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*Contextualizing Inductive Bible Study (IBS) in a
Postcolonial Filipino American Setting*

Abstract

This article seeks to contextualize the application of Inductive Bible Study (IBS) to a postcolonial setting: the Filipino American Church in Los Angeles.¹ As part of the process of doing so, this essay narrates a short history of colonization and Christianity in the Philippines, the migration of Filipinos to the United States and the challenges Filipino Americans encountered as a people living in a foreign land. Included in this story is the importance of Filipino American churches and some contemporary challenges and postcolonial issues (such as “colonial mentality” or internalized oppression) that affect a particular segment of Filipino Americans in its quest to grow spiritually through the Bible. IBS is examined as a liberating and empowering hermeneutic for Filipino Americans and proposals are spelled out as to how IBS can be appropriated in this particular ecclesial setting.

Keywords: Inductive Bible Study, Filipino American Church, Los Angeles, postcolonial, hermeneutics

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The prospective locale I am reporting on for the purpose of contextualizing IBS is the Post-Colonial Context of the Filipino-American Christian Diaspora in Los Angeles.¹

The Filipino American community, also known as the Filipino American Diaspora, is the second largest Asian American group after the Chinese-Americans with a population of 3.4 million as reported in the 2010 census. Overall, in terms of growth rate, the Asian American population is the fastest growing race group in the United States. Asians already passed Hispanics as the largest group of new immigrants in the country. In terms of concentration, the Filipino American Diaspora communities in Los Angeles County, California contain the highest number of Filipinos in America.²

The people of the Philippines have a long history of immigration and settlement in the United States. The earliest recorded arrival was in the 16th century in Moro Bay, California, when Filipino sailors arrived from Spanish trade ships.³ Filipino migration increased exponentially in the 20th century, especially in Hawaii and California, during the period when the Philippines was a colony of the United States for almost 50 years (from 1898-1946) and also after more liberal U.S. immigration laws took effect in 1965.⁴

Likewise, Filipinos have a long history with Christianity. The Philippines is a country that was colonized twice by western nations. Before the United States colonized the Philippines, the country was under Spanish rule for more than three hundred years (377 years to be exact). Spanish missionaries introduced Roman Catholic Christianity way back in the 16th Century. In the early 1900's American missionaries from various denominations arrived in the Philippines and introduced American Protestant Christianity.⁵ Today, a big majority of the Filipinos both in America and in the Philippines are Roman Catholics, with Christians from numerous denominations (mainline, Pentecostal, evangelical, and independent churches) forming a small but growing minority.⁶

As Filipinos migrated to the United States, Filipino Churches (and Filipino Catholics in Catholic churches) also started appearing where they lived.⁷ For Filipino Americans, church gatherings are more than just events for worshipping collectively as a spiritual body. Church is the obvious place to meet other Filipino Americans. There are not many places called Filipino Town, nor are there many Filipino restaurants compared to other Asian Americans. The church context provides a place for the Diaspora community to give mutual support for issues related to living in the homeland of the former American colonial "masters." These immigrant issues include: acclimation to living in the new community, continuation of Filipino practices and traditions, the economic struggle to make it in America while at the same time working hard so they can send money to loved ones in the Philippines,

generational tension between parents and children who were raised in America, feelings of alienation, liminality, feelings of dislocation, and identity issues.⁸

Before I came to Lexington, I served for eight years in various teaching and pastoral positions at four Filipino American Christian churches in Los Angeles and Orange County. Before that time, my formative years as a Christian were spent at a predominantly Anglo church in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. In my observation, the type of Christianity in the Filipino-American churches where I served was not the Western Christianity introduced by Spain and America. The Christianity that arrived from the Philippines and planted itself in U.S. soil is a hybrid form that is uniquely Filipino American – a Western Christianity infused with Filipino cultural and spiritual beliefs, and practices. Some people consider this a form of “Folk Christianity.”⁹ For me, it is simply “Filipino American Christianity.” It is a unique community with its own spirituality and ethos that makes it different from Western Christianity and Christianity in the Philippines. Ministering at these Filipino American churches was for me, in some ways, a cross-cultural experience and in other ways, it was like coming home.¹⁰

The Filipino-American churches where I served provided much social, emotional, cultural, immigration and community support for Filipino-Americans in their own locale. All of them were small Evangelical churches of Reformed and Baptist persuasions, with families and people from all age groups coming from various socio-economic standings and originally coming from different regions in the Philippines. They each had their own distinctive major issues including members with immigration difficulties, complications with other congregations due to the sharing of worship spaces, and pastoral search issues as qualified and available Filipino American pastors were not that common. One frequent issue, that all of these churches recognized, was the need for more depth in Biblical knowledge and hermeneutics. Some members from each of these congregations claimed that they were in these churches primarily because of the community fellowship but they were not, unfortunately, growing spiritually as much as they could through the Bible. But since they did not find it feasible to leave the churches, they turned to a plethora of TV and online evangelists and preachers to supplement the teaching they got from their pastors and Bible studies.¹¹

Some college-age members of one of the churches even took the initiative of attending a small local seminary to supplement this need.¹² In another church I was specifically brought in to teach the church leaders the basics of interpreting scripture and surveys of the Old and New Testaments. For that purpose, I used a specific curriculum designed by an organization based in Florida called Crossing Cultures International. This organization currently employs this curriculum in eleven Asian countries including churches in the southern Philippines. The methods used resemble IBS in some aspects,

especially the procedural steps of Observation, Interpretation, and Application/ Evaluation.¹³

While I can appreciate the zeal of the members and their desire to know the Bible in a deeper way, much can be said about possible reasons why a lack of Bible knowledge and interpretation exist in this context. Some seemed to rely excessively on authority figures to interpret their Bibles. Filipinos have a very high view of authority figures for cultural reasons and as a result of colonization.¹⁴ This manifested itself whenever they sought first and upheld the opinions of Bible teachers, pastors, missionaries and other experts over their own. While nothing is wrong with consulting experts, their over-reliance on these other sources deprived them of making even a rudimentary effort at first-hand engagement of the scriptures. Also, the so-called Filipino “Colonial mentality” could be at work.¹⁵ (I would rather call it “Neo-colonial” mentality since the Americans left the Philippines a long time ago.) This is an outlook that considers anything “American” as better than anything Filipino and is a by-product of the colonial years.¹⁶ They possibly perceived the “American” evangelists and preachers on TV as being better in interpreting the Bible than their local Filipino American pastors and leaders. Unfortunately for them, these media preachers do not necessarily demonstrate appropriate interpretation and some rely mostly on proof-texting. There were also some who desired to dwell on texts that seemed to speak more of the immigrant situation and context instead of others that seemingly did not. They deemed other texts as less significant, which robbed them of getting the full counsel of the scriptures. Finally, there was the issue of life in a fast-paced and high-cost environment like Los Angeles. There were some people who worked two jobs during ungodly hours to make ends meet plus send money to the extended family in the Philippines. For people in this camp, finding time to attend Bible studies was a major issue. Indeed, the reasons may be more than these, or a combination of these and others. Regardless of what they were, the result was the same: they only had limited knowledge of the scriptures and a shallow, deductive procedure of engaging the text, relying mostly on proof-texts, and favorite passages.

I believe that IBS can do much to help if it is properly appropriated in this setting. Assuming that this book on IBS will be in the hands of Filipino-American seminary-trained pastors and trained teaching elders, and assuming that these leaders diligently teach and embody the principles of IBS in their own ministries, I believe that IBS can possibly help increase the spiritual and community vitality of these congregations.

The inductive approach as delineated in IBS will be an empowering and liberating hermeneutical tool and mindset for these churches. First, IBS’s evidential approach and philosophy of radical openness allows for the text to speak on its own terms.¹⁷ Its encouragement of open discussion makes it

more possible that interpretation does not remain mainly in the hands of dogmatic authority figures. In my experience, a lack of candid and open discussion seemed to be the norm in the Filipino American churches. Through IBS, more Filipino Americans would be able to have a voice in interpreting scriptures and this could open up the community to deeper and more diverse and useful meanings. Second, IBS's method of critical realist hermeneutics, which encourages a careful approach of knowing scripture, discourages shallow interpretation coming from proof-texting and reduces belief in interpretation fallacies.¹⁸

Learning this approach would equip people to examine critically interpretations they hear on TV and read in books from experts. Third, IBS's principle of critical realism acknowledges the objective reality of the text.¹⁹ This serves as a constructive critique for those who read the scriptures while giving more weight to their subjective presuppositions and more dogmatic views as a community. The IBS method will hopefully allow them to be aware of their presuppositions and enable the text to speak more authentically as an "other" instead of a text that they merely manipulate to hear their favorite passages. Finally, IBS is also flexible with regards to what readers can do. It can be adapted to various abilities and interest levels.²⁰ Therefore, I can see IBS done in family Bible studies so that the family (an important unit for Filipino Americans) can do this spiritual task together.²¹ Also, since it can be simplified and adapted for those pressed for time, it will lower the barriers of participation for individuals who are heavily committed with other responsibilities.

Assuming it is implemented properly, IBS would definitely be a good fit for the Filipino American churches in Los Angeles. It would be of much support in helping congregations grow deeper spiritually through the Bible. The basis of this assertion comes from being able to witness one of the congregations I worked with grow spiritually when leaders were specifically trained with Bible interpretation skills through the curriculum I mentioned earlier that resembled the inductive approach.

For IBS to work in this context, a big key would be to give the local Filipino-American pastor the right training and support. Since the book's intended audience is seminary trained or scholarly individuals, church members need not read the book unless they choose to do so. The pastor would need to embody and model the IBS approach. The pastor could do this by demonstrating the method in Bible studies and showing it explicitly in sermons. Since Filipino-Americans look up to authority, they would follow the pastor's lead and they would try IBS initially as a response to their relationship with the pastor. Even in instances where some people will insist on finding IBS too difficult or intimidating, the pastor's role would be crucial in providing the support that would be needed. In a way, this approach of

using pastoral authority and relationship is very appropriate. The pastor would need to re-assert spiritual authority in the midst of the influential presence of other spiritual authorities such as TV evangelists and on-line preachers. The pastor, together with the leadership of the church, could then determine the way IBS could be delivered – whether it be through family home bible studies, seminars, or individually.

For the specific church where I taught the Bible curriculum of Crossing Cultures International, I discovered that church leaders and members were willing to stay for three hours after church service every Sunday for a couple of years to learn more about the Bible and grow spiritually together as a community. They even brought their teenagers with them and made the occasion of learning Biblical hermeneutics a family afternoon affair complete with Filipino food. We encouraged everyone to have a voice in the discussions, regardless of their skills and knowledge. It was good to see individuals gain exegetical skills and have their own individual voice in first-hand study of the text, while at the same time, working under the guidance of the church community. In the end, some gained more technical skills than others, but that was expected as people were from different education levels, ages and backgrounds. The result overall during the two years was richer community and spiritual interaction and greater insights into the text.

In conclusion, the Filipino Americans I encountered in Los Angeles sincerely desired to grow in their faith through the Bible. I believe that properly implementing and contextualizing IBS would involve leveraging the following elements in the Filipino American Diaspora post-colonial context: the authority of the pastor (in a way as an embodiment of a less dogmatic and more benevolent figure, like Christ), the respect of the congregation to authority (as a reflection of the Filipino Americans' respect for the transcendent God), and the cohesiveness of the church (which in a way is a reflection of the activity of the Holy Spirit) as an immigrant community in a foreign land. I believe that IBS would be able to facilitate that growth task.

Endnotes

¹ Gonzalez also used the term “Diaspora” in reference to Filipino immigrants (Joaquin Jay Gonzalez III, *Filipino American Faith in Action: Immigration, Religion, and Civic Engagement* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 20). Also see Barbara M. Posadas, *The Filipino Americans* (Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2009), 125.

² Statistics derived from the 2010 U.S. Census (United States Census Bureau. *2010 Census Briefs: The Asian Population 2010*, Washington: Government Printing Office, March 2012).

³ The year was 1587 to be exact. Spanish ships of the galleon trade were partly manned by undisclosed numbers of Filipino natives who participated in voyages of discovery along the Pacific coast. The ships travelled back and forth between Acapulco and Manila between 1565 and 1815, which resulted in Filipino

settlers in what is now known as California and Mexico. In the year 1883, a Filipino settlement (called “Manila Village”) was reported in Louisiana. These Filipino settlers were fishermen who brought their shrimp-drying techniques to the New Orleans area (Posadas, *Filipino Americans*, 13-14).

⁴ In 1906, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association started recruiting Filipino agricultural workers. The number of Filipino workers hired increased dramatically as the Association relied less on the Japanese, which was the population group who did most of the work before the 1900’s. By 1932, seventy percent (69.9) of all sugar plantation employees were Filipinos. A number of those laborers eventually went to the mainland where they served as a good source of labor for Pacific coast and Alaskan employers in the arena of agriculture, salmon canning, and other service industries. Of course, some workers came directly from the Philippines as well. The mobility in immigration enjoyed by Filipinos was initially a result of the country’s status as an American colony, which gave Filipinos a distinct advantage over the Chinese and Japanese nationals. In addition to workers, Filipino students also came from more elite Filipino families in the early 1900’s to get their education in the U.S. as part of the American colonial administration policy. Similar to current times, during the 1920’s and the 1930’s most Filipinos lived in the West Coast. U.S. military (all branches) also actively recruited Filipinos to serve as messmen and musicians. They were considered as “good servants” and eventually displaced African-American messmen (Posadas, *Filipino Americans*, 15-42).

⁵ The missionaries were sent as part of the mandate of U.S. President William McKinley’s benevolent assimilation policy to carry out the “civilization and Christianization of those savage Filipinos.” The United States annexed (actually “purchased”) the Philippines from Spain in 1898 and fought a war with Philippine revolutionaries and freedom fighters (the Philippine American War), which cost the lives of more than 600,000 Filipinos. Formal fighting ended on July 4, 1902 but actual fighting stopped in 1913 (Gonzalez III, *Faith in Action*, 20-23).

⁶ For a more detailed write-up of Filipino-American Christianity in the early 1900’s, see Steffi San Buenaventura, “Filipino Religion at Home and Abroad: Historical Roots and Immigrant Transformations,” in *Religions in Asian America: Building Faith Communities* (ed. Pyong Gap Min and Jung Ha Kim; Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2002), 143-183. In addition to Roman Catholicism and the various Protestant denominations, a Filipino Christian Independent Church also emerged in 1902 as a breakaway group from the Roman Catholic Church. The *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* was popularly referred to as the Aglipayan religion (named after the head of the denomination Gregorio Aglipay) and was considered a heretical group by the Roman Catholic Church. By 1948, the Church received its validity from the consecration of its Orders by the Episcopal Church and by 1961 a full communion was established between these denominations.

⁷ In addition to churches, Filipino evangelists were initially recruited to minister to the Filipino populations. American Protestants who were formerly missionaries in the Philippines or had connections with the colonial government also conducted Filipino evangelization in the early days in the mainland. One reason that these churches and other Filipino fellowships emerged was that the Filipinos experienced feelings of discomfort and lack of acceptance when they worshipped in the more predominantly Anglo American churches (San Buenaventura, “Filipino Religion,” in *Religions in Asian* (ed. Min and Kim), 156-169).

⁸ See Posadas, *Filipino Americans*, 99-124, for more elaboration on Filipino American contemporary issues.

⁹ San Buenaventura explained that a dual process of conversion took place during the “Christianization” of the Philippines. The Filipinos embraced the Christian faith but also took an active role in reinterpreting this new spirituality and reformulating and integrating it in their own cultural and religious context (San Buenaventura, “Filipino Religion,” in *Religions in Asian* (ed. Min and Kim), 148-150).

¹⁰ This feeling reminded me of Perez Firmat’s comment when he said that to be a Cuban-American in the United States is to live ‘on the hyphen’ meaning, in two worlds at once and as ‘other’ in both (Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 16).

¹¹ A popular figure is Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston.

¹² This move created other issues as the seminary they chose to attend promoted a specific theological agenda and doctrine that has some distinctive differences from the church tradition of their home church.

¹³ The specific curriculum is called Bible Training Centre for Pastors and Church Leaders (BTCP). It is actually a ten-course curriculum that deals not just with Bible Interpretation but also Bible Surveys, Systematic Theology and other ministry courses. The method is not purely inductive or evidential since it uses deductive elements through the adherence to a specific theology or doctrine that served as a lens to view the Bible. For more information, see: www.bibletraining.com. For more information on Crossing Cultures International, see www.cccionline.org.

¹⁴ Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede developed the “Power Distance Index” which is a way to gauge the extent in which less powerful members of society accept inequalities of power that could be an indicator of how they accept authority. In his Index, which was derived from a study of IBM employees in more than fifty (50) countries, the Philippines ranked near the top of this cultural dimension scale with an Index of 94 compared with the United States with an Index of 40. This meant that authority figures are more accepted and expected by Filipinos as compared to Americans (Geert Hofstede, *Cultural Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* (2d ed.; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: 2001), 79-143). In terms of the impact of colonialism, Eva-Lotta Hedman and John Sidel cite the practice and characteristic of “Bossism” as a colonial legacy. “Bossism” refers to the presence of “bosses” in Philippine political spheres of influence who aspire and make themselves perpetually entrenched through systemic and other various methods that essentially create a corresponding attitude of perpetual dependence by its citizens. I bring this up here to relate this to a possible “dependence mindset” this system may have created among Filipinos for authority figures. Hedman and Sidel traced the origins of Bossism to systemic political infrastructures established by the American colonizers (Eva-Lotta E. Hedman and John T. Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century: Colonial Legacies, post-colonial trajectories* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6-8, 88-117).

¹⁵ Colonial Mentality is also known as “Internalized Oppression.” Dr. E.J.R. David did an extensive study of this psychological / cultural phenomenon in cooperation with various Filipino-American communities. It is a condition arising

from the product of colonization which instills in Filipinos a mindset that anything American (most especially “white” America) is superior and better than anything distinctively Filipino. That means Americans have superior skin color, media, products, education, people, etc. Anything Filipino is inferior and substandard. The result is that Filipino and Filipino Americans, who have this condition in varying degrees, suffer from lack of confidence, inferiority, self-hate and extreme dislike of other Filipinos and anything related to the Philippines. Dr. David traced the origins of this mentality during the Spanish colonial times. Although the Philippines is no longer a colony of either Spain or the United States, the presence of the global mass media in the Philippines (that promotes American shows and movies), the continued perception of English as the language of the educated which started during the American colonial years, and the continued immigration of Filipinos (the yearly immigration rate of Filipinos is second only to Mexicans) to the United States are some factors that continue to perpetuate a neo-colonial mindset. Dr. David believes that the biggest damage this causes to the Filipino / Filipino American psyche is the loss of Filipino self-identity. As a result, he also hypothesizes that Colonial Mentality may bear some responsibility for the high depression and suicide rates among young Filipino Americans. In my opinion, if you add an ongoing crisis of identity with feelings of dislocation and disorientation arising from being an immigrant or belonging to a family of immigrants in a foreign land, high rates of depression and other mental health issues are understandable (E.J.R. David, *Filipino - / American Postcolonial Psychology: Oppression, Colonial Mentality, and Decolonization* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2011).

¹⁶ See Eleazar S. Fernandez, “Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans’ Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), 249-250. Not only did Fernandez mention colonial mentality, but he described it as an attitude that made America a ‘huge god’ from Filipinos who want to be ‘white.’

¹⁷ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive*, 17-19.

¹⁸ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive*, 32-34.

¹⁹ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive*, 32-34.

²⁰ Bauer and Traina, *Inductive*, 6-8.

²¹ Posadas speaks of the value of the family in the Filipino kinship system. See Posadas, *Filipino Americans*, 45-48.

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