The Quest for Peace Through the Culture of Dialogue: A Philippine Context

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Abstract

The history of mankind is also the history of encounters between peoples and religions. In the Philippine context, cultural and religious diversity creates opportunities in society, but also poses significant risks of polarization. People who were either killed or displaced by wars and sectarian conflicts have become poignant portrayals of this division. But diversity can also lead to cultural symbiosis when major challenges and core issues are faced and discussed. "As a consequence of the realization that the world is moving closer together and peoples are getting ever closer to each other, believers today try to emphasize what all people and religions have in common, going beyond what separates them."[1] Today, the fundamental question arises as to how religions and cultures should coexist. In congruence with this, the author presents in this paper that dialogue is of primordial importance and a linchpin of a peaceful coexistence in the Philippines and beyond.

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[1] Adel Theodor Khoury, *World Religions and Ethics* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1993), 9.

Introduction

Reflecting on the historicity and richness of Filipino cultures, one can say that diversity has become both a blessing and a challenge. On the one hand, the positive encounter between the cultural practices and faith traditions of the community's diverse inhabitants enriched the Philippine society. But on the other hand, the seemingly irreconcilable religious beliefs made it difficult for their followers to transcend their differences and achieve consensus and common grounds.

On a global stage, the concept of cultural diversity has been defended and cemented by the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* since it was founded in 1945 by various countries.[2] Moreover, cultural diversity is defined as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group."[3] It comprises also the beliefs, lifestyles, traditions and value systems. "Cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature."[4]

The focus of this paper is the Muslim-Christian dialogue. Thus, it concentrates mainly on the context of Mindanao. It does not mean that the author downplays the conflicts and peace-building efforts in the entire Philippines at large. The Mindanao conflict is the problem of the entire nation. The need for a dialogue becomes an imperative as we reflect on the long history of conflicts and political conundrum in Mindanao where the lives of the affected are turned upside down. It has created psychological damage and intergenerational trauma to those who witness the carnage of war in the region. Muslim and Christian cultures and religions in the Philippines have been used as elements of division and cynically weaponized in different stages of history since the beginning of Spanish colonization. They see others through the prism of cultural prejudice that builds the *us-versus-them*

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[2] Richard T. Schaefer, *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society Volume 1* (SAGE Publications, 2008), 558.

[3] Elsa Stamatopoulou, *Cultural Rights in International Law: Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Beyond* (Colombia University, 2007), 77–79.

[4] "UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity," *UNESCO Digital Library*, accessed August 17, 2022, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127162.

paradigm. In this paper, the author answers the following questions: What is dialogue? Why is the culture of dialogue important in our quest for peace? What is the significance of interreligious dialogue in attaining a peaceful coexistence in the Philippines?

I.   Brief History of Islam and Christianity in the Philippines

The spread of Islam in the Philippines began in the 14th century, mostly by Muslim merchants from the western part of the Malay Archipelago. The Islamization in the archipelago started in 1380 when the Muslim missionary Karim Al-Makhdum arrived in Bwansa (Jolo) and constructed a mosque on the island of Simunul, Tawi-Tawi. He was from Johore (in present-day Malaysia).[5] In the course of time, Islam continued to spread in Mindanao, from centers such as Sulu and Cotabato.[6]

Spanish *conquistadores*[7] and missionaries arrived in the Philippines in the early 16th century. Under the service of Spain, the Portuguese navigator and explorer Ferdinand Magellan came across the Philippines in March 1521 while searching for the Spice Islands. Catholic historians as well as non-Catholic scholars agreed that the Spaniards crossed the seas primarily to Christianize the colonized pagan lands. In addition, historian as Pedro Gagelonia argues: "Economic prosperity and political greatness were their secondary goals."[8] They have strong yearning to involve in the lucrative oriental trade, particularly that of spices, which was a Portuguese monopoly in the early sixteenth century. They also wanted a geographical base to galvanize trade and missionary contacts with China and Japan.

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[5] Vivienne Angeles, "Islam in the Philippines," *Oxford Bibliographies*, October 20, 2013, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0102.xml.

[6] N. P. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 52.

[7] *Conquistadores* is a term used to refer to soldiers and explorers of the Spanish and the Portuguese Empire in a general sense. During the Age of Discovery, *conquistadores* sailed beyond Europe to North and South America, Oceania, Africa and Asia to conquer new territories and open trade routes.

[8] Pedro Gagelonia, *The Filipino Historian: Controversial Issues in Philippine History* (Manila, 1970), 49-50.

The term "Moro" comes from the Spanish word meaning "Moors" which eventually becomes the cultural and political name for Filipino Muslims of Mindanao. The Spanish colonizers distinguished the Moro from the *Indios*, which refers to the Christianized people of Luzon and the Visayas.[9] The long-standing struggle of the Moro people, from the beginning of the Spanish colonization (1565), has always been a struggle for self-determination until now. During the American rule from 1898 to 1946, the Moros offered resistance because they realized the threat to their own identity. A few initial and small-scale skirmishes developed into more frequent and fiercer battles. Some of the hardest battles were fought at Lake Lanao. At the end, the Moros had to surrender to the technically superior Americans.[10] The Moros resisted against the Japanese, Americans, and Spanish for 400 years and morphed into their current war for independence against the state of the Philippines.[11]

From 1903 to 1973, landless Christians were encouraged by the Philippine government from other parts of the country to migrate and settle in Mindanao in a so-called *Homestead Program*. The natives of Mindanao have no land titling system at that time and many Christian settlers exploited the situation. This leads to disputes about land ownership and marginalization of Muslims. It is said that the Homestead Program is one of the root-causes of the Moro Conflict.[12]

II.   Jabidah Massacre and the Moro Struggle for Independence

According to the Bangsamoro narrative, Muslim military trainees were killed in Corregidor known as the Jabidah massacre on March 18, 1968. They were trained in the island of Corregidor to form

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[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Omar H. Dphrepaulezz, "The Right Sort of White Men: General Leonard Wood and the U.S. Army in the Southern Philippines, 1898-1906" *UCONN Library, Doctoral Dissertations,* 2013, https://opencommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6251&context=dissertations.

[11] Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Maritime Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Abu Sayyaf Threat," *Naval War College Review*, 2005, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol58/iss4/7/.

[12] Damien Kingsbury, *Territorial Separatism in Global Politics: Causes, Outcomes and Resolution* (Routledge, 2015), 55.

a secret commando unit called "Jabidah," which would infiltrate, destabilize, and take over Sabah. The trainees eventually refused to do their mission, for reasons that are still debated by historians today. Jibin Arula, the lone survivor, said that whatever the reasons behind their objections, all of the recruits aside from him were massacred, and he escaped only by pretending to be dead.[13] It is considered as a main reason that fueled the Moro insurgency in the country. Nur Misuari, a young professor of political science in the University of the Philippines in Manila, gathered a "Moro Assembly" in Zamboanga City and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed in 1972 under his leadership.[14]

Nur Misuari's primary goal of using the Bangsamoro discourse to unite everyone who identified themselves as Filipino Muslim was not wholly successful.[15] Clans of central Mindanao, who trace their genealogy to the pre-Spanish sultanates, re-emerged to challenge the ascendancy of Misuari, who hailed from the Tausug ethnic group. Hashim Salamat, a member of the Maguindanao ethnic group, denounced how Misuari's MNLF appeared to imitate the secular strategy of the communist insurgency waged by the New People's Army. In 1984, Salamat renamed his MNLF faction the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).[16]

III.   Challenges of Extremism

According to Peter T. Coleman and Andrea Bartoli, the core problem that extremism presents in situations of protracted conflict is less the severity of the activities (although violence, trauma, and escalation are obvious concerns) but more so the closed, fixed, and intolerant nature of extremist attitudes, and their subsequent

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[13] Marites Dañguilan Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, "Jabidah and Merdeka: The Inside Story," Rappler, March 18, 2018, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/24025-jabidah-massacre-merdeka-sabah/.

[14] Max L. Gross, *A Muslim Archipelago: Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Washington: NDIC Press, 2007), 183.

[15] Cameron Sumpter and Joseph Franco, "Islamist Militancy in Indonesia and the Philippines," *International Centre for Counter Terrorism Publications,* September 15, 2021, https://icct.nl/publication/islamist-militancy-in-indonesia-and-the-philippines-domestic-lineage-and-sporadic-foreign-influence/.

[16] *Ibid.*

imperviousness to change.[17] Extremism militates against the spirit of dialogue and it contradicts the very principle of democracy. It is an anathema that uses physical, moral and psychological violence to achieve goals. And sadly, there is a number of groups who are moving in the opposite direction, creating a bigger gap between Muslims and Christians. Their own foundations or religious texts as well as political ideologies or socio-political values insist on the absolute claim to truth.

Extremists are representatives of a closed view of the world and of man. For them, the world is divided into good and bad, black and white, with no intermediate positions. Extremists believe in the mischievous creed that promotes the clash of civilization. Extremism tarnishes the image of cultures and religions we cherish dearly. Most often, in the midst of conflict between warring parties, it is the civilians who become casualties.

In the southern Philippines, specifically Muslim Mindanao, terrorism is most associated with extremist groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). After returning from the Afghan-Soviet conflict in 1989, Abdurajak Janjalani founded the ASG, and sought to differentiate his group from other mainstream ethnonationalist organizations like the MNLF and the MILF.[18] Abu Sayyaf grabbed global headlines in 1991 when they bombed a Christian missionary ship M/V Doulos in Zamboanga City in Western Mindanao, intentionally targeting foreign nationals.[19]

It took several decades, specifically the rise of the so-called *Islamic State* (IS), before Filipino militant groups tried to link up to another brand of global-scale jihadism. IS epitomized a modern, and online media-savvy jihadism. In 2014, Isnilon Hapilon, one of the faction leaders of the post-Janjalani ASG, pledged loyalty to IS. However, instead of being declared a *wali* or governor of an IS wilayah

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[17] Dr. Peter T. Coleman and Dr. Andrea Bartoli, "Addressing Extremism," *The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution,* accessed August 18, 2022, 3–4, https://www.cve-kenya.org/media/library/Coleman_Bartoli_2002_Addressing_Extremism.pdf.

[18] Cameron Sumpter and Joseph Franco, *Islamist Militancy in Indonesia and the Philippines.*

[19] *Ibid.*

or province, Hapilon was designated as a mere *emir* or leader as reported in the fifth issue of Dabiq. His pledge was more an attempt to gain legitimacy and funding from the IS core, rather than a demonstration of actual control.[20]

The 2017 Battle for Marawi was arguably Hapilon's last attempt to establish control over a significant area in Mindanao. Lasting five months, the incident displaced hundreds of thousands of people and killed thousands of combatants on both sides. But contrary to views espoused by some foreign reporters and academics, the presence of foreign terrorist fighters was not impressive in terms of improving the combat capability of local fighters such as the Maute Group (MG) from Central Mindanao and the ASG. Without prior grounding in the history of the Mindanao conflict, it was easy to subscribe to the belief that IS had grafted itself into the southern Philippines. Visual similarities between two urban battlefields, Marawi, Philippines and Mosul, Iraq are often juxtaposed together.[21]

There must be efforts to recognize other indicators to detect and then consequently curve violent extremism. Measures to detect the lack of effective governance and the occurrence of clan conflict appear to be the most promising indicators to foresee other future conflicts in the region.[22] Specifically, it could involve monitoring non-traditional measures that may not be directly related to countering violent extremism or security initiatives. Statistics on municipal or even village-level economic inequality, out-of-school-youth, and even incidents of financial fraud can be brought together as early-warning indicators. It may also be more productive to look at other indicators such as the responsiveness of local governments, poverty levels, and the effectiveness of educational institutions. The success of the Bangsamoro sub-region in making changes in the quality of life could be the more reliable indicator of how extremism is diminished in the southern Philippines, rather than fluctuations in the influence of jihadist movements abroad.[23]

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[20] *Ibid.*
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*

IV.   The Quest for Peace through Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Historical stereotypes persist that the Moros are "dangerous people" and the Christians are "land grabbers" and there is very little opportunity in the midst of the traumas of war to calmly reassess these images. These sweeping statements have opened a Pandora's box of fear and distrust. Therefore, our work in dialogue is focused on bringing solidarity to the grassroots communities especially those who are in total destitution. It is only through this that religious extremism can be prevented from flourishing within communities.

The word dialogue comes from the Greek word διάλογος (dialogos) meaning conversation between two or more people.[24] Cultural dialogue "occurs when members of different cultural groups, who hold conflicting opinions and assumptions, speak to one another in acknowledgment of those differences."[25] And according to Thommas Lemmen, "Interreligious dialogue refers to a living encounter between religions regarding the positive and constructive relationship of the believers and communities of different faiths in order to get to know and enrich others."[26]

The Vatican II Council and the documents of the Church are encouraging Catholics in the way of dialogue with people of different cultures and faiths. Since the Second Vatican Council, theology has been an important response to the challenges of the modern world as represented by religious and cultural diversity. Theology in this regard involves horizontal dimensions related to social issues and closely related to human history. It is not separated from the world, from the *here and now.*

It is therefore the task of theologians to consider the signs of the times and seek wisdom from the living history of mankind and its relationship to God. In *Lumen gentium*, it is stated: "But the will to

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[24] K. Jazdzewska, "From Dialogos to Dialogue: The Use of the Term from Plato to the Second Century CE," accessed August 18, 2022, 17–36, https://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/viewFile/14987/6295.

[25] W. Leeds-Hurwitz, "Intercultural Dialogue," *Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue*, accessed August 19, 2022, 1, https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/key-concept-intercultural-dialogue1.pdf.

[26] Thomas Lemmen and Melanie Miehl, *Living Together: Christians and Muslims in Conversation* (Gütersloh, 2001), 87.

salvation also includes those who recognize the Creator, among them especially the Muslims who profess the faith of Abraham and, with us, the worship a God, the merciful, who will judge men on the last day."[27] In *Gaudium et spes*, it was said in the same way: "We turn then also to all those who recognize God and who preserve in their traditions valuable elements of religion and humanity, and wish that an open dialogue will lead us all to listen to the promptings of the Spirit to receive faithfully and to fulfill with zeal..."[28]

A. The Role of the Universities in the Region

Before the formal institutionalization of Peace Education in the Philippine education system, the endeavors for Peace Education in the country began in the early 1980s, with the efforts of several individuals and groups from civil society organizations, academic institutions, and international organizations engaged and mobilized to advocate and mainstream education for peace.[29] After the 1986 People Power Revolution, peace education took off through various efforts of individuals, universities, academic and professional groups and civil society organizations, among others.[30]

Universities can be avenues for unique and inspiring stories of commitment towards peace advocacy, justice and integrity. Educators can use storytelling as a powerful tool for peace education. It is an opportunity to cascade theoretical knowledge about peace into practice and to eventually strengthen the implementation of peace education.[31] Both educators and students can use platforms for promoting peace education to create social transformation. Through peace education, students learn the historical injustices in the different stages of our history. Universities can be instruments in affirming peace education initiatives among Christians, Muslims and

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[27] *Lumen gentium 16* in *Small Council Compendium: All Texts of the Second Vatican Council*, Karl Rahner und Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1966).

[28] *Gaudium et spes 92* in *Small Council Compendium: All Texts of the Second Vatican Council*, Karl Rahner und Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1966).

[29] "Three Decades of Peace Education in the Philippines," *UPEACE News*, June 27, 2016, https://www.upeace.org/noticias/three-decades-of-peace-education-in-the-philippines.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

indigenous peoples and inspire them to become committed and passionate people.[32]

Over the years, universities particularly in Mindanao have become increasingly important allies in the interfaith dialogue movement not only in light of the innovations they have made in their academic programs but more so because a growing number of these institutions have established centers for peace and interfaith dialogue within their systems. More importantly, these institutions help make success stories in the region more widely known through their various publications. Universities in Mindanao like the Notre Dame University, Mindanao State University in Marawi, Ateneo de Zamboanga and Ateneo de Davao are active in promoting peace in the region.

B. Silsilah Dialogue Movement

Silsilah Dialogue Movement was founded in Zamboanga City in 1984 by Fr. Sebastiano D'Ambra, PIME. "Silsilah" is an Arabic word that literally means "chain" or "link". In the Philippines and other countries, the same root word is used to mean "genealogical tree" which implies a spiritual chain of humanity as created by the same God.[33] This movement promotes a deeper and better relations between Muslims and Christians with particular emphasis on the "spirituality of dialogue." Silsilah is challenged by the continuous discovery, in terms of experience, that God is the Creator and creation is the expression of God's desire to enter into dialogue with humanity. Based on the principle of Silsilah Dialogue Movement, Muslims may become better Muslims and more committed to Islamic faith and Christians may become better Christians and more committed to Christian faith.

Silsilah envisions a life-in-dialogue for all Muslims, Christians, and peoples of other living faiths in respect, trust and love for one another, and moving together towards a common experience of harmony solidarity and peace. As channels of dialogue and peace, members of this movement commit themselves to live the essence of

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[32] *Ibid.*

[33] "Vision and Mission of Silsilah Dialogue Movement," *Silsilah Dialogue Movement*, accessed October 10, 2022, https://silsilahdialogue.com/vision-and-mission-of-silsilah-dialogue-movement/.

our respective faiths and bear witness to the values enshrined in religious traditions. Furthermore, they also commit themselves to engage in dialogue with all peoples, regardless of culture and faith, promoting a culture of dialogue with particular emphasis on spiritual values and to be in solidarity with all peoples in the uplift of the less privileged, in the building of a progressive, just humane and ecologically sound society. Recognizing the uniqueness of each religion, people are called to undergo a process of spiritual growth by continuously discovering God's dialogue with humanity. It is a call to live the spirituality of *life-in-dialogue* and to witness God's presence in the plurality of cultures and religions as a habitat and an experience that leads to dialogue and peace.[34]

C. Culture of Dialogue

The culture of dialogue is an impetus in shaping our country's destiny. It is because cultural traditions are the source of collective values and the wellspring of national strengths. They cement the moral fabric of the Filipino people. The inner aspiration of humanity nurtured in the diversity of cultures and religions has to become the guiding element for a sustainable development and peace. The tendency of the past was to divide people according to cultures and religions, while the challenge of today is to liberate ourselves from echo chambers and appreciate the different cultures and religions, building together a new world without barriers.

Believing and living a *life-in-dialogue* based on each one's faith and tradition is a style of life, and it becomes *"culture"* when many who live it can nurture this seed in their cultures. The seed rooted in different cultures should grow and become a *culture of dialogue.* Moreover, "Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception."[35]

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[34] *Ibid.*
[35] "The Concept of Intercultural Dialogue," *Council of Europe*, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/concept_EN.asp.

Dialogue is indispensably important as humans are in constant communication with one another. As the world currently witnesses violent conflicts on a daily basis, how we respond to conflicting views through the culture of dialogue is an infinitely important matter for human coexistence. We have the possibility to respond with fear, hatred and violence or with open-mindedness, acceptance and understanding. Dialogue can unite as it opens the possibility to share a common experience of listening to one another, with people we might be very different from.

D. Elements in Dialogue

The Personal Element: The goal of dialogue is to understand the other. Dialogue's main attribute is listening. There is a need to understand and respect the identity and narrative of each participant, by listening carefully and genuinely seeking to come to know a lot about each person. Through this process, people in the group come to recognize the human dignity and integrity of each other. We have to stop demonizing the "other". Dialogue thus requires a degree of openness to others and oneself. Openness includes allowing emotions, along with reflections, stories and faith, thus making space for 'the whole person'. **Interreligious Learning:** Education that is properly and sensitively taught by good teachers can go a long way in a short time to breaking down ingrained negative stereotypes of each other's religions without using a coercive force. **Discussing Core Issues of the Conflict:** We believe that in a genuine dialogue process, the core issues of the conflict can be discussed in an open, honest, and sensitive fashion, guided by careful and consistent professional facilitation, without creating animosity. **Taking Action, Separately and Together:** We are obligated to work for peace, to influence others, and to cause a ripple effect. All of our participants especially the religious leaders, women, youth, and educators are asked to take actions separately and together as a result of the personal transformational processes that they go through within this intensive experience.

Acknowledging commonalities: Dialogue acknowledges commonalities in certain traits and characteristics among Muslim and Christian Filipinos found within the larger context of Philippine culture. **Acknowledging differences:** In dialogue, one acknowledges the differences. Because of these differences between Muslims and

Christians, dialogue becomes imperative. To dialogue does not mean to convert the other into one's faith. Neither does it mean the imposition upon one by the other of his religious and cultural predispositions in life. **Moving together in this journey of life:** Muslims and Christians can move and go together in this journey of life with perfect understanding of their differences. It enjoins each one to remain committed to his own faith but at the same time allows a genuine and authentic respect for the faith and religious profession of others. **Choosing to stay and live together in peace and harmony:** Beyond the differences, Muslims and Christians can *choose* to stay and live together in peace and harmony in the Philippines as well as everywhere in the world.

V. Human Dignity as Basis for Dialogue

In the Judeo-Christian understanding, the dignity of man is guaranteed by the free and universal love of God. "So, God created man in His own image; in the image of God, He created him."[36] It is grounded on *imago Dei* or likeness to God. Despite all differences, all human beings have the same dignity because they are all children of God the Creator. Defining human beings in terms of the *imago Dei* offers a very different starting point for dialogue and creates a very different trajectory for the discussion. *Imago Die* is the personal and relational nature of human existence and the mystery of God. "The most fundamental of all statements of a theological anthropology, namely that man is a creature of God, connects Judaism, Islam and Christianity."[37]

As mentioned in *Gaudium et spes*, *imago Dei* means that humans must be provided whatever is necessary to make a life truly human such as food, clothing, and shelter, the right to freely choose a way of life, to start a family; the right to education, to employment, to adequate information; to act in accordance with the upright norm of one's conscience, protection of privacy and liberty, including religious matters. Christians and Muslims can see themselves obligated to

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[36] *Genesis 1:27, The Bible.*
[37] Gisbert Greshake, *Being Human as a Calling to Communion with God* in *The God of Christianity and Islam: Contributions to the Theology of Religion 2* (Mödling, 1978), 167.

witness to their religious values and be in solidary with those who are in dire need. We should value human dignity as a gift from God. In dialogue between Christians and Muslims, this topic is of central importance.

VI.   Interreligious Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence

Individuals often know very little about the cultural practices and faiths of other religions. The pursuit of interreligious cooperation, tolerance and peace must certainly be the subject of interreligious dialogue. "The discussion about war, peace and the underlying problem of violence shows that Christianity and Islam have common tasks."[38] Interreligious dialogue and engagement plays an important role in a variety of areas, including community development, community organization, conflict resolution and peacemaking, education, health care, and social advocacy.

Interfaith dialogue is understood as a peace building method, bringing people together to learn to live in peace, while the task of politicians and diplomats develop peace treaties between governments. In interreligious dialogue, people do not solve the general global conflict, but mitigate and realize it through dialogue and educational programs. Everyone is involved in this project: young people, adults, religious leaders and educators must be involved in this process of mutual rapprochement.

Through pedagogical work, a model can be developed that combines and deepens personal encounters and interreligious learning in action projects. Interreligious dialogue is a complementary and parallel track to political peace processes. While people recognize the importance of the political and diplomatic processes, they need to be aware of their limitations. On the other hand, peaceful coexistence through interfaith dialogue is the work of rabbis, imams, priests, educators, social workers and psychologists who bring people together to enter into dialogue and educational processes aimed at helping people and finding out how to coexist in peace with each other. These are psychological, educational and spiritual transformations that take many years to complete.

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[38] Jürgen Miksch und Michael Mildenberger, *Christians and Muslims in Conversation* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), 65.

The importance of interreligious dialogue for peaceful coexistence must also be emphasized where political processes hardly work. The idea is that religions, i.e., their leaders and followers, should help resolve conflicts in communities by transforming them from a violent phase to an educational and social phase. This program should also be geared towards youth and students as volunteer work and in action projects. This allows them to see that there are two legitimate sides to a conflict. One should accept people who have different opinions. In this way, they become better listeners and are able to view the conflict in a more realistic way. They also learn to be strong in their opinions while at the same time becoming more tolerant and open. This also includes improving relationships between Christian, Muslim and non-believer students at universities, studying different traditions, visiting faith communities and celebrating together in order to achieve an important goal which is to break down the psychological barriers.

In interreligious dialogue, religious leaders and followers select appropriate texts with a positive message from the sacred canons of each religion, such as the Bible and later commentaries (The Midrash and Talmud), the Qur'an and Hadith, or the New Testament and the Church Fathers. One should teach in a way that can be easily understood and appreciated by the other side. The first part of the dialogue process builds an important foundation of trust that is essential to the rest of the dialogue. It often creates lasting friendships or at least collegiality as an important basis for a constructive, honest and fruitful dialogue if critical components are also addressed.

In this exchange, one talks about common humanistic values shared by religions, where one feels a spirit of religious partnership that motivates to continue the dialogue and to seek meaningful paths of action together. Discussion should be open, honest and sensitive, guided by careful and consistent professional relief without animosity. "It must be made clear to people through religious education that the essence of the great religions is compassion and justice, not violence

and revenge. The criterion of a true religion is that life flourishes and does not perish."[39]

One has an obligation to work for peace, to influence others and to have a positive effect. Action can take many forms - personal, social, educational and political - but it is agreed that everyone who is moved by the dialogue process has an obligation to share their experiences with others. "Today there are Christians and Muslims who call on their fellow believers to orient themselves to their founders, Jesus and Muhammad, and to work towards solving the great social and political problems of our time - poverty, hunger, discrimination, war, environmental destruction."[40]

VII.   Bishop-Ulama Interreligious Dialogue

A concrete example of interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines is the *Bishop-Ulama (Muslim religious leaders) Dialogue in Mindanao*. It started in the new spirit of the *Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD)*. The SPCPD is an agreement signed on September 2, 1996 between the Government and Nur Misuari, MNLF leader, after more than twenty years of revolution in the spirit of the Moro people (the Muslim in Mindanao) who claim part of Mindanao as their heritage and demand self-determination through a genuine autonomy. The SPCPD is a fruit of a long negotiation to open the door to a peace process through a sophisticated accord that aims at solving the conflict in both sides without losing face and maintain the national unity. "The Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC) works to initiate dialogue aimed at improving understanding between Muslims and Christians."[41] Over the last several decades, various attempts have been made by representatives of religious parties to initiate dialogue aimed at improving understanding between Muslims and Christians. Since the late 1960s, religious leaders have held many serious formal dialogues

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[39] Paul M. Zulehner, *On Right-wing Populism in Europe: Reasons and Counter-strategies* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2017), 23.

[40] Jürgen Miksch und Michael Mildenberger, *Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, 55.

[41] "The Bishop-Ulama Conference," *Peace Insight*, December 2015, https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/the-bishop-ulama-conference-buc/?location=philippines&theme.

to analyze the problem of mistrust and understanding between Christians and Muslims. Annual dialogues in which many Muslim and Christian leaders participated were held from 1967 until the late 1990s, including seminars on Islam and topics such as the problems of the Moro minority group and their role in a Christian-dominated society.[42]

The first Bishop-Ulama dialogue started on November 29, 1996 in Cebu City and was attended by the majority of the Catholic Bishops of Mindanao and a good number of Ulama. This historical event gave the confidence that it is possible and advisable to continue the dialogue and to face realities using their moral power to guide properly the Muslim and Christian communities. The second dialogue was held in Davao City on February 18, 1997. During this dialogue they went to more details in the planning and decided to invite also the protestant Bishops to be part of the Dialogue. The third encounter was held in Marawi City on May 6, 1997. The City of Marawi is considered as the Islamic City of the Philippines. On this occasion some relevant attempts at dialogue were made and on the following day the chairman of the *Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines* (CBCP) for the *Episcopal Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (ECID) was invited by more than one thousand Muslim religious leaders to share with them the Church's vision of dialogue. During the third dialogue it was agreed to invite also leaders of the indigenous people of Mindanao (*Lumads*) and to form a permanent secretariat of the Bishop-Ulama Dialogue to follow up and implement any decision of the dialogue.

Their general commitment to dialogue is to strengthen their relationship and use their religious and moral power for peace and harmony. This experience and many other experiences in the national and local levels are good signs. There is hope that the next century will be an *era of dialogue.* Religious leaders are called to take this challenge; if not the world of globalization will divide peoples into new groups and clans. We have to bring God to the center of people's life. In a special way Islam and Christianity which are the biggest religions in the world and claim to have a universal mission, have to strengthen

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[42] *Ibid.*

inter-religious dialogue among themselves and with other people of living faiths moving together toward a common path of peace.

VIII.   Dialogue and Peace Education in Today's Society

History has shown us that education is a powerful tool in promoting peace and a bulwark against extremism. The Silsilah Elementary School and Extensions is one of the programs of Silsilah Dialogue Movement that received credit from the Department of Education (DepEd) as a private institution. It is functions in the spirit of *Building Bridges and Serving People* which is the fundamental essence of the *Tulay Bata for Dialogue and Peace Initiative* - a way of promoting the Culture of Dialogue, Path to Peace which plays a pivotal role to develop a holistic education of the learners. For this School Year 2022-2023, the Silsilah Elementary School and Extensions formally opens the School Year 2022-2023 on September 19, 2022 for Main Campus and September 22, 2022 for Mainland Campuses. In order to cope up with the present situation, the school adapted the blended learning as the modality for this School Year.[43]

One of the influential peace organizations today that made a salient impact in our society is the Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL). It is an international peace organization in the Republic of Korea that propagates a culture of world peace by hosting dialogues and introducing peace efforts with the support of educational and religious institutions and organizations.[44] The most remarkable achievement of HWPL is contributing to peace in war-torn regions of Mindanao. Chairman Man Hee-lee was instrumental in ending a 40-year conflict by establishing a peace agreement. This became the blueprint for peace initiatives that could be applied in other nations facing similar conflicts.[45] In 2013, tensions were high in the Philippines due to reignited military clashes between the government forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the

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[43] "Silsilah Elementary School and Extensions," *Silsilah Dialogue Movement*, accessed October 12, 2022, https://silsilahdialogue.com/silsilah-elementary-school-and-extensions-on-the-move/.

[44] "Culture of Peace: HWPL's Global Peace Efforts Expand in Mindanao," *Heavenly Culture World Peace Restoration of Light*, August 23, 2022, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/culture-peace-hwpls-global-peace-230700719.html.

[45] *Ibid.*

largest armed resistance group in Southeast Asia. With the conflict resulting in more than 100,000 casualties, many institutions and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supported a peaceful resolution. Finally, on January 24, 2014, a government-MILF peace agreement was drafted.[46]

Today, there is also a strong advocacy in integrating Peace Education in the school curriculum which is spearheaded by Commissioner Dr. Ronald L. Adamat of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).[47] During the press conference held on June 18, 2022, he laid out his current and future initiatives for education, peace and development, and indigenous peoples' rights within a democratic framework. At present, he is designing a roadmap under the concept *Peace Makes One Nation, One Future*. Through the commissioner, CHED and HWPL officially entered into a partnership through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed in January 2018. The partnership resulted in the approval of CHED Memorandum Order No. 1 Series of 2019 mandating all higher educational institutions to incorporate peace studies in their respective curricula.[48] From 2019 to 2022, HWPL has initiated 14 sessions of the Peace Education Capacity Building Program for 2,551 educators both under CHED and the Department of Education. Currently, there are 36 educational institutions that are implementing peace education.[49]

IX. Conclusion

The culture of dialogue is an indispensable tool in attaining genuine peace and in upholding the spirit of democracy in our society plagued by series of wars and multi-faceted conflicts that are presented and discussed in this paper. Beyond these lamentable events in our history is the hope shown by committed people, religious leaders, politicians, peace organizations, schools and universities who selflessly dedicate themselves in advocating the

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[46] *Ibid.*
[47] Angely Mercado, "CHED Commissioner Calls for the Proclamation of National Peace Day," *Philippine Information Agency*, June 20, 2022, https://pia.gov.ph/news/2022/06/20/ched-commissioner-calls-for-the-proclamation-of-natl-peace-day.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*

culture of dialogue that created significant impacts in our quest for peace in our society. Peace agreements, peace education, and humanitarian support in war-scarred regions like Marawi bear testaments to the efforts and contributions of dialogue movements and peace organizations in the country from the 1970s to present.

Moreover, the significance of interreligious dialogue was also elucidated in this paper as an avenue where Christians, Muslims and other cultural groups in our country engage in a constructive and mutual encounter. Deriving from theological arguments, the author argues that human dignity must always be the basis for interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is instrumental in our effort to curve the emergence extremism and religious fundamentalism that poisoned the minds of their adherents and eventually inspired them to sow the seeds of bigotry, terror and violence. In essence, the culture of dialogue is indeed paramount in achieving peace and it is an enduring lesson that must be upheld and promoted not only today but in the coming generations.

Warmongering rhetoric and ideals with narrow political agenda are not the paths to a peaceful society. Instead, they only lead us to collective failure and national schism. As Filipinos and citizens of a civilized society, we are entrusted with profound responsibility in building a genuine peace that is anchored in dialogue, solidarity and love. No matter what burden is brought to bear, let us never waver in blazing new trails of peace initiatives and conflict-ending agreements. It may be an enormous challenge but this is our historic opportunity to be the catalyst of change and to champion the cause of peaceful coexistence. Only then can we build a more secure and prosperous Philippines. Let us then seize this opportune moment, to let dialogue usher us in an era of universal peace, for it is we ourselves who can best appreciate what the blessings of peace and harmony would mean.

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