

METHODIST MISSIONARIES AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1899-1916

by Kenton J. Clymer

In the wake of the "splendid little war" of 1898, the United States wrested from Spain most of what remained of her empire and thus acquired for itself its first significant pieces of overseas real estate.¹ Protestant churches had, by and large, supported the war and the ensuing imperialistic outburst. In fact, the war had scarcely begun when representatives of several Protestant groups gathered to plan the religious conquest of the Philippine Islands, the most important piece of the Spanish empire that seemed about to fall into American hands.²

Although President William McKinley reportedly told a group of Methodist visitors that he took the Philippines "to uplift and... Christianize" the people,³ it was always something of an embarrassment to Protestant missionaries that the people they were sent to convert were already Christian, by and large, though of the Roman Catholic persuasion. The missionaries were well aware that critics were charging that it was a waste of scarce resources and talent to convert an already Christian people. Was not proselyting in a Catholic land even unchristian? In short, was a Protestant presence justified?

Some Methodist missionaries and their spokesmen at home responded that "Romanism," or at least the Latin variety, was really not a Christian religion at all and that Protestantism was needed every bit as much as in a heathen land. Arthur W. Prautch, for example, a Methodist local preacher and unofficial missionary in the islands, very nearly condemned Catholicism out of hand.⁴ But Prautch was something of a

¹Hawaii was also annexed as a byproduct of the war, but it was not a part of the Spanish empire.

²The most comprehensive study of Methodist opinion about the war and the American empire is Kenneth M. MacKenzie, *The Robe and the Sword: The Methodist Church and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Washington, D.C., 1961). For joint planning, see Arthur Judson Brown, *One Hundred Years: A History of the Foreign Missionary Work of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A....* (New York, 1936) p. 862-865.

³Cited in Charles S. Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley* (2 vols.; Boston and New York, 1916), p. 111.

⁴See, for example, Arthur W. Prautch, "A Curse, Not a Blunder" (unpublished manuscript) Missionary Records: Philippine Islands Correspondence, file 74-11, Methodist Episcopal Church, United Methodist Archives, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. (Hereafter referred to as Missionary Records).

maverick; his views were often not in the mainstream. By contrast, most Methodist missionaries gave the Catholic church considerable credit for its contributions to Philippine society. They were, in fact, less critical of Roman Catholicism than were spokesmen of almost all other Protestant missions in the islands. Many of the earliest Catholic missionaries, wrote the editor of the *Philippine Christian Advocate*, were "as sincere and devoted as any who ever went out in the name of the Master."⁵ The early priests westernized the local alphabet, introduced education (even on a limited scale for women), and in general raised the level of "civilization," many Methodists conceded. One only had to compare Filipinos with their non-Christian Malay cousins in Borneo or Malaya, thought Homer C. Stuntz, to see the positive influences of Catholicism.⁶

More to the point, the friars introduced important religious truths: the concepts of the suffering savior and the self-sacrificing saints, love of Mary, the ideas of redemption and eternal salvation, and above all the unity of God were part of the Catholic heritage. These concepts were immensely superior to the teachings of, say, Buddha, most Methodists agreed, and represented an almost immeasurable advance over traditional polytheistic, animistic Philippine religious beliefs.⁷

One Methodist missionary to whom this kind of analysis made particularly good sense was D. H. Klinefelter, who worked among the non-Christian Chinese community in Manila. Whereas there were thousands of Filipino Methodists by 1907, Klinefelter could count only eight baptized Chinese. No wonder he readily concluded that Catholicism was "vastly better than no God, no Savior, and no Holy Spirit."⁸ Klinefelter had apparently made little headway by 1911, causing him to observe resignedly, "One needs only to know the conditions of a truly pagan people to know that the Filipino has been greatly helped by the system of religious teaching he has had."⁹

Nevertheless, few Methodists doubted that their presence in the Philippines was essential. Admittedly, the Roman Catholics had introduced significant religious truths and had upgraded the populace. But Catholicism was a seriously deficient form of Christianity, they insisted.

⁵J. L. McLaughlin, "The Philippine Problem," *Christian Advocate* LXXX (November 9, 1905), 1787.

⁶Homer C. Stuntz, *The Philippines and the Far East* (Cincinnati and New York, 1904), p. 319. Mary Isham, "Our Little Brown Sisters in the Philippines" (unidentified clipping), Mrs. Harry Farmer materials, file 43, box 339, United Methodist Archives. (Hereafter cited as Mrs. Harry Farmer materials).

⁷Stuntz, *The Philippines and the Far East*, pp. 86-97; William F. Oldham, "Hopeful Signs in the Philippines," *Christian Advocate*, LXXXV (June 9, 1910), 814.

⁸*Official Journal of the 3rd Annual Session of the Philippine Islands Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1907), p. 60.

⁹*Official Journal of the 4th Annual Session of the Philippine Islands Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1911), p. 35.

This was particularly true of the Spanish variety, they felt, which one Methodist bishop described as "the lowest form of Roman Catholicism."¹⁰

In terms of theology, the missionaries felt, Spanish Catholicism brought to the islands "no correct conception of God, no present Savior, no personal experience of righteousness."¹¹ Images of the saints were sometimes said to be idols. But above all, Protestants criticized the church's unwillingness to share the Bible with the parishioners. Instead of presenting the deep spiritual truths of the scriptures (which, Protestants were convinced, would reveal to the people the errors of Catholicism), the priesthood substituted "empty rites and ceremonies," incorporated pagan elements into the ritual, and fostered ignorance and superstition.

Withholding the Bible and keeping the masses in a superstitious state of mind served the corrupt purposes of the church, the missionaries felt. "Whatever its contribution to the national uplift of the earlier day," wrote Bishop William F. Oldham, the church "kept the people ignorant, and imposed upon them with all manner of puerile superstitions to the enrichment of the church treasury and the mental and religious impoverishment of the people."¹² Only a few received the benefits of a modern education; the rest were kept in ignorance and in awe of the priests. Missionary J. L. McLaughlin, for example, reported coming upon a series of engravings depicting what tortures lay in store for those who defied Catholic authority. The pictures were, he wrote, intended to "haunt the fevered imagination of the unsettled."¹³

Political influence, power, and wealth seemed to the Protestants to be the sole interest of the Roman church. They charged the friars with demanding excessive fees for their services and high rent for poorly maintained cemetery plots. If the rent was not kept current, the bones of the deceased were removed and thrown in a common pile, a practice Protestants found abhorrent. The church also managed to acquire the best lands — Protestants assumed because they robbed and tyrannized over the people — and amassed very large estates. Bishop Frank W. Warne even blamed the friars for producing indolent habits and deceitfulness in Filipino culture. Why work, if one's land would be seized on some pretext when it proved to be productive? Why tell the truth, if one would be taken advantage of?¹⁴

Clerical oppression, the missionaries thought, reflected a debased

¹⁰Frank W. Warne, "The People of the Philippine Islands," *Christian Advocate*, LXXVI (January 17, 1901), 94.

¹¹McLaughlin, "The Philippine Problem," p. 1787.

¹²William F. Oldham, "The Latest Word from Manila," *Christian Advocate*, LXXXV (April 28, 1910), 603.

¹³J. L. McLaughlin, letter to the editor, *ibid*, LXXVIII (October 1, 1903), 1588.

¹⁴Warne, "The People of the Philippines," p. 94.

theology that failed to relate religion to moral behavior. In their view, Catholic doctrine divorced the two. Consequently, Catholicism fostered immorality among the populace and, what was even more shocking to the missionaries, among the clergy. Bishop Oldham came to believe that corruption was "well-nigh universal" among the clergy, and that clerical abuses went unrebuked by the hierarchy.¹⁵ Clerical corruption included numerous "unmentionable atrocities," as one missionary expressed it¹⁶ (which, however, were regularly and vividly mentioned), of which the most appalling to turn-of-the-century Methodists were allegations of sexual immorality. Homer Stuntz found this matter "the most unpleasant of all things I must write of," and in his book provided three and a half pages of examples. "Catholics," he felt certain, "will shudder at the disclosures of this chapter."¹⁷

All in all, then, Methodist missionaries gave the church credit for its initial contributions, but they felt that it had long since lost its "spiritual energy."¹⁸ It was theologically deficient and morally bankrupt with little apparent hope of redemption. A Protestant presence was therefore fully as justified, they felt, as it was in truly heathen lands.

If the Catholic church in the Philippines had lost its spiritual vitality, the missionaries were convinced that as a temporal organization it remained strong, the "most astute and skillful organization the mind of scheming man has ever devised."¹⁹ And with the arrival of the Protestants, who threatened the status quo, the church used much of that "scheming" power (or so the Methodists believed) to combat the heretics. Though sometimes the struggle took the form of legitimate competition, much of it resulted in "persecution," at least from the Methodist vantage point.

Allegedly denouncing the Protestants as "dogs and devils and the spawn of hell,"²⁰ the Catholic church harrassed Protestants in various ways. At the most elemental level, missionaries and, more often, their Filipino converts and workers were threatened with death and injury, were stoned, beaten, and otherwise physically abused. Numerous annual reports contained references to physical persecution of this sort. In

¹⁵William F. Oldham, "The Philippines — The Duty of the Hour. II" (unidentified clipping), Mrs. Harry Farmer materials.

¹⁶Jay C. Goodrich, "Methodism in the Philippines," *Christian Advocate*, LXXV (April 19, 1900), 614.

¹⁷Stuntz, *The Philippines and the Far East*, pp. 109-114.

¹⁸Oldham, "The Philippines — The Duty of the Hour. II."

¹⁹William F. Oldham, "The Philippines — The Duty of the Hour. III" (unidentified clipping), Mrs. Harry Farmer materials.

²⁰*Minutes of the 4th Session of the District Conference of the Philippine Islands of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Malaysia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1903), p. 25.

Pangasinan Province, for example, where the priests were said to be "exceedingly active in their efforts to overthrow our work," there were threats to kill Methodist missionaries and deport their converts.²¹ No Methodist missionary was killed or seriously injured, but some Filipinos apparently were. As late as 1915, for example, a former village official attacked the Methodist pastor in San Felipe, near Manila. When a parishioner intervened to protect the minister, the attacker nearly severed his hand with a bolo. "He held it up to me limp and useless," reported the missionary, "to show me what a man may still suffer at the hands of the Romanists in the Philippine Islands."²² Aside from occasional personal assaults, Methodist property was sometimes attacked and burned, and literature was confiscated and destroyed.

Beyond the threats and actual attacks, the missionaries reported considerable intimidation. Boycotts were launched against Methodist shopkeepers, priests warned the people to have nothing to do with the missionaries, and parents of university students living in Protestant dormitories were pressured to withdraw their children. Particularly irritating to the missionaries were alleged Catholic efforts to prevent landlords and landowners from renting or selling to the mission. "If we try to rent a building and the friars hear of it all the machinery of the Church is set in motion to head us off," complained Homer Stuntz. "If we attempt to purchase land," he added, "their rage knows no bounds."²³ In Vigan, for example, a center of opposition, "the Irish Yankee priests" allegedly influenced the owner of the house rented by the missionaries to raise the rent; he then threatened to evict them, even after they readily agreed to the higher rent.²⁴ Often land transactions had to be arranged through intermediaries.

A related form of harrassment involved prejudicial ordinances and the improper action of town officials. Ordinances were sometimes drawn in such a way as to interfere with Protestant street meetings, and unfriendly officials took delight, or so it appeared to the missionaries, in making things difficult for the Methodists. In Vigan, for example, a judge, allegedly acting under Catholic influence, set aside a contract the Methodist mission had signed for the purchase of some property, even though the mission had already made a down payment.²⁵ Missionaries

²¹E. S. Lyons, quoted in *Official Journal and Reports of the 5th Annual Session of the Philippine Islands District Conference, Malaysia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1904), p. 31.

²²D. H. Klinefelter, in *Official Journal of the 8th Annual Session of the Philippine Islands Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1915), p. 73.

²³Homer C. Stuntz, "Protestantism in the Philippines," *Christian Advocate*, LXX / I (August 1, 1901), 1222.

²⁴Oscar Huddleston to Adna B. Leonard, July 26, 1909, Missionary Records (Oldham file).

²⁵Harry Farmer to William F. Oldham, October 5, 1908, Mrs. Harry Farmer materials.

also reported the arrest and jailing of those attending Methodist functions. "Some of our best men have been arrested, thrown in jail, and haled before the courts on flimsy charges....," wrote Marvin Rader in a typical report. "In nearly every case," he went on, "it is the petty officer who lends himself to this kind of persecution."²⁶

Whether the Roman Catholic church reformed, theologically and morally, during this period was a question that divided the missionaries. D. H. Klinefelter, for one, thought not. In spite of his admission that Catholicism had done much for the Philippines, he remained convinced in 1915 that "Rome has not changed much since the days of the Inquisition," and, he added, if she were not stopped by the authorities, she would even then burn, flay, and hang Protestants in the Philippines.²⁷ Likewise, J. F. Cottingham, in an appeal for funds, called for "sympathy, prayers and money to meet Rome" which was "coming back to claim her own which she held in bondage and darkness for four hundred years."²⁸

But others, including Bishop William P. Eveland, who arrived in the islands in 1912, disagreed. Eveland observed "a great housecleaning" in the Catholic church by 1915, which he attributed to Protestant pressures and example. Priests were now more carefully trained, he felt. Churches, schools, and hospitals were being built. And all in all, "a new and better Romanism" was emerging with the church beginning to "behave like a true shepherd of the flock of Christ rather than like a selfish, dishonest hireling."²⁹ Even in Vigan, where persecutions had been among the most troubling in all of the Methodist territory, missionary Oscar Huddleston noted "a marked reformation in the Roman Catholic Church." Extravagant charges for various services were no longer demanded, he reported. Sunday schools were operating, now, that taught the scriptures, and the priests were "organizing other classes for the good of the people, rather than sleep[ing] in their broken down convents and liv[ing] in vice and indolence."³⁰

²⁶*Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1910* (New York, 1911) p. 347.

²⁷*Official Journal of the 8th Annual Session of the Philippine Islands Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1915), p. 73. Klinefelter did admit, however, that "the lives of the Romish priests do not now flagrantly violate the laws of morality," which he accounted a victory for Protestantism rather than a change of heart among the Catholic clergy. See *Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1915* (New York, 1916), p. 174.

²⁸J. F. Cottingham, printed appeal, n.d. (but at least as late as 1914), Missionary Records, Record Group 43: file 66-2.

²⁹*Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1915* (New York, 1916), p. 168.

³⁰*Official Journal of the 9th Annual Session of the Philippine Islands Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Manila, 1916), p. 79.

Different perceptions of the amount of change in the Catholic church sometimes reflected the liberality or, conversely, the rigidity of a particular missionary's view toward Roman Catholicism. They might also be generational in character, for there is little question that the earliest Protestant perceptions were sometimes superficial. As the dean of the Presbyterian mission told an interdenominational gathering of Philippine missionaries in 1905, the first missionaries tended to be overly critical of the Catholic church. They lacked, he felt, a sympathetic appreciation of its contributions and of the difficulties the church encountered; and he even questioned some of the pervasive stories of an immoral priesthood. "We must discount some of the tales we hear about the friars and their work," he said.³¹ The newer missionaries may have been more open to such arguments.

On the other hand, there was clearly truth in many of the missionaries' observations, something Rodgers fully conceded. Thus the differing assessments of the amount of change may also have reflected different experiences. The attitude of a particular Catholic bishop, or the strong devotion of the people to their historical faith in any given locality, could and did make a difference in the reception accorded Protestants. In retrospect, however, it is clear that those who reported a reformation in the Catholic church saw the future, for without question the church did change many of the attitudes and practices to which Protestants objected. The changes came slowly, though, and were not fully apparent by 1916.

From another perspective, both the original and newer attitudes coincided with Protestant needs. Committed to expand their ministry for sincerely-felt religious reasons, Methodist missionaries, like most other missionaries, were always in need of additional funds from supporters in the United States. Contributors needed to know which evils their dollars would help alleviate. In pagan lands, stories of the degraded lives of the "natives" served the purpose. In the Philippines, stories of an abased Christianity supplemented the tales of warped lives.

At the same time, it was comforting to the potential "investor" to know that results had been achieved. Hundreds had been converted; hospitals, notably the famous Mary Johnston Hospital in the poor Tondo area of Manila, were serving the needy; Protestant colleges, like Philippine Christian College in Manila, and Methodist dormitories near secular universities, were helping to save students from infidelity; and

³¹James B. Rodgers, "Lessons from Five Years of Protestant Work in the Philippines" (unpublished manuscript), dated March 15, 1905, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Board of Foreign Missions, Missions Correspondence and Reports, microfilm series, reel 287, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia. Portions of this manuscript were read to the Evangelical Union, an organization that included most Protestant missionaries in the Philippines, on March 16, 1905.

even Rome, under pressure from the missionaries, had cleaned its house somewhat. Most pleasing of all, victory was in sight. "If you will stand by us and invest some of the Lord's money," read one Methodist circular (appropriately divided into two sections, "The Dark Side of the Mission Field" and "A Brighter Side"), "we will by His help finish this job."³²

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These church newspapers have recently been microfilmed and are now available for purchase in positive copies. Few issues are missing in the years covered, and every effort was made to locate all extant issues. Anyone knowing of additional numbers should communicate the information to the General Commission on Archives and History.

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³²J. F. Cottingham, printed appeal, n.d. (but at least as late as 1914), *Missionary Records*, Record Group 43: file 66-2. For a stimulating discussion of the "home base" of the missionary movement, and of the problems and techniques of fund raising, see Valentin H. Rabe, *The Home Base of the American Chinese Missions, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978).