

สลายความขัดแย้งทางศาสนา: บทเรียนจากมินดาเนา

Breaking the Walls of Religious Intolerance: The Mindanao Experience



สุลต่าน มากูอีตี มาร์อุโฮม

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มินดาเนาอยู่ในตอนใต้ของประเทศฟิลิปปินส์ มีประชากร 13 ล้าน จากการผสมผสานเป็นชุมชนขนาดใหญ่จากชุมชนคริสเตียน มุสลิม และ คนพื้นเมืองที่เข้ามาตั้งถิ่นฐานตั้งแต่ศตวรรษที่ 5 ความขัดแย้งทางศาสนาเป็นส่วนหนึ่งหนึ่งในสาเหตุสำคัญของการแบ่งและความขัดแย้งระหว่างกลุ่มคนในฟิลิปปินส์ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งระหว่างชาวคริสต์และมุสลิม ซึ่งมีผลเป็นการเผชิญหน้า ความรุนแรงและสงครามทำลายล้างหลายจากยุคอาณานิคมจนถึงครั้งล่าสุด และได้พัฒนาเป็นความขัดแย้งทางศาสนาที่มีความยาวนานที่สุดในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

คำสำคัญ: ความขัดแย้งทางศาสนา มินดาเนา

Abstract

Mindanao in the southern Philippines which is now populated by around 13 million of mainly mix Christian, Muslim and Indigenous People communities has a long history of religious intolerance spanning for five centuries. Religious intolerance had been identified as one of the essential causes of division and conflicts among groups of people in the Philippines, particularly between Christians

and Muslims, which has resulted into several violent confrontations and devastating wars from the colonial period until the most recent times. This Christian-Muslim discordance later developed into political conflict that resulted in decades of dreaded insurgency wars waged by Muslims in the south against the Christian controlled central government. It is described by many as one of the longest standing conflict in the Southeast Asia region.

Keyword: Religious Intolerance, Mindanao

I. The Root of Religious Intolerance in the Philippines

Religion is believed to be the essential cause of social discordance or only dragged into a long sociopolitical dispute and wrongly used to justify injustice and violence to prop up an oppressive system. Whichever the case was, it is apparent that religious intolerance spawned by prejudice and fear had been the natural consequence that only served to worsen the rift and division of people who came from one root and had co-existed in peace for centuries. How religions were turned as tools that promote discordance and violence to engines of unity and peace is one of the success stories in Mindanao that gives insights for quest for lasting peace.

The native (original) populations in the Philippines consisting of Indigenous Peoples and Muslims sharing the same roots and traditional culture and living together in abundance of resources had a long tale of peaceful co-existence prior to the arrival of the colonial powers. The situation, however, changed from the time the first Christian (Ferdinand Magellan) who discovered the archipelago for Spain set foot in the Philippines in 1521 and succeeding expeditions had been launched by Spain to subjugate and convert majority of the native indigenous population in the northern and central parts of the country with the used of the so-called “cross and sword” and ruled it effectively. Some historians claimed the hidden intention behind Spain’s conquest and colonization of the Philippines were

driven by their economic interest. Nonetheless, the use of religion to advance such an objective was blatant. Spain, which is a part of the Iberian region that was previously conquered and ruled by the Muslim Moors for about seven and a half centuries up until its liberation in 1492 could not tolerate Muslim segment of its new found territories in the Philippines and had to launch a continued war of conquest against the Moros. It was the Spaniards who first called the Muslims in the south as Moros from the name Moors of Mauritanian peninsula. In many of those war expeditions waged by the Spaniards, Filipino Christians were used as soldiers by the invading forces to fight the Muslims, and thus caused an animosity between people who claimed to have come from one root. Led by the Sultanates and rallying behind the Islamic faith the Muslims in the south staged a gallant stand against the invading Spaniards.

In the course of this long drawn battle, the Muslims were also forced to take many retaliatory actions by raiding several Filipino Christian villages in the Luzon and Visayas Islands often resulting into slaughter and plunder of entire Christian villages and taking vanquished people as slaves, which earned them the infamous label as “pirates and plunderers” by Christian Filipinos. The so-called Moro-Spanish war in the Philippines lasted for more than three centuries until the coming of the Americans as a new colonial power, mainly ending in stalemate, save for some areas in Mindanao where the Spaniards had successfully established forts and garrisons and converted its native populations. The Moro-Spanish war in the Philippines went down in history as the first confrontation of Christianity and Islam in the Far East and considered by many as an offshoot of the crusade and the Iberian conflict fought by Christianity and Islam. Spawned by prejudices against each other and fear due to a long experience of conflict and violence, Christian and Muslim intolerance of each other had developed at this earlier stage of time that was passed on through the generations. More often these deep-seated prejudices and mistrust bordered on misconception and ignorance of each other’s religion and culture. Deepening of the Wounds of Intolerance Such intolerant stance against the Muslims in the south had continued to exist and even influence

the colonial policies for Mindanao by another Christian power that replaced the Spanish rule in the Philippines, the United States. The Muslim controlled areas (Moroland) in Mindanao mainly consisting of the central and western parts of the Island including the Sulu archipelago which were not conquered and ruled by the Spaniards were effectively subjugated by the Americans with the use of modern tactics in warfare, superior weaponry and cunning use of deception. The Americans imposed their claim for sovereignty over all parts of Mindanao by virtue of the Treaty of Paris in 1898 whereby, for the price of \$20 million, Spain ceded all its territories to the U.S. shortly after they were defeated by the U.S. in the Battle of Manila Bay.

American rule in the Philippines barely lasted for half a century but the devastation it wrought to the Moro people was greater and more loathsome compared to the several centuries of Moro-Spanish conflict as hundreds of Muslims that resisted the American rule had been virtually massacred including women and children and thousands more were displaced. Like the Spaniards, the American also used Filipino Christians in their campaigns against the Moro people by forming constabulary contingents for Filipinos to confront the resisting Muslims in the south which only intensified Muslim sentiments against their former brothers.

Swaths of fertile lands left by the dislodged Moro communities who were considered by the Americans as wild tribes were expropriated and distributed by the U.S. colonial administration to Filipino Christian settlers from the north and to multi-national corporations, as Mindanao was advertised as “the land of promise” for northern Filipinos. Desperate Muslim fighters who were no match to the superiority of a modern army had to summon and muster all the religious fervor, turning hundreds of them into suicide fighters who faced certain death to continue the resistance against a foreign power. They were martyrs in the eyes of Muslims but labeled by the Christians as no more than people who were running amok, known during the Spanish time as frenzied “juramentados.” The most powerful

handgun on earth that existed until today known as the .45 caliber has to be invented by the Americans to stop the deadly assaults of these so-called mad fighters.

The Political Dispute and Moro Rebellion Despite championing democracy the U.S. unjustifiably forced the Moro people without the benefit of a referendum to be incorporated in the larger independent Philippine republic to be ran under the control by the Filipino Christian majority despite vehement objections from the Moro leadership. Fearing the negative effects of cultural and religious differences and the long experience of violence against each other the Moro communities petitioned to remain under a protectorate status of the U.S. rather than be incorporated with a Filipino Christian controlled independent republic.

Subsequently this question was taken as one of the essential reasons for the Muslims in the south to demand for their right to self-determination and wage a long bloody rebellion against the Philippine central government lasting for six decades and causing the loss of 150,000 lives and billions of pesos worth of damaged properties. It is estimated that more than 2.5 million were displaced in the decades of Muslim insurgency war. Under an independent Philippines, Muslims had been alienated and socially marginalized due to discrimination and neglect by the central government in Manila. And as has been feared before, the religious divide and cultural differences had played important roles in defining the social relation of the Christian majority and the Muslim minority.

The Muslims felt they were clearly ending as losers in this unjust political arrangement set up by the American colonial power. They became mere minority in Mindanao where previously, together with the Indigenous People, they were the majority. As a consequence, they lost more than half of their lands as the Philippine republic continued some of the American policies that expropriate and distribute Moro ancestral lands to Christian settlers and corporations. Today, the poverty incidence among the Moros is 56% while the national average is about 30%. The Muslim rebellion was preceded and triggered by a dreaded militia war involving the Christian and Muslim civilians in 1971 which was labeled as a religious

war by some politicians and the media and made as one of the important justifications for the declaration of martial law by President Marcos. Martial law did not solve the situation but triggered more violent responses resulting to more destruction and wanton abuse of human rights. Many analysts would later conclude that this militia war was staged by some Christian and Muslim politicians loyal to President Marcos to play on the religious divide and the intolerant attitude of both the Christian and Muslim populations against each other to serve their hidden political agenda.

This experience even encouraged unscrupulous politicians to continue using the religious divide and sentiments of the two religious groups to gain political mileage during elections which only yield added effects to the deteriorating relation of Christian and Muslim communities. The long drawn insurgency war only increased prejudice and mistrust and intensified the intolerance between the Christians and Muslims. Segregation and lesser social integration and cooperation had now been more obvious than before.

Once more, feeling under siege many Muslims were enticed to go back to their religion in search of answers. This only strengthened their resolve and provided deeper motivation to wage their struggle for freedom and justice. This time around, a new brand of Islamic fundamentalism imported from the Middle East provide justification for violent change in the notion of ‘jihad’ from a religious obligation into an ideological path became popular, especially among conservatives Muslims. Feeling desperate and faced with the perceived failure of a nationalist secular agenda initiated by the more moderate Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which started the Muslim rebellion in the south, more Islamist and militant groups had come to fore like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The infamous terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) affiliated with international terrorist organizations was organized latter on and more recently, the Bangsamoro Independent Freedom Fighters (BIFF). These groups that are waging a violent campaign against the Philippine Government draw their inspirations from the teachings of Islamic fundamentalism which aside from promoting violence it

also emphasizes exclusivity and intolerance against people of other faiths.

Bridging the Muslim-Christian Religious Divide It has become apparent that religions had been continuously used to motivate and promote injustice and violence and widen the gap of understanding and religious tolerance. In the midst of the growing unrest between the Christian and Muslim civilians, on one hand, and between the Muslims and the Philippine central government on the other, in 1974 a group of Christian religious leaders led by the late Bishop Bienvenido Tadtud of the Prelature of Marawi, inspired by the vision of the Second Vatican Council, took the exceptional courage to start interfaith dialogue among and between religious leaders and followers of both religions to promote understanding and goodwill, encourage forgiveness and reconciliation and enhance respect and tolerance. The Protestant churches under the banner of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) came in to participate in the effort after few years. In the beginning Muslims were hesitant to join the endeavor suspecting that this was another ploy by the Christians to assimilate the Muslims to the mainstream and fast modernizing culture of society toward westernization, or worse, a means of enticing them to convert to Christianity, which had been resisted by many Muslim religious leaders since the colonial period. Only few moderate Muslims, especially those involved in activism and having a better appreciation of social realities were the first to respond to the call. Nevertheless, the sincerity of purpose and sustained engagement by the Christians no matter the odds, slowly gained grounds as the real intention of interfaith dialogue unfurled and its positive impacts were slowly felt. Several Christian religious leaders who were engaged in the effort were either murdered or abducted by suspected extremists who were opposing the work. Despite this, the Christian did not give up and painstakingly continued in pursuing the effort.

The turning point in interfaith dialogue in the Philippines came in 1990 when some respectable Ulama led by the late Dr. Mahid Mutilan, who was then serving as Governor for a Muslim province, succeeded in organizing a number of Muslim clerics and joined with their Christian counterparts, the Bishops of both the

Catholic and Protestant Churches based in Mindanao. Together they formed the Bishop-Ulama Conference in the Philippines. It is the highest interfaith council that provides guidance and leadership. Although in many ways, this body serves a symbolic purpose of unity, this has significantly boosted the credence and acceptance of interfaith dialogue and inspired a lot of Muslim leaders and grassroots communities to actively participate and become equal partners in the effort. Shortly afterward, the Muslims began to initiate on their own the transformation of the mindset of Muslims and organize community interfaith dialogues.

Today the effort has grown popular that almost all areas affected by the conflict had its own interfaith dialogue formations not only confined among religious and lay-leaders but more significantly it involved the grassroots communities. The grassroots are the most vulnerable section of society that are easily manipulated and are at the same time the victims of injustice and violence. When they are transformed and motivated, they provide the crowds that are essential in big mobilizations for the advocacy of justice and peace.

Not only the Christian churches were involved in the effort from the diocese level down to the parishes but also Moro civil society organizations engaged in conflict resolution had been promoting and organizing interfaith encounters and building zones of peace in ethnically mixed communities. Apart from interfaith encounters initiated by the religious groups, Christian and Moro civil society organizations with many Indigenous peoples' groups had also formed bigger interfaith and inter-people networks of their own such as the Mindanao Peace Weavers (MPW), Mindanao People's Caucus (MPC), and the Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement with similar goals. Although most interfaith dialogue groups were self-sustaining, government and some international funding agencies have also come in not only to extend moral support but augment resources by supporting interfaith dialogue projects that aim to promote conflict resolution and peace building.

II. Rereading of History

As elaborated above, religious intolerance in Mindanao had a long narrative but there is a common realization that this predicament basically developed as a reaction to injustice and violence experienced from one another over a long period of time. In the case of the Philippines the root of the problem could be traced back to the period of colonization centuries ago which subsisted until the most recent times because of same causes that were allowed to continue. It is even fair to consider that this contemporary conflict between the Christians and the Muslims had been induced by the crusade which was fought over the centuries by the early Christians and Muslims in the Middle East. Prejudices and fear which breed mistrust and even hatred were recognized as the essential elements that engender intolerance and division. But even prejudice and fear had been spawned by misconceptions and stereotypes which bordered on ignorance of both historical facts and the faith and culture of each other.

In response to these problem, interfaith formations in Mindanao deal extensively not only on the understanding of the faith and culture of each other but important historical events related to the problem of intolerance such as facts in the long period of colonization of the Philippines by foreign powers. These are done in regular meetings of interfaith bodies and in seminars and workshops, in big forums and gatherings and in media exposures. This topic is also included in forums conducted by interfaith groups involving the youths in schools. This issue is also discussed broadly in separate intra-faith dialogue forums, separate encounters of people of same faiths, as part of formation building and in preparing ordinary grassroots leaders for real interfaith encounters with people of other faiths.

The realization that religions were not only used in the past to build empires but propped up oppressive systems has had a tremendous effect in transforming the mindset of the people. Somehow the long history of conflict influenced how people interpret their faiths and traditions. Obviously, verses from the scriptures were interpreted out of context to justify and promote not only

exclusivity, but bigotry to perpetuate intolerance. This important process encourages both Christians and Muslims alike to think critically and look for new meaning from their traditions relevant and responsive to present challenges of society. Muslims for instance were stunned to learn that in reality it was the early Muslims that spilled the first blood by conquering Damascus and Jerusalem from the Christians shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Whereas the Muslims in Mindanao only experienced three centuries of war against the Spaniards and were not even conquered, Spain was subjugated and ruled by the Muslims for more than seven centuries. It is not surprising to see that Christians who were aware of the historical injustice done to the Moro people would eventually turn to support the Moro advocacy for their right to self-determination based on moral grounds.

III. Understanding of Present Realities

Awareness on important events in history should lead to the understanding of the present social milieu. Discussion of burning social issues forms one of the important undertakings of interfaith dialogue that are also included in interfaith forums, workshops and big gatherings like the yearly Celebration of the Mindanao Week of Peace which is spearheaded by the Bishop-Ulama Conference in the Philippines. This action does not only broaden understanding of participants on effects and causes of pressing social and environmental challenges faced by society but leads to the consciousness that the effects of these problems are shared and common among people regardless of their faiths and cultures.

This realization that in truth, problems of society bringing injustice victimize everyone, and do not respect religious affiliation provides effective inducement on the need for interfaith understanding and solidarity. Though some differences do exist in our faiths and traditions, in reality, for Christianity and Islam many deep spiritual teachings are common among them; including ethical teachings and of righteousness, and vision of peace for society. Essentially, not only that they share

the belief in the same one God, there is also a common understanding on humanity and the divine responsibility (and accountability) entrusted to the human being as a steward or keeper of all God's creation on earth as taught by the two religions which provide the deeper motivation for its followers to work for inclusivity.

Whatever few differences the two religions have, are basically confined on doctrinal matters. But having originated from one source, which is the Abrahamic faith, much of the theological aspects of the two religions are common and therefore moral and spiritual insights toward possible solutions of common problems in society are shared. These similarities in ethical principles and vision for society provide the most significant strength that makes interfaith solidarity for the common good not only possible but lasting. Interfaith formations in Mindanao not only aspire for understanding of differences in faith and culture but promote respect and tolerance on such differences. As much as it does, it also aim to create stronger bond and solidarity of people of different faiths based on what are common among them from the teachings of their different faiths and traditions, and thus, creates "unity in diversity," leading to pluralism.

This consciousness allows the possibility for the people of different faiths to unite together and using their faiths, time, energies and resources, struggle together for the common good. Because of this, interfaith groups in the Philippines had taken joint actions on several advocacies on issues involving good governance, peace and security, human rights, environment, Mindanao peace process and other moral issues. Hundreds of people join mobilizations initiated by interfaith groups such as prayer rallies and marches and petition signing for these advocacies.

The Defining Moment for Peace Advocacy in Mindanao One significant achievement that interfaith groups had immensely contributed is the forging of a peace agreement between the Muslims and the Philippine government recently that will put an end to this long standing conflict. The signing this year of what has been described as a "landmark" peace agreement between the Philippine

Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) with the facilitation of Malaysia marks the defining moment for peace advocacy in the Philippines, particularly for Mindanao. This peace agreement is designed to correct the centuries of historical injustice for the Bangsamoro and allow them some form of self-governance. A product of 17 long years of painstaking peace negotiation, the peace deal called the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) will change the status quo and hopefully usher a new beginning that will finally end the pain and suffering endured for a long time by the people of Mindanao and offer a climate that will facilitate “living together in peace.”

Although this is a legal document that has been reached through compromise by the two parties, support coming from the people is essential; it cannot succeed without such popular support from the Christians, Muslims and Indigenous Peoples, particularly those living in the conflict affected areas. Past peace agreements had dismally failed because of the objection of majority of the people, particularly the Christians, which were mostly driven by fear. Civil society organizations and interfaith groups did not only generate many pressure campaigns for both parties to come up with a just and lasting solution to this centuries old problem but they had also come out strongly to campaign for support from the people for the peace deal to succeed. As this particular peace agreement ensured democracy and an inclusive government that guarantees equal rights for all, there is a brighter prospect that majority of the people will approve it in a plebiscite that will be held to ratify the law to change the status quo sourced from the agreement. Latest survey shows that a high percentage (87 percent) of the people living in the conflict affected areas support the agreement which shows that people in Mindanao are changing their attitudes toward being more accommodating and tolerant to each other. With no doubt interfaith dialogue had immensely contributed along this success.

