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CHRISTIANITY IN THE PHILIPPINES

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There is only one predominantly Christian country in all of Asia. The Philippines is approximately 85 percent Christian (mostly Roman Catholic), 10 percent Muslim, and 5 percent 'other' religions, including the Taoist-Buddhist religious beliefs of Chinese and the 'indigenous' animistic beliefs of some peoples in upland areas that resisted 300 years of Spanish colonial rule. The purpose of this lecture is to explain how a small number of Spaniards converted the bulk of the Philippine population to Christianity between the mid-1500s and 1898--the end of Spanish rule. It also discusses some of the variety of forms of Christianity practiced today in the Philippines.

Historical background:

In the 1500s, the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan encountered the Philippines while sailing under the flag of Spain in search of a western route to the East Indies, the source of the spice trade. He and his men landed on the island of Cebu in the central Philippines.

At this time period, almost nothing was known of the Philippines, and so our sources of information about pre-Hispanic societies in the country date from the early period of Spanish contact. Most Philippine communities, with the exception of the Muslim sultanates in the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao, were fairly small without a great deal of centralized authority. Authority was wielded by a variety of individuals, including 1) headmen, or *datu*; 2) warriors of great military prowess; and 3) individuals who possessed spiritual power or magical healing abilities.

The absence of centralized power meant that a small number of Spaniards were able to convert a large number of Filipinos living in politically autonomous units more easily than they could have, say, converted people living in large, organized, complex kingdoms such as those Hinduized or (later) Theravada Buddhist-influenced kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia and on the island of Java in Indonesia. The Spanish were unsuccessful in converting Muslim Sultanates to Christianity, and in fact warred with Muslim Filipinos throughout their 300 year colonial rule from 1521 - 1898. Nor did they successfully conquer certain highland areas, such the Luzon highlands, where a diverse array of ethno-linguistic groups used their remote, difficult mountainous terrain to successfully avoid colonization.

Magellan's arrival in Cebu represents the first attempt by Spain to convert Filipinos to Roman Catholicism. The story goes that Magellan met with Chief Humabon of the island of Cebu, who had an ill grandson. Magellan (or one of his men) was able to cure or help this young boy, and in gratitude Chief Humabon allowed 800 of his followers to be 'baptized' Christian in a mass baptism. Later, Chief Lapu Lapu of Mactan Island killed Magellan and routed the ill-fated Spanish expedition. This resistance to Western intrusion makes this story an important part of the nationalist history of the Philippines. Many historians have claimed that the Philippines peacefully 'accepted' Spanish rule; the reality is that many insurgencies and rebellions continued on small scales in different places through the Hispanic colonial period.

After Magellan, the Spanish later sent the explorer Legaspi to the Philippines, and he conquered a Muslim Filipino settlement in Manila in 1570. Islam had been present in the southern Philippines since some time between the 10th and 12th century. It slowly spread north throughout the archipelago, particularly in coastal areas. *Had it not been for Spanish intervention, the Philippines would likely have been a mostly Muslim area.*

'Christianization' Strategies Employed by the Spanish:



Early Spanish Chapel, Luzon

In little more than a century, most lowland Filipinos were converted to Roman Catholicism. There are a number of reasons why Spanish missionaries were successful in this attempt:

1. **Mass baptism** - the initial practice of baptizing large numbers of Filipinos at one time enabled the initial conversion to Christianity. Otherwise, there is no way that such a small number of Spanish friars, or Catholic priests, could have accomplished this goal. It is said that many Filipinos associated baptism with their own indigenous 'healing rituals', which also rely on the symbolism of holy water--very typical of Southeast Asian societies.

2. **Reduccion policies** - in areas where Filipinos lived scattered across the landscape in small hamlets, the Spanish military employed a resettlement policy that they had used successful in Central and Latin America. This policy was called *reduccion*, and essentially meant a forced relocation of small, scattered settlements into one larger town. The policy was designed for the convenience of administration of the Spanish colony's population, a way for a small number of armed Spanish constabulary to control more easily the movements and actions of a large number of Filipinos. It was also designed to enable Spain to collect taxes from their Christianized converts. Throughout Spanish rule, Christianized Filipinos were forced to pay larger taxes than *indios*, or native, unChristianized peoples.

The *reduccion* policy also made it easier for a single Spanish Catholic friar to 'train' Filipinos in the basic principles of Christianity. In reality, the policy was successful in some areas but impossible to enforce. Spanish archives are full of exasperated colonial officials complaining about how such settlements were 'all but abandoned' in many cases after only a few weeks.

3. **Attitude of the Spanish clergy in the early phase** - Spanish friars were forced to learn the native language of the peoples they sought to convert. Without schools that trained people in Spanish, the Spanish friars had no choice but to say Christian mass and otherwise communicate in the vernacular languages of the Philippines. There are over 200 native languages now; it is unknown how many existed in the beginning of Spanish rule.

In the first half, or 150 years of Spanish rule, friars often supported the plight of local peoples over the abuses of the Spanish military. In the late Spanish period, in contrast, Spanish priests enraged many Filipinos for failing to a) allow otherwise 'trained' Filipino priests to ascend into the higher echelons of the Catholic Church hierarchy in the Philippines; b) return much of the land they had claimed as 'friar estates' to the Philippine landless farmers; and c) recognizing nascent and emerging Filipino demands for more autonomy and a greater say in how the colony was to be managed.

4. **Adaptation of Christianity to the local context** - Filipinos were mostly *animistic* in their religious beliefs and practices prior to Spanish intervention. In most areas they revered the departed spirits of their ancestors through ritual offerings, and also believed in a variety of nature spirits. Such beliefs were central to healing practices, harvest rites, and to maintaining a cosmological balance between this world and the afterlife. Spirits were invisible, but also responsible for both good and bad events. Spirits could be blamed for poor harvests, illness, and bad luck generally. Yet Filipinos believed that proper ritual feasting of the spirits would appease them, and result in good harvests, healthy recovery of the ill, and the fertility of women.

The legacy of Spanish conquest and colonial rule in the Philippines, as is true of all colonial attempts to 'master' or manage indigenous populations, is mixed. On the one hand, Spanish clergy were very destructive of local religious practices. They systematically destroyed indigenous holy places and 'idols', or statues and representations of indigenous spirits, gods or goddesses. They also tried to stamp out all examples of native scripts and literature for fear that Filipinos were using exotic symbols to foment rebellion. The Spanish also imposed new 'moralities' on Filipinos by discouraging slave holding, polygamy, gambling, and alcohol consumption that were a natural part of the indigenous social and religious practices.

At the same time, Hispanic rule left a legacy of syncretic, rather than totally destructive, elements. Spanish clergy introduced some very European features of Catholic practice that blended well with indigenous ritual practices. Spanish Catholic priests relied on vivid, theatrical presentations of stories of the Bible in order to help Filipinos understand the central messages of Christianity. Today, this colonial legacy lives on whenever Filipino Catholics re-enact through religious dramas the passion of Christ, or Christ's martyrdom, during Holy Week.



The beginning of a Pasyon play, Manila



Christ and two disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane



The Devil tempts Christ



Christ is led away by Roman soldiers



The Crucifixion of Christ and Two Thieves

Other Filipino ceremonies also mark the Christian calendar, such as during the rituals surrounding death. Death is always an occasion that marks a society's traditions, and in the Philippines funerals are usually accompanied by somber village processions and music, essential parts of Roman Catholic ritual practice. Filipino indigenous religious beliefs traditionally celebrated rice planting and harvesting times, the death anniversaries of departed ancestors, and these have been blended in meaning and timing with Catholic rites such as All Saint's Day and Fiesta de Mayo. In this kind of religious syncretism, blending the rites and meaning of two totally separate societies, the outcome is often a surprise rather than a foregone conclusion.

On October 31, for example, children in rural villages in the Philippines often go house to house asking for small sums of money--a traditional almsgiving. Filipino families also spend much of the evening visiting their ancestral graves, showing respect and honor to their departed relatives by feasting and offering prayers. In contrast, American children honor October 31 as 'Halloween', or the night of the dead, going house to house and asking for treats. Christian families in the U.S. do not consider this occasion a time to 'visit' and feast with their departed ancestral or kindred spirits. In the U.S., the proper time to 'visit or honor the departed spirits' is Memorial Day at the end of May. In the U.S., too, it is considered unseemly to 'feast' or celebrate one's dead relatives by having picnics in cemeteries.

Similarly, Filipinos set up small altars and chapels decorated with flowers in the spring during the Fiesta de Mayo, or festival of May 5 (traditionally a Mexican holiday celebrating their revolution). Every Catholic town in the Philippines celebrates an annual *barangay*, or '*barrio*', fiesta in honor of their patron Catholic saint. During this period, there are large processions and

parades throughout the town, with the saints, the *mayordomo* or sponsor of the fiesta, and school children marching through the settlement to band music or music played on a videocassette. In addition, each family visits other neighbors and relatives to share home-cooked, special 'feast' foods during the fiesta. In many coastal or riverine communities, fishers celebrate by carrying the image of the patron saint on boats in a fluvial procession to bless the waters and fish. The sacred days of the Roman Catholic calendar also affect traditional livelihoods. For example, Good Friday, the day Jesus Christ was crucified, even today is considered a 'taboo' day for fishermen. It is an omen of terrible fates, and fishers fear for their lives if they go out fishing on that day. In the past, *every* Friday was deemed to be a risky day to go fishing, but these beliefs have been modified over time.



Flores de Mayo, Batangas

The Roman Catholic emphasis on godparents became known as *compadrazgo*, which celebrates the alliance of two families in marriage. The godparent institution is a common and important institution in countries like the Philippines (and Malaysia) where marriages traditionally were arranged between families. In these areas, long before the advent of Islam or Christianity, it was considered customary and desirable for the heads of two friendly families to cement their 'alliance' by arranging an appropriate marriage for their children--in many cases while their children were still very young. The goal of such arrangements was to ensure that each family's child (and eventual married couple) would always have concerned advice and support from all of their affinal (or in-law) relatives as well as blood relatives so as to enable them to establish themselves firmly in the future.

Christianity in the Philippines Today:

Christianity in the Philippines today, unlike during the Spanish period, is a mixture of nationalistic efforts by local peoples to 'Filipinize' Roman Catholicism and the efforts of a variety of Protestant missionizing successes. In the American colonial period, 1900-1946, a lot of Protestant teachers and missionaries came to the Philippines to 'purify' what they viewed as the incorrect or 'syncretic' characteristics of charismatic blends of Filipino Roman Catholicism. The Aglipayans were among the first to try to Filipinize Roman Catholicism and were popular in the early part of American colonial rule. The Iglesia ni Kristo is another Filipino-founded sect that has found strong support among well-to-do Filipinos.

In remoter parts of the Philippines, where Spanish colonialism and Roman Catholicism never penetrated until the beginning of the 20th century, a variety of Christian missionaries compete for new converts. Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses typically go door-to-door, spreading the specific messages that their sects support. In traditional, staunchly Roman Catholic areas, their missionizing efforts and attacks on syncretic forms of Roman Catholicism are often unwelcome. In areas where Roman Catholicism is still fairly recent, the missionaries carry messages that are more carefully listened to by local Filipinos. What was once a truly Roman Catholic country in terms of the population has given way to a variety of forms of Christianity.

In the Luzon highlands, for example, where many indigenous ethno-linguistic groups resisted Spanish rule, Roman Catholic or Anglican priests today have a fairly comfortable accommodation with indigenous forms of ritual and belief. Local peoples follow traditional customs related to burial rites, but often invite Christian priests to celebrate the last rites or formal burial rites in addition. The advantage of this kind of syncretism is that people's beliefs and support for their traditions are not lost, but simply accommodated with beliefs and practices associated with the newer religion. Many recent Protestant missionaries, in contrast, fail to recognize the value of supporting indigenous customs, and simply attack local religious practices as evil. Their meager success in attracting converts speaks to the need for understanding the context in which American religious practice can flourish.



Roman Catholic Cathedral, Baguio City

Most recently, 'El Shaddai' is a fundamentalist Christian movement within Roman Catholicism in the Philippines that has attracted a large number of converts, both in the Philippines and among Filipinos working abroad. Like charismatic fundamentalist Christian sects in the U.S., the El Shaddai movement, led by 'Brother Mike' Velarde, relies on 'healing' rites, mass congregations, and radio and t.v. appearances and broadcasts to appeal to a large number of people seeking messages and solutions to their poverty or problems. In the rallies in Manila that are broadcast throughout the Philippines by the media, vast numbers of Filipinos seek redemption or a better life by listening to what is essentially 'Filipino' gospel. Filipinos of all walks of life attend these rallies, sometimes to have their passports blessed so they can more easily attain jobs abroad that will help their families, and sometimes to have their bank books blessed so they can more easily save money. In any case, they, like many Americans who become enamored with t.v. evangelists, are looking for messages that promise not only salvation in the afterlife, but a better living standard in this life. Religious belief, as always, is based on the ability of a religion to offer answers to the questions, concerns, and needs of people in different cultural and economic circumstances.