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# What Aglipayans Believe

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ENRIQUE L. VICTORIANO. S.J.

**L**IKE any other religious organization the Aglipayan church proposes a certain body of doctrines or beliefs to its membership. Indeed, Aglipayans are wont to claim that they have everything the Catholic Church has with the exception of allegiance to the Roman Pontiff. It is because they take this claim at its face value that many people refer to Aglipayanism as a schismatic rather than a heretical movement.

Certainly, a considerable number of the laity who joined the movement in its early stages did so largely because of anti-friar sentiment, and since the Roman Pontiff represented the ultimate authority behind the friars it was easy to direct their resentment against him also. But theirs was an emotional rebellion against authority rather than an intellectual repudiation of long-held beliefs. They cut themselves off from Rome in protest against the wrongs, whether real or imaginary, of the Spanish friars; but they clung as long as they were able to the Roman Catholic doctrines which the friars had taught them.

But what of the leaders? It is surely pertinent to recall in this connection that Gregorio Aglipay, even when still a priest in good standing, was already noted for certain ill disguised "liberal" tendencies; and that Isabelo de los Reyes, the co-founder of his church, was an enthusiastic disciple of the British Bible Society, had read widely in the literature of anarchism, and had introduced socialism to the Philippines.

If the rank and file of the movement continued to say the prayers which they had learned in the Catholic Church and to take part in rites which they fondly believed to be the same as the Mass, the leaders had far different ideas. What these ideas were may best be gathered from the official documents of the Philippine Independent Church itself.

The *Oficio divino de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, edited by Isabelo de los Reyes and approved by Gregorio Aglipay, was obviously meant to be an official handbook for all Aglipayans.<sup>1</sup> It is divided into two parts. The first part, entitled *Novísimo Evangelio*, is described as

the General Gospel of the Philippine Independent Church carefully expurgated of heresies and interpolations and completed from the writings of Moses, the prophets and the apostles. Unified, interpreted and expurgated of the thousand interpolations and contradictions which are to be found in the canonical books, in the light of the writings of the prophets and apostles and other most ancient codices preserved in the libraries of Jerusalem, Rome, England, France and Spain.

This "general Gospel" is divided into 31 sections to provide reading matter for every day of the month. Here is an excerpt from the First Day, in which the name of God (Yahweh) and his nature is explained:

YHWH corresponds exactly to BTHL, the letters with which Filipinos up to the arrival of the first Spaniards in our archipelago (1521-1571) were wont to write the name of God, Bathala. For, like the Hebrews, they wrote only the consonants.

God is one and there is no unity like unto His. In Him there exists but one person, one essence, one spirit. The Father of the Universe was made incarnate in Jesus. It was the divinity that hid itself under that appearance of man who was called Jesus Christ, and the Lord stated a great truth when He said, "I and the Father are one." The soul of Jesus was God; whether another Soul exists whom the platonic Christians call the Holy Spirit is by no means certain. Much less is it certain that there exist three divine persons, for then there would be three essences and three distinct spirits and consequently three Gods. Of such errors . . . there is not the slightest trace or mention in the Old Testament or in the true First Gospel, that of St. Mark.

Let this, then, be our general norm in reading the Gospel, that where the Master says "Father" His divinity is to be understood, and

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<sup>1</sup> Barcelona, 1906.

where "Son", His humanity. And what is called "Holy Spirit" is nothing more than the spirit of Jesus, not a distinct person.

The unequivocal denial of the doctrine of the Trinity shows how far beyond a mere schism official Aglipayanism had gone by 1906. And the Trinity was not the only article of Catholic belief to go by the board. Original sin is denied on the Seventh Day: "Jesus once again affirms that He came to evangelize us, not to redeem us from an imaginary original sin;" and on the Thirtieth Day, Christ's redemptive mission:

Jesus definitely abolished all sacrifices . . . Jesus was most just and died a hero's death; in spite of that, however, we see that we do not cease to be sinners . . . Moreover His sanctity and His crucifixion do not redeem us from an imaginary original sin or from other sins.

Hell is abolished on the Fifteenth Day: "Just as the command to pluck our eyes out and cut off our hands and feet if they lead us to sin is to be understood metaphorically, so is the saying that our bodies shall be cast into an imaginary hell, or eternal fire, equally metaphorical. The pretended eternity of punishment is utterly false—*falsa de toda falsedad*."

The second part of the *Oficio Divino* is the "Culto Eucarístico". It is called a "missal" and might be said to be the Aglipayan Book of Common Prayer. It states definitely what the official Aglipayan religious service is *not*. It is not the Sacrifice of the Mass. "There is no such thing as transubstantiation nor sacrifice; only an homage of filial piety to God and a remembrance of Christian fraternity united in a sacred symbol."<sup>2</sup>

The second document we wish to examine is called the *Cátedra* or *Sermonario de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, edited by Isabelo de los Reyes.<sup>3</sup> It is a compilation of speeches and sermons by both De los Reyes and Aglipay, and it is said to be "most necessary for all Aglipayans because it rectifies and completes our previous books." The following is from a speech of Aglipay before a convention of the American Unitarian Association in Boston, Massachusetts, in June, 1931:

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Manila, 1932.

We discard all dogmas and ancient traditions, for these were evidently creations of infantile minds when man was just beginning to acquire his reason . . . Consulting the latest discoveries in physics, we have not found anything which proves the existence of the supposed spirit . . . We do not believe in creation but only that matter and life or conscience, which others call the spirit, form an eternal substance. We believe that original matter, ether, heat, light, electricity, magnetism, gravity and life or reason, are manifestations of the one supreme cause which is God who is life and is the great mover of the Universe, the principle of all life and movement.

The following is from a speech of Aglipay delivered on December 26, 1924. Note what he has to say on Christ's divinity and compare it with what was said above in the "Novísimo Evangelio":

With these immortal teachings Jesus transformed the world wondrously. But let us not exaggerate our admiration for Jesus by transforming Him into a God, for thus we would commit a gross error and reduce the gigantic moral stature of the Master.

From the remarks of Isabelo de los Reyes under the section entitled "Reorganización de Nuestra Iglesia" we have the following:

In our previous works let the words *soul* and *spirit* be erased and in their place write *life* or *being* where it is necessary; and write *transformation* for *death*.

Let us practice what we preach in order not to become a laughing stock. For example . . . recently our wise Bishops and Apostles let out such a polemical blast in the Manila press against the Mass and other teachings of the Catholics that they attracted the approval of impartial observers, and even of Catholics who are freethinkers, because of the wisdom of their doctrines and the abundance and truth of their proofs; and if we should now go on celebrating Mass, we will give our adversaries an advantage...<sup>4</sup>

Juan A. Rivera, one-time Governor of La Union (1934-1937), is the author of an unpublished M.A. thesis entitled *The Aglipayan Movement*.<sup>5</sup> We quote from the thesis:

Due to the fact that the Independent Church has retained most of the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church, people get the mistaken idea that its ideology must be the same as that of the Roman Church. In

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> University of the Philippines, 1932.

theology the Independent Church is farther from the Roman Church than Orthodox Protestantism itself.

In line with this avowed theological policy, the Church put out a new version of the Gospel conveniently arranged in thirty-one days . . . The unity of God is a cardinal point. The belief in the Trinity is repudiated.

Heaven, hell and purgatory, as places of definite destination for souls, are entirely repudiated. The threat of eternal punishment is a fraudulent theory to whip the people into blind obedience.

Aglipayanism, taking sides with Unitarianism, daringly asserts that modern science should be placed above the Bible. Not that the Bible should be discarded, but that the parts of the Bible which do not bear out the discoveries of science must be discarded as obsolete and dangerous.<sup>6</sup>

In February, 1936 Aglipay gave a speech before a group of prominent Filipinos. The speech is recorded by Santiago López in a booklet called *Mons. Aglipay y la Religión del Porvenir*. This speech is one of Aglipay's more startling pronouncements. In the beginning, when the movement was still young, Aglipay put forth his ideas rather tentatively. In fact, the early ideas seem to have come more from the facile pen and nimble mind of De los Reyes than from him. Now in his 60's, his thinning hair turned white, his face stern and unsmiling, he speaks out in a voice that brooks no contradiction.

The Christian churches have claimed the exclusive right of interpreting [Jesus Christ] and have fallen into the most abject error. The Filipino Independent Church alone has left this task to the wise so that it may garner from their impartial observations the most faithful and the most reasonable interpretation of the role of Jesus in the progress of humanity.

There was a time when men were full of gratitude and love for Jesus. They deified him, elaborating his apotheosis with the legend of his resurrection. But modern man, progressive by nature, feeling the same gratitude and love, is not content to entertain the same childish delusions.

After conscientious study and unceasing efforts to reform religion, we are eager to divest Jesus of this artificial raiment . . . Jesus did not die on the cross, neither did he rise again. If we analyze even casually the gospel stories, we shall find sufficient proof that Jesus did not die on the cross. Medical science teaches us that in a corpse

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<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*

the circulation of the blood ceases immediately. The fact that when Longinus speared the side of Jesus at five o'clock in the afternoon to determine his condition he saw blood and water spurt from his side evidently shows that he was still alive. . . . Jesus was provisionally laid in a new sepulchre where he was given medical first aid and was later transferred to a more appropriate place.

Having thus summarily divested Jesus of his divinity and accused Him of abetting what would have been history's greatest hoax, namely His resurrection from the dead, Aglipay now pays Him this one last tribute:

Jesus was not without his faults. For many years now we have been maintaining that, undoubtedly, the son of Joseph and Mary had to struggle with the same temptations we wrestle with. The gospels show many of his faults and marks of littleness. Our Church, in its official books, has condoned his errors as arising from the complicated problems of his great historical role. Jesus lived and labored as a man, not as God. Our church so asserts!<sup>7</sup>

Here are extracts from *The Faith of the Independent Church*, a statement by Isabelo de los Reyes, Jr., son of the founder and one of Aglipay's successors as *Obispo Máximo*:

Our Church has retained from the Roman Catholic Church all that was found reasonable and harmless. Its vestments and many of its magnificent ceremonies that possess so great an appeal for the Filipinos and other artistic peoples were retained, but with a rational interpretation. . . . We accept the leadership of Jesus as the greatest Master of men, but we acknowledge him not as God but as a man, not exempted from certain frailties common to all humans. We maintain always that modern science must inspire our doctrines; hence since our establishment we have declared that through evolution man has become what he is today. We admit no miracles. We always have maintained that the Bible has many interpolations and inaccuracies. Yet we consider the Bible as a holy book with many excellent lessons. We believe that all the scriptures of the world contain good.<sup>8</sup>

The following is from *The Seven Sacraments Used in the Independent Church* by the same author:

The Independent Church considers the Sacraments as a collection of ritualistic prayers through which we ask God for special graces. We deny that these Sacraments have any intrinsic virtue.

<sup>7</sup> In López, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> This statement is published in *THE PHILIPPINES CALLING* by Louis C. Cornish (1942).

Baptism was the ancient rite of washing one's body before entering the temple. We do not hold that Baptism cleanses us of original sin. We hold that Baptism is a visible profession of a faith in God and the teachings of Jesus. Confirmation . . . we presume that this sacrament was not established by Jesus. Confession . . . we confess only to God . . . those who wish to do so may confess to their priest. Communion we consider as a survival of the brotherly dinners that Jesus held with his poor disciples. We also hold that the Communion Service is the memorial of the Last Supper of Jesus with his Apostles. Although we keep the form of the Mass of the Roman Church in large measure, our service differs essentially. It is a memorial, and we deny that the bread and wine are offered as a sacrifice. We deny transubstantiation. Extreme Unction . . . we symbolically touch the sick persons with oil. Ordination . . . we do not accept the theory of Apostolic Succession. Matrimony perfects the legal union of a man and woman.<sup>9</sup>

*The Initial Rites of the Philippine Independent Church* is a booklet which claims to be a guide to Aglipayan rites and religious ceremonies. The author, B. E. Figueras, undertakes the difficult task of copying Catholic rites and ceremonies while at the same time being different. The result is, to say the least, curious. It is not known how widely accepted the booklet is among Aglipayans themselves. It is evidently the work of a sincere member of the sect, but both contents and style fall below the standards set by Aglipayanism's leaders. What is of particular interest to us, however, is that on page 65 of the *Initial Rites* we see the familiar Apostles' Creed, used universally by the Catholic Church and expressing belief in the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the resurrection of the body and other Catholic dogmas elsewhere denied by Aglipayans. The author makes a concession to consistency by means of a footnote explaining the article "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." He says: "*Catholic*, according to Webster and the Christian sages, means any Church that believes in Christ."<sup>10</sup>

Juan M. Ruiz is the author of a biography of *The Three Pillars of the Philippine Independent Church*. In his introduction to this book, Isabelo de los Reyes, Jr., has this to say:

Our people have had no quarrel with the doctrines and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Their protest has solely been directed

<sup>9</sup> In Cornish, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> INITIAL RITES (Vigan, 1947).



against the secular abuses of the Spanish clergy, and the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* despite certain unitarian leanings in its past remains a truly Catholic and Apostolic Church with all the universally accepted tenets of the Christian Faith but totally emancipated from any foreign superiority and mastery.

The delay encountered in these negotiations drove Mons. Aglipay to lean more and more on the friendship and assistance so generously proffered by the Unitarians. However, while the great mass of the people remained profoundly loyal to their leader, they were not influenced by his theological deflection towards Unitarianism, but tenaciously retained their Trinitarian faith. Gradually all traces of heretical teachings were eliminated so that the Church, in 1947, could issue an Orthodox Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion unanimously approved by the Supreme Council of Bishops and the General Assembly.

The Philippine Independent Church . . . accepts the statements of the faith contained in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and the Bible as the Word of God and that nothing which cannot be proved by Holy Scriptures is to be held as necessary to salvation . . .<sup>11</sup>

In its early days Aglipayan belief consisted in the denial of one Catholic dogma after another with very little that was constructive to fill in the void thus created. In recent days, when there is nothing more to deny and the vogue of rationalism has spent itself, the leaders of the sect seem to go back on their previous assertions and are looking for a fresh start. In the process they offer no apology for turning their backs on everything that their founders stood for. Either that, or else the matter of doctrinal beliefs is considered of so little importance that what is white today can be black tomorrow. Anyone, it seems, may become and remain an Aglipayan no matter what he believes in, provided that he is steadfast on one point: opposition to Rome.

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<sup>11</sup> THREE PILLARS (Manila, 1947).