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Mindanao Armed Conflict: Religious or Otherwise?

ABSTRACT

This study investigates and contests the labelling of the armed-conflict in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines as religious in nature. By historicizing the inception and evolution of the conflict, this study intends to make explicit the pertinent factors that are concealed in the process of labelling the conflict as religious. Furthermore, employing William Cavanaugh's deconstructive contestation of the very idea of religion, this essay aims at destabilizing the essentialistic tendency to regard religion as a violent entity.

Keywords: Mindanao armed-conflict, historicizing, religion, William Cavanaugh

INTRODUCTION

Is the armed conflict in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines religious in nature? Several authors either explicitly or implicitly suggest that it is. In "The Religious and Social Motivations behind Islamic Insurgencies in the Philippines," Chun Yin Yeung identifies the Muslim's intent to please Allah and strengthen their relationship with Him by making His Word supreme and to politically assert their rights and freedom for self-determination with the purpose of establishing a state that imposes the Shariah Law as the underlying religious reasons of the separatist groups' struggle with the Philippine government.[1] In "Causes of Terrorism: The Philippine Case," Samira Gutoc accentuates that the rise of separatist groups in Mindanao is influenced by religious fundamentalist ideologies.[2] While acknowledging its multifaceted aspects, Maria Vivod, in "Multiple Layers of the Conflict in Mindanao," conjectures that the long-standing religious rivalry between Christians and Muslims in the country worsens the Mindanao problem.[3] Also, in "Cause of Conflict Between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao," Victor posits that the violent religious traditions, which he readily associated with Islam, exacerbate the conflict.[4] Contrary to what these researchers held, however, this paper argues that associating of religious beliefs to causing the conflict, the correlating of religious affiliations to violence, the essentializing tendencies to regard religion as an inherently violent entity, and the linking of political ideologies to "religion" are but reductionist interpretations of the conflict's complex history.

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[1] Chung Yin Yeung, "The Religious and Social Motivations behind Islamic Insurgencies in the Philippines." Unpublished Material. UK: Salford University, 2014. https://www.academia.edu/18058908/Religious_and_Social_Motivations_behind_Islamic_Insurgencies_in_the_Philippines [accessed November 22, 2017]: 2.

[2] Samira A. Gutoc, "Cause of "Terrorism": The Philippine Case," in *Arellano Law and Policy Review* 4.1 (July 2003): 60–61.

[3] Maria Vivod, "The Multiple Layers of Conflict in Mindanao," https://www.academia.edu/28449836/THE_MULTIPLE_LAYERS_OF_CONFLICT_IN_MINDANAO [accessed November 22, 2017]: 7.

[4] Victor, "Cause of Conflict Between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao, Part 1 (July 2005)," unpublished material. http://www.iiipeace.org/Philippines%20Causes%20of%20Conflict%20between%20Christians%20and%20Muslims.htm [accessed December 08, 2017]: 1–2.

We contend that the misreading of the Mindanao conflict is mainly due to either an apparent misinterpretation of its history and/or an uncritical and credulous confidence and on the contested idea—religion.

To prove that the Mindanao conflict is other than religious, this investigation involves two tasks. To bring more clarity to the inception and development of the conflict, the first task engages the scholarly work of several authors in an attempt to historicize the armed struggle between the Islamic separatist groups and the Philippine government. Subsequently, in order to unravel the mistaken entanglement between religion and violence, the second task employs William Cavanaugh's critical contestation of the very idea, "religion."[5] The paper makes use of Cavanaugh's insights on the contested idea of religion in order to make explicit the quiet remnants of a deeply rooted Spanish colonial Christianization project that is tacitly implicated in the ongoing conflict.

THE INCEPTION OF THE ARMED CONFLICT

The armed conflict in Mindanao certainly did not just appear from a vacuum. The Spanish colonization of the Philippines in the 16th century, with its intent to Christianize the whole indigenous and Muslim populace, instigated it. The Spaniards reached Mindanao in 1526 "with their sword and cross."[6] Alongside these, they carried with them their animosity and struggle with the Moro people in their own land and projected it to the Muslim communities in Mindanao. Peter Gowing notes that the Spaniards brought a "fanatical hatred of Islam which was born of hundred years of struggling for independence from the Moorish rule."[7] From this, we can conclude that the religious tagging of the conflict has its

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[5]William Cavanaugh, a professor of DePaul University, is a renowned theologian in the twenty-first century. He has major contributions in political theology, economic ethics, and ecclesiology.

[6]Karl M. Gaspar, *Davao in the Pre-Conquest Era and the Age of Colonization* (Davao City: Alethia, 2015), 18.

[7]Peter Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland: the American government of Muslim Filipinos, 1899-1920* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1977), 13.

roots in the Spanish rule. The Spanish intent to subjugate the Muslim communities became mixed up in their agenda of proselytizing the natives. Understandably, we can infer that the Muslim's struggle is fundamentally a reaction to their experience of threat against their security and identity. Ivan Molloy, in "The Decline of Moro National Liberation Front in the Southern Philippines," observes that the Muslim communities perceived their struggle for over four centuries "as a fight to protect their religion, cultural identity, and homeland against foreign invaders."[8]

When the colonization project continued, the tribes in the north [Luzon] and central [Visayas] parts of the Philippines were easily conquered and converted to Christianity, but, "Muslim Mindanao was never successfully seized and colonized by the Spaniard."[9] These happenings, however, had seen undesirable consequences to the Muslim communities. "While the north and the central part of the Philippines, that embraced Christianity and learned the European culture, started to develop economically, socially and politically, the Muslim communities in Mindanao that resisted Spain remained stagnated in these aspects."[10] The stagnation occurred because they were highly marginalized and disintegrated in the larger national political system. Moreover, although there was an apparent tolerance for Muslims' own governance and religious practices during the tail-end of the Spanish regime, the Muslim communities saw themselves marginalized still in the larger Christian polity.[11] In addition, the intention to colonize and Christianize them had never completely left the imaginings of the Spaniards.[12] Christina Montiel discerns the influence of the Spanish

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[8] Ivan Molloy, "The Decline of the Moro National Liberation Front in the Southern Philippines," in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 18.1 (1988): 61.

[9] Patricio Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict* (Davao City: MindaNews Publication, 2003), 3.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] Cesar Adib Majul, "The Moro Struggle in the Philippines," *Third World Quarterly: Islam and Politics* 10.2 (April 1988): 898.

[12] Cristina J. Montiel, et. al, "The Moro Struggle and the Challenge to Peace Building in Mindanao, Southern Philippines," in *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, eds. Dan Landis and Rosita D. Albert (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 75.

rule to the escalation of the armed-conflict in Mindanao along three dimensions:

> *"First, the colonization of the Luzon and Visayan regions of the Philippines, including northern and eastern Mindanao, led to the formation of a socioreligious collectivity called Christian, which may, in turn, have led to the development of the Filipino identity. Second, the Spanish divide-and-rule strategy created and sustained feelings of hatred and mistrust between the Moros and the Christianized Filipinos. Third, Spanish colonial aggression weakened the Muslim sultanates economically and politically, thereby allowing for the easy conquest of the Moros and the occupation of their territory by another colonial aggressor, the USA."[13]*

The agenda mentioned above continued to reverberate under the American and the Philippine governance. After the Treaty of Paris and subsequently overcoming resistances from the Filipino revolutionaries and the Moros, the Americans ruled the Philippines in 1898.[14] Under the US government, Muslims experienced a similar fate that they had endured during the Spanish rule. The new administration initiated political devices that suppressed and tried to integrate the Muslims in the larger Philippine society. The assimilation efforts of these new colonizers resulted in another conflict for the Muslim communities and "the labeling and classification of the population, the discriminatory provisions of public laws, and the resettlement program had contributed significantly to their struggle."[15] Montiel adds that:

> *The minoritization of the erstwhile indigenous and majority Moros, as well as the non-Christian and non-Muslim lumads of Mindanao, was the result of a series of deliberate programs to voluntarily resettle or repopulate the area with predominantly Christian migrants from*

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[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*, 76.

Luzon and the Visayas... this numerical domination of the indigenous Moro (and Lumad) minorities by nonindigenous (and predominantly Christian) settlers was exacerbated by (and may have in fact produced the conditions for) economic deprivation of the indigenous Moro and Lumad peoples."[16]

These programs had propelled the influx of Christian Filipino migrants from Luzon and Visayas to Mindanao, which had added serious troubles in the Moro land.[17]

In 1946, the Philippines gained its independence from the US colonial power. It could had been a fresh start for the Moro people. Unfortunately, however, the newly independent Philippine government adopted the American political structure and most of its programs.[18] Montiel states:

As the new Philippine state was formed, the entire machinery of a unitary system of government was put in full force. The land distribution policy and the discriminatory public land laws remained in effect; the resettlement programs also intensified. Compulsory public education remained a tool of cultural integration. In local governance, more and more Moro leaders were absorbed into positions of power, both national and local. The political units that were earlier tagged as special were finally allowed by law in the mid–1950s to elect their local officials. At the start, Moro and Lumad leaders easily won in their traditional territories. But as a consequence of migration, as the arrival of more and more settlers led to numerical dominance, it became more difficult for Moro and Lumad leaders to win in their own towns. As a result, tension and resentment began to build up.[19]

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[16]*Ibid.*

[17]Jorge V. Tigno, "Migration and Violent Conflict in Mindanao," in *Population Review* 45.1 (2006): 23.

[18]Montiel, *The Moro Struggle and the Challenge to Peace Building in Mindanao*, 77.

[19]*Ibid.*

Under this new state, violent confrontations between the Philippine government and the Muslims continued. Worst, these eventualities have resulted to the sprouting of the Islamic separatist groups.[20] The declaration of Martial Rule in 1972 by the late President Marcos, that was supposedly intended to suppress the uprisings of the *New People's Army* (NPA) and the pockets of Muslim groups had resulted to the founding of the *Moro Nationalist Liberation Front* (MNLF) in that same year.[21] In 1985, the MNLF experienced divisions that birthed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Montiel, 79).[22] As the conflict persisted, an infamous *Abu Sayyaf Group* (ASG) was established in 1995. Another notorious separatist group called Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) was established in 2010. The ascent of these separatist groups has seen an endless oscillation of events from conflict to peace. But it is a kind of peace that would only ricochet back to conflict because it does not address the main roots of the problem. The oscillation between conflict and peace has become an interminable cycle for decades. This situation eventually leads many Filipinos to become all the more indifferent to the conflict in Mindanao. Conflict has become so natural that many would just take it as the fact of life that cannot be settled. Despite the ceaseless conflict, however, the pursuit of peace came to fruition when the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was established in August 1989 through a constitutional mandate.[23] Although after it was established the conflict has not abated, the work for peace continues.[24]

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[20]Charles O. Frake, "Abu Sayyaf: Displays of Violence and the Proliferation of the Contested Identities among Philippine Muslims," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 100.1 (March 1998): 41.
[21]Montiel, *The Moro Struggle and the Challenge to Peace Building in Mindanao*, 79.
[22]*Ibid.*
[23]Wikipedia, "Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomous_Region_in_Muslim_Mindanao#ARMM's_precursors [accessed December 10, 2017].
[24]Montiel, *The Moro Struggle and the Challenge to Peace Building in Mindanao*, 80–87. According to Montiel, the work for peace continues and, if not initiated by the government, is constantly sought by Church groups and NGOs. Montiel presents lengthy discussion on peace initiatives done by the government, NGOs and religious sectors.

As discussed, the historical accounts of the conflict in Mindanao attest to the idea that the rise of the Muslim separatist groups and their constant skirmish with the Philippine government was primarily due to their long-standing history of marginalization and their pursuit for political self-determination and not to any religious motivation. Hence, we can sensibly conjecture that its religious characterization, a rather simplistic deduction of a complex situation, is due to the misreading of or the lack of historical awareness about its roots and the immediately uncritical tagging of the conflict as "religious."

THE IRRELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE ARMED CONFLICT

In his poetic narration, Diaz describes the Mindanao conflict in the following words:

> *Betrayal begot the Muslim and Mindanao problems. Betrayal of trust, of truth, and of justice. People so trusting left abandoned; truth distorted; justice mocked. Betrayal angered, disillusioned. Twisted truth deceived. Injustice, real or imagined, embittered, alienated. They fueled the Mindanao conflict. Selfishness and greed for political and economic power blinded deafened. People were lulled with promises to hope, each time to be awakened in disillusionment. There were always scapegoats to blame. The Muslim conflict remained unsolved. This has gone on for centuries. The actor changing; the script recurring. The Muslim problem nourishing the Mindanao problem; the Mindanao conflict feeding on both.*[25]

Here, Diaz emphasizes two interrelated problems embedded in the Mindanao conflict that can only be substantially understood against the background of its history: the "Mindanao problem" and the "Moro problem". The former pertains to ""the socio-economic and political struggles of Muslims against the

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[25]Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict,* xvi.

Spaniards, Americans and the current Philippine government," while, the latter refers to "the socio-cultural life of the Muslim people.""[26] Diaz is keen to note that there is no religious taint in their struggle for self-determination. Likewise, Bacani asserts their war against the government is a political struggle for self-determination.[27] While Cragin and Chalk identify the political and social marginalization and minorization of the Muslims as grounds of their resistance with the Philippine government,[28] Gowing avers that "the Christian-Muslim tension has to do with economic, greed, and power struggles."[29]

Moreover, this paper is in agreement with Adriano that the Mindanao conflict needs serious attention. In his article, "A second look at understanding the Mindanao conflict," he highlights several ideas that are critical to understanding the Moro struggle. For him, the insurrectionary Muslim force is a reaction to their marginalization and the constant threat to their communities and not because of fundamentalist ideologies. Likewise, their struggle was never intended to promote an independent state but a fight for political recognition. By highlighting these aspects, he debunks the notion that the Muslims are the primary aggressors and Islam is a violent religion. Moreover, he avers that it is incorrect to consider them as a homogenous group and to ascribe or universalize violence to the general Muslim people. He also asserts that the conflict is not only geographic-specific, but it is a nation-wide concern and the

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[26]*Ibid.*, 2.
[27]Bacani, 506.
[28]Kim Cragin and Peter Chalk, "Mindanao," in *Terrorism and Development: Using Social and Economic Development to Inhibit a Resurgence of Terrorism* (US: Rand, 2003), 15-22. Likewise, Tigno accentuates that "the contemporary conflict situation embedded in the social fabric of Mindanao is rooted in the historical, systematic, and collective marginalization and mineralization of the indigenous Filipino Muslims or Moros and native Lumad peoples (See Tigno, "Migration and Violent Conflict in Mindanao," 23)."
[29]Peter G. Gowing, "Of Different Minds: Muslim and Christian Perceptions of the Mindanao Problem," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, 5.4 (December 1977): 243-252.

military solution, based on the long history of the struggle, was and will never be successful.[30]

Hence, we contend that in the tagging of the conflict as religious in nature, the socio-economic, cultural and political reasons are shelved in the shadows of religion. So far, the conflict's underlying reason is clearly socio-political and economic in nature: the government's political effort to integrate and regulate the Muslims in the Philippine society and the desire for the utilization of the natural resources of the Moroland. More to this however, the paper would also assert that the religious characterization of the conflict tacitly and adversely incites an idea that Islam is a violent religion.

RIPPLES OF THE COLONIAL PROJECT

To deepen the discussion further, we engage Cavanaugh's critical analysis of the contested term "religion". In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh is resolute in correcting a view that uncritically associates violence with religion. Arguing against the "absolutist" and "functionalist" views that regard religion as a basic, transhistorical, and transcultural component of human social life identifiable with its content or function," he advances a constructivist view that sees religion as a constructed idea—"a term that constructs and is constructed by different kinds of political configurations," and as such, "has been used in different times and places by people according to different interests."[31]

Challenging the idea that religion "has caused more violence" than other institutional forces, Cavanaugh argues that the conception of religion is "historically specific" thus purporting the impression that "there is no transhistorical or transcultural

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[30]Fermin A. Adriano, "A second look at understanding the Mindanao conflict" (February 1999), Business World Publication, in http://www-lexisnexis-com.kuleuven.ezproxy.kuleuven.be/hottopics/lnacademic/?verb=sr&csi=173384&sr=HEADLINE(A+second+look+at+understanding+the+Mindanao+conflict)%2BAND%2BDATE%2BIS%2B1999 [accessed December 14, 2017].
[31]William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 58.

concept of religion." He posits that religion is not "a universal genus," "a system of propositions or beliefs," a "purely interior impulse," "an institutional force," and "a supernatural" realm of activity" as opposed to the modern assumption. For him, "What counts as religion and what does not depends on the configurations of power and authority."[32]

Refuting the idea that religion "tends to be absolutist, divisive and irrational"[33] and thus susceptible to endorsing violence, Cavanaugh asserts the need to be critical on what is legitimized with these accusations. He is particularly critical about the essentializing tendencies to attribute religion with violence for it legitimizes political and secular arrangements and at the same time authorizes the marginalization of what is considered "religion".[34] He even criticizes scholars "who appear to agree that religion promotes violence," but are ambiguous in their understanding of religion itself. Without excusing religion for its complicity in violence, he avers that "religious violence is a myth told to justify secularizing arrangements," or whatever it is that it legitimizes.[35]

If we consider and engage Cavanaugh's insights on our analysis of the Mindanao conflict, we can reasonably infer that ascribing religion with violence would mask its political, social and economic elements as well as legitimize the Philippine government's political and military devices against the Muslim communities in Mindanao. With this in mind, we begin to be wary not only about how socio-political strategies are justified along the process but how such strategies also implicitly legitimize Christianity as the ideal religion in the country. In the Philippine context, we aver that associating Islam with violence legitimizes Christianity as superior and essentializes it as a nonviolent religion. The uncritical faulting of religion with violence endorses a kind of adverse conditioning. We speculate that this kind of conditioning

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[32]*Ibid.*, 58; 119.
[33]*Ibid.*, 487.
[34]*Ibid.*, 121.
[35]*Ibid.*, 58.

is the culprit for the stigmatization and demonization of Muslims and Islam in general, not only in Mindanao. This is clearly expressed in the neologism, "Islamophobia," which we believe to be founded irrationally since to say that religion is essentially violent is to misinterpret and distort the truths of the teachings on peace embedded in various religious traditions, particularly Islam.[36] The very word Islam means peace in Arabic. The Book of Koran says: "O You who believe! Enter absolutely into peace (Islam). Do not follow in the footsteps of Satan. He is an outright enemy to you."[37] We would like to believe that as Islam is viewed as a violent religion, Christianity is aggrandized as a religion of peace which in effect legitimizes the tacit and still rippling Christianization-of-Muslims project that has its roots in the Spanish colonial agenda.

CONCLUSION

Based on what have transpired in the discussions, this paper concludes that the idea that the armed conflict in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines is religious in nature is a simplistic and ahistorical interpretation of a complex situation—a condition that can only be understood through a critical appraisal of its history. Thus, the associating of religious beliefs to war, the correlating of religious affiliations to violence, the essentializing tendencies to regard religion as inherently violent, and the linking of political ideologies to "religion" are but apparent misinterpretations. Coming from this assessment, we contend that, on the one hand, the labeling of the conflict as religious masks its political and economic reasons. On the other hand, such action also legitimizes the deeply rooted Spanish agenda to Christianize-the Muslim communities in Mindanao that still silently ripples in the ongoing armed conflict.

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[36]Tania Saeed, *Islamophobia and Securitization: Religion, Ethnicity and the Female Voice* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 1-12.
[37]*Cf.* Holy Koran: 2, 208.

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