AN HISTORICAL NOTE ON THE RELIGIOUS BASIS OF MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING

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Conflict in human society is a product of complex situations. It cannot be tied to just one cause. It may be attributed to political intrigues, economic difficulties, class interests, cultural differences, or religious misconceptions. The Mindanao problem, which may be related to the general problem of socio-economic unrest in the Philippines, is not historically alienated from the problem of human nature and man's search for spiritual meaning. It is, therefore, necessary first to identify or explain the roots of Muslim-Christian misunderstanding and then discuss the religious basis of understanding and its implications.

Early sources of Philippine history indicate that the first possible conflict between Christian Filipinos and Muslims started after the coming of the Spaniards. What then was the state of ethnic or social relation in the Prehispanic period? It seems that various ethnolinguistic groups co-existed peacefully although the presence of feuding factions, tribes, or confederations of tribes may not be discounted. If Majul's reconstruction of Muslim history were assumed reasonable, then relation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities must have been harmonious in areas like Manila and Mindoro where social interaction generally revolved around trade or economic activities and did not substantially involve religious affairs. In fact, these economic activities made possible the frequent contacts between groups of different cultural backgrounds, including Chinese, Arab, Indian, and Malay traders.

Islam, which evidently had already taken some roots in prehispanic period, assimilated many local customs and practices and developed into a syncretic type which was predominantly indigenous pre-Islamic

animism. This "folk Islam" neutralized or prevented the emergence of conflicts along religious differentiations such as were apparent in the religious conflicts in pre-modern Europe. Peaceful co-existence between communities was also brought about by the tolerant nature of Islam attributable largely to the absence of a monolithic structure which characterized Catholicism as a religious organization. In fact, it can be reasonably shown that the propagation of Islam in the Philippines was not done by the sword, as some Christian scholars believe. Nor was it undertaken by any missionary organization, political or otherwise. The faith was largely spread through culture contact and kinship relations.

Religion, in effect, was not a reason for conflict. The introduction of Catholicism in the last half of the 16th century resulted in the emergence of "folk Christianity" similar to the "folk Islam" of an earlier period. Folk Catholicism, as O. D. Corpuz observes in *The Philippines,* manifested the dominant beliefs, values and practices of prehispanic animism, including the worship or adoration of spirits and ancestors which were also present in "folk Islam". The use of charms and divinations figured significantly in both syncretic forms. There was also no strict differentiation between Muslim and Christian communities along rigid dogmatic lines which marked the disruptive relations between Christian Europe and the Islamic world in the late medieval period and seem to have remained in contemporary time.

The question that should not be asked is: why had pre-hispanic co-existence developed into a kind of relation marked by tensions, fears, hostilities, and open conflicts and why had such relation become more and more religious-oriented? The answer lies in two factors: 1 the nature of Spanish colonialism and 2 the state of Muslim societies and their goals. Historically, Christianity was not divorced from the broad aims of Spanish colonization. Pacification (conquest) and Christianization were two inseparable aspects of Spanish colonial policy which was carried out faithfully by colonial officials, especially the ecclessiastics to whom Spain owed its endurance, the status of local leaders. It also created a cleavage between potentially hostile factions or between rival leaders. Collaboration became common in political activities. But the Spanish belief in the fact that real acceptance of Spanish rule was contingent on the Christianization of the natives somehow transformed

local reaction from a politically-motivated to a religiously-directed re-action. Churches, missions, and institutions became the most effective and subtle instruments of conquest. Being involved in a way with the colonial government, the local *datus,* chieftains, and leaders saw the ultimate effect of Spanish policy on their future. They say the possible loss of their political state and with it their traditional status, role, and power. Their very survival as individuals and as a social class in the native society depended on the maintenance of mass support and on the elimination or neutralization of the Christian threat. It was there-fore logical that the Muslims regarded the Christian government and society as a danger to their future and their faith; that is, as perceived or interpreted by the ruling elite through whom realistic contact with the Muslim masses was established by the colonial government. From Spanish sources, this threat was evident in the communications of Spa-nish officials regarding the "Moros" of Mindanao and Sulu. For instance, on May 23, 1578 Gov. Gen. Francisco de Sande told Capt. Esteban Rodriguez de Figueroa not only to convert the "Moros" but also to destroy the evidences of their culture.

The tension and friction in Muslim-Christian relations were also re-inforced by the state of Muslim societies and their goals. The Muslim perception of the Christian danger was more or less associated with the upper crust of Muslim society. The Muslim ruling class of sultans, datus, imams, panditas, etc. saw their own institutional demise in the Spanish effort to establish a political state in the archipelago. Since Christianity was the major tool in this colonial effort, Muslim leaders opposed Christianization, however sincere or innocent they might had been. It was therefore not so much the fear of being Christianized as it was the fear of losing their political state that made the Muslims resist colonia-lism and Christianity. But for the Muslim rulers to effectively meet the Christian challenge, they had to utilize the tremendous potential of re-ligion to bring the Muslims into a general resistance to colonial rule. Islam undoubtedly provided the strong emotional ties in wars, however divided by ethno-linguistic barriers the Muslims were. The Muslim leaders thus rallied their people behind the crescent, often portraying the conflicts, depredations, wars, etc. as *jihad,* meaning a death-struggle against the enemy for the faith or God.

The colonial and/or feudal exploitation of Christianity and Islam was not eradicated even after the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1898. It remained substantially a characteristic of Muslim-Christian relation during the American and post-American periods of Philippine history. The patterns of conflict had become more complex because of the emergence of postwar nationalist movements which sought to bring the country together with a Filipinistic orientation. But the nationalist movements have been affected or thwarted by the persistence of colonial-feudal influences in social thought, values, and actions.

In the foregoing historical context, is it possible to establish a religious basis for Muslim-Christian understanding, notwithstanding the seriousness and magnitude to which the Mindanao-Sulu conflict has developed? To answer this would require an inquiry into the *differences* and *similarities* between Islam and Christianity.

The Area of Basic Differences. Although some differences are irreconcilable — in the sense that the acceptance of one view would destroy the other view — mutual understanding can begin from an objective recognition of basic differences as natural and necessary. This may be illustrated or applied to the Mindanao-Sulu problem. It is worthwhile to mention that both Islam and Christianity can be meaningfully compared along certain lines but more likely along *theological, Christological, scripturological, practical,* and *structural* lines.

1. **Theological.** By "theology" is meant the more limited or restricted reference to the "doctrine of God" rather than the general reference to the corpus of ecclessiastical doctrines. Theologically, Christianity maintains the trinitarian dogma which explains God as a reality existing or pre-existing in three persons, co-equal and co-substantial in the Godhead, and designated positionally, functionally, dispensationally or otherwise as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The contention is contrary to the Islamic view that God, whom they refer to as Allah, has pre-existed since the beginning, has never been, and will never be, shared by anyone or anything, and whose relationship to man is one of love tempered with justice. To a Muslim mind, the trinity is not a valid concept. It does violence to his concept of the oneness and unity of God whose 99 names in the Koran reveal his absoluteness and completeness.

2. **Christological.** Christology, a distinct doctrine in the Christian dogma, refers to the study of Christ as God and Man or "God-Man" as some theologians call this unique and dichotomous nature. This dichotomy is also known in Christian doctrine as the "hypostatic union" of Christ. Christians believe in Christ as a co-equal person in the Godhead whose role in human history was, and is, to serve as a mediator between God and Man and a saviour through whom mankind finds salvation from sin. In Islam, Christ is considered an "Isaruallha" and one of God's greatest prophets. In recognition of Christ, Muslims devote one part of the day — the *waktu Isa* — to prayer. But Christ is never regarded as Deity or a partaker, in part or in any manner, of the Divine essence or personality which is absolutely or solely God's or Allah's. The worship, therefore, of Christ as Deity become blasphemy or idolatry to a Muslim. This Islamic or Muslim belief is opposed to the Christian position and can be a source of misunderstanding.

3. **Scripturological.** Scripturology is not the same as bibliology which, as used in this paper, deals narrowly with the study of the Bible. Scripturology is a generic designation of the study of all written bases or scriptures of religions such as the Bible for Christianity, the Koran for Islam, the Zend-Avesta for Zoroasterianism, the Vedas for Hinduism, the Tripitaks for Buddhism, the Kojiki or Nihonji for Shintoism, and others. Christianity uses for guide the Bible. For the Protestant viewpoint, the Bible has 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament and from Catholic viewpoint, which recognizes the canonicity of some Apocryphal books, has 77 books. Christians maintain that the Bible is the Word of God and, by implication or direct discourse, exclude the other scriptures (including the Koran) from divine inspiration. In fact, the fundamental wing of Christianity is even more dogmatic in adhering to what is doctrinally referred to as "the plenary verbal inspiration" of the Bible. That is, every text, dot, and title in the original Hebrew for the Old Testament and in the Greek for the new Testament were inspired directly by God and nothing can be added to or removed from the sacred book without God's judgment in this life and hereafter. This position has been, however, tempered by the modern or liberal wing of Christianity which contends that the Bible *contains*, but is not, the word of God. This view, which refers more to

thought than *word* inspiration, recognizes, in effect, the validity of other scriptures as equally containing God's message.

Likewise, the Koran is regarded by Muslims as the sacred source of God's revelation and as Fyzee says, "The Word of God" into which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be removed. It is so sacred that it cannot be translated from the original Arabic without losing its inspiration and its practical benefits for the faithful. Hence, Christian and Muslim attitudes to their scriptures are irreconciliable and can be a source of problem and friction, especially when seen from the Christian perspective. It may be noted that Islam does not deny the Bible's significance to life although it does not give the Bible the sanctity and place it gives to the Koran.

4. **Practical.** Differences in practice between Christianity and Islam may be many, but two will suffice for illustrative purposes. Christian worship generally utilizes the visual effects of icons or other graven objects with strong psychological potentials for worship although they may not be in reality or essence worshipped as Deity. Personal images of saints and Christ are particularly prominent in Catholic practice just as beautifully-ornamented crosses, murals, paintings, etc. have become in Protestant houses of worship. The Muslims do not or cannot allow the use of icons or personal images in worship, however divorced their usage or implication might be from the real worship of God. This prohibition stems from their general conception of God as one whose likeness or attributes cannot be concretized. The icons or graven images in Christian churches is therefore regarded by Muslims as a form of idolatry and can be source of misunderstanding.

Another illustration is evangelism, sometimes called missions, which is basic to Christian ministry. The Christians so believe in the truth and compulsion of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:27) that they cannot conceive of Christianity, whether viewed in relation to the individual Christian or to the Church as an institution, without missions spreading the Christian Gospel and endeavoring to bring as many of the unsaved or "heathens" of the earth as possible to the "saving knowledge" of Christ. The slogan "The Church that will not reach out will pass out" has echoed throughout the Christian world. Many Christians have given their lives and wealth for what they believed was and is a worthy cause. This kind of regard for evangelism has not been different

in the Philippines, especially among conservative Christian groups that have taken the path of self-denial in every respect.

Islam is not, or does not, seem to have a missionary program in the same way as Christianity. It has not established Islamic mission of the same magnitude and seriousness as the Christian faith in history for the sole purpose of soul-winning or conversion. It seems to have been content or confined to a kind of religious growth based on either kinship relation or on political convenience. Seldom does one see a Muslim distributing "salvation tracts" to people in the streets, or, preaching to a group in public places, or, globetrotting around in evangelistic meetings and healing campaigns. So that, Christianity, because of its systematic missionary program, has been in the offensive and Islam has become defensive. The rationale behind Christian missions includes the conscious recognition of the "lostness" of all non-Christians; hence Muslims are in this case in need of salvation. This is clearly seen in the numerous Christian missions in the Muslim world and in the Philippines, in the Muslim areas of Mindanao and Sulu. Pscyhologically, such missions has developed in Muslims a kind of counter-consciousness", a fortification against the Christian threat and which sometimes would develop into conflict. The search, therefore, for a religious understanding must necessarily involve a reassessment of the Christian mission.

5. **Structural.** Whereas, Christianity is a monolithic system, Islam is not. Christianity, Catholic or Protestant, has a bureaucratic or hierarchical structure in which authority is clearly differentiated. Its structural flow guarantees the institutionalization of values and the standardization of dogmas and practices. The pyramid of power gives the Christian faith the essential support in its control of Christian societies and in its external relations. Christian monolithic structure gives the society a kind of unity or stability which allows the faith to exercise influence or power on the state. Islam has no unitary structure of authority. Its framework consist of independent or semi-independent structures, sects, or divisions not bound to any supreme religious authority, except that of God. Therefore, there are as many variations in religious interpretations and practices as there are religious leaders or groups, although they generally look to God and the Koran as their sources of strength and authority. The absence of any Islamic hierarchy has contributed to the difficulty of creating real unity in the Muslim world. In

the Philippines, the same lack of monolithic authority has kept Muslim societies divided except in their nominal adherence to the faith.

The question now is how these differences can be utilized for understanding rather than misunderstanding. Differences are differences. But it seems that the proper attitude is to recognize these differences in their reality and totality as distinctive or distinguishing marks of each religious group. The problem in the past was in equating religious differences with the "superior-inferior stereotype" which has continued to bring about social imbalance and conflict. It may be mentioned that numerical superiority of a religious group in a community tends to create a social consciousness from whence emerged the group's dominant influence in society. Thus, in a predominantly Christian community, Christians consciously or unconsciously tend to assume a superior attitude and, conversely, in a predominantly Muslim society, the Muslims assume the same superior posture. Philippine society, being predominantly Christian, tend to favor the dominant Christian group and to promote its varied interests in society. The question, therefore, of inequality in political participation, economic program, educational opportunities, and social well being cannot be alienated from a process in which religion has contributed to the rise and fall of socio-religious groups. The social effect has been to gradually relegate not only the non-Christian religions to statuses of inconsequence but also, and especially the non-Christians themselves, to minor or inferior social positions. It seems that, for the differences to be really utilized for unity, they have to be conceptualized along more neutral and human lines rather than along the "superior-inferior" criterion which marked social or human relations in colonial times between the colonizers and the colonized. Muslims and Christians are, therefore, different but they are not necessarily superior or inferior one to the other. If this conceptual premise is assumed, then, the process of eliminating the barriers to understanding has been initiated.

B. **The Area of Basic Similarities.** Social and/or individual similarities, just like difference, have their important functions in human relations and understanding. In the Muslim-Christian conflict they can be truly utilized as a basis of understanding. Briefly, there seems to be four basic similarities between Islam and Christianity. Both believe in the

reality, supremacy, and university of God. Both believe in the brotherhood of all men. Both believe in the necessity and desirability of peace. Both believe in the capacity of man to resolve human problems.

Something in each of these similarities can be developed conceptually as an alternative to both the Christian and Islamic system. In the concept of God, the inscrutability of his nature and attributes can be a common approach to the worship of Deity rather than narrowing worship to either Christ, Allah, or any other person or being. Complementary to this may be the maximal utilization of the concept of the universality of man, that is, men viewed as human rather than as Christian or Muslim. Perhaps, in a narrow sense or application, this concept can mean a recognition of all ethnic groups in the Philippines as Filipinos rather than Christians or Muslims. It seems that it is in this general context that man's desire and need for peace can be meaningfully placed. It appears that this desire or need characterizes man's humanity. But in the course of development, man has allowed himself either by force of circumstances —social, political, economic, or otherwise — to be circumscribed by religious dogmas and racial prejudice. The Christian and Muslim Filipinos evidently have gone through this experience. In effect, the narrowness of religion has contributed to the inhumanity of man and the dehumanization of society. Hence, the realization of peace through understanding lies in the liberation of both Christians and Muslims from the confines of dogmas, ethics, and practices and in seeking the true meaning of religion in the individual himself. But can this task be done? It seems that this is not impossible although it may be difficult.

Christians and Muslims also believe in the human capacity to resolve problems. But this capacity at this point in Philippine history can only be utilized in the search for a common direction if certain institutions of religious life are restructured to minimize if not eliminate the conditions that divide or disrupt.

III.

The analysis of the historical roots of Muslim-Christian misunderstanding or understanding seems to point to certain significant implications:

A. Implication to Religion. Fyzee observes in **A Modern Approach to Islam** that for Islam to maintain its role as a contributor to civilization and for it to survive in a rapidly changing world, it must be reinterpreted. He says:

> Islam emphasizes truth, beauty and goodness, the Platonic values. As to truth, few civilizations have served literature, science, and philosophy as Islam has. It produced a magnificent civilization; Islamic scholars translated books from the Greek and Sanskrit, and Islamic science was the father of modern science. As to beauty, it advanced art, music and architecture. As to goodness, it proclaimed largely practiced the brotherhood of man. It thus paved the way for the modern concept of democracy . . .

But Fyzee identifies what he thinks is the area in which change in Islam should be introduced or strengthened. He says:

> After serving the cause of civilization for some seven centuries, Islam came under a shadow. Its spirit was throttled by fanaticism, its theology was gagged by bigotry, its vitality was sapped by totalitarianism. For the last two centuries efforts are being made to free it from its shackles . . . Let us release this bright spirit of joy, compassion, fraternity, tolerance, and reasonableness, and modern man will be happier for its presence.

The same view was echoed by Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad in an address before the Ramgarh Session of the Indian National Congress in 1942. He clearly saw and experienced the complementarity between belief in Islam and loyalty to the state.

While it is important for Islam to be reinterpreted to suit the modern world, it is equally necessary to restructure or reexamine Christianity's goal. The need of the times calls for a redefinition of the Great Commission. It seems that the "salvation of souls" is no longer as imperative and essential as the "salvation of society". The promotion of social well-being should become the aim of Christianity and not just the statistical growth of the Church through what is labelled by non-Christians as "proselytizing". Although in a sense inadequate to meet ideologically social problems, Christian sociology may yet provide the meeting ground between Christians and Muslims in the pursuit of national goals. All men, regardless of religion, ideology, or race, desire better

food, shelter, health, environment, and freedom. These necessities which are as universal as the air we breathe can be a source of mutual understanding. But this can only be attained if Christian evangelism is restructured along societal rather than religious lines. Therefore, churches, as well as mosques, need to be readjusted to this particular aim. They should initiate the discussion of social problems more than religion which should be relegated to the individual or personal conscience. The "Call to God" in evangelistic meetings should be replaced by a call to humanity and community effort. Religious schools, centers, agencies, and institutions of religious purpose should cease to mix secular and religious aims. To do so is a form of subversion or exploitation of humanity. But the question is whether religion, the church, and the mosque can survive secularization.

B. **Implication to Society.** Egalitarianism, as a basis of social relations, is desirable but may not be compatible with the hierarchical nature of Christian and Islamic systems which recognize, if not support, class distinction and interests. Thus, the development of an egalitarian society necessarily requires some modifications in the Christian and Islamic religious structures which have helped preserve colonial and/or feudal values which undoubtedly contributed to social problems and unrest. To eliminate the continuing effects of colonialism, an egalitarian society has to be established. The fear, however, of people is the "death of God" in human experience. But this is not necessarily true. On the contrary, egalitarianism seeks to give meaning to what God really is since He has always existed in human history as an abstract reality often manipulated by men for selfish ends. The concretization of God in social relations and actions allow the widest possible dimensions in well-being and happiness because human miseries and social benefits are mutually shared by all in society. In effect, the secularization of religion seems to be one way of realizing its reason for being.

What develops in an egalitarian society will not necessarily mean total elimination of religion from experience. Religion is merely placed in a perspective where it is most effective and meaningful to the individual. Its defect seems to have been in its institutionalization in society. Reduced to lowest terms, religion should involve essentially the individual and the independent search for God and all that He means. This

can be realistically done through the understanding, not merely the reading, of the scriptures. This is particularly applicable to Muslim societies in which the understanding of the Koran is not an essential part of Koranic teaching. Memorizing the Holy Book in the majestic poetry of the Arabic is all that really matters in the *pangadji* — an educative process in Muslim societies. Yet, it is the understanding of the Koran that truly brings the brotherly and humane attitudes essential to peace. Undoubtedly, the Koran does not teach nor imply any negative attitude to Christians who are referred to in the Koran as the "people of the book". Whatever animosity or prejudice some Muslims have against Christians is not Koranic. On the other hand, the understanding of the Bible may not necessarily produce the same effect since a great deal of the New Testament, especially the Pauline and Petrine epistles, deifies Christ and distinguishes the unsaved (un-Christians) and the saved (Christians). This is a probable source of negative attitudes and prejudices which Christians might develop as they read and understand the Bible. Unless the Bible is reinterpreted in such a way that only its humanitarian and universal values are propagated, there might be difficulties in creating the foundation for Muslim-Christian understanding. Yet, the restructuring of the Christological essence of the Bible implies a substantial change in the very rationale of the Christian faith and mission. Is the Christian Church or are Christians willing and ready to undertake this change for the sake of peace and co-existence? No one can answer this but the Christian society itself.

C. **Implication to the State.** Since, historically, religion is linked to colonial conquest of ethnic groups, its realistic separation from any such links or semblance of it, even long after the end of colonial rule, has been a problem. It may be essential to mention that most enlightened constitutions of nations have either separated the Church from the state or have subordinated religion to secular goals. There is something in religion, because of its nature, that makes doctrinal or theological agreement quite elusive if not impossible. In the case of the Philippines, the separation of church and state has been historically, but nominally, accomplished since the historic one-vote difference between those who favored and those who opposed the establishment of a state religion in the 1898 Malolos Constitutional debate.

Since the American conquest, this separation has remained related to legal or constitutional processes. It was re-expressed in the 1935 Philippine Constitution which has remained the fundamental law of the land until the promulgation of the Constitution of the New Society in 1972. The separation, however, was in reality nominal although the constitutional step was significant. What has remained a problem is the realization of the ideal in social consciousness, which is still chained to traditional values, including the integration of political and religious values. Men and women involved in decision-making somehow have remained in orientation, and intellectually, circumscribed by the belief in mutual relation between state and religion. Thus, even long after the formal delineation of the two institutions, men still continued to preserve the same attitude.

Being by nature integrative of political consciousness, Islam has to be reconstructed by delineating the legal from the religious values of Muslim society. Conflict will arise for as long as the two aspects are entwined in a system. Fyzee suggested that to solve this problem three fundamental steps are necessary: 1. to define religion and law in terms of twentieth century thought; 2. to distinghish between religion and law in Islam; and 3. to interpret Islam on this basis and give a fresh meaning to the faith. Likewise, the Christian Church, although theoretically separated from the state since the collapse of Spanish rule in 1898, should cease or minimize its direct or indirect interference in the formulation of national policies. It should also resist the temptation of taking advantage of its dominant position by wielding its influence to serve its religious aims which might be detrimental to other religious groups. It is possible for people in authority to be influence consciously by their religious sentiment and to make official judgments or decisions in accordance with such sentiment. This has happened in the colonial period and post-colonial times. Thus, the equitable distribution of political power or the diffusion of political influence among various ethnolinguistic groups in national and local affairs is one important step in the prevention of any injustice. It is one way of pre-empting any tendency to take advantage of situations by reason of religious affiliation. But a better way is to create a new secular orientation divorced from either Christian or non-Christian religious identity.

In reflection, it is imperative to stress that it is only when Christianity and Islam in the Philippines and elsewhere are both emancipated from the narrow confines of their basic differences and, instead, are wedded into a common ideal by their basic similarities, that the religious basis for Muslim-Christian understanding shall have been truly established. Perhaps, more important is the development of a strong secular orientation in Philippine society which draws man away from a preoccupation with the Unknown he cannot truly understand and focuses his attention on himself and society which he can really know. It is one thing to see the theoretical validity of the suggested reforms. It is another thing to really witness their implementation which has always remained the main defect of solutions to any Muslim-Christian problem.

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