

Dialogue of Friendship: A Phenomenological Study of Christian-Muslim Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding in Mindanao, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Religions were usurped, justifying atrocious acts against each other since time immemorial. To name a few in contemporary times, the Marawi siege of 2017, and the September 11, 2001, attack against the United States of America. Recently, the Israeli-Palestinian Gaza war of 2023 reignited more than half a century of conflict. Now, we have the US-led Israel war against Iran, and US President Donald Trump was heard trumpeting his messianic role in saving Christianity from barbarous deeds of the Middle-Eastern states, justifying now his more atrocious deeds against them. This study investigates the role of interreligious dialogue in the life of Christians and Muslims living in Southern Philippines, also known as Mindanao, in this post-colonial period. It intends to understand the state or condition of dialogue between adherents of religions, particularly, the Muslims and Christians of Mindanao, as to how interreligious dialogue brought about mutual understanding, peaceful co-existence, cooperation, and harmonious living between them. And by this, the findings can hopefully contribute to the establishment of peace in other places and peoples in conflict by indicating the salient points that serve as learning considerations. Thus, to find the answer, the researcher worked on knowing the lived experiences of co-researchers who are advocates, practitioners, and scholars of interreligious dialogue (IRD) in Mindanao. And by this, the data gathered and analyzed became a resource of learning in the work of the peace process via interreligious dialogue among adherents of different religions. Phenomenology was employed as its interpretive framework in the data supplied by 4 co-researchers. All of them have dedicated years working and studying, Christians and Muslims thriving and coexisting in Mindanao. In the final analysis, the success story of interreligious dialogue in Mindanao was attributed to the dialogue of friendship between Christians and Muslims thriving there. In their dialogue of friendship, they were able to affirm each other's identity and history, surpassing challenges they had encountered along the way.

Keywords: *Interreligious dialogue, peacebuilding, dialogue of life, dialogue of friendship*

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of interreligious dialogue has come up again because of the many conflicts we have here in the Philippines and abroad. Religions were usurped, justifying atrocious acts against each other, like the Marawi siege of 2017, and the September 11, 2001, attack against the United States of America. Recently, the Israeli-Palestinian Gaza war of 2023 reignited a conflict that has lasted more than half a century. Now, we have the US-led Israel war against Iran, that have spilled over to its neighboring countries like Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain, not including countries affected at the economic level. This conflict led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, resulting in an oil crisis affecting more than half of the world, especially countries that import crude oil from this region. While the nature of the conflict is geopolitical-economic, the way of life of people is undoubtedly affected. Alongside economics, culture, particularly education, worship, and religious lifestyle, were halted. Thus, the pursuit for peace and call for dialogue is now heard. Leaders around the world, like the Pope (Leo XIV), are calling out for dialogue and other peaceful means to resolve the conflicts.

The irony, however, is that while the world is becoming smaller and smaller in terms of communication, the chasm that bridges genuine understanding amidst differences remains the same, if not even widened. Thus, the purpose of this research is to see how interreligious dialogue between

religions, specifically, Christians and Muslims of Mindanao, Philippines can become a model of peacebuilding for places distraught by conflicts.

The scope of the study is Christian-Muslim interreligious dialogue in the post-colonial era of Mindanao, Philippines. While other religions of indigenous peoples in Mindanao are also present, the researcher did not include them intently.

1.1 Historical Context of The Philippines

Before the monotheist religions – Islam and later on, Christianity- the people's religious system, in the Philippines, involved an indigenous faith tradition. This tradition embodied beliefs that are linked to a spirit world where diwata and anito coexisted with human beings in the natural world. The communities in the archipelago that later on embraced Islam were not much different from the other communities in the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian eras. Mindanao's history in the precolonial era is closely intertwined with trade and the introduction of Islam.

Not for long, sultanates were created in many coastal lands of the archipelago – from Sulu, Maguindanao, Buayan, and Kabuntulan. The coverage of the Sulu sultanate is Sulu, Basilan, Palawan, some parts of Zamboanga, and Sabah. While Maguindanao reached as far as Cotabato, Lanao, Davao, Misamis, Bukidnon, and Zamboanga (Gaspar et al., 2002).

When Spain had accumulated debts with Germany and Italy to pay for its wars and overseas expeditions, it needed more colonies to serve more as markets for its products and as sources of gold and silver. While it was envisioned to become a world power. After colonizing and Christianizing Luzon and Visayas, the Spanish officials used the Christians against the Moros in their battles. Likewise, the Spaniards have made friends with some Moro rulers through favors as a means of subjugating those who would defy them (Gaspar et al., 2002).

The case of a Muslim minority desiring to separate appears on the Philippine island of Mindanao, where local ethnicities do differ, but there is an overall Malayo-Polynesian ethnicity. Here, religion is an even more obvious factor in creating conflict because ethnic differences are of secondary concern. In the 1930s, the United States encouraged the migration of Filipinos to less populated Mindanao. These migrants were Catholics moving to predominantly Muslim Mindanao, which served only to exacerbate the centuries-long tense and often-violent relationship between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines. The Mindanao Moros openly rebelled in the 1970s (Kosuta, 2017).

The expectation, therefore, of this study is to understand the state or condition of Muslims and Christians of the Southern Philippines (Mindanao), as to how interreligious dialogue brought about mutual understanding, peaceful co-existence, cooperation, and harmonious living between them. And by this, the findings in the study will be able to contribute to the making of peace to places and peoples stricken by war or conflict.

1.2 Statement of The Problem

With this, the following questions were asked: “How can the experiences of selected advocates, practitioners, and scholars engage in interreligious dialogue (IRD) in Mindanao, Philippines become a resource of learning in the work of peacebuilding?”

To address this central question, the study research seeks to answer the following specific questions:

1. How may the lived experiences of selected advocates, practitioners, and scholars of Interreligious Dialogue in the post-colonial Mindanao, Philippines be reflectively described and analyzed?
2. What meanings and insights may be derived from their lived experiences?
3. How can the study contribute to the plethora of knowledge?

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The research design employed for this study is qualitative method. As the nature of this study is to examine the lived experiences of selected practitioners and advocates of interreligious dialogue in the

Philippines (Mindanao), the researcher finds it appropriate to employ Phenomenology as its interpretive framework in describing, organizing, understanding, and finding relevance to what these lived experiences may convey.

The co-researchers who were selected are scholars and/or practitioners, and/or advocates of interreligious dialogue here in the Philippines (Mindanao) in this post-colonial era. The researcher was able to gather 4 co-researchers who had committed to this endeavor – three of them are Christians, i.e., a bishop-emeritus of Pagadian, a theologian-anthropologist religious brother, and a lay married interreligious dialogue scholar and community organizer. The fourth co-researcher is a married Muslim, peace advocate, and scholar. All of them have spent years of their lives working and studying, Christians and Muslims thriving, coexisting, and working for peace in Mindanao.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Since the method employed was phenomenological, the responses (lived experiences) of the co-researchers in their interview were clustered and organized. Eidetic insights were taken from their clustered responses. What follows are the essential insights in their narrative form. The researcher assembled the findings into 2 groups – as “outer essential preparation” and “inner essential disposition.”

3.1 Outer Essential Preparation

First, “Muslims can be as good as Christians. And they can also be as sinful as Christians.” That statement reflects the overall position of the researchers in this study. The study claims that personal experiences and social environment dictate people’s view of things, their behavior, and also their dispositions toward them. Encounters with different people, each in their educational settings and workplaces, were some of the social settings that ingrained the seeds of interreligious dialogue inclination in the researchers here, which in turn made them advocates of it later. Different experiences in doing interreligious dialogue likewise changed the misconceptions and prejudices of the researchers as well as the people they work with against those different from them in faith.

Second, there is a need for proper disposition among participants of interreligious dialogue, and there should also be social institutions that would support, enhance, and sustain this movement. This was highlighted in the study. The theology of dialogue of faith and life was said to be the blueprint of Mindanao’s interreligious dialogue (IRD). “*Duyog Ramadan*” (“duyog,” a Bisaya term for accompaniment) was one of the ways for Christians and Muslims of Mindanao to engage in interreligious dialogue via rituals. Likewise, logistics and location were mentioned as physical essentials in doing interreligious dialogue (IRD). Funding or monetary resources, while certainly needed, were not stressed as the most vital element in IRD more than the commitment and consistency that people can give to its work. Consequently, a ministry of IRD was recommended to be made present in the level of the parish Church, i.e., up from the hierarchy, down to the lay communities. Unfortunately, in the level of the Philippine Catholic clergy, not all are driven by this kind of ministry. This was mentioned by the two religious co-researchers of this study. Accordingly, this is primarily because the priests were not required to perform such tasks in their ministry, as they are expected to perform other tasks as well. Notwithstanding, when parish priests do not also know how to delegate other roles, they tend to micro-manage every department in their parish. The need, therefore, to have a “special ministry” on interreligious affairs was suggested.

Third, leaders and elders in the community are essential in interreligious dialogue as they were said to be essential resource of history who can explain the root causes of their social problems, like the origin of conflicts in their place. They were also seen as pacifiers in their community. With this, organizations such as the Bishops-Ulama Forum/Conference (BUF/C), which was an organization for Christians and Muslims to dialogue, were deemed crucial. At present, this organization is revitalized

under the new name: Mindanao Religious Leaders' Conference (MiRLeC), an arm under the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the Philippines (CBCP).

Fourth, the study also highlighted that there is the need for institutions and educational structures specializing in interreligious dialogue and peace-building. The Al-Qalam Institute of Ateneo de Davao University was seen as exemplary in this.

3.2 Inner Essential Dispositions

While the "outer preparations" were deemed necessary, the "inner makeup" of doing interreligious dialogue was said to be equally important.

Highlighted in the study was education. It was said that to be educated is the very best and foremost approach to interreligious dialogue. This learning, however, is lived out beyond the classroom setting. The study showed that the friendship that was established between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao was brought about by their long history of coexistence, and mutual understanding that led to mutual trust and collaboration, which eventually developed into friendship. This was fortified by their mutual participation in each other's religious rituals and celebration, a program pioneered by Bishop Bienvenido Ttud, called "*Duyog Ramadan*". Likewise, and more importantly, IRD was found in their daily life interactions (i.e., dialogue of life). And as such, different forms of dialogue emerged – the dialogue of action, the dialogue of religious experience, and even the dialogue of theological discourse (Dialogue and Mission, 1984).

Good relationships are born out of time. They require shared experiences, consistent communication, and intentional connection to grow from an initial spark into a meaningful bond. These were what the advocates, as well as those who had "lived" IRD, have experienced and realized after immersing themselves and living with the different people from different faith traditions in Mindanao. Time became an ally and essential element that built the kind of relationship that persists between Christians and Muslims of Mindanao.

Alongside education and experiential learning were the spiritual values of each religion serving as bridge, which made interreligious dialogue easier. Values like compassion (*pakikipagkapwa-tao*), peacebuilding, respect for each other's rights and dignity, common goodness, and universal purpose of goods were present in the relationship between the Mindanaoans – Christians and Muslims.

Commonality amidst diversity. The researchers claimed that people are more similar to one another beyond their social affiliations and distinctions. For instance, the researchers had observed that all the people they had encountered inclined to listen empathically, to understand, and to respect others, especially in the way they would want their lives to be. Highlighting that the way to befriend those who are different from us was to listen, to recognize them as different, and not see them as enemies. Likewise, the character of speaking from the heart, while focusing on issues at hand, was stated. This was perceived to be the manner to have genuine interreligious dialogue. Similarly, the need to address the prejudices against each other, and to tackle ignorance and indifference in doing interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding, were the actions that must be taken initially. Interreligious dialogue goes far beyond matters of religion or faith alone. It covers the socio-cultural-political aspects of people's lives thriving in particular communities. And this is found in the reality of Christians and Muslims living together in Mindanao.

The success story of interreligious dialogue in Mindanao can be attributed to the dialogue of friendship between Christians and Muslims thriving there. In their dialogue of friendship, they affirmed each other's identity and history. However different they may be with one another, proofs of their coexistence and collaboration corroborated their exchanges of each other's life concerns – daily needs, survival, security, health concerns, peaceful living, and the like. Through the passing of time and establishment of trust, through sharing of stories and conversation of life experiences, they became powerful means for them to understand each other's reality in a bigger perspective, to coexist amidst difference, and to counter hatred with each other entrenched by prejudice and ignorance. In the same spirit, their participation in each other's rituals became avenues for them to do interreligious dialogue much further. For instance, the Muslims were invited to celebrate Christmas with Christians, as the Christians were also invited to participate in the Hari Raya Eid al-Fitr of Muslims. The most innovative

of these concelebrations is the “*Duyog Ramadan*” begun by the late Bishop Bienvenido Tudu, where Muslims and Christians commemorate Ramadan during the Mindanao Week. The sharing of meals, goodwill, and gift-giving, as well as participation in prayer rituals during these celebrations, fortified their friendship and sustained their friendly demeanor toward each other. Trust and respect for each other were further enhanced by these celebrations, as they became instruments for Christians to be educated about the Muslims’ faith and culture, and vice versa. Customs such as meal-table sharing, exchanges of faith experiences, concelebrations, and participations in each other’s rituals, education, and social justice paved way for them to further open up and address myriad social issues common to both Muslims and Christians (even to the indigenous people).

The following are the postulates derived from their Eidetic insight:

a. We all have a choice to be good and friendly, or sinful and inimical

Differences with each other do not determine how one will treat the other. Respecting others is a choice one has made out of free will. Goodness or sinfulness, therefore, is not determined by one’s religious affiliation but by one’s choice and action. Christians and Muslims can (choose to) be good or sinful. When our actions are just/ unjust to people of other faiths, they reverberate to their co-religionists, who will then respond in treating those of other faiths rightly or wrongly, just or unjust as well.

Recent events in Mindanao, like the Marawi siege of 2017, led people to differentiate and not generalize all Muslims as terrorists or violent. Specifically, Muslims and Christians questioned violence justified in the name of God or in the name of religion. Such was due to the efforts of interreligious dialogue and peace-building movements.

b. Structures are secondary to the movement of interreligious dialogue

We have seen that structures advocating for peace and dialogue are essential in building communities with people coming from different backgrounds, beliefs, and traditions. Interreligious organizations or movements not only produce interreligious understanding among people of different faiths, but also serve other concerns apart from religion that are needed by the community. Conversely, the spiritual dimension of faith from different religions sustained peace-building organizations/ communities to continue working for peace and dialogue with each faith tradition.

Education and formation programs likewise played a very important role in bringing about a peaceful relationship between Christians, Muslims, and Lumads of Mindanao. Orthodoxy (right education) generated true understanding between Muslims and Christians. There were various ways this was practiced – activities such as art workshops, stage plays, seminars, conferences and workshops, publications and newsletters, retreats and recollections, and Mosque visits, to name a few. Such activities educated the young minds of students to perceive not only the Muslims, but also the Christians, rightly, thereby preventing and rectifying biases and prejudices against each other. These formations and education tackled the first hurdle towards peaceful coexistence.

Specifically, interreligious dialogue structures assimilated by Catholic Higher Educational Institutions were seen by us to be effective and essential partners in bringing about learning, understanding, cooperation, collaboration, peaceful coexistence, community-building, and, of course, dialogue. The Al-Qalam Institute of Ateneo de Davao is a testament to this success. Catholic schools and universities that have centers for interreligious dialogue were seen as distinctive venues for peace-building and conflict resolution, apart from the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are not school-based. Students coming from different religious beliefs thrived together peacefully in many Catholic universities or school settings, polarizing the “world outside,” where Muslims and Christians were compelled by some to hate each other. School settings are really great venues for interreligious dialogue with all its dimensions to flourish.

We have also realized that, as the call for peaceful coexistence is a universal concern, the need for institutes of interreligious dialogue should forge international networks to work together. We have seen that interreligious dialogue movements became instrumental in the creation of “smart cities,” where

genuine accommodation of different faiths is considered seriously. Models of such smart cities in Asia are Singapore and Malaysia.

Nevertheless, whichever way interreligious dialogue is made, the spirit of RESPECT, ACCEPTANCE, JUST TREATMENT, COMMONALITY, and FRIENDSHIP would always be its common bases.

c. Relating to the other is dialogue

When we live in solidarity with one another, built on trust and respect, irrespective of background, beliefs, culture, and religion, we are always relating. And when we relate and see ourselves as not that different from the core with others, dialogue happens.

Our study has seen that the relationship of Muslims and Christians in Mindanao is rooted in the basics of life – life's daily concerns, survival, security, sustenance, aspirations, and the like. It is a dialogue of life.

d. When there is dialogue of life, all other forms of dialogue follow

The dialogue of life is a dialogue of ourselves as well. We open ourselves to the other like opening our hearts and making ourselves vulnerable, so that the other can see through us, as we see through them. And when we find that we are not that different from one another, we become sensitive to others. We come to understand each other's innermost core. When we come to understand each other, we also come to understand that we have the same needs, concerns, aspirations, and the like. So, when we dialogue about life's concerns, we cannot help but dialogue also about how to live life and act on them as well. And so, it will not be that far that we will also share each other's beliefs, faith in God, and what gives meaning to our lives.

e. Fear of not knowing is the culprit

Common to all the narratives arising in our study is the antagonism of both Christians and Muslims, rooted in their prejudices and/or ignorance of who the other party is. While prejudice and ignorance may seem to be different, both come from fear of not knowing. Prejudices that come from fear of not knowing become presumptions. While presumptions become a more convenient recourse of action than a long, hard process of learning and understanding the other. Ignorance, on the other hand, as it is the lack of knowledge of something, and/or the dismissiveness of what needs to be known, also becomes the easier way out. Thus, both ignorance and prejudice are related. As one is ignorant, one may as well just settle with one's own presumptions and prejudices. And both are thriving out of fear of knowing the truth.

In the end, one can say that the work of interreligious dialogue is both a “deconstruction” and a “reconstruction.” A deconstruction of the former view of it, and a reconstruction of what it should be.

Friendships were established between Christians and Muslims because of dialogue. Yet, this friendship did not happen or was not established overnight. Trust and respect were the key factors to this. But when we dig deeper to know where this trust and respect were coming from, it was not immediately from their religious affiliation. They resulted from acts of kindness people give to one another irrespective of their religious affiliation. The study stands on the belief that all of us are innately capable of being good, irrespective of religion and what not.

The study also underscored the issue of Fundamentalism, a byproduct of the community's shadow. The longing for an “absolute” in our present era where Relativism is becoming an accepted norm is also one of the reasons for Fundamentalism to rapidly spread among religions. But in any stance, the position of the fundamentalist is still the hardest to dialogue with. Extremism resulting from the fundamentalist view remains to be an unacceptable course of action to justify legitimacy of recognition. This is the reason why our study was adamant not to equate the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/ Levant (ISIS/ ISIL) to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)'s cause. As a co-researcher accentuated, “One cannot immediately impose to others one's way of life.

Neither can one rashly condemn those who took up arms in their struggle. We need to listen to them first; the government should listen!”

This study has also shown to us that all of us advocates of interreligious dialogue (IRD) and peacebuilding were or have been influenced by our social environment, by our “ecosystems”. We have realized that our immediate social environment, the Microsystem (Guy-Evans, 2024) has the most influence to us as to why we are into IRD. Proving how valuable, powerful, and effective our immediate social environment is. While conversely, as the Ecosystem theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) presents, we can also influence the community we are part of. Indeed, this community we live in is bigger than our faith affiliation. Thus, if our Ecosystems in general, and our Microsystem in particular, “dictate” a lot of our behavior, then this where our biases must have come from.

Actually, our immediate social environment, our lived experience with the people around us, is the one that had instilled in us to see and treat others (Muslim or Christian), friend or foe.

In addition, we have also highlighted in the study that when the setting of our immediate environment (Microsystem) is transformed, our disposition and behavior toward it also changes. Thus, we can correlate the two, and this is supported by the Ecosystems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This explains why it is in doing interreligious dialogue, irrespective of its form, that our mindset towards other(s) also changes, that is, either improved or corrected. Such was demonstrated in our lived experience. Those priests, religious, and lay who have worked and implemented “Duyog Ramadan” were able to alter their antagonistic disposition against the Muslims. Their negative biases and prejudices were removed, if not, at least improved because of the change in setting, that is the situation they are in.

Furthermore, other than the Microsystem of the Ecological Systems theory, the Chronosystem is the system that speaks of the influence of a particular event in history to the person’s present state and throughout his lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Our study has indicated paradigms and structures (Exosystem) that are not just working well for those doing interreligious dialogue in Mindanao but are also creating peaceful settings for a harmonious coexistence between Christians and Muslims through time.

Paradigms, situations, spaces, and structures building on peace and co-existence among varied peoples were said to be needed for interreligious dialogue (IRD) to flourish. Its values and principles should be assimilated and adapted up to the level of culture (Macrosystem).

Likewise, Church organizations are essential venues for IRD among leaders of different religions like the Mindanao-Sulu Peace Council (MSPC), the Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF), and then later on renamed the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC). The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) and Basic Human Communities (BHCs) of the Church in the grassroot level of parishes incorporating interreligious dialogue were seen as ideal spaces for IRD to materialize, especially, to parishes/ dioceses are located with peoples of other faiths/ religions. Moreover, Church ministries within the parish that support interreligious dialogue advocacy, and the creation of separate office in charge with such endeavor were found to be worth considering. In line with administrative concerns, we have seen that parish priests, who micromanage all the tasks in their own parishes, limits their capacity to perform other ministries like IRD. While on the other hand, empowering lay leaders/ elders to take charge of certain ministries, were found to be helpful in the ministry of IRD.

Additionally, the study have seen that support from bishops, or to say the least, the encouragement they give to their priests in leading interreligious dialogue goes a long way. We have pointed out, that when the values and principles of interreligious dialogue are included in the seminary training, not only in their subject courses, but also in their community exposures and apostolates, there is a greater chance for the seminarian to imbibe those values. And then later on, when those seminarians

become priest, they will include such endeavor in their parish ministry (or in their religious life endeavor).

IV. CONCLUSION

The study of Interreligious Dialogue still goes a long way. The context of Mindanao, Philippines may be unique in some ways, while also be similar to some ways with other places, communities, and identities and histories. Thus, it is recommended to harness the insights of this study with other peoples' context, and see how the aforementioned postulates are applicable, comparable, and recommendable to them as well.

This study remains to be a humble contribution to the work of peace and dialogue among different religions here in the Philippines and in Asia. Many areas and facets that aggravate or even started the conflict in the many parts of Asia and the rest of the world still need "fixing," or at least needing an in-depth understanding. Politics, economics, and cultural points and causes of contention were not brought out here. There are also so many areas in the Filipino culture and also in the Muslim tradition that were not covered in this study that could be contributory to the success of interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Mindanao. The study did not also cover the contribution and presence of the indigenous peoples (Lumads) in the dynamics of peace building and dialogue in the Moro region.

All these aforementioned could be the future endeavors this researcher and others can consider tackling.

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