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Antonio D. Sison, The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius

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Antonio D. Sison. *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021. 232 pp. \$30.00 Paper. ISBN: 9781626984219.

Antonio D. Sison's book advances an inculturation "from within" and "from below" (187), creatively highlighting "the contributions of the people being birthed into Imago Christi," despite the "multiform crucifixions" of the religious-colonial experience (5). Upper-level undergraduates and graduate students are the intended audience. Through a process he terms "Indigenous inculturation," the author guides the reader through a critical and creative revision of inculturation from local perspectives, showing how colonized and silenced communities embody a liberative and decolonial Christianity. For Sison, "Indigenous" means "native to a local community," yet this use of the term hides as much it reveals about the communities doing the inculturation. By this definition, popular Catholicism could be considered Indigenous. It certainly contains many Indigenous components, but it is also a *mestizo* reality, which in turn overshadows its Indigenous roots.

Methodologically, Sison interlaces theology, postcolonial theory, and aesthetics of liberation, introducing art as a *locus theologicus*. He draws on religious icons, paintings, and murals rooted in "Indigenous culture and folk religious practices" (7). Sison constructs a tri-modal approach that functions as a prism to highlight the native, local, and liberational ways in which Christianity has been adopted. With the help of postcolonial theory, Sison develops a hermeneutics of suspicion "to interrogate the relational asymmetries, cultural fallout, and religious implications . . . of colonization" (14). He then turns the prism to a "hermeneutics of appreciation" through which we see "the astonishing creativity, resilience, and tensile strength of Indigenous communities who have insisted on life though the death sentence of colonial history" (15). One more turn of the prism, and we encounter a "hermeneutics of serendipity" that Sison

defines as the “conspiracy of grace; the serendipitous turns of history open up kairological” (17) moments when colonized people reclaim their humanity and culture “in the face of colonial and postcolonial curtailment” (15). Together, God’s liberating grace active in history and Indigenous peoples’ agency pursue a “cultural survival and redemption” (188).

In the next three chapters, Sison applies his hermeneutical method to vastly different contexts. The mosaic “Our Lady of Africa” opens the journey. It depicts the faces of Mary and Jesus wearing traditional African masks. The “Hekima Christus” fresco in Nairobi also depicts Christ’s face as an African ritual mask. African masks make present ancestors, gods, and other spirits during rituals: “The mask bearer embodies the spirit whose likeness he has assumed” (47). The “Hekima Christus” is “Christ-Ancestral-Mask, the revelatory African icon of the death-life rhythms of the paschal mystery” (69). Focusing on the religious significance of African masks, Sison un.masks the sinful defacement brought by colonization.

“Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe,” a mural in La Villita, a Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, welcomes the reader into the next chapter. The mural depicts an “imagined community reconciled under the mantle of Guadalupe” (79). A second mural, “Increíbles Las Cosas Que Se Ven,” provides some clues. Guadalupe once again welcomes us. This time she “lovingly watches over the border crossers like a mother concerned for the safety and well-being of her suffering children” (81). In his effort to grasp the immense prophetic-liberating power of Guadalupe as God’s liberating grace, Sison turns his prism to the colonial period. He shows how Spaniards’ efforts to impose the Guadalupe of Extremadura over against Nahuatls’ religion backfires. Our Lady of Guadalupe emerges in a “subversive thread interwoven into the complex tapestry that is the Guadalupe tradition” (124). Sison calls Guadalupe “Our Lady of Serendipity,” closely connected to her Indigenous and liberationist roots. She is Tepeyac-Tonantzin-Guadalupe, giving

dignity and identity to Nahuatls and *mestizos*. Sison's treatment of Guadalupe is beautiful, yet for those of us familiar with this topic, it does not add novelty. Instead, connecting Guadalupe of Extremadura with cosmic motherhood (*Theotokos*) and Guadalupe of Tepeyac merely with the Immaculate Conception completely misses the fact that in the Nahuatl religious system, Tonantzin is a cosmic divine mother, more closely connected to the Divine herself/himself than to Mary.

Sison's strongest chapter is the one on Manila's "Black Nazarene," a dark-skinned, half-kneeling statue of Jesus Christ. Sison analyzes three historical renderings of the feast of the Black Nazarene that interlace with the Philippines' colonial and racist history. During Holy Week, devotees intertwine readings of Christ's passion and death with the story of a young man encountering *Kalayaa*, a female figure embodying the value of *kagandahang loób*, "the beauty of one's authentic inner self" (164). In Sison's view, devotion to the *Quiapo* Black Nazarene creates a space where the "vanquished religious beliefs of a primal religion live organically in the rhythms of life of its devotees" (161). Sison's in-depth knowledge of Philippine embodied spirituality and culture makes this chapter robust.

This book is a step in the right direction. It offers a creative bridge for a more open-minded and respectful engagement with contextual Christianities. A decolonial lens can help unveil that which lies behind what is labeled "syncretic" and thus silences local inculturation efforts. Sison sees syncretic realities as part of a conversion journey. Sison's choice of the term "primal religion" indicates a desire to evolve. However, one cannot but wonder: evolve into what—Christianity? Indigenous theologians would strongly disagree with the use of the term and its colonial implications. They claim that God has always been present in their cultures. The fact that Sison does not cite Indigenous theologians, especially in the case of Latin America, throws

doubt on the depth of his entire work. Sison fails to encounter Indigenous religions on their own terms, something difficult to do considering the scope of his manuscript. Nonetheless, Sison's major contribution is his tri-modal approach. Readers are invited to question their assumptions and learn about a Christianity that seeks decolonization and redemption. In sum, readers will not only learn more about local Christianities; they will also become more curious about Indigenous theologies grounded in millennial wisdom.

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