Colonial Apostles: A Discourse on Syncretism and the Early American Protestant Missions in the Philippines

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Abstract

The popular discourse pertaining to the colonial experience of the Philippines under the United States is commonly placed within the context of imperialism and its economic motives as a main catalyst for colonial aspirations. The colonial experience, however, is complex and can be explained beyond this conventional view. Colonialism serves as a channel for the accelerated mutation of colonized societies, such that, the colonizers in as much as the colonized are active participants in the dynamics of the colonial encounter. As civilizations interact in a world system, syncretism takes place, which is the blending of elements from different cultural traditions, and the result is that a foreign tradition becomes meaningful in a land far from its origin. Thus, it is possible to re-image the colonizer and the colonized people as beneficiaries of a shared experience. This deviation from the traditional paradigms used to explain the era, has permitted an alternative perspective of looking at colonialism.

The paper focuses on the early events that transpired with the initiation and propagation of Protestantism, as a belief system, through various religious missionary groups during the early stages of American colonial rule; how the Protestants in the United States viewed the colonial acquisition of the archipelago; and why were they welcomed by those who first came in contact with them. The intention is to understand the reasons why Protestantism came to the Philippines and give a picture of the role and influence of the early religious programs on the overall schema of the American colonial experience at its onset. By doing so, it is possible to describe the Filipino response to Protestantism as a result of cross-cultural exchanges that has led to cultural enrichment.

Introduction

The papers’ approach is influenced and guided by the concept --- that as belief systems interact in a world system, cross-cultural conversion takes place through the process of syncretism, which allows the blending of elements from different cultural traditions, which will result in a way that foreign tradition could become “intelligible, meaningful, and even attractive in a land far from its origin” and as a result social conversion takes place in which people and societies adopt or adapt foreign cultural traditions.\(^1\) Conversion through syncretism has three types; conversion through voluntary association, conversion introduced by political, social, or economic pressure and conversion by assimilation. This study describes the Filipino reaction to Protestantism based on these three patterns of social conversion from a historical perspective.

In voluntary association, societies’ influences were caused by political, economic, or commercial alliances with well-organized foreigners. The agents responsible for contacts of societies were merchants who engaged in long-distance trade and eventually remained and established Diaspora habitats in the lands where they traded. These communities also was responsible for the continuous introduction of their culture, tradition, religion, and other aspects of their way of life that some indigenous people would voluntary accept these newly introduced practices and traditions. These conversions were hastened especially when the local elites of the native lands found these introductions appealing to them and at times even served to empower them.\(^2\)

In instances of conversion induced by political, social and economic pressures is caused when states choose as a matter of policy to support the agreements, treaties, and even cultural alternatives at the expense of their own interests, and that since such course of action is mandatory and the people controlled by such a state have no choice to accept. Examples of this are the economic and political colonization by the Asians and later, Europeans in the Americas and in Asia as well, in which the indigenous inhabitants could not do anything but to accept the rule of the new rulers. In this situation, soldiers and missionaries

\(^2\) Ibid, 11-12.
also serve as agents of exchange together with merchants.

In the case of conversion by assimilation that involves a process in which minority groups adapted to the practices, traditions, and standards of a ruling majority since they enthusiastically believe in the political, social, and economic advantages they would gain from accepting foreign cultures.

These concepts are to be utilized in analyzing the nature, scope, and effects of early cultural relations between the Philippines and the United States and see to what extent it brought about a continued cycle of historical contacts and exchanges between cultures that has led to an advantageous regional coherence. Moreover, it is to see how cultural syncretism has changed, modified, and improved national identities within a historical framework.

**Protestant Sentiments in the United States about the Acquisition of the Philippines**

It is significant to point out that the American Protestant reaction to the acquisition of the Philippines is influenced by two general trends that characterized Protestantism in the United States by the turn of the twentieth century. First, was the clamor for the importance of an institutional church that later had a socialistic and humanistic outlook — “A historic Kingdom of God was sought on earth through cooperative projects of discipleship”; and second, is the trend of late nineteenth century Protestantism was its self-assertiveness and strident emphasis on the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons as typified by the American branch.\(^3\) These two major trends serve to explain the succeeding descriptions to capture the essence of the American Protestant sentiment at that time with regards to their country now being a colonial power. As a result, the American understandings and imagery of race as defined by their civilizational-social responsibility—becomes a catalyst for colonial religious motives. Moreover, “implicit of all these forces—nationalism, humanitarianism, imperialism—was a sense of mission.\(^4\)

The historic May 1 battle of Admiral George Dewey in Manila rushed a fury of interests where the Philippines was and became the main issue in all corners of discussions of eager Americans. Few knew exactly where the islands lay; few had any real knowledge of the life and habits of the Filipinos, or of the natural environment of the Islands.\(^5\) Through the months of May to December of 1898 are described as “exciting” for most Protestant churches in the United States and there was a clear support for the expansionist outlook as they supported the war against Spain, then lobbied for the acquisition of the archipelago.\(^6\) This Protestant fervor for the Philippines was also fueled by the fact that the archipelago was the very last country in proximity to peninsular Southeast Asia to open to “Protestant Bible colportage” or mission work; French Indo-China had been opened in 1891 by French missionaries and only in 1903 that Christian and Alliance missionaries from the United States would begin their work in Da Nang, Vietnam.\(^7\) However, it is important to note that protestant Bibles were already in circulation in the Philippines through the American Bible Society; such that in 1853, a total of 1,050 Spanish written Bibles and 100 testaments were sent to Manila.\(^8\) Early exposures, especially after 1834 when the Philippines opened her ports to international trade and the liberal movements in Spain led to the distribution of more Bibles and other Protestant and liberal documents in the Philippines.\(^9\) By 1877, portions of the New Testament were translated into three Filipino dialects and secretly passed around.\(^10\)

The first American Protestant workers in the Philippines from YMCA secretaries and chaplains that came with the volunteer regiments in 1898, who were then followed by members of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) and the American Bible Society (ABS).\(^11\) In reality, the army was expected to go beyond their regular duties as they were assigned to “larger and larger posts for economical,

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5 Ibid, 11.


7 Sitoy, Valentin, T., Jr., *Several Springs, One Stream: The United Church of Christ in the Philippines*, Volume 1, (Quezon City: United Church of Christ in the Philippines), 1992, 1. In the work, Dr. Sitoy states that “the Philippines is the very last country in Asia to open” but I replaced “Asia” with Peninsular Southeast Asia since Dr. Sitoy’s discussion elaborates on other Christian religions in Asia, such as Nestorian Christianity and Catholic Christianity in different parts in Asia. But to be clear when Protestant Christianity arrived nearest to the Philippines, actually begins in French Indo-China which includes Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, thus, my usage of the term Peninsular Southeast Asia of which the three countries are a part of in a geographic collective context.

8 Ibid., 6.


10 Gowing, Peter G., *Christianity in the Philippines: Yesterday and Today* in the Silliman Journal, Vol. XII, No. 2 second quarter (April-June), (Dumaguete City: Silliman University), 1965, 137. The name of the Dominican friar is not mentioned, perhaps to protect that individual, but this is only speculation on my part.

educational, and disciplinary purposes, but their presence in the Islands is beneficial to the cause of order.” With religious freedom installed under American rule, no less than seven Protestant missions from the United States opened new work in the Philippines in the three years between 1899 to 1902. The first ones were the Presbyterians and the Methodists, followed by the Baptists, the Episcopalians, the United Brethren, the Disciples, and the Congregationalists. The Christian and Missionary Alliance also sent some volunteers since 1900, but only until 1905 that they would formally have a Philippine mission. The last evangelical groups to begin work in the Philippines were the Seventh-Day Adventists, in 1906.

The Baptist reactions as reflected in their news publications like the Watchman published in Boston and the Examiner in New York, at that time were focused on the four courses of action that was open to the American government regarding the Philippine situation. These four options are; the archipelago could be returned to Spain, or held in joint protectorate with some other nation, or given to the Filipinos for self-government, or simply be retained. The main reasons for discouragement in sending Protestant missions came in various issues. First was the fact that Catholicism which had three centuries of dominance would create difficulties in converting the people; second, was the reality that homeland problems in uplifting the lives of their own “ethnic minority”, the African-Americans and the American Indians of which the government has done very poorly; third, was the climate of he archipelago; fourth, the distance of the new territory; and fifth, the possibility of the overshadowing of Baptist missions in India and Burma; and lastly, the uncertainty of the Filipino Revolution.

But these pessimist pronouncements where later driven out by the strong motives by expansionist Protestants who believed in the notion that they needed to put the Bible in the hands of the people -- a theological aspiration for the people themselves to interpret the scriptures when translated to the vernacular in the hope to increase literacy.

Thus, the general Protestant sentiment in the Unites States generated some hesitations due to the lack of information and knowledge about the Philippines and as in any new enterprise, the unknown would always be a factor that leads to uncertainty. But eventually, all these uncertainties were overcome by the belief in the Whiteman’s ability, destiny, and heavenly mandate to bring the “light” unto these darkened shores.

Early Filipino Reactions to Protestantism

The entrance in of Protestant bibles into the Philippine in the mid 19th century was an offshoot of the clamor for reforms in the church in the form of secularization and national sentiments for democratic freedoms. As a result, even before the entrance of American missionaries in the Philippines, a number of individuals became Evangelicals and several tiny underground congregations—supported at times by Freemasons—came into existence. This sentiment was felt by Aguinaldo himself as reported by one Bible agent that he looked favorably on the establishment of protestant missions in the Philippines as later proven when he gave his permission for residents in Kawit to convert to Protestantism. In fact, he later sent of his two sons, Esteban and Miguel to Silliman University ran by the Presbyterians; to further this notion of Protestants who believed in the notion that they needed to put the Bible in the hands of the people -- a theological aspiration for the people themselves to interpret the scriptures when translated to the vernacular in the hope to increase literacy.

It is also important to understand that Aguinaldo was sympathetic to the Protestant movement as early as October of 1898 when he appointed Gregorio Aglipay, founder of the Philippine Independent Church, as the Military Vicar General of the Revolutionary Government. The Philippine Independent Church was born out of the Regular-Secular conflicts among the Catholic clergy that was actually caused by racial discrimination against Filipino priests who were denied administration of parishes and other duties by the Spanish friar. It is in this sense that Protestantisms’ acceptance by Filipinos can be viewed as...
a reaction to Spanish religious colonial policies. In fact, the schism of the Independent Church of Aglipay in the religious aspect, contributed to the partial conversion of the Filipinos through their doctrines, especially the non-recognition of the Catholic Pope; as James A. Le Roy, a journalist and staff member in the Philippine Commission, observes in the early 1900’s.

Therefore, indirectly, the growth of the Aglipayan movement meant also the growth of the Protestant faith through doctrine and the later decline of the Aglipayan organization primarily due to the non-acquisition of the Catholic churches they occupied, led to the further blossoming of Protestant denominations due to the doctrinal inertia already introduced by the Independent Church. In the census of 1918 there were a total of 124,575 Protestant Filipinos, 1.3% of the total population. Although some would consider this a less impressive figure considering it has been roughly eighteen years since the introduction of the new faith, conversely, it is impressive to note that it was possible for their numbers to grow despite the odds they faced, especially that of an already deeply entrenched Catholic faith and the initial resistance to American rule. The Presbyterians reaction to the 1918 census was that “We should not rest content until we more and more reduce the difference shown in these figures.” Today, the phenomenal growth of mainstream as well as smaller denominations that later on also grew in numbers is a result of the initial efforts of the missionaries.

From the very beginning, Evangelical Protestantism sought to minister to the needs of the Filipino people which were actually part of the hearts and minds campaign, of the American colonial structure. Institutions founded under Protestant sponsorship played a significant role in putting forth education, health, agricultural development and other types of social services. The earliest institutions were the Presbyterian school of Silliman University (1901) in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental; Central Philippine University in Ilo-ilo (1905) founded by the Baptists; and The Union Theological Seminary in 1907 [now also enjoined in one campus with Philippine Christian University, located in Dasmarias, Cavite]. These institutions fostered social service programs that were a mainstream objective of the American colonial philosophy. Education intertwined with the religious aspect was felt not only by the missionaries themselves but by those entrusted to set up the public system in the Philippines, thus making it a generic guiding element of the colonial framework embodied in the notion of “Christian Education”. C.E. Steele, a Thomasite writes on the “Log of the Thomas”:

The religious sentiment has not been neglected on the good ship Thomas. The fact that so many teachers are going to the islands of the sea carrying the best that a Christian civilization [emphasis is mine] can give to a downtrodden people led many to think seriously of the trust committed to their care, and to give some time each day to the consideration of how to give the richest blessings to our new possessions.

In areas that come under these Protestant missions and generally other places in the archipelago, became peaceful with the help of the US Army, of whom, as mentioned earlier went beyond regular duties, as each company was ordered to assign one soldier to teach English in the schools. Importance in the establishment of an educational system is revealed in the words of W. H. Taft:

There is no real difference between the educated and ignorant Filipino that cannot be overcome by the education of one generation. They are a capable people in the sense that they can be given a normal intellectual development by the same kind of education that is given in our own common school system.

The above statement also reflects the American assessment of the effects of Spanish educational administration and further comments that the Filipinos have to be educated regarding health practices due to the poor sanitation situation in the country. In a letter to the Presbyterian missionary Rev. George W. Wright, Col. E.L. Munson of the Philippine Health Service requested the mission to open two hospitals in Samar and Tacloban due to “highly inadequate facilities for hospital relief in the islands (25 provinces now

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22 Salamanca, Filipino Reaction, 94.
24 Majority of the primary sources are found in the archives of this school. These archives, upon my visits, are a rich source for those interested in American Missions. Although something has to be done to
26 Taft, Special Report, 27.
28 Ibid, 50-51.
Thus, the evident congruence with the political and religious campaign in the archipelago that, indirectly
also appealed to the whims and caprices of the elite leaders of the revolutionary movement and later, the American sponsored Filipino government.

It is evident that the spread of Aglipayanism also meant the spread of the Protestant doctrine since protestant missionaries have been advisers to the dogma of the Independent Church.\textsuperscript{41} Aside for the non-recognition of Vatican authority, other syncretized Protestant beliefs and practices became appealing to the Aglipayans that significantly complements the national sentiments of self-determination. First, was the translation and dissemination in the local dialects of the Bible; second was the practice of the political structure of the church from top to bottom in a congregational manner of which have transparent policies; third, was the freedom of interpretation of the written word and even the acceptance of modern science; and fourth, the election of Bishops was practiced.\textsuperscript{42} Viola R. Smith, a missionary in the Albay-Camarines station reports that “they [Filipinos] have begun by giving out and selling bible portions. This greatly delights them as it makes them feel like real missionaries on their own”,\textsuperscript{43} this practice could have never been possible under previous administrative auspices, and thus the importance of religious self-worth was felt by the Filipinos.

This notion of self-determination was also incorporated in the financial aspect and later on achieved by indigenous churches – “Prominent among the tasks that have engaged the attention of the Albay-Camarines station during the past year has been the promotion of self-support among the churches recently graduated from the financial care of the station”, writes Stephen L. Smith a missionary.\textsuperscript{44} Although the numbers of Aglipayans were more numerous than Protestants, only one tenths of the Aglipayans,\textsuperscript{45} at the beginning phases of the century, this was only the start of a non-Catholic schism that was to spread and grow into many branches in the archipelago in the years to come. These practices and beliefs were suppressed during Spanish friar rule, thus its character of self-determination became appealing as a vehicle for a nation in search of a vehicle to express such freedoms.

Contrary to popular notion, that Protestantism competed with Aglipayanism, the latter, in reality, opened the floodgates for the former; and coupled with the dissatisfaction with Catholicism at the time, ensured a steady flow of Protestantism into the Philippine religious stream.

**Concluding Notes**

In the colonial perspective, it is clear that Protestantism was part and parcel of the whole schema to implant in the archipelago an American stronghold in all aspects. This was possible through the civilizing objective of the new rulers as they considered themselves as the “bearers of light” through education and religion that promulgated political and social reforms through established American institutions. There is a clear cut cooperative link between government and the Protestant missions, although not made officially as with the former colonial ruler that officially stated the legitimacy of Church rule in the archipelago. This situation eventually led to the steady acceptance of Protestantism as a syncretized faith in the islands.

Primarily, the acceptance of Protestantism was because of the support of the new colonial and local elites which has led to voluntary association with the new faith. The former, represented by the leadership of the American politico-economic hierarchy driven by pushing forward an agenda for establishing a strong foothold in the islands; and the latter, from the revolutionary leaders that were driven by the dissatisfaction with the former colonial power and the church served as a source of that dissatisfaction. Because of this support, it created an indirect political, social, and to a certain extent economic motivations on the Filipinos to welcome the faith. Political and social motivations since Protestant missionaries served also as representatives of the colonial government as administrators of educational institutions, health facilities, and other social services. These facilities catered to the needs of the people where they were located, thus seeing their use and benefit, attracted people to the new faith.

Also related to political pressure, in a positive sense, is the fact that nationalism expressed through the Aglipayan Church led to the acceptance of protestant doctrine of which had a most attractive character --- self-determination. Thus, the new faith appeared as one that was in congruence with the popular sentiment of national freedom as espoused by its doctrines as well as being in sync with the popular

\textsuperscript{41} Le Roy, *Philippine*, 95.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} *Annual Reports 1928-1929 Philippine Mission*, Presbyterian Church in the USA.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. Although this is written in 1928, it is evident that from the very beginning it was the intention to make mission churches to be self-governing in all aspects and this testimony is a result of that effort.
\textsuperscript{45} Salamanca, *The Filipino*, 94.
American declarations for benevolent assimilation for the purpose of preparing a nation for self rule. In the economic sense, in areas where these missions were located and established, order was restored, and because of this, regular investments both local and American, were then allowed to continue. Therefore, conversion to the faith was possible also through assimilation since, there were social and economic advantages to it for those who integrated themselves into it through the various educational and social service institutions.

Cross-cultural contacts and exchanges is a process that takes place when civilizations interact through colonization brought about by war and trade. It is an inevitable occurrence that cultures and practices are modified and even lost depending on the degree of adaptation of introduced ideas and new traditions. Accepting this as a “normal” trend in human history, then perhaps events can be understood as transactional occurrences in order to view these experiences from a non-violent and non-confrontational perspective. Thus, allowing us to understand the contacts with other belief systems as a cultural experience of enriching exchanges and not just a consequence of conflict.