THE PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENT CHURCH IN HISTORY *

William Henry Scott

THE Republic of the Philippines occupies a unique place in history as an oriental nation so westernized that neither its own people nor its visitors recall that it is an oriental nation. Equally unique is its place in Church history as the only oriental Christian nation, that is, a country whose congressmen, officials and public leaders are pre-dominantly professing Christians. But even more significant historically is another unique feature of the Philippines, its possession of a Catholic church separated from Rome and seeking reform 450 years after the Reformation. The church is the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (Philippine Independent Church), and its existence gives pause for thought to any historian who sees God as a God of History both able and willing to direct the course of all human events.

The Roman Catholic Church has a long and generally noble history in the Philippines; for centuries it maintained an enlightened attitude toward a native population helpless in the face of exploitation by civil officials. It has left the modern Filipino with a vigorous folk devotion in the villages and a vigorous intellectual life in the capitals. Yet, human nature being it is, i.e., sinful, the Spanish colonial system which identified Church and State put into the hands of the religious a tempting power which bore within it the seeds of abuse and corruption. By the nineteenth century the Spanish friars enjoyed such a suffocating monopoly on farmland that they became the main target of that revolutionary literature which finally united the Filipinos in armed rebellion in 1896.

Within the Church itself there were demands for reform, and Filipino clergy agitated against both the arbitrary power of the foreign friars and what we would nowadays call racial discrimination, e.g., native clergy always occupied second-rate positions and were never elevated to episcopal rank. Three Filipino priests who

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were executed on trumped-up charges in 1872 for having taken a too actively anti-friar stand on the centuries-old question of turning the parishes over to secular clergy served as martyrs in the revolutionary cause. The charge was also levelled against the friars that their educational system doomed the Filipino people to a superstitious kind of folk Catholicism. It was, therefore, inevitable that when hostilities finally broke out, the Church would be inextricably involved.

After fighting began, the leading patriot priest—Victor Heiser remembered him as part of the "brains" of the Revolution—was Father Gregorio Aglipay of Ilocos Norte. He was appointed Vicar General of the Revolutionary Army by General Emilio Aguinaldo when Dewey's arrival in Manila Bay revived the stalemated Filipino-Spanish hostilities. Three weeks later Spanish Bishop José Hevia Campomanes, a prisoner of the Filipino forces, named him Ecclesiastical Governor of Nueva Segovia, a huge episcopal see covering all of Northern Luzon. In this important position, Aglipay was able to make immediately clear his intention of reforming the Church and of directing it into full support of the nationalist movement.

Aglipay acted on the reputation which the Church had for being wealthy at the expense of the Filipino people by issuing circular after circular directing the clergy to give financial support to the revolutionary government. He ordered them to make contributions and to float loans, warning that if the independence movement failed, the friars were sure to come into possession of the church properties again—a prophecy all too soon to be fulfilled. He directed that incense should only be used in solemn masses, "in confirmity with Roman decrees", and tried to stop the parading about of holy images for the soliciting of alms. He enveighed against preachers who were "trite and dreary" by comparing them to "those friars of unhappy memory who, not knowing the language of the region, pushed themselves forward to preach, taking with them some ridiculous sermon, composed desultorily, with horrible pronounciation and atrocious grammar".

In February, 1899, Filipino nationalists, disabused of the hope that American forces would give them their freedom, took up arms against the new invaders. Two months later Aglipay was excommunicated on the technicality that he had exercised ecclesiastical jurisdiction before his official appointment. In October he called a

meeting of patriot priests in Paniqui where they establised a provisional council to take charge of ecclesiastical affairs until such time as a settlement of Spanish abuses could be made directly with Rome, and then joined the guerrilla forces. The revolutionary government at Malolos, meanwhile, tried to open negotiations on this same issue, and in 1901 appointed a commission of Filipinos resident in Spain to petition the papal nuncio there to present their grievances to the Pope. The outcome of this meeting Aglipay himself later described as "an unjust insult inflicted by the Roman Pope on the whole Filipino people when the delegates of Aguinaldo's independent government petitioned that the orders of the Council of Trent be complied with, by which the bishops of the Philippines would be natives, and he answered that the Pope would never agree to it even if we beheaded the imprisoned friars which we held in our power because Filipinos were not capable of episcopacy"!

That same day, the Filipino delegates announced their withdrawal from the Roman Church in the Spanish Press, and the issue of nationalism and Church reform were more strongly identified than ever. In the Philippines the slogan was soon heard, "An independent church in an independent Philippines". The double-headed aspect of this independentist movement was resolved the following year with dramatic suddenness. In May nationalist ambitions were at least temporarily quashed by American military might, and in August one of the irate delegates to the Spanish papal nuncio broached the matter of religious independence before a meeting of the first Filipino labour union. "I am fed up with the arrogant attitude of the Vatican towards all demands from our people for justice toward the Filipino clergy," he cried. "I solemnly and without any reservations declare that today we definitely secede from the Church of Rome and renounce allegiance to the Vatican and, relying on God's aid, proclaim ourselves members of a Christian, Catholic, Independent Church, to be ruled and administered by Filipinos!" Those present then proceeded to elect seventeen "bishops" and Gregorio Aglipay as "Supreme Bishop" (*Obispo Maximo*). Thus was the *Iglesia Catolica Filipina Independiente* finally and officially born.

The fiery founder of the Philippine Independent Church was Don Isabelo de los Reyes, journalist and folklorist, labour organizer and free-thinker, and a member of the Imperial and Royal Geographic Society of Vienna. He was the son of the Ilocana poetess, Leona Florentino, and father of the present Supreme Bishop of the

Independent Church. It was natural that the new church should turn to Aglipay for leadership. But this great Filipino churchman was priest as well as patriot, and could not immediately accept so irregular an ecclesiastical appointment. He went into retreat for a time in a Jesuit convent, during which the independent Catholics in the Ilocos appointed another chief, who resigned as soon as Aglipay accepted. The choice must have been an expensive one for the conscience of a Catholic priest, but it must also have been inevitable that he accept the logical outcome of his own leadership over the preceding years. The new "bishop" therefore approached the Old Catholics in Europe and the Episcopalians in the United States with the hope of receiving consecration at the hands of an historically valid episcopacy.

The summer of 1902 was hardly an auspicious time for an independent church to find favour with Americans in the Philippines. The last of that armed resistance which had cost over 4,000 American lives and three hundred million dollars had only been put down three months before, and the ban on pro-independence political parties was not to be lifted until 1905. It had been less than three years since the Vicar General of the Philippine Army and Ecclesiastical Governor of Nueva Segovia, costumed as a revolutionary general, had ordered his priests to wear military uniforms and urged his people to "shed their last drop of blood before submitting to the slavery of the insolent North American invaders". *The Churchman* in November described the situation with dignified restraint as follows (italics added):

"Father Aglipay, an excommunicated native priest, celebrated mass on October 27, in defiance of Roman authority, and in an address on that occasion definitely denounced it by saying the new Church would maintain practically all the religious forms of the Roman Church. Aguinaldo sent a letter saying he was too ill to attend, but approved the movement, which is supposed to have the sympathy of Katipunan secret society and of native labour organizations. It is said that Aglipay will have associated with him fourteen junior 'bishops' and a large lay council. *In some quarters in Manila it is thought that the new movement will seriously disturb the present political situation.*"

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ship and encouragement. This was especially true in the case of Governor-General William H. Taft, who was appointed Honorary President of the Independent Church before he left for the States in 1903. Aglipay continued to preside over a church that celebrated masses, venerated saints and dedicated buildings to the Holy Trinity, but he made public profession of his Unitarianism for the next forty years. Both he and Don Isabelo set their hands to publications which made this position clear, literary oddities that seem to have had little influence either inside or outside the Independent Church. A glance at these works reveals the intellectual path which these late-Victorian reformers trod. Disgusted with a Church that tolerated an abjectly superstitious folk religion (Don Isabelo had said in his founding speech, "Our adoration shall ever be given to God alone and not to any of His creatures"), they moved from denial of those miracles ascribed to local religious images to denial of the miracles recorded in Scripture. Finally, caught up in the contemporary intellectualism which hailed a promising science as the arbiter of all truth, they reached a near-pagan deism expressed by Aglipay when he received the degree of a Doctor of Divinity in Chicago as follows:

"When in 1902 we separated ourselves from the Pope for his injustices to the Filipino clergy, begging humbly for guidance to build a Church worthy of Him and of the progress of the day, we did not make off with all the dogmas and ancient traditions, for they were obviously the capricious creations of the infantile intelligence when man had just acquired the use of his reason; and with the help of God we delve into the broad fields of Astronomy to seek the origin of the Universe instead of believing the absurd legends of the Bible."

It is, of course, impossible that those millions who rallied behind the patriot priest in the heat of the Revolution could or did follow these flights into the rarefied atmosphere of the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom. Up until the present time, these multitudes have maintained the Pan-Latin piety which expresses itself in private prayers in public places. Even Don Isabelo himself has left a reputation behind in his staunchly Romanist home town of Vigan for having spent pious hours on his knees in the cathedral, free-thinker and modernist though he was. It is hard to find an *Independiente* layman today who knows what the first *Obispo Maximo's* Unitarianism meant

and Roman Catholics who had their children christened by an Aglipayan priest in the absence of a Roman cannot remember whether they were baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity or not. Indeed, there is a certain quaintness in the description of the Aglipayan churches in 1939 by the President of the American Unitarian Association assuring his readers that the clouds of incense and brocaded vestments which all but obscured the *"Biblia y Ciencia, Amor y Libertad"* inscribed on altars were but empty, pretty ceremonials.

Although the original issue of the Filipino demands was acceptance of native bishops—Don Isabelo was enough of a student of church history to remark "as has happened in other countries in times past"—other areas of reform were also taken up. Both the founder of the Independent Church and its first Supreme Bishop expressed their intention of modelling the national church on Anglican precedent, and their priests were permitted to marry. This was a fairly obvious reform for the Philippines, for Juan de la Cruz (the Filipino "John Doe") maintains an often impertinent scepticism about sacerdotal celebacy. The mayor of a certain municipality once boasted of his four wives before a gathering of the Knights of Columbus with the comment that this was less hypocritical than the practice of the *padres,* and street gossip calls it "common knowledge" that the late President Manuel Quezon was the son of a Spanish friar.

An obvious area of reform was the use of the vernacular in public worship, but this was reduced to comparative insignificance by a number of other circumstances. Neither Aglipay nor Don Isabelo were Tagalogs, whose dialect was to become the "national" language of the Republic, but Spanish-speakers in the Spanish-oriented culture. Spanish thus became one of the first "vernaculars" to be used, and remains to this day a language of prestige expected of people like archbishops and supreme court justices. Language reforms meant little to the average worshipper, however, for he generally occupied himself with telling his beads or private devotions while the mass was mumbled in the sanctuary or, at best, celebrated as a dialogue between priest and choir. It is possible today to speak with Aglipayan laymen who do not know what language is spoken at the altar of their own parish church.

The financial corruptness to which all totalitarian organizations are prone was another concern of *Independiente* reform, although neither English-style establishment nor American-style capitalism

was available as a solution. In the Philippines, as in other oriental nations, people who enjoy steady salaries constitute a select minority, and priests have traditionally found it necessary to collect "stole fees" for individual services. Aglipayan clergy sought to avoid abusing this practice by serving the poor free and by asking reasonable sums at all times. Examples can be cited in which a coffin, stopped at the door of a Roman church for want of the demanded fee, was taken across the street to an Independent church where the funeral was conducted at half-price.

Evangelical or liturgical reform was not an early concern of the new church, and as time went on its major Evangel became an appeal to the patriotism of its supreme bishop and attacks on that church against which this patriotism had expressed itself. But as an enlightened Roman policy began to place missionaries from half the nations of Europe and the Americas under the jurisdiction of native bishops and archbishops, this Gospel of nationalism began to lose its force. Yet even today, a day which finds a Filipino Cardinal enthroned in Manila, it frequently serves as the text of an *Independiente* sermon which offers vague historic generalities as an apologia, pours invective upon the other church, and speaks little of the Love of a Lord who created all mankind.

When two million or more Filipinos joined Aglipay in his revolt against the Roman Church, they retained possession of the buildings in which they had been worshipping. Under the American régime however, a court settlement handed all such properties back to Rome completely dispossessing the *Independientes* and throwing them upon their own resources for the construction of makeshift churches. An American missionary who has been a guest in Aglipayan homes and preaches in their churches in their own language has suggested that to appreciate their position we might picture what the Anglican Church would have been like in the seventeenth century had the Spanish Armada successfully landed in England and turned all the church properties back to the Roman Church. One needs to add to this the picture of an Anglican Church without a Cranmer or Melancthon or Hooker, without any colleges or universities, without even a printing press. The new Filipino church could not hope to reproduce those magnificent Spanish cathedrals that had been constructed over the centuries out of the sweat of the people. Zaide's standard text on the social history of the Philippines comments: "It has no beautiful churches to impress the imagination of the people, and no

rich benefactors to endow its activities."

Being "the poor Filipino's church" put the *Independientes* at a stifling disadvantage in a predominantly Roman land where the traditional church boasted a well-organized vitality, some of the greatest educational institutions in the country, and an impressive roster of scholars of many nationalities. Communications are still so poor in the sprawling Independent Church that it cannot state its own numbers accurately, and Jesuit writers have ridiculed the fact that its officers have issued mutually contradictory membership figures. There were and are no church-operated colleges for its youth to attend, and those who enroll in the great Roman schools tend to apostasy. The most debilitating effect of *Independiente* poverty, however, was its inability to provide itself with a well-trained clergy, and native Roman priests with a decade of philosophical and theological study behind them or advanced training in Italy or Spain amused themselves by comparing notes on Aglipayan competitors who knew no doctrine or who mumbled Latin phrases without knowing what they meant. Indeed, the Independent Church and its friends have often resorted to pointing out that the Apostles were uneducated working men, as an apologetic.

The Independent Church has, by and large, been spared overt persecution by the dominant Church both because of an American-introduced concept of free speech and freedom of religion, and because the Roman Church has itself pursued a new policy since the removal of the Spanish friars early in the American period. But as a kind of poor relative in the Philippine religious scene, the Independent *padre* at public affairs often sits in the pit while his Roman, or even *Protestante*, opposite number pronounces the Invocation from the platform. Potentially more devastating, however, is the Roman tactic of conducting scholarly research on Aglipayanism itself, taking as a premise the traditional Catholic faith of the Independent members and extending them a sympathetic welcome to "come home" after having been led astray by their leaders. A number of priests, and at least one archbishop, have presented theses on the subject, and two Jesuit scholars are presently publishing a two-volume work characterized by exhaustive scholarship, careful documentation, subtle bias and a graceful style.

In the face of these difficulties, the young Church's mere survival—let alone retention of two million members over this half century—is remarkable. A Roman author has recently predicted that

there will be no Philippine Independent Church in another ten years. It is an unlikely prophesy. An historian would take a long, hard look at an institution with such staying power. And "staying power" has been the major characteristic of this church, for while it has enjoyed no great glories or prestige, it has been an omnipresent part of the Philippine national scene. For forty years its white-maned *Obispo Maximo* was one of the grand figures out of the Revolutionary past, a confidant of Aguinaldo, and one of the people's candidates in the first presidential election. When he died, the President of the Philippines laved the hands of his successor in the installation ceremony. Moreover, there are a few areas—notably the province of Ilocos Norte where every Roman priest but one defected in 1902—where the Independent Church is financially competent and politically influential.

Nationalism was the vitality that held the Philippine Independent Church together through its many trials and setbacks. Religiously, the average Aglipayan lost nothing and gained little: he gave up worship in the beautiful churches of his forefathers, but he continued to hear a generally unreformed mass, and he enjoyed the intensified fellowship of a minority church and a clergy less susceptible to corruption than in a wealthier body. But only recourse to the political vitality of nationalism explains how these Catholic laymen and priests continued to rally behind an apparent Unitarian. Although Aglipay's earliest statements of faith were traditionally Trinitarian and Catholic, as early as the 1902 Doctrine and Constitutional Rules intellectual touches of Don Isabelo's hand can be discerned, e.g., Catholic faith was to be accepted in all that "did not contradict the Word of God, the natural law and the judgment of reason", and the human conscience was to be emancipated from "error and unscientific scruples contrary to natural law". He still felt apologetic about his orthodoxy before the Convention of Unitarians in America in 1931, writing: "When we proclaimed the Philippine Independent Church we were confronted by a seeming insurmountable obstacle—the state of blind Catholic belief sustained with incontestable power by Catholic agencies in the government and in the courts, and for that reason we could not openly proclaim the true principles of our Church."

There was always a small hard core of zealous leaders in the Independent Church, including urbane *caballeros* of whom Swiss Bishop Hertzog would not have written, as he did of the Obis-

Maximo in 1904: "I understand perfectly that Señor Aglipay is not a good Oxford family." From this group came those churchmen who, after Aglipay had died and World War II totally discredited the modernistic illusions of the few Unitarian members, turned their hopes back to that historic Christianity from which they had been cut off for forty-five years. At the time of their church's founding, an American journal had commented: "A national Filipino Church might indeed be theoretically an improvement on a church united with Rome, but practically it might attain a level only a little higher than the Church of Abyssinia." Whether or not the new leaders ever read that remark, they could look about them and see the danger. As soon as the war was over, their Supreme Bishop approached the Episcopal missionary bishop in the Philippines on the subject of valid historic consecration, presenting documents signed by the Supreme Council of Bishops attesting the trinitarian orthodoxy of their faith.

A new day dawned for the Philippine Independent Church with the laying-on of hands in 1948 by three American bishops of the Episcopal Church on the *Obispo Maximo* and two other Filipino bishops, who, in turn, subsequently passed this succession on to all others of their bishops and presbyters. Not only was the young church brought back into contact with historic Christianity, but the Episcopal seminary in Manila opened its doors to *Independiente* candidates and undertook the training of the indigenous Filipino church, while American liturgical scholars offered advice on the formulations of a new prayer book and liturgy. Episcopal permission was immediately given for intercommunion in special cases like the Seminary and the chaplaincies to hospitals, universities and prisons, and twelve years later, when an Anglican-based liturgy had been published, the Philippine Independent Church formally petitioned the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America for a concordat of full communion. During 1960-61, American and Filipino Episcopalians—bishops, priests and laymen—visited Independent parishes from one end of the Philippines to the other, some raising Protestant eyebrows at practices like band music at the elevation of the Elements, others ferretting out in Catholic indignation the Spanish texts of the early leaders' Unitarian adventures—probably making the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* the only church in history to be simultaneously suspected of being non-Catholic and too Catholic. On 22 September, 1961, then, at the Sixtieth

Triennial Convention of the Episcopal Church, this deeper Christian fellowship implicit in the earlier bestowal of Apostolic Orders was officially concluded, the House of Deputies rising to express both their affirmative votes and to greet with moving affection the Supreme Bishop in person.

The leadership of this Supreme Bishop, Mons. Isabelo de los Reyes, Jr., son of the founder and an intimate associate of the first Supreme Bishop, is one of the brightest spots in this new Christian dawn in Southeast Asia. A cultured and sagacious Christian statesman, he is remembered by his grade-school classmates as a brilliant, pugnacious student who was usually head of his class—or, as the Jesuits had it, "Emperor" of the "Carthagenians". He is a man who brings patience and understanding to the problem of clarifying the doctrinal vagaries of two million churchmen, for he has experienced a deep spiritual pilgrimage himself. Imbibing the heady intellectualism of his father and his senior bishop, he accompanied Aglipay on his 1931 visit to the Unitarian churches in the United States, and made use of his ready command of English to publicize the current Aglipayan theological position. But he attributes his own failure to be swept away by these modernist views to his position as a parish priest constantly in touch with a congregation of Catholic faith and their spiritual needs.

Being the head of a minority church and having to bear criticism of his own theological changes of heart have done nothing to turn the edge of the *Obispo Maximo's* personal courage. As a guest preacher of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, whose parent bodies had been frankly proselytizing American missions, he recently said: "The early American missionaries, far from joining hands with Filipino reformers, concentrated themselves in planting little colonies of their particular denominations and discouraged, if not actively opposed, all movements for religious or political self-determination." Presiding over a church which is now a part of the historic Catholic Church, a member of the World Council of Churches and of the East Asia Christian Conference, and a supporter of the Philippine Bible House, Bishop de los Reyes writes on stationary headed *"Iglesia Catolica Filipina Independiente"*, but at a dedication service for a Protestant Bishop he referred to his chuch as "a National Protestant and Apostolic Church".

Now that its candidates for holy orders are provided for in St. Andrew's Theological Seminary and its entire membership is in full

communion with the Episcopal Church the immediate needs of the Philippine Independent Church have been expressed by its Supreme Bishop as schools, a college* and a printing press. The Philippines is a nation so interested in academic attainment that the major newspapers carry a daily educational page, and the Roman Church has traditionally been the supporter of fine schools and scholarly publications. The Independent Church will have a hard time either setting its own house in order or exerting a reforming influence upon Philippine Christianity generally if its members are not able to compete in this field. Yet these educational needs are but symptomatic of the Church's larger need to be brought back, not simply into Apostolic Succession and communion, but into the quickening ferment of the intellectual and spiritual mainstream of world-wide Christendom.

This need of the Philippine Independent Church for fellowship with historic Christianity is certainly one of the most vital Christian challenges of the twentieth century. It was with such a vision of mission that the Rt. Rev. Norman S. Binsted made that appeal which his earlier predecessor, Charles Henry Brent, would not, for the bestowal of valid orders upon this independent wayward church. Those who know Bishop Binsted best believe that he was motivated solely by a sense of granting a grace freely given, unimpeded by any conditions or bargaining or strings attached. Sooner or later, all reformed Christians who profess membership in a body whose parts are committed in holy stewardship one to the other will be called upon to reject or embrace this same missionary vision. If 1902 was an inauspicious year for considering an "independent" church in the Philippines, 1962 certainly ought not to be. One half of all the people in the world live in a triangle described by Jerusalem, Tokyo and Columbo, and it is not a Christian half. Christianity today is showing a gradual awareness of the arrogant folly of having attached such vital significance to the history and welfare of a mere fraction of the world's past and present population. As what Occidental historians have called "the sleeping giant of Asia" struggles to its feet and into the arms of Baal, western Christians may well tremble before the God of All History in the realization that those they have treated as mere factors in a post-Malthusian formula are in fact their brothers, creatures all of a common Creator. Against this

* Since its purchase in 1963, Trinity College in Quezon City, operated jointly by the Episcopal and Independent Churches, has supplied that need—Ed.

background, may not the Grand Historian in His omniscience be recording the preparation of a fertile seedbed off the coast of Southeast Asia whence a hybrid Reformation will send forth its branches into the most barren corners of a pagan hemisphere and provide fruit for a hungering mankind that could never feed itself?