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## **Contextualizing the Contextual: A Note on the Revolutionary Exegesis of Gregorio L. Aglipay**

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# Research Note

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## Contextualizing the Contextual A Note on the Revolutionary Exegesis of Gregorio L. Aglipay

The contextuality of all biblical exegesis is often emphasized—and rightly so. However, the history of contextual exegesis still needs to be written, which leads to a situation in which those involved in “contextual exegesis” are often insufficiently aware of the contextuality of earlier approaches and the fact that they are heirs to a long tradition of contextual biblical interpretation. Using the example of the “revolutionary” exegesis of Gregorio L. Aglipay, this research note illustrates how contextual exegesis may have much earlier roots than is frequently assumed.

**KEYWORDS: GREGORIO AGLIPAY · IGLESIA FILIPINA INDEPENDIENTE · CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY · BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION · JESUS · SEVEN LAST WORDS**

**T**hat exegesis is always contextual, always interested, and always localized no longer needs to be argued. As Fernando Segovia (2006, 34–35) puts it, “The long-dominant construct of the scientific reader—the universal, objective and impartial reader, fully decontextualized and non-ideological—yielded, slowly but surely, to the construct of the real reader—the local, perspectival and interested reader, always contextualized and ideological.”

However, the history of contextual exegesis is yet to be written. Often contextual exegesis is interested in showing how today’s exegesis, which is conscious of its contextuality and aware of the fact that contextuality is both unavoidable and heuristically necessary, achieves a better interpretation than earlier attempts to interpret a text. With this position, a certain concept of evolution is also introduced into exegesis, which considers today’s contextual reading as more appropriate than earlier interpretations. This self-understanding of contextual exegesis seems to blind this particular exegetical enterprise to one aspect of its own contextuality: the fact that it is part of a much longer history of exegesis to which it is not only connected in terms of discontinuity, but also in terms of continuity. Awareness of this situation could help contemporary scholars doing contextual exegesis to gain a better view of precisely their own contextuality.<sup>1</sup>

This research note aims to draw attention to this issue by presenting the political exegesis of the life of Jesus, in particular of his seven words on the cross, drawn up by a Filipino theologian and bishop, Gregorio L. Aglipay, the first Supreme Bishop (Obispo Maximo) of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI). Aglipay can well be viewed as an early representative of political theology and exegesis in the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> This note presents a succinct biographical and theological sketch of Aglipay, after which it focuses on his political and nationalistic reading of the life of Jesus, written toward the end of Aglipay’s life, as a representative and comprehensive example of his political and contextual theology. In this way this note contributes to the history of (contextual) exegesis in the Philippines as well as to the history of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente by discussing an otherwise less accessible text<sup>3</sup> and a period of the church’s theological development that often is not touched upon.

### **Gregorio L. Aglipay (1860–1940), Political Theologian**

The Union Obrera Democratica proclaimed the establishment of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente in Manila on 3 August 1902, with the prominent Filipino priest Gregorio Aglipay as its head.<sup>4</sup> Aglipay’s eventual acceptance of this nomination would determine the rest of his life as a clergyman and theologian. However, Aglipay was not unprepared to head a national and nationalistic church, which considered itself to be the true church of the Filipino people and thus opposed to any kind of foreign interference in the Philippines, be it on the ecclesial or political level. In the years leading up to the IFI’s proclamation, Aglipay had already been involved in heading the organization of a national church in the context of the short-lived Republic of the Philippines under the presidency of Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo, and the IFI was intended to be a continuation of this national church.

The background to the intent to organize a national church was, at least, twofold. On the one hand, there was the profound desire to be liberated from the influence of foreign (regular) clergy and to have a church with a recognizable, i.e., Filipino, face. On the other hand, there was the desire to be liberated from foreign influence in general. This desire could be seen as an expression of nationalism in both the political as well as the religious spheres, which were closely intertwined, if not in fact the two sides of the same coin. In the history of the IFI, the two would coexist and mutually influence each other.

Aglipay was to head his church until his death in 1940. During his long tenure as Supreme Bishop of the IFI, Aglipay developed together with Isabelo de los Reyes Sr., his companion during much of his theological journey, a distinctly nationalistic theology, which incorporated not only political (and religious) Filipino nationalism as a hermeneutic lens for doing theology, but also much of the liberal and enlightened or modern worldview from which this nationalism largely proceeded. Eventually, all of these factors led Aglipay into the direction of a theology that was as nationalistic (in the anticolonial and emancipatory sense of the word) and political as it was rationalistic and, in the end, Unitarian.

In spite of everything that is doctrinally problematic from a mainstream Christian perspective, Aglipay should nevertheless be seen as a highly original and creative theologian. He was fully “localized” in the sense that the political situation of his country became the interpretative lens for his theology and, as shown below, his exegesis.

## **Aglipay's Contextual and Political Exegesis: The Life of Jesus**

As we noted, Aglipay produced his sketch of the life of Jesus during one of the last years of his life. His long-time personal secretary, Simeon Mandac, published his treatise. Here, for the reader's convenience, reference will be made to the English translation of the Spanish original, which together with the original copy of the translation seems to have vanished. The last reference to Mandac's work in Spanish, which was available to the present author, is found in Pedro de Achútegui and Miguel Bernad's (1957, 379) study of Aglipay's birth date.

Aglipay begins by locating his own treatise, which he considers to be a piece of objective exegesis, within the history of research, pointing out the (then already) enormous amount of scholarly output on the subject. Next, he notes that the churches have claimed to be the sole legitimate interpreters of the life of Jesus, while not doing a particularly good job (“[they] have fallen into the most abject errors”) (Mandac n.d., 217). He then singles out his own church as the only church to have left the task of impartial interpretation to “the wise,” he contends, “so that it may garner from their impartial interpretations the most faithful and reasonable interpretation of the role of Jesus in the progress of humanity” (ibid.).

The sources Aglipay then refers to consist of the libraries of some of the main university cities of the West, including the US. In this way Aglipay presents his exegesis not so much as a perspectival piece of work but as something that stands in the best of the liberal and enlightenment traditions of biblical interpretation. Simultaneously, while locating his own method of interpretation in the way he does, he presents it as highly contextual.

Aglipay then outlines how Jesus' life consisted of two phases, mainly the “pro-country phase” and the “pro-humanity phase,” discussed in that order. The “pro-country phase” is summarized in the beatitudes, while the political testament of the “pro-humanity phase” is preserved in Jesus' seven last words on the cross (ibid., 218). Thus Aglipay's interpretation is from the start guided by a political framework, attributing to Jesus a particular nationalistic and humanistic interest. The interface of this putative interest of Jesus with Aglipay's own religio-political enterprise is obvious.

The gist of the nationalistic phase in Jesus' life lies in his preaching of the “gospel of solid brotherhood and mutual helpfulness to defend the country to the last” (ibid.). To this gospel is connected an option for the poor, which

serves a nationalistic goal: economically and socially united, a country will stand stronger than if it had no such unity (cf. ibid., 218–19). Still, it seems that the main move for social and political unity will have to come from the rich, as Aglipay portrays Jesus as organizing gatherings at which the rich shared their foodstuffs with the poor in the context of Jesus' preaching—his reading of the miraculous feedings (cf. Mk 6:32–44, 8:1–10; Jn 6:1–15)—and proclaiming the overcoming of the rich by the poor. However, the goal of this whole enterprise remains the overthrowing of the Roman legions and the political and religious elite—without doubt a reflection of Aglipay's own background and, probably still, deepest desires—which failed only because of Judas' treachery (Mandac n.d., 219).

Having outlined this narrative of Jesus' life, Aglipay arrives at the Beatitudes, which he presents in a combination of the forms found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Mt 5:3–13; Lk 6:20–26) and interprets as a succinct statement of Jesus' gospel, even if it is “somewhat enfeebled by the centuries” (Mandac n.d., 219). By equating nationalism and social justice, i.e., showing each to imply the other, Aglipay here makes an interesting move, which may well have applied to the context of the Philippines in the early twentieth century. Aglipay, at least, directly connects the context of Jesus and his own context, viewing himself and the movement he represents as vindicators of Jesus' ideals:

**Time, vindicator of noble motives, has justified Jesus and permitted the realization of the beautiful dreams of equality.**

**And this belief in the progress of mankind has been for me a constant inspiration in my struggle against the colossal errors with which the conscience of the majority of the Filipinos continues to be enchained. (ibid., 220)**

Having made this statement, Aglipay proceeds with a narration of Jesus' militant nationalism as the preaching of the new society as being also embodied in the Beatitudes sets the whole of Judea, Galilee, and the rest of the region on fire. The enthusiasm for Jesus is, in Aglipay's view, fuelled specifically by Jesus' attack on the (false) religious authorities and the rich, while seemingly avoiding a direct confrontation with the Roman legions (ibid., 221–22).<sup>5</sup> The background of this avoidance is that Jesus

wants to build up<sup>6</sup> and test his strength first<sup>7</sup> before striking. As already noted, none of these plans come to fruition as Jesus is betrayed and quickly tried and executed by the Roman authorities “to prevent a communistic uprising” (ibid., 223).

In the context of Jesus’ execution, Aglipay gives a place to the seven last words of Jesus on the cross. These words, which are interpreted in a very particular way, merits quoting in full:

As in all hazardous enterprises, the fearful Christians invented passwords and spoke in parables to hide their plans.

The significance of the seven last words of Jesus on Calvary is worth knowing because it embodies his political testament. They are as follows.

#### First Word

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!” This means: “My people, pay no heed to what you see, for soon your grievances and sufferings will be redressed.” Jesus called the people “Father.”

#### Second Word

“Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” means that soon the multitudes who acclaimed his triumphal entry into Jerusalem will foregather and with Dimas, the daring Christian bandit, as general, will annihilate the Roman legions.

#### Third Word

“Woman” (speaking to his mother), “behold thy son” (referring to St. John), and addressing his beloved disciple, added: “behold thy mother.” He wanted to say that in order to triumph the concerted efforts of all, men and women, without any discrimination whatsoever, was necessary.

#### Fourth Word

Jesus, feeling that while his energy was ebbing away fast the revolution had not started, cried, “I thirst,” meaning, “I am anxious that you begin the battle by taking me from the cross and exterminating all the Romans, priests and Pharisees.”

#### Fifth Word

As no one moved, Jesus exclaimed: “Father, Father, why hast thou forsaken me?” Meaning to say: “My people, why have you forsaken me?”

#### Sixth Word

Blinding lightning followed and the people, instead of attacking, were frightened and ran to shelter in their houses, abandoning Jesus alone with the charming and sorrowful Magdalene, the only one faithful disciple, who did not desert him. Jesus, full of pain and disappointment, murmured: “All is ended.”

Magdalene, passionate and crazed with sorrow, took it to mean that the redemption of the Jewish people was consummated. She was convinced from then on that Jesus would rise again to secure the liberty and the glory of the people of Israel; and in effect, on the next day she brought fragrant flowers and aromatic herbs to the sepulchre, to cover the pathway of the Master upon his resurrection.

#### Seventh Word

Jesus, falling unconscious, made a last effort to move the frightened populace, and full of sorrow, exclaimed with what remained of his energy: “Father, in thy hand I commend my spirit!” That is: “My country, I commend my cause to you, which is the cause of all, and it is for you to decide whether a patriot should die like a criminal nailed to the cross between two thieves.” (ibid.)

The seven last words of Jesus on the cross, which are otherwise the focus of devotion to Christ’s passion and not interpreted in a particularly revolutionary way,<sup>8</sup> are here presented as the testament of a nationalistic and humanistic revolutionary, using secret codes in the best tradition of Filipino revolutionary movements, most famously the Katipunan (see, e.g., Agoncillo 1990, 140–66). Aglipay’s exegesis is strikingly original and differs strongly from contemporary interpretations of the seven last words.<sup>9</sup> The most striking difference between those interpretations and Aglipay’s is that generally the various expositions of and meditations on the seven last words of

Jesus, whether set to music or not, invite the readership or audience to either identify with the suffering of Christ as an act of discipleship and a way of deepening one's spirituality, or to reflect theologically (rather than politically) on Jesus' suffering and death in order to gain a fuller understanding of it. Only occasionally, and in interpretations postdating Aglipay's account, is a connection made between the suffering that Jesus endures and the suffering of, for instance, political and other prisoners in contemporary society.

However, rather than a detailed comparison between various interpretations of the seven last words and Aglipay's, here the interrelationship between Aglipay's context and his interpretation is of primary interest. In particular, the following observations can be made. Firstly, unlike more common interpretations of these texts, Aglipay shifts Jesus' primary point of reference from his heavenly Father to the people of his country.<sup>10</sup> This shift already turns Jesus from a (religious) prophet into a full-blooded revolutionary without any particular religious orientation. Secondly, the emphasis on renewed togetherness is striking, as becomes clear in the interpretations of the second and third words. In Aglipay's interpretation these words refer to the future regrouping of his followers under "Dimas" and the necessity of coherence among his followers in order to gain victory. Thirdly, Jesus' anxiety concerning the battle and the subsequent victory is underlined in the interpretation of the fourth, fifth, and seventh of the last words. Finally, the whole is placed in the context of consolation through the interpretation of the first word, while the sixth word seems to point to Jesus' exasperation over the flight of all his disciples.

Thus, in Aglipay's interpretation, Jesus was executed as a revolutionary (even if he survived it, according to Aglipay), not only seemingly—for good historical reasons one may assume that the core of the charges brought against him were indeed of this kind—but also in reality. By means of these interpretative moves, Aglipay arrives at a highly political and—in view of the colonial situation in which the treatise was written—a highly contextual interpretation of the life of Jesus, in which probably much of his own story and that of his movement fuse with that of Jesus. Thus, Aglipay's interpretation is quite an outspoken one and can be appreciated as an impassioned view of Jesus' mission, ministry, and death by someone who had himself served as a revolutionary military leader. Given the late date of Aglipay's interpretation of the seven last words of Jesus, he himself probably saw much continuity between his revolutionary commitment under Spanish

rule and American rule, however different the two were, and between his life in the armed revolution and his work as a religious and political figure of note. The manner in which Aglipay depicts Jesus and his followers might also suggest that he himself did not regard Jesus' mission—and to the extent that Jesus' mission represents Aglipay's own mission—to have succeeded.

From the perspective of biblical studies, some aspects of Aglipay's interpretation are fanciful and historically untenable, such as the idea of coded language in Jesus' seven last words. Also quite questionable is the underlying assumption that Jesus indeed spoke these seven words on the cross. However, more important than these historical-critical issues is the general emphasis Aglipay places on the political import of Jesus' ministry and mission. While Jesus may not have been a military leader, as Aglipay suggests that he was, Jesus certainly was someone who placed himself in the service of God's liberation of the people of Israel and the renewal of creation.<sup>11</sup> This view goes widely beyond any notion of a "spiritual gospel," and that is something for which Aglipay has a very good antenna. In this sense, his work is still relevant for contemporary exegesis as well given that New Testament exegesis frequently lacks an awareness of the political ramifications of the texts that it studies.

Having discussed Jesus' last words, Aglipay's reinterpretation of Jesus as a political activist and revolutionary is completed. Aglipay dedicates the rest of his treatise to a discussion of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. He comes down firmly on the side of its unhistorical interpretation: Jesus did not really die, but lived on for some months after his crucifixion (Mandac n.d., 226)—leading to a broader discussion of the role of the scriptures, science, and conscience in the IFI.<sup>12</sup> That discussion is not directly relevant to the purposes of this research note, which aims to contribute to the history of contextual and political exegesis in the Philippines as well as to the history of the IFI.

## **Concluding Observations**

Obviously Aglipay's presentation of the life of Jesus was inspired by contemporary European critical exegesis, of which he may well have been one of the foremost recipients in the Philippines. The significance of Aglipay's treatise on Jesus lies not so much in its value as a piece of historical-critical exegesis because his interpretative choices and assumptions seem to be too extreme, too one-sided, and too hypothetical. Rather, in the view taken

here, its significance is found in its exemplary character as a highly creative, highly contextual, and highly political outline of the life of Jesus, aimed at and emerging from the political context of the Philippines as a colony of the United States. By reading Jesus' story through the lens of political and religious liberalism (including political nationalism), Aglipay is able to relate the life of Jesus to the story of his own life as a nationalist and revolutionary as well as to the political context of his country. Even though Aglipay presents his own reading of the life of Jesus not as one among many, but much rather as the most valid one, the introductory remarks at the beginning of his treatise make clear that it is a reading of the life of Jesus using a very specific interpretative strategy. In this way, this piece of Aglipayan exegesis is a precursor of much contemporary consciously contextual exegesis.

This presentation of an example of the political and contextual exegesis of Gregorio Aglipay, the supreme bishop of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente has achieved three things in particular.

Firstly, it has drawn attention to the existence of political exegesis avant la lettre in the Philippines. Aglipay presents his "life of Jesus" at the end of his life and as the culmination of much of his theological work.

Secondly, the existence of such contextual and political exegesis puts the current political and contextual exegesis in historical context and within a longer tradition of exegesis.

Finally, this research note has presented parts of an otherwise less accessible historical source, Mandac's biography of Aglipay in English translation, which others may utilize in understanding the history of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente.

## Notes

- 1 For the interrelationship between contextuality and (historically and linguistically oriented) exegesis and how these can interact fruitfully, cf. Smit 2016.
- 2 On Philippine political theology and exegesis in general, cf. England et al. 2003, 331–497. On the contribution of the theologians of the IFI, see esp. *ibid.*, 350–56.
- 3 The main source for the subject under discussion here is Mandac n.d., 217–30. Mandac's work is referred to without a date, as the publication lacks such information. There is also a copy in the IFI Archives, St. Andrew's Theological Seminary, Quezon City, OM 14.1, Box 49a, Folder No. 157. The original of this translation is: Simeon Mandac, *Actividades del Fundador de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente, el Obispo Maximo, Dr. Gregorio Aglipay* (unpublished manuscript, in the Achútegui collection). Aglipay's treatise reproduced in these works is dated February 1936. Cf. Achútegui and Bernad 1972, xiv, 142.

- 4 On Aglipay in general, cf., e.g., Scott 1987; Whittemore 1961, 63–165.
- 5 The question of the extent to which this analysis reflects the adapted nationalism that governed much of the political scene in the Philippines in the 1920s and 1930s has to remain open here.
- 6 Aglipay views the Gospel of Luke (Lk 22:36) as Jesus' command to his followers to arm themselves for the upcoming battle. Cf. Mandac n.d., 222.
- 7 Aglipay's interpretation of the triumphal entry is in terms of a test of his popularity and hence strength (cf. Mk 11:1–10, Mt 21:1–11, Lk 19:29–38, Jn 12:12–16). See Mandac n.d., 222.
- 8 See, e.g., the overview offered by Rebekah A. Eklund (2014, 3–18).
- 9 For an overview of such interpretations, cf., e.g., the survey provided by Michael Theobald 2010; the representative sample of literature that Theobald also refers to consists of: Bauer 1909, 220–26; Wilkinson 1964; Kistemaker 1976; Schwermer 1998; Hautz 1953; Dover 1967; Meyer 1995; Gross 2001; Lange 2002; Niskansen 2002; Steinmetz 2002; Wijnkoop Lüthi 2005; Resch 2007; Langrock 1987; and Kreyssig 1994.
- 10 Cf. esp. the interpretations of the first, fifth, and seventh words.
- 11 This statement is made from the perspective of mainstream New Testament scholarship; cf., e.g., Theissen and Merz 1998.
- 12 This discussion fits the broader intellectual development of Aglipay and the (liberal Christian) doctrinal course toward which he steered the IFI. For a general overview, cf. Smit 2011, 233–53.

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