

The Roman Catholic Church and the Discontents of Philippine Society Under Spain: A Freudian Dilemma

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Religion played a key role in the colonial project of Spain in the Philippines. Spain's colonial enterprise used the Church as an instrument to pacify the natives and make the people submit to Spanish rule. Consequently, the missionary priests became the real figures of authority in the local level and their superiors in Manila the masters of the colony. Throughout the Spanish period the religious authorities played a dominant role in civil affairs because of the theocratic nature of the Spanish monarchy.

Using Freud's views regarding religion and his arguments about the human aggressive instinct as well as Isaiah Berlin's concepts of liberty, this paper attempts to offer another way of looking at the role played by religion in the cultural fiber of Philippine society during the Spanish period. It tries to answer the question: was Spain's "civilizing mission" in the Philippines better equipped to cope with the inherent instinct of aggression or did it contribute instead to the discontent of the people and increased their resentment against Spanish colonial rule?

The Church suppressed the aggressive nature of the people through Christian indoctrination. The Church, amongst others, offered the hope of paradise and the threat of hell to make the native converts follow the moral laws it imposed. But in their effort to establish a "civilized" society by restraining the aggressive instinct of the natives, the Church, in-effect, also curtailed the peoples' positive and negative liberties and created so much discontent.

KEYWORDS: Spanish colonization, civilizing mission, religion

Religion was one of the categories used by the western European nations to justify their acquisition of colonies abroad. It was a vital feature of Europe's "civilizing mission," a presumed responsibility to improve the conditions of African and Asian peoples. The Civilizing mission of the West "gave a moral dimension to arguments for imperialistic expansion that were otherwise limited to economic self-interest, strategic considerations and national pride. It enabled its adherents to defend violence and suffering as necessary but temporary evils that would prepare the way for lasting improvements in the condition of the subject peoples... Because of it, nineteenth-century European colonizers could speak of conquest as 'liberation' or 'deliverance' and of repression as 'pacification.'"¹ Thus, Spain came to the Philippines to "civilize" the natives whom the westerners perceived as barbarians and savages.²

Using Sigmund Freud's views regarding religion and his arguments about human basic instincts—specifically the aggressive instinct—as well as Isaiah Berlin's concepts of liberty, this paper attempts to offer another way of looking at the role played by religion in the cultural fiber of Philippine society during the Spanish period. It tries to answer the question whether the "civilizing mission" of Spain in the Philippines was better equipped to cope with the human inherent instinct of aggression according to Freud or whether it contributed instead to the discontent of the people, and eventually increased their resentment against Spanish colonial rule.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud claims that the features of civilization include beauty, cleanliness and order. Freud, however, asserts that "No feature seems better to characterize civilization than its esteem and encouragement of man's higher mental activities—his intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements—and the leading role that it assigns to ideas in human life," foremost of which are the religious systems.³ When Spain conquered the Philippines it had three objectives in its policy toward the islands, its only colony in Asia: to acquire a share in the spice trade, to develop contacts with China and Japan in order to further Christian missionary efforts there, and to convert the Filipinos to Christianity. Only the third objective was eventually realized, and even this was not completely achieved because of the active resistance of both the Muslims in the south and the Igorots, the upland tribal peoples in the north. Nonetheless, it could not be denied that they have been effective in establishing their Church in the Philippines. Roman Catholicism, without doubt, is the most lasting imprint Spain had left in the Philippines. Indeed, the

Church was a vital tool used by the Spaniards to “civilize” the natives.

To understand better the role of the Church in Philippine society during the Spanish period it is important to note that being the institutional religion of the colonizer, it played a key role in the affairs of the state. During the time of Spain, the missionary priests were the true authority figures in the local level and their superiors in Manila the masters of the colony. The clergy became the real representatives of the Spanish crown and supervised the affairs of the colony.⁴ Throughout the Spanish period the religious authorities played the dominant role in civil affairs because of the theocratic nature of the Spanish monarchy. In the Philippines, the “royal patronage of the clergy” made the church the most important agency of the crown in subduing and pacifying the native inhabitants of the colony.⁵ The Spanish colonial project used the Church as an instrument to make the people submit to colonial rule. The Spanish conquistadores and missionaries believed that the inhabitants of the world were fated to the universal claims of Catholicism. With this, cultural hegemony was legitimized and regulated only as a function of the Spanish crown’s Christianizing mission and provided Spain’s colonial enterprise with its ideological framework.⁶

Essentially, the Spaniards used the Church to entrench their rule in the Philippines. They used the Church to subdue and pacify the resistant Filipinos through Christian indoctrination. From a Freudian point of view, this is a way of controlling the aggressive nature of the natives and makes them, in the eyes of the Spaniards, “civilized” beings and to maintain order in society. As asserted by Freud, the human tendency of aggression “is the factor which disturbs our relations with our neighbors.” Further, he says, that as a result of this mutual hostility of people, “civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration.” Civilization therefore has to use a lot of effort to limit human aggressiveness.⁷

The doctrines introduced by the Church to make the native converts follow the moral laws it imposed included death and dying and the hope of paradise. This future hope allowed the self to be realized in another time and place where suffering, pain and tension no longer exists. In return for complying with God’s laws, one may have a place in heaven, not as a slave or someone oppressed but as a child of the Father. The wish for a place in God’s kingdom is a common theme of 17th-century Spanish missionary texts in Tagalog:⁸

Tanong: Ano ang ygaganti nang Dios sa manga banal na tauo?

Sagot: Ang calualhatian sa langit doon maquiquita nila ang Dios, at matotoua at malili gaia, at lualhati magparating man saan.

(Question: What will God give back to holy people?

Answer: The tranquility of heaven where they will see God, and obtain happiness, and joy, and rest forever and ever.)

Paradise is depicted as a wonderful land without death, no sorrow and sadness, only joy and happiness. It is a place that is not what earthly existence is. If on earth they are suffering, in paradise everything will be glorious.⁹ Being good assured the native converts of a place in heaven. And “being good” meant submitting to the will and obeying the commandments of God as preached by the Church.¹⁰ Apparently, one has to endure all the sufferings on this earth until we receive God’s blessings in heaven.

Yet paradise, as an idea of another life in another time that lay beyond death can only be meaningful and intelligible to the extent that it could be opposed to something else, a counter-paradise that is, hell. It was in the creating of the threat of hell that fear could be generated. It was against the manufactured fears of hell that the idea of paradise could be offered as an attractive alternative. Paradise gave current fears a context. But before it could effectively do so, the context of fear, which is the possibility of hell, had to be constructed.¹¹

Consider this 16th century Tagalog catechism. A priest asked a native convert: “*Ano ang ypaparusa niya (Dios) sa manga tauong tampalasan?*” (With what will God punish sinners?). The expected reply was: “*Yhoholog niya sa ynfierno doon maghihirap sila at maccacasaquet magparating man saan.*” (He will throw them into hell and there they will suffer and ache forever).¹² This notion of ynfierno is also highlighted in an 18th century poem by Father Pedro de Herrera, a poem that depicts the never ending suffering and pain in Hell, stanzas 2 and 3 of which reads:¹³

Cun icao ypahintolot
sa calalima,t yholog
ang hirap mo,y, ualan togot
saquit na dili magamot

Cocohan damay sa iyo
malupit na Demonio
ang galit nila,t pagtampo
sa iyo rin ybobonto.

(If you were cast down
and thrown to the depths
your suffering will have no end
your pain will have no cure

You will have the companionship
of the cruel Devil
their anger and their rage
On you they will vent.)

This can also be seen in the 19th century novel of Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*. In the first chapter of his book, the author attempts to present a house-country analogy: he likens the Philippines to the house of Capitan Tiago where a party was held. Describing the house of Tiago, is therefore, like describing the Philippines itself. According to Rizal, the walls were crowded with paintings “depicting such religious themes as *Purgatory, Hell, The Last Judgment, The Death of the Just Man, The Death of the Sinner...*”¹⁴ These were the favorite subjects in the sermons of the priests, constantly warning their parishioners about what may befall someone in the afterlife.

Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines attempted to control the aggressiveness of the natives by imposing the Church’s morality on the people through the idea of sin and hell. By constantly indoctrinating the native with these threatening hegemonic ideas, it made one think twice about doing something that was against the “morals” established by the Church. This is clearly an example of Freud’s argument on how “religions have never overlooked the part played in civilization by a sense of guilt.”¹⁵

In a way, this also connects with Isaiah Berlin’s theory on positive liberty, which, Berlin claims, is the result of the individual’s desire to be his/her own master. According to Berlin, positive liberty is derived from the notion of the self as a conscious, thinking, willing, active being that bears the responsibility for its own choices and is capable of explaining them by references to his/her own ideas and purposes.¹⁶ In this view of liberty, one can infer that the presence of control is with the individual. To be free you must be able to control your own destiny based on your own interests. Creating a “sense of guilt” clearly is a way of limiting the positive aspect of your freedom based on Berlin’s definition. According to Berlin, there are two concepts of liberty—negative and positive liberty. Berlin claims that negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has

negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is the possibility of acting—or the fact of acting—in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes. While negative liberty is usually attributed to individual agents, positive liberty is sometimes attributed to collectivities, or to individuals considered primarily as members of given collectivities.

Throughout the Spanish period it can be argued that oppression became a usual part of life among the natives. The Spaniards abused the Filipinos through the imposition of various institutions such as forced labor and arbitrary taxation. The Church, again through religious indoctrination, may have played a role in trying to control whatever aggressive reaction the people may have wanted to undertake. This was done through another hegemonic teaching of the Church which promises a reward of eternal glory in the Kingdom of God if one would endure and suffer all hardships in life as Jesus did. As claimed by Freud, religion can be seen as a system of doctrines and promises which on the one hand explains to individuals "the riddles of this world with enviable completeness," and, on the other, assures individuals that a careful Providence will watch over one's life and will compensate one for any frustrations he or she suffers here in future existence.¹⁷

The fear of suffering in the after life on the one hand and the promise of eternal life without pain on the other, in a way was what controlled the aggressive tendency of the people. In effect, however, they also restricted the individual liberties of the native, particularly what Berlin calls negative liberty.¹⁸ According to Berlin, negative liberty refers to the "area within which a man can act unobstructed by others." One is said to have negative liberty to the point in which no one or a group gets in the way with one's activity.¹⁹ Liberty in this sense is seen as the absence of obstacles outside of the individual which enables him or her to do whatever he or she might want to do. The Church, by threatening the native of eternal suffering and promising them eternal life, in effect, became an institution that instilled in them a sense of control over what Freud considers as our basic instinct of aggression. The Church clearly used external intimidation or coercion which curtailed the native's negative liberty. Freud contends that the liberty of the individual was greatest before there was any civilization. The development of civilization only imposes restrictions on it.²⁰ And curtailing such freedom, according to Freud, is one of the reasons for an individual's discontent with society since it defiles or alters human

nature.

Another teaching of the Church aimed at suppressing the aggressive nature of the people focused on Jesus' commandment to "Love thy neighbor as thy self." Freud says that this is the strongest defense of the Church against human aggressiveness. He, however, suggests that this commandment is impossible to fulfill since "such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value, not rid of the difficulty."²¹ Likewise, looking at how the Spaniards had treated the natives, one cannot help but echo what Freud says that "so long as virtue is not rewarded here on earth, ethics will, I fancy, preach in vain."²² With how the natives were discriminated, abused, oppressed, and denied equality before the law, one can surmise that this "ethical" teaching may not have been as effective in controlling aggression as the threats of fire and brimstone or the promise of Eden.

So, how effective was the Church in containing the aggressive nature of the natives? Freud claims that religion may succeed "in sparing many people an individual neurosis," but "hardly anything more."²³ The Spaniards may have tried to control the aggressiveness of the Filipinos for over 300 years but the frustration and discontent of the people that had been building up could not be contained forever. It eventually burst. It started with a movement among Filipino intellectuals in Spain who clamored for change in the colony foremost of which was the expulsion of the Spanish priests in the Philippines. A leading figure among those who cried for reforms was Jose Rizal, regarded to be the "Father" of Filipino nationalism. Rizal wrote novels and other writings that were among the first to openly criticize in particular the Spanish friars.

The Church was extensively utilized by the Spaniards to "civilize" the Filipino natives. But in doing so, it may have ended up being viewed as an institution that curtailed their liberty—especially negative liberty. Instead of controlling the aggressiveness of the people, it may have only made the natives, particularly the members of the Filipino intelligentsia studying in Europe who had been exposed to the ideas of the French Revolution, unhappy and discontented, and encouraged them to challenge what Partha Chatterjee calls the "rule of colonial difference"—the premise of the colonial state's power that sought for the preservation of the "otherness" of the ruling group in the domain of the state.²⁴ Thus the members of the Reform Movement would also clamor for wider social and political freedom, freedoms that they thought would help them pursue self-mastery or self-determination.

The cause of the Filipino intelligentsia would be taken up by the

masses that eventually brought it into the open through a revolution.²⁵ Rizal's works in particular proved to be a turning point in Philippine history as it inspired a group of non-elite natives who organized an underground armed movement aimed to topple Spanish rule in the Philippines.²⁶ Its leader, Andres Bonifacio, was known to have read and be inspired by Rizal's novels and other writings. Bonifacio had been greatly influenced by Rizal and his works so that he in fact had used the name "Rizal" as the password for the highest ranking members of the revolutionary movement. During the Philippine Revolution in 1896 it may be important to point out that among the first to be attacked by the revolutionaries were the Spanish priests and their parishes. The struggles Bonifacio initially instigated eventually culminated in the independence of the Philippine islands from Spanish hands. This desire for independence truly can be traced to what Berlin calls positive liberty — the desire to be one's own master.²⁷

Clearly, the teachings of the Church were meant to control the aggressiveness of the natives and make them submit to colonial rule. But the Church, in effect, helped the natives realize that they were subordinates, a realization that was essential in the emergence of a resistance against the colonizers.

The "civilizing mission" of the West was designed to create in colonized populations disciplined agriculturists or workers and obedient subjects of a bureaucratic state.²⁸ An important aim of the "civilizing mission" of Europe, particularly of the last quarter of the 19th century, was to build structures capable of reproducing European societies: stable government replacing the violent, conflict prone tyrannies of indigenous political organization; orderly commerce and wage labor replacing chaos of slaving and raiding; a complex structuring of group boundaries, racial identities, and permissible forms of sexual and social interaction replacing the unacceptable looseness of the past.²⁹ Ultimately, the goal of the West was to create an obedient, hard working, refined, and "morally" upright native subject.

Indeed, the Spanish colonial government had dominated and controlled the Filipinos through the Roman Catholic Church. But in their effort to establish a "civilized" society by restraining the aggressive instinct of the natives, they also created so much discontent. Thus Freud exclaims: "What a potent obstacle to civilization aggressiveness must be, if the defense against it can cause as much unhappiness as aggressiveness itself!"³⁰

There were definitely other factors that led to the displeasure

of society, which brought forth the birth of a nationalist movement in the Philippines and the eventual outbreak of a revolution. But it may also be important not to ignore the role played by the Church in contributing to the restlessness of the Filipinos. The Church, by trying to control the natives' aggressive nature, limited the people's liberties and, in effect, created so much discontent and unhappiness.

END NOTES

¹ Michael Adas, *Machines as the measure of men: science, technology, and ideologies of Western dominance* (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 200-201.

² Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979) argues that the peoples of Africa and Asia have been viewed by the Europeans through the eyes of "orientalism," a lens that distorts the real image of the colonized and portray them and their culture as backward, savage, stagnant and weak.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its discontents* (N. Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, 1930), p. 47.

⁴ Paul Rodell, *Culture and customs of the Philippines* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), p.30.

⁵ Benjamin N. Muego, *Spectator society: the Philippines under martial rule* (Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1988), p. 38.

⁶ The view of regarding the role of the Church in the emergence of resistance against Spain is also shared by Leonard Davis in *Revolutionary struggle in the Philippines* (1989). In his study, the author notes that the Church people (mainly Spanish priests), were both church officials and state officials and the political expression of their Christianity was colonialism. Davis argues that the Spanish assault against the natives was justified on Christian grounds as liberation from enemy religions, whether animist or Islam.

⁷ Freud, 1930 p. 68-69.

⁸ *Doctrina Cristiana en lengua española y tagala* (1593), ed. by Carlos Quirino. (Manila: National Historical Commission, 1973) in Vicente L. Rafael, *Translation and conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule* (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.171.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168. In the work of Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and revolution*, the author also demonstrates the emergence of an ideology of resistance based on Spanish Christian notions of suffering and paradise. The peasant revolts that coincided with but deviated from the elite led nationalist revolution of 1896 were made comprehensible to their participants in so far as they were embedded in terms taken mainly from

seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century devotional texts such as prayers, poems, and songs, and the *Pasyon*. One of the principal ideas developed in Iletto's study is that the masses' experience of Holy Week fundamentally shaped the style of peasant brotherhoods and uprisings during the Spanish and Early American colonial periods. The issues, however, that this book is concerned with go beyond the subject of the masses and their participation in the revolution. The author attempts to closely examine in historical context the Passion of Jesus Christ to reveal the vitality of the Filipino mind. Likewise, it looks into the conditions of the possibility of the emergence of popular individuals who were able to play the political power game, which had been dominated by elites, and challenges the notion that the elites are the only source of "culture" in Philippine society.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ P. Pedro de Herrera. *Meditaciones cum manga mahal na pagninilay na sadia sa Sanctong pag ejercicios* in Vicente L. Rafael, *Translation and conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule* (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.180.

¹⁴ Jose Rizal, *Noli me tangere*, translated by Leon Ma. Guerrero (Manila, Philippines: Guerrero Publishing Inc., 2004), p. 2.

¹⁵ Freud, 99.

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberties," *Four essays on liberty* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 131.

¹⁷ Freud, 1970 p. 22.

¹⁸ Berlin, 1970 p. 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁰ Freud, 1930 p. 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

²² *Ibid.*,

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories* (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 10. As claimed by Chatterjee, nationalism starts with the colonized educated middle class who struggle to reduce their "difference" with the colonizers.

²⁵ Long before the outbreak of the revolution of 1896, sporadic revolts already occurred throughout the archipelago one of the causes included the imposition of the various Spanish institutions, e.g., taxation and forced labor as well as the natives'

disillusion of the Church and government established by Spain in the Philippines. Most of these early revolts, however, were suppressed by the Spaniards.

²⁶ It could not be denied that Rizal and his works played a crucial role in the awakening of the Filipinos from colonial subordination. He made them see their common grievances against the colonizers. The treatment the natives received from their colonial masters made them realize that they belonged to a different group, a different community even if it was just imagined (read: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined community: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* [1991]). Their being looked down as inferior beings motivated them, especially those who were exposed to the new and liberal ideas in Europe, to fight for their rights and prove to the world that they were their equal.

²⁷ Berlin, 1970 p. 131.

²⁸ Cooper and Stoler, ed., *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁰ Freud, 1930 p. 109.

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