowledge me and

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16 Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau, ‘Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24:3 (2013), 227–34.

17 Robbins, ‘Anthropology and Theology’, 285.

18 For a discussion of the anthropological implications of this ‘embedded’ act of observation, see Julius Bautista and Peter J. Bräunlein, ‘Ethnography as an Act of Witnessing: Doing Fieldwork on Passion Rituals in the Philippines’, *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62:3 (2014), 501–28.

simply continue with the ritual practices that are vehemently denounced by the institution I was thought to represent.

The media reports of Passion rituals would depict clerics as stringent and uncompromising ‘enforcers’ of church doctrine. In reality, however, many priests on the ground in Pampanga personify the experience I share above, as ‘clerical insiders’ who have directly engaged with Passion ritual practitioners, even allowing the latter to use church premises, and at times blessing the whips and crosses used for the rituals. Being mistaken for a priest enabled me to inhabit, albeit momentarily, a gap between prescribed doctrine and lived ritual agency. It was within that gap that I was able to observe first-hand the fluidity between the clerical insistence on sacramental compliance and the tacit accommodation of extralitururgical ways of relating to God.

From the perspective of empirical practice, my fieldwork experience encouraged a kind of shift in the way I, as an anthropologist, related to clerical insiders. Instead of categorizing them as representatives or spokespersons for the religious institution, it has been more productive to engage them as conceptual consultants in the production of anthropological knowledge. The collaborative potential of clerical insider subjectivity was demonstrated to me by one of the most prominent bishops in Angeles City, who is widely recognized as someone who openly interacts with flagellants and cross-bearers. Although the bishop is well aware that the church denounces such practices as doctrinally misguided and soteriologically redundant, he described his evangelical mandate as one conditioned by a sociological and/or anthropological imagination. To him, Passion rituals can and should be understood by contextualizing them according to the cultural and socio-political realities of tradition and custom in Pampanga. In this sense, ‘culture’ was the locus of engaging with those encountered in the ritual sphere. Interacting and conversing with the bishop, I became increasingly aware of the analytical benefits of acknowledging the commensurability between how clerics and anthropologists—both, after all, concerned with the dynamics culture and religion—engage with religious agents.

Aside from the practical implications of this empirical shift, interaction with clerical insiders enabled me to expand the conceptual wellsprings from which anthropological insight could be drawn. In more specific terms, the bishop conceived of his engaged subjectivity as premised upon the theological notion of inculturation, which encouraged a heightened sensitivity to the distinctive features of Kapampangan culture. Inculturation, he told me, was not just a church policy but was in itself a particular kind of subject position, a mode of ‘being in the world’, that enabled a more nuanced and profound engagement with the otherness in its midst. Inspired, therefore, by the convergence

between the bishop's perspective and the call made by Joel Robbins for anthropologists to 'find otherness in theology', it is pertinent to focus attention on the analytical richness of inculturation.<sup>19</sup>

### Passion and Inculturation

Inculturation is a theological concept used to describe the process of fostering mutual interaction between Gospel and the culture of the subjects of evangelizing work. There has been a host of multidisciplinary scholarly work explicating, interpreting, and expanding upon this topic.<sup>20</sup> Most argue that, at its core, inculturation is a recognition that culture—a term that encompasses the shared ideas, customs, and social conventions of a group of people—is a locus of Revelation. As it is described in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), 'Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium, but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating the Gospel through the cultural resources of a people'.<sup>21</sup>

As it pertains to Passion rituals, what is significant is that inculturation as a theological approach manifests the conceptual elasticity that can encompass both clerical attitudes of denouncement and accommodation of Passion rituals. On the one hand, views that strongly discourage or disavow the practice of these rituals can be seen as a deployment of the reorientative mandate of inculturation. For while inculturation calls for the Gospel to be adapted to culture, the latter is simultaneously seen as a target to be evaluated, realigned, and changed. Fabella observes that while inculturation identifies culture as the means by which the Good News is made meaningful, '[culture] must allow itself to be critiqued, purified and transformed by the Gospel'.<sup>22</sup> Denouncements of the 'fanaticism' or 'illicitness' of Passion rituals channel the critical attentiveness and discernment implied in inculturation towards the view that

19 Robbins, 'Afterword: Let's Keep It Awkward...', 333.

20 See, for example, Dennis M. Doyle, 'The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism: A Theological Consideration', *U.S. Catholic Historian* 30:1 (2012), 1–13; Virginia Fabella, 'Inculturating the Gospel: The Philippine Experience', *The Way* 39:2 (1999), 118–28; and Patricia Panganiban, 'Inculturation and the Second Vatican Council', *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 18:1 (2004), 59–93.

21 FABC Paper No. 60(1) as cited in Fabella, 'Inculturating', 118.

22 Fabella, 'Inculturating', 126.

it 'entails the transformation of the authentic values of these cultures by their integration into Christianity...' <sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the more tolerant and accommodating attitudes and actions towards Passion rituals also find resonance within the conceptual framework of inculturation. As the bishop from Angeles suggested, a positive engagement with the rituals is based on a heightened sensitivity to local customs and traditions, which in turn is premised upon the acknowledgement of a more modernist concept of culture promulgated in the Second Vatican Council, and more locally, in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991. In an 'incultured' approach, cultural traditions are not so much an inheritance of practices and beliefs preserved in their authentic state, but rather a historically contingent process of adaptation to external influence (whether imposed or otherwise). Moreover, inculturation manifests in the primacy of culture as a repository of *values* which are, as stated in the CBCP's pastoral exhortation on Philippine culture, '...at the deepest level of culture—they are its heart and core. They are, for all intents and purposes, what give people their identity as a people, a distinct human society'. In this respect, clerical insiders are pursuing their pastoral and evangelical responsibilities as analysts of cultural life, highlighting the bishop's suggestion that inculturation is a practical mode of positive engagement and not just a policy to be regulated and enforced.

### Conclusion

The tone and content of prevalent media depictions of Passion rituals reinforce the tendency to reduce the institutional church's attitudes and response to a caricature of its official proclamations. From an exclusively discursive perspective, one gets the impression that Roman Catholic clerics in the Philippines are strict and uncompromising in enforcing the doctrinal prohibition against rituals of self-mortification. While it is indeed important to inquire into the church's official position regarding Passion rituals, as we have done in the first part of this essay, it is also important to consider how attitudes of tolerance and flexibility infuse the actual, 'on-the-ground' deployment of evangelical responsibilities. It is in the spirit of accounting for the diversity and complexity of clerical and public discourse regarding Passion rituals that the central problematic of this paper is framed. From an anthropological perspective, it has been the concern of this essay to address what appears to be opposing views

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23 Flannery Austin, *Vatican II: Ad Gentes Divinitus* (Harrison: Daughters of Saint Paul, 1984) p.813.

on being critical or being accommodating of ritual agencies that fall outside the scope of doctrinal or sacramental adherence.

In confronting this issue, I have drawn productive insight from a fieldwork experience of misrecognition which, somewhat unexpectedly, enabled me negotiate the ‘thickness’ of the complex ethnographic landscape of Philippine Passion rituals. I have argued that a consideration of the conceptual elasticity of inculturation is a way of being more attuned to how the seeming contradiction in perspectives on the rituals can be accounted for on a theological level. Going beyond that, I have advocated an approach that argues against reducing inculturation to theology. In the latter part of the essay, I discussed inculturation as a kind of ethnographic praxis for ‘clerical insiders’ with whom anthropologists can most productively converse, even while the former attend to their evangelical and pastoral responsibilities. The call to ‘re-classify’ clerics as analytical cohorts may initially seem counterintuitive to anthropologists, whose disciplinary inheritance in an enlightened ‘science of man’ has entrenched an aversion to being too involved—to ‘go native’—in religious domains. Yet perhaps the more recent challenge of ‘taking religion seriously’ should not be too awkward for anthropologists upon the realization that there already is a great deal of commensurability between ethnographic practice and the way some clerics have taken an incultured approach, one that confronts the dynamics of religious agency in a way that ‘takes culture seriously’.

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