

Muslim - Christian Dialogue: In the Present Philippine Realities

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Assalamu Allaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarkahtuho!

Brief Background

The roots of conflict between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines can be traced back to the advent of Spanish Colonization. Spanish colonization used religion as an instrument for conquest. Long before the Spaniards set foot in the shores of what is now known as the Philippine Republic, the Muslims of the archipelago had already established a stable and prosperous society. The Spaniards used new Christian convert natives to fight against the Muslims in the name of the cross. This conquest was portrayed as a crusade of good--the Christians, against evil--the Muslims. It was the Spanish colonizers who coined the term Moro, extracted from the term 'Moors', as the collective name of the Muslims of the Philippines. The Spaniards used the term Moro with derogatory connotations, depicting them as a barbaric, piratical and uncivilized people. This event in the history of Philippines planted the seeds of the continuing prejudices and biases between and amongst the Muslim and Christian populace.

Then followed a string of colonizations; from the Spaniards came the Americans then the Japanese. One event led to another before the Philippines eventually became a modern nation state, a Republic having a Christian majority population. In fact, the Philippines is the only predominantly Catholic country in Southeast Asia. The once proud Muslim or Moro Nation has now been reduced to the status of a national minority.

In order to gain support and control over the majority population, the powers that be in the Philippines have never failed to utilize the age-old tactic of divide and rule, pitting the Christians against the Muslims, in the process rekindling historical animosities and further widening the gap between the two faith communities.

History had witnessed how the Marcos dictatorship in 1970's created and used Christian vigilantes to fight and sow terror against Muslim communities in Mindanao. Today, we have reason to believe that such tactics are still being practiced, albeit covertly. At the height of the Estrada administration's all out war in Mindanao two years ago, Christian fringe and vigilante groups who were rabidly anti-Muslim had resurfaced. These groups still continue to exist and from time to time issue statements agitating the Christian population to wage war against the Muslims. For the powers that be, the utilization of such tactics proved to be an effective instrument to maintain political hegemony over the majority population. With this situation, the Moro, minoritized and marginalized, continue to be at the losing end.

The Forum for Muslim-Christian Solidarity

1. What is being done

Ten years ago a group of us activists coming from Muslim and Christian backgrounds formed the Forum for Muslim-Christian Solidarity in Metro Manila (FMCS). Because of our religious convictions, we came together to search for common ways to address issues affecting the lives of the Muslims in the country. We were convinced that our respective faiths should not be a hindrance but a motivation for solidarity and that we should do something in the face of the conflicts in Mindanao that affected the lives of many Muslims, Christians and Lumads (indigenous peoples).

Taking advantage of the openness and seriousness of the government under then President Fidel Ramos' administration, we sponsored forums inviting representatives from the government, military, Congress, Muslim groups and non-government organizations (NGOs). We believed that the NGOs who were coming from or in close contact with the civilians are stakeholders and therefore need to be heard. Most often, in the midst of conflict between warring parties, it is the civilians who become casualties.

As we address social issues, we believe that our faith resources would help us, both Muslims and Christians, in making the country a better place to live in. Thus, we also scheduled days to study the basic beliefs of both traditions. We also studied the history of the struggle of the Moros in the Philippines, from the Moros' point of interpretation rather than from the Christians', to know who the Moros are and to understand their legitimate grievances.

Personal contacts between adherents of religion are very important in promoting cooperation and understanding. Thus, we facilitated exposure/immersion programs in Quiapo, one pocket area of Muslims in Manila. At one time, Christian young adults were invited to visit the Muslim community and interact with the members. Later on, they organized a medical mission team for the Muslim community. At another time, some theology students were assigned to live with Muslim families for a period of time to get a feel of the Muslim world and culture. Later on, some Christians were guests in the post-Ramadan celebration. On the part of the Christians, they also invited the Muslim friends to their church and let them see and experience the Holy Week celebration.

At the height of the "total war" policy of the administration of Mr. Estrada in 2000, the FMCS joined other human rights organizations and NGOs in forming the Peace Not War (Peace NoW) Movement, composed of Muslims and Christians. We were protesting against the "total war" policy of the government which was causing the death of hundreds of people, the displacement of thousands of families, and the destruction of livelihood and properties in Mindanao. Once we came together for an inter-faith ritual. An imam represented the Muslims, while a Catholic priest represented the Christian group. We read from our religious sources, the Qur'an and the Bible, for reflection and meditation. We prayed for peace in Mindanao and in the country. In the ritual of peace,

we released several doves as a sign of peace, and we embraced each other as a sign that our respective faiths are committed to work for peace.

2. Assessing the situation

a. The movement for Muslim-Christian dialogue is fast gaining grounds and winning more advocates. One very important challenge for the Muslim-Christian dialogue movement in the Philippines is how it can effectively muster the active participation and involvement of the grassroots of both faith communities. Existing movements appear to be limited only to known religious personalities, the academe, NGO technocrats and sometimes, politicians. This limitation can provide handicap towards the realization of real understanding and cooperation among the two faith communities. We know for the fact that those who are direct victims of inter-religious conflict and violence are the grassroots communities. Statements alone by known personalities of interfaith dialogue could not prevent extreme religious vigilantes from sowing terror in the communities. Sometimes these statements are reactive and come late after a certain incident has already happened.

While we do not claim to have a very successful program, the FMCS made several attempts to bring the dialogue movement to the grassroots communities in Manila.

b. In general, it is difficult to build a sense of community between the two religious communities in Manila. Recent researches point out the fact that Catholics are more prejudiced against the Muslims, than vice versa. This deep-seated prejudice against the Muslims prevents easy communication and dialogue between the two. This also makes the Muslims wary about any initiative coming from the Christians. In our experiences, we realize that it is the Christians who usually take the initiative in promoting inter-religious dialogue. Their initiatives are not easily accepted. Interestingly, we have learned that for the Muslims in Manila, dialogue means debate! Thus, when Christians come to visit the Muslims for dialogue, the Muslims would look for their Ustadz or Imam who can authoritatively "dialogue" (debate!) with the Christians.

c. The religious and spiritual identity of the Muslims is a life and death issue in the Philippines. The post 9-11 era gives a new impetus in the recurring Muslim-Christian animosity in the Philippines. In the global campaign against terrorism, anti-Muslim sentiment is being hyped. In the Philippines, bombings and other activities giving semblance to terrorism are immediately blamed on the Muslims. A virtual xenophobic atmosphere against the Muslims has been created and discrimination against the Muslims is once again on the rise.

Discrimination of the Bangsamoro people has been felt in manifold expressions in all dimensions of the social, political, cultural and economic spheres of our national life even before the 9-11 tragedy. It is a nightmare that is experienced in an almost daily basis. The term Muslim is disparagingly used in media with derogatory connotations. The Muslims are the usual suspects and fall guys in almost all criminal and "terroristic" incidents. Muslim students are forced to abandon religious customs to comply with

discriminatory policies of educational institutions. Some Muslims in the Metropolis even have to hide their true identities by assuming Christian names in order for them to get a job or rent an apartment or be accepted in dormitories or boarding houses.

Because of these harsh realities the Muslims in the Philippines are left with no other recourse but to defend themselves. There is a great danger that these sentiments of the Muslims can be manipulated by some Muslim extremist organizations and individuals riding on the issues of the Muslims for selfish and mercenary motives. These opportunists can easily grab and ride on this situation to further ignite religious animosities.

This is what we want to prevent. Our work in dialogue is focused on bringing interfaith dialogue and solidarity to the Muslim grassroots communities. It is only through this, we believe, that religious extremism can be prevented from flourishing within our communities.

Thank you very much and WASALAAM.