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## **Karl M. Gaspar, Mystic Wanderers in the Land of Perpetual Departures**

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## **BOOK REVIEWS**

Karl M. Gaspar. **Mystic Wanderers in the Land of Perpetual Departures.** Foreword by Fr. Esmeraldo A. Reforeal, O. Carm. Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia Inc., 2005. 381 pages.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory is perhaps not as commonly applied to the study of Philippine culture as those of Derrida, Althusser, Jameson, and other poststructuralist thinkers. However, Karl Gaspar is rare in his attempt to apply Bourdieu's theory in the Philippine context. Through him emerging Mindanawon authors are now beginning to be acquainted with this theory.

This book can be read from two perspectives: from outside-in and from inside-out.

First, the challenge that the author poses to himself is to examine spirituality not only normatively but also descriptively, not only as lived experience but also as academic discipline. Here, Bourdieu's theory of the "habitus and capital" comes in handy. Gaspar's work is pioneering in the application of Bourdieu to spirituality studies. Most books on spirituality remain on the level of idealist discourses, of visions and values, of love and generosity, of oblation and kenosis. Karl Gaspar tells us that it is also playing with capital present in one's habitus and against other players, also spiritual people, in the same field called the church. Such a premise can draw out novel insights on spirituality.

Gustavo Gutierrez's *Drinking from our Own Wells (Beber en su Propio Pozo*, 1983) took great pains to assert that liberation theology was not only

political but also theological. Gaspar's work argues for the opposite view: that spirituality is not only theological but also political. In a highly euphemistic universe (e.g., we always warn people to refrain from asking "*magkano ang bayad sa binyag; magkano kung magpa-misa*" because the sacraments can't be bought; we don't call the *kolekta* as monetary contributions but "love offering"), Gaspar—by his use of Bourdieu's framework—does not hesitate to call spirituality the practice of asserting or mobilizing one's capital. In a world where human practice is seen as an expression of utter generosity to God and others (as shown in related spirituality terms like "oblation," "self-emptying," "dedication"), this book does not hesitate to analyze the stance of practitioners of spirituality in relation to other actors in the so-called ecclesial or religious field, unconscious they may be.

While spirituality and religious life have always been viewed as a divine calling, Gaspar invites us to see it more as realistic and human, as historical practice, as a game, in fact. If spirituality were a game, the players would be his nine religious informants who have a "feel" for such a religious game even from childhood (*habitus*), with differing trump cards or chips (Gaspar, following Bourdieu, calls this *capital*), and whose manner of playing is determined by other players within the *field* called Mindanao Church. To understand such practice is to understand the game and its dynamics.

If the nine informants have a feel for this game today (that is, a spiritual life nourished by their work with Indigenous Peoples or IPs), it is because their *habitus* from childhood already led them to this: the rosaries of their grandmothers, the priests who frequented and ate in their homes, the Basic Ecclesiastical Communities (BECs) organized in their localities, the religious schools they attended, their being settlers themselves or their affiliations to *lumad* (ethnic) communities, and so on. These exposures, which sociology calls "primary socialization," already predisposed our players to this game with ease and gusto. Such analysis of spirituality has already been done in previous studies on the psychological, social, and cultural background of religious vocations. What Gaspar has achieved is to make these researches (most of them pietistic) resonate in sociological language to be consistent with scientific discourse.

What is original in Gaspar's work, however, is that he sees these personal predispositions as forms of capital, and the practice of spirituality as engagement with other players that also possess other quantities and forms of capital. This may seem to be irreverent and blasphemous, for who would ever think that when we wept as we uttered our vows, or when we walk miles to reach an IP community, or when we live without urban comforts, we were or are gaining some form of capital? We think we are giving up all that we possess "for the greater glory of God" and "for the sake of the kingdom," only to be informed by this book that we have, in fact, gained. But Gaspar challenges us to give ourselves that hard look.

This challenge is best shown in his excellent analysis of the Mindanao church, in which Gaspar has been a key player for a long time. In the positioning of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) vis-à-vis the repressive Marcos regime, all the social and cultural capital of the church were marshaled to protect grassroots communities. The progressive MSPC position was also a game (a critique or reproach) against the dominance of more established churches in Luzon and Mindanao. Even the so-called rupture within the Mindanao church itself was a game of capital between the dominant (mostly traditional) hierarchy and its progressive elements, mostly from lay movements. What are crucial in this game are the positions practitioners take. In other words, the Mindanao church can take such a progressive option because it was in a dominated position vis-à-vis more powerful forces in the economic, political, and ecclesiastical establishment. In the process, it won for itself some "marks of distinction" (a gain of capital), which the more dominant and traditional powers envied and later adopted (or, shall I say, coopted) into its own framework: the BECs, the option for the poor, lay empowerment, spirituality for social transformation, and so on. These were parts of the game of the Mindanawon church long before they were enshrined in the texts of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II).

Gaspar's study opens many other avenues to further investigations, which limitations of time and resources prevented him from pursuing. The logic applied by Gaspar to the politics of the Mindanao churches is the same logic he used to analyze his nine religious informants and the type of spirituality they practice. These informants pursue the direction

of negotiating their dominated capital in the field of dominant forces, be it in their own families, in the localities where they came from, within the congregations they joined, and even in the context of the IP communities with whom they worked. For, as Gaspar also acknowledges in the spirit of reflexivity, even as these religious work among the dominated of society, respecting their way of life without taints of condescension, they in fact exercise some form of power by their mere presence, and by the force of the cultural and social capital they carry with them in their language, minds, and bodies. This is the same kind of power that their congregations carried with them when they opted to work among the marginalized communities in a situation where there were dominant religious communities working in Mindanao and in the whole country. Further research along these lines can help us understand the realistic human dynamics involved in our spiritual and religious options—and the spirituality of the religious working among indigenous peoples.

However, lest he be misunderstood as positing sacrilegious ideas, Gaspar also adds that, beyond being a human engagement, spirituality is a personal-communal relationship with the divine. Gaspar's study asserts that within human practice—within all its political struggles for capital mobilization—springs forth the feel for the beyond, the urge to wander, to be “wildmen and wildwomen” for the Other. Here, Michel de Certeau is his guide—that man who was a wanderer all throughout his life, both internally and externally, in response to the promptings of the Other beyond him.

Gaspar diligently and meticulously tallied his nine religious informants' responses to questions of spirituality that he posed to them. All the responses revealed that their experiences of God irrupt from within the monotony of the everyday—experiences of exile and loneliness, moments of need and limits, the times when they were free to cry, and so on. These liminal spaces, where the play of capital is most intense (e.g., of being pulled to the poor and the perceived lack of support from the companions of their own community; of being in love and not wanting to possess; of being called to pray in the midst of Muslim chants or indigenous rituals), become the horizons where the “God of surprises” reveals Himself or Herself. Gaspar's study alerts us that historical practice in all its humanness (i.e., the play of capital and its politics from

which spirituality is never exempt) is always characterized by uncertainty, unevenness, and ambiguities. But it is precisely this uncertainty that provides the space in which the irruption of meaning, of life, of God may occur.

With Bourdieu, Gaspar's study looks at spirituality from outside-in. With de Certeau, it invites us to view it from inside-out. Ironically, in his works, de Certeau is in polemics with Bourdieu, just as phenomenology can never sit well with structuralism. But Gaspar has made these two great authors and philosophical traditions to sit down and dialogue with each other in order to put forward a view of spirituality for our times.

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Ligaya Fernando-Amilbangsa. **Ukkil: Visual Arts of the Sulu Archipelago.** Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005. 296 pages.

The author, an artist and a former teacher in Tawitawi, has regaled us here with a coffee table book that follows and surpasses her earlier *Pangalay* illustrated presentation of folk dances and other related artistic expressions in Sulu (Filipinas Foundation, 1983). This new volume is a feast for the eyes, with abundant and beautiful color photographs and exquisite drawings. It covers a wide range of artistic genres found in the Sulu Archipelago: basketry, cloth weaving, embroidery, appliqué and cutwork, pottery, carving, blacksmithing and casting, and gold- and silversmithing. Of great importance to the researcher are comprehensive classification tables that follow some of the chapters, the most notable being those of the various decorative designs, the designs in mat weaving, embroidery, grave markers, and selected blacksmithing products.

The graphics of this book, at least most of the photographs and all the drawings, are of high quality. In themselves, they bear a well-deserved testimony to the diverse richness of Sulu's visual arts across the years and until now. For me, most stunning is the cover itself that reproduces