



# Cultural Exchanges between the Muslim and Christian Worlds: Focus on the Philippines\*

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## **Introduction: Tensions and Violence in the Post Cold War Era**

Everyone expected the post - Cold War period to usher in an era of prosperity and greater freedoms for all peoples of the world. However, we are still facing continuing wars in Eastern Europe following the break up of the USSR. Far from bringing about universal peace, the post-Cold War period brought into relief internal dissensions, inter-ethnic conflict and religious strife that often exploded into violence. Among the most frightening examples of this phenomenon are the continuing war between the Palestinians and the Israelis, Taliban and other Muslim factions in Afghanistan, and Chechen rebels against Russia that spill across state borders, and the US invasion of Iraq. The September 11,2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provoked the USA to seek restitution by waging all-out war against perceived perpetrators of the crime in Afghanistan and then Iraq. US occupation forces in Iraq are still at a loss to prove that former President Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction”.

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Ostensibly, the US invasion of Iraq was waged in order to depose a terrible and hated “military dictator” and to bring “democracy” to the Iraqis. President George Bush avoided any mention of what may have been the most crucial motivating factor for the invasion- control of Iraqi oil and securing America’s free and unimpeded passage in the Persian Gulf and the eastern Mediterranean. The USA and its ally Britain having vanquished the military forces of Saddam Hussein are now faced with Iraqi guerilla-type resistance. Deaths of American soldiers will surely exacerbate American public hostility against Iraqis, Afghans and Muslims in general and this attitude will contribute to the further deterioration of Christian - Muslim relations around the world.

Besides the US’ determined drive to control the vast oil reserves in the Middle East, what adds to world instability and tension is that ethnic, cultural and religious minorities are up in arms against their respective central governments. In West Asia, Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, various socio-cultural groups and political factions are fighting central authority. In the Philippines, Muslims have been waging a war against the central government since the Spanish colonial period and have not given up the struggle up to the present. The most recent eruption of violence started in March 2002 when hostages were taken by the Abu Sayyaf, a small break-away Muslim faction that is condemned by the broad coalition of Muslim organizations in Mindanao and Sulu. The central government responded with the use of force. Force may temporarily halt armed conflict, free hostages and punish some of the culprits, but it cannot by itself quell Muslim rebellion. For the causes of Muslim rebellion, its evolution and the aspirations are very complex. Evidently rebels have been fighting under the banner of Islam for their right to maintain and advance Islamic faith, the Ummah, Islamic community, and their way of life. They are struggling for equal recognition and benefits enjoyed by the Christian majority that control the levers of power in our government. They demand redress for unjust appropriation of lands to outside settlers, lands which they claim are their ancestral domain. They are fighting what they perceive to be centuries of

discrimination and neglect by government and other institutions. These grievances must be examined in the light of their historical background and the prevailing national and global political and economic system obtaining today.

This conference, by convening scholars and diplomats from the Philippines and Iran, provides a forum for serious frank discussions. Conferences of this kind can help promote dialogue among different cultural, religious and ethnic groups. Dialogue is an important step towards the promotion of mutual understanding and respect for cultural and religious differences. In turn, mutual understanding and respect provides the groundwork for mutual trust, goodwill and peace, and paves the way for concerted efforts in building the institutions that can guarantee liberty, justice and human rights for all peoples.

### **Historical Background of Philippine Relations with Muslim Countries**

So far, there is no written record of early and direct cultural exchanges between West Asia (much less Persia) and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Whatever relations and exchanges there were occurred through intermediaries, via the Indian subcontinent and countries along the Malay Straits and the South China Sea. These relations were part of the international trade between West Asia (Middle East) and China along the maritime silk route that was activated when the overland route was closed in the late 8th C. But there must have been indirect relations that may have begun before the advent of Islam. Ancient Persia had wide relations in trade and commerce, and travelers may have spread Persian culture, its language and literature via the Indian subcontinent and from there to Southeast Asia. The paucity of Arabs and Persians in historical documents on Southeast Asia may be explained by the tendency to ignore the varied ethnic composition of traveling merchants from West Asia who came to Southeast Asia and East Asia. Historians lumped together all West Asians as "Arab" "and after 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> C. these people were all called Muslims regardless of their religion or which country they came from."<sup>2</sup>

The scarcity of information about Philippine contacts with West Asia was due mainly to geographical distance and the colonial and predominantly Christian-centered historiography in the Philippines. Having been a colony of western Christian powers - Spain and the USA, the Philippines as a whole could not conduct an independent foreign policy. Indeed, western colonial dominance obstructed relations with Asian countries, particularly those that professed Islam. Spanish colonial policy was to divide and rule the various ethnic and tribal groups in the archipelago precisely at the time when they were undergoing the process of social and economic consolidation under the Muslim Sultanates of Maguindanao, Sulu and Tondo in the late 15<sup>th</sup> C. By the 1570's, imperialist Spain shattered the trade and religious alliances forged by the Sultans and rajahs within the archipelago and with neighboring countries. Spain together with the British, Dutch and Portuguese obstructed if not completely cut off Mindanao and Sulu relations with neighboring kingdoms of Aceh and Samudra-Pasai in Sumatra, relations that had flourished since pre-Islamic Srivijaya (7<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> C.) Similarly disrupted were relations with the sultanates in Ternate and Tidore (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> C.) in the Moluccas, Brunei in West Borneo (16<sup>th</sup> C.), Malacca (16<sup>th</sup> C.), Jahore in the Malay peninsula (16<sup>th</sup> C.) and China<sup>3</sup>. Conversion to Christianity became the hallmark of Spanish colonial legacy and while it may have helped weld together the various tribal groups and other political principalities under its colonial-cum-ecclesiastical administration, it also ingrained anti-Muslim sentiments among the Christian converts. Anti-Muslim prejudice was intensified by the continuous wars waged by Spain against the Mindanao and Sulu sultanates utilizing "Christianized" Filipino troops. Filipino Christians harbor prejudice against Muslims, which was aggravated by Moro raids into the so-called "Hispanized" areas in the Visayas and Luzon. Although conditions have changed with the ascendancy of Christianized Filipinos over the Muslims, these sentiments still influence our social and political institutions until today.

### **Philippine Relations with West Asia in the Post Independence Period**

Only after the Philippines won independence from the USA were diplomatic relations with West Asian countries established. Although sporadic and negligible, diplomatic relations paved the way for further direct contacts. The formation of the United Nations in 1948 and the partition of Palestine to create the state of Israel aroused greater interest in West Asian affairs and in Islam. The establishment of Israel provoked violent resistance among the Muslim peoples that could not but affect those living in the Philippines. Subsequently, cultural and economic contacts with West Asia, particularly the oil-rich countries, reached their peak in the 1970's during the oil crisis and as a consequence of Philippine policy of exporting Filipino contract labor to West Asia.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Historical Background of Christian - Muslim Relations**

The broader history of Christian-Muslim relations in the outside world affected relations in the Philippines. These relations could be characterized by ambivalent attitudes. Relations were good during good times and turned antagonistic and even violent during bad times. It should be pointed out however that this kind of relationship applies not only with respect to Muslim-Christian relations but also to Muslim relations with other faiths such as Zoroastrians, Manichaens, Jews, Animists, etc. Apart from religious and doctrinal differences, social, political and economic considerations affected their relations with one another. And yet disputes over territory especially over trade routes and markets, dominion over peoples, disposition of resources, political authority, and dynastic successions were embroiled and oftentimes obscured by religious discord.

Muslims had ambivalent attitudes towards Christianity and Christians that are reflected in the Quran. Shura 5.85 says that Muslims

will find Christians “nearest to them in Love.” But another Shura 5.54 warns them that Christians and Jews can neither be their “close friends” nor their “protectors” (*awliya*)<sup>5</sup>. By the same token, Christians were also ambivalent towards Muslims. Christian propagandists depicted Islam as a “Satanic plot” and claimed that Islam intended to destroy the Christian faith. Other polemics that depicted the Prophet “as lascivious” for having several wives and concubines, and as an “ambitious conqueror and a merciless murderer,” reflect ignorance of social and political conditions obtaining in Arab society in the 7th C to 8th C. What this harsh criticism ignored was that marrying the widow of one’s brother or kin was a practical solution to the care of helpless female family members. Frequent wars caused the early deaths of fathers, brothers and husbands so that their daughters, sisters and widows had to be cared for by surviving males. The accepted arrangement in such situations was for widows to be married to males even though the latter may already have been married. As for wars waged by Muslim troops, this was the accepted practice in the region at the time when people fought for survival and competed over resources, and when they had no other recourse for obtaining justice or rectifying grievances. It was precisely to address rampant violence by despotic kings and ambitious empire builders and injustice against the weak that Christianity and Islam offered the alternative moral philosophies to the arbitrariness of despotic kings and the general lack of institutions of justice during those times.

From the very beginning of Islam, Muslims for the most part lived in close proximity and interacted peacefully with Jews, Christians and other religious sects. According to Ibn Ishaq, one of the biographers of the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife had a Christian uncle who was the one that interpreted the prophet’s experience in the cave in Hira as a “divine revelation.” It was likely that Muhammad’s Christian uncle-in-law understood the extraordinary intensity of his spiritual experience. When Muhammad built his first mosque, he invited Christian delegates from Najran to pray and even debated with them regarding the doctrine of

Incarnation. Muhammad was given a slave woman named Mariyah as a gift by an Egyptian king. She happened to be a Christian Coptic and must have been his favorite for on the last days of his life, after taking leave from his other wives, he spent his last moments with her.<sup>6</sup>

When Muslim states were firmly established, the need to govern multi-ethnic populations professing different religions led to the evolution of the concept of the rights of minorities (*dhimmi*). The protection of the *dhimmi* became part of Islamic law. Muslim authorities maintained very good relations with Christians, Jews and other minorities. Indeed Muslim rulers instead of removing them from government retained the pre-existing bureaucracy that counted Christians and Jews among them. They also continued the use of Greek as the language of administration rather than Arabic. More significantly, Muslim rulers like Caliph al Ma'mun (reigned 813-833 CE) considered themselves as inheritors of classical Greek traditions and they supported and further developed this proud legacy. Caliph al Ma'mun founded an academy whose task was to translate works of science, philosophy and medicine from Greek to Arabic. One of the religious works translated was *The Bible*. Islam used the cultural legacy of Greece and the rest of the Mediterranean civilization and undertook some of the most creative intellectual and technological innovations in human history. One of its greatest achievements in the arena of human rights was the concept of the legal rights of non-Muslims, a concept enshrined in Islamic law. Islamic cultural and intellectual achievements together with the sanctity of the concept of legal rights of minorities survived the breakdown of political unity of Muslim caliphates.

The Medieval Period (9<sup>th</sup> C.) marked the breakup of political union of the Muslim world. During periods of instability and uncertainty, the larger majority of the populace felt threatened and became restive. People tended to look for quick solutions and tended to be intolerant. These conditions were ripe for the occurrence of many kinds of social abuses and excesses and the first victims of intolerance and whose human rights were violated were non-Muslim minorities.<sup>7</sup>

The period of the Crusades and the rise of despotic and expansionist monarchies in Europe brought in its wake the horrors of war and instilled a deep-seated fear and hatred of Islam and of Muslims. This drew a similar reaction among Muslims whose leaders imposed harsh measures not only on Christians but also on all minorities. While the large influx of Europeans to and from West Asia brought back the benefits of classical Greco-Roman and Arabic civilizations, Islamic contributions to this cultural legacy in philosophy, science, medicine, the arts, military tactics, were almost obliterated from the memory of majority of lay Christians.<sup>8</sup> What remained instilled were suspicions and hatred of Muslims. The 14<sup>th</sup> C. onward saw the decline of Muslim political unity. The westernmost Muslim State Granada, in Spain, fell to Christian assault in 1492; Mongols from Central Asia expanded their armies all the way to Persia and Turkey, while Muslim rulers weakened in the Muslim heartland of Arabia, Syria and Iraq. In the meantime, the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> C. saw the ascendancy European powers that sought colonies around the world and brought in its wake vigorous and determined Christian missionaries that sought to convert “pagans” and “infidels.”

The spirit of the Crusades was carried forward by Western colonial powers into Africa and Asia. French and British encroachments into Africa and West Asia led to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire (1281-1924), the one remaining political entity under the banner of Islam.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Portugal and Spain their conquistadors had as inseparable companions Christian missionaries armed with belief in the superiority of their faith and institutions over the conquered peoples. Muslim - Christian relations reached its nadir during the centuries of Western colonial expansion, and since Muslims offered the fiercest resistance, they were the victims of harshest retaliations by the colonial governments that favored Christian converts. As quiescent subjects, Christian converts were given special treatment while Muslims were persecuted or neglected.

The rise of European Enlightenment in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C. and the French Revolution brought about a great change in Christian thinking and faith.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment scaled down the primacy of religion in public life, and replaced it with human reason and the concept of the natural rights of humans to personal freedom, liberty, justice and democracy. The succession of religious wars in Europe, the rise of Protestantism, and developments in science and technology contributed to the depreciation of faith while respect for established authority led to the exaltation of human reason and the scientific method. Twentieth century advances in science and technology, industrialization in vast scale, and urbanization affected peoples of varied cultures and regions. The rise of commercial-industrial complexes overshadowed and even undermined the authority of social, political and religious institutions of individual countries. This chain of events has been viewed as the sum total of the modernization process of societies. And when individual reason and the scientific method is upheld, belief and faith in the Absolute, Transcendental, and the Unseen often diminishes as well. Thus, modernization also brought about secularization and diminution of religious authority and reliance on faith. It is in confronting the challenges of modernization and secularization that Muslims and Christians may be said to stand together. Regardless of their mutual animosities, the majority of devout Muslims and Christians often stand against crass materialism and unbridled competition for personal gain. For the more orthodox and fundamentalist factions among Christians and especially among Muslims, they consider most malevolent the unstoppable onslaught of secularization as exemplified by American culture. It should be emphasized however, that many American intellectuals are also very critical of American popular culture purveyed by movies, television, mass media, and advertising agencies. American intelligentsia like I. F. Stone and Noam Chomsky write of the shameful and degrading values propagated by the US-dominated global entertainment industry.

Academics, scholars and intellectuals by themselves cannot change the global economic and political arrangements that have been put in place since the end of World War II. The current regional and economic alliances of powerful and rich countries and their multi-national

corporations dominate the nation states of the Third World. Experience tells us of the futility of waging wars of liberation against the superpowers and their economic institutions, its military agencies as well as client states whose leaders often acquiesce with the current global economic and social order.

We are concerned for genuine world peace and social justice, not a Pax Americana that ignores the grievances of the majority of peoples around the world and imposes American values and way of life. We can begin by systematic, rational analysis of the global situation and identifying sources of the conflicts and how these may be solved. Let us start with cultural values espoused by Christians and Muslims that seem divergent and even irreconcilable. And yet, if we analyze these religious beliefs and cultural values, it can be demonstrated that there are certain analogies and parallelisms between the two. What clouds and obfuscates the issue of Christian-Muslim relations is the failure to distinguish between the various facets of the conflict, between religious and theological, ethnic, social, cultural, economic, demographic, ecological, disputes over land and natural resources, administrative and leadership aspects. Aspects often ignored are class conflicts, economic disparities, and unequal access to education, resources and opportunities for social mobility. We should also keep in mind that these aspects are inter-related and inter-acting. Nevertheless we have to deal with them one by one for heuristic purposes. Moreover, it is important to take into account the complex diversities and internal divisions as well as animosities within the Muslim and Christian countries and communities.

Some of the analogies and parallelisms that may be mentioned pertain to the fundamental beliefs to which both Muslims and Christian subscribe. Both believe in transcendental and immutable power of God or Allah. Both believe that the Muslim *Koran* and the Christian *Bible* are the revealed word of God, that these beliefs and attendant rituals and ceremonies are sources of personal and group identity. Muslim community or ummah is somewhat equivalent to Christian parishes and diocese, while

the *ulamas* and Muslim clerics and scholars are analogous to the Christian religious orders. Among the spiritual practices common to both Christianity and Islam are asceticism involving prolonged seclusion, introspection, fasting, acceptance of suffering, and even martyrdom as the supreme test of unwavering religious devotion and resolve. Sufi mysticism has its equivalent in Christian mysticism as exemplified by Mother Theresa, and the Muslim *tariqahs* have analogies in the Christian lay organizations. We should also stress that Muslims regard Jews and Christians as belonging to a special category to which Muslims also belong as “people of the book,” meaning that they trace their origins from the ancient Jewish tradition since Abraham.

### **Contrasting Ideology and Values: Orthodox Muslims and Western Secular Capitalists**

Admittedly, there are varieties of world-view or ideologies among Western secular capitalists and Muslims, and on each side different groups harbor a wide spectrum of positions. Indeed there are many Muslims who share many values of Western secular capitalists, in the same manner that many Westerners would agree with values adhered to by Muslims. At the risk of going into gross generalizations, and ignoring some other values, for purposes of discussion it would be useful to enumerate two extreme positions focused mainly on Islam and Western secular capitalist world-views. The list serves as a guide in order to trace some of the ideological bases on which certain “extremist” groups and governments wage violent actions such as in Afghanistan, Algeria, Indonesia and the Philippines. This is not to say that there are no violent conflicts in countries professing other religions and values. Furthermore, the values listed below are certainly incomplete and need more detailed elaboration and qualification.

These contrasting values and world outlook need not be irreconcilable and adversarial. As was pointed out earlier both sides do not necessarily adhere rigidly to all of these values nor do they practice them to the same degree. There is need to search for the middle ground

Orthodox Muslim	Western Secular Capitalist
Primacy of faith, obedience to religious and learned authority; Complete submission to Allah as revealed in sacred texts and Muslim exemplars	Reason, scientific inquiry and analysis, empirical proof constitute reality, it follows that individual free will is important and cultivated Personal exertion, hard work & industry stressed
Tradition drawn from Islamic history beliefs, customs more important than individual reason; live within the Ummah	Rational thinking and self-directed behavior in order to navigate & succeed in earthly existence
Life on earth is temporary, exert effort to prepare for the next life; practice piety & morality	Gain profit, accumulate capital, consume luxuries, gain high social status
Simplicity and humble life style source of high social status & prestige	Wealth & luxuries are power and the
Land and natural resources belong to Allah Communal ownership preferred	Land and natural resources can be individually-owned, accumulated & disposed of
Cooperation & collective achievement	Competition and individual success
Social stability, consensus; Allah & the Ummah determine one's social status looking	Change, innovation, social conflict expected Value progress; forward-looking
Extended family, arranged marriages; Polygamy & monogamy allowed but not adultery and extra-marital affairs	Nuclear family, monogamy, mobility of family members; laxity in extra-marital affairs
Superiority of males over females Male protection of females	Women are independent & equal to men in all aspects
High regard and value the elders, tendency to look back to past generations for guidance	Children and youth are highly regarded and enjoy greater individual freedom and rights
Devotion to Allah, practice of Islamic rituals, ceremonies, tenets are mandatory and are considered inseparable from one's individual and group identity	Religious values are private and individual; tend to be lax in the performance of religious obligations

and stress the commonalties rather than differences between the two sides. Surely belief in the Transcendental Almighty, respect for life and human dignity, pursuit of social justice, and combating oppression and tyranny are principles both sides would uphold. The Dialogue of Civilizations proposed by President Muhammad Khatami can be brought to fruition if we search for the fundamental bases of our common humanity.

Fortunately we can work with government and private cultural and educational institutions and organizations to undertake programs that will help our communities. There are also many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and People's Organizations (POs) that mushroomed during and after the fall of martial law (1972-1986) that address a host of social, cultural and environmental problems. The Christian Churches of the Philippines (Protestants and Filipino Christians) are taking steps to work for peace and reconciliation through dialogue and by undertaking community service. Many are taking part in the ecumenical movement to work for religious and cultural understanding and cooperation to help alleviate social problems. No longer does the Roman Catholic Church seek to convert Muslims and Indigenous Peoples as aggressively as it did during the Spanish colonial period. In 1988 Pope Paul VI instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with the people of other religions called the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID). The PCID has the following responsibilities:

1. to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and followers of other religious traditions;
2. to encourage the study of religions,
3. to promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.

Apart from initiatives from the Roman Catholic Church there are similar efforts of the World Council of Christian Churches that regularly convenes conferences, workshops, undertakes research and community projects to foster inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. International agencies and organizations like the UN even though it is still hampered

by the Security Council is contributing to the amelioration of poverty, violations of human rights, environmental pollution, and promoting the rights of women, children, the infirm, indigenous peoples and refugees around the world. We should help undertake educational and cultural projects that contribute to humane values of peace, mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural and religious differences. Educational programs should also have practical aspects that develop needed skills for business and industry, that inculcate qualities of industry, hard work, productivity, capability in solving problems and fostering social cohesiveness and cooperation. Designing programs and projects that will contribute towards these goals should be part of the subsequent discussions in this conference.

### Notes

- 1 The term West Asia applies to the region called "Middle East" in western maps and literature. It covers present-day Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. For convenience, the name "Philippines" will be used for the Philippine archipelago even though it was the name given by Spanish conquerors in the 16th C. Parts of the archipelago were known as Luzon, Ma-I, San-su, Sulu, Maguindanao, and by other various names in historical texts; the earliest accounts referring to the archipelago were written by Chinese.
- 2 Hourini, G. F. *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Medieval Times*, Princeton Univ. Press, New Jersey, 1951.
- 3 Majul, Cesar Adib, *The Muslims in the Philippines*, Philippine Center for Advanced Studies, Univ. of the Philippines, Quezon City, 1974: 1-23. Saleeby, Najeeb, *History of Sulu*, Bureau of Printing, Manila, 1905. For the earliest trade mission to China, see: William Henry Scott, "Filipinos in China Before 1500," *Asian Studies*, Asian Center, Univ. of the Philippines, August, 1983.
- 4 Wadi, Julkipli, "The Philippines and the Islamic World," in *Philippine External Relations, a Centennial Vista*, edited by Aileen San Pablo Baviera and Lydia Yu-Jose, Foreign Service Institute, Dept. of Foreign Affairs, Manila, 1998:15-90.
- 5 Arberry, A. J., translator, *The Koran, Interpreted*, 2 vols. London and New York, 1955.
- 6 Breiner, Bert F. and Christian W. Troll, "Christianity and Islam," in John L. Esposito, editor in chief *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford and London, 1995, 5 vols. vol. 1: 280-286.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Cambridge. 1951. There were eight crusades from 1096 to 1291 where millions of Europeans most of whom were French fought "the Infidels" in the belief that they would attain salvation in paradise. While its main purpose was to conquer the Holy Land focused on Jerusalem, control over the city shifted back and forth from Muslim to Christian hands until the 19th C. Territorial gains of the Crusaders were limited to Spain and northwestern tip of Africa while Muslims not only remained in control over traditional territories but expanded to Eastern Europe. Europe in any event gained foothold in Asia and found direct routes to the East. The Crusades inaugurated Western aggressive Christianizing mission into Asia and Africa that became the handmaiden of colonial conquest of the world. In the aftermath, it strengthened the political power of the Papacy and enabled it to contest European monarchs. On the other hand despite the violence spawned by of European imperialism, there were also some positive effects of close

European and Asian contacts resulting in the cross-fertilization in the field of scholarship and learning.

- 9 The combined French, British and Russian forces exacted trade and commercial privileges called "Capitulations" from the Ottoman rulers since the early 17<sup>th</sup> C. and in 1798, the French occupied Egypt.