A. Introduction

The period of 1578 to 1609 can be called the “golden age” of Christian evangelization in the Philippines by the Spanish missionaries. John Leddy Phelan’s notes: “The decades from 1578 until 1609, after which date the Philippines began to feel the full impact of the Dutch war, were the "golden age" of the missionary enterprise. Fired with apostolic zeal, this generation of missionaries was inspired by a seemingly boundless enthusiasm.”1

This “golden age” was marked by an amazingly rapid and peaceful evangelization of the Filipino natives by the Spanish missionaries. By early 1600’s, less than 50 years after a sustained presence in the islands, most of the natives were converted to Christianity with approximately 250 missionaries. "As the sixteenth century drew to its close, the Spanish missionaries in the Philippines had laid the firm foundation upon which was to rise the only Christian-Oriental nation in the Far East."2

The military conquest of Philippine islands was relatively bloodless in comparison to the conquests of West Indies. Catholicism provided the main instrument of colonization for the Spanish conquistadores. In effect there was not much use of Spanish military might as there was for Spanish missionaries. Indeed the colonization of the Philippines by Spain was done through Christianity.

Behind this relatively peaceful assimilation of the Philippines through Christianity are abundant dynamics of mutual conversion between Spanish missionaries and Filipino natives. In the encounter between Christianity and indigenous religion of the Filipino natives both

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underwent significant transformation. At the same time there was a dynamic of contradiction: While Christianity was used to the hilt by Spanish missionaries as instrument of hegemony and power it became a medium for resistance and subversion for the Filipino natives.

There are abundant sources for the history of the Philippines during this period of great missionary enterprise. Many remain untapped. Yet most sources come from the perspective of the colonizers – Governor Generals, Spanish missionaries, soldiers, chroniclers, etc. The colonizer’s perspective indeed presents a hurdle but nevertheless not an irreparable one in constructing a history of this period. Due to limited space, this essay will only cite few snippets of these sources.

**B. Evangelization by the Spanish Missionaries**

Most of the Christian evangelization from 1578 – 1609 was done by Spanish missionaries from religious orders called regulars. The religious orders and the year they arrived in the Philippines were the Augustinians (1565), the Discalced Franciscans (1578), the Jesuits (1581), the Dominicans (1587), and the Augustinian Recollects (1606). As Catholicism was the main instrument of colonization, the regulars wield great influence and power. “Every responsible officer of the Crown realized that the continuation of Spanish hegemony in the provinces largely depended upon the authority and prestige that the religious exercised over their parishioners.”

The beginnings of the colonization showed some great signs of missionary zeal and dynamism among the religious missionaries. From the very start, the missionaries raised a great howl both in Spain and in the Philippines, against Spanish unjust colonization of the Philippines on the basis of just title, military might and economic exploitation. They

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contested that the only justifiable reason for Spain conquest of the Philippine islands was to evangelize the natives without the use of force.\textsuperscript{4}

One can not underestimate the dedication of the missionaries. The Dominican Diego Aduarte relates about his confreres’ mission to Bataan in 1587, maybe with a tinge of embellishment, but nevertheless gives a glimpse of their missionary witness:

“At times they went from one village to another by sea in small boats, but frequently it was necessary to pass through swampy and muddy country, so that they considered it was better to go barefoot and bare legged. On arriving at the place they were going, soaking wet and covered with mud, immediately they began to hear confessions or baptize as the need might be. They asked for nothing more than a little rice boiled in water and occasionally some small fish, if perchance the Indios had such for their food. The floor or the house of an Indio was their bed, and their wet clothing their covering, without anything more. Thus they acted and continued, to give the Indios to understand that all those trials they were undergoing had no other purpose than to gain their souls for God. . The Indios saw that they were without interest for their own personal welfare, and noticed that when they called them for some matter, whether by day or night, in rain or thunderstorm, the Fathers never considered or seemed to consider the request to come unreasonable.\textsuperscript{5}

Sadly, there was a falling off of missionary enthusiasm in the years to come as the regular clergy became increasingly aware of the limits of their resources and the magnitude of their task. The human spirit of the regulars succumbing to power and wealth and the crushing burdens of the Dutch war, among others also contributed to this decline.\textsuperscript{6}

The religious’ influence and power gradually metamorphosed as the main mode of oppression of the natives for most of the Spanish colonial period and became the main source of packets of revolt in the islands in the later period of the Spanish era. Jose Rizal’s\textsuperscript{7} two novels \textit{Noli me Tangere} and \textit{El Filibusterismo} were anti-clerical satire on Spanish friars and

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\textsuperscript{6} John Leddy Phelan, \textit{Hispanization}, 71.

\textsuperscript{7} Jose Rizal is the Philippines’ national hero. A member of the \textit{illustrado} (educated and upper class), he studied medicine in Spain but was more well-known for his two novels.
the atrocities committed in the name of the Church which became one of the triggers for the Philippine revolution in 1896.

The missionaries’ missionary zeal and passionate defence of the natives’ voluntary acceptance of the faith notwithstanding, the Spanish missionary was guided by a triumphalist Eurocentric agenda of religion and civilization right at the beginning:

“In both America and the Orient the reconquista tradition of suppressing paganism was supplemented by a Christian humanist ideal of Renaissance inspiration. The Indians were to be Hispanized as well as Christianized. The natives were to be resettled in compact villages and taught to live and to work as European labourers.”

Driven by this triumphalist mentality, one of the very first steps the missionaries did was to stamp out the indigenous religion of the natives which the missionaries often described as the devil’s work. This is reflected in the Augustinian Thomas Ortiz insistence upon fellow missionaries their duty to "examine their doctrines, customs, abuses, and superstitions, and, having examined them, impugn them and disabuse the said Gentiles of them because unless their roots are cut, the bad weeds will sprout again, no matter how many times you cut them".

On the other hand, not all missionaries were harsh in dealing with indigenous religion. In 1589 for example, the Franciscan Juan de Plasencia’s short treatise on marriage customs, slavery, burial rites, and "cults and superstitions" served as one of the bases for the subsequent missionary efforts at incorporating certain native practices that did not conflict with Christian notions while proscribing other aspects of the culture which did.

Sometimes the missionaries substituted pagan practices done by indigenous priestesses with Christian rituals but serving the same function. An example of this is recounted by the Jesuit missionary chronicler Pedro Chirino:

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9 Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, 107.
“A plague of locusts had been doing great damage in the island for two years. In order to obtain from God a remedy for this evil, they chose the most holy Virgin Mary as their intercessor, and made a vow to celebrate the feast of her most pure Conception, and to give on that occasion liberal alms as aid for the marriages of the poor and the orphans. They fulfilled their promises, and our Lord received their humble service, showing them that He was well pleased by turning aside the locusts from their crops, and giving them that year very abundant harvests. All the people of the village have now directed to the Church that recourse and dependence which they formerly had on the ministers of the devil.”

Along this effort to uproot the natives from their indigenous religion was the effort to combat certain local practices perceived by the missionaries as contradictory to Christian principles. One example was marriage practices like polygamy and divorce. Polygamy proved easier to eliminate than divorce. Since polygamy was a custom derived from recent Muslim influence in the Bisayas (Samar, Leyte, and Cebu), it was easily liquidated. More formidable, however, was the task of the missionaries to teach the Christian doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage to the members of a society accustomed to the principle of divorce.

The missionaries also vigorously campaigned against the pre-conquest system of sharecropping and debt system based on usury. Chirino in 1600 describes this practice:

“Whenever they made loans (not of money, which they did not use or possess, but of other things, most commonly rice, bells, and gold—this last more than all else, for when weighed it took the place of money, for which purpose every one carried in his pouch a balance), they must always agree upon the profit which should be paid them in addition to the sum that they were to lend. But the evil did not stop here, for the profit or interest itself went on increasing with the delay in making payment until finally, in the course of time it exceeded all that the debtor could pay. The debt was then charged to this person, and the poor wretch became a slave, and from that time all his descendants were also slaves. There was another form of this usury and slavery, by which the debtor or his son must remain from that time a slave, until the debt, with all the usury and interest which were customary among them, was repaid. As result of this, all the descendant of him who was either a debtor or security for the debt remained slaves.”

11 Pedro Chirino, SJ., Relación de las Islas Filipinas y de lo que en ellas han trabajado los Padres de la Compañía de Jesús (2nd ed.; Manila, 1890), 74 – 78. Taken from John Shumacher, SJ., Readings in Philippine History, Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979, 76, #43
13 Pedro Chirino, SJ., Relación de las Islas Filipinas y de lo que en ellas han trabajado los Padres de la Compañía de Jesús (2nd ed.; Manila, 1890), Taken from John Shumacher, SJ., Readings in Philippine History, 63, #29
The missionaries’ evangelization efforts were both aided and hampered by the geography of the land—an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands. The geography helped in the fragmentation of pre-colonial Philippines which accounts for the absence of a unified and vigorous resistance. The only form of political and social organization was small kinship units known as barangays\(^{14}\) spread into the different islands, independent of each other and with its own indigenous culture.

With the diversity of the geography and political organization comes linguistic diversity.

“Although, all the Philippine tongues go back to a common Malayo-Polynesian root form, the Filipinos spoke a bewildering variety of languages. On the island of Luzon there are six major languages, many minor ones, and a host of dialects. The Tagalogs of central Luzon where Manila is located formed the largest single linguistic group. In the Bisayan group of islands in the central Philippines there are three principal languages in addition to a confusing variety of minor languages and dialects. And the southern Philippines formed yet another Babel of languages.”\(^{15}\)

Due to this linguistic diversity, one of the earliest methods required of the Spanish missionaries was the use of the local language of each region. By 1582 the Manila Ecclesiastical Junta elevated the practice of translation to the level of official policy. In 1603 the king issued a decree requiring every missionary in the Philippines to have the "necessary competency, and know the language of the indios whom he should instruct."\(^{16}\) "'Nothing can be done in the ministry,' a Franciscan wrote in the seventeenth century 'if the religious do not learn the language of the natives.'"\(^{17}\) Significantly, evangelization in the vernacular prevented the imposition of Spanish language into the natives.

An outstanding example of the use of the vernacular by the Spanish missionaries, pointed out by José M. de Mesa, was the translation of the Our Father into Tagalog – Ama

\(^{14}\) A name derived from the sailboats which brought the early Malay immigrants to the Philippines. The barangays usually consisted of from 30 to 100 families. A few barangays, such as the ones of Manila, Vigan, and Cebu, contained as many as 2,000 people. John Leddy Phelan, Hispanization, 15.

\(^{15}\) John Leddy Phelan, Hispanization, 18.

\(^{16}\) Vicente L. Rafael, Contracting Colonialism, 19.

\(^{17}\) Vicente L. Rafael, Contracting Colonialism, 19.
Mutual Conversion of Spanish Missionaries and Filipino Natives

*Namin* – in 1593. The text of *Ama Namin* in the 1593 *Doctrina Christiana*, the first book ever published in the Philippines, was written in the nearly extinct native script *baybayin* as well as in the Romanized characters.

*Ama Namin* was not only a literal translation from Spanish to the local language but exploited the rich local cultural values and categories. This showed that the first generation of Spanish missionaries considered cultural awareness as indispensable for evangelization. The early missionaries had a wide variety of *Tagalog* words and concepts at their disposal. The actual choices they made in translating the Lord’s Prayer into *Tagalog* is an especially eloquent testimony to their exceptional respect and appreciation for Philippine culture.¹⁸

Besides the use of vernacular, the missionaries made some creative attempts at inculturation. At the same time that Mateo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili were leading pioneering efforts at inculturation in China and India respectively, Spanish missionaries in the Philippines, were integrating drama and indigenous dances in their evangelization methods:

“They perform in their own language dramatic representations of the lives of the saints with such interior feeling that the spectators whether Spaniards or Indios, are moved to many tears of compunction and are impelled to change their lives. This is what happened in the town of Sinaloa [Siniloan, Laguna], where a presentation of the Last Judgment made such an impression on many of the unbelievers that almost all asked with great earnestness and humility for baptism, and so it was done. The skill and grace with which they dance, executing every movement no matter how difficult, is worth seeing. This they do on the feast-days, especially that of Corpus Christi.”¹⁹

No doubt the colourful and festive Christianity in the Philippines today can be traced to the natives penchant for pageantry. Phelan describes this:

“It is apparent that one of Catholicism's strongest appeals was its splendid ritual and its colourful pageantry. In this respect the Filipino attitude was not substantially different from most other indigenous peoples of the Spanish empire. But there are

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special features to the Filipino response. Singing played a prominent role in the pre-Hispanic culture, hence the Filipinos proved eager and talented pupils of liturgical music. They soon acquired proficiency in singing Gregorian chants. They learned to play European instruments like the flute, the violin, and the flageolet with remarkable skill.”

C. Reception of the Filipino Natives to Evangelization by the Spanish Missionaries

The response of the natives to Catholicism was described in Spanish accounts as warm embrace and yearning openness. The Franciscan Marcelo de Ribadeneira for example, narrates the fervour of the natives in the region of Bikol with regards to the mass:

“For during its whole duration they are always kneeling on the ground, and they try to hear it every day. Not content with just one if they can hear many Masses, sometimes some of them are there the whole morning, hearing all the Masses which are said. They feel so badly not to have Mass when the minister goes to some other place or when there is no church in their own place because of its smallness, that they go to other places, even at a great distance, to hear Mass. In fact some even leave their own place and go to towns where Mass is never lacking, and just for this reason.”

However, Filipinos received Catholicism in the milieu of their indigenous religion and culture which they never relinquished. Ironically the indigenous religion of the natives, the very stamp which the Spanish missionaries have fought so hard to eradicate, became the source of hospitality for the natives in receiving the new faith. The Filipinos were deeply spiritual and religious even before the Spanish came to evangelize them. Many studies on the Filipino natives’ pre-colonial society points to a well developed indigenous religion.

There are plenty of examples even from Spanish accounts of how the natives accepted the new faith according to their indigenous beliefs. As indigenous religion permeated all phases of life, the sacred and profane were often indistinguishable. A notable example is the warm reception of the Filipinos to baptism. The natives readily submit to baptism because they believe baptism not only has spiritual powers to wipe away their sins but has the power to cure their illness:

“The first to perform what might be called a "medicinal" baptism was the proto-
missionary of the Philippines, Magellan himself. Pigafetta writes: The captain told
them to burn their idols and to believe in Christ, and that if the sick man were
baptized, he would quickly recover; and if that did not so happen they could behead
him [i.e., the captain] then and there. . . . We made a procession from the square to
the house of the sick man with as much pomp as possible. There we found him in such
condition that he could neither speak nor move. We baptized him and his two wives
and ten girls. Then the captain had asked him how he felt. He spoke immediately and
said that by the grace of God he felt very well. That was the most manifest miracle
[that happened] in our times.”

Many of the indigenous undercurrents served as harbingers for some of Christianity’s
practices. The calling upon by the natives of the spirits to negotiate for their earthly concerns
and difficulties encouraged the popular devotion to Catholic saints. Healing and other myriad
of rituals which celebrate connection with the densely populated spirit world in native
religion inspired the natives to try to bring down the Christian doctrines and formalities and
most especially God to the level of their daily life and struggles. No wonder, the most that
appealed to the natives about Christianity was its pageantry and colourful rituals, as Phelan
observed: “As it happened, the Filipinos endowed certain aspects of the new religion with a
ceremonial and emotional content, a special Filipino flavour which made Catholicism in the
archipelago in some respects a unique expression of that universal religion.”

Phelan further observes that in this process of what he calls "Philippinizing"
Catholicism the natives showed a remarkable selective process of stressing and de-
emphasizing certain features of Spanish Catholicism. This selective and appropriation
process behind the facade of rapidity in the conversion of the natives, was demonstrated by
Vicente Rafael, in his study of Tagalogs’ reception to evangelization in early Spanish era, as
the natives own way of resistance to colonial rule: “...what recurs in the colonial context…
are the ways by which translation and conversion produce the vernacular as that which

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23 John Leddy Phelan, Hispanization, 72.
24 Ibid.
Mutual Conversion of Spanish Missionaries and Filipino Natives

simultaneously institutes and subverts colonial rule.” 25 The rapidity of conversion may also have meant that the Tagalogs had their own way of appropriating Christian signs, which to the Spaniards appeared to indicate an insufficient grasp of doctrinal subtleties. 26 For it seems that for the Tagalogs, confession, the very epitome of Christian conversion, had little to do with comprehending the message of God by incorporating His Law. Indeed, conversion occurred with astounding rapidity precisely because the majority of the people did not, from the Spanish point of view, seem to understand the faith they were accepting. 27

A noteworthy creation of the Filipino natives is blending Christianity with native religion so as to release the liberating potential of Christianity. Reynaldo Ileto’s seminal work on Philippine history28 showed how some sort of syncretism of pre-Spanish and Christian beliefs became the basis of rituals and ideology of many of the popular mass uprisings which led to the Philippine revolution in 1896. This syncretism happened especially in the masses’ experience of Holy Week. The various rituals of the Holy Week, particularly the reading and dramatization of the story of Jesus Christ called the Pasyon had simultaneous contradictory functions: From the Spanish friars perspective’ the pasyon was to inculcate among the Indios loyalty to Spain and Church, to encourage resignation to things as they were and to instil preoccupation with morality and the afterlife rather than with conditions in this world. However, from the lowland Filipinos it provided a language for articulating their own values, ideals and even hopes of liberation.29

D. Conclusion:

Christianity as represented by the Spanish missionaries and indigenous religion as represented by the Filipino natives benefited from a process of mutual conversion during the

25 Vicente L. Rafael, Contracting Colonialism, xv.
26 Vicente L. Rafael, Contracting Colonialism, 87.
27 Vicente L. Rafael, Contracting Colonialism, 87.
29 Reynaldo Ileto, Pasyon and Revolution, 15.
beginnings of Spanish colonial era in the Philippines. Christianity was able to transform
certain practices of the natives connected with indigenous religion e.g., polygamy, divorce,
ritual drinking, usury, etc. Indigenous religion was able to adapt these changes which explain
why it has survived the onslaught of colonization and Christianization. On the other hand,
indigenous religion transformed Christianity by harnessing its liberating dimension and
making it into a more expressive and down-to-earth rather than merely doctrinal and
formalistic religiosity.

The Christian evangelization in the Philippines in 1578 – 1609 was a two way
process. The Spanish colonizers brought Christianity to the islands to transform the
indigenous religion of the natives but in the process the indigenous religion also transformed
Christianity. This mutual conversion became the unique stamp of Christianity of the
Philippines today.

The lesson here is the creative dynamic of partnership of both Christianity and
indigenous religion in history and in faith not in the fusing of the two into one religion.
Christianity and indigenous religion did not destroy each other, on the other hand they have
been partners in the living and articulating of the faith of the people.

This historical lesson is especially relevant to contemporary evangelization,
particularly as the church deals with the issue of popular religiosity and the vital relationship
between faith and culture.

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