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## The Proper Use of Documents

W. H. Scott

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# Notes and Comment

(The Editors of *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* have received the following communication from Mr. W. H. Scott of the Episcopal Mission of Sagada, Mountain Province)

## *The Proper Use of Documents*

[The historian] is a good or a bad historian in proportion as he is successful in digging up the true facts and in presenting them as accurately as possible and in the historical context in which they happened. Thus the historian's first task is to be sure of his facts. He must get at the most reliable documents. If these are not available, he must obtain his facts elsewhere from other reliable sources.<sup>1</sup>

The historian has a duty to be objective... The historian who wishes to be objective must go to the sources; seek and utilize, as far as possible, impartial testimony; and take care to prescind from any ulterior end which may distort his presentation of the facts.<sup>2</sup>

The above words, which appeared in earlier issues of this journal, are a ringing declaration of the credo of the historian in his search for truth, a quest which is rather like a delicate plant that flourishes only in a certain rare political, economic and academic climate.

Philippine historiography is at present in a comparatively unsophisticated and impressionable stage, and the work of reputable scholars must inevitably exert an exemplary and formative influence. Fathers Achútegui and Bernad have taken as their subject the life of a man who led a significant religious revolution against the church they serve, and their research has been remarkable for its extent, pleasant presentation, and claim of objectivity.<sup>3</sup> The subject has been one of understandable controversy between Aglipayan and non-

<sup>1</sup> Pedro S. de Achútegui, S.J., and Miguel A. Bernad, S.J., "The True Birth Date of Gregorio Aglipay," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 1957), p. 370.

<sup>2</sup> Achútegui and Bernad, "Bishop Whittlemore's 'History'," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (October 1962), p. 693.

<sup>3</sup> "The True Birth Date of Gregorio Aglipay," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 1957), pp. 370-387; "New Light on Aglipay from the Manila Archives," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 1958), pp. 174-209; "Aglipay's Examination Records," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (November 1958), pp. 437-453; "Aglipay as Ecclesiastical Governor of Nueva Segovia," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 1959), pp. 135-161; "Brent, Herzog; Morayta and Aglipay," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 1960), pp. 568-583; *Religious Revolution in the Philippines*, Vol. I (Ateneo de Manila, 1960).

Aglipayan writers, and claims and counter-claims of prejudice and lack of objectivity are probably too inevitable to invite comment. The purpose of the present paper is not to join this controversy nor to complain that Fathers Achútegui and Bernad are unobjective; rather it is to suggest that their tendency to equate history with documentation, and the subsequent obscuring of considerable deviation from the scholarly tenets of their own credo, is nothing to be imitated.

The recourse to original documents is of course a necessary part of historical research, and insofar as the efforts of Fathers Achútegui and Bernad are characterized by this technique, they are exemplary. Documents, however, may be used in two ways—to find out new facts or to illustrate old arguments. Both ways are legitimate—but the one is research and the other is polemic, and a natural temptation on the part of youth to confuse the two ought not to be encouraged by any example which dulls the distinction. We submit that this is precisely the danger which the style of Fathers Achútegui and Bernad entails, for, in what otherwise appear to be historical essays, they preach such persuasive sermons on the duty of the historian to depend on documents that the mere presentation of a written statement appears to the uncritical reader to be ample proof of whatever conclusions the authors draw. Moreover, a certain aura of infallibility is created by a parade of photostats such as would not be required by the ordinary exigencies of scholarship—for readers who trusted the researchers' integrity would not need them, and others would not accept them.

Once such an atmosphere of inviolability is established, the researcher can stray rather far afield to pick up anything that can be included under the heading "Documents," and build often irrelevant structures on them. The first document presented in *Religious Revolution in the Philippines*, for instance, is the comparatively sterling witness of a baptismal record, while the last is a personal letter against Aglipay written by a man who met him only once, had a fistfight with him, and is so little known to the authors they cannot even identify him correctly. The baptismal certificate alluded to presumably establishes the date of Aglipay's birth and might logically be presented in one sentence of text and one footnote—plus one photograph, if the authors insist. It is therefore difficult to see how an honest desire to establish "The True Birth Date of Gregorio Aglipay" could produce an 18-page article beginning with words like "The poet or story-teller may give free rein to his imagination," and ending with the following innuendo on Aglipay's ancestry, "Some interesting theories could be constructed from the records, but that would take us too far afield." Despite its title, the article devotes most of its space to discrediting the scholarship of other writers not only on this subject but on such extraneous topics as membership figures of the Independent Church, concluding: "The explanation would seem to be

obvious: independent [sic] scholarship has not taken the trouble to dig up the records and verify the date."<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the explanation may not be so obvious: poor scholarship could hardly explain why Aglipay should not have known his own birthday, and biographers who received this information from his lips might be excused for having taken him at his word.

An unexpected perversity of over-reliance on documents is that it engenders such an uncritical confidence that a writer may fly in the face of even such public documents as a Supreme Court decision simply by failing to mention them. On January 28, 1955, for instance, the highest court in the land upheld the 1950 decision of the Court of First Instance of Manila "declaring Mons. Isabelo de los Reyes, Jr., as the sole and legitimate Supreme Bishop of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente,"<sup>5</sup> yet Fathers Achútegui and Bernad refer to him in 1957 as "head of the trinitarian faction of the Aglipayan Church,"<sup>6</sup> and his church in 1962 as the "Trinitarian branch of the movement led by Isabelo de los Reyes, Jr.,"<sup>7</sup> compounding this latter inaccuracy by a 14-line footnote listing other groups of Aglipayan origin with the implication of equal status. That de los Reyes is denied the title of Bishop in the earlier articles is understandable in view of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize the validity of the Anglican succession in which he received consecration, but that he is promoted to this title in the 1960 *Religious Revolution* makes the reader wonder what new documents have occasioned the change of attitude. The change of attitude itself, however laudable from other standpoints, is an offense against the dictum, "By objectivity is here meant the presentation of facts as they are, undistorted by personal sentiment or prejudice."<sup>8</sup>

History is not, of course, a mere succession of documents, for documents often do not speak clearly for themselves, and sometimes appear to say more or less than they mean. Probably for this reason Fathers Achútegui and Bernad try to ensure that even a careless reader draw the same conclusions they do. "The reader will of course readily see the flaw in the arguments,"<sup>9</sup> they say at one point,—and then go on to spell it out; and to the simple documentation of Aglipay's loss of his mother at the age of one year and seven months they append the remark, "For a child to lose its mother at such an early age is seldom without psychological repercussions."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, documents may speak to the fertile imagination of the reader much more than they really say according to the manner of their introduction:

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 379.

<sup>5</sup> G. R. No. L-5917, *Santiago A. Foncier vs. The Court of Appeals, et al.*, Jan. 28, 1955, p. 2 (as printed).

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 378.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 685.

<sup>8</sup> *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 693.

<sup>9</sup> *Religious Revolution*, p. 316.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

sober research would hardly approved an *indirect* quotation introduced by the clause, "In language too strong to be quoted verbatim...;"<sup>11</sup> or the following treatment of a direct quotation: "*Aunque Aglipay tuvo algunas debilidades humanas—y quien no las tiene—pero Aglipay no era mujeriego.*" We prefer not to discuss this last point."<sup>12</sup>

Inevitably, too, the same document has different significance for different historians. Fathers Achútegui and Bernad, for instance, retell a story in which American tourists in Malacañang were amazed to learn that Aglipay's followers were drawn from "the ignorant masses" for abroad his Unitarian endorsements implied an "advanced theology [that] could only appeal to the cultured few." To the Jesuit scholars this story "illustrates the irony of Aglipay's position"<sup>13</sup>—but it might just as readily illustrate an historic fact available to any scholar who associated with those who revere the man's memory to-day, namely, that Aglipay's religious leadership was kerygmatic in a sense many intellectuals and few tourists would recognize.

A more serious abuse of documents encouraged by an attitude of adulation towards them is presenting them out of context, or failing to describe the circumstances under which they were written. For instance: it is in the nature of revolutions—however much we may disparage unsuccessful ones—for property to change hands suddenly and violently; therefore to write a whole chapter on Filipino revolutionaries' seizure of Church properties against a background of legal property rights seems downright fatuous. "The consequences of Taft's proclamation [permitting revolutionaries to retain possession] was anarchy,"<sup>14</sup> our authors write—as well they might have written of the process by which the Archbishop of Canterbury came into possession of his throne but for the fact that Philip II had no George Dewey. The supreme court which reversed Taft's decision would not even have been sitting in Manila were it not for an act of American aggression hard to defend either morally or legally; instead, the issue would have been decided in the courts of a government headed by the man who appointed Gregorio Aglipay the Military Vicar General of the first Philippine Republic.

Another effect of document-worship is a disinclination to believe anything happened which left no written record behind it. Previous Aglipayan biographers recounted a story in which José Rizal influenced Aglipay to become a priest while the two of them were chatting and fencing together during their school days, and while Fathers Achútegui and Bernad do not invoke the absence of documents to disprove the story—for what kind of documents would two men have left of a fencing conversation?—much the same effect

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 500 n.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

is achieved by quoting somebody else: "The learned Filipino scholar, Dr. José P. Bantug, finds no foundation for the story beyond the statement of Aglipay's biographers."<sup>15</sup> On the grounds of what is presumably logic they conclude that since some of the ideas Aglipay is quoted as saying Rizal expressed were not typical of Rizal's published opinions of that date, the whole story "may safely be dismissed as a myth." By "myth" they must mean "lie" for there are men still living to whom Aglipay told this story as a first-person account while passing the very house in which he claimed the incident took place. The possibility of an old man's having exaggerated an actual historic event of his youth through years of retelling seems to have been ruled out. Yet in the absence of documents the only basis for concluding that the story was made up out of whole cloth would be if such an act were typical of the man's character. The research of Fathers Achútegui and Bernad have convinced them that this is just the sort of man Gregorio Aglipay was, and they present various documents to illustrate his character with an honest announcement of their purpose.

The attempt to establish a man's personal character by documentary evidence can be rather venturesome excursion for the historian, for quotations from personal correspondence may testify as to what a writer thinks about somebody else, but give little clue as to the writer's right to this opinion. Fathers Achútegui and Bernad devote a special appendix in *Religious Revolution* to printing two documents of this sort, although other documents are relegated to the appendices of a promised but unpublished second volume.<sup>16</sup> These are two letters written by the superintendent of the (Episcopal) Mission of St. Mary the Virgin in Sagada in 1913 to his employers for the purpose of reporting a personal altercation with the visiting Aglipay and to establish his own innocence—certainly evidence no judge would admit without hearing the defendant's side of the story. The incident is insignificant, and the letters are insignificant, but the attention they receive suggests they must be essential evidence of the main argument of the book.

Episcopalians seem to be accepted by Fathers Achútegui and Bernad as particularly reliable assessors of Aglipay's morals. They unequivocally state: "That Bishop Brent, who was clearly in sympathy with the Aglipayan movement, and his Episcopal colleagues—White, Staunton, and Johnson—should have chosen, for reasons of moral principle, to have nothing to do with Aglipay and his church, is the most telling condemnation of that movement."<sup>17</sup> They regularly refer to the Episcopal Church with dignity and respect, and

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Appendix B, pp. 525-528.

<sup>17</sup> *Religious Revolution*, p. 409.

say it "holds doctrines in common with the Catholic Church."<sup>18</sup> They state that "Bishop Brent, unlike many protestant missionaries, entertained the highest respect for the Catholic Church as such and refused to proselytize among Catholics,"<sup>19</sup> afford him a three-page biography of his own, and quote him a dozen times in *Religious Revolution*, mainly as a star witness against Aglipay's character.

A more careful study of this great man's life and times, however, would have made it clear that, like other big-thinking Americans of his generation, he judged the moral behavior of other races from the vantage point of what he himself called the Anglo-Saxon way of life. As an honest turn-of-the-century American imperialist, he considered it a Christian virtue to confront other men with the straightforward disregard for their *amor proprio* which was no less offensive to non-Americans then than it is today. In letters quoted by Fathers Achútegui and Bernad, he frankly reports having insulted Aglipay to his face; he shows his ignorance of the gentlemanly circumlocutions common to the world's older cultures by complaining, "Aglipay... said that the reason he did not answer my second communication was because he was away in the provinces: I do not believe him for a minute"<sup>20</sup>; and he demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of, and sympathy for, Filipino psychology in advising Aglipay, "If you are in earnest you ought to be as frank on paper as you are in conference."<sup>21</sup> What self-respecting Filipino would make a formal request for consecration of an American House of Bishops and run the risk of so cosmic a rebuff without first feeling out the probable response? Far from being quoted as an authoritative witness against the character of a brother priest, Bishop Brent's treatment of Gregorio Aglipay may be adjudged in the fullness of time a strange blind spot in the life of a man whose whole career was marked by vision.

Yet even Brent himself seems at times to have been aware that part of the problem was cultural and Aglipay basically a fairly sincere fellow with problems of his own. This is indicated in a passage from which our authors have chosen to quote only one sentence but which, if quoted in full, would have given the reader a better under-

The Filipino is as fickle as the wind. Even before these words reach those for whom they are written, Sr. Aglipay may veer off in another direction, so that I shall get no response, or else a communication of polite nothings, in acknowledgement of the above letter. However little his written statement denotes it, his great desire is to be connected with historic Christianity. The Methodists have paid him consideration attention, but neither in doctrine nor in policy do they possess what would satisfy his followers. I attribute his failure to put in writing all that he said to me, partly to that suspicion that is never wanting in the Malay, and partly to the fear that his acknowledgement that he does not possess episcopal orders might be made public in such a way as to be used to the confusion of the Independent Church.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409 n.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

<sup>22</sup> "Private Addendum to Report on Religious Conditions in the Philippine Islands," 1904, pp. 117-118, Brent Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

standing of the situation.

The reconstruction of a man's moral character by document reaches its most hazardous point upon inquiry into his sexual habits, and it is sincerely to be hoped that future scholars will not follow Fathers Achútegui and Bernad's lead in handling this subject. Their first reference is the quotation of a bit of irresponsibly scurrilous gossip by Episcopal missionary Mercer Johnson, whose good judgment could have been fairly assessed by a quotation from the third page of the same letter, "I think the RC Church here, quite as much as Tammany Hall in New York City, is one of the strongholds of the powers of darkness, an enemy of truth, and an enemy of purity."<sup>23</sup> The second stands in remarkable contrast to the first by invoking unimpeachable sources with a reticence that amounts to understatement. It is one of the rare instances in *Religious Revolution* where documents are left to speak for themselves—a wittily dramatic presentation of a newspaper clipping, a tombstone epitaph, and two entries recorded by the Registrar of Deaths and the Marriage Registrar of the City of Manila which reveal that Aglipay had fathered a child out of wedlock. Yet, in so delicate a matter as a man's moral reputation, even such reticence as would be suggested by good taste can deprive a judge of full insight into the case, for judgment is not passed on even the meanest felon without inquiry into the circumstances under which his crime was committed. In this case, the reader would have been in a better position to render true justice to the accused, even if not to condone the crime, had Fathers Achútegui and Bernad submitted some such testimony to the circumstances as the following passage from a document in which they have shown great confidence—Bishop Brent's "Report on Religious Conditions in the Philippine Islands" of 1904.

No one but a blind partisan, afraid to recognize and face painful facts, seriously denies any longer the grave moral laxity that has grown up and still lives under the shadow of church and *convento* (parsonage) in the Philippines... It is considered no special discredit to either party concerned—certainly not to the man—if a temporary contract is entered upon between a man and a woman, to be terminated when expedient... Many—I use a conservative word—many Filipino priests have a personal lot and share in the *costumbre* under discussion, either in its less or its more revolting form. Their grown-up children bear witness to the strong continuance of the custom. The fact that the people consider it is not a serious lapse from righteousness on the part of their spiritual leaders, added to the publicity which often accompanies it, proves that it has been unmolested, if not winked at, by the hierarchy for a long time.<sup>24</sup>

Mons. Isabelo de los Reyes, Supreme Bishop of the Philippine Independent Church, cooperated with the research of Fathers Achútegui and Bernad in good faith, candidly answering questions in personal interviews and lending documents from the Aglipayan Archives. Such cooperation bespeaks a deep love of truth and the conviction

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Bishop Brent, 30 June 1904. Brent Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>24</sup> Reprinted in full in *Spirit of Missions*, Vol. LXIX, No. 9 (9 Sept. 1904), New York, pp. 658-669.



that the perusal of documents will lead to that truth. Since the publication of *Religious Revolution in the Philippines*, he has directed that these archives be closed to future Jesuit research. Perhaps he has become a wiser man by observing what can happen to documents when they become a sort of sacred cow.

W. H. SCOTT

## Reply to Mr. Scott

### I

The first document which Mr. Scott mentions is the baptismal entry in the church register in Batac, Ilocos Norte. In fairness to us, we would like Mr. Scott—and our readers—to review with us the reasons why we have attached so much importance to that baptismal entry.

Before we published our article on "The True Birth Date of Gregorio Aglipay" to which Mr. Scott objects, there had been some confusion about the exact date of Aglipay's birth. The exact date—indeed the exact year—was a controverted point. The *Encyclopedia Americana* said that he was born "about 1864." The well-known *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada* of Espasa gave his birth date as 7 May 1870. Here then were two standard encyclopedias giving two different years for Aglipay's birth. On the other hand, almost all other writers gave an entirely different year; namely, 1860.

Which of these three years was correct?

Among those who were agreed on the year 1860, there was a difference of opinion as to the exact day: some believed it was the 7th of May; others, the 8th; others, the 9th. Again, which of these three dates was correct?

The 7th of May had few adherents but they included two well known names: Retana and Foreman. The 9th of May had many more adherents. These included Camilo Osias, George Malcolm, Manuel Artigas, Juan M. Ruiz, Leon O. Ty, James Robertson, as well as the *Directorio biográfico filipino*. The weekly newspaper *La Verdad*, which espoused the Aglipayan cause, in its issue of 21 January 1903 carried the statement: "*El Arzobispo Aglipay nació en Batak, Ilocos Norte, el 9 de Mayo de 1860.*" An Aglipayan calendar of 1904 contained the following entry for 9 May: "*Nacimiento del Ilustro Gregorio Aglipay en 1860*"<sup>1</sup>

The 9th of May, therefore, seemed to enjoy the weight of authority—except that the 8th of May also had many adherents, including,

<sup>1</sup> For bibliographical details see *Philippine Studies*, 5 (1957), 370-387.