

**CHRISTIANITY IN THE POLITICAL-ECONOMY OF EAST TIMOR  
AND THE PHILIPPINES**

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**Abstract**

*Colonial period was an era characterized by two major phenomenon – economic exploitation and religious expansion, where foreign religions influenced the cultural and social lives of the colonial territories. East Timor and the Philippines have had historic colonial experiences, especially as it concerns religion. The introduction of Catholicism in both countries thwarted the various indigenous religion, given the colonial strategy employed by the colonists and the missionaries; Catholicism took a linear path into the political economy of both countries. This study adopts a narrative analytic method, while relying on written sources such as journal articles, books and relevant internet materials to bring answers to the inquiry on the massive impact of Catholicism in East Timor and the Philippines. This study finds that the Portuguese and the Spanish adopted peculiar strategies of assimilation that varies from other colonial powers, giving rise to massive conversion and catholic hegemony in East Timor and the Philippines. However, Catholicism should not be used as a tool for discrimination to other religions, in order to maintain a system that portray unity and collective development.*

**Keywords:** Catholicism, Political-economy, East Timor, Philippines, Colonialism

**Introduction**

Cultural evolution and cultural diffusion is a process that states and people experience at one time or another. It transforms the indigenous practices and beliefs of the people, which subsequently affect the political, social and economic systems of such people.

East Timor or Timor-Leste and the Philippines found in Southeast Asia have experienced colonial conquest and administration from more than one colonial power. East Timor was first colonized by the Portuguese and later, Indonesia, while the Philippines were colonized by Spain and later by America. Their first colonists introduced Catholicism to them which undoubtedly influenced the culture, politics and economy of both states. Christianity is one of the major aftermaths of colonial leadership; it is usually introduced simultaneously with other aspects of

colonial administration. While this aspect of colonial legacy affected colonial territories of Africa and other parts of Asia, Christianity and Catholicism in particular took a linear path in the political economy of East Timor and the Philippines. Important factors such as colonial heritage and Indonesian occupation of 1975, serve as integers to the hegemonic power of the Catholic Church in both countries, all of which would be analyzed in this study.

### **The Portuguese In East Timor**

Catholicism was first introduced in East Timor by the Dominican priests in 1515 before the actual colonization of the area. . By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese took over the coastal areas and penetrated into the interior. The Dominican priests penetrated the interior for evangelization and by 1640, 10 missions and 22 churches had been established in East Timor.<sup>1</sup> by the time the colonial officials arrived East-Timor, the people could not mount much resistance against the Portuguese because of the advancement of Christianity which had lasted for years and had prepared the mind of the people over the Portuguese arrival. The Portuguese officials were given special rights as patrons over the churches, which they built and supported<sup>2</sup>. As the Portuguese solidified their rule on East Timor, the church became an essential arm of the government. In fact, being baptized in the church became one of the criteria of becoming an 'assimilado' (a subject who has attained the level of civilization to qualify him for the full rights as Portuguese citizens); other criteria include: speaking Portuguese, having formal education, paying taxes and wearing European cloths<sup>3</sup>. This social imbroglio delayed the evangelization and conversion process in Timorese; perhaps the people thought that becoming a Christian and becoming culturally Portuguese were the same, and thus were not interested in the new faith.

The church was therefore regarded as an institution of the educated and the elites, whereas the majority who were commoners continued with their indigenous religious practice of animism. Animism is a collective worship and reverence to spirits and dead ancestors. It emphasizes reverence to living things and even some non-living things, which they believe to have spirits<sup>4</sup>. This continued to the extent that throughout the Portuguese colonial period in East Timor, not more than 10% of the people were converted into the catholic faith. One could rightly say that although the Portuguese introduced Christianity in East Timor, their

strategy and administrative quagmire discouraged the people from early conversion to the new religion.

Portuguese incursion into East Timor was very unpleasant and cruel. East Timor experienced neglect and misery with little or no introduction of infrastructural development. More than half of the population lived in primitive subsistence rural isolated farming. There were high record of malnutrition, infant mortality of about 50% and diseases like pneumonia, tuberculosis and gonorrhoea<sup>5</sup>. Hull recorded that it was not until 1959 that essential infrastructure like electricity, adequate medical facilities, a radio station, durable bridges and sealed roads came to East Timor. Around the same time, only 2% of Timorese children received primary education. The people were excluded from professional and commercial ventures. Professional jobs for doctors, lawyers, and teachers were reserved for the portuguese<sup>6</sup>. The Portuguese administration paid less attention to the development and well-being of the colony. Perhaps, the Portuguese attitude to the East Timorese could be attributed to the many negative experiences of the Portuguese at the time. Portugal had a larger population to cater for; it was declining in power in international politics as some of their other colonies were under threat, leading to loss of wealth and poor performance in East Timor<sup>7</sup>. They were however more interested in exploiting the natural and human resources in East Timor than in introducing western civilization and development.

The Catholic Church on the other hand provided amenities especially towards the provision of education, while the Portuguese continued their colonial policies of misery until 1974, when most European countries had granted independence to their colonies. It was in the same year that the Portuguese dictatorship regime was toppled through a revolution carried out by the separatist group in East Timor.

### **Indonesia And The Growth Of Christianity In East Timor**

At the end of Portuguese rule in East Timor in 1974, Indonesian occupied East Timor the following year, after they subdued the separatist group in East Timor. By 1974, East Timor had divided ideologically; there was the separatist group who wanted an independent East Timor, while the pro-Indonesian group wanted to be incorporated into Indonesia. The separatist group forces declared their independence from foreign rule on 28 November, 1975. Subsequently, the Indonesian government under Suharto deployed troops who

supported the pro-Indonesian group and later incorporated East Timor as a province of Indonesia in July 1976.<sup>8</sup> At the occupation of East Timor, Indonesia favoured strong and direct rule which was not accepted by the Timorese who were determined to preserve their culture and national identity. Indonesian government however, created a climate of terror for the Timorese. There were occasional massacres and uprisings, which resulted to more killings among other atrocities meted out to the East Timorese. Any pocket of revolutionary movement or uprising was militarily tackled without considering the lives of the people.

From the world view, the United Nations and other world powers ignored the plight of the Timorese, although the UN refused to recognize the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Again, Australia who was a closer neighbour to East Timor as well as other major world powers were also silent on the matter on the Timorese; while America out rightly supported the invasion.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church did not fall into the silence spell like the great powers, but decided to be up and against the abuses of the Indonesian military forces, which had generally resulted into widespread environmental degradation.

Ironically, the Indonesian occupation of East Timor led to the highest rate of East Timor conversion into Catholicism. Indonesia was predominantly a Muslim state who did not recognize the traditional/indigenous beliefs of the people. In their moral law, it officially allowed five religious practices which includes: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. The East Timorese majorly preferred Catholicism to Islamism, perhaps because of their erstwhile colonial experience with the Portuguese and a bit of similarity found in their believe in spirits and the catholic believe in praying to the saints. This resulted into massive conversion of above 90% of the people to Catholicism<sup>9</sup>. Apart from the Indonesian administrative policies, Joel Hodge explains that some internal factors also contributed to their massive acceptance and participation in the catholic faith during Indonesian occupation. The Catholic Church established one of the Timorese local languages 'Tetum' as the language of the church to replace Portuguese. This was a step towards uniting the various tribal groups in East Timor. Through tetum, the church brought the message of hope to the struggles of the people which served as a shield for the

resistance fighters. The church provided information and resources and even related the plights of the Timorese to the outside world<sup>10</sup>.

Although the Catholic Church during the Portuguese colonialism acted as an imperial and civilizing tool, the role of the church changed especially in the aftermath of the Indonesian invasion. The suffering of the Timorese brought the priests much closer to the people, socially and politically. The support of the church for East Timor at a time became worrisome to Indonesia that the then former officer, Major Prabowo stated that “ the church, the religion and the priests are the three factors which threaten East Timor’s integration with Indonesia”.<sup>11</sup>

The Catholic Church in East Timor could be said to have stood with the native people from the Portuguese colonial administration, but more so during and after the occupation by Indonesia. The Bishops, the priests and the nuns stood for the peace and dignity of the people to the extent that when the crisis became unbearable, the people’s safe haven became the Bishop’s compound. For Bishop Belo, who was in charge of the church at the time, maintained that the people had to decide their own fate. The Catholic Church however gained more trust from the Timorese. On this Chris Lundry wrote that the support of the Catholic Church to the East Timorese unintentionally sowed the seed of nationalism<sup>12</sup>.

It is in line to state that the Catholic Church which was the only institution allowed to exist by the Indonesian administration (as other institutions like media were banned) did not fail in their responsibility to the people. It was through the church institution that the outside world heard about the sufferings of the Timorese, through the involvement of the outside journalists and media persons. The strength and the support of the church thus continued to command respect among the East Timorese.

Looking back to the history of East Timor, especially during the twenty four years of Indonesian occupation, the importance and contributions of the Catholic Church cannot be over emphasized. It was the church’s unquivering support and efforts that finally led to a referendum in 1999 and later independence in 2002; making the Timorese to hold the religion and its teachings to a very high esteem.

### **Christianity And Politics In East Timor**

At independence, the Catholic Church continued to maintain her hegemony on Timor, through influence of their constitutions and policies<sup>13</sup>, which reflected in major sectors of her economy.

In November 2004 for instance, the Timorese government in the bid to harmonize the education system approved an experimental curriculum proposal for elementary schools, which made religious education an optional course. The Catholic Church stood against this decision, stating that teaching religion in elementary schools should be mandatory, while the parents would have the right to declare the options of religion to engage their children in. To the Catholic Church in East Timor, religion is a moral source of reforming individual's world view, identity and behaviour. On the other hand, the government under the prime minister Mari Bin Amude Alkatiri, justified the proposal, asserting that the national curriculum was put in place by the government as well as the National parliament, and as such should be accepted by all. He further stated that as the highest authority in the executive, he considers the constitution as his bible. He was of the opinion that the government should not fund religious teachings. The church thus criticized the prime minister for comparing the holy bible to the country's constitution, and maintained their stand as the people's representative.

In February 2005, the Catholic Church published a pastoral note to all the christened, where the reason for their criticism was addressed. The church further undertook a nineteen days public demonstration to drive home their grievance. The issue which was viewed as a minor one later escalated to the extent that the church started to campaign for the resignation of the prime minister, which made the prime minister to insinuate that the Catholic Church had become a political party instead of a religious group and is unnecessarily interfering in the issues of the government.

The church stood her ground on the matter, having concluded that since the prime minister and his cabinet members were mostly made up of returnees and educated elites who grew up overseas and did not experience the occupation and domination by Indonesia, they would not understand the essence of religion to the identity of Timor. The church also condemned the relationship which the Prime Minister was said to be nurturing building with Indonesia, on the notion that Timorese should not align with Indonesia, who treated them

gruesomely in the past. In April 9, 2005, the church advocated that Timorese identity should ultimately be “catholic and Asian” rather than “European or Mozambican” (as the prime minister was a Mozambique returnee).<sup>14</sup>

After much attempts at negotiations by the government and the church, Timorese government gave up its decisions and publicly acknowledged the importance and values of the Catholic Church in the building of the Timorese national identity as well as in the socio-cultural and economic formation of the people. The crisis was finally settled on May 7, 2005, through a joint signature of the church and the executive. As a result of the agreement, religious education became compulsory in elementary school curriculum.

More so, the government through the influence of the Catholic Church included in the penal code that abortion and prostitution would continue to be regarded as criminal acts<sup>15</sup>.

### **Religion And Christianity In The Philippines**

The Philippine was colonized by Spain for more than 300 years, during which Catholicism, the Spanish traditional religion was introduced<sup>16</sup>. The first Spanish contact with the Philippines was made when Ferdinand Magellan arrived in 1521. Later on, four Australian monks in company with a merchant named Migual Lopez de Legazpi, arrived in 1565, established ports and settled in the Philippines<sup>18</sup>. On arrival, the Spaniards had two interests in the Philippines- trade in spices and Christianization. Their hope for trade in spices was shattered when they discovered that the Philippines had no spice. The port which they had established was rather used as a resting point for trade between Mexico and China. By establishing ports in the Philippines, the Spanish missionaries carried on with converting the people to Catholicism, while the merchants pursued their trading interests.

Before the introduction of Christianity in the Philippines, religion played an important role in the society. The indigenous people believed in the supreme God called “Bathala” who created the universe and controls other gods and dead spirits. The smaller gods and dead spirits were believed to have control over the streams, fields, trees, mountains, forest and houses. Sacrifices, prayers and rituals were usually organized in reverence to these gods and spirits.<sup>18</sup>

The dead spirits known as 'anitos' were believed to have come back to the earth to watch over the people. The spirits were said to have varied personalities; while some are regarded as good and works for the good of the people, others were regarded as evil that causes and brings bad omen like poor crops, sickness, poverty and death. The people however believe that the evil spirits could be warded off by wearing 'amulets' (small carvings made of wood, ivory or gold) for protection<sup>19</sup>.

When the Spaniards came into the Philippines, Islam was already firmly established in areas of Mindanao and Sulu. On arrival, the Spaniards were guided by the commitment to expel non-Christians. They dispersed the Muslims and began total Christianization of the Philippines. Various means were applied including military force in order to achieve the Spaniard conversion goals.<sup>20</sup> Muslim natives in the Mindanao strongly resisted the Spanish forces but only succeeded in maintaining the Islamic religion in the Southern part of the area while Catholicism dominated the Northern part.<sup>21</sup>

The missionaries had a grievous believe that teaching Christian values was the essence of their existence, hence their radical strategy of conversion. Their radical approach changed the social, political and religious lives of the native Filipino people and gruesomely altered the indigenous culture which they regarded as sin and evil. In their quest to make more converts, the missionaries invited more representatives from different catholic order like the Jesuit, Franciscan, and the Dominicans to the Philippines, who learnt the local language in order to facilitate their mission. They inculcated the concept of heaven and hell on the people and frightened the natives to conversion.<sup>22</sup>

Although majority of the Philippines were converted and baptized in the catholic faith, they practiced what was called 'folk Catholicism' (The combination of Catholicism and the spirit worship). The reason for this could be perhaps attributed to the similarities of both religion, just as was the case with the East Timor. The Filipino native religion had a concept of supreme God, known as Bathala, who created the world. This supreme God could only be reached through lesser gods, spirits (anitos) and ancestors, who serve as intermediaries and were worshiped through idols. For Catholicism, there is also a belief in the supreme God. There are intermediaries, like angels, archangels, and saints, through which they believe God could be reached, although they are not worshiped as God on their own.<sup>23</sup> This perhaps contributed to the



easy conversion of the indigenous people of the Philippines to Catholicism.

### **Revolution In The Philippines**

During Spanish rule, the Spanish system was imposed on the Philippines without considering their cultural demands. The native Filipinos were discriminated against and were economically and educationally deprived. Relevant positions were preserved for the people of Spanish blood while the Filipinos were left with lower job opportunities like clerical officer. By 1872, revolutionary sentiments arose against the Spanish rule when three Filipino priests were publicly executed because they called for more equality within the church. The revolution split the Filipino into the reformist group and the revolutionary group. The reformist group believed that the Spanish should continue to rule but with a reformed administration; while the revolutionists supported nothing but Philippines independence. As time passed by, more radical revolutionist began to emerge in the persons like Bonifacio and Rizal, who chose to fight for their just course. The Spanish matched the Filipino radicalism with brutality, killing the revolutionists. This crisis lingered on until America stepped in against the Spanish in 1899<sup>24</sup>.

### **America's Involvement In The Philippines**

America came into the Philippines in 1899, at the time when the Spanish colonial power and the Philippine's revolutionist were at loggerheads. On arrival, America was engaged into a war from 1899-1902. The Philippines continued their anti-colonial rebellion which abinitio was concentrated on the Spanish but had turned towards America. America's military prowess availed them the power and opportunity to bombard the Spanish Philippines and carried on with their tutelage mission. America claimed that their occupation of the Philippine was a noble course and a 'rescue mission' to acquaint the people with the practical experience of political governance. Considering the environmental decadence experienced under Spanish colonial administration, America declared their intention to provide political development for the Filipinos who under Spanish rule could not learn the ethics of political governance and grant her independence afterwards<sup>25</sup>.

Spanish colonial rule and the entire administration was characterized by corrupt practices and fraudulent activities. The government was

void of checks and balances which gave room for personalizing of official offices and duties, amassing of public fund, and unaccounted taxation on the people<sup>26</sup>.

Before America totally took over from Spain, Philippine was exchanged for \$20 million by the Spain and America after signing the treaty of Paris in December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1898.

When America occupied the Philippines, the political system of the area was not revitalized, America instead, continued with the already existing anomaly in the political system. They maintained the officials used during the Spanish rule whose activities undermined the efforts of America in rebuilding political leadership of the area. This also gave the Filipino office holders the leverage to amass public fund meant for development<sup>27</sup>.

In the religious aspect, the change in government was felt in the church. During the Spanish rule, governance was collaborative effort of the resident governor general who represents the King of Spain and the Arch Bishop of Manila, who represents the Roman Catholic Pope. This means that governance was a partnership of the state and the church.

America introduced a totally new scenario for the church. All religion were declared independent of the state as far as their activities were within the confines of the state law and constitutions. Whereas the law was to respect all religions; and no longer had the power to impose any particular religion on the people. This invariably means that no particular religion was to be considered before institutionalizing any law or civil or political rights<sup>28</sup>.

Dennis et al, explains that the church during America's administration was both serving the purpose of 'teacher' and 'learner' in the political community, and no longer a ruler or an agent of the state. This stands to explain that though the church and the state are autonomous, it does not necessarily mean that the church would be mute on pressing issues that concerns politics and politician or even public policies. The church however, maintained the right to show their grievances and can appeal to people's conscience through religious teaching. For instance, a candidate of a political office could be supported by a particular church which may decide to campaign for such a candidate and even go as far as instigating their members to vote the candidate<sup>29</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

East Timor and the Philippines were colonized by different colonial powers, and thus had varied experiences in the process of their conversion to Christianity. For the Timorese, the Portuguese did not apply forceful means in their missionary process unlike the Spanish, whose process of conversion was actualized by radical and brutal means.

The Timorese had a slow response to Christianity at the beginning, but were compelled by the conditions of the Indonesian government to ally with the church instead of Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism which were the only religions allowed by Indonesian government. The Timorese shift to the church was to some extent a response to law, but to a larger extent was their last resort for hope when the Indonesian military administration caused death and mayhem in East Timor. The church also experienced pressures which gave them opportunity to flee from Timor, but they rather persisted in protecting and advocating for the people amidst violence and torture. The unequivocal support of the church to the East Timorese earned them their current status and influence over the politics of East Timor.

On the other hand, the Philippines were forcefully converted to Christianity, which perhaps contributed to their combination of Catholicism and animism (folk Catholicism). Notwithstanding the conditions and processes of conversion to Christianity, both East Timor and the Philippines remain the only countries in Southeast Asia with a higher population of Christians, with East Timor having up to 97.6% Christian population while the Philippines have about 86% Christian population.

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