

Philippine performance artist jailed for “offending religious feelings”

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In late 2010, Philippine performance artist and tour guide Carlos Celdran, dressed in late nineteenth century attire, entered Manila Cathedral during an ecumenical service celebrating the distribution of bibles and silently held up a cardboard sign with one word: “Damaso.” Celdran was escorted from the church by security guards. He was subsequently arrested and charged with “offending religious feelings,” a criminal offense in the Philippines. He was found guilty and sentenced to an indeterminate jail term of up to one year, one month and 11 days.

The event occurred in the thick of a political debate in the Philippine legislature over a proposed Reproductive Health (RH) bill. As a measure reforming sex education and access to contraceptives in the Philippines, the bill is limited indeed. It maintains the criminalization of abortion and allows schools to opt out of sex education on religious grounds, but it does provide free condoms to a small section of the poorest members of the population. The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines fiercely opposed the bill.

On September 30, the Catholic Bishops Council of the Philippines (CBCP) threatened to excommunicate President Aquino from the church if he continued to back the RH bill. On the same day, Celdran entered the Cathedral, which is always open to the public, and held up his sign.

The word “Damaso” is the name of a character taken from Jose Rizal’s anti-colonial novel *Noli Me Tangere* first published in Spanish in 1887. The novel is trenchantly satirical, each character vividly captures and lampoons the various social types that populated late Spanish colonial Manila—bureaucrats and their hangers-on, an ignorant and utterly backwards native elite, and a rapacious and manipulative clergy. Father Damaso embodies this last group. A cruel and arrogant

Franciscan priest, he lies to imprison his personal enemies, rapes a woman and fathers a child, who winds up being a key figure in the novel.

Rizal was the son of a well-to-do family from Laguna province south of Manila. His family leased a hacienda from the Dominican religious order on which they managed the work of tenant farmers. Rizal was able to travel throughout Europe to obtain his education as an eye doctor. He wrote two novels exposing the evils of Spanish colonialism and in particular the medieval obscurantism of the Roman Catholic Church.

At the instigation of the church, Rizal was arrested, tried and executed by firing squad in 1892. In 1896 the Philippine revolution against Spain broke out under the leadership of Andres Bonifacio. The gains of the revolution were immediately shattered by the intervention of US imperialism, which conquered the islands in a protracted and bloody war.

American colonial officials made Rizal the national hero, posing him as a non-violent reformist who simply wrote books but did not take up arms. The *Noli*, as his novel is now referred to, became required reading in every high school. It was read in a bastardized Tagalog translation that eviscerated the wit, style and substance—the Enlightenment spirit—of the novel. Essentially all anti-clerical references were purged.

Statues of the new, inoffensive Rizal were erected in every *plaza*—town square—across the country, and his profile stamped on the one peso coin. Each such plaza, situated at the town center, is surrounded by four institutions: city hall, the public market, the elementary school, and the Roman Catholic church.

It is impossible to overstate the pervasive reach of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. It has repudiated none of its medieval, obscurantist past. In 1719, the Spanish Governor General was assassinated by a crowd

of Dominican friars when he encroached upon their interests. They marched from Manila Cathedral to the Palacio del Gobernador and stabbed him to death with knives and then appointed the archbishop as the new governor general. Precious little has changed since then.

From the superstitious injunctions of mitre-headed prelates to the ubiquitous dissemination of cheap plastic scapulars, the church has labored to preserve conditions of grotesque social inequality by fighting off modernity with Marian devotion; science with dancing Santo Nino dolls; and class struggle with the inculcated sense of passivity and submissiveness.

The Catholic Church does more than meddle in the affairs of state; at times, it runs them. Until his death in 2005, Cardinal Sin was a kingmaker. He named the church's presidential candidate in each election; he intervened during the late days of the anti-Marcos struggle to effect the rise to power of Corazon Aquino. Nearly every bourgeois politician in Philippine society bows before this power and quite literally kisses the archbishop's ring; those few who do not at least affect a polite curtsy. The front organizations of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) are no different. They stage prayer rallies and thank the CBCP for their political support.

When Carlos Celdran, dressed as Jose Rizal, held up the word "Damaso" in front of the red capped, dour faced elders of the Manila Cathedral, he violated article 133 of the revised penal code of 1930—written during US colonial control of the Philippines. It states that it is a crime to "offend religious feelings," which is defined as to "perform acts notoriously offensive to the feelings of the faithful." This law is carte blanche for the suppression of free speech by religious institutions. What evidence is needed to substantiate offended feelings?

The transcript of Celdran's trial highlights this. One of the four witness produced by the Catholic church "explained that the word 'DAMASO' pertains to a priest, who committed something against the church. Although she admitted that she did not know the meaning of the word, however, she claimed that every time she hears the word 'DAMASO' it is very traumatic to her."

Oozing hypocrisy from every pore, the head of the Church in the country, Cardinal Rosales stated that he

"had forgiven Celdran."

The grotesque legacies of political dynasties, religious backwardness, and American imperialism, all refracted through a society riven by extreme inequality, have produced a country in which the headlines always have a hint of the farcical to them. The brilliant wit of Rizal has been reduced to textbook pap; the masses are told by religious leaders to flagellate themselves bloody; and a man has been imprisoned for a symbolic challenge to the Catholic Church.



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