

ISLAM IN THE PHILIPPINES

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"We are no longer free."

"We are oppressed and exploited."

"I do not consider myself a Filipino."

"We are losing our cultural heritage and our identity."

"Water in a saucer full to the brim in the hands of someone unpredictable and capricious is in constant danger of spilling over and of being absorbed by other elements or of just evaporating into nothingness. This is how we feel about the present system ."

These comments were made recently by Muslims living in the Philippines. The following reflections are a very personal view about what has been happening in these islands and of how this situation has come to be. Apart from my own personal thoughts, I sought out the views of Muslims living in Mindanao, mainly of the Maranao group but there were some Tausug and Sama included as well.

It became increasingly clear to me as I enquired about their feelings that it is more accurate to speak of Muslims who live in the Philippines rather than of Filipino Muslims. Many of them do not consider themselves to be part of the body politic of the Republic. The problems and pains of the Muslim minority are not confined to them alone. There are many minority groups in the Philippines. In practically all of the larger islands we find many dozens of different tribal groups, each with its own language and culture. There are the T'boli of Mindanao, the Bontoc of Luzon, the Negritos of the Visayas and so on. All of these peoples have their own world view and their individual way of responding to that world view. These differing worlds have been called "lowland," i.e. the world views of the majority Tagalog and Visayan speaking population and "upland" the world views of the tribal groups. These views are usually radically different and are one of the main sources of tension in the Philippines. The problem becomes more than mere tension when one side tries to impose its will on the other and the problem becomes acute when the dominant side is equipped to erase the other.

The Maranaos and the Tausug have become culturally stronger because of their sense of religious identity. Islam is their religion and with help and inspiration from some other Islamic countries they have struggled to preserve their religious and cultural and political identity. The other tribal groups had no such aids and for better or for worse they are being absorbed into the majority "Christian-lowland" population. But it is clear from the comments of

the Muslims that they too are feeling very keenly the pain of being an "oppressed minority."

Presently the overall situation is one of tension and conflict and the causes of this are many and complex. One of the root causes is the migration of the Tagalog and Visayan speaking peoples south to the island of Mindanao. This migration began in Spanish times and with their encouragement and continued on during the American period. After World War II what had only been a trickle of people became a flood and they all came to Mindanao to make it their "land of promise." They came, lived, worked, and often died trying to tame this land. But this land of promise was already lived in and "owned" by the Muslims. They say their land is being taken, their culture eroded by Christians, their political system being used to control them and finally a "foreign Christian army" camped in their land. Who are these Muslims and how has this situation come to be?

The Philippines has a population of about 50 Million people, 2.5 million of whom are Muslim. The remaining 47.5 million, with the exception of some tribal groups are Christian. The Muslims are concentrated in the south and west of the island of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago and the island of Palawan. (See the shaded areas on the map.) 95% of the Muslims belong to 4 major ethnic groups -the Maguindanao, the Maranao, the Tausug and the Sama.

The *Maguindanao* is the largest group and they are found in the Cotabato region of Mindanao and their name means "people of the flood plain." They live mostly as agriculturalists.

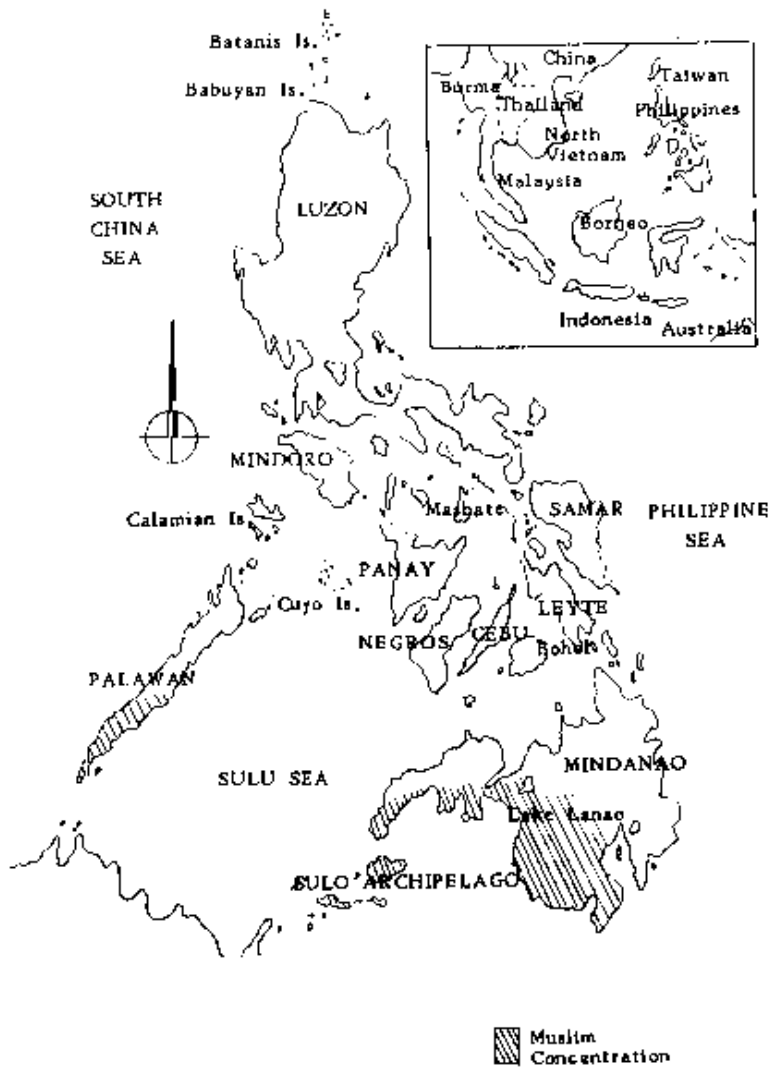
The *Maranao* are found in the two provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur. They are also primarily agriculturalist but are also well known makers of fine brass, mats, and wood carvings. Their name means "people of the Lake" because they live on the shores of Lake Lanao, the second largest lake in the Philippines.

The third largest group are the *Tausug* the people of Sulu. Some are farmers but mostly they take their living from the sea. They are famed as seafarers and have sailed all over South East Asia and until now are known as smugglers.

The *Sama* also live in the Sulu Archipelago and are a seafaring people. There are smaller groups like the *Badjao* who live in small sea houses and who rarely come ashore, and the *Yakan* who live on Basilan Island off the tip of the Zamboanga Peninsula.

These people make up the 2.5 million Muslims who live on the island of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the remaining 7.5 million people of Mindanao are all Christian migrants and the children of migrants coming from Luzon and the Visayas in the very recent past. A glance at the map shows the concentration of the Muslims in the southern end of the Philippines. The majority of Asian Muslims live in Indonesia, Sabah, and Malaysia and it is easy to see why Muslims in the Philippines look to their neighboring Muslim countries for guidance and inspiration and not to the north and to Manila. The artificial line drawn by Spain dividing the Philippines from the rest of South

The Philippines in Southeast Asia



East Asia exists only on the map and not in the consciousness of the Muslims who find themselves in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

Spain arrived in the Philippines in 1565 and Islam had already been long at work shaping the people of the Archipelago and giving some of the groups a sense of nationhood. Most of the non-Muslim groups were small, fragmented, and easily conquered by Spain. Islam enabled the Muslim groups to organize and to oppose the imposition of Spanish rule. The Spanish armies which now included Christian Filipinos, did succeed in driving Islam out of the northern island of Luzon and from the Visayas but they were never able to eradicate Islam from Mindanao and Sulu. Spain of course had just concluded her fight with Islam at home and brought with her all her hatreds and prejudices and then initiated a series of "moro wars." The Muslims even at this time were aided in their struggle against Spain by Muslims from Java and the Celebes, shades of things to come. Neither were the "moro wars" confined to defending Mindanao from invasion; often the Muslims went on the offensive and attacked towns and villages throughout the islands. They plundered, burned, kidnapped, killed, and enslaved these peoples. So much of the present distrust of the Muslims by the Christian Filipinos springs from those days and remains vivid to the present time.

Spain was gradually getting the upper hand in their war when in 1893 she lost the Spanish American War and America took control of the Philippines. The Muslims were just as displeased with their new masters and a series of wars erupted once again. The American armies, sometimes with great brutality, put down the Muslim struggle and brought the whole Philippines under their control. Through development programs, they tried to attract the Muslim population to adopt the "lowland" cultural values and systems. They did this with schools, by building bridges, roads, and hospitals. Muslim parents were pressured into sending their children to school. They were reluctant to do so—with good reason—believing that the real purpose of many of these programs was to draw them away from their old way of life and religion, and so control them more easily.

After World War II came Independence but the Muslims again saw little difference between the Spanish, the Americans, and now the government of the Republic. They never accepted their inclusion into the Republic. From that time on they have at intervals rebelled against the national government. The migrations that we mentioned above now became a flood of people and they soon became a minority in a land they considered to be their own. One small example will be sufficient to illustrate the point. In the Kapatagan valley of Lanao in 1918 there were two dozen Christian settlers. In 1941 there were 8,000, by 1960 more than 93,000, and in 1970 more than 200,000 migrants. This migration has completely swamped the 7,000 or so Maranaos who are living there. Land is a sacred thing to the Muslims in a way that perhaps we cannot fully comprehend. One Muslim said recently "I feel that there has been and still is a deliberate effort on the part of the government to dispossess us of our lands. They have established settlements in Mindanao for the dissidents

of Luzon. The settlers were transported here under government supervision. Lands which belonged to us from time immemorial were given to these outsiders. We were asked to secure titles which never meant anything to us before... Why should ownership of the land be based on a piece of paper secured by some clever person who may or may not have set foot on it while I have been occupying and tilling it all my life?" He continued, "Our lands are being taken for public utilities. The sacred remains of our ancestors are being violated by huge machines digging our lands. Government banks grant loans to farmers with titles as security. If the loan is defaulted, the lands are confiscated. One way or another our lands are being taken over by outsiders or by a few of our own people who are more clever and powerful than the rightful owners. Now strangers are lording it over us." Thus spoke a Muslim in May 1983.

At the present time the struggle for Muslim independence/autonomy is being fought by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MNLF say that they are fighting against the Republic in order to preserve and protect their Islamic identity and the culture of the Muslims of the Philippines and to secure some form of genuine self-government in relation to the Republic. Most of the Muslims here have never been involved in the armed struggle but there is no doubt where their loyalties lie—with the rebels. They feel, as we shall see, that their cause is just and that they have the sympathy and interest of the Islamic world.

The Muslims living in the Philippines feel that they are a distinct group and they have a sense of their own nationhood. Few of them consider themselves to be Filipino citizens in the full sense of the word, and that includes those who have bought into the system and actually work for the government. When Spain came to the Philippines she found many peoples and tribal groups. There did not exist a single nation as some would have us believe. When the Commonwealth government took over, it also found many peoples and not yet one nation. The situation is not unlike that of Italy after unification. In the Philippines this fact of many peoples was especially true of the Muslim groups and they have never accepted their inclusion into this "Christian" state. They feel that the values and structures of the "Christian" government are being forced on them, sometimes even by their own leaders who have opted for the side of the national Government. At a recent Muslim-Christian dialogue in Marawi City, one elderly Muslim eloquently spoke of how he could not in conscience allow himself to be ruled by an alien Christian government from Manila. He said that if he did, he could no longer be said to be a true Muslim. He could not accept the values that were presented to him as the only way in which he should live as a Filipino. This is possibly the reason why many Muslim parents send their children to the madrasah Arabic schools rather than to the public or private schools run by the Christians.

Muslims also deeply resent the presence of the army in their midst and see it as an alien army of occupation, as alien as the armies of Spain and America were. "We are no longer free." Oftentimes the presence of the army is

justified by the government because there are infrastructures to be protected in the Muslim areas. But they feel that the so called development projects are just outward shows to lull them into being subservient and resigned to their condition. The few gains are small consolation compared to their lost freedom which they have defended for centuries. As one Muslim said. "What are cement roads, electricity, and modern facilities if we cannot even enter our own homes without showing our I.D.s." When asked to elaborate on this he said. "In the old days people were free to move around their communities, but now even a sultan travelling in his own lands has to stop at military checkpoints and wait for a signal from the soldiers before he can pass through. He is lucky if he does not have to submit to a search as well. This is an affront to his pride and personal dignity which cannot be compensated by any material progress."

The Christians on the other hand are resentful of the Muslims because they say that the government is bending over backwards to appease the Muslims and to win them over to the Republic. If a Muslim rebel is caught he is given amnesty, they say, but anyone else will spend many years in jail.

The political situation of the Muslims is confused and precarious. They do not see themselves as Filipinos. From a small sampling done many Christians consider them to be outside the pale. Muslims see their own lands taken and used for the benefit of the Christian majority with little or no benefit for the Muslims. A good example of this would be the lake in the province of Lanao del Sur. It is a 97% Muslim province, where most of the Maranao live—the people of the lake. The lake is being used now as a source of hydro-electric power for the rest of the island. In the very recent past they have seen their lake dammed at its only exit, causing their rice fields to be washed away in the rainy season and completely dried up in the dry season. The lake is the source of food, water for washing, drinking, for the ablutions before prayer. Now its ecology is disturbed, rice lands made useless because of the new fluctuation levels. No one thought to ask the Maranao what they thought about the project except to install thousands of soldiers to guard the power stations by keeping the local Muslim population in check. Meantime the electricity being produced is used mainly in the non-Muslim arrears of Mindanao, in other words for the Christian majority. Muslims feel that they have little or no say in determining their future. The most common complaint would be that there is never any real change, that all the programs, developmental projects, the so-called autonomous government, the introduction of the Islamic Law courts, are all image but little or no substance. "It is mostly cosmetic."

While Christians readily make the distinction between Church and State, religion and politics, the Muslim considers the community and religion as one. One law, the divine Law must govern them. So it was not difficult for them to make the equation between Christianity and the governments of Spain and America. It is equally easy for them today to identify Christianity with the government of the Republic since this is a "Christian" government. "According to the constitution there is freedom of religion," said a Muslim recently, "but how free are we? How many mosques were destroyed during military

operations?" Some Muslims are indeed happy at the government's seeming interest in their religion but others feel that it too is all show. "The Government of the Philippines is a secular one and Muslims cannot expect the support that it would get in an Islamic State." Many Muslims, especially the Maranaos, have an almost paranoid fear of being converted and see in every act done by a Christian as part of a plot to make them all Christian. Given past history and indeed the present practice of some of the more fundamental Christian groups, there is a basis for their fears. There are people who do wish to convert them.

Religion for the Muslim has been and still is a great unifying force. The Islamic resurgence that is being experienced around the world is being felt here in the Philippines. There are many young men who have studied in the Middle East and North Africa and are now back in their native land trying to Islamize what they consider to be the folk Islam of the Philippines. Now the Muslims of the Philippines find themselves under attack from all quarters. A young Maranao woman wrote recently: "For centuries we Muslims in the Philippines have maintained our cultural identity and our religion despite the colonial powers who tried every means to rob us of this identity. The culture that had withstood Spanish and American influences is now besieged by Western and Arabic influences. This time all the signs are that the defenses are finally weakening and the winds of change have finally penetrated the hitherto unbreachable world of Muslim culture. I feel that our exposure to Western influences through the media, through the education system, both of the State and the Arabic Madrasah school, the influence of the Ulema coming from abroad, is the beginning of the end of the Maranaos as a separate people and cultural group with an identity of their own."

Slowly but surely the values of the Christian and lowland part of the Philippines are being absorbed by Muslim society. For example, most Muslims now will speak Tagalog or Filipino, the national language; soap operas on the TV are watched as avidly in Marawi City as in Manila; disco music blares from a thousand tape recorders; and of course there is a radio in every home. A modern Maranao wedding has all the western trappings, the white wedding gown, the wedding cake, flowergirls, and bridesmaids in design gowns. Speakers at an all Maranao or Tausug gathering try to make themselves understood in English. Indeed what Spain and America failed to destroy with their armies is now taking place as we watch.

Is there any solution to this? I will limit myself to suggesting what we as church should try to do. There are conflicting ways of coping with life. The problems we now see are only manifestations of this conflict. So far no real effort has been made to try and reconcile these differing world views. The majority Christian and lowland Philippines is overwhelming because it has all types of mechanisms to promote itself. Educational institutions are usually biased against the Muslims and sometimes seem to patronize them. Any resistance to the Christian way is seen as destructive of peace and order. The majority feel justified in using violent means to suppress any such breach of peace and order and they use the armed forces. The solutions must be

addressed to the roots of the problem. We must begin with an attempt to understand the inner movement of these differing mentalities. This understanding will be a dialogue of life. Dialogue presumes that one religion or culture respects the other. Those who begin the dialogue must keep in mind the fact that they are in this because there is a conflict to start with and that the conflict is made worse by the prejudices on both sides. We must be open to the possibility of rejection and humiliation. Those who take part in the dialogue must not only be open to being influenced and enriched, they must also have an openness to the risk of surrendering one's own precious and cherished positions. They must see this dialogue to be a meeting of persons and not simply a meeting of systems and ideologies.

In the Philippines we cannot talk about dialogue without touching on one's relationship with the Divine. Filipino Muslims and Christians are religious peoples and religion is central in their lives. So the dialogue of life also includes a dialogue of faith. Dialogue here does not mean one side trying to win over the other. Proselytism has no place in genuine dialogue. Readiness for dialogue of faith implies an openness to the spiritual riches of the other religion. When we talk about faith the believers must distinguish between faith as a system of truths to be believed and moral laws to be fulfilled and faith as personal response to the call of God. Dialogue about a system of truths means an exchange of the ways our beliefs are expressed according to our cultural symbolisms, but real dialogue happens when there is a mutual sharing of our responses, our commitment, and our surrender to God. Real dialogue must take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust and this is where we as church can take our place in this area of the Philippines by endeavoring to be a reconciling presence in the community.