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## **The Episcopalian Missionary Encounter With Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, 1901-1916**

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## Notes and Comments

### The Episcopalian Missionary Encounter with Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, 1901-1916

KENTON J. CLYMER

Following the "splendid little war" of 1898, as Secretary of State John Hay put it, the United States wrested from Spain lands that would comprise its first significant pieces of overseas real estate — Puerto Rico, Guam, and most important of all the Philippine Islands.<sup>1</sup> Protestant Christianity had, by and large, supported the war and the ensuing imperialistic outburst; and even before the war was over, major Protestant denominations made plans for the religious conquest of the fields that seemed about to open to them.<sup>2</sup>

Although the turn-of-the-century missionary movement attracted widespread support in the United States, the new fields had one peculiar embarrassment: the large majority of the population was already Christian, though of the Roman Catholic persuasion. Missionaries could easily justify their activity among heathen populations. But was it a proper use of time and money to proselytize among Roman Catholics? Did not the very effort raise serious questions about a true Christian spirit? In short, was a Protestant presence justified?

1. During the course of the war, Hawaii was also annexed, though it was not a part of the Spanish empire.

2. On Protestant support for the war and expansion, see Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Baltimore, 1936), pp. 279-316; Gerald H. Anderson, "Providence and Politics behind Protestant Missionary Beginnings in the Philippines," in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Studies in Philippine Church History* (Ithaca and London, 1969), pp. 279-300; and Kenneth M. MacKenzie, *The Robe and the Sword: The Methodist Church and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Washington, D.C., 1961), especially pp. 88-103.

No missionary body found these questions more disquieting than did the Episcopalian. The church's traditions were clearly closer to Roman Catholicism than other Protestant denominations; yet the Episcopal Church has always contained lay persons and clergy with widely divergent attitudes toward the mother church. This was certainly true of Episcopalianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To some, Episcopalianism meant Anglo-Catholicism; only the absence of a Pope kept the church from being Roman. Others felt that Roman Catholicism contained theological and doctrinal errors of more than passing significance, and that it had, in addition, become little more than a temporal power interested in wealth and influence. It had, they felt, lost its spiritual power; in short, it had become corrupt.

The Episcopalian mission in the Philippines reflected this divergence. On the one hand was Fr. John A. Staunton, Jr., founder in 1904 of the famous Episcopalian Sagada mission in the mountains of Luzon. Staunton worked closely with the Belgian Fathers stationed in the same area, incorporated as much Roman Catholic ritual and doctrine into Episcopalian services as was possible, and strongly resented "Protestant" leanings in the church's hierarchy. When in Manila, he normally attended mass in the Catholic cathedral instead of worshipping in the Episcopalian church. And when the mission board, strapped for funds, proved unable to continue the Sagada mission on the scale Staunton thought necessary, he attempted to have it turned over altogether to the CIMM Fathers. After more than two decades of dedicated service, he returned to the United States where, after a few years, he embraced Roman Catholicism and accepted a position in the philosophy department at Notre Dame University.<sup>3</sup>

While the irrepressible Staunton was establishing the mission in the mountains, the Reverend Mercer Johnston, rector of the prestigious Manila cathedral, was trying to convince Bishop Charles Henry Brent that the church should emphasize its Protestant aspects. Like Staunton, Johnson was an intense man with strongly held convictions. He abhorred public immorality, for

3. Charles Henry Brent, "Opportunity and the Orient," *Spirit of Missions* 81 (June 1916): 410-11; William Henry Scott, "Staunton of Sagada: Christian Civilizer," in *Hollow Ships on a Wine-Dark Sea and Other Essays* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp. 69-102. Scott's essay appeared originally in the *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 31 (December 1962): 305-39.

example, as deeply as did his Protestant colleagues. When the Manila municipal government sanctioned a cockpit at the annual carnival, for example, Johnston castigated the officials in a colorful sermon entitled, "A Covenant with Death, An Agreement with Hell."<sup>4</sup> Not a few parishioners withdrew in protest over the fiery discourse. "At heart he is a rabid Protestant," confided Brent, with a touch of amusement, to a fellow bishop.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not to proselytize among Filipino Catholics was the central question. Johnston encouraged Brent to undertake evangelistic work among Catholics in Manila. The initial call for missionaries, made at a time of considerable ignorance about conditions in the islands, contemplated work among Filipinos who were thought to be disenchanted with their historic faith. Even Fr. Staunton, one of the first group of four missionary appointees, fully expected to find Filipinos "eagerly waiting for our ministrations."<sup>6</sup>

Staunton soon concluded, however, that there were few if any Catholic Filipinos interested in joining the Episcopal church. On the contrary, he found that the people were, by and large, deeply religious and attached to their church, a church that had, thought Staunton, served them well on the whole. The Episcopal mission, therefore, should find a way to put "new roots down into the soil" instead of chopping "at the old ones." Protestant baptism of Catholic Filipinos, he contended, was too often "a sacrament of hate." "It is better to plant a forest," he concluded, "than to cut and pile cord wood."<sup>7</sup> Walter C. Clapp, another of the first group of Episcopal missionaries, agreed. Like Staunton, he was initially tempted to the islands by the prospect of "native" work, but he soon came to feel that for the most part the people were devoted to the Catholic church. If widespread infidelity developed later, a prospect Clapp did not rule out given the secular impera-

4. Preached in the Cathedral of St. Mary and St. John, Manila, February 23, 1908, copy in Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs Relating to the Philippine Islands, National Archives, Washington, D.C., file 6633. (Hereafter cited as B.I.A. file ---).

5. Copy, Charles Henry Brent to Arthur C. A. Hall, 19 December 1906, Charles Henry Brent Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

6. Alexander C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent: Crusader for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia, 1948), p. 47; Scott, "Staunton of Sagada," pp. 74-75; John A. Staunton, Jr. to George C. Thomas, 10 December 1901, Philippine Islands Mission Correspondence, Archives and Historical Collections of the Episcopal Church, Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas. (Hereafter cited as Philippine Mission Correspondence).

7. John A. Staunton, Jr., "Some First Impressions which Remain After a Week's Residence in Manila" (unpublished manuscript), especially pp. 6-7, Philippine Mission Correspondence. See also Staunton to Thomas, 10 December 1901, *ibid.*

tives of American rule, the Episcopalians would be justified in working with the nominally Roman Catholic population. But for the present, he concluded, "It does not seem to us right to have any part in introducing confusion or revolt."<sup>8</sup>

#### BRENT ON PROSELYTIZING

Bishop Brent, who arrived in the Philippines in 1902 and remained until 1916, in spite of numerous tempting offers to return to the United States, preferred to allow his clergy considerable latitude in doctrinal and liturgical matters.<sup>9</sup> He could, therefore, easily tolerate the extremes represented by Staunton and Johnston, for he recognized the spirit of God in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic faiths. He was so broad-minded in fact that the more doctrinaire Staunton, in an intemperate and largely unfair letter written in 1920, commented, "Bishop Brent's whole career has been marked by 'wobble'."<sup>10</sup> But on the question of converting Catholics, the bishop was steadfast. Except when the people in a given area had been totally abandoned, he abhorred such action and therefore confined Episcopal undertakings almost exclusively to the American and European communities and to non-Christian Filipinos, notably the mountain peoples of Luzon and the Muslims in the southern islands. Thus, when Johnston advocated establishing work among Filipinos in Manila, Brent agreed to consider a school, but no more.<sup>11</sup>

Brent's disapproval of proselytizing among the Catholic population was doctrinal in character. Though differences existed between the two churches, Brent felt that the mission should "lay stress on our points of contact" rather than on inessential theological distinctions.<sup>12</sup> "There has been altogether too much . . .

8. Walter C. Clapp to Arthur Seldon Lloyd, 21 August 1902, *ibid.*

9. For a good overview of Brent's career in the Philippines, see Zabriskie, *Brent*, pp. 44-122. Zabriskie does not, however, discuss Brent's relations with Catholics in the Philippines at much length.

10. Scott, "Staunton of Sagada," p. 98. By contrast, Brent's defenders say that the bishop was entirely too tolerant of Staunton, that his decision to place Staunton at Sagada was "the worst mistake in judgment he made in the Philippines." Zabriskie, *Brent*, p. 63.

11. Copy, Brent to Hall, 19 December 1906, Brent Papers.

12. Charles Henry Brent, "A Study of Missions Among a Primitive People" (manuscript), p. 5, *ibid.* See also Charles Henry Brent, "Religious Conditions in the Philippine Islands," *Spirit of Missions*, 69 (September 1904): 666-67.

abuse of Roman Catholic theology by men who have never studied it first hand," he wrote in 1914.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to seeing considerable value in Catholic theology, Brent and other Episcopalians gave the Roman church credit for its historical contributions to the Philippines. "That measure of Christian belief and practice which the mass of the Filipino people enjoy today," Brent wrote, "is the fruit of the labors of the Spanish friars and Jesuits." Spain's motive was religious, not commercial, he pointed out. Spanish Catholicism saved the populace from Islam, provided the strongest unifying force in the islands, and inculcated such virtues as domesticity, love of children, and hospitality, he thought.<sup>14</sup>

All in all, then, Brent professed a desire to avoid interfering with Catholic work in the Philippines. When appropriate, he encouraged and commended cooperative ventures. He publicly praised Staunton in 1916, for example, for "working on friendly terms with the Roman Catholic clergy who are laboring in that [Sagada] district." Though admitting that the Catholic clergy might feel obligated "to present something of an opposition" on occasion, Brent gave the impression that whatever opposition existed was of little concern. "I am as proud of that relation to that great venerable Roman Catholic Church," he told his mission board in 1916, "as I am of our relationship with the various missions of the Protestant communions."<sup>15</sup>

The unwillingness to carry on evangelistic work among Filipino Catholics set the Episcopalian mission apart from other Protestants who found ample justification to convert Catholics. But this should not be understood to mean that relations between Episcopalians and Roman Catholics were smooth. On the contrary, there is evidence of considerable friction. Brent's soothing words to the mission board in 1916, for example, incensed Edward A. Sibley, Episcopalian missionary at Bontoc, the capital of Mountain Province, not far from Sagada. "Only blind optimism or entire ignorance could characterize [Catholic opposition] as 'something of an opposition'," he wrote to Brent, parroting the bishop's words.

13. Charles Henry Brent, "The Years that are Past. III. The Uttermost Parts of the Earth," clipping, identified as *The Churchman*, 28 February 1913, B.I.A. file 12848.

14. Brent, "Religious Conditions in the Philippine Islands," pp. 662-63.

15. Brent, "Opportunity and the Orient," pp. 410-11. This is a published version of an address Brent delivered to the Episcopal Board of Missions on May 10, 1916.

For the past eight years, Sibley recounted, the opposition had been determined, tenacious, crafty, and unscrupulous. Though the missionaries had refrained from public criticism, in fact the situation had "tried our souls to the uttermost." Furthermore, Catholic harrassment in Bontoc reflected the world wide posture of the church, Sibley thought. "There is not one scintilla of evidence to show that as far as Bontoc is concerned the Roman Catholic clergy is any different from what it ever has been."<sup>16</sup>

Though Sibley directed his angry remarks to Brent, the bishop more than half agreed with him, at least in private. For if Brent found little to criticize in Roman Catholic theology and was adamant on the proselytizing question, he was not blind to the church's faults and was well aware of Catholic resistance. In fact, Brent arrived in the Philippines sensitive to alleged Catholic weaknesses. A stopover in Rome on his way to Manila enhanced his suspicions. Although he had cordial conversations with leading Catholic clerics at the Vatican and was deeply impressed with the "benign expression and emotion" of the Pope, he came away from the Holy City with a sense of the church's materialism, its grasping worldliness, and its unscrupulous methods. "Surely, surely," he wrote, "no religion can be blest that tampers with truth, that schemes and plots to gain its own ends, that winks at the dishonorable." And he anticipated confronting Catholicism in its "worst character" in the Philippines.<sup>17</sup>

What Brent found in the islands confirmed his fears. Citing instances where the Catholic church had apparently engaged in criminal activities to gain its ends, Brent confessed almost complete disillusionment. "Until the last few years my mind turned toward Rome with a measure of sympathy and veneration," he wrote after eighteen months in the Philippines; "against my will that has all gone. As I see her abroad she is a world power, nothing more," he added, "unless it be that sometimes she is the enemy of Christ in morals as well as in policy."<sup>18</sup>

Particularly irritating to Brent, and other missionaries, were Catholic attempts, both overt and covert, to undercut Episcopalian efforts – or at least so the missionaries thought. "There are

16. Edward S. Sibley to Brent, 25 August 1916, Brent Papers.

17. Brent to Hall, 23 July 1902, *ibid.*

18. Copy, Brent to Hall, 13 November 1903, *ibid.*

indications that the Roman church is going to use all means possible to loosen my hold on the people that we have succeeded in reaching," he wrote in 1905. ". . . I am not a violent opponent of the Roman Church as a Christian organization," he added, "but as a mode of intrigue and as a political meddler, and as an institution that uses methods unworthy of the name Christian and hardly that of moral, I shall oppose it to the bitter end." Like missionaries from other churches, Brent thought the Catholic church was obstructing the mission's efforts to purchase property in Manila; the church was also opposing Episcopalian work in Sagada, Bontoc, and Baguio. Even Fr. Staunton found himself resisting the Catholics. "I told Staunton," Brent wrote in amusement, "that it was an edifying sight to see him fighting the Roman Catholics."<sup>19</sup> Two years later Brent felt that the church was opposing construction of an Episcopalian hospital, and in 1908 he privately chastized the church for its political intrigues.<sup>20</sup>

Brent's published comments on relations with the Catholics were more circumspect, but even in print the bishop was sometimes critical, even pointedly so. In 1903, for example, Brent wrote in *The Spirit of Missions* that the church had neglected Filipinos for decades, had lusted after wealth and power, and lacked veracity. Sounding very much like a Protestant critic of that age, Brent contended that the Christianity of the masses was "so purely nominal that it would be no indignity to the Roman Church were an earnest effort made to win them to religion,"<sup>21</sup> a remarkable statement given his outspoken devotion to avoiding competition with the Catholics.

#### BRENT ON CATHOLIC CLERGY

One element that Brent was quite willing to discuss publicly was the incompetence and immorality that he perceived among the Catholic clergy, particularly the Filipino clergy. An extended trip through northern Luzon early in 1903 convinced him that the

19. Brent to Bishop Lawrence, 26 April 1905, *ibid.* See also Brent to Frederick G. Morgan, 13 May 1905, *ibid.*

20. Brent to John W. Wood, 13 April 1907, Philippine Mission Correspondence; Brent to Wood, 2 May 1908, *ibid.*

21. Charles Henry Brent, "The Church in the Philippines," *Spirit of Missions* 68 (September 1903): 636-38.

Filipino priests were "incompetent where they are not bad," a situation he ascribed to the deliberate policy of the Spanish friars who wanted to keep the indigenous clergy ignorant and dependent. "The *Frailles* wanted *muchacho*-priests," he wrote in a scathing indictment, "and they certainly got them."<sup>22</sup> Shortly thereafter, Brent traveled to Panay and found similar conditions. "We learned nothing encouraging about the work of the native padres," he wrote.<sup>23</sup> By mid-1904, Brent had reluctantly concluded that immorality was rampant. "Inch by inch I have been forced back by the pressures of the facts from the position I originally held that there was a minimum rather than a maximum of immorality," he concluded.<sup>24</sup> Few missionaries from other Protestant denominations condemned clerical immorality in stronger terms than Brent, and some were notably less outspoken.<sup>25</sup>

At one time or another, most other Episcopalian missionaries were also critical of the Catholic church's performance in the islands. Even before Brent arrived, Fr. Staunton himself concluded that, despite its many fine qualities, the church had failed to produce "love of righteousness, justice and truth in its closest adherents" because it aimed always to control rather than to develop the people.<sup>26</sup> Hobart E. Studley, who operated the church's mission to the Chinese community in Manila, wrote that the priests considered him and his followers to be heretics,<sup>27</sup> while the same year Walter C. Clapp suggested that the detested Dean C. Worcester, a senior official in the insular government who had allegedly attempted to block Episcopalian efforts to acquire land for the Bontoc mission, remained in office only because of Catholic influences.<sup>28</sup>

22. Charles Henry Brent, "The Church in the Philippine Islands," *ibid* 68 (November 1903): 793.

23. Charles Henry Brent, "From Iloilo to Capiz," *ibid* 69 (July 1904): 507.

24. Brent, "Religious Conditions in the Philippines," p. 664.

25. James B. Rodgers, the dean of the Presbyterian mission, told a gathering of Protestant missionaries in 1905 that many of their earliest judgments of the Roman Catholic church had been superficial. "Lessons from Five Years of Protestant Work in the Philippines" (manuscript), dated 15 March 1905, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Board of Foreign Missions, Missions Correspondence and Reports, Microfilm series, reel 287, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

26. Cited in "Philippine Problems and Possibilities," *Spirit of Missions* 67 (March 1902): 166.

27. Hobart E. Studley to Lloyd, 13 January 1908, Philippine Mission Correspondence.

28. Clapp to Wood, 9 July 1908, *ibid*.

Whether or not the replacement of Spaniards in the church hierarchy with Americans made any substantial difference in the conduct of the church, as perceived by Episcopalians, is not entirely clear. Surely they anticipated better days, for they often insisted that American Catholics were several cuts above their Spanish brethren and would be just as quick to condemn the lapses of the church as they. But what finally emerged was a changeable and ambivalent picture.

Bishop Brent's early comments on the new hierarchy were full of hope. "I am very favorably impressed with the recent appointments of the Roman Catholic Church in the Islands," he wrote to Secretary of War William Howard Taft. The new archbishop of Manila was, he thought, "a spiritually minded man, modest and earnest," and all of the bishops treated Brent cordially. Though theological differences remained, of course, he saw "no reason why we should not work shoulder to shoulder in matters that relate to civic and national life, as well as in moral questions."<sup>29</sup> Indicative of his optimism, the bishop wrote glowingly for publication about the new hierarchy. The new clerics, he stated, would be just as shocked as any Protestant at the low state of morality among the clergy and would, he was sure, try to reform the church — though he feared that the church's celibacy requirements posed great problems in this regard.<sup>30</sup>

Yet at almost the same time that Brent's words were appearing in print, the bishop was at the White House agreeing with President Theodore Roosevelt that Frederick Rooker, Catholic bishop of Jaro, Panay, was apparently "devoid of true American spirit, and would like to enforce once more the oppressive methods of the Friars." And, he added, "I am afraid [Bishop Dennis] Dougherty [of Nueva Segovia] is not much better." But only a few months later he confided to another prelate that "the Roman bishops are good men and I think the present Apostolic delegate, Monsgr. [Ambrose] Agius, is a man of character as well as of ability."<sup>31</sup>

To some degree, these contradictory statements are explained by the difference between Brent's public statements and his

29. Brent to William Howard Taft, 6 February 1904, William Howard Taft Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, microfilm reel 42.

30. Brent, "Religious Conditions in the Philippines," 665.

31. Copy, Brent to Edouard Herzog, 28 July 1905, Brent Papers.

private beliefs. Publicly, the bishop usually managed to avoid derogatory comments about the new hierarchy, partly, one senses, to preserve whatever influence he might have with the archbishop. In 1906, for example, he attempted privately to secure the support of Archbishop Jeremias J. Harty for the Moral Progress League, a non-denominational (but Methodist inspired) organization to reform public morality.<sup>32</sup> Though it is doubtful if Harty would have cooperated with the League under any circumstances, Brent must have felt that discretion in his public statements would enhance whatever influence he might possess.

Sometimes Catholic opposition caused Brent to lower his guard; but when he did he seems to have regretted his impetuosity. In 1907, for example, Brent complained in private correspondence of Bishop Dougherty's decision to place Belgian and German Fathers in Sagada and Bontoc, where the Episcopalians had already established their work. He could, Brent felt, have located the Fathers in any number of areas in the province that were completely unchurched. "I wonder how the spirit of Christ can remain in the Church that does such things," he wrote to Walter C. Clapp.<sup>33</sup> The unchristian spirit (so Brent believed) that animated Catholic intrusions into Bontoc and Sagada seems to have festered, for the next year Brent's sense of indignation overcame his natural caution, and in an article intended for publication, Brent lashed out at the Catholic hierarchy for forbidding social intercourse with the Episcopalian missionaries and for intruding on territory manned by Episcopalians, particularly when there were thousands of unchurched people elsewhere in the mountains. "Oh when will Christians learn," he lamented, "that proselytizing from other Christian churches is as hateful to our Lord as the same spirit among the Jews was hateful to Him when he was on earth! . . . When will we come to see that the defamation of the character of one Church by another is as despicable as the defamation of one man by another!"<sup>34</sup>

32. Brent to Wood, 18 July 1906, *ibid.*

33. Copy, Brent to Clapp, 22 May 1907, *ibid.* See also Brent to Wood, 20 May 1907, Philippine Mission Correspondence.

34. Charles Henry Brent, "Among the Mountain Tops" (manuscript article), enclosed with Brent to Wood, 21 November 1908, Philippine Mission Correspondence. Brent's article was published as "Among the Philippine Mountain Tops," *Spirit of Missions* 74 (February 1909): 88-94.

But Brent shortly recanted, apologized personally to the archbishop, and retracted some of his views in a letter to the editor of the *Outlook*:

I have had reasons to modify my judgment of several aspects of the affair. I do not think that the Archbishop of Manila had anything actively to do with it. I was hasty in my characterisation of their intrusion, and the methods employed on the occasion of the visit of the Bishop of Nueva Segovia [Dougherty] were fortunately not repeated. I told the Archbishop that I was sorry that I spoke, or rather wrote, in the terms that I used though I added that I considered that what had been done was detrimental to the highest spiritual interests.<sup>35</sup>

Brent's public attack on the American-dominated hierarchy in 1908 (published in 1909) appears to have been his last. It may be that the real changes that did take place in the church (though they came slowly) eventually convinced Brent, as they did many other missionaries, that hopes for a reformation in the Catholic church were being fulfilled. Perhaps then, Brent's statements in 1916 to the Episcopal mission board, that the Belgian Fathers, though officially needing to "present something of an opposition," really felt at heart the "the church of God is one, and that the work we are doing is part of the great work of the Catholic Church," represented his mature views.<sup>36</sup> Responding to Sibley's letter that took issue with his characterization of relations between Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, Brent confessed that "all you say has its elements of truth . . . . On the other hand," he continued,

I deprecate as I have always deprecated, the *spirit* of rivalry. It may be that I am too optimistic in my estimate of the situation. Nevertheless, it is my fixed judgment. The main point is that we have all the opportunity we can possibly use. Even if from time to time we do have direct interference, the magnitude of the opportunity is not thereby seriously affected.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Brent's final words on the subject suggest that after nearly fifteen years in the islands he had reached a philosophical peace of mind. Admitting in private that there was a Catholic opposition

35. Copy, Brent to Ernest H. Abbott, 2 July 1909, Brent Papers.

36. Brent, "Opportunity and the Orient," p. 411.

37. Copy, Brent to Sibley, 16 October 1916, Brent Papers.

and that the new hierarchy had not fulfilled all of his hopes, little would be gained by public recriminations. Such denunciations would align him too openly with the other Protestant missions, thus alienating his "High Church" supporters and undercutting whatever influence he might have with the Catholic hierarchy. Furthermore, real changes had taken place. Besides, in the final analysis, as he put it, "we have all the opportunity we can possibly use."