

Islam, Development, and the Muslim Filipinos¹

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Over the years, as a student of Muslim Filipino affairs, the writer has inquired into the past and present economic, political, social, and religious situation of the Moros. He has had to reflect to some extent on the role that Islam plays in their desire and effort to improve materially and spiritually their life situation—which is what he understands by development. This essay, then, offers some of the information and insights he has acquired about Islam and development, particularly with regard to Muslims in the Philippines. The essay focuses on three aspects of this large subject: First, some comments on Islam and development in general; Second, some reflections on the struggle of Muslim Filipinos to develop in accord with the Islamic ideals of development; Third, some thoughts about the future of development for the Muslims in this land.

Islam and Development

Any knowledgeable Muslim will be quick to point out that if by development we mean the upliftment of man's condition in every respect, then Islam is very much a religion of development. Some religious philosophies (even some Christian philosophies) disparage the worldly need of human beings and insist that their devotees focus only on the world to come. Not so Islam. Islam is not merely a set of rituals and doctrines, it is also a comprehensive code for the moral, spiritual, and social conduct of believers both as individuals and in community. One thing which distinguishes Islam's attitude toward development is that it insists that the improvement of the material well-being of believers be attained in consonance with their spiritual well-being. The achievement of material well-being at the cost of spiritual well-being, or vice versa, is contrary to Islam (cf. Gohri, 1972:281).

This, incidentally, explains part of the dynamics behind the recent Islamic revolution in Iran. Iran under the Shah had attained remarkable technological, economic, and material progress—so that it was regarded as one of the most modernized, progressive countries in the Middle East. But in the view of the Ayatollah Khomeini and millions of his followers, Iran's material development had been achieved at enormous spiritual cost. Understood in its own terms, the Islamic revolution in Iran is not an effort to turn back the clock on the country's material gains, but to bring about comparable gains in moral and spiritual development. This latter

involves purging Iranian society of those features of Western decadence and alien values which had accompanied Western technology.

On the subject of development, when one reads the Qur'an and the Hadith—the two basic sources in Islam for guidance on how believers should live—he discovers that the material and the spiritual are always held in proper relation. There are many verses in the Qur'an which can be cited to demonstrate this, but here take just one. In the Surah of the Assembly (LXII) we read (verses 9 and 10):

O ye who believe, when the call is heard for prayer on Friday, hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off all business. That is better for you, did you but know. And when the Prayer is ended then disperse in the land and seek of God's bounty, and remember God much, that you may prosper.

This passage, and there are others like it, encourages believers to go about diligently earning their livelihood—but in the same breath it also exhorts them to remember God and their duty to pray to Him. Thus believers will both seek God's bounty in the earth and seek to be spiritually in right relation to God their Creator.

The Qur'an teaches that man has a purpose for being and that God holds him responsible and accountable for fulfilling the purpose. The purpose of man's creation is that he should receive the impress of God's attributes and should manifest these attributes within the limits of his capacities (Hussein, 1974:159). In order to achieve this purpose, God has endowed man with appropriate powers and capacities and has given man dominion over the earth and its resources. Says the Qur'an (XXI:20):

God has made subservient to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth and granted to you His bounties both manifest and hidden.

Man is thus urged to gain control of nature and the earth since God has created them for man's service. On the basis of this and similar verses, Muslim scholars assert that in Islam, scientific research and progress in technology are enjoined; development is a duty. In the perspective of Islam, there is no virtue in shunning the bounties of God. On the contrary, the virtue is in enjoying them, though within the framework of God's will for man's moral and spiritual development (cf. Hussein, 1974:159-60).

Islam teaches that God made man to live a life of obedience to His holy will, to bear the impress of His image and to lead a morally righteous, physically healthy, and spiritually wholesome life. This is genuine *manhood*. Accordingly, in Islam all development, material and spiritual, must have in view the progress of the person towards this genuine manhood. Development which aims solely at *manpower*—that is, which aims at the individual or collective improvement of human power and wealth and comfort as ends in themselves—cannot be Islamic. In Islam, all human development must be seen to serve the purpose of God, not man; and the purpose of God is to bring man and the communities of men to their proper manhood (For an elaboration of this theme see Gowing, 1977:248-50).

There is a widespread view, particularly in the West, that Islam as a religion stands in the way of development and is identified with economically and technologically stagnant and unprogressive societies. This is a grossly erroneous view even while it must be admitted that there are Muslim societies which are backward in terms of modern technology and economic and material well-being. But the causes of this backwardness can, in virtually every case, be attributed to factors and dynamics which have nothing to do with Islam. Indeed, it is well attested that Islam has been associated historically with societies and civilizations of great scientific, technological, social, and artistic achievement. And today a number of Muslim lands, having freed themselves from an exploitative colonialism, are making remarkable strides in development. Of course, some Muslim lands are *not* developing. But, again, the reasons are not to be found in some inadequacy in Islam. Some years ago Karamat Gohri, an able young Pakistani diplomat assigned in Manila, was questioned by journalists on his view of Islam and development. When he was asked what Islam as a religion expected of its followers and what blame should attach to Islam if Muslims failed to live up to the expectations, he gave an eloquently straightforward answer (Gohri, 1972:284):

Islam expects its followers to lead a normal, healthy and balanced life in piety, righteousness and truth. Islam expects Muslims to mould their lives according to the teachings of Koran which were personified and epitomized in the life of the Holy Prophet. If a believer goes astray, it is his fault and religion cannot be held responsible for his shortcomings.

The Qur'an itself, of course, points out that man is quite capable of abusing or misusing the powers with which God endows him. The earth

and its resources are given to man as an *amanah*, a trust, to facilitate the perfection of his true nature and purpose in the world. But man often proves foolish or ignorant; he forgets that he is God's creature and that he owes obedience to God's commands. In his forgetfulness he becomes unjust, a tyrant and a fool (see Qur'an XXXIII:72; LIX:19; see also Majul, 1980:7-8).

Muslim Filipinos and Development

In light of what we have said about Islam being a religion of development, what can we say of the development situation of the Muslim Filipinos?

Certainly from the standpoint of material and technological development, the 2.5 million Muslim Filipinos are presently in a sad condition. In the two so-called "Autonomous Regions" where the largest percentage of their population is concentrated, we find that, based on recent statistical studies (summarized in *Ibon Facts & Figures*, 1981), the usual indices of development present a bleak picture indeed. These two Regions in 1980 had the highest number of illiterates and semi-literates in the Philippines—only six out of ten people could write, against a national average of eight out of ten. In Region XII the food consumption levels in 1980 were below national levels for all food groups except cereals. The national food sufficiency rate in 1980 averaged 60.17%, but in Region XII it was 48.25%. In Region IX in 1975, 85% of the inhabitants did not own the land where their houses stood and 71% lived in houses judged to be in poor and dilapidated condition. In 1975 the average annual family income in Region IX was ₱1,118; in Region XII it was a little higher, ₱1,245—but these figures were far below the national average of ₱5,456 per family (*Journal of Philippines Statistics*, 1978:99). Again in 1975 the Philippines as a whole averaged 29.1 live births per 1000 population, while in Regions IX and XII (where people are no less fertile than the rest of the Philippine population) the average was only 18.3 and 16.3, respectively (*Philippine Statistical Yearbook*, 1979: 78-79). All these figures support impressions outside observers readily formulate as they travel in areas where Muslim Filipinos predominate: impressions of poverty, widespread unemployment or underemployment, poor standards of sanitation, health, and education.

An *Ilaga* commander voiced the sentiment of many Christian Filipinos when he addressed a letter to Muslim Filipino leaders ten years ago (*Darwa'l Islam*, 1972:3), saying:

If the Muslims in the Philippines are poor and backward it is because of their wrong religion and ideology, Islam. You will understand the meaning of what I am saying by just seeing the difference in progress between a Christian and Muslim Filipino. This holds true with regard to their communities. The entire nation would have been united, peaceful and progressive were it not for the mistake of the Muslims in resisting the implementation of the Cross in Mindanao at the time of the arrival of the Spaniard. You and your people should not compound your grievous historical mistake by clinging on to the religion that has only brought poverty, ignorance and darkness to you and your community.

The writer of this letter revealed his ignorance not only of Islam but of history. He also showed his poor grasp of the social, political, and economic dynamics behind such conditions as "poverty, ignorance and darkness" — whether in the Muslim areas or in some of the predominantly Christian areas of the Philippines.

Looking for a moment at history, we find that at the time of the coming of Islam to the southern Philippines in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the inhabitants of this archipelago were in a comparatively undeveloped condition, living in small baranganic settlements, following various types of subsistence-level economics. There existed in the Philippines no *civilization*, understood in its technical sense. The coming of Islam introduced the first sustained spiritual and ideological impetus to civilization about which we have any information. Filipino groups in Mindanao and Sulu which embraced Islam developed the most advanced socio-political organization which existed at the time of the Spanish arrival in the Philippines in the sixteenth century. They also became conscious of being part of a wider religious community in the world beyond their shores. Under the influence of Islam, they learned a new system of writing, a new way of keeping track of time, and received other such contributions from the arts and science of Islamic civilization. In short, under the aegis of Islam, through the influence of Muslim missionaries and traders from abroad and the impact of economic and religious contacts with other parts of the Muslim World, the Filipinos who became Muslims underwent a remarkable degree of development. Cesar Majul (1972:7) has commented:

Islam introduced so many features and had so transformed the older culture that it produced a veritable new culture. . . . It cannot be denied that the different Muslim

groups in the Philippines formed one single spiritual community and shared a common culture distinct from those of non-Muslims in the islands.

Moreover, many historians have pointed out that had history taken its course undisturbed, the Muslims might well have Islamized the whole of the Philippines. All the inhabitants of the archipelago might well have developed along Islamic lines. But this was not to be. Renato Constantino (1975:28) succinctly tells us why:

Instead of the more developed society expanding its influence over the others and diffusing its culture and social organization throughout the less developed ones, Spanish conquest aborted this historical trend, developed the other regions, and froze the evolution of what had once been the more advanced society—the Muslim South.

Picking up from this comment of Constantino, an important point should be stressed. In terms of technological and material development, the evolution of Muslim Filipino society has remained more or less stagnant from Spanish times until the present. What advances there have been over the centuries have certainly not been at the pace seen among the Christian Filipinos. Why has this been so? The answer basically is that Muslim Filipinos have expended so much of their energy and resources trying to maintain their identity, culture, and political freedom in the face of the colonial onslaught that they have had little energy or resources left over for life-enhancing development. The Moros fought the Spaniards tooth and nail rather than yield to the Spanish policy aimed at their Christianization and colonial subjugation. For a decade early in this century, they likewise fought costly, devastating battles resisting the American colonial regime which sought to impose foreign ways and values.

Indeed, throughout this century Muslim Filipinos have been obliged to stand by more or less helpless and watch outsiders, at first Americans, then Christian Filipinos, come to govern them in their own territory, impose strange laws, levy odious taxes, subvert or suborn their leadership, and seize their weapons. They have had to acquiesce as a Philippine government many of them had never really recognized set up schools and sent teachers to teach their children values and customs alien to their own. They have listened sullenly to lawmakers devising grand schemes for their integration into the mainstream of the Philippine nation, schemes implemented in a manner which showed contempt for their religion and culture and which obviously sought their assimilation into a Christian

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society. They have also watched as hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands of settlers from the north and central provinces of the Philippines came down to Mindanao, encouraged by the government, and occupied lands the Muslims had always thought belonged to them. Invoking land laws the Muslim had had no part in formulating and often taking advantage of Muslim Filipino ignorance of, or indifference to, these laws, the settlers encroached on the living space of the Muslims. Sometimes they cheated Muslims out of their lands in collusion with corrupt officials or even with the connivance of self-serving Muslim leaders. When from time to time Muslim Filipinos raised the banner of revolt against what they saw as injustice and oppression, they were almost always defeated and sometimes suffered retribution at the hands of Philippine Constabulary or Army forces (see Tan, 1977).

All of this is a matter of abundant historical record and it goes a long way towards explaining why, in material terms, the development situation of the Muslim Filipinos is in such a sorry state. For more than a decade now, the Muslim areas have been caught up in a desultory rebellion which has cost them enormously in lives lost, people displaced, and property destroyed. And what has the fighting been about? The government has its answer to that question. The leftist groups have their answer (see Gowing, 1980:287-94). But the Muslims themselves, and most especially the ones who have been doing the fighting, say that they are struggling against colonialism — Filipino colonialism,² which, like its Spanish and American predecessors, is seen to threaten the religion, identity, and culture of the Muslims and appropriate their lands and resources. In the opening paragraph of its "Manifesto on the Establishment of the Bangsa Moro Republik" (March 18, 1974), the rebel Moro National Liberation Front spoke of the "oppressed Bangsa Moro people" who wished to free themselves "from the terror, oppression and tyranny of Filipino colonialism," which among other things has caused "untold suffering and misery by criminally usurping our land" and threatened Islam "through wholesale destruction and desecration of its places of worship and its Holy Book."

We reiterate a point made earlier: Because the Muslim Filipinos have been for centuries on the defensive against real or imagined attacks by powerful non-Muslim forces, they have found it almost impossible to develop as Muslims and in Islamic terms. Reacting to the onslaught of colonialism, whether in its blatantly aggressive forms or in its more subtle integrationist guises, many Muslim Filipinos have hardened their institutions, becoming tradition-bound and resistant to change. Suspicious of de-

velopment programs initiated by outsiders, they have often repudiated such programs outright or undermined or sabotaged their implementation. This was a very natural, very human reaction, and one common to minority people everywhere who feel themselves oppressed or threatened with ethnocide.

Prospects for Muslim Filipino Development

"Ethnocide"—this is what Muslim Filipinos fear most and what they have been struggling against for centuries, a struggle which has inhibited their development. Cesar Majul (1980:113) has stated that unless the Philippine government and the majority population face up to the fact of cultural pluralism in this archipelago, they will be obliged either to kill off all the Muslims (i.e., commit genocide) or take steps to systematically destroy the Muslim Filipino religion and culture (i.e., commit ethnocide). Muslim rebels in the past have indeed charged that Muslim Filipinos are being subjected to genocide. Most Muslims, of course, recognize that that is not so. It is not the policy of the government or of the Christian population to kill off all the Muslims—though the killing has been terrible on both sides. But many Muslims are convinced that there is, and has been for a long time, a policy of ethnocide. And certainly there are many Christians who agree that the country would be better off if the Muslims would simply abandon Islam. But four centuries of Moro wars should have impressed upon everyone that Muslim Filipinos would prefer death to giving up their faith. Michael Mastura, a Muslim delegate from Cotabato to the 1971-72 Constitutional Convention, told his fellow delegates (1972:18-19): "Even more traumatic than the prospects of physical extermination is the fear to be totally submerged in a Christian-based national Filipino identity."

Most Muslims, whether rebels or moderates or ordinary people, are convinced that their proper development as Muslims cannot occur unless there is a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between the Muslim population and the Philippine State. Some, but by no means all, of the Moro rebels feel that that restructuring demands nothing short of secession, complete independence. Many other rebels, the moderates and probably the majority of ordinary Muslim Filipinos, feel that some form of genuine autonomy—such as that envisaged (though not yet really implemented) in the Tripoli Agreement of December 1976—would suffice to give them the freedom they require to live and develop more fully as Muslims.

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It is hard for Christians to understand why Muslim Filipinos are so insistent on a restructuring of their relationship to the Philippine State. They cannot see why Muslims do not simply behave as law-abiding citizens on the same basis as everybody else, accepting their share of the economic pie, however large or small it may be. Many Christians feel that, as it is, a disproportionate amount of development spending is in the Muslim areas and that other deserving areas are being neglected. They charge the Muslims with ingratitude for all that is being done for them.

Whether the Muslims are in fact being given a disproportionate amount of assistance by the national government is in fact open to examination. But that is beside the point. The point is that the Muslim Filipinos perceive government-sponsored development programs as tools for their absorption into a general Philippine society whose goals have little or nothing to do with the religious and moral goals of Muslim society. Muslims, as Cesar Majul (1980:98) reminds us, do not prefer sickness to health, rags to good clothes, ice-boxes to frigidaires, and carabao transportation to cars and buses. They are not against roads, schools, health facilities, and industrial plants. But they would like to have these worthwhile things on their own terms and embrace them in a manner which will further the good of their society as Islam understands that good. As far as Muslims are concerned, their economic, social, political, moral, and spiritual development towards the good presupposes a measure of communal freedom which has not been possible within the Philippine political system. Therefore, they have been struggling for a degree of genuine autonomy.

What are their prospects for achieving it? Perhaps we can at this point only answer that there are some bases for pessimism but also some bases for optimism. Easy optimism that Muslim Filipinos will soon achieve genuine autonomy is discouraged when we view the way in which the Tripoli Agreement has been handled. Probably most Muslims rightly regard the Tripoli Agreement as a very promising statement of the principles behind the autonomy they seek; they would like to see negotiations resumed between the MNLF and the Philippine government on the basis of the Tripoli Agreement. Insofar as Christian Filipinos know and understand the contents of the Tripoli agreement, many of them oppose it as making too many concessions to a minority people. Sensing the unpopularity of the Agreement with some sectors of the public, the government, some observers believe, may be obstructing the implementation of the Agreement even while it insists that it is implementing it.³ In any event, a careless remark by a high-ranking Foreign Ministry official in March 1980 to the effect that the Tripoli Agreement was no longer valid caused many Mus-

lms to question the government's sincerity, and prompted Nur Misuari and his followers in the MNLF to abandon autonomy and revert to secession as the stated goal of their rebellion.

Another discouraging factor is that there is really no understanding of, or friendly disposition to Muslim aspirations for autonomy among the generality of Christian Filipinos. Many fear that autonomy is just one step short of secession and the dismemberment of the nation. There certainly has not been much effort to educate the public on what autonomy means.

The fact that the Philippine government tends to rely on "politically reliable" Muslim politicians as spokesmen for the Muslims must also be seen as a negative factor. These politicians are supporters of the status quo—they divide the Muslim community and stand in the way of public attention to the more authentic leaders of Muslim opinion and society.

The present disunity of the rebel leadership at home and abroad must be seen as a discouraging factor as well. That some of these leaders now advocate the secession of the Muslim regions from the Philippine Republic, rather than a form of autonomy within the Republic, is likewise discouraging. Their stance injures the cause of autonomy in that it reinforces the suspicion in the minds of many Christians that secession is really what the struggle is all about.

And, finally, we will have to count the character of the present Philippine government—described as "constitutional authoritarianism"—as a factor which discourages optimism about prospects for genuine autonomy for the Muslim Filipino any time soon. Authoritarianism of any type would seem incompatible with the true sharing of power presupposed by the autonomy which Muslims desire. Whether the present authoritarianism is a permanent or a temporary characteristic of the Philippine political system remains to be seen. But as long as it exists it is hard to see how headway can be made towards Muslim autonomy.

But there are factors which sound a more optimistic note for the autonomy Muslims desire as *sine qua non* for the preservation of their identity and selfhood as citizens of this republic. First, the very existence of the Tripoli Agreement is a positive factor. It is the high-water mark of the Muslim struggle over the past dozen years. It clarifies what most Muslims realistically aspire for: defining an area of autonomy and the principles for the structure of that autonomy. The fact that the Philippine government was a party to the Agreement—even if it has seemed in some respects to back away from it—gives at least tacit official acknowledgement that the restructuring of the relations of the

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Muslim population to the Philippine State is important to the solution of the centuries-old "Moro Problem."

Another positive factor is that there is a better understanding among an increasing number of influential Filipinos that the Philippines is a religiously and culturally plural society and will remain so. There is a growing awareness that the Muslims (not to mention the other minority groups) have had good reason to feel aggrieved and are, by any standards of human decency and fairness, entitled to certain rights and accommodations as a community. Individuals and institutions, public and private, some related to the church, are making efforts to promote this sort of understanding.

Certainly one of the most encouraging developments is the rise in the last fifteen or twenty years of a small core of Muslim leaders and thinkers who have been able, from within Philippine society, to eloquently articulate the grievances and aspirations of their people, suggesting concrete, feasible ways of accommodating them while affirming loyalty to the Philippine nation. They have been advocates for "unity-in-diversity"—and to some extent the Philippine government, even in its authoritarian form, has proven responsive. The promulgation of a Code of Muslim Personal Laws, the establishment of the Philippine Amanah Bank, the growing relationship between the madrasah school system and the Ministry of Education and Culture, the setting up of a Ministry for Muslim Affairs, the growing number of Muslim civil service appointees do testify to the government's responsiveness, whatever one might say in particular criticism of these developments.

Still another encouraging factor is the Islamic renewal movement, especially among young Muslim Filipinos. In touch with the world-wide movement for moral and spiritual renewal, young Muslim Filipinos are developing into more knowledgeable, more deeply and spiritually committed Muslims than perhaps their elders were. And this movement stresses that better Muslims make better citizens. These young Muslims have a vision of the lines along which their community should develop, materially and spiritually; and from their ranks will come the informed, articulate leaders of tomorrow, who will emphasize that Muslims do not wish to be developed by others but wish to develop themselves in accord with Islamic ideals. They ask only the freedom to do so.

Finally, we can point to the fact that Muslim Filipinos are today more squarely on the map of the Muslim World as yet another factor which encourages optimism for the future. Muslim Filipinos are not alone—the eyes of the Muslim World are on them and their situation in

this country. The Muslim World gives them moral and to some extent material support in their just struggle for communal rights.

Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls).

Qur'an XIII:11

Notes

¹Paper read at the Philippine Political Science Association National Conference, Mindanao State University, Marawi City, 24-26, September 1982 (This issue of *SJ* was actually printed in November 1982, a bit late. *Ed.*)

²The Indian journalist T. J. S. George in his *Revolt in Mindanao* (1980:84), chides the Muslim rebels for failing to see the distinction between "a colonial and an independent government." In the view of Muslims, Mr. George misses the point, which is that the government in Manila, whether Spanish, American, or Christian Filipino, is a government foreign to the Moros.

³For a cogent critique of the way autonomy under the Tripoli Agreement has been implemented, see Abul Khayr Alonto, *Autonomy By the People*, 1982. For a complete text of the Tripoli Agreement and a Philippine Government defense of the way the Agreement has been implemented, see *White Paper on the Fulfillment of Autonomy for Muslim Filipinos*, 1982.

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