

**HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
OF CPBC PASTORS ON THE MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN CONFLICT
IN MINDANAO**

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by

Cris Amorsolo Villafranca Sian

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A. Background and Rationale

The war in Mindanao has affected the southern Philippines in particular and the Philippine society in general. It breeds fear upon the heart of every Filipino as the conflict escalates into a protracted war between the Muslims and the Christians. The conflict occupies the headlines of many local and foreign newspapers. Its effect permeates almost every aspect of the Filipino. The deployment of Philippine military forces and the fierce battles between the Government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) troops resulted to the dislocation of thousands of families of Christians, Muslims, and *Lumads* (another indigenous people of Mindanao). In 1998 alone, a total of 17 battalions of the Armed Forces of the Philippines were deployed by the Estrada administration mainly in Muslim territories in Central Mindanao. The intensified battle displaced 110,000 families.¹ In September 1999, AFP operations in Carmen, South Cotabato adversely affected 1,000 families. The Philippine Daily Inquirer in its May 19 issue (page 4) reports that the conflict affected 353,581 people in 306 barangays and 11 municipalities. The war between the government and the Muslim rebels is one of the “world’s longest – now in its 29th year and has claimed more than 120,000 lives.”²

With this turn of events, people are led to ask questions like: “Is the conflict really religious?” “Can it be solved by purely militaristic action?” “Do I really know what I need to know about the conflict?” No conflict especially in the context of religious and cultural

¹ NCCP Newsmagazine. May-August 2000 issue. p. 23.

² Philippine Free Press. May 27, 2000 issue.

pluralism emerged from a vacuum. Somehow it has its roots in the past. The study of Philippine history would reveal the dynamics of the present conflict in Mindanao.

Fightings, kidnappings, and strife in Mindanao are rooted in what Muslims see as four centuries of discrimination which resulted to social and economic inequality.³ “Governments have promised us everything,” whines 58-year old Hashim Salamat, leader of a Muslim separatist movement. “But look around and what is the everything they have delivered? Do you see roads? Electricity? Economic development? Factories? The everything is Nothing!” For the Muslims there is really a great deal of discrimination and prejudice against the Moros “that is expressed officially, as in disenfranchisement of the entire Muslim communities from the body politic, and unofficially, as in chauvinistic jokes that portray Moros as crude, opportunistic yokels.”⁴

Regardless of centuries of struggle against foreign aggression and with the marginalization they have experienced from the present system, the Moros take pride in their history. Their pride is derived from their “history as an identifiable community than any other Filipino people.”⁵ Islamic sultanates were already existent before the coming of the Spaniards in the 16th century. They were one of the few pre-Spanish people in the archipelago who were able to repel the might of foreign aggressors.

Later in history, the Moro sultanates were “tricked into giving access for the colonizers to get their lands. Slowly the Moro lands were included in the Philippine geography...the members of the sultanate were integrated into the Philippine elite and were given special privileges like acquisition of lands that even belong to their fellow

³ Philippine Free Press, May 2000 issue.

⁴ Datu Jamal Abbas. *The Social Impact of the Mindanao Conflict*. A speech delivered at the University of the Philippines, Los Baños, Laguna, September 5, 2000.

⁵ Peter Gowling. *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon*, 1979, p. 17.

Muslim peasants.”⁶ Satur Ocampo, in his Sun Star column dated May 11, 2000, entitled “Deeper Look at the Moro Problem” quoting Salah Jubair in his book “Bangsamoro Under Endless Tyranny” said that the U.S. colonial regime and the Commonwealth government passed series of laws that dispose the Moros of their ancestral domain. It was called “legalized land grabbing.” “Through these laws the Moros who held 98% of the lands in Mindanao and Sulu before the turn of the 20th century, ended up in 1976 owning less than 17% -- mostly remote and infertile.”

One of the myths in the Muslim-Christian relation is that the Filipino people were united in their desire for independence from the U.S. Yet during the American aggression, the great majority of the Moros fought hard in whatever ways they could muster to push their own agenda for independence. They never ceased to inform their aggressors of their desire for self-determination. But “If they could not attain their independence, they would rather be with the Americans than with the Filipinos.”⁷ During the 1935 Constitutional Convention 189 ranking Maranao datus sent an appeal to U.S. government through the Governor General saying: “...with regard to the forthcoming Philippine Independence, we foresee that the condition will be characterized by unrest, suffering and misery...”⁸ The Dansalan Declaration continues that the Maranaos would rather “drown in the lake” than be included in the Philippine Independence. That is why, the granting of Philippine Independence by the Americans in 1946 “gave rise to Muslim fears that whatever political, economic, social and cultural possessions they had preserved under the American liberal democratic system might finally be lost to the

⁶ Amirah Ali Lidasan. *Justice and Land for the Bangsamoro: The Moro People's Struggle for Self-determination*. A paper presented to the URM Southeast Asia Sub-Regional Forum. Christian Conference of Asia. Davao City. June 23, 2001.

⁷ Abbas, 2000.

Christian Filipinos who had become virtual heirs to the American Colonial government.”⁹ The integration of the Moro in the mainstream Philippine politics was inevitable. The granting of independence happened shortly after World War II and the newly installed republic centered its efforts in the reconstruction and recovery in whatever is left in the Philippine economy. Even the Muslims were also busy in restoring order in their society. Muslim leaders benefited from the postwar reconstruction programs by accepting aids from the American government. The more radical ones no longer had the resources to finance another war. Thus “the honeymoon with the Philippine Republic begun.”¹⁰ This honeymoon was uninterrupted except from the Kamlon revolt in the 1950’s which was “triggered by inter-Muslim feuds and unresolved land conflicts” and not by a clear political agenda. Kamlon surrendered and was incarcerated in Muntinlupa but was released on September 11, 1968 during the birthday of Marcos. Kamlon’s release had extensive media coverage to show to the Muslims the President’s sincerity in wielding peace in Mindanao.

However an event called “Jabiddah Massacre” opened the Muslim consciousness of their real plight and was a precipitant in the creation of Moro people’s movements. “The Corregidor incident are clouded in a fog of conflicting reports but at least 28 Muslim recruits (called Jabiddah commandos) out of a larger number undergoing guerilla warfare training in Corregidor Island (allegedly in secret preparation for Philippine Military operation in Sabah-Operation Merdeka) were treacherously and summarily

⁹ Abbas, 2000.

¹⁰ Samuel K. Tan, *The Internationalization of the Bangsamoro Struggle*, 1993, p. 19.

¹¹ Abbas, 2000.

executed late in March 1968 by Philippine Army personnel...they were reported to have mutinied over not being paid of their one month salary.”¹¹

However, based on the lone survivor Jabin Urula who lived to tell the horror, these innocent young recruits were “trained to fight for subversive and sabotage mission against their Muslim brothers in Sabah.”¹² This event led to the realization of Filipino Muslims that “their rights, liberty, and happiness were not guaranteed and protected by the very government expected to ensure these rights.”¹³ The Jabidah massacre sow the birth of Moro consciousness in the Philippines. Whereas, the Moro elites were controlled by the Philippine government in the Philippine Congress, the Moro Youths broke away from the government’s integration programs by waging Moro consciousness in their generations. Moro legal and underground organizations would later surface – the Mindanao Independent Movement (MIM), composed of some disgruntled elites, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), comprising of the Moro youths and professionals headed by Nur Misuari and Hashim Salamat. The MIM would later bow to the iron fist of Marcos’ dictatorship but the MNLF would continue its bid for a separate Moro nation (Bangsamoro). Because of the upheaval and the negative effects it created in the Marcos’ presidency, Marcos tried to negotiate with the dissidents using the Tripoli Agreement to advance his own personal agenda. The Agreement “defines the areas and the mechanisms by which the autonomy would be implemented in 13 provinces in Mindanao.”¹⁴ However, Marcos gave autonomy to only two provinces

¹¹ Gowing, 1979, p. 25.

¹² Tan, 1993, p. 21.

¹³ Tan, 1993, p. 21.

¹⁴ Lidasan, 2001.

The Aquino administration also tried its hand in the Tripoli Agreement. A Republic Act was signed to create an Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) giving four Moro populated provinces in the hands of Moro elites and politicians. However, according to some critics the ARMM did not do anything to alleviate the suffering of the Moro people. "What ARMM did successfully was to pave the way for more businessmen and foreign monopolies to invest in Moro areas and later dropped their bid for secession and join the corrupt system of Philippine bureaucracy."¹⁵ Ramos under his Peace agreements in 1996 successfully persuaded MNLF cadres to surrender in exchange of the promise that they will be accorded an open arms by the Philippine bureaucracy as politicians and militiamen. However, another break away group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) would resurrect from where the MNLF had fallen and continue the struggle for the liberation of the Bangsamoro people. The deposed president Estrada initiated the "all-out-war" policy against the MILF in Central Mindanao and the Abu Sayaf in Western Mindanao. It was one of the costliest wars the Philippine government ever waged. It caught thousands of families in the crossfire and hampered the ongoing peace talks.

At present the Philippines is experiencing a surge of kidnappings courtesy of the Abu Sayaf which is mistakenly lumped with the MILF. The former has no clear political agenda while the latter does have. Another facet to the problem was added when Misuari, the then governor of ARMM was deposed from office and led his cadres to perform series of hostage taking and destabilization activities.

¹⁵ Lidasan, 2001.

Should a purely militaristic way end the crisis? Samuel K. Tan has this to say: “It is important to note that in the ongoing military clashes between thousands of government troops and hundreds of Muslim rebels, the government may eventually win the war because of sheer superiority in land, air, and sea. But it may lose permanently the enduring peace it seeks. As in the decades of American campaigns against the Moros from 1899 to 1936, military superiority may destroy the capacity of the Bangsamoro to win the war but it will not destroy their will to resist as it was during the entire era of colonial rule and conquest which lasted for more than 400 years. Contributing to the undying will to resist is the arrogance of the military triumph expressed through the rhetoric of contempt and ridicule for the vanquished Moros as bandits, criminals and savages without consideration and respect for the ideals and aspirations that have propelled their long and costly armed struggle. This is not the time to hide the facts and tell lies. This is the time to tell the truth to make us free indeed. It is not enough to know the Mindanao conflict. It is necessary to understand it.”¹⁶

B. The Problem

There are already voluminous materials which were published tackling on the Muslim-Christian conflict in Mindanao. These publications were written by authorities in various fields like historians, theologians, journalists, professors, and the like, both from the Muslim and the Christian side. They presented views, perceptions and positions on the conflict. These views had been widely used in seminars, fora, and dialogues, and were

¹⁶ Samuel K. Tan, *Understanding the Mindanao Conflict: Mindanao at the Crossroad*. A paper presented at the Cotabato City Peace and Development Forum, July 20, 2000.

even involved in normal conversations on issues dealing with the Muslim-Christian relations.

However, no study had been conducted yet on the view of the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC) pastors on the Muslim-Christian conflict in Mindanao. Are they united in their understanding of the conflict? Do they have the same analysis on the causes of the conflict? Do they perceive the same solution to the problem? What is their attitudes toward Muslims? These are the questions that this study purports to answer.

C. The Objectives

This study aims to present and analyze the view and understanding of CPBC pastors on the conflict in Mindanao. This study on their view and perception includes their awareness of the conflict; their perception on the causes and resolution of the conflict; their attitudes toward the Muslims; their role as pastors in the conflict resolution; and their hope for peace in Mindanao. To situate the views and responses of CPBC pastors on the conflict in Mindanao, this study attempts to describe and analyze Islam in Philippine context. This includes a brief history of Islam and significant events which triggered violent conflicts in Mindanao. Moreover, this study presents a brief historical background on the conflict as viewed from the perspective of history including the perception of people from different sectors, from the government, from the Muslim and from the Christian groups.