

Book Review

Jesus for Filipinos: Reflections on Philippine Social Issues in the Light of the Gospel, by Ramon Echica

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“Jesus was born, lived, preached, and died in Asia. Yet he is often seen as a westerner.”

- Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (2006)

In the Introduction to his classic book *Jesus Before Christianity* (2001), Albert Nolan invites his readers “to take a serious and honest look at a man who lived in first-century Palestine and to try to see him through the eyes of his contemporaries (p. 1).” Any book on Christology, therefore, must strike a balance between academic rigor and clarity on the one hand, and urgent pastoral action on the other. It must have a practical purpose. As Nolan puts it succinctly: “I am concerned about people, the daily sufferings of so many millions of people, and the prospect of much greater suffering in the near future. My purpose is to find out what can be done about it.”

Fr. Ramon Echica’s book *Jesus for Filipinos* (2023) has undoubtedly achieved this goal. It is an essential contribution to the ongoing Christological investigation anchored on Philippine society’s pressing religious, socio-political, and moral problems. Written in a scholarly yet highly accessible manner, each chapter is replete with stories and anecdotes that should lead the reader to do serious theological reflection and praxis.

The book seeks to answer the question “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15), in the light of the Filipino people’s faith-life journey as they grapple with life’s intricacies. It makes its jumping point two important historical conjunctions: the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines and the 30 years of implementation of Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II). Its approach is “Christology from below”: a perfect blend of rigorous theological research and pastoral commitment, whereas its ultimate goal is to have a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ “in the light of Philippine social conditions, both past and present, and discern the demands Jesus makes on us in the here and now (pp. 5-6).”

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: As Filipinos, who do we say Jesus is? In our lives in the here and now, are we becoming an embodiment of His teachings and values? Where are we heading as His disciples as we navigate the crisis and issues hounding the Filipino nation? Thus, this scholarly work can rightly be called a book on

decolonial Christology as it seeks to free subjugated epistemologies that were excluded by European, male-dominated, Western theologies for more than five centuries.

The book effectively decentered traditional (devotional) Western Christology in favor of a decolonized epistemic perspective that counters a triumphalist “Christology from above.” Such an approach in Christology highlights Jesus’ divinity, i.e., Jesus as King, Lord, and Savior, and the pre-existing “Logos”—Western categories detached from the daily experiences and contexts of Asian peoples. This “tamed and sanitized version of Christ,” as Fr. Echica puts it, “serves as an opium that dulls our minds to contemporary issue (p. 9).”

On the other hand, *Jesus for Filipinos* examines the historical Jesus as he is incarnated in the concrete life experiences of the Filipino faithful. By itself, Fr. Echica’s book bridges the gap between popular devotion and social action, faith, moral commitment, and Christian discipleship viz-à-viz Philippine social condition. Fr. Echica’s starting point is contemporary human experience, the concrete situations of people, especially the issues and challenges they face. They are the experiences of “joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes* #1). These contemporary human experiences are then subjected to social analysis, using available analytical tools from the social sciences, to dissect and uncover the actual condition and root causes of such experiences.

The book is divided into eleven chapters whose arguments are substantiated by rigorous research supported by modern biblical hermeneutics and theological, sociological, and historical scholarship. Although the chapters can be read independently, it is best to start with the first chapter.

Chapter One discusses the urgent task of bridging popular devotion with socio-pastoral action. As a Cebu-based priest-theologian, Fr. Echica sees the “apolitical” devotion to the Santo Niño alarming. Starting with the infancy narrative, the chapter examines how God, through the incarnation, “participates in human history at a particular point in space and time.” As the author argues, one can have a better understanding of the infancy narrative and the birth of the Messiah if we look at it from an event that is “inevitably enmeshed in the politics of his day” (p. 17). Hence the question: if the birth of the Child Jesus was deeply entangled in the sociopolitical tensions of his time, why is our popular devotion to the Santo Niño depoliticized? With this, the first chapter sets the tone for an anti-colonial and decolonial Christology. Starting with the infancy narrative, Fr. Echica frames the birth of Jesus from an anti-imperialist posture, indicating the contradiction between Jesus’ vision of God’s Kingdom of peace, justice, and freedom on the one hand, and the Empire’s unjust, oppressive, and exploitative rule personified by Herod and the Roman Caesar.

This theme resonates with our contemporary society. As a neo-colony of U.S. imperialism, our task, therefore, is to (re)appropriate the liberating message of the infancy narrative and integrate it into our devotion to the Santo Niño. This can only be done by linking the infancy narrative and our devotion to the Holy Child as a protest against the pretensions of the Empire (p. 32).

Chapters Two to Nine address specific issues like the use of violence, humor, the problem of clericalism, capital punishment, extra-judicial killing, interreligious dialogue, law, the environment, and the ethical dimension of the Eucharist; and purport what would be Jesus' stand on these issues. Chapter Two tackles a rather controversial yet interesting topic seldom explored by theologians: the use of violence in changing unjust structures. The author noted several priests and religious who opted for or "were sympathetic to armed struggle" (p. 34)—Fr. Rustico Tan, MSC, Fr. Gregorio Aglipay, Fr. Pedro Dandan, Fr. Teodoro de la Cruz, Fr. Luis Jalandoni, Fr. Edicio de la Torre, and Fr. Conrado Balweg. From a decolonial perspective, the unfinished anti-colonial revolution of 1896 necessitates a protracted and sustained armed resistance against U.S. imperialism and its local allies. Hence, Chapter Two also asks the crucial question, "When the violence coming from the political and economic establishment has become institutionalized to such an extent that there is no legal remedy to help the victims, can a follower of Jesus take up arms to end an evil situation?" (p. 37).

The project of decolonization in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal setting must confront the three evils of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism. It must use all means available to the toiling masses, including armed resistance. In the words of Vijay Prashad (2022), "The only real decolonization is anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. You cannot decolonize your mind unless you also decolonize the conditions of social production that reinforce the colonial mentality." Indeed, there is a lot of parallelism between the socio-political situation of first-century Palestine and our time today. The New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan describes the socio-political situation of first-century Palestine:

The Kingdom of God movement was Jesus' program of empowerment for the peasantry becoming steadily more hard-pressed, in the first-century Jewish homeland, through insistent taxation, attendant indebtedness, and eventual land expropriation, all within increasing commercialization in the booming colonial economy of a Roman Empire under Augustan peace and a Lower Galilee under Herodian urbanization. Jesus *lived* against the systemic injustice and structural evil of that situation... (Crossan 1996, p. 211)

It is in this socio-political context that Crossan calls Jesus a revolutionary figure. Beyond the polarizing images of Jesus as a militant and revolutionary figure or radical pacifist, Fr. Echica proposes a middle ground and invites his readers to follow Jesus as a "peaceful revolutionary."

Chapter Ten continues the task initiated in Chapter One, focusing on the Filipino people's obsession with the suffering of Christ. The author's main arguments can be divided into five parts: first, that Filipinos are naturally and emotionally attached to the suffering Jesus; second, that this is aggravated by a Christian spirituality that over-emphasized Jesus' crucifixion and death at the expense of neglecting his Life and Mission; third, that this seeming fixation on morbid images of the Passion and Death of Jesus somehow contributed to an attitude of passive acceptance of needless suffering, such as injustice, oppression, and dehumanization; fourth, that a liberating understanding of the Passion is not only possible but necessary, one that would inspire Filipinos to stand for justice, truth, freedom, and genuine democracy; and fifth, that this is only possible if we can (re)connect Jesus' Passion and Death with his Life and Mission.

Jesus did not simply die; his death was a consequence of his words and actions. He was killed by the powers-that-be: political and religious leaders who were subservient to the Empire. In this chapter, Fr. Echica taught us to uncover the "perverse logic"—to borrow a term from Walter Mignolo—underlying the theological conundrum of the Passion narrative (Mignolo 2007, p. 224).

Chapter Eleven closes the book with a profound sense of hope. The Resurrection assures us that evil will never have the last word. An authentic disciple of Jesus must be unwavering in the struggle for truth, justice, and human dignity. It may be complex, challenging, and arduous, but "it is not without eternal value" (Echica p. 197). In the end, the battered, tortured, and crucified bodies of the victims will be resurrected and will be shared in the new heaven and new earth where love, peace, justice, and freedom will genuinely reign.

A Filipino decolonial Christology is premised on the fact that all Christologies are contextual, i.e., every articulation of who Jesus Christ is "is very much shaped by the realities of the specific context in which it arises: one's location (social, cultural, economic, political, geographical, etc.) determines how one apprehends the faith" (Chia 2022, p. 21). Faithful to the decolonial project, Fr. Echica succeeded in doing Christology critically and independently of our colonial masters. Lastly, Fr. Echica's book is a theological rupture, a modest contribution to the ongoing "epistemological decolonizing turn" in theology. It invites readers to encounter Jesus, the Liberator, as someone *from the periphery*.