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Churches and Sects in the Philippines

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Review Article

Churches and Sects in the Philippines

IN this small volume* Dr. Elwood of Silliman University presents much useful information. This is more than a Directory. It is also, as the subtitle indicates, "A Descriptive Study of Contemporary Religious Group Movements in the Philippines." Despite references to the Roman Catholic Church, however, this study is largely confined to Protestant and other religious bodies outside the Roman Catholic Church.

These bodies are numerous. As Dr. Elwood indicates, there are in the Philippines some 350 organized religious groups. Most of these are of post-War origin. One hundred churches or sects were organized within 12 years after World War II. The number of indigenous groups organized after the war is 210 (or 67% of the total). Of these indigenous groups, 14 are "Rizalists" and 7 are "Spiritist" sects.

In the space of two years (from March 1965 to March 1967) 90 new churches or sects were registered for incorporation. There are also 64 Bible-training schools sponsored by at least 34 different groups.

Besides the churches registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission, there are other non-registered but organized religious groups. Questionnaires were sent to these groups, but only one-third of them sent in replies. Unfortu-

*CHURCHES AND SECTS IN THE PHILIPPINES. A Descriptive Study of Contemporary Religious Group Movements. By Douglas J. Elwood, Ph.D. Dumaguete City: Silliman University, 1967. ix, 213 pp.

nately, Dr. Elwood does not give any indication as to which of the churches are or are not registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission. This makes it difficult to check the reliability of the data given in the Catalogue.

In effect the data given are those submitted by the respective organizations. From previous experience we know that such claims are not always accurate and can not always be taken at face value.

CONCLUSIONS

In Chapter 2 (pages 26-29) the author summarizes his conclusions from the data compiled. These conclusions (entitled "Results") are sufficiently interesting to repeat here:

(1) The most obvious result of this survey is that the Philippines today has at least 350 separately organized religious bodies or regional associations of greater or lesser Christian orientation—twenty others being interdenominational in character—which is possibly the largest number of any country in Asia.

(2) One-third of the total number of religious bodies catalogued are "transplanted" from abroad, or enjoy partial support from overseas in terms of subsidy, personnel, literature, or equipment. There is no exact correlation between "foreign corporations" and "foreign" organizations because many "domestic corporations" are backed by mission agencies overseas, and this relationship is not always indicated in the registration papers.

(3) Eighty-two per cent of all the foreign mission agencies currently operating in this country identify with the independent wing of Protestantism, ranging from the narrowly ecumenical to the exclusively *separatist*.

(4) In terms of membership, eighty per cent of Evangelical-Protestant Christians—taken alone—belong to independent groups.

(5) In terms of personnel, the Philippines has at least 1,380 officially appointed, non-Roman Christian missionaries from abroad, only 400 fewer than the total number of Roman Catholic foreign priests (1,800).

(6) In terms of personnel, again eighty-four per cent of all non-Roman Christian missionaries in this country represent

independent mission agencies from abroad. The trend since the Second World War has been clearly in this direction, as our comparative growth studies show. The seven member-bodies of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines evidence an aggregate increase of only 16 per cent, over the past decade, whereas the seven largest independent denominations of foreign origin show a phenomenal combined increase of 112 per cent during the same period.

(7) The concentration of growth, both in number of separate organizations and membership, is obviously post-War. Eighty-two per cent of all the organizations catalogued originated or began their work in the Philippines after World War II. Ninety-five per cent of these post-War groups identify with the independent wing of Protestant Christianity, the largest grouping being organizations of the pentecostal type.

(8) Sixty-seven per cent of the organizations listed are more or less indigenous, 210 of which also began in the post-War period. At least one-third of this number appear to be the products of schism.

(9) Only sixteen per cent of all known indigenous organizations are of the "independent Catholic" type, but they represent five and one-half per cent of the general population, and more than all Evangelical-Protestant Christians combined.

(10) Of the organizations catalogued 124 remain "unclassified," in some cases because not enough information is available, in other cases because the facts known indicate that the organization has deviated too far from historic Christianity — "catholic" or "evangelical" — to be considered a viable "heresy." Even these, however, should never be treated as fixed and static, but may be expected to undergo change, as the history of the dynamics of religious movements would indicate.

Not all of the above conclusions possess the same degree of validity. But Numbers 6 to 10 are particularly enlightening.

One interesting fact is the annual loss suffered by the religious organizations that comprise the National Council of Churches (NCCP). During the decade from 1955 to 1965, these churches have suffered a net loss of 1.6% per annum.

By contrast, other Protestant groups, and in particular the three largest denominations of foreign origin, have re-

gistered an increase of 86% during the same decade. These three denominations are: a) The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel; b) The Assemblies of God; c) The Southern Baptist Church. The denominations under (a) and (b) are both pentecostal.

These figures, if accurate, would mean that whereas the Protestant churches taken together grew by only 66% between 1952 and 1962, these three particular denominations (which have entered the Philippines since the second World War) grew phenomenally at the combined rate of 539%.

This is indeed a phenomenon. But, as Dr. Elwod himself points out in a footnote (page 44, footnote 15), the figures must be taken with caution. "This may be somewhat misleading" (he says) "because percentages of growth rate are always much higher when the membership figure is still small."

The point is well taken. An organization that begins with only 5 members and gains another 5, may be said to have increased by 100%: the percentage is impressive, but the actual increment comprises only 5 members.

PROLIFERATION

The official titles of some of the newer denominations are noteworthy. One church, organized in 1947 in Abra, is called: "Filipino Assemblies of the First Born, Philippine Branch, Incorporated". A pre-War sect organized in Candelaria, Tayabas, was called "Iglesia Sagrada Filipino ng Cinco Vucales y Virtudes Tierra Santa de Jerusalem". One sect organized in 1951 in Nueva Ecija is called, "Samahan ng Amangkaamaamahan at ng Inang-kainainahan". (Society of the Father of Fathers and the Mother of Mothers.) Another founded in 1949, with headquarters at Tinago in Surigao, calls itself "Timaan sa Balaang Laway ni Hesus" (Mark of the Holy Saliva of Jesus).

One important point should give food for thought not only to the founders and followers of new denominations, but also to students of the religious situation in the Philip-

pires. Dr Elwood calls attention to this point in two places. On page 67 he says:

There is in this country—as also in other Asian countries of Christian missionary influence — the parallel development of indigenous “sects,” as deviations from the dominant “faith,” alongside foreign “denominations” which, when transplanted to the Philippines, constitute a phenomenon still somewhat alien to the national culture as a whole. Filipinos who are more amenable to American influence may be expected to adhere to one of the “denominations” transplanted from abroad, whereas Filipinos who are more nationalistic in spirit may be expected to attach themselves to one of the indigenous “sects.”

On page 35 he again adverts to a similar point.

A number of other religious organizations, registered as “domestic corporations,” are “indigenous” in the sense that they are relatively free of direct foreign support and control, but “foreign” in the sense that they are “carbon copies” of identical organizations abroad. One might conclude that the tendency to adopt American ways uncritically, is another significant factor leading to the reception of separate mission agencies from abroad.

FIGURES

The following summary figures will give an idea of the religious situation in the Philippines outside the Roman Catholic Church:

Total number of groups:	368
Registered with SEC	298 (80%)
Not registered	70 (20%)
Foreign	120 (33%)
Indigenous	248 (67%)
Pre-War	65 (18%)
Post-War	303 (82%)
Ecumenical pre-War	13 (18%)
Ecumenical post-War	10 (5%)
Independent pre-War	19 (62%)
Independent post-War	174 (95%)

It is not Dr. Elwood's fault but that of his sources that the figures given in this Directory are not always accurate. In fact, the figures are in many cases merely guesses. This fact is evident from an examination of Chapter 5. Of the 175 churches and sects catalogued, 149 give their membership in round numbers. For example:

United Pentecostal Church:	10,000
Iglesia Patriota de N.S. Jesucristo:	25,000
Philippine Independent Church:	1,600,000
Alaph Divine Temple:	90,000

Dr. Elwood apparently accepts those figures at face value, adds them up meticulously, and comes up with totals like the following:

Pentecostal and Holiness Movements:	104,693
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The *totals* are exact. But the components are in round numbers.

MISLEADING FIGURES

These round numbers have been received a little too uncritically. And this can be misleading. Two examples will suffice:

For instance, the "Iglesia ni Kristo" (INK) is credited with 500,000 *adult* members. Since the average Filipino family consists of 4 or 5 members, an *adult* membership of half a million *could* mean a total membership of from two to three million. That, in fact, is the claim of the INK, a claim which Dr. Elwood's figures of 500,000 "adult members" would seem to warrant.

Yet the 1960 Census credited the INK with a membership of 270,104. That figure included all individuals of all ages. Assuming that in the past eight years the INK has kept pace with the growth in population, the INK today could well have half a million members of *every age* — not half a million "*adult* members."

Dr. Elwood's figures are likewise misleading with regard to the Philippine Independent Church (PIC) which is given

as 1,600,000. The Census of 1960 gave the *total* number of Aglipayans as 1,114,431. That figure included *all* Aglipayan bodies, including the PIC. The PIC by itself—apart from the other Aglipayan bodies—must have had considerably less than that number.

The Aglipayans over the past several decades have been *decreasing* in proportion to the growth in population. If therefore the PIC—which had less than 1,114,431 in 1960—has 1,600,000 in 1968, there must have been a sudden and phenomenal reversal in its growth patterns in the past eight years.

This point has in fact been treated in our work (*Religious Revolution in the Philippines*, Vol. II. Manila, 1966) and it is disappointing to us that no account has apparently been taken of that work.

This carelessness with regard to figures is regrettable because it detracts somewhat from the value of an otherwise excellent study.

There is also a certain looseness in the use of terminology. To mention only one instance, the term "Protestant" is sometimes used strictly, excluding organizations of "Catholic" tendencies like the PIC. At other times, it is used in a more inclusive sense, including the PIC and the INK.

ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The extraordinary proliferation of religious denominations in the Philippines in the short space of 68 years since 1900 is somewhat alarming. Three hundred and fifty is a large number. "The Philippines has a far greater number and variety of separately organized religious groups of greater or lesser Christian orientation than any previous cataloguing would indicate." This is an important fact which must be taken into account by all who are interested in promoting ecumenical relations.

Of the 530 churches and sects, one-third have been transplanted from abroad or are receiving financial and other

assistance from foreign churches or missionary societies. This is not entirely a happy situation: in the past 68 years, the missionary endeavour in the Philippines of foreign Protestant missionary societies has not tended towards unity but towards division among Filipino Christians.

Again it is noteworthy that 82% of the religious organizations included in this Directory are post-war organizations. Of these post-war groups, 95% "identify with the independent wing of Protestant Christianity, the largest groupings being organizations of the pentecostal type." As Dr. Elwood points out, the more independent Protestant groups have not been ecumenical in tendency. The more ecumenically-minded groups are greatly outnumbered. The total membership of the NCCP-related bodies is only 274,000, as against 1,146,000 who belong to independent Protestant groups. Eighty per cent of evangelical Protestants in the Philippines are outside the ecumenical movement.

The same non-ecumenical trend may be seen in the number of ministers. The total number of missionaries representing agencies *related* to the World Council of Churches is 217 (18%). But the total number of missionaries representing agencies *unrelated* to the World Council of Churches is 1,163 (82%).

On the other hand, against this overwhelming proportion of non-ecumenical or anti-ecumenical Protestant groups, there is what the author calls "a growing spirit of ecumenism among the moderately conservative Protestant groups of an intentionally restricted kind" (pages 36-37).

These facts, brought to light by Dr. Elwood, are important in assessing the actual strength of the ecumenical movement among Protestants in the Philippines. The ecumenical movement (among Protestants) is in fact confined to the seven churches which constitute the NCCP and a few other groups. Since ecumenism is a two-way street, it is probably towards this small group that Catholic ecumenical efforts should be directed at the start.

THE TOTAL PICTURE

There are a few other ambiguities in Dr. Elwood's book, which we need not mention in detail, except perhaps one small point. In referring to the status of Protestantism in Taiwan, only one work seems to have been consulted: *The World Christian Year Book 1962* (page 27 footnote 1). But other works of reference might usefully have been consulted. For instance the *China Year Book 1959 to 1960*; *The Taiwan Christian Year Book 1964*; the *Christian Year Book, Centennial Edition of Taiwan* (1965); and the *China Year Book 1966-67*. Hellington Ton, *Christianity in Taiwan*, might also have been consulted (especially Chapter 17). The number of Protestants in Formosa is at present probably over 300,000.

More important than these small points is the total picture given. That picture is not in focus. The Roman Catholic Church in Dr. Elwood's presentation is only one of many religions, and there is little indication that its sociological or cultural impact is greater than that of the others.

For instance, on page 167, Dr. Elwood gives a list of "International Christian Agencies Represented in the Philippines". There are 15 such Agencies listed, among them the Gideons International, the United Bible Society, and the Roman Catholic Church.

To put the picture in focus, it should be remembered that of the 27 million inhabitants of the Philippines in 1960, over 22 million (or nearly 84 per cent) were Roman Catholics. The Muslim constituted nearly 5% of the population, and "others" (including Buddhists and Animists) another 2.2%.

The Aglipayans (5.2%), the Protestants (2.9%), and the INK (1%) together constituted a total of less than 10% of the entire population: and it is to *this* 10% that the Churches and Sects treated by Dr. Elwood belong.

The above indications and others that could be made do not detract from the fundamental value of the book. It has intrinsic merit. The author must be congratulated for

his positive contribution in clarifying facts and aspects that were rather confused. His book is the best of the directories of non-Roman Catholic churches in the Philippines that have been published so far. A second edition with some corrections, and the companion volume announced by the author, will make the work truly useful.

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