

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN CONFLICT IN THE PHILIPPINE SOUTH*

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I

The Philippine government and its Muslim citizens in the South—Mindanao and Sulu—are today locked in bloody conflict which has left many persons dead on both sides, countless families homeless whole villages and even cities laid waste. The government calls the rebels outlaws and insurrectionists. The Muslims see themselves as patriots and holy warriors, defending home and faith against infidel attack. It is a difference in point of view which has a long history in the Philippines.

The historic sultanates of Sulu and Mindanao stand at the eastern extremity of the Muslim Malay world, counterparts to Aceh in the west. Politically and economically, the approximately two million Philippine Muslims are not everywhere the same. There are several unique Muslim ethnic groups, each with its own language and customs; its own political structure, and in many ways its own response to the Philippine central government.¹ Where they are alike, however, is in their view toward events as *Muslims*. The present Christian-Muslim conflict in the Philippine South may be considered merely the latest chapter in the long story of struggle between the Crescent and the Cross in that archipelago, a struggle which has gone on already for four centuries.

This conflict has many ingredients and many complex causes — ethnic hostility, economic rivalry, political antagonism. Here I want to discuss only one single aspect of the long narrative of

Christian–Muslim relations in the Philippines : the radically different understanding of each side as to what the conflict is all about.

Events in the world of humans are not neutral, nor are they fixed in some universal meaning. Human observation of the events of this world is always and essentially interpretive. People do not “see what happens”; they see what they construe as having happened. They do not merely experience events; they interpret them and their understanding of what happened is saturated with that interpretation.

This epistemological situation has, of course, been a core concern of the science of cultural anthropology, which seeks to grasp and clarify the complex conceptual structure in terms of which people construct the events of their world.² But most ordinary men in everyday life are not cultural anthropologists and for the most part are not sensitive to this dimension of cultural difference. Typically, men witness behavior by someone of another society—done in accordance with that society’s cultural norms — and judge it in terms of their own. Ordinary men in everyday life are on the whole quite ethnocentric; and they take their own understanding of events for granted as “reality.” This state of affairs has caused no small amount of trouble in human relations. It is one of the multitude of factors which have an impact on the course of events in history. Two individuals may come to blows because they differently assess a small act—because the meaning taken is not the meaning intended —and whole nations find themselves at war because they differently interpreted each other’s behavior.

This particular factor, that people act on the basis of their own “reading” of what occurs in the world, has played a significant role in the long course of Christian-Muslim relations in the Philippines. Philippine Muslims have read the history of their contact with the Christian West quite differently at many points than the West has read it, and this cultural “confusion of tongues” has made a marked contribution to the ensuing bloodshed and violence.

II

By the middle of the ninth century, Arab Muslim traders had become dominant in the vigorous Southeast Asia sea trade and not long afterwards Islam began to take hold in the Malay world. Marco Polo found a flourishing Muslim sultanate in northern Sumatra at the end of the thirteenth century and by the middle of the following century Islam had been established in Sulu, in what is today the Philippine South. By the early sixteenth century, the faith of the Prophet had spread to Mindanao and had begun to work its way northward through the Philippine archipelago. There it ran into the conquistadores of Spain.

The Spanish extended their military and missionary conquests to the Philippines in the sixteenth century. Magellan, sent by Charles I of Spain to locate a Pacific passage to the Moluccas, had arrived in the Visayas in 1521 with authority to annex any new lands he should discover. But the actual conquest began with the expedition to the Visayas of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565. By 1572, when Legazpi died, Manila had been taken from its Muslim overlords and the Spanish were in firm control throughout the lowland areas of the northern and central Philippines. Muslim expansion had been stopped, and Muslim rule limited to the southern islands of Palawan, Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago.³

The Spanish came to the Philippines possessed of a fanatical hatred of Islam, due to a long and bloody struggle to win Spain back to Christianity from the Moors. The fall of Granada, marking the end of Muslim rule of Spanish territory, had taken place only some seventy years before Legazpi's arrival in the Philippines and by that time the last of the Moors had yet to be driven from the Iberian peninsula. The Spanish applied the same title—Moros—to the Muslims they found themselves fighting in Southeast Asia.

For three centuries, Spain tried to conquer and hispanize the Philippine Muslim South as they had the islands to the north, in an effort to add that territory to the Spanish Philippine colony,

under direct rule from Manila. But the Muslims resisted with awesome ferocity. Again and again, the Spanish launched military expeditions against Sulu, Mindanao and the Brunei sultanate in Borneo —with Spanish armies consisting largely of Christian Filipinos—but without lasting success. At various times, they built a series of forts in Mindanao and Sulu, only to be driven out again by the force of Muslim resistance.

Spanish intentions in the “Moro Wars” were always clear—political control and Christian conversion. In 1578, for example, Captain Esteban Rodriguez de Figueroa was commissioned to launch a campaign against the Muslims. The Sultan of Sulu was to be forced to pay tribute to Spain and the Maguindanaon chiefs of Mindanao were to be reduced to vassalage. In his instructions to Figueroa, Governor-General Francisco de Sande ordered him to burn mosques, to arrest Muslim preachers, to stop any more Islamic missionaries from coming from Borneo and to inform the ruler of the Maguindanaon that it was Spain’s intention to convert him and his people to Christianity. Figueroa had little success. He was repulsed by the Muslim forces on Mindanao. He captured Jolo, the capital of Sulu, and wrested a treaty from Sultan Pangiran, but the Sultan repudiated it and declared *jihad* (holy war) against Spain as soon as Figueroa’s forces left.⁴

For the next 300 years, the Moro Wars raged between the Spanish North and the Islamic South. The Spanish raided and the Muslims counter-raided. The Spanish launched flotillas and expeditions, and Moro vessels burned, plundered and took slaves along the Spanish shores in the name of holy war. The men of Maguindanao and Sulu were in part farmers and in part expert sailors and maritime tradesmen. The interior of their homelands had long provided sufficient food for survival, but profit had come from commerce in goods and slaves in the ports of the Malaysian seas. The Spaniards aided the process unintentionally by “reducing” the Christianized Filipinos of Luzon and Visayas into concentrated

coastal villages where they were easily accessible targets. To the Spanish, the Muslim attacks were "piracy" and the slaving was "barbarian." To the Muslims, it was not only profitable; it was righteous—it was protection of the homeland and the faith; it was *jihad* against the infidel.

Whenever Spanish conquest was successful in Muslim areas, however temporarily, there were individuals who would carry on the holy war on their own, through the institution which the Spaniards called *juramentado*. Certain warriors would go through a religious rite and a night of prayer, then, on the following day, would hurl themselves against the Christian invaders to kill as many as possible before they themselves fell. The *juramentado* was called a *mujahid*, "one who performs holy war," by his fellow Muslims and his act was seen specifically as an individual defense of *dar ul-Islam*, "the abode — or territory — of Islam," against the intrusion of unbelievers. Upon his death, the *juramentado* was buried as a *shahid*, Arabic for "martyr".⁵ Later, in the American period, when the sultanates had ceased to exist as political entities, and technically the idea of *dar ul-Islam* was no longer applicable in the Philippines. Muslim legalists disclaimed the *juramentados* — but there can be little doubt that, in the popular Muslim mind, these people continued to die in heroic defense of Islamic homeland and faith.

It was not until the late nineteenth century, when the Spanish introduced steam gunboats and other more modern weaponry, that they were able to establish lasting and effective control of Muslim territory and by then the Spanish period in the Philippines was almost over. When Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States in 1898, as a consequence of the Spanish-American War, her rule over the Muslim South was still incomplete and Muslim guerrillas were in full control in much of the territory.

III

Although the Muslim *jihad* against the North was termed piracy by the Spaniards, and was condemned as barbaric, both sides saw their conflict in much the same way—a struggle for the supremacy of a religion and an associated culture. This commonality of viewpoint did not persist into the American period in the Philippines, when the Muslim South came under foreign political control.

The American government, like the Spanish before it, wanted to make the Muslims an integral part of the Philippines, under rule from Manila. U.S. President William McKinley defined what he saw as America's mandate in the Philippines: "to develop, to civilize, to educate, to train in the science of self-government" the Filipino population. The Muslims of the South were to be integrated with the Philippine North into a single nation.⁶

The American attitude toward Muslim culture was well revealed by two quotes from the period of early American rule. General Samuel Sumner, a United States military commander in the South, wrote:

it will be necessary to eradicate about all (their) customs . . . their religion will be a serious bar to any efforts towards Christian civilization.

General Leonard Wood, the first governor of the Moro province, made this observation:

the Moros and other savage peoples have laws—simply a few customs, which are general . . . nothing has been found worthy of codification or imitation, and little or nothing which does not exist in better form wherever humane, decent and civilized laws are in force.⁷

In 1917, when the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes was established as a wing of the United States government in the Philippines to deal with the Muslims and other "non-Christians," it was set forth as one of its goals the "complete fusion of this group of Filipinos and the majority segment of Filipino Christians."⁸

The process of integrating the Muslims with the Christian areas of the Philippines—so far as to make them more "humane, decent, and civilized" — was not seen, however, by the Americans as a religious matter. Indeed, the American government repeatedly expressed its position as one of complete tolerance of the Muslim's religion and customs. Justice Malcomm, for instance, wrote that:

one cardinal point in the policy towards Moros has consistently been not to interfere with their religion.⁹

Americans saw their political regime in the Philippine colony as one in which church and state were firmly and traditionally separate matters. This was, after all, a central and key concept in the political culture and heritage of the United States which was to be taught to the Filipinos under the "American mandate."

And, accordingly, in the eyes of the government, the major programs of American rule in the Muslim South were all entirely secular: slavery was outlawed, American laws and notions of justice were imposed, taxes in support of the government were introduced, public schools and other public services were created, land was surveyed and titled, and homesteaders were encouraged to migrate from overpopulated northern areas and settle on open lands in Mindanao. In all of this, the practice of Islam was freely allowed, if it did not conflict with the U.S. program or with U.S. laws.¹⁰

From the point of view of the Muslims, however, these activities — and the whole associated notion of integration with the

Christianized North — were far from secular. In their understanding, the American program was a fundamental assault on the Islamic faith and American rule struck not only at the previous political authority of Muslim leaders but at the very substance of *dar ul-Islam*.

The Muslim understanding of political order is that it is not and cannot be a “secular” matter. Geertz, writing on Islam in Java, has elegantly described Muslim political consciousness:

Cut off by an absolute gulf from direct experience of God and so restricted to the books of the prophets, and especially to the Koran and the Hadith. for their knowledge of Him, mankind — a part now, the whole of it later — has bound itself into a legal community, defined by its adherence to a set of objective laws based upon the revelations God has seen fit to communicate to man. There are no priests, because no man is any closer to God or of any greater intrinsic religious worth than any other; but the law must be communicated, interpreted, and administered, and so there are teachers, judges, and officials, and schools, courts, and religious bureaucracies. It is the adherence to an objective, deductive abstract law that defines a Moslem and defines the Moslem community.¹¹

Even the very notion of “separation of church and state” is, in the view of Muslims, a Christian idea. For Islam, the two are indivisible, at most two aspects of the same reality. American secular schools, American law, and American political organization may be enlightened, progressive, humanitarian and any number of other good qualities in the eyes of Americans, but they are not, in the eyes of Muslims, what God has willed and revealed. The systems of education, law and government may be secular matters to Americans, but they are certainly not so to Muslims.

They are institutions which stand at the very center of God's revealed will for man. There could not be a better example of a fundamental difference in how events are to be understood.

And so, Muslims in the Philippine South resisted the American government with the same tenacity and the same sense of religious zeal with which they had resisted Spain for so many centuries. In 1899, when U.S. forces arrived at Jolo to replace the Spanish, General John C. Bates signed a treaty with the politically weak Sultan Jamal ul-Kiram II which defined Sulu as an American protectorate—but most of the Sulu local chieftains refused to recognize it and the Bates Treaty was abrogated as unenforceable in 1904. There was fierce guerrilla fighting and numerous *jura-mentados* throughout the Muslim regions until, after a bloody defeat on Jolo in 1913 and after many of the most prominent resistance leaders were captured or killed, Muslim arms finally gave in to American military power and the old sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu were made a reluctant part of the Philippines.

IV

It was the avowed intent of the United States to grant political independence to the Philippines as soon as Filipinos had learned the "sciences of self-government," but most Muslims—still morally opposed to integration—wanted to be no part of an independent Philippine Republic. Around 1920, the Americans had turned over day-to-day governance of the Muslim South to Filipino civil servants in the Insular Government. Most of them were Christians and Muslims harbored many grievances and deep resentment against these "infidel" officials, whom they felt ignored or despised Islamic customs and sensibilities and whom they found all too ready to abuse their authority.¹²

All through the period of American rule, Muslim leaders continuously asked the United States to be kept separate from the government of Christian Filipinos. They wanted America to grant

them separate independence or, at least, to retain the South as an American possession. In the early 1920's, a group of Muslim leaders wrote "A Declaration of Rights and Purposes Addressed to the Congress of the United States of America" requesting that in the event of Philippine independence the Muslim areas be kept under the American flag. Otherwise the Declaration proclaimed, "it is our firm intention and resolve to declare ourselves an independent constitutional sultanate to be known to the world as the Moro Nation." The document listed the complaints of the Muslims against Christian Filipino government administrators: inadequate Muslim representation, mistreatment and the like. Prominent among the grievances was outrage at the effort "to submerge our civilization and culture through the assimilation of our people by the Christian Filipinos."¹³ Just before the inauguration of the Philippine Commonwealth, in 1935, another petition was sent to President Franklin Roosevelt--this one from leading datu of Lanao on Mindanao--with the same request: either independence or continued U.S. control.¹⁴

On July 4, 1946 the United States declared the Philippines--including the Muslim areas --to be an independent republic. The Muslims did not revolt or attempt secession as they had threatened, but they continued to find the government of Christian Filipinos onerous and, inevitably, repugnant to their religious convictions.

Particularly galling was the Philippine policy, following that of the United States, of resettling Christian Filipinos in the Muslim areas of Mindanao. In part this was to relieve overcrowding and population pressure in Luzon and the Visayas and in part it was aimed at introducing a "civilizing" influence on Mindanao. The Province of Cotabato was heralded as the Philippine "Land of Promise" and large numbers of Christians moved there and opened homesteads. In the 1930's, almost a quarter of a million Christian Filipinos migrated to the South, and the steady influx continued

after World War II. By 1953, it was estimated that the new settlers outnumbered the original Muslim inhabitants in the Province of Cotabato.¹⁵

Early in the period of American rule, the government had conducted extensive surveys to classify the land and to establish legal ownership. This was done strictly on the basis of United States civil law and paid no heed to the Muslim traditional view of land ownership. Some Muslims saw this as a scheme to levy taxes on them and moved to land classified as public. Others sold their land for token amounts. It all enhanced the widespread Muslim conviction that the government—the Christians—had a plan to deprive them of their land.¹⁶ The land problem, over the years, led to abuses on both sides. In Cotabato, for instance, the Maguin-danaon view of land property was that people occupy and share land but do not normally own it. Christian would find a piece of land untitled, would title it through the government, and then would force off its traditional Muslim inhabitants as squatters. On the other side, often one Muslim would sell some land to a Christian, only to have his relatives refuse to recognize the sale and demand more money. Serious disputes could hardly be avoided and took years to settle through the courts. Some Muslims responded to this alienation of their land by Christian homesteaders by taking advantage of the situation and becoming rich; many others resorted to extortion and terrorism. Almost all thoroughly disliked and resented what they felt was the appropriation of their homeland and feared the growing economic, political and cultural power of Christians in what had been *dar ul-Islam*.

This distrust and resentment was extended to the ever-growing network of public schools started by the Americans and increased by the Philippine Republic. Most Muslims saw the government schools as agents of Christian teachings and Christian values, which they feared would subject their children to pervasive infidel influence. The idea that the public schools were, in some

sense, anti-Muslim was greatly strengthened in the early American period by the clear flavor of Protestantism which unofficially permeated them.

The Muslim reaction to having to live under a "foreign" Philippine political and legal system was mixed. A few of the leaders found a place and a role in the Philippine political structure and established themselves in positions at the municipal, provincial and even national levels. But most Muslims simply resented what they considered to be a Christian and intrinsically hostile political presence. They felt the same way about Philippine law. The Republic of the Philippines prohibits by law either polygyny or divorce—following the Roman Catholic norms—but it is a temporary law which has continually extended and which allows these practices among the cultural minorities as a sort of condensation to their morally inferior state. This is deeply resented by Muslims, who see nothing morally inferior about the Islamic arrangement. Quite the contrary. the Qur'an permits both polygyny and divorce and, in Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippines, is what Gowing has termed "the Moro image" and which he has called "the single most serious obstacle to Moro-Christian harmony in the Philippines."¹⁸ Due to the centuries of warring and raiding, "there emerged an image of the 'Moro' as a cruel cunning, treacherous savage, a pirate, a raider, and a slaver."¹⁹ The image persists to this day among many if not all Christians, perpetuated from generation to generation by word of mouth, by pejorative accounts in school history books, and by popular dramas. Muslims are portrayed—primarily because of their religion—as ignorant and backward as having a low-grade civilization, as tricky and violent, lawless, over-sensitive and ultra-conservative. They are pictured, in short, as people who deserve to be second-class citizens in a Catholic country.

The Muslim view, of course, celebrates their Islamic identity and is a virtual mirror image of the popular Filipino opinion. Be-

cause of their faith, Muslims feel they are in fact morally and culturally superior to the Christians who, after all, eat pork, worship images and perpetuate abuse after abuse on the Muslim people.

Most Muslims have therefore resisted the integration policy of the Philippine Republic just as they resisted the integration when it was sponsored by Spain and the United States. It is all too clearly based on the notion that the principal difference between Muslim and Christian Filipinos is that the former are comparatively backward, deprived by historical circumstance of the enlightenment enjoyed by the Christian North, and on the facile assumption that the solution is to be found in better physical facilities, more modern technology and a sizeable number of scholarships and government jobs. In short, integration means assimilation. This understanding of the "needs" of the Muslim South pays no heed whatever to the profound religious and cultural differences between Christianity and Islam and there is no way in which it could be acceptable to the majority of Muslims. Any such "secular" integration, which is construed as nothing other than assimilation into a Christian society, is utterly foreign and an anathema to the Muslim mind.²⁰

Although, over the decade, a number of Muslims have been attracted into a larger Filipino national identity, the great majority, particularly in the rural areas, have no real sense of being part of the Philippines at all. Their orientations are entirely local or, beyond that, to the larger Islamic world. They regard the Philippines as a sort of foreign and infidel power, devoted to the annexation of Muslim lands and the subversion of Muslim people away from their faith.²¹

In a very real sense, the Christian Filipinos and the Muslim Filipinos do belong to different worlds. Each is oriented toward a different wider community from which they draw their religion, their law, their values and their sense of history. The Christians look to the West and the English-speaking world; Muslim roots are

in Islamic civilization and the Arabic tongue. Since World War II, these roots have grown deeper and these identities more firm. While the Philippine government has been concerned with trade and military agreements with the United States, with constitutional and political upheaval, and with economic, scientific and educational development in the Western mode of secular nationalism, the Muslims have been growing more firmly fixed in their Islamic consciousness. Many new mosques were built and Muslim religious schools established. Religious teachers have come in considerable numbers from Egypt and other Muslim lands. Thousands of Filipino Muslims have made the *hadj* to Mecca, and hundreds have gone abroad to study in other parts of the Islamic world.²²

In 1961, the call for Muslim independence was heard again, when Representative Ombra Amilbansa of Sulu introduced a bill to the Philippine Congress asking for independence for the Muslim South. Nothing came of the bill, but the yearning for independence was clearly still alive. It would surface again a few years later and Christians and Muslims would once more take up arms against each other in Mindanao and Sulu.

V

By the late 1960's, tensions between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao were reaching the breaking point. While Muslim political leaders held control of the provincial government of Cotabato, Christian mayors had been elected in a number of towns where the populations were predominantly non-Muslim. Political rivalries, the long-festering problem of land disputes, various economic difficulties, unchecked lawlessness and widespread cultural misunderstanding and suspicion had strained relations between Christians and Muslims to a level which many felt were beyond endurance. Each side had a long list of grievances; both were, hardening into a brittle sense of enmity.

In 1968, Datu Udtog Matalam, a former governor of Cota-

bato Province, organized the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM), advocated the secession of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan from the Republic of the Philippines, and the creation of an Islamic state, "The Republic of Mindanao and Sulu." This was set forth on May 1, 1968 in a manifesto sent to Muslim Filipino leaders, the heads of all Muslim states, the United Nations and the world press. The manifesto specifically decried the Muslims among the Christian majority in the Philippines. In view of the large Christian population then in the area, however, and in hopes of including them in the move for independence, the MIN soon changed its name to the Mindanao Independence Movement. By August of 1968, Datu Udtog was advocating a government for the proposed republic similar to that of Lebanon, in which Christians would have a guaranteed representation.²³ In the same year, he wrote to Muslim Sabah that, should the Philippines attempt military action over its claim to North Borneo, the Pilipino Muslims would never participate.²⁴

Again, there was no immediate result of this move for independence and at the outset the MIM attracted more publicity than it did followers. The Philippine government was concerned, recognizing that Mindanao and Sulu are an indispensable part of an economically viable Philippines, but took no avert action.

Finally, in 1970, violence erupted in Cotabato. It began in a very disorganized fashion with isolated and ill-planned skirmishes between Maguindanaon and Tiruray (a non-Muslim ethnic group in the mountains along the southwest coast) and between Muslim farmers and Christian loggers in the hills of northwestern Cotabato. In the province of Lanao, the violence was set off by a bitter conflict between two prominent politicians, one Christian and the other Muslim. It was not long until the struggle spread and increasingly came to be viewed as a general confrontation between the settlers and the Muslims.²⁵

As peace and stability fell apart in Cotabato, a number of

Muslim datus and Christian mayors emerged as some sort of territorial warlords. A terrorist organization of Christians, called the Ilaga, or 'Rats,' began operating and Muslim armed bands developed in response. The MIM, which grew rapidly in number of adherents once the conflict became hot, fielded a military force, the "Blackshirts," and in Lanao a comparable Muslim guerrilla band was organized and called the "Barracudas." In the ensuing disorder, along with the actual paramilitary groups—the Ilaga, the Barracudas and the Blackshirts—a number of outlaw bands and teenager gangs compounded the instability of the area and many a family took the occasion to settle private grudges and feuds.²⁶

Whole towns, as well as farmsteads, were burned to the ground, and by the summer of 1971 refugees were pouring into Cotabato City. Many Christians fled their farms—some returning to Luzon or the Visayas, but most moving into "Christian" towns. Similarly, Muslims evacuated to towns and villages where Muslims were in the great majority. The result was that the province and even some of the towns, were divided into what amounted to Christian and Muslim zones.²⁷

Philippine government troops were charged with restoring peace and order, but seemed to Muslims to be flagrantly pro-Christian. They saw a pattern in many of the incidents: Ilaga terrorists would kill a Muslim family or drive them off their land; Muslims would retaliate and the Christians would call in the government forces to do battle with the Muslims. In June 1971, Islamic religious sensibilities were stunned when almost 60 Muslim men, women and children were called into a mosque for what was to be a peace conference, were locked in and were massacred with grenades and automatic weapons. Christians, too, had many stories of atrocities done against them.

Throughout the growing hostilities and increasing bloodshed, the Christians did not, on the whole, see the conflict as religious in nature—but rather, as quite a secular confrontation over land

and political power by two opposing ethnic groups which happened to be of different religious faiths. It was frequently asserted by Christian and government spokesmen that "this is not a religious war." But such statements did not come from Muslims. They certainly recognized the economic, ethnic and political aspects of struggle, but they saw them as permeated by defense of *dar ul-Islam* against the aggressions and intrusions of Christianity. To Muslims the conflict had, at least in part, a religious character. The Christians could view the fighting as secular if they wished, but to many Muslims it bore the unmistakable stamp of holy war.

Other Muslims perceived the hostilities in much the same way. In July 1971, there was a meeting of Muslim Filipino civic, political and religious leaders in Manila, which issued a communique entitled, "Muslim Leaders' Consensus of Unity." In attendance at this meeting was the Rector of Cairo's Al Azhar University and the Libyan ambassador. Not long afterwards, the charge of "genocide" was filed against the Philippine government in the United Nations and Libya donated some 250,000 Libyan pounds (over 4 million pesos) as aid to Muslim refugees. This was followed in June of 1972 with an announcement by Libyan Premier Muammar Kadafi that he would send "money, arms and volunteers" to aid the Muslim cause in Mindanao and Sulu.²⁸

On September 23, 1972, President Marcos, for complex reasons which went far beyond the troubles in the South, announced martial law throughout the Philippines. In his proclamation, he said that disorders in Muslim areas had resulted in the deaths of over 1000 civilians and some 2000 armed Muslims and Christians, that over half a million persons were injured, displaced and homeless, that the economy of Mindanao and Sulu was paralyzed, and that the MIM was a "lawless" and "subversive" organization out for secession by violence and force.²⁹ A few days later, Marcos met, with great publicity, a delegation of Muslim leaders, who pledged to "live peacefully" under the "New Society," but in the

South the fighting only intensified. After martial law, the Ilaga organization was officially disbanded, but the same people were issued guns and ammunition by the government to "protect themselves against Muslim attack." From then on the fighting was mainly between Muslims and government troops.

As part of the program of martial law, all unauthorized guns in the Philippines were ordered to be turned in to government authorities. Although some 50,000 weapons were collected in Mindanao, the great majority of the people there—both Christians and Muslim—were unwilling to disarm.³⁰ On October 14, three weeks after martial law has been proclaimed, President Marcos issued a statement saying that he was prepared to commit an entire Philippine army division to the South to "annihilate" the outlaws. If all guns were not turned in by the 25th of October, the Army would "search every house and village." But the guns were not all turned in and the fighting between the increasingly militarized Muslims and the Philippine armed forces grew more and more bitter.

Late in October, some 400 armed Maranao tried to take Marawi City by force and government troops had to be brought in by helicopter. A week later, there was a battle between Muslims and army troops in Parang, Cotabato. November 6: the army in another part of that province reported being attack by some 500 Muslim "outlaws." On November 29, bloody fighting broke out on Basilan Island and the government detachment was killed to the last man. Efforts to disarm the Muslim of Sulu led to bitter fighting there, too.

By the end of 1972, secessionist movements were growing rapidly among the Muslims; the MIM was extending its influence on Mindanao, while the people of Sulu were preparing seriously for war of independence. Government troops and Muslims fought encounters throughout 1973 in Mindanao and, increasingly, in Sulu. In early February 1974, Jolo was devastated. Muslims in-

filtrated the city and attacked the government troops in force; the army responded by literally bombing Jolo to the ground. In spite of repeated claims from Manila that the "Muslim problem" is under control, there seems to be no end in sight.

VI

In 1972, speaking to the Egyptian-Libyan delegation, which had been invited by President Marcos to come to the Philippines and investigate the charge of genocide, Foreign Secretary Carlos Romulo said that there was "absolutely nothing religious in the conflict, just the usual political, feudal, economic, and personal fights."³¹

The Philippine government has officially argued that the Muslim-Christian troubles are not religious in nature. Wary of possible intervention from some other Muslim state, the government has insisted that the struggle is merely one over land and politics. And, clearly with an eye to providing a rationale for its harsh military repression in the South, the government has consistently asserted that Muslim secessionist efforts are connected with Communism—that Muslim military leaders are "Maoist." They claim to have documents from Communist rebel sources in Luzon which affirm the link and which show that the rebels are trying to create a second front in the Philippines. The February 1974 destruction of Jolo was officially reported in the Manila press as a casualty of government efforts to combat Communist rebels—"Maoist Muslims."³²

The Muslims are "outlaws," they are "rebels," they are "insurgents," their fight is over ethnic tensions, land squabbles and political power. This government understanding of what is happening in the South is not really wrong; all the epitaphs are applicable and the issues quite real. But it is the familiar viewpoint, once again, of the Christian West—dividing into "religious" and "secular" matters which to Muslims are simply not divisible in that way.

The Muslim "reading" of what is happening is quite different. They are fighting over land and politics, to be sure, but the land is *dar ul-Islam* and the political struggle is once again with a Christian power threatening their Islamic culture. As Muslims construe reality, there can be no doubt that the war is profoundly religious in nature, that the stakes are spiritual as well as mundane, and that the context is 400 years of confrontation between Islam and Christianity in the Philippines.

Economic rivalry, political competition, ethnic friction—certainly these have played roles and crucial roles in the tragic unfolding of recent events in Mindanao and Sulu. When the history of the conflict is finally written, these factors will be important chapters. But a central theme, I suggest, will have to be that events do not speak for themselves. Or if they do, they speak in different tongues to different peoples.

FOOTNOTES

¹See Baradas 1972:364, which emphasizes this point.

*from "The Southern Philippines Issue: Reading in the Mindanao Problem," Vol. I, Comp. Alfredo T. Tiamson and Rosalinda N. Caneda, The Secretariat, 12th Annual Seminar on Mindanao—Sulu Cultures, Nov. 16-18, 1979, Mindanao State University, Marawi City (Mimeo)

The original version of this paper was delivered in Indonesian in an address given by Stuart Schlegel at the anniversary celebration of the local university in Indonesia. This English version was originally sent to David B. Baradas for comments.

²See, for instance, Geertz 1973.

³For a full account of the spread of Islam and its struggle with Spain in the Philippines, see Majul 1973. Brief summaries are found in many secondary surveys; see, for example, Tate 1971: 202-204. On the Islamization of the Malay world in general, see Majul 1964.

⁴See Saleeby 1908:49 -54 : also Majul 1973:6

⁵Majul 1973: 353 - 360. The same institution of private holy war was known elsewhere in the Muslim world; in Aceh the Dutch called it *Atjehmoord*. See Siegel 1969:82 - 83.

⁶See Gowing 1968 for a full discussion and analysis of U.S. policy and administration in the Muslim areas of the Philippines.

⁷Both quotes are taken from Gowing 1968-69: 88, 89.

⁸Tamano, 1969: 14

⁹Tamano, 1969:14

¹⁰See Gowing 1968.

¹¹Geertz 1960: 129

¹²See Gowing 1963 1968.

¹³The text of the declaration is appended to a speech by Rep. R.L. Bacon (New York) and is found in the Congressional Record May 6, 1926, pp. 8830 - 8836.

¹⁴On the 1920 and 1935 petitions, see Gowing 1973: 9. 10.

¹⁵Hunt 1957.

¹⁶Glang 1972: 372

¹⁸Gowing 1968-69: 93.

¹⁹Gowing 1973.

²⁰Gowing 1973.

²¹Gowing argues that the Philippine government's integration/assimilation policy confronts the Muslims with such an assault on their basic identity as to threaten "psychological death." See Gowing 1969.

²²Gowing 1968:69: 95

²³O'Shaughnessy 1972; see Gowing 1973

²⁴Utrecht 1973:87

²⁵Stewart 1972: 367

²⁶Stewart 1972: 369

²⁷Stewart 1972: 368

²⁸See Gowing 1973. At Philippine government invitation, a joint Egyptian-Libyan Mission toured Mindanao and reported no national policy of genocide but evidence of Christian Filipino support of violence against Muslims.

²⁹Marcos 1972

³⁰It was estimated that there were as many as 100,000 loose firearms in 1971. Most were homemade shotguns, many were relics of World War II, and some were automatic rifles and machine guns, smuggled from Vietnam.

³¹Quoted in Utrecht 1973:91

³²See the *Newsweek* account, "Mr. Marcos's Maoist Muslim," March 11, 1974. Western writers from the Left have generally taken the same view. Utrecht (1973), for instance, published under the auspices of the Association for Radical East Asian Studies, argues that the war in the South is not religious, but political and economic—a war of "national liberation".

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