
The Legacy of Charles Henry Brent

Mark D. Norbeck

In Lausanne, Switzerland, in a section of the Bois de Vaux cemetery reserved exclusively for distinguished foreigners, there is a 7' x 3' granite grave marker with an eloquent Celtic cross carved into its top. Etched into the stone are the following words:

Charles Henry Brent, 1862–1929

A soldier of Christ

A servant of Humanity

An Apostle of Christian Unity

Bishop of the Philippine Islands, 1901–1918

Bishop of Western New York, 1918–1929

Chief of Chaplains American Expeditionary Force, 1917–1918

President First World Conference on Faith and Order, 1927

The epitaph alone leads one to conclude that under this stone lies the earthly remains of a unique, energetic, multitalented leader of the modern church.

But exactly who was Charles Henry Brent? For many outside the circle of ecumenical and missionary scholars, Brent remains an obscure figure. It is hoped that this survey of Brent's life and legacy will help secure the bishop's place as one of the great Christian statesmen, ecumenists, and missionaries of the early twentieth century.

The Making of a Missionary

Charles Henry Brent was born on April 9, 1862, the third of ten children of the Reverend Henry Brent and Sophia Francis Brent. Brent grew up in the small town of Newcastle, Ontario, where his father was the local Anglican rector. After attending the town's public schools and graduating from Trinity College school in Port Hope, Ontario, Brent enrolled in Trinity College, University of Toronto, and majored in the classics. Graduating in 1884, he moved back to Port Hope and taught school for two years while studying privately for the priesthood. In 1886 Brent was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church of Canada. However, because there were no openings in his diocese, he left Canada and sought employment in the United States. One year later, he was ordained to the priesthood and found work in Buffalo, New York.

Brent's residence in Buffalo was brief, and in 1889 he moved to Boston, where he lived in an Episcopal monastic order, the Society of St. John the Evangelist. The Cowley Fathers, as the society was popularly known, put Brent in charge of St. Augustine's, a small chapel erected to minister to the African-Americans living in Boston's dilapidated West End.¹

Brent managed the assignment well, probably because of the constant support and spiritual discipline he gained while living in the Cowley community. Historian Michael C. Reilly has suggested that although Brent never took any vows, his three years with the Cowley Fathers had a profound impact.² Late in life Brent confirmed that analysis, remarking that his training with the Cowley Fathers was "so sound and inspiring that I could covet it for every young priest." He elaborated: "Daily medita-

tion was a severe and joyous task. The Practice of the Presence . . . the love of Jesus Christ, the application to modern life of principles by which He lived, and the overwhelming importance of the unseen, were instilled into my being in a manner and to a degree from which there is, thirty-five years later, no escape."³

In his Boston assignment Brent's Cowley spirituality had a practical outlet; indeed, true faith is never fully cloistered. As he applied pragmatic Christianity in Boston's slums, he became receptive to the social gospel, then in vogue with urban churches throughout the United States.

Brent's spiritual growth and social awareness evolved further after a conflict within the Cowley order ended his monastic career in 1891. Soon thereafter, Brent and another Cowley refugee, Henry Martyn Torbert, volunteered to work at St. Stephen's, the Boston City Episcopal mission located in an Irish-Catholic and Jewish ghetto. Together, they built one of the more impressive institutional mission churches in Boston's South End. St. Stephen's physical plant was expanded to include a parish house, a settlement house, a rescue mission, a lodging house, and a wood and coal yard that allowed men to earn money for their meals and housing for the night. All the various ministries of St. Stephen's, according to its own declaration, were established "to minister to the physical, mental and spiritual needs of people . . . in the loving spirit of Christian neighborliness."⁴

While never an original theologian, Brent read widely and was profoundly influenced by the Anglican Socialists, especially J. F. Denison Maurice. In Boston he became friends with American Christian Socialists W. P. D. Bliss and Vida Schudder. He was an active member of the Christian Social Union, an organization dedicated to gathering economic and social data for experts in the fields of economics and social work. Brent also associated

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with notables in the settlement movement such as Robert Woods. Yet, his theology of social reform rested on biblical foundations and focused on Christ's summary of the law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." In his first book, *With God in the World* (1900), Brent wrote: "The Master gave a new commandment of love, a commandment new not in essence but rather in intensity and comprehension. . . . If the first part of the commandment of love calls us to a study of theology, the second demands a study of sociology—an old science under a new name."⁵ Brent added, "God never considers men apart from, but always as part of, a great social order—a social order that is not a concourse of independent units, but a body instinct with life, a society which is not an organization but an organism." Thus, for Brent, loving one's neighbor had broad implications that extended beyond one's immediate friendships and were to be applied to the whole of humanity.

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Christ's great commandment also had a profound impact on Brent's thoughts about missions. In 1898 he wrote, "It is so thoroughly unnatural for a Christian not to hope and pray and work for the widest conceivable extension of the Church's boundaries that it is hard to understand how a man can be a sincere Christian and not see this at once." Indeed, Brent concluded that through baptism all Christians are called to be missionaries.⁶

The year 1901 was a watershed. There were both personal losses and new opportunities. Brent's mother died, and he became financially responsible for a younger sister. Furthermore, his friend and colleague, Torbert, also passed away, leaving him in charge of St. Stephen's. At the same time, W. S. Rainsford, rector of the prestigious and progressive St. George's Episcopal Church in New York City, offered Brent a position on his staff. The University of the South elected him to their faculty, while General Theological Seminary, New York, was seriously considering him for the position of dean.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Brent was elected missionary bishop of the Philippines. He was both elated and terrified. Except for work in Liberia, China, and Japan, the Episcopal Church's missionary record was dismal at best. Indeed, Episcopalians as a whole were generally apathetic about foreign missions. However, after confiding with close friends and after many days of prayer, Brent accepted the post. He was consecrated missionary bishop of the Philippines at Emmanuel Church, Boston, on December 19, 1901.⁷

The Work in the Philippines

It took eight months for Brent to arrive in the Philippines after his consecration. The long interim was due to several months touring the United States and raising funds, developing tentative plans for the mission, and making important contacts with government officials. This time proved well spent. It allowed Brent the opportunity to meet President Theodore Roosevelt, his cabinet, and William Howard Taft, the newly appointed governor of the islands. Brent developed lifelong friendships with Roosevelt, Taft, and other prominent officials that eventually proved beneficial to all. Whenever Brent was outraged by some government policy or his mission faced difficulties with minor colonial officials, he often found immediate recourse through direct access to the highest authorities. In turn, when the colonial governor or president needed an official or unofficial diplomat, Brent often filled that role.

Brent's holdover in the United States also allowed him time to consider a more personal matter. Brent was in love with a young woman identified in his diaries only as Mary. Despite their professed love for each other they agreed that it would be best not to marry. However, love letters continued between the two, and during a stopover in Rome, Brent wrote Mary asking her to be his wife. Though she declined, she continued to send amorous notes to the bishop. When several more marriage proposals were rebuffed Brent complained, "I have everything [Mary's love], yet nothing [no hope of marriage]!" Finally, the relationship ended on August 29, 1904, when Mary wrote, "another hand has come into my life."⁸ Brent responded by immersing himself in his work and devoting himself to a life of celibacy. Thus the bishop never married; the resulting loneliness frequently left him depressed in later life.

When Brent arrived in the Philippines on August 25, 1902, he found much missionary work ahead. The Episcopal Church had been established in the islands in 1898 by the efforts of several military chaplains and lay members of the Brotherhood of St.

Andrew. However, much of their enterprise disintegrated because the chaplains fell ill or were transferred elsewhere. The Episcopal Board of Missions sent out two priests in 1900 to fill the void. But it was too late. All that was left of the Episcopal mission in 1902 was a small American congregation worshipping in a borrowed schoolhouse.⁹

As he reorganized the missionary diocese, Brent decided that the Americans in the Philippines were his first concern. His goal was to establish a Christian influence on the colonial government. It was very important to Brent that American rule be just and display a sense of disinterested benevolence. Only then could the United States justify its presence in the Philippines.

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Only then could it properly fulfill its mission to build a democratic and Christian republic in the Far East.

To this end, Brent erected an impressive cathedral in Manila that could seat over one thousand people. To help young Americans combat the "vices of the Orient," the Columbia Club, a YMCA-like organization, was founded at the cathedral's parish house. Its facilities included a basketball court, tennis courts, bowling alleys, showers, and a swimming pool; all proved to be a great success. At the height of its popularity the club claimed more than 450 members.

In the summer capital of Baguio in the mountains of northern Luzon, two schools were established for American boys and girls so American families would not have to send their children back to the United States for their education. The boys' school was financed solely through Brent's private efforts. In Zamboanga, on the southern island of Mindanao, another small church was founded for American civil servants and military personnel.

Among the predominantly Roman Catholic Filipinos of Manila, Brent drew upon his social gospel experience by establishing a settlement house in the slums of Tondo. The settlement flourished and spawned an orphanage, numerous boys' and girls' clubs, sewing classes, and a profitable secondhand exchange. An impressive hospital and nurses' training school also trace their origins from a small dispensary established in the settlement. These projects of social uplift were intended to address the physical needs of destitute people. As for their spiritual needs, Brent built a small Filipino chapel and staffed it with a Filipino priest. Nevertheless, he was heavily criticized by the Board of Missions because he refused to "build up a constituency by deliberately drawing upon the Roman Church." Brent felt that by acts of sharing, teaching, and healing, the Episcopalians exhibited Christ's divine character and his Gospel was implicitly proclaimed. If this brought Filipinos into the Episcopal fold, so be it. However, if the Filipinos returned to the Church of Rome, that also deserved his benediction. Unlike many evangelicals inside and outside the Episcopal Church, Brent insisted that the Roman communion was an authentic expression of the Christian faith.

A third constituency that the Episcopalians worked with in Manila were the Chinese merchants from Amoy, China. Brent recruited Hobart Studley, a former missionary from the Reformed Church of America who had years of experience in

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Amoy, to work with the Chinese. Studley was so successful that the Methodists and Presbyterians eventually turned their own work over to the Episcopal Church.¹⁰

Besides work in Manila, extensive efforts were made to evangelize pagan head-hunting tribesmen in the mountains of northern Luzon. Three centers of activity were established. In Baguio, Easter School for Igorot boys was organized. Further north, in Bontoc, a mission church was founded and vigorously evangelized the local Igorots. In addition, the Bontoc missionaries wrote the first Igorot grammars, which were quickly published by the colonial government.

Between Baguio and Bontoc there stood perhaps the most impressive work of the Episcopalians. At the town of Sagada, Father John A. Staunton established a church, hospital, sawmill, and extensive industrial training school. Brent put particular interest in vocational training. "To train the head of the average native without training his hand," said Brent, "unfits him rather than fits him for life."¹¹

This same attitude led Brent to establish the Moro Agricultural School for Muslims on the southern island of Sulu. Brent took particular interest in the Moros. He realized that strained feelings created by years of Moro resistance to Spanish and then American rule would take generations to overcome. Therefore instead of proselytizing, the bishop sought ways to provide fellowship between the Westerners and the Moros. He built a hospital, a settlement house, a press, and a school in Mindanao. Brent felt the need for mutual understanding was so important that, when the Board of Missions refused to support his efforts, he made the Moro mission his personal enterprise and raised money from friends at home.

Evaluation of Mission Strategy

A cursory review of the Philippine Mission in 1914 would leave one with the impression that the diocese was a great success. However, there were serious problems that Brent never overcame. First, staffing the mission was incredibly difficult. For example, St. Luke's Hospital in Manila suffered because of the constant turnover of nurses. Often Brent had to recruit army and civil service personnel, many of whom were affiliated with other denominations. "Truly it is a great disappointment," complained head nurse Ellen Hicks, "to pretend to be a missionary of the [Episcopal] Church and have only the satisfaction of working in a general nonsectarian Hospital."¹²

A second problem with the missionary district was due to its geographic breadth and its multiethnic diversity. Brent originally envisioned Manila as the center of the diocese, from which all other ministries would radiate. However, because of the distance between the capital and the mission stations in northern Luzon and in the southern islands of Mindanao, travel was often so expensive and perilous that only the Manila clergy could attend the annual convocations. Vincent Gowen, one-time Philippine missionary and critic of the bishop, stated that "it was easier for Brent to get from Manila to San Francisco than from Manila to Zamboanga." In addition, Gowen noted that even if the indigenous people from the far-flung stations of the mission did get to Manila for official gatherings, their distinct languages and social customs made communication difficult at best.

A third problem within the district was caused by Brent's frequent absences from the Philippines. He was gone so much that his critics referred to him as "the bishop from the Philippines." His absences allowed his staff the freedom to initiate several expensive projects without careful consideration of their

long-term viability.¹³ Thus, several grandiose projects were created that put a severe strain on the mission's finances.

Undoubtedly these were glaring deficiencies over which Brent despaired. But to be fair, most of the long sojourns away from the islands were unavoidable. The bishop was often called to the United States because of death in his family, poor health, triennial General Conventions, and the constant need for fundraising. Furthermore, in 1903 Brent became a leading figure in an international crusade against the opium trade.

The Antiopium Crusade

Soon after his arrival in the Philippines, Brent discovered that opium addiction was the islands' most pressing social problem among the Chinese community and that the malaise was spreading into the rest of the Filipino population. Brent and other religious leaders demanded that the colonial government put an end to this evil. In response, the Philippine Commission agreed to study the matter and formed an Opium Committee to investigate how other countries dealt with the problem; Taft appointed Brent to the committee.

After months of research and traveling, Brent and the Opium Committee made the following recommendations. First, an immediate government monopoly should be placed on the narcotic. Second, over a three-year period, importation of opium would be phased out until it was finally prohibited from the islands altogether, except for legitimate medical use. Third, confirmed addicts would be licensed and given free medical attention. Finally, an antidrug campaign would be launched in the islands' schools.

The Opium Committee's report had a widespread impact. Within four years the United States and the Philippines officially prohibited opium. The report was translated and circulated throughout China, which bolstered its own government's growing antiopium movement. In England the report reopened the debate on the morality of the trade and eventually forced Parliament to refrain from using opium exports to finance its Indian empire.

Brent continued as a key figure in the international antiopium crusade for the next quarter of a century. Indeed, it was at Brent's suggestion that the United States organized the first Interna-

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tional Opium Conference, in Shanghai, China, in 1909. Brent served as an official representative of the United States and was reappointed to The Hague Conference in 1911. He presided at both conferences. After World War I he also participated in two more such conferences. Historian Arnold H. Taylor has written that Brent's participation in the opium conferences was "fortunate for the antiopium movement as a whole." Brent was a man of great moral conviction, which was coupled with "an ability to analyze issues realistically"; thus, he gave the international movement "the character of a moral crusade."¹⁴ Brent's participation in the antiopium crusade made him an international figure and statesman.

Faith and Order

Brent's international celebrity grew in religious circles after he attended the 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, Scotland. From the beginning of his episcopate, Brent was deeply interested in ecumenism. He sincerely believed that the disunion and competition between the various denominations left non-Christians bewildered. Even so, Brent had serious misgivings about the Edinburgh Conference. He noted the absence of Roman Catholic and Orthodox participation. In addition, he felt the conference's agenda evaded fundamental theological and polity issues that divided Christendom. "It is worse than folly," he wrote, "to pretend that such things matter little or do not matter at all." He felt that unless these issues were frankly addressed, true unity would always remain illusory.¹⁵

Despite his initial doubts, Brent left Edinburgh a renewed ecumenist, and he committed himself to mending the tattered seams of the universal church. In October 1910 Brent thus went before the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, asking that it take the lead in planning the first world conference on Faith and Order. Brent's proposal was accepted, and for the next ten years an Episcopal commission worked faithfully to keep his dream alive, in spite of the ravages of World War I.

After seventeen years of preparation, finally, on August 3, 1927, a total of 406 delegates, representing 108 denominations, met in Lausanne, Switzerland, for the First World Conference on Faith and Order. Brent was the unanimous choice for president. In his opening remarks, he reminded the delegates of the fact that total agreement was not the aim of the conference, nor was a federation sought. Instead, Brent insightfully warned, true unity would be a long, agonizing process. Before Christendom's harmony could be restored, the various communions would first

have to learn to fellowship with one another, to listen sympathetically, and to open themselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Faith and Order, Brent claimed, was an important first step in a long pilgrimage to restore the true catholic church.¹⁶

Brent's leadership was crucial for the success of the first Faith and Order conference. His sense of humor, his diplomatic skill, and his patience kept the conference from breaking up on several occasions. Arguably, this was Brent's finest hour, but it was bittersweet. To many of his friends, it was obvious that he was in poor health.

For more than a decade, he had been suffering from recurring heart attacks that left him temporarily incapacitated. Although dismayed by these spells, Brent refused to cut back on his responsibilities. For example, on October 20, 1917, he resigned his missionary post in the Philippines, only to begin more stressful duties in Europe as Senior Headquarter's Chaplain of the American Expeditionary Forces. After the war, Brent assumed the post of bishop of Western New York, where his schedule was so busy that he became notorious for speeding his car throughout the diocese, going from one appointment to the next. Moreover, Brent's last years were filled with nine more trips to Europe. In 1921 he delivered the Duff Lectures at Edinburgh. He continued to work toward the eradication of the opium trade through the League of Nations and international conferences. And he helped plan and attended Faith and Order and also participated in other ecumenical gatherings. His heart finally could not take the strain, and on March 27, 1929, he died in Lausanne, Switzerland. Ironically, he was en route to the Mediterranean for a much-needed vacation.¹⁷

By the time Brent died, he had become perhaps the best-known Episcopal clergyman since Phillips Brooks, and his friends were many of the secular and clerical leaders from around the

world. As stated above, Brent was never an original theologian, nor was he an innovative mission strategist. Nevertheless, he left an indelible mark on the modern church. Although he lived to see only one Faith and Order conference, his vision continued under the able leadership of Archbishop William Temple, Bishop Yngve T. Brilioth of Sweden, and a Continuation Committee for another nineteen years until 1948, when Faith and Order relinquished its independence and became the Commission on Faith and Order in the newly founded World Council of Churches. In this new venue, the universal church, which "partly is and wholly hopes to be," continues its work for understanding and wholeness.¹⁸

Brent's legacy also remains alive in current international

diplomacy and law enforcement. Today the international community still struggles to free its citizens from the curse of illicit drug use and trade. While defending his participation in the antiopium crusade, Brent asked rhetorically: "Can any Christian afford to abstain not only from that which, directly or indirectly, encourages drug abuse, but also from a planned and intelligent attack upon it?"¹⁹ On a deeper level, Brent asked Christians, and indeed all citizens of the world: Are we going to tolerate this evil in our midst? If not, how are we going to eradicate it? This remains a fundamental question for the local, national, and international community to resolve. Brent's example challenges us to work for viable and humane solutions.

Notes

1. Alexander D. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent: Crusader for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), pp. 28–29.
2. Michael C. Reilly, "Charles Henry Brent: Philippine Missionary and Ecumenist," *Philippine Studies* 24 (1976): 323–24.
3. S. Whitney Hale, "Bishop Brent," *Church Militant*, April 1959, p. 2.
4. Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, eds., *Handbook of Settlements* (New York: Arno Press; reprint ed., New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1911), pp. 134–35.
5. Charles H. Brent, *With God in the World* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1900), p. 62.
6. Charles H. Brent, "Scrapbook," Brent Papers, Library of Congress (LOC), Box 42.
7. Lawrence to Brent, July 15 and July 20, 1901, Brent Papers, LOC, Box 5.
8. Diaries, 1901–1904, Brent Papers, LOC, Box 1. Brent edited any mention of Mary out of his diaries with ink and a blue crayon, and none of their correspondence survives. Fortunately for the historian, the original writing has bled through over the years and much of it can be read with the aid of a magnifying glass. It is appropriate to disclose the bishop's relationship with Mary at this time because of a recent biography by Douglass Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia: 1881–1900, Ralph Adams Cram: Life and Architecture*, vol. 1 (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1995). Although a biography of Cram, Shand-Tucci also touches upon the relationship of Brent with his Cowley superior Arthur Crawshaw Hall; he claims that Brent had a homosexual disposition that manifested itself in a life-long "marriage of the soul" with Hall (see pages 184–199). Although Shand-Tucci provides circumstantial evidence for such a claim, the only hard evidence of Brent's sexual orientation, noted above, suggests heterosexual inclinations. Furthermore, all surviving correspondence between Brent and Hall found in Brent's papers housed at the Library of Congress and the Archives of the Episcopal Church, in
9. Mark D. Norbeck, "False Start: The First Three Years of Episcopal Missionary Endeavor in the Philippine Islands, 1898–1901," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 62 (June 1993): 215–36.
10. Mark D. Norbeck, "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the City of Manila, Philippine Islands, from 1898 to 1918: An Institutional History" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Texas at El Paso, 1992).
11. William H. Scott, "'An Engineer's Dream'—John Staunton and the Mission of St. Mary the Virgin, Sagada," in *Studies in Philippine Church History*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969).
12. Hicks to Wood, January 28, 1908, and April 2, 1916, Philippine Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Church (AEC), RG76–30.
13. Vincent Gowen, "Philippine Blue-Print," pp. 7–12, Philippine Papers, AEC, RG76–93.
14. Arnold H. Taylor, *American Diplomacy and the Narcotics Traffic, 1900–1939: A Study in International Humanitarian Reform* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 163–64, 183, 187–88, 192.
15. Eugene C. Bianchi, "The Ecumenical Thought of Bishop Charles Henry Brent," *Church History* 33 (December 1964): 449.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 451–53.
17. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent*, pp. 195–98.
18. Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517–1948* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), pp. 427–41.
19. Charles H. Brent, "Annual Convocation Address," *Journal of the Ninth Annual Convocation of the Missionary District of the Philippine Islands*, Philippine Papers, AEC, August 1, 1912, p. 21.

Selected Bibliography

Works by Charles H. Brent

Brent published over twenty books during his lifetime, and a few more were published posthumously. Most are devotional in nature or collected works of sermons. Listed below are some of the more substantial works.

- 1900 *With God in the World: A Series of Papers*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1908 *Leadership: The William Belden Noble Lectures*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1908 *The Mind of Christ Jesus in the Church of the Living God*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1915 *Adventure for God*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1915 *The Revelation of Discovery*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1918 *The Mount of Vision: Being a Study of Life in Terms of the Whole*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1930 *The Commonwealth: Its Foundations and Pillars*. New York: D. Appleton.

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Kenton J. Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898–1916: An Inquiry into the American Colonial Mentality* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986) includes important material on Brent. Two essential articles are Eugene C. Bianchi, "The Ecumenical Thought of Bishop Charles Brent," *Church History* 33 (December 1964): 448–61; and Michael C. Reilly, "Charles Henry Brent: Philippine Missionary and Ecumenist," *Philippine Studies* 24 (1976): 303–25. Also see Mark D. Norbeck, "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the City of Manila, Philippine Islands, from 1898 to 1918: An Institutional History" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Texas at El Paso, 1992); Emma J. Portuondo, "The Impact of Bishop Charles Henry Brent upon American Colonial and Foreign Policy, 1901–1917" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic Univ. of America, 1969); and Leon G. Rosenthal, "Christian Statesmanship in the First Missionary-Ecumenical Generation" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1989). A dated, but still the best, biography of Brent is Alexander C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent: Crusader for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948).



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