philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Protestant Missionaries in the Philipines

Jose S. Arcilla, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 36, no. 1 (1988) 105–112

Philippine Studies 36 (1988): 105 - 12

Review Article

Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines

JOSE S. ARCILLA, S.J.

PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1898-1916. AN INQUIRY INTO THE AMERICAN COLONIAL MENTALITY. By Kenton J. Clymer. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986. xi + 267 pages, map, plates.

Before 1900 non-Catholic Christianity hardly had a chance in the Philippines. Spain, with its *patronato*, made sure only the Roman Catholic faith prevailed in the colony. It could not have done otherwise. Political control of the islands was legitimized by the crown's willingness to plant the Roman Catholic Church there. And yet, as early as 1828, the American Bible Society had already tried to smuggle bibles into the country. There is evidence, too, that by the middle of the nineteenth century, freemasonry had secured a firm toehold in the islands. But these were individual efforts. For, even if some of the colonial officials were members of the lodges, they were, at least openly, careful not to flaunt their anti-Catholicism.

COMING OF PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES

But when the Americans came at the end of the century, the first open efforts to preach Protestant Christianity began in earnest. The occupation army had Protestant chaplains and YMCA officials who confined their ministry to the troops. But in 1899, the American Bible Society named Jay C. Goodrich its first Methodist minister in the Philippines. Soon members of the British and Foreign Bible Society arrived mainly to translate the Bible into the Philippine idioms.

The first Protestant preacher in Manila was Arthur Prautsch. From India where he and his wife had served as missionaries, they came to Manila to try their luck in business. The old zeal revived, prompting him to open a "Soldiers' Institute." When Methodist Bishop James M. Thoburn arrived in February 1899, he licensed Prautsch as its local preacher.

Other missionary groups soon followed. Members of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society arrived in February 1900. By 1916, the Methodists counted 50 missionaries and 45,000 converts in the Philippines. Nine years later, in 1925, their membership rose to more than 65,000, making them the largest Protestant church. The Presbyterians, led by James B. Rodgers, arrived in April 1899, and by 1916, they had 65 missionaries. By 1925, they reported 15,700 members. The Episcopalian chaplain who arrived with the occupation army in 1899 returned to the United States and it was only in 1902, three years later, that two others started a permanent mission. They were followed a year later by Charles C. Brent who stayed until 1918. The Baptists started a mission in Panay and Negros in 1900. A year later, the United Brethren established a center in La Union. By 1925, they had 2,858 converts, among whom was Camilo Osias who helped translate the Bible into the local tongue. In 1901, too, the Disciples of Christ and the Foreign Christian Mission Society began their work in Luzon. By 1925, the Disciples claimed to be the third largest non- Catholic church in the Philippines with 7,326 members. The Congregationalists inaugurated a mission in Davao in 1902, and in 1908, they started a hospital there. The Seventh-Day Adventists arrived in 1905, and by 1925, they reported a membership of 2,924 converts.

There were other missionary groups. The Protestant teachers who arrived at the turn of the century did not confine themselves to academic work but also helped spread non-Catholic beliefs. There were also a few Mormons, the Christian Science Society, the Christian Missionary Alliance who opened stations in Zamboanga which became permanent only in 1907.

Why did they come? They came because they felt they had to. They were convinced they had to discharge the "white man's burden." The revivalist movement in the United States in the 1870s which had resulted in a Students' Volunteer Movement in Massachusetts produced zealous young men and women eager to save the heathen. Inspired by the example of missionaries already in the field, they could not refuse God personally calling them to satisfy the world's need for Christ, to "go abroad . . . the most sacrificial and complete manner of meeting the duty incumbent upon being a Christian" (p. 14).

Was the Philippines not already Christian? It was, but many of the Protestant missionaries considered Latin Catholicism unchristian. Besides, with American secularism, they wanted to forestall the probable loss of the moral values of the "unformed Filipino character." As the Episcopalians put it, they hoped to preserve the "children of nature" from the "corrupting, debilitating aspects of advancing 'civilization'" (p. 16). And, just like the first Spanish missionaries of the sixteenth century, the Philippines seemed to them the gateway to the vast oriental world where millions of unbaptized souls were waiting.

How did they plan to save the Filipinos? Besides preaching the Gospel and erecting churches, they initiated several philanthropic works to supplement their sermons. Although some had initial doubts about the wisdom of this second apostolate, they came to agree that their task in the Philippines was twofold: the salvation of souls and the transformation of Philippine society.

It was never an easy task. All of them were faced with hostility, they were unaccustomed to the local climate, they suffered various diseases, and they put up with a certain deprivation of basic necessities. To their credit, not a few accepted these as part of the cross they had shouldered. But the more serious problem was their personal rivalries and differences in motivation. If their work included social transformation, was personal salvation less important? They could not always favor western Christianity. Not infrequently some found western industrialism a hindrance to the apostolate, to forestall which they "indigenized" *(avant le mot)* the faith, which later led to serious problems when the Filipinos began to agitate for political independence.

It was to solve this difficulty that the Protestant churches accepted the idea of "comity." Relatively exclusive territories would be distributed, and specific spheres of cooperative activity would be agreed on. In 1907, seven Protestant groups formed the Evangelical Union of the Philippines among whom "unwholesome rivalry was non- existent" (p. 35). It also led to the establishment of what is now the Union Theological Seminary in Dasmariñas, Cavite today, and the start of the Silliman Bible School (later expanded to the Silliman Theological School, now part of Silliman University in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental). Later, in 1920, because of declining American population in the Philippines, the Union became the Evangelical Church of the Philippines mainly in order to facilitate their work and avoid confusion due to the multiplicity of Protestantism.

It was not all praise for comity. The Presbyterians and the Methodists, both signatories, always suspected each other, the former accusing the latter of entering what they considered "their" territory. Until about 1925, the Presbyterians had been harboring complaints against the Baptists, whom they accused of rebaptizing their converts by immersion. And the Episcopalians never joined it. Bishop Brent recognized the value of Roman Catholic sacraments, the priesthood, and external cult. And despite Protestant conviction that the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines was "beyond redemption," he saw "value in the mother church and thought it a waste of scarce resources to devote much attention to the already Christianized portion of the population." Nor was he alone. Fr. John A. Staunton, who had arrived in the Philippines a year earlier, declared that "the Episcopalian Church regards herself as one of the historical Catholic bodies. Protestantism and Catholicism are not different phases of the same thing, but mutual negatives of each other" (p. 51). And finally, the Disciples of Christ never could agree with the other Protestant churches regarding baptism and ordination. They refused the Evangelical Union's division of territories besides bringing up certain personal grievances.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES

Perhaps it is unfair to ask what the Protestant missionaries accomplished. The book is limited to a study of the "American colonial mentality," in an effort to reevaluate Philippine-American relations, of which religion is by no means a negligible factor. Statistically, however, the Protestant churches are a decided minority today, and of the estimated 54 million Filipinos, 82.46 percent claim membership in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1903, there were 1,573 Roman Catholic churches (with an average capacity for 4,345 Catholics) and only 35 Protestant ones. Still, one's appreciation of the Protestant effort must take into account how the Protestant missionaries regarded the Filipinos. Just like the Spanish missionaries before them, they both admired and looked down on their prospective converts. With exceptions, they considered the Filipinos inferior (whose racial stock might be improved by interracial marriage--though few attempted it), culturally inadequate (because of unclean personal habits, ignorance of the basic principles of hygiene and sanitation), immoral (given to gambling, drinking, smoking, chewing betel nut, sexual abuses, indolence, etc.). But they also noticed the Filipino's good side: his religious inclination, his neatness, courtesy, dignified bearing, natural artistic abilities, and especially the strength of the Filipino woman. Not surprisingly, Filipino failures were attributed to Spanish Catholic rule. To many Protestant ministers, the Spaniards had made no efforts to link religion and morality, the priests had been a bad influence, the alleged native disposition to laziness had not been corrected. And so, they concluded, there was need to change native attitudes. How else could the Philippines develop, since industrial growth needed disciplined people who did not disdain to work? The Protestant missions, then, were to help the people "use their bodies as instruments of the enlarged mind and soul which are the earliest gift of Christian conversion . . ." (p. 84). Converted to the Protestant churches, the Filipinos could be weaned from the gambling table, taught the value of work and other wholesome physical activities (e.g. sports), at the same time that they would be introduced to democratic processes, justice, and equality as an antidote to *caciquismo*.

Obviously, the Protestants had to accept the fact that the Philippines is a strongly Roman Catholic country. However, most of them did not understand Catholic theology, and their attitude was best expressed in the conviction that Roman Catholicism was unconnected with true Christianity or it did not present the terms of salvation. Catholic honor and respect for the images of the saints they interpreted as idolatry, and because people still practised a number of their prehispanic customs (e.g. during harvest time) the

Protestants jumped to the conclusion that superstition was tolerated. They saw only a wealthy and corrupt clergy who failed to promote morality, closed the Bible to the people, and based the faith also on tradition and not just on holy scripture. At most they conceded Roman Catholicism was a "deficient" form of Christianity.

In 1904, Manuel Aurora, one of the first Filipino Protestant ministers, organized his *Cristianos Vivos Metodistas*. Summoned to explain himself, Aurora broke away from his mother church and had himself ordained minister by his followers. This was quite a reversal to the movement, and the Methodists were concerned others would imitate him. Indeed, in 1906 Agustin de la Rosa broke away from the Presbyterians, in 1908 the Disciples in Pasay split, in 1909 Nicolas Zamora, grandnephew of Fr. Jacinto Zamora of the Gomburza incident, inaugurated the *Iglesia Evangelica Metodista en las Islas Filipinas* (IEMELIF). What led to these schisms?

Political independence had always been the Filipino dream. They wanted to be their own rulers, a desire felt also within the various religious denominations around the country. When the first Protestant missionaries arrived in the Philippines, they coopted Filipinos into their ranks. Soon their converts began to chafe against what they called their "secondary" status as ministers. They claimed their salaries were cut without notice, and they refused to continue to be the "slaves" of the Americans. Zamora's is a case in point. Ordained a deacon of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he was assigned in 1906 to Tondo where tension was high and the Filipinos were agitating for a separate church of their own. At first Zamora was able to restrain them, but in 1909 he joined about 1,500 separatists to start his own IEMELIF. It was said they were against exorbitant marriage fees (which Clymer claims is doubtful). More probably, the cause was the unequal treatment given the Filipino ministers. For example, Zamora claimed Americans were allowed paid vacations in Baguio every five years, while he had been denied it for the last ten years. Interviewed by a newspaper reporter, he accused the Americans of placing "their national prejudices above the teachings of Jesus Christ. By word and action they have for years belittled our capabilities even to the extent of repeatedly asserting to our faces that the Filipinos are not fitted to conduct their own churches" (p. 125).

This is perhaps one of the more significant ideas of the book. By and large, the missionaries believed Dewey's victory over the Spaniards off Cavite and their coming to the Philippines to lay down the evangelical foundations of democracy were part of divine providence. The majority supported the "national purpose," i.e. introduce western politics, western economic practices, and American cultural and spiritual values. The government had to be initially paternalistic, even if opposed by the Filipinos. That is why the missionaries could not logically oppose American use of force against the Filipinos, whose armed resistance they called a "misguided insurrection" which had to be crushed. One could argue that after 13 August 1898 the Americans were in control in Manila, and to oppose this was "rebellion." But the Americans were not yet in control in the provinces and so military operations could be called a war of "conquest." And because the anti-imperialists made much of American military atrocities, the Protestant propaganda in the United States glossed them over. In turn, the military helped the missionaries in various ways, offering them transportation, lodging, facilities for communication, mutual advice, etc. Finally, with the end of military resistance in 1902, the government was free to carry out the "white- man's burden" through hospitals, schools, public works--all to uplift the little brown brother! In this task, the missionary role was clear.

RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT

American officialdom in the Philippines was divided over the presence of the Protestant missionaries, some favoring, others rather critical of them. For example, Frank Carpenter, Governor of the Moro province in 1914-20, showed himself a "'strong friend' of the mission, but was in no sense partisan, and. . . would work just as quickly with Catholics 'if they proved better instruments of civilization' . . ." (p. 185). And more than once opinions of Protestant ministers with regards to vacancies and appointments in the Philippines were welcomed by American decision makers.

For their part, the Protestant missionaries had no inhibitions about condemning American personal failures at least during the first four years of the American occupation. By their attachment to sex and drink, indifference to religious services, greed, supercilious attitude and racial prejudice, the latter were a scandal to religion. Although there were several agencies (e.g., YMCA, the Columbia Club, and a library club in Naga City) to counter these, the ordinary Protestant missionary had serious misgivings lest the aberrations of his fellow-countrymen prove counterproductive. The business group was especially singled out, for although theoretically their coming was "part" of the providential plan to introduce new economic skills and new products, nevertheless the opening of saloons and the sale of liquor, the nonobservance of the Sabbath, and the lack of sympathy for the Filipinos negated whatever positive effects could have followed.

On the other hand, many of the officials of the colonial government received favorable comments from the missionaries. Taft was universally commended, and, understandably, James Smith-was an object of suspicion because he did not hide his Roman Catholicism. Harrison personally presented no problem, but his support of immediate Filipinization did. And, of course, there were a number of officials who were denounced for accepting Philippine assignments only to make money, who considered themselves a rung above the ordinary people, who led immoral lives, drank, and "organized dances" (p. 186).

Finally, there were the school teachers, the most important American group in the Philippines, according to the missionaries. Their work was highly praised "due to the missionaries' view of the intrinsic value of education in developing the individual, partly due also to the need for literacy to read and understand the Scriptures, partly due (especially in the Philippines) to the desire to undercut the traditional Roman Catholicism of the populace, and partly due to a burning desire among most missionaries to impart the best of American traditions and culture to the new wards" (p.187). Nor was this attitude confined to mere words: some of the missionaries were teachers, and some teachers acted as missionaries. In many towns, the teacher was the only American around, often a Protestant, and more often than not he distributed copies of the Bible, held Bible reading sessions, and tried to proselytize for new converts.

Of course, there were also teachers guilty of serious misdemeanor, drawing upon themselves the ire of the Protestant missionaries. Both as government personnel and individual Americans, they were supposed to bring to the Philippines a "new and superior civilization. Yet the representatives of the superior culture . . . seemed to arrive in the Philippines in disproportionate numbers: and the cosequences, the missionaries thought, were potentially tragic. Their very presence called into question the American claims of cultural superiority, and their existence threatened to corrupt totally a culture which the missionaries considered already in a deplorable state." And so, as KJC remarks, it was a "challenge of the first order" (p. 190) that faced the American Protestant missionaries in the first two decades of American rule in the Philippines.

That the Filipinos have been Americanized is clear. American democratic institutions have been accepted and continue to the present day. English, despite its present decline, *is* spoken and read. American music, styles of clothing, and even eating habits have spread all over the country. But one hesitates to speak of a similar success of Protestantism. Why? Besides loyalty to the Roman Catholic faith, the Roman Catholic church itself experienced a rebirth after the few decades of uncertainty early in the century, forestalling any significant Protestant missionaries to make a real impact on the people. It is not without interest that conversion to the Protestant churches generally occured among the less educated and economically less privileged groups.

CONCLUSION

Within the limits he has imposed on himself, KJC deserves congratulations for analyzing an aspect Philippine historians have till now never seemed aware of. Based on primary sources and contemporary accounts, he has described the human dimension of what is essentially a spiritual endeavor. One familiar with the history of the Spanish Catholic missions will be struck by the parallelism in both undertakings. Racism (for which traditional historiography has mercilessly castigated the Spanish friars), cooperation and dependence on government (call it *patronato real* for the Spaniards), cultural indoctrination ("friar control" of education in the words of the nineteenth- century Philippine propagandists), institutional rivalries among missionary groups, personal failures of the missionaries--all these are part of the story of both the Spanish and American missions in the Philippines. Change the names and the dates, the narrative rings a familiar tune!

One or two points need to be brought up. It would perhaps have helped if Filipino poverty and backwardness were specified. Dates of contact between the missionaries and the Filipinos would have helped. The author himself mentions the "second generation" of missionaries, perhaps exemplified by Laubach who was generally optimistic in his assessment of the Filipino. KJC bases his study mainly on missionaries' letters: how many of these were expressions of personal experiences and not an objective assessment of the Philippine missionary scene? For example, Filipino hatred for the Americans in 1903 was widespread; but to take the statement of an individual American Board missionary that in Samar this was manifested by the absence of prostitutes "in spite of the large encampment of American soldiers on the island" (p. 114) is stretching the point. One is not sure whether the statement that "elopement was common in the islands" (p. 128) is the author's or a missionary's opinion. If the latter, the question now is what evidence there was for such a report. It will never do to draw general conclusions from individual missionaries' experiences and contacts which which necessarily were limited.

All in all, however, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines* is a book that should be read by students of Philippine history. It is another contribution to the current effort to understand an experience that rapidly changed a fledging American nation into an international power. In this transformation, whether one likes it or not, a man's religious inclinations must be taken into account.