

Christianity Returns to America

It is quite common for history buffs to talk about America's political, economic, and military intentions for acquiring the "Pearl of the Orient Seas" from Spain. But very few mention that the assimilation of the Philippines also had a religious dimension—one that ushered a "second coming of Christianity" into the country. Of course, this religious intent was neither predicted in the holy Bible, nor revealed by a charismatic preacher.

Instead, America's benevolent crusade was proclaimed in December 1898 at the White House by then President William McKinley, a devout Methodist, who shared his vision of an American-inspired "Christian revival" in the Philippines to a visiting delegation of leaders from his church. To many of his astonished guests, it seemed that somebody forgot to brief the honorable American president that the country he was referring to was already very Christian after more than 300 years of evangelization by Spanish Catholic religious orders. But as his tirade continued it became apparent that what McKinley really meant was that his fellow Methodists should spread the word of an American brand of Christianity to what he perceived as wayward Filipino Christians.

Eager to support their beloved President's appeal, many American Christian missionaries boarded the same ships that carried businessmen and military officers who were going to the Philippines for commercial and security concerns. Initially concentrating their religious activities in the gateway city of Manila, American Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Adventists, Episcopalians, Mormons, Witnesses, and other Christian missionaries came to convince Filipinos to embrace American Protestant teachings.

They were very effective since unlike their Spanish religious counterparts who discouraged the masses to learn Spanish and banned the reading of the Bible, American Protestant Christian missionaries immediately began teaching English and set up many mission schools, especially for the poor. They also encouraged the translation of the bible into the various Philippine languages and dialects. American Protestants believed that there was a need to reform the Spanish-style practice of Christianity, which was not strongly bible-based, and tainted with folk beliefs, idolatry, as well as the veneration of saints and the Virgin Mary.

Besides Protestants, the second Christianization of the Philippines also brought many American Catholic orders to the Philippines, including: the Redemptorists (1906), the Benedictine Sisters (1906), the Congregations of San Jose (1906), the Fathers of the Divine Word (1907), and the Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart (1907). Their main task was to cleanse the Catholic Church there of its excesses and create a new image for its Roman Catholic clergy. These Catholic priests quickly showed locals that they were different from the corrupt and decadent Spanish friars, who Filipinos despised.

A number of indigenous Christian churches like the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Philippine Independent Church), the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Benevolent Missionaries Association, the Rizalistas, the Moncadistas, and Santa Iglesia, also flourished during the American inspired Christian revitalization in the country. Nationalistic in nature and popular among the poor, these religious sects attracted many who were in search of a more “Filipino” Christian Church.

By the time the Philippines was granted independence on July 4, 1946, the Americans had not only built a strong foundation in terms of government, education, public infrastructure, and commerce; they had successfully begun the second Christianization of the Philippines through persistent American Protestant and Catholic missionary work. However, President McKinley and the Christian churches that heeded his call never imagined the effects of their evangelization efforts in the Philippines to American society.

While many Americans were busy administering, developing, and Christianizing their one and only colony in the Far East, the 1920s and 1930s saw a major wave of Filipinos leave the Philippines for the United States. They were mainly agricultural workers, domestic helpers, as well as hotel and restaurant cooks, dishwashers, bellhops, elevator boys, and busboys destined to work in Hawaii, California, Washington, and New York. After World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Korean War, many Filipinos who served in the US military also decided to try out greener pastures away from their native land. Immigration increased further with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, which encouraged a new wave of highly skilled professionals, i.e. doctors, nurses, engineers, and accountants to move to the U.S. Their families were allowed to join them soon afterwards.

Through several decades, San Francisco was the popular gateway city for most of these Filipino immigrants. They brought with them rich and distinctive cultures that eventually blended with the diverse cultural mix that characterized the Bay Area. Filipino food, dances, music, art, languages, and literature were slowly integrated into the local scenery. But, probably, the biggest and most obvious cultural contributions of generations of Filipino immigrants to San Francisco are the active roles they play in the city’s churches—roles that range from pastors to brethren. Given the mass exodus from their motherland, maybe the “second coming of Christianity” was really from the East to the West, or from the Philippines to the United States.

After all, before 1965 many San Francisco Christian churches had been experiencing serious declines in active membership. Low attendance rates led to low financial contributions. With rising maintenance bills, many of these churches had to rent out space to other interested religious congregations. Some were simply forced to close and sell their property. Interestingly, many religious sites have been “saved” by new immigrants groups, including, not surprisingly, Filipino Christians.

Coming from the only largely Catholic country in Asia, most new Filipino sojourners have a Catholic background. Hence, the growing number of Filipino immigrants to San Francisco has also led to corresponding increases in attendance rates at Catholic churches in the vast Archdiocese of San Francisco (which encompasses the counties of San Francisco, San Mateo, and Marin). Today, there are more than 90,000 registered Filipino parishioners in the Archdiocese. Statistically, one out of every four Catholics in the area is of Filipino descent.

One example of a church that has been "Filipinized" is Saint Patrick's Catholic Church, once a favorite place of worship for Irish-Americans. Its dynamic Filipino pastor, Monsignor Fred Bitanga, has proudly proclaimed "that Filipino parishioners practically saved the historic church from serious demise." Saint Patrick's is presently staffed by Filipino priests, nuns, deacons, and other lay workers. Daily noon services are popular among Filipino workers in the surrounding downtown area while Sunday services draw loyal parishioners not just from the city but from all over the Bay Area.

Many other Catholic churches have also filled up with devoted Filipino parishioners, especially south of San Francisco and across the bay in the neighboring Diocese of Oakland. Both Saint Andrew's Church and the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Daly City, and Saint Augustine Church in South San Francisco all have Filipino priests preaching to memberships that are more than 80 percent Filipino. Tagalog masses are held at Saint Patrick's Church and Saint Boniface Church in San Francisco as well as Holy Angels Church in Colma. Filipino-American choirs, devotions to the Santo Nino, San Lorenzo Ruiz, and Mother Mary are very common. Seven parishes celebrate the Simbang Gabi while Flores de Mayo and the Easter Salubong are slowly being integrated into regular church activities. Numerically speaking, Filipinos make up a significant part of the leadership of Bay Area Catholic churches: there are now 39 priests, 12 full-time deacons, 5 sisters, and 30 lay workers of Filipino descent in the 52 parishes of San Francisco.

The "second coming of Christianity" to the Philippines brought many American Protestant groups to 'build churches and save Filipinos'. In an interesting reversal of roles, the same Filipinos they ministered to are now the ones evangelizing, actively worshipping, and ensuring the survival of American Protestant churches. Christianity had returned to America!

Because of their strong growth, Filipino Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Adventists, Episcopalians, Mormons, and Witnesses have successfully established flourishing congregations all over the San Francisco Bay Area. Even the nationalistic Iglesia ni Cristo and Iglesia Filipina Independiente, as well as the charismatic El Shaddai, Jesus is Lord Movement, Bukod Loob sa Dios, Couples for Christ, and Divine Mercy have gone forth and multiplied rapidly among Filipino brothers and sisters.

Many of these Filipino religious congregations have taken over houses of prayer and worship that used to be all European-American (Caucasian). Peter Burnett, California's first governor, would probably never have expected that Saint James Presbyterian Church in Visitacion Valley, where his family attended services and taught Sunday school, would one day be transformed into a church pastored and participated in by brown skinned Filipinos from across the Pacific Ocean. Similar changes have taken place at Saint Francis and Grace United Methodist Church in the Sunset District, which has become predominantly Filipino.

Members of the all-Filipino Faith Bible Church of San Francisco purchased the former Salvation Army Church on Broad Street, while the San Francisco Filipino-American Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Pacifica and Holy Cross and Our Lady of Peace Episcopal Church in Sunnyvale both converted former Lutheran Churches. In 1968, the largest non-Catholic denomination in the Philippines, the Iglesia ni Cristo began its overseas mission when it formally established locales in Honolulu and San Francisco. In less than 40 years, it has expanded to 24 American states and 70 countries in the world. Beginning with two Bay Area congregations in the early 1970s, the Filipino-American Jehovah's Witnesses have increased to 12 congregations. Members have to know Tagalog to attend their Filipino services. Meanwhile, the Filipino ward of the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints in Daly City, which also began in the 1970s, has grown to more than 350 members.

In the Catholic churches and many other Filipino Christian religious places, liturgies, homilies, novenas, bible studies, confessions, baptisms, counseling, and prayers sessions are conducted in Tagalog, Ilocano, Cebuano, Kapampangan, Bicolano, and Ilonggo. Some Tagalog hymns have even found their way into the services. Aside from religious rituals, Filipino immigrants use their churches as much-needed places for community gatherings, group meetings, dances, cultural presentations, etc. Many senior citizens and retirees seek companionship and camaraderie in the churches. This has grown over the years with the influx of Filipino war veterans, many of who have no family members in the US.

In addition to helping their own parishioners, Filipino-American churches reach out to non-Filipinos, non-members, and the San Francisco Bay Area community at-large. Their volunteer efforts have saved Bay Area cities thousands of dollars. Some common civic activities are blood drives, tree plantings, cleanups of public places, and food distribution to homeless and other needy people. Politicians have taken notice and have officially hailed many of these invaluable contributions. For instance, the Daly City Council has awarded the Iglesia ni Cristo with a number of community citations for their clean up drives and environmental enhancement activities. But most of all, Filipino American congregations contribute to Bay Area society by helping many new Filipino

immigrants in their adjustment to America. Through their churches local congregations are able to help Filipinos in the Philippines, too.

Unlike the McKinley's benevolent assimilation proclamation which did not have any scriptural basis, there are some Filipinos who believe that the return of Christianity to America, as manifested in the rise of their churches, is foretold in the bible—"From the far east will I bring your offspring, from the far west will I gather you." (Isaiah 43:5, Moffatt Translation of the Bible,). The current diaspora is only the beginning. If this trend is sustained, Filipino immigrants will continue to flock and to multiply, bringing with them their strong Christian faith—to the "promised land" and wherever else they choose to go.

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