

RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION IN THE PHILIPPINES AND OTHER ASIAN COUNTRIES*

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The Philippines is probably one of the most dramatic examples, if not the most dramatic example, of a modernizing Asian country seeking to rediscover its cultural identity. In asking basic questions as to what would be a better future for the nation, or whether such is even possible, the Philippine case appears to be an interesting study of how religion has been used in imperialistic designs over less developed countries (LDCs).

In the Philippine case, modernization could hardly be divorced from westernization, since its colonial history indeed propelled the very notion of nationhood and then of national independence from its colonial masters as a component prerequisite of modernization. It is the common colonial exploitation and subservience that tied together the once disunited and unorganized clusters of semi-independent settlements which then had no particular consciousness of a common Philippine nationhood. The Philippines in fact acquired its name and its contemporary majority religion as a result of the occupation and colonization of the islands in the latter part of the 16th century.

The arrival of Ferdinand Magellan in Philippine waters on 17 March 1521 is traditionally dated as the beginning of the Spanish period. The Spanish intrusion in this part of Asia was a result of the rivalry between the Portugueses and the Spaniards in the exploration of the non-European world. Between them, the world was divided by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 with the issuance of the *Inter caetera* (a papal bull) drawing a demarcation line so that all lands lying one hundred leagues west of the Azores and the Cape Verde Islands were to belong to Spain, and those east, to Portugal. Since the Pope, Alejandro Borja, was a Spaniard and expected to favor the Spaniards, the papal bull was somehow held suspect by the Portuguese. The Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 between the two powers thus moved the demarcation line 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. In 1592 the Treaty of Zaragoza extended the demarcation line and defined it in the Pacific at 297½ leagues east of the Moluccas, with Spain

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gaining the right of ownership and settlement over lands east of this line. Interestingly, the Philippines even lay unquestionably within the Portuguese side of the demarcation line. Moreover, its acquisition was facilitated by the proceeds of the sale of whatever right Spain may have had over the Moluccas, except that the Moluccas actually was within the Portuguese sphere of influence, as delineated by these treaties.

This pattern of deceit and religious-political intrigue became the *leitmotif* of the Spanish occupation and its imperialistic exploitation of the Filipinos. Religious interventions in political matters were justified by the principle of union of church and state which previously laid the foundation or the rationale of the Spanish *conquista*—that of “civilizing and Christianizing” such pagan lands initially assigned by fiat of the Pope. This led to encroachments by the ambitious and avaricious friars of the Catholic Church on jurisdictions of the civil government.

Due to the short tenure of civil officials and the clergy’s relative advantage of actual presence and knowledge of the local languages reinforced by the possession of the technology of colonization, the Spanish friars became virtually the most visible element of stability and continuity of Spanish sovereignty in the rest of the Philippines outside of Manila. The civil officials, moreover, tended to be concentrated in Manila alone, which historically explains the centralization pattern of civil government even well into the sixties.

The friars’ systematic exploitation and interference in the political, economic, and social life of the people made their domination so pervasive and oppressive that Filipino propagandists and reformists demanded their expulsion from the Philippines. The contrary principle of separation of church and state thus became one of the constitutional principles that survived the Malolos Congress which was convened on 15 September 1898 to draft a Constitution for the First Philippine Republic. Even the subsequent war with the United States, and the defeat of the First Republic, did not change that historic commitment.

In the Philippine context, “secularization” meant merely “nationalizing” the Catholic Church by replacing the friars with native secular priests. This was a reaction to the Spanish friars who were perceived as obstacles to education, progress, and freedom. The Filipino rebels against the Spanish actually had to fight two battles toward the end of that period. The first one was against the Spanish, and the other, against the Americans. Deceit and political-religious intrigue was similarly the *leitmotif* of the neo-imperialism of the Americans, who had initially led the Filipinos to believe that they were going to be allies against Spain. The realization of this fact by the ilustrado leadership of the Revolution later brought on the Philip-

pine-American war which was ingloriously referred to as "The Philippine Insurrection" in American historical accounts.

The American colonial period, which followed after some three centuries of Spanish rule, is officially dated as starting on 1 May 1898 with the one-sided naval battle resulting in the destruction of Admiral Patricio Montojo's fleet of Spanish ships in Manila Bay by then Commodore George Dewey. Dewey, who was maneuvered into position as the American Asiatic Squadron Commander by then Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt Sr., was even promoted to Rear Admiral for this naval victory. Even then, American war-mongers had imperialistic designs over Spanish possessions. The Philippines was to have been a coaling station for the Chinese trade which was expected to be very profitable. "Oil for the oil lamps of China" was a very picturesque expression of its profitability expectation.

The taking of Manila however involved more deceit and treachery. A mock battle was staged to save Castillian face or honor, while at the same time excluding the Filipino revolutionaries from participating in the "liberation" of Manila. This colonial phase of the Philippines was thus no better than the preceding one, in that treacherous design, deceit and division were the same techniques used in dominating and exploiting the Philippine population in the same spirit of their own brand of Christianity — in the case of the Americans, the various Protestant varieties.

That the American soldier used education as an enticement, education having been virtually denied the Filipinos by the Spanish friars, was a master stroke of colonial innovation. This had the consequence of having certain ideas and norms infused in the culture and values of the Filipinos that persist even up to the present day. This is often the contemporary "demon" denounced and demanded to be "exorcised" by latter-day radicals in their analysis of the neo-colonial aspects of Philippine culture, including the "miseducation" of the Filipinos.

The apocryphal story of President William McKinley's claim to having been told by God to "take the Philippines," and the assignment by General Arthur MacArthur of chaplains and non-commissioned officers to teach, even before the American civil government was established, again illustrate the role of religion in colonization. Emphasized in the system, process and content of education transplanted by the Americans were the virtues enshrined in the Protestant ethic, so basic to the development of capitalism. At the same time, avoiding the establishment of a state church, which is anathema to most Americans, who happen to be Protestant too, made it easy to ignore the religious dimensions of the American colonization.¹

¹ A "naughty" question may indeed be injected at this point: "Is the continuing presence and even perhaps the increasing ubiquity of White Protestant missionaries in

The establishment of a secularized public school system and the use of English as a medium of instruction and communication laid the foundations of a continuing Westernized direction to Philippine modernization, and an insidious acceptance of American values and models of development, notwithstanding gross differences in history, culture and resource base which continues up to the present.

Secularization, taken in its broadest sense, means the increase in the worldly, the temporal, or non-church — or in its more extreme case, of the profane — functions or activities. Thus, it is only an added “political” dimension stressing greater participation where the original “religious” dimension was confounded with an authoritarian, exclusivistic, and special interest group characteristic.

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of the combination of these “political” and “religious” dimensions each representing a continuum of opposing or “polar” typologies. The resulting single “circular continuum” shows secularization as merely an alternative to the church-state relation: (1) union of church and state, typical of less modern nations — at least, as defined by the West; and (2) separation of church and state, said to be typical of modern and modernizing states — at least, insofar as Christianity is concerned.

In the non-Christian parts of the Philippines, as in the rest of Asia, religion is not of the exclusivist and intolerant variety. It occurs in so many forms — there are the essentially metaphysical or “other-worldly” religions; there are the religions that so pervade the very life of the people that is coterminous with their culture; there are philosophical systems which, because these developed the inner discipline of the individual to provide him with a strong moral foundation, were considered religions by Western scholars; or even the pantheistic or animist varieties, or any combinations of these. It is not uncommon in Asia to see these religious strains mixed, not only with one another, but even with social and political doctrines, with the resulting combinations so confounding to Westerners. Ironically, Christianity, although Asian in origin, became so Westernized that it had difficulty being diffused in Asian than did the other great Asian religions. Its penetration to the Asian world appears limited at the rim, the Philippines being on the eastern side, from which both Catholic and Protestant missions were often, and still continue to be, launched into the heartlands of Asia.

Although safeguarding the principle of separation of church and state in the Philippines and preserving the secular outlook of education, the American colonial administration virtually obliterated whatever remaining

a country claiming to be the only Christian country in Asia, another insidious form of neo-colonialism by the Americans?”

native ideas, customs and traditions, and even the national cultural identity of the Filipinos that the Spaniards were unable to replace, as part of their colonial design. "Modernization" hence continued to mean "Westernization," just as "civilization" under the Spaniards meant "Christianization." The contemporary search for a national cultural identity of the Filipino has therefore often been branded as "anti-clerical" or "anti-Spanish," "anti-American" or "anti-colonial," depending on what political or historical "demon" the ideologist or ideologue may wish to "exorcise" from the system.

Secularization is no defense against the monastic influence that still pervades the social and cultural life of the people. Even though officially Christian, even Catholic, Filipinos actually continue to practice paganistic rituals not only in rural but in urban areas as well. "Paganization" of Catholic devotions had even been commercialized as tourist attractions, so that the evolution of a "folk Catholicism" often proscribed from the pulpit, generally persists despite the vigilance of the official Catholic hierarchy, or the incessant evangelization efforts of Protestant missionaries. Of course, as long as the West defines modernization in its own image, such syncretic combinations will be regarded as "pre-modern," and their *excoriation* demanded as a "price" for modernization.

Conceptually, religion can mean not only the organized doctrine, ritual, and practice in or by a collective, but also the unorganized set of values, beliefs, and norms that are accepted on faith by an individual. It may include or involve a faith in, and/or worship of, a deity or deities, and it could mean a devotedness or dedication to a holy life, no matter how defined. In this case, the issue of religions and secularity in Asia is hard put to be resolved on the issue of modernization. Religion and the religious influence are so pervasive in Asia that secularization often means not a rejection of religion, but a repudiation of a decadent clergy who have become exploitative, rigidly formalist, and standing in the way of genuine spiritual development.

It is this typically Asian repudiation which marks the secularization experience of the Philippines. Obviously, Filipinos turned their backs only to the decadent Spanish friars and not to priests in general, nor to the Catholic religion, as shown by the failure of some nationalist native clergy to form a Philippine national church² as well as in the conversion of only a small percentage of Filipinos to Protestantism by the American mission-

² The closest attempt during the Revolutionary period is the Philippine Independent Church founded by Gregorio Aglipay. The members' distrust of the foreign orientations of the Catholic Church led them to call Catholics "*Romano*." In fact, in many rural areas, today, the Catholics continue to be referred to as "*Romano*" just as members of the Philippine Independent Church (PIC) are called "*Aglipayano*" after its founder. The PIC was the first native Catholic Church—very much like the Anglican Church in the U.K., at least, in so far as doctrinal matters are concerned. Today, however,

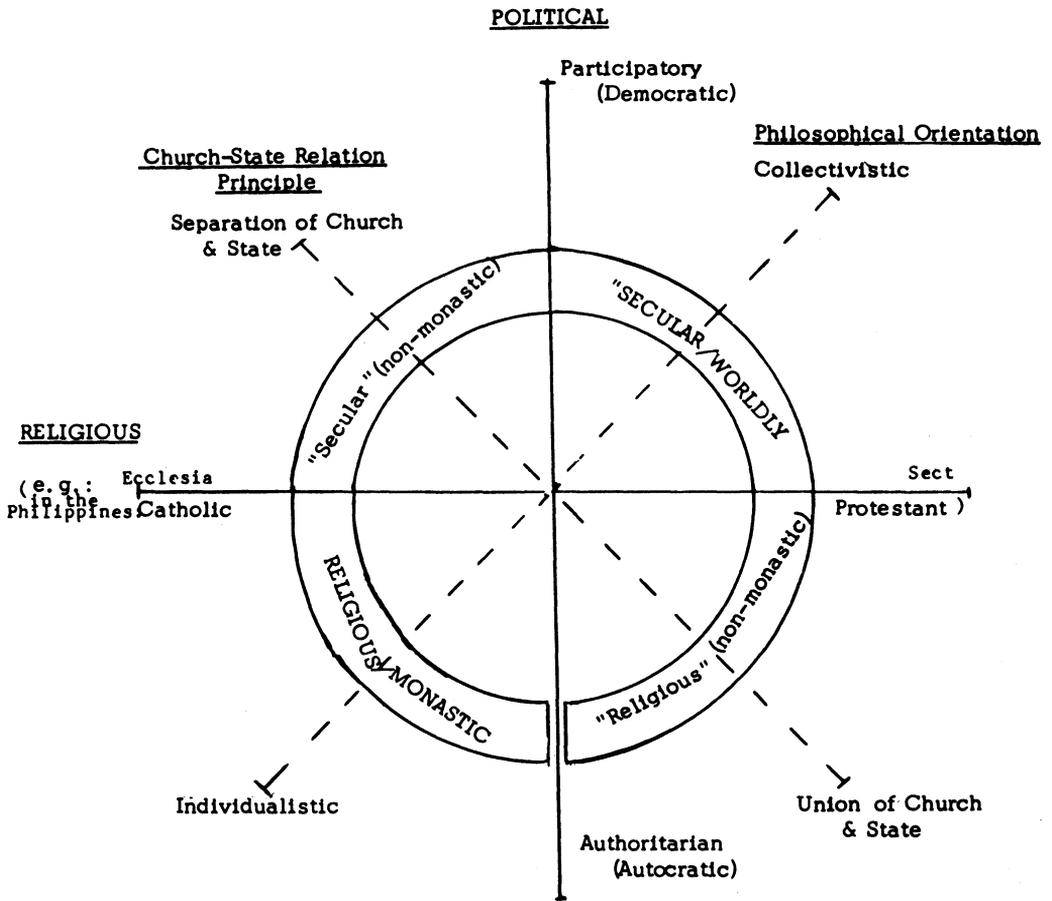


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the combinations of political and religious dimensions with philosophical orientations and church-state relations principles as additional dimensions, resulting in a single "circular continuum."

aries. The other aspect of secularization — materialism, which perhaps reflects more the Philippine colonial heritage from the Americans — and the Filipinos ready acceptance of the Western models of modernization make difficult the contemporary Filipino's rediscovery of his national cultural identity.

The "essence" of modernization should not be confused with its "accidents," one of which is its Western location or identification by *western* culture-bound writers. But if "modernization" is defined as a "dynamic form of social and technological innovation resulting from the knowledge explosion in recent times," or as "the process by which historically-evolved institutions adapt to the rapidly changing environments, taking on new and growing functions that are consequences of unprecedented increases in man's knowledge, permitting control in turn, over these same environments," one can avoid the mistake of equating modernization with "Westernization." "Westernization" could only be *one* form, but not the *only* form, of modernization.

The complexity and interrelatedness of all aspects of the modernization process is perhaps better appreciated in a holistic and syncretic manner, rather than in the mutually exclusive perspectives of the West and its religions. The line between religion and secularization is not quite that clearly drawn in Asian societies. For in the experience of some Asian nations, both religion and secularization have been instruments for "modernization," although both under colonial ventures have been eschewed as unacceptable. Thus, the search for rediscovering one's national cultural identity has to also involve an analysis of the impact of religion and sacred values on modernization. It is this holistic, syncretic and eclectic approach, which is typical of Asia, that can satisfy the *Kokugaku*-type scholars in their search for national self-determination in pursuit of modernization. In the Philippines, we at the Asian Center of the University of the Philippines, have taken on the task of establishing stronger linkages with our Asian neighbors, relating to our own rediscovery of our cultural identity from a perspective of international cooperation.

it is no longer unusual for *Aglipayanos* to go to *Romano* churches. Their animosities only flare up in rare and distant places, and the PIC itself has been plagued by intra-denominational conflicts.