

Sects and Cults

Iglesia ni Cristo

Independent Third World Churches are a fact to be reckoned with in these last decades of the 20th century. Whether they are orthodox or seriously heretical, they need to be studied by the churches in the West. What is their appeal? What can they teach us about the methods for evangelization in the vastly different cultures of the world? The Iglesia ni Cristo of the Philippines is one of the largest and powerful independent and indigenous churches in the Third World, and illustrates the struggle between nationalism, colonialism, Christianity, sectarianism and native religions.

In spite of the apparent dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, the Philippines has been fertile soil for the development of an astounding variety of semi, quasi and pseudo Christian sects and cults. One effort, in 1968, to list all the religious groups in the Philippines included 350 separately organized religious bodies, most of them falling in the sect and cult category.

Spanish colonialism introduced Roman Catholicism to the Philippines. In 1898 Spain transferred its sovereignty over the archipelago to the U.S.A. American Protestants sent missionaries to their nation's new colony. A new period in the Philippines began that was characterized "by things American," while at the same time Filipinos were searching for their roots and identity. In this religious and political climate, the Iglesia ni Cristo was founded. And as I will show, this heretical sect didn't have to adapt to Filipino culture, it grew out of it. It is an indigenous and nationalistic movement.

1. History

The Iglesia was founded by Felix Manalo. He was born not far from Manila in 1886. His mother was a devout Roman Catholic with whom he daily attended church. Manalo's education was scanty. He didn't attend more than two or three elementary school grades. His parents were very poor. In 1902 Manalo converted from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism and associated himself in the course of years with five different denominations, ranging from the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Disciples of Christ to the Seventh Day Adventists. He also attended a few Bible colleges in the Philippines. In 1919 he studied for one year at the Pacific School of Religion in California.

In 1914, Manalo founded his own church. On July 27 of that year he filed the Articles of Incorporation. This date of filing is important for the Iglesia members as they claim that this date coincides with the beginning of World War I. They use this fact in their prophetic writings. Manalo declared himself to be "God's Messenger" in fulfillment of Revelation 7:2.

The new church had a slow growth for some time. The Iglesia membership was 60,000; in 1960 it had risen to 200,000. The 1973 census figures gave 475,000 members. The Iglesia itself, however, claims more than 2 million members. Felix Manalo served as Supreme Pastor of the church until his death in 1963. He saw his movement develop

from a very humble and small beginning to a significant force in the Philippines. It became the second largest non-Catholic church in the Philippines. The postwar years didn't only see rapid numerical growth, the Iglesia also became powerful and fabulously wealthy.

What are the factors contributing to the tremendous increase in church membership? The church mobilized its members; evangelism was aggressive; postwar changes made people receptive. Its monthly magazine *Pasugo* (God's Messenger) forcefully and persuasively propagates Manalo's teachings. Dr. Gowing gives as reasons for the Iglesia's growth: "... its exaggerated nationalism, its anti-Western flavour, and its theologically heretical doctrines. The Iglesia continues to grow, gaining many new adherents from among malcontent or dissatisfied members of the mainline Churches, both Catholic and Protestant."

Iglesia's chapels are readily recognizable. They are large, beautiful, and spacious cathedral type buildings. We visited a chapel in Cebu city. It could easily seat over a thousand worshippers. The building and the grounds were immaculately kept. By 1973, 137 chapels had been built in Manila and other cities and towns in the Philippines. In the late 1940s Manalo realized the dream of a central chapel and personal palace at the cost of \$2 million. Committed members do give generously and the large Pasasalamat (Thanksgiving) offering at the end of the year is also a major source of income. Some claim, though this has not been proven on any large scale, that finances have come as well from politicians who pay the Iglesia to vote for them. After Felix Manalo's death, his son Erano, who was personally trained by his father, became the successor. His eldest son "Eddie Boy" is now being prepared to follow in his father's footsteps.

2. Theology

Iglesia assumes Biblical inerrancy and emphatically rejects church tradition and extra revelation. The perspicuity of the Bible is strongly denied. The ordinary Christian cannot understand the Bible unless it is interpreted by authorized ministers. The basis for authority in the Iglesia is, therefore, the Bible as interpreted by Manalo. Since the 1930's the Iglesia has denied the pre-existence of Christ. His existence began in Mary's womb. Before His conception and birth, Christ existed only in the mind and plan of God. One of their crude arguments is: "What did Mary do to the child she bore? She wrapped it with diapers. Do you put diapers on God? No."

The church founded by Jesus Christ and referred to in Matthew 16:18 was destroyed in the early centuries. Where is the true Church of Christ found today? In the Philippines! How can this be proven? Iglesia bases its claim on John 10:16: "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold." These "other sheep" are the ones mentioned in Acts 2:39: "For the promise is to you, and to your children and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." What country is referred to as "afar off"? Iglesia has found the answer in Isaiah 43:5,6 "I will bring thy seed from the east - and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, give up, and to the south, keep not back, bring my

sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth." The Philippines is the far east in which Christ has now the sheep of "the other fold."

Who can be saved? Only those who belong to the Iglesia. Christ died for His body. The Iglesia is His body and no one else.

The Iglesia has as a key teaching its unique view of Manalo. According to the Iglesia, Felix Manalo's special mission was to proclaim the true gospel and to snatch the true believers away as "ravenous birds" (Isaiah 46:11) from the trappings of false religions. Since Manalo was specially commissioned by God, he was, therefore, also the authorized interpreter of the Bible and the leader of the true church. No Iglesia minister can write his own sermons or publish his own articles without prior approval of its contents by church authorities.

The Iglesia teaches a regimented lifestyle. The church has an all-Filipino leadership and has a close-knit authoritarian organization. Church attendance is checked. Nonattenders are visited by the deacons. Ex-communication is practised. Causes that lead to the severance from the church include excessive drinking, immorality, gambling, marriage outside the church, apostasy and disagreement with administrative policies. Julita Reyes Sta. Roman comments: "The Iglesia pays attention to every little thing and it requires a lot of patience, tact, and courage from the deacons and ministers. It is the duty of and business of local unit officials and even members to watch the behaviour of co-members and report anything they observe, see, or hear to the deacons. Whatever the problems or troubles are the deacons will try their best to resolve."

The Iglesia's control over its followers has led to a significant influence in political life. Members must vote in every election, and specifically for Iglesia agreed upon candidates. Justification for this block-voting is found in 1 Corinthians 1:10. So the unity of believers must also be expressed in political life.

All the efforts of the Iglesia are dedicated to growth. Indigenous means are used. Filipinos love debates. Open forum debates in plazas have been used effectively by the Iglesia for the propagation of its message. The Iglesia has also shown the Filipinos that nationals are capable of running their own affairs. It has fostered national pride by demonstrating that their own resources are sufficient to meet any church needs. The Iglesia has even a foreign mission program in the U.S. It began in 1968. By 1974 it had 21 congregations and nine chapels. For example, about 300 members (nearly all Filipino) regularly attend its Los Angeles local. The services are conducted in English but follow the pattern of those in the Philippines. The hymns are sung in Tagalog (one of the Philippines major languages).

The Iglesia ni Cristo's rapid growth shows the obstacles our missionaries face in their church planting work. They need much wisdom to work fruitfully for Christ in a foreign culture.

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