‘Figuring’ Catholicism: The Santo Niño and Religious Discourse in Cebu

Julius J. Bautista

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University

December 2003
The Syncretic Santo: Folk Catholicism and Religious Discourse in Cebu

In July, 2002 the Catholic Archdiocese of Cebu released an edict that was reported to have “shaken the very foundations of Cebuano belief” (Vanzi 2002). Thirty-seven years after the Vatican had officially anointed the Santo Niño as the Patron Saint of Cebu, it was announced that the figure would be replaced in this designation by the localized image of the Virgin Mary, the Lady of Guadalupe. This was a proclamation that was made upon logical as much as theological premises. Since the Santo Niño is a figure of Jesus Christ himself, it cannot be conceived of as a distinct entity from God the Son. As such, the notion of ‘intercession’ on which the status of patron sainthood is premised was deemed technically inappropriate since, as the Archdiocese reasoned, the Santo Niño could not possibly be an intercessor onto itself.

By no means was this announcement reflective of a decline in the intensity of religious devotion to the figure. Immediately after the announcement, local talkback

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1 In 1965, the fourth centenary of Christianization of the Philippines, Papal Legate Ildebrando Cardinal Antoniutti of the Vatican designated the Santo Niño as the patron saint of Cebu and the Philippines (Cf. Villanueva 1965). A patron saint is understood as an individual who, in their service to God through charitable works, has led a life of inspiring virtue. They are people to whom miraculous deeds have been attributed (such as healing the sick or effecting natural phenomena). A patron saint offers his merits and prayers for wayfarers, becoming their advocate and protector; that is to say, he “intercedes” for them to God the Father. Those on earth, for their part, respond the saint’s intercession not only by expressions of gratitude and acknowledgement of his supernatural divinity, but also by the invocation of his assistance in their own lives.
radio stations became inundated with calls, mostly expressing shock and outrage over what they saw as an effective ‘demotion’ of the revered icon. Random interviews conducted by the local media revealed a great deal of indignation over an act that was made with little, if any, public consultation. In spite of this, the edict was met with cautious agreement from City officials and members of the middle class, who came to applaud the logical cogency of the Archdiocese’s proclamation. Editorials in the major local news dailies were largely sympathetic to the Archdiocese’s move, and had described the Lady of Guadalupe as a good ‘substitute’ for the Santo Niño. Such sentiments were, however, tempered with an urgent call for qualification, as many commentators highlighted a need to explain the edict to the common tawo (read: the ‘folk’) before it could receive widespread support. As such, the matter of revoking the Santo Niño’s patron sainthood soon became one of ‘educating the masses’ rather than eliciting their consensus. For the revocation was a forgone conclusion made on the latter’s behalf, and it was incumbent upon the Archdiocese to assure those dissatisfied that the edict was justified at this point in time.

The Archdiocese itself had anticipated that this announcement would be confusing to the majority of Santo Niño devotees [“nakahatag kini og kalibog sa mga tawo”] (Archdiocese Pastoral Letter, October 2003). Indeed, the Philippine Catholic Church has always positioned itself as adept at dealing with such moments of perplexity, particularly among the most devout members of the faithful. Mercado (1982), for example, narrates how “ignorance distorts the image of Christ...” through his experience with a woman devotee of the Santo Niño:
[She] claims that had Christ believed in the Santo Niño, he would not have suffered and died on the cross. Obviously the woman believed that the Santo Niño is different from Christ! The same ignorance can also explain why some farmers have more devotion to San Isidro Labrador than to Christ himself. If they pray to Christ, they pray to him on Sunday. The devotees confidently think that their patron saint will take care of everything from God... (1982, 56)

Indeed, the process by which ‘revocation of title’ becomes construed as ‘demotion’ can only be facilitated upon the “ignorant” act of literally and semantically differentiating between Jesus Christ and His childlike incarnation. For this devotee, the logical ‘fine-print’ of patron sainthood is seemingly lost in her obtuse understanding of the doctrine. Mercado’s depiction may well be a profile – stereotypical, to be sure -- of the very ‘ordinary Cebuano’ that the Archdiocese has been called upon to “educate”.

As such, the 2002 edict was immediately accompanied by a directive for parish priests to reiterate that praying to the Santo Niño was a direct way of communicating with God, and not an intermediary transaction. Cebuanos were given reassurances that while the figure’s patron sainthood would definitely be revoked, festivities during the Santo Niño’s feast day, the Simulog, would still be celebrated in the same manner in which it had been previously. To this end, the faithful were to be encouraged to revere the Santo Niño as fervently as before, particularly those in the outlying areas and in the barrios. For it is among the “simple and poor” constituents of the Church that the devotion to the Santo Niño was most passionately expressed. It is among them, so the Church believes, that resides a devotion to the icons of the Catholic faith that often lie outside the logical and theological prescriptions of the scripture. Theirs is a devotion that is expressed in sincere, if raw, emotions of ardor often lacking among many other members of an increasingly materialistic elite. The responsibility of the clergy is to
channel that raw passion towards a more acute appreciation of the logic and significance
of the doctrine, particularly where this latest announcement is concerned. With this in
mind, priests were directed to encourage moments of careful reflection on the sagacity of
the edict. “Pasabton lang gyud ang mga tawo” [“It’s merely a matter of making the
people understand”], reassured the prior of the Augustinian Community of the Basilica
del Santo Niño, Father Ambrocio Galdinez. For indeed, with enough perseverance in
this regard, “…eventually, they will understand” (Cf. Ramos 2002).

A Syncretic Religiosity

How does one conceptualise the gap between the common tawo’s intense
devotion to Christian symbols (manifested in this instance by the popular reaction to the
‘demotion’ of the Santo Niño), and their supposed failure to fully appreciate the depth of
meaning of Christian doctrines? To what can be attributed the fact that the Santo Niño
can be both an ‘official’ figure of established Catholicism and a “people’s figure” capable
of expressing popular sentiments, which at times proves to be at odds with Church and
State institutions? This chapter is about the answer that many Cebuanos have given me
in response -- that a Filipino brand of Catholicism (of which the Santo Niño is a potent
symbol) is one that transcends the barriers between official doctrine and popular, if at
times idiosyncratic, interpretations. This negotiation has often been seen by scholars
(whose works will be examined here) as the basis by which Filipino Catholicism is a
‘syncretic’ religion. In this sense, the Santo Niño figure itself is both the means and the
symbol of a compromise between the orthodoxy of the scripture and the orthopraxy of the
faithful – discursive categories which, as shall be discussed, are often the site of contradiction and active negotiation.

We have seen in the previous chapters how the Santo Niño is depicted in historical sources as being the symbol that blurred the distinction between the Christian God and indigenous religious systems in Cebu. Both on the level of practice and of belief, native Filipinos and Spanish colonialists ‘figured’ through the Santo Niño a common element on which the respective interpretations of the colonial encounter were framed. It had resulted in the convergence of disparate religious and cosmological elements into one symbol. In one sense, therefore, the syncretism of Filipino Catholicism is manifested in the mutually convenient interpretations of the Santo Niño icon. Within the broader aims of this thesis, the pertinent issue is the extent to which the Santo Niño embodies a kind of power of conciliation between those who worship God based on the liturgical dictates of the scripture, and those who are thought do so on pure sentiment and infatuation. An examination of the ‘figuring’ of the Santo Niño devotion entails a discussion of the ‘syncretism’ of Filipino Catholicism for in many ways, is within this dynamic that the Santo Niño is conceived and venerated by a large number of people.

Syncretism as a concept is one with a particular history of debate and scholarship. Defined as the fusion of two discrete religious systems, it has been applied to many contexts from Africa to the Pacific, such that it may well be argued that every religion is syncretistic inasmuch as they draw upon heterogeneous elements. To this extent, it becomes almost impossible for scholars or theologians to draw discrete boundaries between systems of belief. As the various contributors to Steward and Shaw’s
Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism... (1994) point out, for example, merely stating that a ritual or tradition is ‘syncretic’ has very limited heuristic or intellectual benefit since all religions have composite origins and are continually undergoing processes of synthesis, erasure and reconstitution. One could therefore argue, as many in the field of religious studies have, that syncretism is a useless or redundant concept in analyzing various religious icons.

This chapter seeks not to argue against this proposition. The aim here is to show that syncretism remains a very interesting and relevant concept when seen as part of an active process of religious discourse in Cebu. Rather than treating syncretism as a mere descriptive category – an ‘ism’ – the focus here is upon processes of religious synthesis which actively condition how events such as the revocation of the Santo Niño’s patron sainthood is experienced by Cebuanos as ‘religious’ (read: morally legitimate). What are the processes by which the ‘unique blend’ of Filipino Catholicism influence notions such as “holy” and “illicit”, or “sacred” and “profane”? What are the relations of power and authority that dictate the acceptance and popularity of Church edicts, particularly about religious icons like the Santo Niño?

In the first section will be discussed which aspects of Filipino Catholicism are described as syncretistic by scholars, theologians and people themselves. This is to suggest that describing Catholicism in Cebu as syncretistic refers to a politics of ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1977) in which dichotomies of rurality/urbanity or provincialism/cosmopolitanism are discernable themes. A discussion of “promdi” Catholicism is here used as a heuristic concept in the popular conceptualisation of the ‘folk’ as a category of credulity, yet also of ‘devoutness’ and ‘passion’. Syncretism in

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this sense becomes not only a description of the intercession of two religious systems, but distinguishes between the liturgical naïveté of the ‘folk’ and the enlightened modernity of other members of the Catholic faith.

The second section explores two specific discourses upon which ‘syncretism’ is framed. It will examine the various expressed opinions on the subject of the synthesis between animism and Roman Catholicism in scholarship, media reports and theological debates over the last half-century. The subject here is the capacity of the Catholic Church as an institution to authorize some religious practices as ‘truthful’ and others as ‘false’. But this capacity is a double movement of sorts, tempered as it is by the acts of ‘tolerating’ and ‘accommodating’ extra-doctrinal religious practices among its flock. In so doing, it becomes possible to examine the historical and discursive dynamics upon which the Archdiocese of Cebu exerts a discursive and semantic jurisdiction over religious experience in Cebu. The edicts and proclamations that concern even Cebu’s most dominant and revered icon is but one way in which this jurisdiction is enacted.
Syncretism as Synthesis

"SYNCRETISM" IS MOST COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD as the synthesis of two religious systems in their active engagement with one another over time. What results is a combination, reconciliation, or coalescence of varying, often mutually opposed beliefs, principles, or practices into a new conglomerate whole. To inquire into a syncretic religious system is to ask about the extent to which parts of that system had been 'borrowed' from another and if so, how these borrowings should be interpreted within the broader context of its devotees' lives. In the context of the lowland Christian Philippines, the syncretism of Filipino Catholicism is an identification of which of its elements (either material or doctrinal) correspond to local cosmological belief -- anitismo -- and which to Christianity as a legacy of over three-hundred years of Spanish colonialism.²

An examination of syncretism, however, must go beyond this act of identification. As will be demonstrated in the following section, the perception of syncretism as a characteristic of Filipino Catholicism is not merely a straightforward process of discovering religious origins, but is itself a discourse conditioned by specific relations of class, ethnicity and provinciality. As such, descriptions of a syncretic Filipino Catholicism manifest dichotomies — sometimes implicitly, other times less so — of rural

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² Hislop uses the term "anitismo" to describe pre-Hispanic belief in the active co-option of spirits and souls by humans. This description is derived from "anito", which in the Philippines generally loosely describes spirits of indigenous belief. Kern notes that anito is of Malayan derivation of "andito", meaning beings that are "those there, far away". "Anitismo" is a concept discussed further in the fifth chapter of this thesis. See Kern (1956, 7)
versus urban, modern versus rustic, ignorant versus enlightened, sacred versus profane. It is necessary to be attentive to the semantic slippage between a concept of “Filipino Catholicism” and “Folk Catholicism” where ‘folk’ is category applied to the provincial, the rustic or the otherwise spiritually naïve. In specifying the ‘folk’ as the foremost practitioners of a syncretic mode of worship, syncretism hints at a discourse of ignorance, contamination and salvation (or as the Santo Niño edict is concerned, ‘education’) that renders the task at hand beyond one of description or identification alone.

Filipino religion is often characterized in scholarly works as a unique blend of anitismo and Roman Catholicism. Gonzalez (1981) describes it as “a mixture of both [the Filipino’s] traditional values… and his Christian heritage, now more than four hundred years contextualised, diffused and adapted to the local society” (p. 12-13). Some contemporary Filipino anthropologists have taken up the suggestion that although spirits were replaced by Saints, and indigenous prayers with Christian ones, certain underlying concepts remained intact such that “imperatives of local beliefs and practices still provide the people with proper ritual contexture of economic propositions in seeking the goodwill and assistance of the supernatural” (Jocano 1981, 23).

Yet though this may be the case, a syncretic ‘balance’ of Filipino Catholicism is by no means an equal one. On the level of public proclamations and Church edicts, Roman Catholicism in its pure, unadulterated form is still conceived of as the ideal to which all Catholics must aspire. If Filipino Catholicism is to be described as syncretic, it is ostensibly only so in unofficial, if not clandestine ways. Nonetheless, the syncretism of Filipino religiosity is manifested within the mechanism of the Church itself, particularly in Holy Mass where, as Mercado (1982) observes, “animistic practices of
offering sacrifices (such as food offering) to the spirits of ancestors and other anitos (spirits) take in a new form in using Requiem Mass” (p. 7). While patterns of anitismo are observable even in the context of formal Christian worship, they remain peripheral to those rites deemed more appropriate and legitimate.

The devotion to the Santo Niño, as has been described in the previous chapter, is an example of how Filipino Catholicism manifests a syncretic mode of worship existing ‘outside’ the official and physical barriers of the Church. The tinderas who perform in petition of the Santo Niño de Cebu consider their dancing as continuing a tradition of devotion that had been practiced since before the arrival of the Spanish. The value of the dance itself is premised upon an authenticity that is both local and ancient. It is precisely for this reason that Sinulog dancing maintains its currency among many Catholic Cebuanos who consider it a legitimate form of Roman Catholic worship. Indeed, the Filipino Catholic, argues Jocano (1981), has little qualms about practicing a form of worship interspersed with anitismo elements. Yet this is so not because they have resolved any contradictions inherent in these systems of belief, but rather because of a tacit acceptance of the faith, even if its message is not fully understood:

When a Catholic in the barrio is asked what religion he is, he replies that he is a Roman Catholic. What he means by this is that he was born in a Roman Catholic home and has a Christian name... Whether he understands the institutional and normative organization of the church is another issue. But this is not important as far as he is concerned (1981, 20).

Far from a state of identity crisis, or a lack of devoutness to the principles of the orthodoxy, a syncretic Filipino Catholicism arises from a failure to comprehend the full meaning of scripture and rites of worship. Yet as far as the Filipino is a “creative
innovator” who “selects, modifies, and elaborates those elements he draws from the Catholic Church”, he sees no contradiction in maintaining some form of anitismo in Christian worship particularly in those areas closely associated with one’s livelihood. MacAndrew (2001) draws the example of a farmer who engages in rice harvesting practices while praying the Lord’s Prayer, imbuing the crop with spiritual power in order to ensure a successful harvest. (MacAndrew 2001, ix; see also Jocano 1981, 22) In this context, the continued propitiation of Christian figures in the manner of anitismo spirits are set against the consequences of material loss from those forces beyond mortal control. In either case, the suggestion is that Filipinos do not see syncretic religiosity as as problematic particularly in situations where there is immediate material benefit.

A further example of this is the continued popularity of espiritistas (faith-healers) and albularios (shamans, healers) in Cebu and elsewhere in the country. Thought of as the last practitioners of anitismo-based healing rites, these healers generally remain perceived as belonging ‘outside’ the official modes of worship as well as of scientific and medical orthodoxy. Yet like many Filipino Catholics, espiritistas and albularios have ‘assimilated’ Christian elements into the practice of their craft. In this sense, they maintain some relevance as alternatives for modern medical practices which, as Velez (1977) notes, can be utilized without undermining the Christianity of the patient:

…it is possible to see that one’s religion my not be affected at all… The sick people who attended the sessions come with the belief that the healers can do something for them. Some of them do not fully understand many of the alleged spirit-communications… What they want is their health… For fairness’ sake, it must therefore be said that on the part of those who come for treatment, especially for those who come as a last recourse, it is not really a case of being too naïve or gullible. Rather, it is a case of survival to use the strongest word (1977, 49).
Moments of death and the spectre of loss typically reveal the negotiation between anitismo and Christian devotion, as the above observation suggests. In this sense, the continued patronage of faith healers is premised upon a conviction that the presence of anitismo is not an anathema to one being a good Catholic. Short of equating spirit-communication with official modes of prayer and worship, faith healing is depicted here as a beneficial appendage that enhances one’s chances of attaining grace from powers beyond one’s immediate comprehension or perception.

Most Filipinos agree on the infrequency with which anitismo and official modes of Catholicism come into open conflict. Go (1979), for example, points out that “Rarely do Catholic Filipino priests point out or directly oppose the contradictions existing in the religious practices of their practitioners” (p. 188). Even some members of the clergy testify to having personal experiences with anitismo spirits without calling into question its veracity or explaining it in terms of Catholic scripture. Bulatao (1965), as well, has published his account of having witnessed supernatural spirits and poltergeists in Quezon City of all places. In this account, Bulatao narrates a local house ‘haunting’ in which the supernatural and ‘occult’ are not dismissed as fanciful and imagined but a reality of which the Catholic Church must take heed.  

The ‘naturalness’ in which anitismo and Roman Catholicism coexists has for some time been a topic of scholarly interest, resulting in many works that analyse the nature and extent of the ‘syncretic mix’. Henry (1984) sees Roman Catholicism and animism as coexisting because they fulfill certain discrete functions: Roman Catholicism is the “religion of ultimate concerns while anitismo, that of everyday concerns” (1984, 17). For Henry, the syncretism of Filipino Catholicism is merely a

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3 The full account of Bulatao’s narrative is reproduced as an appendix to this study.

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function of “specialization” whereby Filipinos are able to oscillate between anitismo and Catholicism without a feeling of conflict or guilt:

Filipino church members (both Catholic and Protestant) see no real conflict in going to their in-church practitioners for ultimate concerns and to their out-of-church practitioners for everyday concerns. The issue is simply one of specialization. If the problem is sin, then it is necessary to go to an in-church practitioner (priest or pastor) who specializes in ultimate concerns. But if the problem is perceived to be daot (a curse), then it is necessary to go to an out-of-church practitioner who specializes in this worldly spirit world [sic]. In the same way, if the problem is a broken watch, it should be taken to one who specializes in watch repair. There is no perceived conflict because each category is separate and spatialised (1984, 49).

Henry distinguishes between ‘everyday’ concerns and ‘ultimate’ concerns. The latter is associated with what one encounters as part of mundane experience while the later is more a metaphysical concern associated with the divine and ‘otherworldly’. As long as these concerns are kept discreet from each other, there is a suggestion that anitismo and Roman Catholicism are able to fulfill mutually exclusive (or even complementary) functions in the Filipino’s overall spiritual life.

In its capacity to create a mediated space between ‘ultimate’ and ‘everyday’ concerns, the Santo Niño, as we saw in the previous chapter, is widely regarded as that which embodies the syncretism of Filipino Christianity. As a religious figure thought to possess powers of transcendence and healing, those visiting the Santo Niño’s podium use their handkerchiefs to transport and transmit its gahum [power] to their loved ones. The figure serves to frame a conception among its devotees that the combination of anitismo and Catholicism is not a site of conflict or contestation but indeed a signifier of Filipino Catholicism as a syncretic mode of worship. The examples above suggest that Filipino Catholics are generally able to negotiate a syncretic religious practice with relatively little
sense of dilemma or even contemplation, intertwined with the enactment of one’s livelihood and daily activity.

But while this is so, the notion of syncretism becomes a contested issue once it is considered as a theological and scholarly category. It is in the process of seeking to explain syncretism, typically an academic and theological concern, that arises discourses of religious ‘purity’, ‘corruption’ and ‘contamination’ upon which, in turn, syncretism is treated as a “problem” of the religion. It is to these explanations – relevant as they are in locating relations of power that pervade syncretism as a discourse – that this section shall now turn.

“Explaining” Syncretism

Bulatao S.J. (1967), a Jesuit priest, locates the syncretism of Filipino Catholicism in sources that are more internalized in individuals. Instead of seeing syncretism as a legacy of social and historical factors, he uses psychological methods in conceiving of Filipino religiosity as a “Split-Level Christianity”. What for many Filipinos are profound experiences of anitismo or the supernatural are, according to Bulatao’s analysis, spontaneous or self-induced mental conditions totally explicable by science. Filipinos, he says, “have two theological systems, side by side, the Christian and the pagan existing within one man” (p. 2). These thought and behaviour systems however, are construed as inconsistent with each other, thereby depicting Filipino Catholicism a case of religious schizophrenia writ large. Bulatao interpreted Filipino religious behaviour in terms of ‘altered states of consciousness’ which, when projected outward in the form of
superstition and myth, characterise Filipinos as prone to “hallucinations” of spirits and malignant ghosts. In arriving at such states of consciousness, Filipinos are “gifted [but] unfortunately they are not always aware of this power and as a result have created theologies involving spirits, devils, kulam [voodoo], visions, etc., mostly under the guise of some form of religion” (1977, xx).

Yet if a psychological explanation such as Bulatao’s seems somewhat insufficient in describing the whole dynamic of Filipino folk Catholicism, others have been more willing to ascribe to it a sense of cultural determinism. Jocano’s study (1981) disputes the notion of “split level” religious consciousness in attributing syncretism to a form of “cultural cognition” inherent in the experience of growing up in the Philippines. That is, patterns of Filipino folk Catholicism reflect the dictates of Filipino culture which are portrayed as distinct, immutable and more or less predictable. Filipino religiosity is not to be conceived of as a faithful reproduction of missionary-taught doctrine. It is to be understood, rather, through the idiom of Filipino family relations whereupon the Santo Niño is again the most pertinent example:

The Santo Niño is conceived of as child and, therefore, has to be treated a child. Thus, it is threatened with drowning if it does not obey the worshippers demand for rain: it is bathed and dressed properly before it is brought out of the owner’s house to join the religious procession. In other words, here are examples of overt expressions in action pattern of internalized value-notions acquired from the local culture; cases in which Catholic beliefs are evaluated and enacted in terms of local concepts and practices, and not in terms of what are officially Church-sanctioned behaviour (Jocano 1981, 29).

Insofar as the Santo Niño “is conceived of as child and, therefore, has to be treated a child”, devotees to the figure are here depicted as bound by the cognitive dynamics which they are unable transcend. Indeed, the very history of the Santo Niño itself, as we saw in
the first chapter, is often interpreted in terms of inherent family values. Contemporary accounts of the Queen of Cebu's Baptism in 1521 narrate that she was presented with three figures: the Virgin Mary, a crucifix and the Santo Niño. Her choice of the latter is said to establish that the "Filipino love of Children" was the means by which the figure itself gained acceptance among Cebuanos -- that the adoption of a foreign doctrine was made possible, even easy, because it was foregrounded by the pervasiveness of kinship. "Culture" -- internalized as it is through value notions of family -- is understood here as an overwhelming logic that explains why the Santo Niño is interpreted in ways outside the theological prescriptions of the Church. Their 'deviance' from Church-sanctioned behaviour is attributed to forces which are both inherent and immutable, denying devotees a sense of pragmatic agency and, implicitly, absolving them of any 'blame' for their religious recalcitrance.

Yet even those who are intent on recognizing Filipino religious agency have also argued for locating parallels between Filipino religiosity and underlying notions of family and kinship. Mulder (1996), for example, rejects the term "syncretism" to describe Filipino Catholicism because it implies that Southeast Asian thought is "hopelessly heterodox and exemplary of concrete thinking which they are unable to transcend... it smacks of derogation and observers conceit and missionary arrogance" (p. 17). Yet his description of Filipino religious iconography remains focused on those imperatives where "the family its own closed moral universe" (p. 69). The intimacy Filipinos feel with the Holy family (of which the Santo Niño features as a prominent member) is interpreted as an extension of their own views of kinship relationships: "Since they symbolize the positive aspects of these relationships, such an intimacy emphasizes trust, protection,
dependence, and even playfulness in the case of the Santo Niño” (p. 67). Similar to Jocano’s description, there is a sense of ‘naturalness’ and ‘authenticity’ about a Filipino religiosity that is expressed through the idiom of kinship. In arguing that Filipino popular religion “does not appear to transcend the family”, Mulder’s description reproduces the primacy of culture in the analysis of Filipino Catholicism, depicting syncretism as a cognitive dynamic in which religiosity is a coalescence of Filipino ideals of kinship and a belief in the divine.

Whether premised upon a psychological or cultural dynamic, the explanations for syncretism imply some common characteristics that foreground its occurrence. Filipino converts are depicted as a group of people who would naturally regress to their pagan past in the absence of a constant and strong missionary presence. Furthermore, the elements of anitismo that continues to exert its influence on the Filipino Christian is somehow an innate feature of their ontology, resurfacing there and again in forms that correspond to their psychological or cultural makeup. Ostensibly immutable cultural values such as “family relations” and “affection for children” are used as heuristic tools in explaining why Filipino Catholicism has not quite dispelled aspects of their anitismo past. The continued patronage of both anitismo and Roman Catholicism, meanwhile, is attributed to a ‘split-level’ way of thinking and practicing religion, which even its practitioners themselves are not cognizant of. Most of these ‘explanations’, in short, attribute syncretism to causes and motivations that are the product of a deterministic logic – they are outside and beyond the tawo’s agency, or otherwise can be found in factors in which their pragmatic rationality is denied or downplayed.
There will be occasion, particularly in the next chapter, to examine the ways in which Filipinos are active agents in the interpretation and crafting of the meanings associated with symbols such as the Santo Niño. Yet instead of seeking an ‘explanation’ for syncretism, the task at hand is to examine the semantic and discursive circumstances in which syncretism is associated with a devaluation of the agency of its practitioners. The next section will examine the process in which “Filipino Catholicism” becomes conflated with a “folk Catholicism” — something that might seem an innocent slippage, unless one probes the ways in which the “folk” (as opposed to “Filipino”) is construed within categories of rurality, spiritual naïveté and “promdi” provinciality. In interrogating this slippage, it becomes possible to understand that “syncretism” itself is a concept formed and conceived within specific discourses of class, modernity and distinction (Bourdieu 1977).

“Promdi” Catholicism

The term “promdi” in the Philippines today has pejorative implications. An amalgam of two English words, “from” and “the”, the term is understood as a designation of a person who is a rustic and of provincial origins. A promdi is usually an urban-dweller who has come to the city to enhance his fortunes. The place from whence he or she originates is almost always the probinsya (province) where it is assumed that people do not live a sophisticated and modern lifestyle. As such, a promdi lives an existence where they find themselves caught in a range of otherwise ordinary situations that often leave them befuddled and bemused. A promdi in the metropolis typically takes
the persona of maids who are usually “imported” by householders from provinces and outlying regions. Most often the butt of jest and amusement, prevailing conceptions of promdi are of people who are, in their very provinciality, assumed to be socially backward, uneducated and unrefined. “Promdi”, therefore, is necessarily constituted in the context of class and ethnic condescension. As a designation that is characterized precisely by its origins (where it is “from”), it necessarily alludes to the friction inherent in the struggle between rurality and urbanity and, by extension, between credulity and modernity.

“Promdi”, however, denotes not merely a social but a religious naïveté. In the same way as they are deprived of the economic and educational opportunities in the metropolis, a promdi’s religiosity is characterized by the degree to which it has not absorbed or appreciated a sophisticated understanding of Catholic doctrine. For the rural Filipino, observes Jocano, this has resulted in a kind of doctrinal ingenuousness whereupon:

...what little he knows of the teachings of the Catholic Church normally consists of a body of vague, disconnected ideas and pictures, half-remembered memories of grandmother tales, snatches of conversations overhead in the población, few memorized prayers, and gestures observed during the Mass. To him this is what Roman Catholicism is about (1981, 20).

Prayer here is depicted as a matter of rote recitation, and religiosity merely an arbitrary exercise in mimicry. “Roman Catholicism” as a doctrinally-dictated mode of behaviour is something that is both immediate yet elusive, in light of the rural Filipino’s inability to fully comprehend it. In the concept of “promdi religiosity” can be found the link between a person’s material and mental aptitude and the extent of his religious and spiritual
enlightenment. Though the promdi are often devout in their worship, a lack of education, sophistication and modernity results in a retarded form of religiosity. More significantly, it is one that features elements of the ‘superstitious’, ‘sensational’ or fanatic to fill the gaps engendered by an inadequate understanding of Christian doctrine. It is in this sense that the ‘syncretic’ is commonly ascribed to promdi religion, and its practitioners identified as the constituents of a “folk Catholicism”. Elemental to a conception of ‘folk’ Catholicism” — a mode of devotion that though devout, falls short of a true appreciation of scripture and theology -- is the notion that it flourishes in and propagates from the domain of the provincial and the rural in the way Jocano (1981) and Mercado (1982) described.

The association between provinciality and a syncretic religiosity finds expression not merely in the context of class consciousness or religious orthodoxy, but also in scholarly works. Jocano (1981) further argues that Catholicism in the Philippines is best understood when viewed in terms of a dichotomy between its rural and urban orientations. His analysis traces the development of a syncretic Filipino Christianity to a Spanish colonial project where the continued practice of anitismo rites had the function of “cushioning the impact of whatever innovative stress arises from culture contact and religious conversion” (1981, 71). As discussed in chapter two of this thesis, the Spanish policy of reduccion had effected a radical transformation of Cebuano geography, following a re-employment of their moral and physical universe. In Jocano’s study, the poblacion (having as it did the church as its focal point) was a site in which “roman Catholicism was an effective instrument in indoctrination to new religion.” Those who lived outside the poblacion however, “were less informed about the doctrines of the new
religion” such that they were more likely to relapse into magic, superstition and other rites of anitismo. For Jocano (as, indeed for Schumacher, 1984, 1987) the syncretism of Filipino religion is the byproduct of a colonial policy of social organization. In effectively creating the dialectical categories of “cabecera” and “visita” in the Philippine landscape, the Spanish had engendered a religious system split between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ orientations. The latter is perceived to be the site in which “folk Catholicism” resides and originates, resulting in a “barrio [rural town] theology” practiced by people who are often (if not always) misguided about the true meaning of the Christian message.

To be sure, others have argued that a syncretic Catholicism is not merely the product of the dynamics of physical geography. After all, syncretic religiosity resides as much in urban as in rural contexts. In an article entitled Mothers, Maids and the Creatures of the Night: The Persistence of Philippine Folk Religion (1979), Go argues that it is though the intervention of maids in their child-rearing roles that facilitated this cultural cognition responsible for ‘folk Catholicism’. In doing so, she not only reproduces traditional and anachronistic gender divides (she makes no mention of male intervention, if any), but suggests that indigenous beliefs were able to permeate urban-living, sophisticated families through the intervention of promdi in the city. The superstitious beliefs maids pass on to their wards, therefore, is a manifestation of the temporally and spatially distant brought to bear upon the ‘modern’ and ‘cosmopolitan’. In this sense, Go’s analysis has not transcended the implication that anitismo is the domain of the provincial, backward and, inexorably, the “lower class”.

On one level, therefore, the congruence of anitismo and Roman Catholicism in the Philippines is construed as a distinctive feature characteristic of Filipino Christianity.
The scholarly rationalizations for syncretism, however, depict the “creeping in” of aspects of anitismo practice in Christianity as a process inherent in the Filipino’s culture or in his psyche. It is upon the examination of the ‘explanations’ for its occurrence, an endeavour conducted through the discussion of “promdi”, that we begin to appreciate the extent to which “Folk Catholicism” is construed according to dialectic categories of class and geography. In this construction, the “folk” are effectively consigned to the domain of the rustic and backward, and are defined by their inability to transcend the dictates of their innately ‘animist’ mindset. The province is understood as the location of a religious frontier where a proper Christian message has not permeated. The “promdi”, by extension, are identified as the ones who brought the ‘supernatural’ and the ‘sensational’ into the realms of the metropole, thereby contributing to the continued “persistence” of anitismo, in spite of missionary efforts at eradicating it. The complex politics underlying the call for the Archdiocese of Cebu to ‘educate’ the poor about the Santo Niño’s ‘demotion’ is put into a more meaningful context with these issues in mind.

Yet further progress in the understanding of syncretism can be made not by evaluating the extent to which Filipino Catholicism has been “corrupted” by anitismo, but by examining the relations of power that condition syncretism as a discourse. Inasmuch as syncretism is conceptually founded upon dichotomies of urban/rural, conservative/sensational or educated/folk, the following section will locate the issue of syncretism within a logic of ‘persistence’ of anitismo survivals. This is a regime of truth wherein modes of conservatism and Christian piety are depicted as continuously frustrated by the persistence of indigenous belief which tends to “creep in” into otherwise proper Christian rites of worship. But the case is not a simple, clear-cut conflict between

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the Church and the folk practitioners of a syncretic (read: pagan) Catholicism. For equally characteristic of the actions of the Catholic Church in the Philippines is the degree to which syncretism is negotiated through the idioms of ‘tolerance’ and ‘contextualisation’. This is to say that the Church, particularly in the twentieth century, has not always positioned itself in direct opposition to practices inspired by anitismo, but sometimes engage in the promotion or sanctification of such practices. It is in this context of a discourse of ‘tolerance’ that the conditions of possibility for an acceptable, ‘hybrid’ Filipino Catholicism is located and founded.

II

Deviating From the Path: The Discourse of ‘Persistence’

IN CEBU CITY ON APRIL 1936, a group of people congregated at the Mabolo end of Talamban road at dusk on Holy Thursday. They were there to commemorate Christ’s march to his crucifixion by trekking to the mountain at Dita, the site of Kalbaryo (Calvary). It would take them all night to get there, and they would not return until the following morning, Good Friday. Though the pilgrims had prepared provisions for this journey, residents along the road would offer them water and refreshments as the procession passed their houses. When they returned, they would have collected an assortment of twigs or branches from the trees along the way; objects which they would offer at the main altar of the Basilica during Holy Mass on Good Friday. More than a commemoration of Holy week, the Kalbaryo is a metaphorical representation for how
Filipino ‘folk Catholicism’ is manifested in the desire to share in the pain of Christ’s final march to martyrdom.

The day after the 1936 Kalbaryo, an article on the daily newspaper Bag-ong Kusug lamented the ‘degradation’ of the holy trek, citing that many had joined for illegitimate reasons. It reports of youths seen trysting beneath the undergrowth of trees from which sacred branches may well have been collected (Cf. Mojares, 1991). But the outrage went beyond a problem with youthful over-exuberance. The lament of the paper echoed that of many Catholic priests during the period who focused upon the “license” taken by devotees in holy commemorations such as this. This “licence” referred to a taking exception from the mandates of Christian piety, evinced by actions that alluded to the persistence anitismo beliefs. For those on pilgrimage to Kalbaryo sought the sacred in sources outside the physical and theological confines of the Church. The collection of objects for panaad [offering] to the Christian God underlies the syncretic nature of Kalbaryo, in the sense that the pilgrims sought to “touch God through symbol” (as is the case with Santo Niño replicas) to petition for His grace. Their actions were deemed illicit, furthermore, in so far as they sought God’s grace in the mundane and ordinary (in tree branches and twigs of all things), instead of in the divine and proper modes of worship propagated in Church and in scripture.

Yet the Kalbaryo is significant as a metaphorical depiction of how Filipino Catholics are capable of deviating from the “path” of Christian piety, while still participating fully and devoutly in its rites of worship. To be sure, Filipino Catholics are given clear instructions on how to remain on the path to salvation and absolution. Stringent prescriptions on the prerequisites for conversion and baptism, for example,
were delineated as early as the sixteenth century, such as in native language publications like the *Doctrina Cristiana* (Cf. Shumacher 1984, 253). More recently, books on Catechism are disseminated in schools from a very early age as part of the conventional Catholic educational upbringing. Through the mechanism of Catechism, Filipinos are confronted with a series of transcendent questions and answers, the full meaning of which remains beyond merely logical comprehension of doctrine. It is an experience where the conditions for salvation are revealed by God in and through the scriptures. For a good Christian is expected to suspend an approbation of what falls outside the path — unexplained natural and physical phenomenon, ghosts, misfortune -- and the extent to which one does so is a measure of the degree of one’s “faith”. From a purely theological perspective, God is the only true source of what is divine and sacred and salvation can only be achieved if one follows Jesus and the Saints path of piety and virtue exclusively and without vacillation. Accordingly, to deviate from these prescriptions is, as Mulder observes, “to tumble into heterodoxy and mysticism: to fall prey to syncretism (a synonym for heresy)” (1996, 24).

**Syncretism as a Discourse of “Persistence”**

It is in the context of a clearly defined path to a proper mode of Christian devotion that syncretism can be conceived of within a discourse of ‘persistence’. A feature of this discourse, traditionally deployed by both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, is a sense of incredulity and astonishment that native religious categories have survived, given the length and intensity of Christian missionization in the Philippines. Hislop (1979) for
example, expresses “alarm” at the “extent of pagan practices among those who call themselves Christian. Premised, as it is, upon a separation between the sacred and the profane, a syncretic religiosity indicates that the ‘conversion’ of the native is far from consummated in light of the tenacity of their animistic beliefs.

In the middle ages in Europe, similar discourses of persistence ranged over an enormous domain, manifested in the actions of the Church in creating and delineating religion as a conceptual framework upon which Catholicism could be based. This endeavour consisted not just in the ways in which the Church stated the fundamentals of its beliefs, as in the recital of the Apostle’s creed, or in the routinization of its devotional practice in Holy Mass. The Christian religion as a category was created and defined by establishing the boundaries of what it is not, and by means of actively denouncing those forms of worship and belief that deviated from the path prescribed by the doctrine. In discussing “syncretism” as a discursive category, it becomes possible to understand notions of ‘persistence’ in the Philippines as extensions of a particularly constructed and historically contingent line of thought.⁴

Filipino Catholicism as syncretic, as such, is attributed to the weakness of missionization and has accordingly been conceived as a “problem” of some urgency. While many Filipino Catholics do not problematise the combination of Catholicism and anitismo practices, a study of contemporary religious practice continued to portray a syncretic Catholicism as both the symptom and the cause of the missionary challenge in the Philippines. Shumacher S.J. (1984) sought to establish the causes of the “wide prevalence of religious ignorance and syncretic Catholicism, in spite of the most notable

⁴ For a broader discussion of the Medieval Church’s acts of authorizing and legitimizing religious practice, see (Asad, 1993)
evangelization in the history of Christianity..." (p. 271). Before the late eighteenth century, he argues, missionaries from the various orders had great success in the fostering of a "mature Catholicism". He points to "the adoption of practices, values and norms which were counter-cultural, having no precedent in... the norms of pre-Hispanic society" (p. 255) and to *indio* participation in stringent post-baptismal rites as evidence of the vast inroads made by missionization. It is in such a context of missionary success that Schumacher portrays syncretism as a tragic Fall from Grace. How, he inquires, was there a "lapsing back into ignorance and syncretism" among a population that was well and truly on the right path to salvation?

This deviation from the path is attributed not to a failure of missionization *per se*, but to a problem of insufficient personnel. Shumacher details the political events in Spain and other parts of Europe that had served to drastically and suddenly reduce the number of clergy in the Philippines between 1770 to 1830. The crisis of personnel was such that "not only would untrained Filipino priests hold on to the parishes which had been taken from the religious orders, but more and more other parishes would be handed over to them, ready or unready, worthy or unworthy" (p. 259). Given the circumstances of insufficient personnel in the cities, Filipinos in the mountainous and other rural areas (i.e. the promdi) had become more susceptible to relapse into an animistic and syncretic mode of worship. In areas where evangelization was particularly weak, "the surprising thing is that the faith survived at all, not that it became contaminated with superstitions or pagan elements in a kind of syncretism" (p. 262).

Again, Schumacher's analysis identified degrees of syncretism along the lines of urbanity and rurality. Syncretism is understood as the effect of the degradation of the
“key role of the priest” by forces beyond their immediate control. It was not a result of any lack of skill on the part of the religious orders, to be sure, but by a situation where progress was undermined by the sheer outnumbering of clergy by “pagan” souls. In this scenario, anitismo is a kind of invisible force that constantly works to subvert the process of conversion and baptism. Schumacher’s analysis implies that left on their own, Filipinos would revert back to a natural ‘state of man’ of which anitismo was the most potent and alarming signifier. In this sense, his conception of syncretism echoes that of the ‘natural’ explanations detailed in the first section.

By citing a lack of personnel as the main factor of the failure to eradicate anitismo, ‘responsibility’ is not to be placed upon the folk practitioners themselves as knowing agents. While the discourse of persistence is founded upon a sense of lamentation over the staying power of anitismo, there is an overwhelming notion that the folk were not subjects for punishment but objects to be saved. For their insistence on anitismo was not born out of malevolence as such, but of the credulity and ignorance that is a manifestation of their blind, immature faith. The kind of persistence identified here is one which has frustrated the full propagation of Catholicism. Anitismo continues to be associated with a kind of pristine naturalness that precludes salvation and mercy among those who practice it, despite the level and sincerity of their devoutness. It is the Clergy, educated lay members and the missionaries themselves, rather, who must take some responsibility for the “problem” of survivals by ensuring that the tawo are lead along the true path of virtue and eternal salvation.

Yet not all sectors of the Catholic clergy necessarily acknowledge and openly admit the “corruption” of the faith. Throughout the Spanish colonial period, as we have
seen in examples such as Kalbaryo pilgrimage, many clergy were less than willing to
give credence to the infusion of anitismo into Christian religious practice. In this sense,
syncretism was conceived within an informal agreement to turn a blind eye to its
existence among the supposedly converted. Such attitudes were, as Vandenbogaert
(1972) observes, indicative of an “informal conspiracy of silence to keep the religious
(leaders) ignorant of the continuation of clandestine pagan rituals, practice, and beliefs.”
This transaction between indios and of the fiscals (supervisors of Catechetical
instruction) “contributed to the filipinization of Christianity, a syncretistic form of
Christianity, a blending of Christian elements with belief in spirits.” (Vandenbogaert
1972: 18) For implicit in the logic of syncretism is notion that the status of the universal
Catholic Church as the sole source of knowledge and Truth has become undermined.
The “conspiracy of silence” was fostered upon an awareness of the illicit practices of the
faithful and a corresponding intention to deny its influence by not explicitly
acknowledging its existence.

By and large however, the twentieth century has seen a more confrontational
approach to the notion of syncretism. Instead of fostering an attitude of denial or silence,
the task of educated’ Filipinos, argues Hislop (1971), is quite the contrary. Hislop
encourages everyone to continue the missionary noblesse oblige:

The influence of primitive religion still lingers on, even among those nominally
converted to Christianity... One who has the responsibility for religious training
in the barrio must bear in mind, and must also cope with the pagan attitude of
attempting to get something from the higher power or higher powers, rather than
the desire to give oneself to God’s service in unselfish dedication to a life of
helping one’s brethren. Finally, we who are more highly educated must resist the
tendency to despise primitive Filipinos as possessing unscientific and
superstitious notions about God. The Christian engaged in church or social work
in rural areas must guard himself against the greatest evidence of paganism – self-
centeredness. If he can throw off this sin, he can then be in a better position to aid his less-educated brothers. ‘How dare you say to your brother, ‘Please, let me take that speck out of your eye, when you have a log in your own eye? You impostor! Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will be able to see and take he speck out of your brother’s eye (1971, 154).

In this example, the task of aiding those “less educated brothers” from their belief in primitive religion is framed upon a moral and spiritual imperative. Yet in delineating some prescriptions for what good Christians must do, Hislop propagates some of the dichotomies that had typically become associated with a “promdi” perception of religious syncretism. In the “unique blend” that is Filipino Catholicism, there is a hierarchy between those who are educated enough to appreciate the true message of Christianity, and those who must be saved from their illicit, though passionate, beliefs. The discourse of persistence implicit here is manifested in a call to action for clergy and the faithful alike to take responsibility. For until some effort is taken by them, folk Catholicism will continue to suffer a lingering spiritual affliction. The call to “educate” the common tawo about the veracity of the edict to revoke the Santo Niño’s patron sainthood exemplifies how a discourse of persistence – rooted as it is in a specific ensemble of thought and behaviour – remains a common feature of Catholicism in Cebu.

Syncretism as a Discourse of ‘Tolerance’

In Cebu in more recent times, there is another religious parade which, like the Kalbaryo pilgrimage of the 1930s, is an anticipated occasion for the gathering of the Cebuano faithful. Since 1981, the Simlog fiesta that celebrates the feast of the Santo Niño has been celebrated in grandiose fashion, featuring choreographed performances of
ancient Cebuano dances, various competitions, elaborate religious ceremonies and a street parade that winds around the city. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Sinulog had become seen as the main event of the Cebuano religious and social calendar. Ever since the establishment of the “Sinulog sa Sugbo” (a program initiated with the blessing of the local clergy) the Santo Niño’s feast day had moved beyond a personal dance of petition to a collective expression of the Catholic spirit with which all Cebuanos were in tune.

Yet in some very important ways, the Sinulog can be seen as the manifestation of an interesting reversal. For while the Kalbaryo had been condemned by the Cebuano clergy as a “corruption” of a holy rite, Sinulog was the elevation of an erstwhile pagan ritual into an official religious activity sanctified by the Archdiocese itself. In some very important ways, as this section will show, the modern Sinulog is indicative of the ways in a syncretism of Filipino Catholicism – much as it is pervaded by discourses of persistence -- is also conceived within discourses of ‘tolerance’ and ‘accommodation’, underlying the complexity of Catholicism in the Philippines.

While the discourse of persistence is marked by a negative view of anitismo ‘survivals’ and a hesitation to admit its legitimacy, the Catholic Church has also exercised a degree of leniency with regards to the propagation of a “uniquely Filipino” Catholicism. In light of its usefulness in enhancing the spirituality of Filipinos, the Vatican had given official sanction to the ‘tolerance’ of local, indigenous religiosity. In speaking about the many iconographies of Christ in the Philippines, particularly the Santo Niño, Pope Paul VI during his visit to Manila in 1970 declared that:
The man of Asia can be Catholic and remain fully Asian. If the church must above all be Catholic, pluralism is legitimate and even desirable in the manner of professing one common faith in the one same Jesus Christ (Cf. Mercado, 1982).

"Asianness" in the context in which it is used here describes an indigenous Catholicism as has been described in the third chapter of this study. An Asian manifestation of Christ is one of which poverty, personal sacrifice and a sense of ‘localness’ are the main attributes. In this sense, the Pope’s proclamation re-emplots an alter-ego manifestation of Christ as an acceptable icon of worship that is expressive of “one common faith.” In reiterating that “Asianness” is not an anathema to being a good Catholic, the Pope had formally extended the boundaries of what is “legitimate” to include localised, popular Filipino images of Christ both in iconography and in other forms of worship and belief.

Indeed, Vatican II was particularly active in enacting the process through which Christ’s affinity with the “poor and the ignorant” became reflected in official church proclamations. A discourse of tolerance was a continuing feature of the Papacy’s declarations, particularly towards the late seventies shortly before the Pope’s next visit to the Philippines in 1980. In reference to folk Catholicism, the Pope declared that:

Popular religiosity... has its limits... but if it is well oriented... it is rich in values. It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know... It involves an acute awareness of profound attribution to God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere, patience, the sense of Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. By reason of these aspects, we readily call it ‘popular piety’, that is, religion of the people, rather than religiosity...
(Pope Paul VI 1976, Evangelii Nuntiandi)

This official recognition of popular religiosity as an important part of the Catholic Church is based, ironically, on the very aspect that had made it problematic: the folk’s
obtuse understanding of the scripture. In their very credulity is framed a devotion that is “rich” not in doctrinal appreciation but in sentiment and ‘values’. It is felt in the “interior”, in one’s buot, whereupon the devotion is expressed in its most basic, emotive rendition. Common incarnations of Christ as everyman, or indeed the local depictions of the Santo Niño as alter-ego in Cebu, are the very manifestations of the emotive force of “popular religiosity”, which the Vatican sought to embrace.

Popular religiosity, to be sure, still “has its limits” which its practitioners are unable transcend unless they are “well oriented”. Indeed, left unchecked or given too much “licence” to interpret the doctrine upon their own devices, popular religiosity may yet manifest itself in ways outside the Church’s moral and spiritual parameters. In this sense, it is the mandate of the Clergy to channel the sentimental power of popular Catholicism towards the ‘right path’ (as the metaphor of kalbaryo effectively expressed). Again, the example of redirecting the raw and sentimental passions of Santo Niño devotees in light of the figure’s ‘demotion’ is significant. Inasmuch as is under such circumstances that ‘popular piety’ is seen as distinct from ‘religiosity’, the former captures the sense of misdirected pathos of a people who yearn for salvation and make attempts to achieve it. “Religiosity”, on the other hand, refers to the sense of spirituality which is an ideal to which the ‘folk’ can aspire, but only through the guidance of the clergy and by paying meticulous heed to the dictates of the scripture.

Indeed, the medieval Church in Europe was always concerned with differentiating official knowledge from falsehood and heresy, and along with that distinguishing the sacred from the profane. They were also concerned, as Asad notes, with “authenticating particular miracles and relics (the two confirmed each other); authorizing shrines,
compiling saints’ lives both as a model of and as a model for the Truth; requiring the regular telling of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds to a priestly confessor and giving absolution to a penitent; regularizing popular social movements into Rule orders... or denouncing them for heresy or for verging on the heretical” (1993: 37). In the Philippines, similarly, ‘accommodation’ and ‘contextualization’ -- the primary idioms of the discourse of tolerance -- posits a relationship of power between ‘guider’ and ‘guided’, ‘official’ and ‘sentimental’, ‘licensed’ and ‘illicit’. This power is one exerted from one side alone -- in the active process of orienting ‘popular Catholicism’ towards modes of religious life that is domesticated within the boundaries of orthodox Catholic doctrine. It is the purveyors of official Catholicism, not of anitismo, who are mandated with determining and adjusting the precepts of a proper religious life. This is, indeed, both a necessary and noble act in light of the persistence of anitismo sensibilities which are widely acknowledged to be tenacious, immutable and deep seated. But while both religious systems can exist in a sense of symbiosis, there can only be one body of religious doctrine that is empowered to determine the terms of their hybridity.

As such, the contemporary Catholic Church acts not to deny the existence and persistence of anitismo beliefs, but rather to establish itself as the only valid source of legitimization. It is in this way that the ‘accommodation’ and ‘tolerance’ of folk Catholicism is not seen as a capitulation to the “truth” of indigenous belief. It in this context that a Jesuit priest like Bulatao S.J. earlier in this chapter (his pejorative and slightly condescending depictions of those who believe in anitismo notwithstanding), can publish his personal experience of poltergeists without compromising the primacy of Church doctrine. For his Case Study of a Quezon City Poltergeist (1965) is an account
which places himself (as a representative of the Catholic Church institution) in a role of authentication and validation, after having been called upon by the “educated and sophisticated” members of the household. The supernatural events they commonly experienced were always framed upon the notion that the belief in poltergeists and other anitismo survivals are contingent upon Church agency. And in this particular incident, it is only Bulatao himself, not the members of the household, who can designate inexplicable occurrences as instances of “witchcraft”, “the occult” and “supernatural beliefs”. It is he himself who personified the Church’s authorizing power over what can sensibly be considered outside the proper modes of worship.

Seen in this context, it becomes possible to see how the proclamations of accommodating anitismo did not contravene Church ethos, nor did it constitute an acknowledgement of the validity of anitismo. The act of ‘tolerance’ and ‘accommodation’ were in themselves, rather, ‘survivals’ of colonial Spanish missionary discourse. As we saw in the first chapter, the existence of the demonyo in sixteenth century Cebu operated not to undermine the Truth of the Christian mission, but rather to underscore their noblesse oblige. Then, as now, the initial inconsistency of these two attitudes, of rejection or tolerance of anitismo practices, is resolved by the authoritative power by which the Church assigns them meaning.

In few instances is this more apparent than in the transformation of a “paganistic” ritual of petition such as the Santo Niño’s Sinulog. What had been a dance of petition and illicit form of devotion, had in the early 1980s become elevated into a “grand parade” of the city. Not only had the Sinulog come to be representative of the collective ethos of Cebu City, it yearly receives the official sanction of the Cebu Archdiocese who officiate
and participate in its implementation. So important, indeed, was the Sinulog to the calendar of religious practice in Cebu that the ‘demotion’ of the Santo Niño from its patron sainthood was mitigated by the reassurance that the festival was to be preserved in its current form. The enthusiasm by which the Archdiocese sought to do so underscored how the syncretism of the Santo Niño is effectively domesticated not only through a discourse that laments the ‘persistence’ of anitismo, but by the exertion of the Church’s exclusive authority in acts of ‘tolerance’ and ‘accommodation’.

AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE DEVOTION to the Santo Niño is enhanced by an appreciation of the discourses upon which syncretism is conceived. It has indeed been the aim of this chapter to examine the nature of these discourses beyond its manifestations in Cebu. The revocation of the figure’s patron sainthood furnishes an effective entry point through which can be appreciated the ways in which Church institutions in the Philippines continue to exert control over the proper meanings of religious iconography. The act of revocation itself, premised as it was upon both logical and theological considerations, was accompanied by the need to explain it to the folk who are not expected to fully grasp its significance. In so doing, the latter are recognized not as agents who project and interpret a figure such as the Santo Niño in their own ways, but as objects who must be ‘educated’ and ‘saved’ from those ‘illicit’ interpretations that go outside the official meanings prescribed in Church edicts.

While the actions of the Archdiocese of Cebu suggest a willingness to extend a kind of “tolerance” for a folk interpretation of the Santo Niño, it is striking how
pejoratively those interpretations are sometimes conceived by the defenders of the “true faith”. As the second section has demonstrated, there is a capacity among Filipino theologians, scholars and laypersons to lament at the degree by which anitismo beliefs have ‘crept in’ to Christianity. Anitismo in this sense is seen not as a component of Filipino Catholicism that underlies its uniqueness, but rather as an alarming contaminant by which the legitimacy of the whole religious system is appreciably undermined. As much as the efforts to educate the poor and “promdi” are expressions of notions of ‘accommodation’, they also disclose a sense of the Church’s noblesse oblige to ensure and defend the purity of the Christian faith.

The thrust of this chapter has been to discuss how “syncretism” is itself a product of emergent fields of practice and debate in the history of the Catholicism. In so doing, the task has been to evaluate certain scholarly works in order to draw a distinction between plain descriptions of religious synthesis, and the discourses of persistence or tolerance that pervade them. While this chapter has used the latter to examine how the Catholic Church in the Philippines is an institution that actively and continuously exercises an authoritative power over icons and modes of worship, some ways in which people physically and symbolically subvert this jurisdiction will be the central theme of the fifth chapter of this study.