

## THE IGLESIA NI CRISTO AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

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The Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) is a significant element today in the religious mosaic of the Philippines. Boasting several million members<sup>1</sup> in a country of over 70 million, it has seen remarkable growth since its humble beginnings in 1914.<sup>2</sup> While it considers itself the “true” church, it has several distinct teachings which place it outside the realm of traditional Evangelical Christianity. In brief summary, those teachings include a non-Trinitarian view of God<sup>3</sup> which includes an Arian understanding of Christ as a created being; an understanding of salvation which is dependent on church membership, baptism and works; and a distinctive teaching on the role of its founder, Felix Manalo, as the “angel from the East” (mentioned in Revelation 7) sent by God in this dispensation of time to bring the final message. Other characteristics which set this church at odds with

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<sup>1</sup> Brandon V. Rosquites, “What the Restoration of the Church of Christ in Jerusalem Means to God,” *God’s Message International Edition* no volume (July-August 1996), pp. 10-14 (10).

<sup>2</sup> Philippine Department of Household Statistics, *1990 Census of Population and Housing*, tables 5, 22, and Philippine Department of Household Statistics, *Household Statistics*, p. 477. Philippine census statistics show that Iglesia membership grew from 475,407 to 1,414,393 from 1970 to 1990. That is a threefold increase in twenty years! Note that these are not church membership roll figures, but how people polled in the homes actually perceived themselves.

<sup>3</sup> I have written an extensive analysis of Iglesia theology examining what the church believes, how that has developed over time, and what initially influenced its formation. See Anne C. Harper, “The Theology of the Iglesia ni Cristo” (an unpublished paper; Quezon City: Alliance Biblical Seminary, 1997).

Evangelicals are a proof-texting approach to the scripture which seems to disregard the contexts of passages; an authoritarian, centralized church structure; and extreme antagonism towards outsiders.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the INC's view of Evangelicals and to consider whether we need to reassess our apologetic and evangelistic approach to this group. Writings and missionary experience will show that the Iglesia is wary of and even hostile towards Evangelicals as a result of our focus on the message rather than the receptor. Application of several anthropological frameworks will help us consider how we might better communicate with the group in the future.

### 1. Introduction

When my family first arrived in the Philippines in 1994, we immediately began to notice many large, ornate, well-kept concrete church buildings with a distinctive architecture that dotted the Manila area. Usually off-white with several tall, thin parapets, these buildings were in sharp contrast to the squalor surrounding them. When we asked about them, answers from missionaries were fairly consistent: "Watch out for the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), they are very aggressive and hostile"; "Avoid them, for they love to get into loud arguments and debates"; "Their buildings are built so that they can fly away in the rapture"; or "They are a major competition in the poorer areas we are trying to reach." The attitudes exhibited toward the Iglesia were antagonistic and somewhat demeaning in describing their beliefs.

Evangelicals' understanding of the Iglesia was often inaccurate. As I started seminary graduate studies, I began to examine the INC in greater detail to determine what they actually teach and believe. I realized that there was a great deal of ignorance and fear regarding this group on the part not just of missionaries, but of the Filipino church as well. If we do not understand them, how can we reach them with the good news? My goal became to understand their teaching and write about it for the church. I believed and still do believe that the people will hear and respond to the gospel at their points of critical need. The church needs to discover what those points are.

This paper will attempt to apply anthropological insights to guide that process of discovery.

## 2. How Does the Iglesia View Evangelicals?

*Pasugo* is the official organ of the INC. This publication provides the most accurate understanding of the Iglesia's view of Evangelicals, and when supplemented by anecdotes told by missionaries, presents a clear perspective of the INC's view of Evangelicals.

The Iglesia considers those who claim to be "born-again" or Evangelicals to be misguided--and even deceivers. Almost every issue of *Pasugo* has an article which debunks the Trinity, and many have pieces refuting the doctrine that faith alone is sufficient for salvation.

"Small town" preachers and preachers of "international caliber" alike proclaim that there is no need to join a particular religion or church to be saved by Christ. Many become convinced that this is true. Indeed, there is a preponderance in the number of preachers and so-called evangelical churches to try [*sic*] to prove that faith alone is needed for salvation.<sup>4</sup>

They use very strong words when describing the supposed deception of certain strains within the church,

In vying for membership, they use various gimmicks to win people over. There are those who emphasize miracles and wonders; some boast of their alleged healing powers; others promise material prosperity to their followers.<sup>5</sup>

But does it automatically mean that those who are able to perform great wonders such as healing and prophesy have received the Spirit of God? Not necessarily.... [T]he Bible teaches that the devil is a great deceiver and liar (John 8:44).<sup>6</sup>

Further, the INC's teaching is be wary of Evangelicals,

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<sup>4</sup> Isaias T. Samson, Jr., "Not a Prejudicial Thing to Say," *Pasugo* 50 (October 1998), pp. 5-6 (5).

<sup>5</sup> Reuben D. Aromin, "God's Everlasting Covenant with His People: Part I," *Pasugo* 50 (January 1998), pp. 13-15 (14). The faith/word movement is quite strong in the Philippines, even within established denominations such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Pinnoch, "The Charismatic Movement," *Pasugo* 51 (January 1999), pp. 5-8 (7).

[There is] proliferation of various evangelists and preachers all professing to be of God and dispensers of His words and using the Bible as their alleged proof of being such.... [W]e must be on guard.<sup>7</sup>

Two incidents involving missionary colleagues<sup>8</sup> during our first term of service further highlight this attitude. Blair Skinner, a cult ministry specialist, was involved in research on the INC. Several weeks after visiting a service in a local barangay chapel where he raised questions with the pastor, Blair visited their “mother” chapel (denominational headquarters) in Quezon City. When he arrived, Blair was asked to present some identification and give his name. After he did this, he was told, “We know about you. You’re not welcome here and must leave.” He was then “roughly” assisted out of the building. Several years later he was across the street (a four-lane heavily-traveled road) from the church, taking pictures. When he was spotted, a group of Iglesia men ran across the street and grabbed him. They beat him up and told him never to return--or he wouldn’t be returning to his family.

Another colleague, Terry Williams, has been involved in church planting in a Quezon City squatter area. Visiting the community three to four times weekly, for four years he had faithfully attempted to befriend residents and share the gospel in both word and deed. One day an INC worker (who had never been seen in the area before) came up to him. Terry was rudely told, “This is an Iglesia ni Cristo area. You must leave, or I will be back with others.” It was a very real threat. The people of the community trusted Terry by this time, and offered him their “protection.” The INC worker was told to leave.

It is apparent from these encounters that the Iglesia is more than wary of Evangelical missionaries. Missionaries are actually viewed as a threat.

### 3. Why Does the Iglesia Have This Attitude?

There are three important elements which provide the background for understanding the Iglesia’s response to Evangelicals. The first is a historical one dating back to the beginning of the century; the second is the

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<sup>7</sup> Ferdinand P. Alcid, “The Rightful Preachers of God’s Word,” *Pasugo* 50 (August 1998), pp. 8-12 (8).

<sup>8</sup> Both Blair Skinner and Terry Williams are close friends and missionaries with ACTION International Ministries, the agency with which we work in the Philippines. They told me directly about these experiences.

way in which the message has been and continues to be sent, even to the present day; and the third involves a lack of understanding of the receptor.

To understand the Iglesia, one must return to its founder, Felix Manalo. A brief history of his early years and the founding of the Iglesia will give a framework for my observations.

### 3.1 Historical Background

There are conflicting stories as to how Felix Manalo began the spiritual quest that eventually took him through five denominations. But one thing is clear: initial contact with the Bible caused him to question what he had been taught about God and religion in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> In 1902, while a teenager, Manalo witnessed a debate on the use of images in worship between a Roman Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor. It was inconceivable to Manalo that the priest could lose, but he did. As a result Felix joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1904 at the age of 18.<sup>10</sup> He attended Bible training courses and may have become an exhorter or lay preacher. When his mother became ill and lay dying, he left his studies and went to her side.<sup>11</sup>

Following her death Manalo returned to Manila and began study with the Presbyterians at Ellinwood Bible Training School. He stayed with the Presbyterians for three and half years until he joined the Mision Cristiana, the Christian Mission of the Disciples of Christ, at the age of 22. He attended classes at the Disciples' Manila College of the Bible for four years.<sup>12</sup>

Manalo joined the Seventh Day Adventists in 1911 after attending one of their Bible studies. He was assigned to Bulacan as an evangelist until he resigned following an argument over doctrine and practice at an Adventist workers' conference.<sup>13</sup> There is some disagreement as to his reason for

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur Leonard Tuggy, *Iglesia ni Cristo: A Study in Independent Church Dynamics* (Quezon City: Conservative Baptist Publishers, 1976), pp. 18-19 and Fernando G. Elesterio, *The Iglesia ni Cristo: Its Christology and Ecclesiology*, Cardinal Bea Studies V (Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 25; Elesterio, *Iglesia*, p. 8. Iglesia ni Cristo, *This is the Iglesia ni Cristo* (Quezon City: Iglesia ni Cristo, 1976), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. 27-30.

<sup>13</sup> Elesterio, *Iglesia*, p. 9; Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 34; Iglesia ni Cristo, *This Is*, p. 6.

leaving the Adventists. He may have been disciplined for his elopement or for moral indiscretion.<sup>14</sup>

There followed a brief association with philosophers and atheists which did not last long. The turning point came in 1913 when Manalo spent three days alone in a closet. He emerged claiming he was to start a new church based on the scripture. It was to be a Filipino church, not one led by a foreigner. He immediately began to preach, forming a small church which he registered with the government in 1914.<sup>15</sup> That small church has grown into the INC of today, numbering in millions.

Why did Manalo continue moving from denomination to denomination? Did he have a problem with authority? Or was there a deeper issue? While the first may have been true, there does appear to be a deeper issue involved which has shaped the Iglesia's attitude towards Evangelicals. Research into the efforts of Protestant denominations in the Philippines in the early 1900s sheds some light on this issue.

Kenton Clymer in his work, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898-1916: An Inquiry into the American Colonial Mentality*, has extensively researched the archives and personal records of missionaries to the Philippines in this time period. His writing shows that Protestant denominations were in competition with each other, seeking to build their denominational numbers sometimes at the expense of unity (a continuing theme in Iglesia teaching).<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most telling were the paternalistic and racist attitudes of the missionaries, a result of common western culture and thought patterns of the day.<sup>17</sup> Clymer notes,

It was commonplace to rank the races, comparing them in terms of intelligence, culture and possibilities for advancement.... Although missionaries differentiated among the various Filipino cultural groups, many could not resist the temptation to generalize about Filipinos and to compare them as a whole with other races. As a rule, Filipinos and other Malays were ranked rather toward the bottom.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Julita Reyes-Sta. Romana, "The Iglesia ni Kristo: A Study," *Journal of East Asiatic Studies* 4 (July 1955), pp. 329-420 (331).

<sup>15</sup> Elesterio, *Iglesia*, p. 10; Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. 40-41, 46-47.

<sup>16</sup> Kenton J. Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898-1916* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 32-33.

<sup>17</sup> Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>18</sup> Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries*, pp. 65-72.

In particular, note the following comments about and from missionaries who probably had direct contact with Manalo:<sup>19</sup>

Disciples missionary Bruce Kershner concluded in vivid language that the only thing that kept a missionary "in sympathy with the degraded people he would otherwise despise" was his almost naive faith that there was a saintly quality in all human life.<sup>20</sup>

He believed that Filipinos were "defective" in "thought power."<sup>21</sup> Kershner wrote home,

Imagine them in troops of a dozen, more or less, coming to your home, some covered with sores, scrofulous, epileptic, possibly smallpox [*sic*], all dirty and naked; they sit on your chairs, handle your clothes, play with your books, or any thing they can get.... We try to keep them from coming upstairs where we live, for they are bad enough downstairs in the chapel, vestibule, and school room.<sup>22</sup>

Presbyterian James B. Rodgers thought Filipinos were lazy,<sup>23</sup> and Stealy B. Rossiter believed the island contained a "great bunch of semi-civilized human material."<sup>24</sup> Methodist Homer Stuntz regarded the Tagalogs as "the most enterprising, the most quarrelsome, the most restless race in the country."<sup>25</sup> During the same time period he wrote home, "As a rule all Filipinos drink."<sup>26</sup>

To Seventh Day Adventists, the Filipino habit of smoking was a major concern which they condemned.<sup>27</sup> Clymer notes, one missionary wrote that although he was pleased that Filipinos bought his books and liked to read,

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<sup>19</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, notes several of these names in his description of Manalo's involvement with different Protestant denominations, e.g., Kershner (pp. 28-30), Rodgers (p. 26), Stuntz (p. 25) and the Adventists (p. 31).

<sup>20</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 78. Tuggy notes in his description of an Iglesia service that members smoked outside following the service.

“he commented with a touch of irony, reading was ‘not so distressing as hard work, you know.’”<sup>28</sup> The prevailing attitude was that Filipinos were lazy.

For these missionaries, U.S. nationalism was a component of their endeavors: they were serving not only God, but their homeland.<sup>29</sup> For them American culture was inextricably linked to the Christian message.

In supporting the government, of course, the missionaries expected it to pursue goals worthy of a Christian nation. To many this meant the infusion of American cultural and spiritual values, as well as Western political and economic concepts and arrangements.... Given their belief in the many deficiencies of Filipino society, the missionaries also expected the new government to be strongly paternalistic, to carry out the white man’s burden, even when that meant conflict with the majority of the people.<sup>30</sup>

Most missionaries supported the army during the Philippine-American War and never condemned its atrocities against Filipino civilians.<sup>31</sup>

From this research it is easier to understand Manalo’s movement from denomination to denomination. Was he searching for acceptance? For respect? For an opportunity to use his gifts of leadership? For an appreciation of the Filipino point of view and value system? We do not know, but it is clear these themes were lacking in his interactions with Protestant missionaries. It is not hard to see why Manalo might have left western denominations to form a truly Filipino church.

### 3.2 How Have Evangelicals Been Sending the Message?

Evangelicals have been writing about the INC since 1960. Early writings aimed at summarizing the history of the church and highlighting its false teachings. *A Protestant View of the Iglesia ni Cristo* by Albert Sanders was written in 1962 to provide a “refutation of major teachings”<sup>32</sup> of the INC. Sanders describes them as a “religious sect.”<sup>33</sup> While in general

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<sup>28</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. 155-56.

<sup>31</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. 157-58.

<sup>32</sup> Albert J. Sanders, *A Protestant View of the Iglesia ni Cristo* (Quezon City: Philippine Federation of Christian Church, 1962), p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Sanders, *A Protestant View*, p. 3.



he treats their teachings directly, without pejorative language, on occasion his choice of words might have been better if he had considered the Filipino receptor. "It is inconceivable that since 1914 'the true church,' which it is claimed is the rebirth of the church which was established in Jerusalem in 33 A.D., has existed only in the Philippines."<sup>34</sup> Read by a Filipino with a strong sense of nationalism, who takes pride in his church and whose highest value is good relations, these are "fighting words," not friendly ones. Sanders appropriately writes that the INC's "three basic doctrines are serious deviations from biblical teachings and from the traditional Christian faith" and are "in large measure, negative.... The Iglesia has a deficient and confused Christology."<sup>35</sup> But he goes further by concluding that the Iglesia has an "inbred, ghetto view," meaning that the "Iglesia has little or no serious interest or concern for the world outside its bounds with respect to righting wrongs, encouraging the administration of justice and raising the lot of the underprivileged."<sup>36</sup> Yet he states at the outset of his work, "Protestants need to have a dialogue with the leaders and people of this movement."<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to perceive how a dialogue could take place or even why there would be a desire for such dialogue given the negative attitude of this author.

A brief article in *Christianity Today* in 1965 notes that "evangelicals now view them [the INC] with great concern as a more serious threat [than Roman Catholicism] to the true Christian cause."<sup>38</sup> This perhaps highlights the overarching attitude of Evangelicals during this time period, and is a strong statement given the traditional animosity between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals of the time.

*Studies in Philippine Church History*, which appeared in 1969, included a chapter on the Iglesia written by Albert Sanders. Again, even more negative language and images are presented regarding the INC. Sanders describes them as "aggressive [and] materially successful"<sup>39</sup> and

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<sup>34</sup> Sanders, *A Protestant View*, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Sanders, *A Protestant View*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Sanders, *A Protestant View*, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Sanders, *A Protestant View*, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Eustaquio Ramientos, "The Manalistas," *Christianity Today* 9 (January 1, 1965), p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Albert J. Sanders, "An Appraisal of the Iglesia ni Cristo," in *Studies in Philippine Church History*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 250-465 (350).

refers to the “aggressiveness of Felix Manalo.”<sup>40</sup> In describing Manalo’s funeral he notes,

Thousands filed past the bier to observe the remains of this great religious leader; many of them, mostly women, were seized with paroxysms of grief, collapsing in violent spasms, writhing and moaning on the floor...members were seen weeping, wailing, fainting outright, swooning into fits of anguish.... [S]uch was the spell this man had exercised over his humble followers.<sup>41</sup>

Sanders is not conveying this situation sympathetically, but critically. Yet again, Sanders notes,

The Iglesia ni Cristo and its members have been derided, ridiculed and at times slandered.... Instead of ridiculing the Iglesia and its beliefs, efforts should be made to better understand them, by entering, when possible, into a dialogue with its leaders and members.<sup>42</sup>

It seems that ridicule may have been the prevailing attitude of Evangelicals towards this group.

In 1976 Arthur Leonard Tuggy published *The Iglesia ni Cristo: A Study in Independent Church Dynamics*, the result of his doctoral work at Fuller School of World Mission. His presentation of the group, which included a history and study of its growth and characteristics, is the most careful presentation done by an Evangelical. He writes,

The most helpful image then is that of an independent church, sub-Christian though it may be in some doctrines and practices from the evangelical point of view, but a church that has arisen as an extension of and reaction to, missions.<sup>43</sup>

He notes that the “limiting factor in this research is the almost impenetrable security curtain which the INC administration has dropped

<sup>40</sup> Sanders, “An Appraisal of the Iglesia ni Cristo,” p. 350.

<sup>41</sup> Sanders, “An Appraisal of the Iglesia ni Cristo,” p. 356.

<sup>42</sup> Sanders, “An Appraisal of the Iglesia ni Cristo,” p. 364. To be fair to the author, Sanders does point out some strengths of the INC, “The members are well disciplined and they are exemplary citizens of the nation.... Christians of other traditions may learn some valuable lessons from this body which has become the fastest growing religious movement in the Philippines” (p. 364).

<sup>43</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 15.

over its inner workings."<sup>44</sup> He further highlights the attitude of some missionaries towards the Iglesia by remarking twice on their comments referring to "the devil" being behind its growth.<sup>45</sup> He concludes that Manalo was either "a self deluded leader or he was called by God but in some way was disobedient."<sup>46</sup>

More recent books, pamphlets and tracts have classified the Iglesia as a cult. A prime example is Donald Platt's book, *Counterfeit*, published by OMF Literature in the Philippines.<sup>47</sup> Platt again primarily attacks doctrinal issues and uses words which would be offensive to Filipinos.

The reasoning here is quite fantastic, and is an example of the way many cults ignore the context of Scripture verses and bring together unrelated passages, resulting in some unusual beliefs.... Who knows, maybe someone from Taiwan or Japan or even Hong Kong will soon arise and claim to be the "angel from the East."<sup>48</sup>

Most recently, Robert Elliff's *Iglesia ni Cristo: The Only True Church?* has been widely distributed in the Philippine missionary community. Published in 1989, the book is perhaps most representative of prevailing attitudes and approaches used by Evangelicals in the Philippines to reach members of the INC. Elliff's method is to point out an Iglesia doctrine and then attack it using a proof-text approach. He earnestly believes that simply fighting fire with fire or the scripture verse with the scripture verse will be enough to persuade.

We believe the facts you have read in this book clearly show you that the Iglesia ni Cristo organization is not of God. The choice is yours, you cannot serve two masters. You either serve Erano Manalo and the Iglesia ni Cristo organization or you serve God.<sup>49</sup>

His attitude is, "I've said it, you believe it"--a very western knowledge-based and individualistic approach to conversion. Elliff does

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<sup>44</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. ix.

<sup>45</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. vii, 255.

<sup>46</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, pp. 260-61.

<sup>47</sup> OMF stands for Overseas Missionary Fellowship, the former China Inland Mission. So this publisher is a mission-supported enterprise.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Platt, *Counterfeit* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1981), p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Elliff, *Iglesia ni Cristo, the Church of Christ from the Philippines: The Only True Church?* (n.p.: n.p., 1989), p. 87.

further harm to the Christian cause by presenting the story (anonymously) of a man who had left the Iglesia ministry. The man wrote,

The hypocrite INC ministers preach on the sanctity of their lives. They feel this is necessary to be able to deceive INC members.... I likened this religious organization unto white washed tombs which look beautiful outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.<sup>50</sup>

Elliff's conclusion? "If you stay in the Iglesia ni Cristo organization and do not repent you will perish!"<sup>51</sup>

With the advent of computers and the Internet, web sites on the INC have appeared. Often produced by Evangelicals, these are, again, doctrinally focused and often resort to name-calling.

I intend to show the false doctrines of this organization...that followers of this church may become aware of its spiritual dangers.<sup>52</sup>

One common characteristic among these "unique" basic doctrines is they are all **founded on deception**.... We've chosen anonymity to avoid possible retributions from the INC fanatics for anyone--particular those well-intentioned former members and indoctrinees [*sic*]-who'll [*sic*] help expose its **dark sinister side** (boldface part of the web site).<sup>53</sup>

When viewed side by side, these books and materials written by Evangelicals present some startling findings. First, the message being presented is doctrinally (or knowledge) focused. Second, the message is being sent in a hostile manner. Third, there is a seeming disregard for the culture of the receptor, e.g., he or she is not treated as an equal; the high value of good relations is ignored and not utilized; the message is given in direct, almost staccato fashion. One who is culturally sensitive to the Filipino context would use relationship as a vehicle and not get "right to the point, because we don't want to waste time." Truth is not measured in the same way in the Philippines, because the highest values are different than in the West. A further evaluation of the Iglesia as a receptor is needed.

<sup>50</sup> Elliff, *Iglesia ni Cristo*, p. 90.

<sup>51</sup> Elliff, *Iglesia ni Cristo*, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> Chris Anna, *The Iglesia ni Cristo*, [www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/5645/iglesia\\_ni\\_cristo\\_study.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/5645/iglesia_ni_cristo_study.html) (Oct, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Non Iglesia ni Cristo Association, *Iglesia ni Cristo Deceptions*, [www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/7982/nica.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/7982/nica.html) (Oct, 1999).

### 3.3 Understanding the Receptor

Filipino culture is Asian. It is not western, despite having a thin Western veneer in its large mega-cities. The worldview and values of a Filipino are different and at times distinctly at odds with those of us from the West. A recent *Pasugo* article remarked on this difference, noting that "desirable Filipino traits...[are] courtesy, courage, diligence, helpfulness and hospitality."<sup>54</sup> These are values which highlight a relational society. Most members of the INC are Filipino and speak Tagalog (or local dialects outside central Luzon). To better understand the receptor in a cybernetic model of an Evangelical presenting the gospel to a member of the INC, some anthropological tools and insights need to be applied.

#### 3.3.1 Epistemological Foundations

Paul Hiebert suggests that in order to understand how we communicate, we need to understand our own epistemological foundations.<sup>55</sup> We must also understand the culture we are trying to reach. So a look at the epistemological underpinning of the Iglesia is in order.

The Iglesia hierarchy assumes that it alone has the clear and unbiased interpretation of the Bible.<sup>56</sup> The church is restorationist in outlook, believing the true church disappeared by the fourth century because of apostasy and has only reappeared with the emergence of the "angel from the East," Felix Manalo.<sup>57</sup> The INC alone has the correct interpretation of the scripture<sup>58</sup> and all most agree to this interpretation in order to be saved. They demand unity in their teachings,<sup>59</sup> going so far as to have the same

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<sup>54</sup> El P. Buena, "Metro Manila South Instills Nationalism in Children," *Pasugo* 50 (October 1998), p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 20-51.

<sup>56</sup> "Manalo has exclusive authority to preach the undeniable and unadulterated truth." Letters to the Editor. *Pasugo* 47 (March 1997), p. 3. For further analysis of the Iglesia's sources of authority using Oden's quadrilateral of the scripture, tradition, experience and reason as a framework, see Anne C. Harper, "Sources of Authority in the Iglesia ni Cristo" (an unpublished paper; Quezon City: Alliance Biblical Seminary, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> Iglesia, *This Is*, p. 43. Also, Tomas Catangay, "The Messenger and the Reestablishment of God's Church on Earth," *Pasugo* 49 (May 97), pp. 10-11 (11).

<sup>58</sup> Feljun Fuentes, "Why God Sends Messengers," *Pasugo* 42 (May-June 1990), pp. 6-8 (6, 8).

<sup>59</sup> Feljun Fuentes, "The Angel from the East and His Message," *Pasugo* 45

sermon outline (produced by the executive minister) preached in every chapel throughout the Philippines on a given Sunday.<sup>60</sup> In local and national elections their membership will vote in a bloc as directed by the hierarchy.<sup>61</sup> This is to preserve unity. They believe unity is only possible when everyone completely agrees.<sup>62</sup> Members are not to read the Bible for themselves, much less interpret it.<sup>63</sup> They are told what to believe. The Iglesia attacks those who refuse to accept their position. In Hiebert's typology, these characteristics describe the "naive idealist."<sup>64</sup>

Failure to understand this epistemological underpinning of the INC has led Evangelicals merely to cross swords with them by presenting a different interpretation of the scripture. The result has been rejection of the messenger--and real failure to communicate the gospel.

### 3.3.2 *Cultural Distance*

Missionaries who have studied this group have tended to focus on the truth of their beliefs, usually stressing differences and pointing out false teachings. The Filipino, in contrast, values relationship over truth or order. Maintaining relationships and harmony are the highest values of the culture. Meaning in life is not based so much on accomplishments as on social connections. There is a hierarchical structure to Filipino society; everyone knows his/her place and is most comfortable in that place. The sense of individualism so important to a Westerner is not important to a Filipino. Societal place and relations take precedence; it is a shamed-based

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(November-December 1993), pp. 4-20 (5).

<sup>60</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 149.

<sup>61</sup> Bienvenido C. Santiago, "What We Believe and Why," *God's Message* no volume (Special Issue, July 1993), pp. 23-27 (24).

<sup>62</sup> Fuentes, "Angel," p. 13. Also see the church's constitution which includes a description of church officer responsibilities in Elesterio, *Iglesia*, p. 174:

The Doctrine necessarily to be observed by members of the Church of Christ:

Article 1--The absolute duty of every Minister of the Church of Christ is to obey and submit to their superiors--Hebrews 13:17

Article 2--The Minister who does not submit to the Divine Authority of his superiors is resisting the power of God....

Article 4--Qualifications...(d) Not self-willed, but always cooperating to [*sic*] all agreements concerning the administration--Titus 1:7

<sup>63</sup> *Iglesia ni Cristo, This Is*, p. 59.

<sup>64</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, pp. 26, 40.

society. Being careful to save the "face" of someone is not just important, but absolutely necessary to maintaining good relations (the highest value).

Within the Iglesia there is a very clear class structure which flows from a centralized church structure. The chief executive minister has a cabinet of twelve males who wield great authority.<sup>65</sup> Below are male district officers, male ministers, deacons and deaconesses.<sup>66</sup> The only roles open to females are those of choir member and deaconess.<sup>67</sup> Church members are divided into small groups of seven to ten headed by a deacon and deaconess who check on their attendance and generally care for their needs.<sup>68</sup> Order is important, but only as a means to relationship. No one can advance up the ladder unless his entire family has joined the church and remains active.<sup>69</sup> So there is much social pressure to remain within the church. To question or move away from the church is to disturb peace and unity, which equals offense and shame.

To further understand and quantify the cultural distance Evangelicals need to cross in sharing the gospel, two evaluative scales are presented below (see appendices 1 and 2).

It is apparent from looking at these two scales, that western missionaries have a long way to go to become credible communicators of the gospel. Filipino Christians have a much smaller distance to cross. Together we must consider new approaches to this large group of people. Do we throw up our hands in disgust or give up because methods we have used in the past have not worked? Have they even caused not just rejection of the message, but hostility towards it? No, we must reconsider how to communicate the gospel by including the values and worldview of

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<sup>65</sup> Tuggy, *Iglesia*, p. 149. For further examination of the Iglesia and its structure, see Anne C. Harper, "The Iglesia ni Cristo: Its Ecclesiology in Teaching and Practice" (an unpublished paper; Quezon City: Alliance Biblical Seminary, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Ma. Angeles C. Guanzon, "An Analysis of Religious Leadership in the Iglesia ni Kristo," in *Filipino Religious Psychology*, ed. Leonard N. Mercado (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word University Publications, 1977), pp. 127-40 (127-39).

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Cora, Quezon City, October 1998. Cora is a deaconess in the Tandansora local chapel. The real name is withheld by request.

<sup>68</sup> Tom T. Mercado, "A Milestone in a Couple's History," *Pasugo* 50 (August 98), p. 7: "Among the multifarious duties of this office are administering a group consisting of a number of households, leading them in propagational and education drives, and performing specific duties during worship services."

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Cora.

these people in the process. We need to become incarnational representatives of a Triune God Who longs that they know Him in a fuller way.

#### 4. What Are Some Possible Approaches?

First, we must move away from a doctrinal approach to reaching the INC. Since this is a group that will oppose change from the outside, reaching the church hierarchy should be our priority. Change must come from within and above. These men are people with power and wealth, often involved in businesses outside their church walls or in negotiating jobs for Iglesia members. Filipino Christians in similar positions of power need to consciously befriend them and even provide jobs for church members as a strategy for interaction. As relationships deepen, further opportunities will present themselves for understanding the needs and questions these people have--and that the gospel can meet. We must be intentional in our incarnation of the gospel. Iglesia members need to see how worshipping a God who gave himself for us and being in relationship with the incarnate son of God are different from their church experience.

Evangelicals need to consider the possibility of building on existing "pillars" within the church.<sup>70</sup> That is, what are the truths and good things that this group teaches and promotes? Good citizenship, honesty, desire to learn, repentance for sins, care for other church members, and much more are biblical values that can be applauded. The belief in one God and the authority of the Bible, though distorted from our viewpoint, can be points of building, not of accusation.

Western missionaries need to move from accusation to encouraging dialogue and working together. Concern for the poor, working for justice and promoting harmony are areas where we could join forces.<sup>71</sup> Evangelicals might be concerned that the Iglesia would claim all the credit for joint endeavors. In the light of eternity, that is not important. Given the remarkable growth of this church, there is probably much we could learn from them. What is important is for them to see that we value them and desire to be in relationship with them--just as God does.

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<sup>70</sup> Dudley J. Woodberry, "Contextualization among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word, 1989), pp. 282-312.

<sup>71</sup> Since the writing of Albert Sanders, the Iglesia has been doing remarkable outreach work to help the poor, and it has built housing developments, a hospital and a university.



## 5. Conclusion

Members of the INC are a major unreached people group in the Philippines. They are closed and even hostile to the presentation of the gospel by Evangelicals. This is the result of three factors: Early Protestant missionary attitudes at the start of the century were nationalistic and racist; Evangelicals have focused on the message by using written communication and doctrinal attack as the primary means of communication; and there has been little consideration of Filipino and Iglesia culture in providing a viable, incarnational witness to this group.

Evangelicals' presentation of the gospel continues to be limited by a bounded-set mentality stressing differences which tends to view everything the Iglesia teaches and does as false. We have defined Christianity simply in terms of our own beliefs rather than in terms of a relationship with Christ at the center.<sup>72</sup> Our focus has been on proving their religion to be false, not on leading them to become followers of Jesus by knowing him in a deeper way. While it is appropriate for Evangelicals to point out the error of false doctrine, we must be careful in the way we do it, by showing respect for their beliefs and by not using pejorative language. We need to move beyond words in books and tracts to building relationships which will take time.

We should build credibility not just in what we think (order and truth), but in the ways Iglesia members consider important (relationship). The task is still before us. If this unreached people group were an illiterate society without the Bible, wouldn't we make every effort to see that they received the word? The challenge in front of us today is to truly communicate the gospel to the INC in a manner they will understand and embrace.

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<sup>72</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Perspectives*, p. 117.

Appendix 1: Seven Dimensions of Cross-Cultural Communication<sup>73</sup>

	Distances	
	Missionary to INC	Filipino to INC
Worldview	4	1
Cognitive Process	7	0
Linguistic Form	9	0
Behavioral Pattern	8	1
Social Structure	9	0
Media Influence	5	0
Motivational Resources	6	2
Totals	48	4

Scale: 0 to 10, with 0 meaning no distance and 10 being the greatest distance

<sup>73</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), p. 172. Brief descriptions from pp. 164-68:

*Worldviews*--ways of perceiving the world

*Cognitive processes*--ways of thinking.

*Linguistic forms*--ways of expressing ideas.

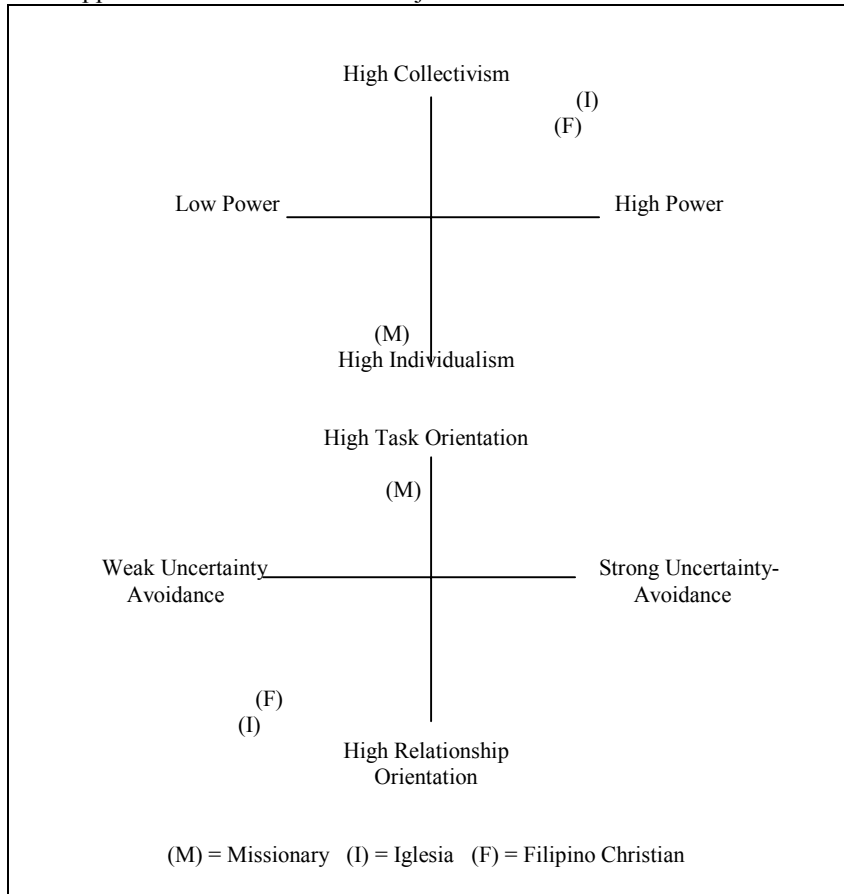
*Behavioral patterns*--ways of acting.

*Social structures*--ways of interacting.

*Media influence*--ways of channeling the message.

*Motivational resources*--ways of deciding.

Appendix 2: Hofstede's Four Major Cultural Distance Dimensions<sup>74</sup>



<sup>74</sup> Robert J. Clinton, "Crosscultural Use of Leadership Concepts," in *The Word among Us*, pp. 183-98 (187-90). He describes the categories as follows:

*Power distance*--refers to the extent to which leaders and followers accept hierarchical differences between leaders and followers....

*The individual-collective* dimension describes the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society....

*The task-related behavior versus relationship behavior* describes a continuum along which a leader's bent toward a leadership style is dominated by task behaviors or relationship behaviors....

*The uncertainty-avoidance dimension* indicates the dynamics involved in a society's approach to uncertain and ambiguous situations.