

# MORO-CHRISTIAN COEXISTENCE AND CONFLICT IN THE PHILIPPINES

Renato Oliveros, SJ  
Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

*The following lecture was given in Professor Jane Smiths' "Essentials of Christian-Muslim Relations" class in the summer of 2002.*

In the 1900s, the Moro (Christian) population of the Philippines numbered 300,000, scattered throughout Mindanao and among smaller islands to the south and west of Mindanao known as the Sulu Archipelago. Today, the Moros constitute a little over five percent of the Philippine population of seventy-six million, while ninety-two percent is Christian (with the *Tagalog* and *Bisayan* tribes being the majority). The Philippines, therefore, is the predominantly Christian nation in Asia. Some ninety-four percent of the Moros are found in four groups: (1) *Tausug*, (2) Maranao-Illanun, (3) Maguindanao, and (4) Samal groups. The *Tausug* constitute the third largest Muslim group. The highest percentage of *Tausug* are found in the Jolo cluster of islands and there is a thin dispersion of them among other large islands of Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu and Pangutaren. The *Tausug* tribe, the main focus of this paper, are the first group to be Islamized in the Philippines. Historically, they have strongly resisted the incursions of both Spain and the United States in Sulu. The American-Moro wars in the Sulu archipelago are legendary.

When the Americans arrived in Jolo in 1899, they encountered a sultanate that had existed for more than three centuries. Prior to the establishment of the Spanish hegemony over Luzon in the sixteenth century, the *Tausug* sultanate was the largest and most powerful political entity in the Philippines, embracing at least a quarter of a million persons in a multi-ethnic group state. Of the sultanates in Mindanao, the Sulu sultanate was most characterized by its traditional Islamic political institutions. This is partly explained by Sulu's relatively early Islamization, as well as by the fact that it has maintained closer contacts with other centers of Islam. More important, however, is the fact that many sultans deliberately tried to approximate some orthodox Islamic institutions, generally with a high degree of success.

## The Tausug Sultanate [vi]

The introduction of Islam in Mindanao and the Sulu islands of the Philippine archipelago was the result of many factors. Among the most important of them is the movement of merchants and missionaries across the trade route that originated from Arabia overland through central Asia and then overseas to India and China. Sulu was located near trading posts or along trade routes. Thus, most historians believe the early Muslim missionaries in Southeast Asia were traders, first arriving in Jolo, the largest island in the Sulu archipelago, around 1275.

In 1380, a Muslim named Karim ul-Makhdum and his companions arrived and converted a large number of the Tausug inhabitants to Islam. They probably were Sufi *tablig* (missionaries) who had come to Southeast Asia to spread Islam. Makhdum was responsible for the founding of the first mosque in the Philippines at Tubig-Indangan on Simunul Island near Jolo. Najeeb Saleeby quotes from one historical narrative as follows: "Some time after there came Karimul Makdum. He crossed the sea ... in a Sarip. He settled at Bwansa, the place where the Tagimaha nobles lived. There the people flocked to him from all directions, and he built a house of worship."

By late in the fourteenth century, Jolo had become a significant port of entry. In 1450, Sayyid Abu Bakr, an Arab from Saudi Arabia, established the sultanate in Jolo. His sphere of influence covered such a wide territory that his kingdom was known as the Suluk Empire. The sultans of Sulu have all claimed descent from him. By the sixteenth century, Sulu had been integrated into an expanding *dar ul-islam* (abode of Islam) in insular Southeast Asia. The Suluk sultanate had diplomatic and commercial relations with neighboring sultanates in Brunei and Malaysia. The royal families of Sulu and Brunei were relatives.

## An Imported Crusade

Spain brought Christianity to the Philippines in 1521, three decades after having militarily ejected Islam from Granada in 1492, where it had been present since the reign of Abdurahman II in 721. Thus, when the Spaniards came to the Philippines, they brought a "fanatical hatred of Islam which was born of hundred years of struggling for independence

from Moorish rule.<sup>[vii]</sup> Islam had been rapidly spreading throughout the Philippines for almost three centuries when the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century to colonize and convert the natives to Christianity. A struggle ensued between Spain and Brunei for political and commercial primacy in the Philippine archipelago.

In 1570, Spain succeeded in destroying the Manila settlement ruled by Rajah Sulayman, a native of Jolo and a relative of the sultan of Brunei. However, while the Spanish destroyed the Islamic principality near Manila, their attempts to conquer stronger Muslim societies in Mindanao and Jolo were frustrated at every turn, and were an enormous drain on Spain's royal treasury. The Spaniards came to convert, but the resident Muslims of the Philippines resisted this religious intolerance. For 300 years the Spanish and the Tausug were engaged in almost continuous warfare, which ended only when Spain left the Philippines in 1899. The gradual Islamization of Jolo was played out against this background of constant struggle. Consequently, the Tausug's conception of Islam grew naturally to emphasize the idea of *parrang sabil* or jihad against the non-believers.

Spain sold the Philippines to the United States in the Treaty of Paris in 1898. When the Americans arrived in Jolo in 1899, they encountered a sultanate that had existed for more than two centuries, and was the largest and most powerful political entity in the Philippines.<sup>[viii]</sup> The Suluk sultanate gradually weakened under the American military government in the period from 1899 to 1920. When the U.S. gave the Philippines a commonwealth status in preparation for its independence in 1946, the U.S. turned over the Sulu islands to the Filipinos.

### The Effects of Colonization

The Spanish invasion clearly divided the Filipinos into two groups along religious lines. During the Spanish-Moro war, "the Spaniards occasionally enlisted the aid of Christian Filipinos (mostly *Pampangans* and *Bisayans*) to launch a full scale offensive against the Muslims, burning towns and villages, killing hundreds of men, women and children in their path."<sup>[ix]</sup> These atrocities, however, were carried out by both sides as Muslim guerrillas did similar butchery in their raids on Christian settlements. The Moros, particularly, have been in a disadvantaged position as a result of this division between Christianity and Islam in a number of specific ways:

1. Moros have inherited a legacy of Christian animosity. "The Spaniards had enlisted the aid of the Christian Filipinos in attempting to subjugate the Moros--they made them think of their Moro brothers as lawless heathen savages who should be fought, subdued and then civilized. A bitter hatred was engendered between Christian and Moro, a hatred which has left its psychological scars to this day."<sup>[x]</sup> History books and the educational system were of no help. Today, Christians in Mindanao have to be liberated from centuries old prejudices against Muslims.
2. "Moro Filipinos today have inherited their geographical position and its consequences. The Spanish conquistadores forced their ancestors from the north and central Philippines, and so for centuries the Moros both maintained themselves and were contained in Mindanao and Jolo. There they intend to stay. The force of history obliges them to resist encroachment on what they consider their territory."<sup>[xi]</sup> The Moros were once the land owners of Mindanao and Sulu. The realm of the Maguindanaoan Sultan Qudarat (ca. 1619-1672) extended along the entire coastal area from Zamboanga Bay to the Gulf of Davao. But a dramatic post-World War II migration of Christian settlers from the north reversed the ratio from the 1939 Muslim-Christian balance of 55 to 45 to a ratio of 35 Muslims to 65 Christians in 1948. In recent decades, incursions of Christian settlers from the heavily populated northern and central islands of the Philippines have ended Muslim land ownership in Mindanao, and reduced them to five small provinces. Christian settlers now outnumber the Moros, and the Moros have been steadily losing the competition with Christian settlers for living space, most especially in the Cotabato provinces, the Zamboanga Peninsula, Basilan and Lanao del Norte. The dilution of the Moro population in their traditional homeland has had serious economic and political consequences. In the view of the Moros, a Christian is a land-grabber who is out to destroy Islam. To this day, the agrarian issue remains as the major cause of Moro rebellion.
3. "Centuries of battling against a hostile outer world forced the Moros in upon themselves. They were fighting not only for their lives but for the religion and customs and way of life, as well. Consequently, they tended to find strength and unity in almost fanatical conservation of their social, political, religious and cultural institutions."<sup>[xii]</sup> To this day, we can see in the *Tausug* culture the negative effects of centuries of continuous war. It has created a culture of violence. Guns still proliferate in Jolo, and many men find it difficult to take up new skills and participate in a modern society.

A tremendous amount of re-education is needed to get the Tausug back on track. No solution to the negative effects of colonialism can be effective without taking into consideration that the Moros are an historical entity whose political organizations (e.g., sultanate) existed even before the coming of the Spaniards. The Moros have an older history

than any other Filipino tribe, and they see Islam as an integral part of their struggle for independence and self-determination.

### **The Church's Response: The Two-Fold Dialogue [xiii]**

It was on 28 October 1965 that the Catholic church renewed its commitment to dialogue with *Nostra Aetate*, a declaration of the Second Vatican Council. The Catholic church's call for dialogue made in the Second Vatican Council has been supported and encouraged by the examples of Pope Paul VI and John Paul II. John Paul II, in his address to thousands of Muslim youths in Casablanca on 19 August 1985, exclaimed that "the dialogue between Christians and Muslims is more necessary than ever today." [xiv]

Dialogue is a new way of being the church in Mindanao. Christians, the majority in Mindanao, should expect other different and valid salvific revelations of God. Dialogue should "never be made a strategy to elicit conversions" [xv] nor to make the believers of other religions doubt their own faith. However, in its present state, dialogue can be problematic for both Muslims and Christians in Mindanao. For instance, Filipino Christians from Mindanao are targets of Muslim proselytizing through radio and personal contact, pressure to revert back to Islam coming through the *Balik Islam* movement. In a similar way, there are also cases of Filipino Muslims still being converted to Christianity. Such actions hurt both faiths, and raise the level of distrust, which seriously hinders dialogue.

The Second Vatican Council has provided the impetus for the Catholic church in the Philippines to reject the age-old teaching of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation). While Christianity is the majority religion in the Philippines, in other parts of Asia, it is a minority religion which tries to coexist peacefully with the believers in Islam and Buddhism, who generally constitute the majority. The natural direction for Asian theologians like Balasuria, Amalados and others is to shift from a church concerned with theology of religions towards developing a theology of dialogue. Theodore M. Ludwig, following the thinking of Paul Tillich, argues: "The big challenge is not only to revise our theology to account for the existence of the other religions; it is also to construct a 'theology of dialogue' with the people of other religions." This "theology of dialogue," or "theology for dialogue," is open to the integration of truths encountered and experienced in the practice of other religions.

The local church in Mindanao attempts to practice a dialogue of life and action between Muslims and Christians in the following ways:

**The Dialogue of Life and Action,** [xvi] through which believers strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. In Mindanao, the situation of poverty logically calls for a Muslim-Christian collaboration to liberate people from various forms of social injustice. In collective action on concrete projects, Christians and Muslims cooperate in programs based on commonly held values, most especially the integral development and liberation of their people. Social centers must work to identify and promote the liberating dynamics of Christianity and Islam, and to initiate common projects for the building of a just social order.

Centuries of conflict between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao have created an attitude of distrust and prejudice on both sides, but at the present – at least in some cases – the two communities have learned to live together in mutual toleration. History books and media depictions of Islam and Muslims have not been helpful because they are often inaccurate and biased against Muslims. Ignorance of Islam and Muslims is a major factor. One way to eliminate such attitudes is to persevere in imparting accurate information about both parties, particularly Islam.

Because winning trust is the highest priority, dialogue must begin with collaboration in civil or cultural works rather than with discussions in the theological arena. To move directly to the realm of theology is not only premature but risky. Only when Muslims and Christians have built a level of trust can they begin to deepen their relationship by searching for areas of theological convergence.

**Dialogue of Theological Exchange.** If discussing theology is not the first step in bringing Christians and Muslim into conversation, once trust is established, the parties must seriously consider where theological convergence is possible. It would be a pity if the encounter and sharing of the two parties were to be limited in scope to the temporal values of this world. Higher values are involved in the spiritual quests of believers, and when they take these into account, they discover that they have much to share with each other on the level of their respective religious experiences. By participating in theological exchange, the faith of all participants is enriched and deepened.

Allow me to cite the case of the religious devotion to the Virgin Mary as an example. Both Christian and Muslim traditions cite Mary as a model of purity and obedience, particularly Mary's full submission to God's will to be the mother of Jesus. The virginity of Mary, suggested in the words of Luke 1:34, is affirmed in Qur'an 19:20 when Mary inquired: "How can I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?" Gabriel replied: "So (it will be): Thy Lord said, 'That is easy for Me: and We wish to appoint him as a sign unto men and a mercy from us.' It is a matter so decreed." (Qur'an 19:21) The Qur'an declares Mary as a model to Muslims. "But to the faithful, God has set an example ... in Mary, who preserved her chastity and into whose womb We breathed of Our spirit; who put her trust in the words of the Lord and His scriptures and was truly devout." (Qur'an 66:11-12). Both Muslims and Christians honor Mary by visiting shrines dedicated to her. In Zamboanga City, one can see Muslims together with Christians at the shrine of *Nuestra Senora del Pilar*, lighting candles to thank the Virgin Mary for her intercessions.

The Catholic church specifically affirms this Muslim-Christian convergence in having the utmost respect for Mary in the document *Nostra Aetate*: "They also honor Mary, his virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. Further, they await the day of judgment when God will render rewards to all those who have been raised up from the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, almsgiving and fasting." <sup>xvii</sup>

## Conclusion

There have been attempts to prove that the social problem in Zamboanga-Jolo has nothing to do with religion, limiting it to the political sphere and disregarding its religious dimension. Many insist that it should not be treated as a Muslim-Christian conflict. I agree that it should not be treated haphazardly as a religious conflict. Yet, the religious factor is an important element in understanding the Muslim-Christian conflict. Ordinary people generally give a religious meaning and interpretation to their experiences of suffering, injustice and war. They may either respond peacefully or violently in situations of conflict.

The encounter between Moros and Christians is also an encounter of two sub-cultures. The Bisayan and Tagalog worlds are viewed as sub-cultures of Christianity, and the Moro world as a sub-culture of Islam. In the Zamboanga-Jolo areas, a Chabacano or a Bisayan would ordinarily identify the Tausug as Muslim with the prejudices attached to that identity, negative images passed down through the centuries. In the same way, a Tausug ordinarily sees the Chabacano and Bisayan as Christians. The national government, comprised mostly of Christian Tagalogs, not surprisingly favors the Chabacano and Bisayans to Muslim Tausugs. For the Tausug, this is simply the reason why Christian populated communities became centers of trade linked by arteries of good roads, while the Moro communities remained comparatively isolated and little touched by government-provided development goods and services. Economic opportunities, education, and development projects are more available to Chabacanos and Bisayans, and less to the Tausugs of Jolo. Ordinary Tausugs perceive that they are treated unjustly simply because they are Muslims. The Tausug is simply a disadvantaged ethnic minority being dominated politically and economically by the Chabacanos and the Bisayans.

The confrontation between Moros and Christians, separated by their religious identities, is now centuries old. From this point on, the focus must be on healing the two sub-cultures. Political solutions cannot simply solve a deep-seated cultural problem. In a situation when old wounds and prejudices are once more brought to the surface, the church can take the lead in helping local communities move away from the culture of violence and distrust towards a culture of peace and mutual friendship. The greatest contribution the church can make is working toward a culture of peace. Bishop Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J., the Coadjutor Bishop of the Prelature of Ipil, proposes four steps in moving from a situation of conflict towards a culture of peace. These are: (1) recognizing the dignity and equality of all persons-- Christians and Moros alike; (2) moving from an attitude of mere tolerance to an attitude of mutual respect, and finally towards a wholesome appreciation for each other's culture and religious tradition; (3) working towards reconciliation, which includes both parties remembering past wounds, accepting the pain and admitting the guilt for wrongs committed, and going beyond the pain and the guilt and asking for forgiveness; (4) finally, working together -- Christians and Moros -- to develop one community, to protect one environment, and to build a brighter future for all. One way to begin to do this is by forming multi-ethnic councils that can promote dialogue at the local level.

It is evident that what is more fundamental, however, is the creation of this culture of peace among the concerned people themselves. Only this can provide the basis for any sustainable peace and development in Mindanao. For Christians, the spiritual encounter with believers of Islam could hopefully open up the wider horizons of God's salvific presence in the world. "Dialogue helps them [Christians] to recognize that these religions are graced with an authentic experience of the self-communication of the divine Word and of the saving presence of the divine Spirit." <sup>xviii</sup>

## Bibliography

1. Richard V. Weekes, *Muslim Peoples: a world ethnographic survey* (Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 1984).
2. Cesar Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City, 1973).
3. Peter G. Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos--Heritage and Horizon*, (Quezon City, 1976).
4. Najeeb Saleeby, *The History of Sulu* (Filipiniana Book Guild, Manila, 1963).
5. *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians* (Secretarius pro Non-Christianis, Ancora Press, 1971).
6. Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Christians and Muslims* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue New York: Paulist Press, 1981).
7. G. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), New York: Orbis, 1992).
8. Peter G. Gowing, *Mosque and Moro: A Study of Muslims in the Philippines* (PFCC Press, Manila, 1964).
9. Peter Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos 1899-1920* (Philippine Center for Advanced Studies, Quezon City, Philippines, 1977).

---

[ii] In the 16th century, when Spaniards discovered that some of the inhabitants of the island of Mindanao were Muslims, they called them Moros after the Islamized North African natives (the "Moors") who, under Arab leadership, had conquered and ruled Spain for eight centuries. In the three centuries of war against Spain, a "Moro image" of a fierce and lawless people, treacherous, warlike--pirates, bandits was created. For a time many Muslim Filipinos disapproved of the designation "Moro." They preferred "Muslim" as a general name for the Filipino followers of Islam. But in the 1970s, as fighting between Moros and Christians escalated, the name "Moro" began to be accepted, and has given Moros a new dignity and self-awareness of being Muslim Filipinos who persist in refusing to be "Christianized."

[iii] Christian here refers to the members of the Roman Catholic Church who comprise the majority Christian church in the Philippines. Protestant churches comprise 8% of the total Christian population. The Christian position in this paper is taken from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church.

[iv]

[v] Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey, Richard V. Weekes (ed.), p. 401.

[vi] Cesar Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, p. 316.

[vii] Sources:

- a. Cesar Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, 1973.
- b. Peter G. Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos--Heritage and Horizon*, Quezon City, 1976.
- c. Najeeb Saleeby, *The History of Sulu*, Manila, 1963.

[viii] Peter Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland*, p. 13.

[ix] Cesar Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, p. 316, 1st edition.

[ix](#) Gowing, Mosque and Moro, p. 21.

[x](#) Gowing, Mosque and Moro, p. 30.

[xi](#) Ibid, p. 30.

[xii](#) Ibid, p. 30.

[xiii](#) *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians*, Secretarius pro Non-Christianis (Ancora Press, 1971), p. 74-77.

[xiv](#) Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Christians and Muslims*, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 2.

[xv](#) G. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), (New York: Orbis, 1992), p. 167.

[xvi](#) *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians*, Secretarius pro Non-Christianis (Ancora Press, 1971), p. 74-77.

[xvii](#) *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

[xviii](#) Rosales and Arevalo (eds.), Statement of FABC, Nov. 1986, p. 259.