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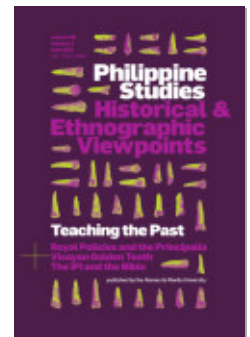
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# The Bible in the Iglesia Filipina Independiente

The Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) has developed its own position regarding the interpretation of the Bible. This article charts the evolution of the IFI's hermeneutical position throughout the three main phases of its historical and theological development, drawing on official and representative statements made by the church and its leadership. It shows how the development of the biblical hermeneutics of the IFI parallels the historical trajectory of the church at large, from its inception under the leadership of Gregorio Aglipay (and Isabelo de los Reyes Sr.), to the centennial celebration of its proclamation in 2002.

**KEYWORDS: IGLESIA FILIPINA INDEPENDIENTE, BIBLE, HERMENEUTICS, TRADITION, CATHOLICISM**

The interpretation of the Bible in the church is traditionally a ground of debate between various Christian churches, most notably, but certainly not only, between those coming from a Catholic and those from a Protestant tradition, in which context the debate focuses on the relationship among Scripture, church, and tradition. Apart from such confessional factors, there is the question of which methods of biblical interpretation are appropriate in what way. This article adds to the body of knowledge concerning the interpretation of Scripture in the church(es) by asking how biblical interpretation has taken and is taking place in the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI),<sup>1</sup> the largest (ecumenically recognized) non-Roman Catholic church in the Philippines. In pursuing this line of investigation, the point of departure of this article is the observation that biblical interpretation is always grounded in and to a certain extent guided by its theological and ecclesial context. Following Fernando Segovia (2000, 48), this matter can be formulated as follows:

In fact, the socio-religious matrix or ambit of the critic—his or her institutional, religious, and theological moorings—has been more explicit or evident than any other factor as regards the re-creation of meaning from texts, the reconstruction of history behind texts, and the use of critical methodologies in relation to texts.

In other words, contextuality always plays a major role in the interpretation of biblical texts, and it can even be regarded as a catalyst for interpretation: Without a vantage point, there can be no interpretation, and each and every point of departure is, like each and every exegete, always also contextual, as Rudolf Bultmann (1961, 289–96) has already argued in modern theological scholarship. Understanding how a particular exegete, or a particular community of interpretation, such as a church, interprets a text can, therefore, only happen with due attention to the context out of which an interpretation emerges. This article outlines how the various phases of the IFI's existence and its theologians' interaction with various aspects of this church's context have led to a hermeneutical tradition that emphasizes distinct forms of interpretation in the course of the church's first one hundred years of autonomous existence (1902–2002). Although beyond the scope of this study, the IFI's hermeneutical development from 2003 onward exhibits characteristics similar to those of the immediately preceding phase.

Before turning to the body of this article, a word has to be said about the choice of the IFI as the case study for this contribution. Apart from the fact that the research done for this study took place in a seminary of that church, there are also other reasons why the IFI is appropriate as a case study. First, little or no research has been done on the Bible in the IFI, while at the same time, a relatively clear trajectory of the development of the place of the Bible in IFI theology can be traced through the body of representative IFI theological statements. In this respect, a contribution to the scholarship on the IFI can be offered. Furthermore, the relatively small body of theological literature involved and the availability of relevant sources make it possible to cover a relatively large timespan within the scope of this article.<sup>2</sup>

In order to achieve the aims of this article, a particular method has been chosen, which consists of the analysis of formal, or theologically representative, contributions (statements, confessional documents, etc.) by the IFI, its representatives, and representative bodies. This approach has the advantage of facilitating the outlining of the IFI's formal stance on biblical interpretation over a century.<sup>3</sup> There are also two obvious limitations, which may be addressed in future research: (a) the interpretation of biblical texts in everyday pastoral practice and on a "grassroots" level cannot be taken into account,<sup>4</sup> and (b) the genealogy of ideas cannot be the main focus, even if it will eventually be necessary to understand patterns not just of exchange of ideas and information between parties within and outside of the IFI but also of influence, as it was exercised from within and outside of the IFI, on its development in order to enhance insight into the history of the IFI. These tasks cannot be accomplished here and will have to await future research.

This study covers the IFI's first one hundred years after its proclamation (the term usually used within the IFI to refer to the autonomous establishment of the church) at a meeting of the Unión Obrera Democrática, a federation of labor unions, on 3 August 1902 when the revolutionary clergyman Gregorio Aglipay was elected as the leader of the new church. It is a time period characterized by substantial developments in the theological outlook of the church (cf. Smit 2011). This article uses the tripartite periodization that is commonly used in the historiography of the IFI to subdivide this century-long period and concentrates on the leadership of Gregorio Aglipay (1860–1940), IFI's first *obispo maximo* (leading or "supreme" bishop; usually abbreviated as OM); its immediate aftermath (1940–1947) and the era when the church was under strong Anglican (Episcopal) influence (1947–1970s);

and the period of the rediscovery of the original inspirations of the IFI (1970s–2002 and beyond).

The IFI was proclaimed following the official end of the Philippine–American War (4 February 1899 to 2 July 1902), when the First Philippine Republic (Malolos Republic) lost both the war and its independence and entered into a period of colonial rule under the United States of America, which had laid claim to the Philippines based on the Treaty of Paris of 1898. The proclamation of the IFI should be seen as a continuation of attempts within the Malolos Republic, in which Aglipay played an important role, to create a fully Filipino and fully catholic church, where Filipino culture, Christian faith, and modernity would all coexist harmoniously. *Bayan* (“country,” “motherland”—the idea of bayan is usually represented by feminine figures) would be the context in which the Christian faith would be received; the faith thus received also ought to contribute to the flowering of the bayan (cf. Gealogo 2010). This bayan was understood, constructed, and also imagined following the lead of intellectuals such as Isabelo de los Reyes Sr.<sup>5</sup> in terms of the indigenous culture of the Philippines that showed remarkable compatibility with modernity and its institutions, such as science and democracy.<sup>6</sup> In its presentation to the public, the church positioned itself as emphatically apolitical, understanding its epithet “independent” in terms of independence from superordinate church and state authorities, yet its pursuit of promoting an agenda of national identity and independence was quite evident at the same time.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, it was part of a broader network of movements furthering national Christian identities throughout Asia (cf. Hermann 2016, 2014), often in conjunction with a modernizing agenda.

## **From 1902 to 1940: An “Aglipayan” View of the Scriptures**

### The 1902 Constitution and the Bible

After its proclamation, the first and provisional constitution of the IFI was drafted on 1 October 1902, though only published at the beginning of 1903.<sup>8</sup> This constitution refers only briefly to the Bible<sup>9</sup> and contains a succinct outline of the doctrinal beliefs of the IFI. In the English translation produced by William Henry Scott (in Ranche 1996), the formulation that sums up the faith of the newly proclaimed church is the following: “The

dogma and creed shall be the same as all the Apostolic Catholic Christians profess and practice, except for the obedience of the Pope.”

This formulation represents the views of those in the IFI, which, after its founding, wanted to continue as an independent catholic church without any further doctrinal renewal. It also suggests an “orthodox” approach to the Bible and indicates a high degree of continuity with the precursor to the IFI, the national church as envisaged under Aglipay’s leadership during the brief period of the Malolos government.<sup>10</sup> The position expressed in this first constitution is a view of a Filipino church that is autonomous canonically (and not subject to Roman authority) but otherwise not focused on doctrinal renewal.<sup>11</sup> What the 1902 constitution says about the Bible comes close to the formulation in Pedro Brillantes’s *Acta de Posesión*, a document drafted on the same day but published earlier than the constitution, whereby he took possession of his diocese of St. James the Greater with its seat in Bacarra, Ilocos Norte.<sup>12</sup> Brillantes described the faith he adhered to as “Fides in Petrum in mente et corde non diplomaticum,”<sup>13</sup> which means a confession of the (Roman) Catholic faith without submitting to Roman hierarchical arrangements (which, in the context of the Philippines, had been tied up inextricably with Spanish colonial rule).<sup>14</sup> In both formulations the crucial issue is that of obedience. With respect to the Bible, however, the stance of the 1902 constitution seems to be that nothing would change and that the newly proclaimed church would remain entirely orthodox from a mainstream Catholic point of view.<sup>15</sup> This would change soon, however.

### The 1903 Constitution and the Bible

The first constitution of the IFI was soon replaced by a new version, which was indicative of the developing self-understanding of the newly proclaimed church. The new “Doctrine and Constitutional Rules of the Philippine Independent Church,”<sup>16</sup> which were adopted on 28 October 1903, took an approach to the Bible that differed significantly from the one taken just a year earlier. The document was issued as a successor to the 1902 provisional constitution and became, in combination with the six “Fundamental Epistles” that were issued in this period,<sup>17</sup> the doctrinal and canonical basis of the IFI. These documents are expressive of the next phase in the understanding of the Bible in the theology of the IFI. The first chapter of the 1903 “Doctrine and Constitutional Rules” outlines the objective of the founding of the new church:

The object of the founding of the Philippine Independent Church is principally to respond to the imperative need to restore the worship of the one true God in all its splendor and the purity of his most holy Word which, under the reign of obscurantism, has been diluted and distorted in a most disheartening manner for any Christian of even moderate education. (ibid., 1)

The guiding principle is not so much the question of being an independent catholic church, which is in faith and discipline the same as the Church of Rome, except for obedience to the Pope, as was the case in the 1902 constitution. Reference is made to the restoration of the worship of God as well as the purity of the Word, which has been obscured. What this implies is unpacked in the next chapter of the 1903 “Doctrine and Constitutional Rules,” wherein section 4 expounds on the subject of the Scriptures:

#### **The unique Book of God**

The immortal and unique Book of God is to adore him as is fitting; to glorify him as we see him in the Psalms, and to petition him as the Divine Teacher taught us to do; and in it too, we encounter salutary rules of life, both private and social, rules which can bring us well-being both in this life and in the next.

“Let us read the Bible in all its purity but absolutely purged of certain ridiculous commentaries conceived only on the whims of audacious commentators. God has no need of interpreters to make himself known to his creatures. Let priests explain and illustrate the application of Biblical teachings; but we must never have the temerity to distort its genuine and simple meanings as many Roman commentators do.” (Epistle III) “To understand the Bible, we need no more interpreters than the sciences for none of them can ever be in contradiction with the others because the sciences, loyal to reality as they are, must all be true.” (Epistle VI) (ibid.)

In the first section of this passage, the Bible is described as a source of worship and prayer, as well as a guide for Christian life and a pathway to eternal life. The particular theological emphasis of the passage becomes apparent only in its second part, where, with reference to the IFT’s Fundamental Epistles



III and VI, commentaries on the Bible, especially Roman Catholic ones, are disapproved. The next step, however, is to replace these commentaries with a new reading help: the sciences, in which a profound trust is expressed. This line runs through the 1903 “Doctrine and Constitutional Rules,” as shown by subsequent sections on the liberation of conscience—the promotion of natural reason as the source of good judgement—and on the idea that natural laws must be the same as the divine laws as they are God’s, for which reason they should be followed. In sum, key aspects of what may be called enlightened modernity (cf. Gentile 2003), as it was part of (politically and theologically) liberal discourse at the turn of the century,<sup>18</sup> become determinative for IFI theology. Still, the document reads like an adapted version of the rule of faith of the 1902 constitution, as it says the following in its second chapter, section 7:

We follow the Romanists in all that is reasonable.

In everything else, we follow the same belief as the Romanists do, so long as it is not contrary to the pure Word of God, to nature, the sciences, and right reason. (Ranche 1996)

Compared with the formulation of the 1902 constitution, this statement constitutes a significant shift. Despite having a “Roman” point of departure, the earlier reservation regarding obedience is now expanded with references to the “pure Word of God,” “nature,” “the sciences,” and “right reason” as criteria for acceptable doctrine. This is indeed what it seems: the starting point of a thorough revision of the theology the IFI received in 1902.

### The Further Development of the Place of the Bible in the Theology of Gregorio Aglipay

On the basis already laid out in the third and sixth Fundamental Epistles, Aglipay, accompanied and inspired especially by De los Reyes Sr., embarked upon a theological quest in the years between the proclamation of the IFI in 1902 and his death in 1940. This journey led him eventually into the waters of Unitarian theology, which offered him a compatible anti-imperialist outlook and a theology congenial to “enlightened modernity” (cf. Whittemore 1961, 136–51). As obispo maximo of the IFI, Aglipay had substantial powers, but he still needed to act in consultation with the episcopate of his church and its synodal structures. And yet, he published

ideas and texts somewhat on his own and without a thorough consultation with his church. The fact that Aglipay seems to have gone his own way does not make his publications, or the publications that he issued in the name of the IFI, any less interesting, but it does mean that these texts and their ideas are more directly attributable to him rather than to the IFI as a whole.

Aglipay's exemplary views regarding the Bible appeared in a lengthy article in *The Independent* of 13 January 1923,<sup>19</sup> and did not seem to have changed substantially in the remaining seventeen years of his life.<sup>20</sup> Nor does this piece suggest that he changed his mind considerably between 1903 and 1923, for which a discussion of his other writings, as they appeared in this period, can be left aside here.<sup>21</sup> The following portion of his article, which discusses the teaching of religion in public schools, is worth quoting in full:

Before God I declare my firm conviction that it would be highly anti-patriotic to introduce the teaching of Christianity and other judaical [sic] and pagan stories in the public schools for the following reasons.

First, the Bible which might have passed as a sacred book in the centuries of ignorance, now appears in the face of the admirable progress and remarkable discoveries of Modern Science, in flagrant contradiction with all sciences. Its affirmations are absolutely contrary to the discoveries of Astronomy, Geography, Palaeontology [sic] and other branches of natural history; it is also contrary to genuine History.

The creation of the world narrated by the Genesis is a pile of absurdities, and a modern religion worthy of our admirable progress cannot be based on those infantile Jewish tales intermixed with very repugnant pornographies.

And passing to the epoch and teaching of Jesus Christ, this Jewish reformer also taught very grave errors.<sup>22</sup> In the first place, he suppressed from the commandments of Moses the rescuer law that man must work six days in a week, and we know already that work is the means God gave us to honestly obtain the satisfaction of all our necessities. Jesus Christ also gave as a model for a good administrator one who robs his master to benefit the debtors of the latter. He did not even permit one who wished to follow him to comply with the filial duty of burying his father.

And Jesus committed other errors of this category that no person instructed in the modern way can now accept miracles and mysteries

and nobody moderately educated can believe in them because they are contrary to the natural laws dictated by God.

Therefore, if we allow the teaching of religion in our public schools, we would commit the absurdity of contradicting the same modern sciences taught therein at present, and we would adopt the false belief of thousand years back.

Second. Before God I maintain that it would be unpatriotic to introduce in our schools the teaching of the Christian religion, it would be equal to preparing our children to reinforce the already very numerous hosts of multiple religious corporations that are evidently against our independence, though they profess the contrary because they are aware that the Filipinos, once independent and entirely free, will follow nothing but the wise, exact and modern teachings of Rizal, Mabini, Marcelo H. del Pilar, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Jacinto, and many others who were admirably instructed in the modern way and because God, through His kind and wise Providence, bestowed on us the faculty and pride to reject manly the teachings of interested and deceitful foreigners. (Mandac n.d., 89–91)

This passage shows how science becomes a hermeneutical yardstick for interpreting the Scripture, manifesting the relationship between the Bible and the modern sciences in the theology of Aglipay. In fact, what takes place is an equation of God with the author of the laws of nature, which Obispo Maximo Aglipay saw as incompatible with the Bible. For this reason, according to Aglipay, the authors of the various books of the Bible, including its characters, such as Jesus, must be corrected on the basis of the progress in modern sciences and modern economic and moral insights. While Aglipay opposed the teaching of the Bible in public schools because of its doubtful usefulness, he preferred the teachings of nineteenth-century heroes of the Filipino struggle for independence.

By taking this position, Aglipay has, of course, moved far away from the statement of the 1902 constitution and, with that, from mainstream Catholic Christianity. This theological evaluation of the Bible remained largely limited to the IFI leadership, if not to Aglipay (and De los Reyes Sr.) alone.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of mainstream Christianity's negative evaluation of Aglipay's theology as far as its content is concerned, the critical impetus behind Aglipay's arguments, as well as his honest attempt to do justice to the whole

of human existence and society, seems to be something that needs to be honored, if not for its content, then for its intention (cf. Whittemore 1961, 151). It should not be forgotten that Aglipay received his theological training in a climate dominated by the heavily reactionary (anti-modern and anti-liberal) course pursued by the papacy of Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) (cf. Scott 1987, 11–18), whose tenor is exemplified by the 1869 *Syllabus Errorum*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in his move away from obedience to the Pope based on politically liberal and nationalistic concepts, Aglipay seems to have also accepted other ideas associated with liberalism, such as critical exegesis and a more positive evaluation of the sciences, even up to the point of a practically uncritical acceptance of these sciences. In fact, one can go somewhat beyond this observation and argue that Aglipay’s theology is a thoroughgoing attempt to produce a contextually sensitive theology for the modern, enlightened Filipino nation, and he saw himself as a trailblazing member of this project. Based on his theological reasoning, e.g., the notion that God is the author of the laws of nature, he was able to conceive the Christian tradition in a new and certainly critical manner.

### **The Return to a Mainstream Form of Catholic Christianity, 1940–1947**

Castro, Fonacier and the Return to the Bacarra Formula<sup>25</sup>

As important as the 1903 “Doctrine and Constitutional Rules,” the return in the 1940s to what may be descriptively called “mainstream Catholic Christianity” marked another turning point in the IFI’s official theology. This movement began practically immediately after Aglipay’s death on 1 September 1940. His passing initiated the process of the election of his successor *obispo maximo*. Of the two main contenders for this office, bishops Servando Castro and Santiago Fonacier, the former withdrew his candidacy on the condition that the church would adopt the “Bacarra formula” as its rule of faith again (i.e., “*Fides in Petrum in mente et corde non diplomaticum*,” as Brillantes articulated). As Fonacier accepted this scenario, he was elected *obispo maximo* on 14 October 1940 and installed on 21 November 1940 (cf. Clifford 1969, 251). With this development, a return to the faith of the 1902 constitution was initiated, even if it had to wait until after the Second World War and a period of internal difficulties, resulting in the deposition of *Obispo Maximo* Fonacier in 1946 (cf. Whittemore 1961,

166–72), which would take shape in a new “Declaration of Faith” and a new “Constitution and Canons.”

### Toward Recognized Apostolic Succession

The process of a return to a(n ecumenically) more generally recognized rule of faith, which had already begun in 1940, gained new impetus after the Second World War under the leadership of the successor to the deposed Obispo Maximo Fonacier, Isabelo de los Reyes Jr., who would move in a doctrinal direction opposite to that of his father (cf. *ibid.*, 166–82). Concretely, he sought recognition of the IFI and its faith by other churches, particularly the bestowal of an ecumenically more easily recognized form of apostolic succession by the Episcopal Church (USA), which had a missionary presence in the Philippines (that has since become autonomous).<sup>26</sup> One of the issues that had plagued the IFI since 1902 had been the nature of its ordained ministry as it was not in recognized apostolic succession (the first IFI bishop to be consecrated, Pedro Brillantes, was consecrated by twelve priests, rather than by bishops on 20 October 1902).<sup>27</sup> For this regularization of orders to take place,<sup>28</sup> the Episcopal Church demanded that the official documents of the IFI, which were at this point still those of 1903, be replaced with more mainstream and ecumenically recognizable Christian materials.<sup>29</sup> This wish was complied with by the new “Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente” accepted by the General Assembly of the IFI on 5 August 1947. This paved the way not only for regularization of the church’s ministerial orders but also for a communion with the Episcopal Church, the churches of the Anglican Communion, the Old Catholic churches, and the Church of Sweden (at a later stage), and for the membership of the IFI in ecumenical organizations such as the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, the Christian Conference of Asia, and the World Council of Churches (cf. Smit 2018). The “Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion” also addressed the IFI’s renewed teaching of the Scripture. To begin with, the second article of the “Articles of Religion” states the following under the heading “A. Holy Scriptures”: “The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation, and nothing which cannot be proved thereby should be required to be believed” (Philippine Bible Society 2002, 356; cf. IFI 1947/2021).

Given that this formulation expresses the “sufficiency” of Scripture,<sup>30</sup> it credits Scripture with much more authority than the 1903 “Doctrine” or

Aglipay in his later theological development. In fact, Scripture has become the norm of the faith again. In line with this, the issue that proved so central to Aglipay, the reconciliation of modernity and (the world of) the Bible, is not treated here. It is touched upon, however, in article 16, which deals with miracles and allows for miracles on the basis of the witness of the Scripture, which regards them as divine interventions in the natural world. This position is directly at odds with Aglipay's stance. Furthermore, in the "Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion," it is significant that the third article recognizes the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed explicitly again, which indicates a return not only to Scripture but also to important parts of the tradition of the early church, in particular, to a Trinitarian faith, which, for obvious reasons, also goes against Aglipay's Unitarian sympathies.

In the "Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion," the most telling example of both continuity and contact with the earlier phase of the theological development of the IFI (under Aglipay's leadership) is article 17, which deals with the IFI's attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church:

#### **B. Attitude toward the Roman Church**

When this Church withdrew from the Roman Catholic Church, it repudiated the authority of the Pope and such doctrines, customs and practices as were inconsistent with the Word of God, sound learning and a good conscience. It had no intention of departing from Catholic doctrine, practice and discipline as set forth by the Councils of the undivided Church. Such departures as occurred were due to the exigencies of the times, and are to be corrected by official action as opportunity affords, so that this Church may be brought into the stream of historic Christianity and be universally acknowledged as a true branch of the Catholic Church. (IFI 1947/2021)

This article presents the intentions of the IFI in 1902 and 1903 as a combination of the Bacarra formula and the 1902 constitution. Beyond this, the 1947 "Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion" distance themselves explicitly from any later developments in article 20, which declares the 1903 documents and the "Fundamental Epistles" as no longer binding upon the clergy or faithful, and only useful in as far as they do not contradict the 1947 expression of the faith of the IFI.

With this new doctrinal basis, the IFI entered the ecumenical world. However, a more contextual and enculturated position on the interpretation of the Bible had yet to be developed, even if the 1947 “Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion” once more affirmed the authority of Scripture in the church and its formal place in the theology of the IFI. The development of its own line of Biblical interpretation can be found within the next phase of the theological development of the IFI.

### **The Rediscovery of the Tradition of the IFI, 1970s to the present**

With the IFI’s rediscovery of an ecumenically recognizable form of the mainstream Christian faith from the 1940s onward, a plausible argument can be made and has indeed been made repeatedly, for instance by Revollido (2001, 4), that this rediscovery of the historical faith was made at the cost of the IFI’s own (nationalistic) heritage and tradition, which were inscribed in the writings and theology of Aglipay and De los Reyes Sr.<sup>31</sup> In the context of Pres. Ferdinand Marcos’s regime (1965–1986), especially in the mid- and late seventies, a process of rediscovering the nationalistic heritage of the IFI began, which again drew heavily on the theological heritage of Aglipay and De los Reyes Sr., especially in as far as it had followed a critical nationalistic direction, which emphasized civil rights and social justice. A younger generation of the faithful, many of them future clergy, played a key role in this movement, a youth movement within the IFI that continues to this day ever since its emergence in the late 1960s (cf. Yonaha 2016). Thus, this new phase in its history may well be seen to last until the present, encompassing the administrations that succeeded Marcos, including that of current president Rodrigo Duterte.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the price that the IFI pays for this commitment to social justice and civil rights is high and comes in the form of marginalization, criminalization (e.g., “red tagging,” i.e., alleging that someone has leftist and terrorist affiliations and ought to be silenced, during the Duterte presidency), and even extrajudicial killings, such as the murder cases of Fr. William Tadena (killed on 13 May 2005) and former obispo maximo Alberto Ramento (killed on 3 October 2006).<sup>33</sup>

In this process of repristination, political and ecclesial independence are again intertwined more closely, as is stressed by turns of phrase such as those calling the IFI the “living sacrament of the 1898 revolution.”<sup>34</sup> This rediscovered critical nationalism, however, now moved within, rather than

outside of, mainstream Christian theology, which is significantly different from what took place from 1902 to 1940. Thus, the nationalistic theology of the IFI from the 1970s onward explored the prophetic potential of mainstream Christian theology, especially its liberation theological variant in an ecumenical context.<sup>35</sup> It seems that this movement, drawing on its own particular theological heritage, operating within the boundaries of ecumenically recognizable Christian theology, and taking inspiration from liberation theology, would eventually provide the IFI with its own perspective on biblical interpretation.

### The Bible in the Life of the Church

A starting point for discovering the emerging hermeneutics in the IFI can be found in the foundational 1976 “Statement on Church Mission,” which outlines IFI ecclesiology and its sociopolitical vocation and would remain a valid doctrine in the years to come (cf. Philippine Bible Society 2002, 427–35). The document does not contain a separate section on the Bible of the IFI as such, but it provides an illuminating section on the role the Word of God plays in human development as seen in the context of the mission of the church. First of all, in relation to human development, this mission is outlined as follows: “The Church missionary presence in the world is her being the Salt, the Light, and the Leaven (Mt. 5:13–15), in the same presence and manner that ‘they may have life and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10:10b)” (section 25 in *ibid.*).

While section 25 is a rather general statement that focuses on leading humankind to abundant life, the following section (section 26 in *ibid.*) is rather more specific and ties this human development close to the Church and the Word of God: “Human development of people by the Word of God is nourishing them with His Body and Blood in the Eucharist; to develop the potentialities God has bestowed upon them; to enjoy the new life in Christ and have it abundantly; and, to enable them to share such abundance with their fellow beings.”

The Word of God here certainly refers to Scripture (cf. section 34 in *ibid.*). The section’s interpretation of human development functions as a “rule of faith” for the interpretation of the whole of the Scriptures. Accordingly, the Scriptures point to the nourishing of people in the Eucharist, developing their charisms, to enjoying life in abundance, and sharing this with the rest of creation. As the document proceeds, it becomes clear that the interpretative



guideline provided here is seen to be rooted firmly in the heritage of the IFI and aimed at social justice, as stated in section 27 of the “Statement on Church Mission” (section 27 in *ibid.*):

This concern for human development is an expression of our faith. We believe that man's humanity is God's gift and it is our responsibility to God to preserve and uphold it.

In the minds of the founding fathers of the IFI, concern for human development has always been there. Their cry and struggle were for liberation from the bondage of colonialism, slavery, oppression, degradation, injustice, human indignity and dependence. The IFI, as an act of loyalty and remembrance, must carry on with passionate zeal that aspiration her founders had and for which they offered their lives. She can only continue this if she remains not being of this world even as Christ her Lord was not of the world (Jn. 17:16). Her security and kingdom is [sic] not with any socio-economic and political institution but with God.

Taken in conjunction with section 27, section 26 is filled with historical and political content. The document's affinity to the global movement of liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s is clear, but there is more here than merely going with the flow of theological fashion: The nationalism of Aglipay and De los Reyes, which has a civic and emancipatory character, is received anew here, but within the framework of a more mainstream expression of the Christian faith.

The IFI followed this way of reading the Scripture in the years to come. This was confirmed by the continuity between the 1976 statement and a statement issued in 1998 by OM Tomas A. Millamena that the Executive Commission of the IFI subsequently adopted.<sup>36</sup> Millamena commented on section 2 of the introduction to the 1977 Canons of the IFI (1977, 35),<sup>37</sup> which says that “the Philippine Independent Church is a congregation of new men educated in and liberated by the teaching of Christ, dedicated to the worship of God in spirit and in truth, nourished and sustained in the Eucharist, and commissioned to be witnesses to God's love in the world.”

As he reflects on the statement regarding being “educated in and liberated by the teaching of Christ” (*ibid.*, 35), Millamena arrives at the following considerations:

The New Congregation is "*Educated in and Liberated by the Teaching of Christ . . .*"

The new basis of the IFI for all its teachings, doctrines and dogmas is the Word of God. The Word, as revealed by the Holy Scriptures, is Jesus, the Incarnate God, "*the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us*" (Jn. 1:14). God, as John 3:16 says "gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life". God sent himself in a form of a servant (Phil. 2:5–8) that he could liberate His people from the bondage of slavery that existed in his time and still exists that they may have abundant life. In fact, that was the reason for the sending and for the coming.

The world was clearly described by St. Paul (Eph. 6:12). "*For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places.*" God sent himself. He emptied himself. He humbled himself. He became a servant and immersed with the poor, deprived and oppressed by the wicked spiritual forces, by the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers. He immersed as human being with God's people, His own people. He lived with them, prayed and worked with them with joyful and painful experiences. That is the IFI solidarity.

The IFI as a new congregation grounds her education on the teachings of Christ to include his preaching and healing ministry for the liberation of God's people. This is so because the scenario of the present world which God created is even worse than the world which St. Paul described in Ephesians 6:12. The present world is dominated by the evils in society. The wealth of the world is in the hands of the foreign masters and their local cohorts.

This text speaks a very clear language in three respects. First, the role of the Word of God in IFI doctrinal theology is firmly formulated as the basis of all teaching and doctrine. This Word is Christ as revealed by Scripture. Second, the mission of the church is described as a mission of liberation on a Christological basis, that is, on the basis of the Word of God (i.e., Christ) as revealed by Scripture. The Christology, as this document outlined, takes as its starting point the incarnation of Christ (Jn. 1:14), which Johannine

(Jn. 3:16) and Pauline theology (Phil. 2:5–8) interprets as a kenotic act of self-giving of God to overcome the forces of darkness and sin (Eph. 6:12). This Christology (and its implied soteriology) is a paradigm of the IFI's spirituality. Third, the teachings of Christ himself, especially his liberating ministry of preaching and healing, are the basis of the IFI's and its members' education.

Thus, both the formal role the Bible plays in the church as an authentic witness to God's self-revelation in Christ and its content, which is presented by means of a Christologically focused rule of faith (on the basis of the Scripture), are formulated in terms of a mission of liberation. I have just outlined the role of Scripture in the IFI in both its form and content. This type of hermeneutics represents the IFI's theology at large, also beyond the documents considered here.

### **Conclusions: The Bible in the IFI**

As I have shown, the interpretation of the Bible in the IFI has, at least on the level of the church's official theology, made an extensive journey. This article has demonstrated how an initial "orthodox" approach to the Bible was replaced by a reading of the Bible that was guided by the natural sciences and other "modern" insights. This phase in the history of the IFI, characterized by Aglipay's leadership, was succeeded by a period marked by a return to a more mainstream Christian theology, including a more ecumenically viable view of the Bible in the 1940s. The documents of this period, especially the IFI's new "Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion" of 1947, state the significance of the Bible, but without providing a hermeneutical guideline for its interpretation, as the sciences, in particular the natural sciences, had during Aglipay's leadership. A new hermeneutic developed only during the IFI's rediscovery of significant parts of its revolutionary and nationalistic heritage in the 1960s and 1970s; however, this heritage was revived along the lines of the church's prophetic ministry and a liberation theological approach in general. The documents the IFI began to issue in these years also offer hermeneutical guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. Characteristic of the understanding of Scripture in these various statements is the view that the Word of God contributes to the church's mission of human development so that all may have life in abundance. The life-giving quality of the Word of God is seen as characteristic of Scripture in general (*ibid.*). In particular, in the earliest and final phases of the IFI's history, as discussed in this article, it is clear that the frame of reference for the life of the IFI and the

interpretation of the Bible remains not just Christian tradition but also the Filipino nation. This conviction means that both the Christian tradition and the contents of the Bible are to be contextualized for the specific setting of the Philippines and reimagined and transformed in the light of the Christian faith and the Bible. The civic, emancipatory nationalism of De los Reyes Sr. and Aglipay *cum suis* at the proclamation of the IFI is still (or rather, once again) a characteristic of IFI biblical interpretation and theologizing at large. The IFI does not just stress the importance of the nation as an active recipient of Christian faith but also envisages its reimagination and transformation through this faith and its practice.

In the course of the life of the IFI, this latter understanding of Scripture is deepened by a Christologically motivated hermeneutic, which takes as its basis the incarnate Word of God, which emptied itself, taking the form of a servant, serving in obedience until his death on the cross. All of this is understood in terms of Christ's fundamental solidarity with the oppressed and his call to join in this service. Presented in a text dealing with the role of the Word of God and Scripture in the IFI, this Christology serves as a hermeneutical guideline for the church (cf. *ibid.*) and also marks a phase in the IFI's approach to the Bible that continues to this day. It is informed by systematic-theological reflection and the experiences of living out this understanding of the Biblical message and Christ's service, which is frequently characterized by contemporary forms of martyrdom. Formal theology and the lived reality of the IFI reciprocally inform and interpret each other.

In conclusion I have given an overview of the Bible in the life of the IFI and shown how this relationship changed through various phases to reach its current form by drawing on both the church's official statements throughout its history and its current reading of the Bible where church life and Scripture are closely intertwined.

## Notes

- 1 In doing so, this study will be informed by research published elsewhere, in particular, Boer and Smit 2012; Smit 2011, 2011/2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020; Smit and Egbers 2011.
- 2 Cf. IFI 1993, 1999, 2002. See further, Millamena 2003 and Philippine Bible Society 2002. Less accessible are the following two theses: Revollido 2001 and 1996. Copies exist in the library of the Aglipay Central Theological Seminary (ACTS); the author had access to the private copy of the dean of ACTS. Accessible works written by scholars who are not affiliated with the IFI are Whittemore 1961; Chandlee 1969; Clifford 1969; and Scott 1987. See also the two volumes resulting out of

multilateral consultation on catholicity and globalization: Dutton 2010 and Revollido and Segbers 2016. Significant but also very skeptical of the IFI are Schumacher 1981, 48–280; and Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972.

- 3 A similar approach is used and substantiated with regard to ecclesiology in Smit 2011.
- 4 That such work would be fruitful is suggested by individual studies, such as Smit and Segbers 2011; Smit 2020, 2017. See also Ranche 2000, 526–31, which demonstrates with reference to texts related to the Katipunan that “vernacular” biblical interpretation is important and offers a good lens for understanding the religious character of the Philippine Revolution and the revolutionary character of (many forms of) Filipino Christianity. In a similar fashion, forms of biblical interpretation are studied by Gealogo 2010.
- 5 See also the attention given to De los Reyes, Sr. by Anderson 2013, 9, 94.
- 6 See, for example, the survey provided by Demeterio 2012 and especially the discussion of the appertaining intellectual discourse by Mojares 2006 and Thomas 2012.
- 7 See, for example, the discussion of the contents and reception of early periodicals of the IFI by Hermann 2016, as well as the extensive documentation provided in Koschorke et al. 2016, 339–446. Cf. also, e.g., Ranche 2000.
- 8 The original Spanish text was published in the inaugural issue of *La Verdad*, the first IFI periodical, on 21 January 1903 and reprinted in Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972, 4:139–41. An English translation by William Henry Scott has been published in Ranche 1996.
- 9 In the same period, a series of so-called Fundamental Epistles also saw the light of day, which is of significance for the doctrinal development of the IFI, but will not be discussed here as their contents are sufficiently reflected by the next constitution of the IFI, the one of 1903. The Spanish text of the “Fundamental Epistles” can be found in Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972, 4:131–33, 146–49, 155–61, 171–77, 190–96, 203–209.
- 10 On the church and Malolos, see Aguilar 2015.
- 11 On this national church, especially its canons as formulated at the so-called Paniqui Assembly of 23 October 1899, see Whittemore 1961, 85–86 and Schumacher 1981, 109–12.
- 12 This document has been reproduced in Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972, 3:137–38.
- 13 See the text of his declaration in Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972, 3:137–38.
- 14 On the “royal patronage” of the Philippines, see De la Costa and Schumacher 1985.
- 15 Terms such as “orthodox” and “mainstream” are, of course, to a certain extent normative and not unproblematic. Here, “orthodoxy” is already coupled with a perspective, i.e., “mainstream” Christianity in the catholic tradition, with which, by and large, the ecumenical and Trinitarian doctrinal convergence as expressed in the work of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order is meant; it is recognized that in other contexts, other things will be regarded as “mainstream.”
- 16 William Henry Scott’s translation of “Doctrine and Constitutional Rules of the Philippine Independent Church” appears in Ranche 1996, 1ff. (Ranche’s compilation begins a new series of page numbers here). The text is reproduced here in English as the Spanish text was not accessible to the author.
- 17 The “Fundamental Epistles” were a series of six circulars issued on behalf of the IFI from 1902 to 1903 and addressed a number of ecclesiological and theological issues. For reproductions of

- the text, see Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972, 3:131–33, 146–49, 155–61, 171–77, 190–96, and 203–9. For a discussion, see also Smit 2011, 150–60.
- 18 On the discourse in which the early IFI participated and modernity, see, for example, Mojares 2006.
  - 19 The text is contained in Mandac n.d., 85–91. There is also a copy in OM 14.1, Box 49a, Folder No. 157 of the IFI Archives, St. Andrew's Theological Seminary, Quezon City. The original text of this translation can be found in Simeon Mandac's "Actividades del Fundador de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente, el Obispo Maximo, Dr. Gregorio Aglipay," an unpublished manuscript in the Achútegui collection; see Achútegui and Bernad 1971–1972, xiv, 142.
  - 20 See e.g., Aglipay's treatise on the life of Jesus, in Mandac n.d., 217–30.
  - 21 These works include Aglipay 1905, 1926, 1932. Mandac (n.d., 151) lists the following books as the most significant products from the Aglipay era: *Biblia filipina: Primera piedra para un Génesis científico expuesto según las rectificaciones de Jesús* (IFI 1908), *Catequesis de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (IFI 1912), *Sensacionales discursos y escritos* (IFI 1924), *Novenario de la Patria* (IFI 1926), *Al padre de todos: Libro de oraciones y enseñanzas de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (IFI 1929). Cf. in general, England et al. 2003, 350–56.
  - 22 At times, Aglipay seems to come close to anti-Semitic statements here. However, nowhere in his writings does he become so outspoken on this subject that it becomes necessary to view the statements in that light. Rather, Aglipay seems to use the admittedly dangerous vocabulary of his day.
  - 23 Cf. Chandlee 1969, 260: "[U]nitarianism was ill-understood by the rank and file of the clergy . . . and hardly at all by the laity of the Church, which remained staunchly Catholic in intention." Similarly, see Whittemore 1961, 150–51. Why the "rank and file" of the IFI did not receive such theology would be a matter of further research.
  - 24 See the theses condemned in this document, for instance section 7 (on miracles) and sections 8–9 (on the sciences and reason), which Aglipay contradicts directly in the text quoted on pages 466–67.
  - 25 For more on this in general, see Whittemore 1961, 166–69.
  - 26 Apostolic succession is a concept that is much discussed in (ecumenical) theology; what is at stake here (and in the parlance of the 1940s) is the passing on of the sacrament of holy orders through ordination by a bishop who himself was ordained by a bishop who had been ordained in the same manner, in a chain of ordinations stretching back to the original apostles.
  - 27 This issue cannot be discussed extensively here, but it should be remarked that the IFI did take this step for sound reasons, among which was the desire not to resubmit itself again to other churches and to thereby enter again into a renewed relationship of (colonial) dependence. Aglipay also discussed this in his correspondence with Bishop Eduard Herzog of the Old Catholic Church of Switzerland, on which, cf. Boer and Smit 2012.
  - 28 For an outline of the appertaining backgrounds, see Smit 2015.
  - 29 Probably the following observation of Bishop Santiago Fonacier is not entirely beside the point. After his deposition as obispo maximo in 1946, he led a breakaway group that claimed to be the true IFI. During the 1952 Asamblea Magna of his group, he described De los Reyes Jr. and his followers as "apostatizing from its faith, doctrine, form of worship and religious practices, and embracing those of the Anglican or Protestant Episcopal Church of America. As they themselves said, they are now autonomous, no longer independent. They are now the 'New Anglicans,'" in

"Proceedings of the Asamblea Magna of the IFI held on Monday, September 1, 1952." Cf. Revollido 2001, 59.

- 30 What is not defined in the 1947 "Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion" is the scope of the canon the IFI adheres to. The 2002 *Commemorative Bible* published for the IFI, however, contains the canon of the Septuagint, i.e., including the so-called deuterocanonical books. In view of the character of this Bible, its canon may be regarded as the official canon of the IFI.
- 31 Cf. Revollido 2001, 87–93, for his own (negative) description and evaluation of De los Reyes Jr.'s, (non)reception of the IFI's nationalistic heritage. Revollido (*ibid.*, 4) notes in his introduction: "(T)he personal background of Bishop de los Reyes Jr. with pro-American ideas and the social context of the already proclaimed independent republic in 1946 made him toe the line of the government under the influence of the Americans. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact also that his administration was known not just in signing the successful Concordat with the Episcopal and other Anglican churches but also in organizing and mobilizing the whole church for an internal IFI development. A mandate from the newly approved 1947 Constitution and Canons of the Church served as a dynamo in the formation of lay organizations, the program of building new and concrete churches, the publication of an official Church newsletter, and the Trinitarian doctrine was again put back in the official writings of the IFI leadership."
- 32 Cf. the representative account given in Philippine Bible Society 2002, 470–75.
- 33 For a theological discussion, see Revollido 2010. See also Smit and Segbers 2011 for the theological heritage of Ramento. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the IFI, often in cooperation with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines and the Ecumenical Bishops' Forum, has addressed a range of topics, such as issues pertaining to seafarers, migrant domestic workers in East Asia, the Lumad struggle in Mindanao, extrajudicial killings, and environmental campaigns and human rights. Also, the IFI has become an active partner in projects such as the Ramento Project for Rights Defenders and the Mission for Seafarers. This list only mentions examples and is by no means exhaustive.
- 34 Cf. e.g., the 1987 "Statement on Development" issued by the Consultative Assembly of the National Consultation on Development as a result of their meetings in the Aglipay Central Theological Seminary on 28–30 July of the same year and republished in Philippine Bible Society 2002, 436–38. For the reference to the "sacrament of the 1898 revolution," see *ibid.*, 436. See also Agoncillo 1990, 232–43, esp. p. 232.
- 35 This was confirmed by conversations with two past officers—the Very Rev. Larry J. Herrera, now Dean of St. Paul's Theological Seminary, Bugnay, Jordan, Guimaras, and the Very Rev. Dr. Eleuterio J. Revollido, now Dean of the Aglipay Central Theological Seminary, Urdaneta City—in charge of the National Priest Organization (NPO), which pushed for many of these theological developments.
- 36 Hence the publication of both of these documents in Philippine Bible Society 2002.
- 37 These canons replaced those of 1947, a development that cannot be discussed here and does not have a strong impact on the IFI's theological understanding of the Scriptures. For a discussion see Smit 2011, 448–58.

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