



RELIGION, CONFLICT AND THE ASIAN THEOLOGY OF HARMONY

PABLITO A. BAYBADO, JR.¹

INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
UNIVERSITY OF SANTO TOMAS
pabaybado@gmail.com

Interreligious dialogue plays a vital role in addressing conflicts in Asia. In situations, however, where there is an interweaving of religion and conflict, interreligious dialogue, as a peace-building mechanism, is fundamentally challenged by its very foundation, which is the notion of religion. By taking the case of the Mindanao conflict, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that religion expressed culturally and geographically as ethno-religious identity forces interreligious dialogue as primarily a process towards radical renewal of the involved faith traditions. By drawing into the Mindanao experiences, the paper argues that interreligious dialogue, in order to perform its peace-building task, should first be able to process ethno-religious identities to overcome their particularity and embrace theology of harmony. The theology harmony transcends religious identity and the priority of the other, and considers acceptance and engagement of the “we”—as a diverse people living together as the very constitution of the involved parties in the interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: Interreligious Dialogue, Ethno-Religious Identity, Theology of Harmony, Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Interreligious dialogue in Asia has to seriously consider the role of religion in many conflict situations, if it has to become an effective mechanism for peace-building. Religion has been considered either as the source of or as a contributing factor to conflict. In his studies on Minorities at Risks, Fox points to the dual role of religion as both a supporter and inhibitor of conflict.¹ Compared globally, Asia is a region particularly prone to conflict, and that religious ideological conflict is on the rise.² To cite an example, differences in religion have been cited as a factor in the historical conflict between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao, Philippines,³ between the Muslims and Buddhists in Pattani, Thailand, the case of the Rohingya people in Myanmar and the increasing volatile relation between the Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka to name a few.

Asia, historically situated in diverse cultures and religions, is a continent of immense poverty and conflict. Using the Mindanao conflict as a case, I claim in this paper that there is a strong connection between religion and conflict. This relation is clearly expressed in the rootedness of religion in a particular ethnic culture, in such a way that religion has become synonymous with ethno-religious identity. The aim is to demonstrate that ethno-religious identity

provides the validity claims of the many conflicts in Asia. For this reason, interreligious dialogue as an approach to attain peace must primordial address the issue of ethno-religious identity in its attempt to address the various conflicts in Asia. I argue that the collective presence of various ethno-religious identities in the same territory do provide the framework in redefining interreligious dialogue. In the Mindanao case, they are referred to as the tri-people of Mindanao, namely the Christians, the Moros and the Lumads. The tri-people dialogue can be appropriated following FABC's theology of harmony, where religion is considered as a relationship, and that experience of relation transcends ethno-religious boundaries. Thus, in this paper, I endeavored to develop the tri-people dialogue into a theology of harmony as an interreligious approach to conflict.

RELIGION AND CONFLICT IN MINDANAO

The Mindanao conflict, considered as the second longest conflict in the world after Sudan, refers to the armed struggle waged by the separatist movement of the Moros against the government of the Christian-majority in the southern part of the Philippines.⁴ In the Philippines, it is in Mindanao that the country has experienced the longest and the most intense conflicts with both ethnic and religious undertones.

The social landscape of the Mindanao conflict is traditionally divided into three distinct identities defined by their own religious and socio-cultural traditions: the Christians, the Muslims or the Moros, and the Indigenous Peoples. The emphasis on religion as a basis of ethnic identity is called ethno-religious identity. The relation among the three ethno-religious

¹ Jonathan Fox, "Lessons on Religion and Conflict Resolution Based on Empirical Studies of Religion and Conflict," *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Proceedings of an International Conference held at Bar-Ilan University*, (2002), 3, <http://www.tinyurl.com/n8nbfzw>.

² Aurel Croissant and Cristoph Trinn, "Culture, identity and conflict in Asia," *Asien: the German Journal on Contemporary Asia* no. 110 (2009): 13-43.

³ See the following: Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding in Mindanao: Interfaith Approaches to Peace and Development in Mindanao*, Sept 7 & 17, 2004, http://www.muslimmindanao.ph/peace_process/Interfaith%20Dialogue%20and%20Peacebuilding%20in%20Mindanao.pdf (January 6, 2016); Bishop Ulama Conference (BUC), *Konsult Mindanao: Voices, Visions and Values*. A Project of the National Ulama Conference, (2010). William Larousse, *Walking Together Seeking Peace: The Local Church of Mindanao-Sulu Journeying in Dialogue with the Muslim Community (1965-200)* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, Inc., 2001); Rudy Rodil, (2010) "Achieving peace and justice in Mindanao through the tri-people approach" *Mindanao Horizons* 1, no. 1 (2010): 25-46.

⁴ Steven Rood, *Forging Sustainable Peace in Mindanao: The Role of Civil Society: Policy Studies 17* (Washington: East-West Center, 2005).



identities is generally perceived as belonging to different races and that an invisible wall divides them.⁵ Moreover, the ethno-religious identity is considered as the key underlying factor in all their encounters and relations whether at the social, cultural, political, cultural, economics and other aspects. Religious identities, particularly for the Muslim-Christian relation, “take on a political nationalistic identity [which] revives ancient conflicts to serve the purpose of their agenda.”⁶ Thus, ethno-religious identity is a dominant issue because any encounter is seen either as advancement or curtailment of their disparate notions of identities and distinct ways of life rooted in their own respective religions.

The view of separate origin and identity is expressed in the notion of colonization that dominates their historical relation. The Spanish conquest has made inevitable the meetings of Muslims and Christians. Colonization is the Christianization of the Philippines, and the de-Islamization on the part of the Moros.⁷ This encounter is generally described as the “Moro Wars,” because according to Majul there is a clear intention and policy on the part of the Spaniards to conquer Mindanao and Sulu [dominated by Muslims] and convert them as Christians.⁸ Colonization has led to the formation of separate identities and defined future relation of Muslims and Christians.⁹ Moreover, the colonial policy, which was later on called the policy of assimilation and integration, has resulted to further political, economic and

cultural marginalization of the Moros and the Indigenous Peoples.

Conflict becomes inevitable among the tri-people as a result of the colonial approach. The central government is perceived as biased in favoring the Christian majority in terms of development and the freedom to practice their religion, while the Moros and the Indigenous Peoples perceived continuous historical exclusion and marginalization in the political, economic and cultural aspects among others. From the perspective of the Moros and the Lumads, the Christian refer to both the policies of the central government and the Christian population in general.

The “violence that causes fears and anxieties arises from a complex interplay of many and varied factors.”¹⁰ It is an understatement to say that the conflict is between Muslims and Christians, which as a result, affected adversely the conditions of the Indigenous peoples. “The causes are neither merely religious nor merely cultural. Rather, historical, demographic, social, economic, and politico-military considerations are to be taken into account.”¹¹

The right to self-determination is the overarching theme that summarizes their struggle. It is the self-determination for the Moros to live the Islamic way of life, and for the Lumads to live their cultural and indigenous identities.¹² The key component in the struggle for self-determination is the issue of land. Territory is considered as the most important factor for self-determination because it provides the space for the other religious communities to live freely

⁵ Larousse, 78; Gowing 1979: 40; Francisco 2004: 40) Peter Gowing and Robert McAmis, (eds), *Muslim Filipinos: Their History, Society and Contemporary Problems*, ed. (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1974); Jose Mario C. Francisco, (2004) “The Mediating Role of Narrative in Interreligious Dialogue: Implications and Illustrations from the Philippine Context.” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 41, no. 2 (2004): 160-175.

⁶ Larousse, 184.

⁷ Pablito Baybado, “Beyond Colonization: The Impact of History in Philippine Interreligious Dialogue.” *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, issue 20, (2017): 38-53.

⁸ Cesar A. Majul, (1973). *Muslims in the Philippines*. 2nd edition. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1973), 343.

⁹ Francisco, 2.

¹⁰ Georg Ziselsberger, *The Vision of Bishop Bienvenido S. Tutud: Interreligious Dialogue – a fundamental attitude of Christian life*. (Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publications, 1990), 18.

¹¹ Ziselsberger, 19.

¹² Abhoud Syed Lingga, “Assertions of Sovereignty and Self-Determination: The Philippine Bangsamoro Conflict,” *Mindanao Horizons* 1, no. 1 (2010): 19-20.



their respective faiths and traditions. Self-determination has to take on the challenge of a “shared-territory,”¹³ which continues to fuel the debate, negotiations and dialogues.

The religious dimension, however, clearly appears as the overarching foundation of the conflict; the foundational element of the Moros’ right to self-determination is Islam and the Islamic way of life, and for the Lumads’ is their cultural and indigenous way of life. It is the religious identity that underlies the conflict and legitimizes the right to self-determination and the perception that the “Christians” are the cause of the conflict that produces the tension in the Muslim-Christian or even in the tri-people encounters.

Larousse emphasizes that “religious identifications of both Muslims and Christians are part of the fabric of their self-identity. Their religious identification is at a deeper level than the simple label of Muslim and Christian.”¹⁴ This deeper level, Gowing describes as the Moro’s Christian problem and Christian’s Moros problem. On the one hand, the assimilation objective is the great “Christian Problem of the Moros,” which is the “obliteration of the religion and culture of minority peoples as the only avenue for national unity.”¹⁵ The Moros’ resistance to national assimilation and unity resulting to war and violence in Mindanao and Sulu, which further derails progress and development, is the Christian’s Moro problem. The Moros are fighting for self-determination, an autonomy in their ancestral domain which will allow them to live the Islamic way of life. The “Christian problem,” however, is the systematic intention to assimilate the Muslims into the national socio-economic and political culture. The Moro’s greatest fear is being totally submerged in a

Christian-based national Filipino identity. For as long as the approach is perceived this way, the Moros will continue to fight for deliverance from a tyrannical, oppressive Christian Filipino colonialism.¹⁶ The ethno-religious identity penetrates all other aspects of the individual and social life. “Thus, the Filipino Muslim struggle is rooted on the question of their ethnic identity, their religious identity, and their national identity.”¹⁷

THE CHALLENGE TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The Mindanao conflict clearly shows that there is a close correlation between religion and conflict. To understand this correlation, Fox distinguishes between religion in its capacity as a motivating factor and as a legitimizing factor.¹⁸ The former refers to religion that directly commands and supports violence and conflict, while the latter refers to religion as validity-claims for grievances and injustice. In the case of the Mindanao conflict, religion plays as the legitimizing factor.

As already indicated, religion is the underlying issue in the Mindanao conflict, and it is also at the very heart of interreligious dialogue. Religion, because it provides the justification for grievances and legitimization for conflict, should take priority in the interreligious dialogue discourse in the country.

According to the FABC Theological Commission, the search for harmony should not be approached from outside situation or by an outsider, but by those living and experiencing these conflicts.¹⁹ The notion of harmony that

¹³ James Kho, “Mindanao: Land of Promise Once More,” *Mindanao Horizons*, volume 3, No. 2 (2011): 56; See also Rodil 2010.

¹⁴ LaRousse, 197.

¹⁵ Gowing and McAmis, 216.

¹⁶ Gowing and McAmis, 201).

¹⁷ Leonardo Mercado, *Interreligious Explorations: The Challenge and Rewards of Inter-religious Dialogue*. Manila: Logos Publications, 2004), 153; Samuel K. Tan, *Decolonization and Filipino Muslim Identity* (Quezon City: UP Department of History, 1988), 73-78.

¹⁸ Fox, 300.

¹⁹ Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed, *For All the Peoples of Asia Vol. 2*, (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 292.





will guide the inter-religious relation should arise from their own contexts, shared joys and pains.

Religion is at the heart of ethno-religious identity. It provides the deep sense of belonging to a particular religious group and defines one's collective and individual identity. As such, religion functions as a social boundary; hence, in the case of the Mindanao conflict, this boundary is generally called the Christian, Moros, and Lumads encounter. Religion, however, is not merely an epistemological social construct that defines one's uniqueness and identity in a pluralist society. Religion is also relational and experiential.²⁰

“Religion is a relationship. It is an experience. People who have experienced relationship can relate to different people. Each relationship is different. One can compare them with reference to a particular element. But that element is not the exclusive characteristic of any one relationship, because in that case it cannot be a point for comparison. No one relationship need be normative to judge others.”²¹

Challenged by this situation, Christianity in Asia, the local churches in particular, is called upon to a deeper mutual knowledge and understanding, of friendship and solidarity involving a sharing of thought, or prayer, theological and pastoral orientations, even of some material and personnel resources; and, joint study and reflections, leading to a greater community of vision, discernment, responses to common or similar situations.²²

Such profound sensitivity to the situations and context of Asia requires a responsive theology. For this reason, FABC calls for a theology that advances a deeper sense of community, “a new world of Asia, as a true family of nations in

this part of the earth, linked not only by lines of geography, but by mutual understanding and respect, by the nobler bonds of brotherhood and love.”²³ It is in this sense that Fr Arevalo sees FABC as “truly an issue of the grace that was the Second Vatican Council.”²⁴ FABC is a concrete expression of the *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council. As an expression, FABC has entered and involved itself in the unique identity, concrete history, and various struggles of Asia. It did not enter with ready-made answers and pre-fabricated conception of Asia. It comes like a child ready to listen, to be formed, to grow amidst the “joys and sorrows” and “lights and shadows” of Asia. FABC is a “new way of being Church,” precisely because it is a Church in the making. It is a family of Churches continually shaped by the struggles and challenges of the “innumerable cultures and traditions of Asia.” It is a communion in the making, always fresh and young, because of its receptivity and resiliency in listening to the Spirit at work in Asia.

THE ORIENTATION OF DIALOGUE

The community of the local churches amidst the innumerable cultures and traditions striving to become a family within a family, at the same time struggling to become an integral part of the bigger rich, Asian families can only take place with the orientation of *dialogue*. “It is around this focal point that the FABC’s understanding of the Church and its mission revolves. Dialogue frees the Church from becoming self-centered-community, and links it with people in all areas and dimensions of their lives.”²⁵ Dialogue, in a sense, is the mechanism of inserting/integrating the local Churches to the situations in Asia. If the Spirit is at work in Asia, Dialogue is the Church’s communion and fidelity to the Spirit.

²⁰ Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed, *For All the Peoples of Asia Vol. 2*, 292.

²¹ Michael Amaladoss, SJ, *Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World* (Chennai: IDCR & ISPCK, 2003), 137.

²² Gaudencio Rosales, DD and C.G. Arevalo, S.J. (eds) (1997). *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 1*. Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), xvi.

²³ Rosales and Arevalo, xvi.

²⁴ Rosales and Arevalo, xvi.

²⁵ Rosales and Arevalo, xxiv-xxv.





Thereby, dialogue is pursued in various spheres, namely; Asian religions, Asian cultures, and the multitudes of the poor.

Guided by this orientation, FABC is faced with at least four major challenges: the socio-political sphere, national integration, harmonizing tradition and modernity, and challenges derive from differences in ideological orientations. As the home of all major religions, it is scandalous to think that it is also the home of a great multitude of the poor amidst the very few extremely wealthy. With traditions founded in antiquity, globalization, westernization, Americanization have gradually uprooted Asians from their traditional psyche creating imbalance at the cultural, economic, religious and ecological aspects. Asia is also home to many internal conflicts brought about by opposing ideologies such as communism and democracy, socialism and capitalism, clashes and violent rivalry between major tribes or ethno-linguistic groups and others. Home to ancient religions, there is a need to bring balance and harmony to prevent extremism and fanaticism.

In short, the dynamics of Asia is so diverse that no single unilateral approach coming from a single entity can bring peace and harmony. Dialogue, therefore, is not only an insertion of the Church to the concerns and spirituality of Asia. It is also a creative move towards cooperation and collaboration between and among all players of Asia such as the environment, the poor, the rich, all religions, etc to effect a meaningful transformation. In the spirit of dialogue, FABC comes not as the solution, neither the “savior” of Asia, but as an active participant in the Asian harmony and cooperation of allowing the Spirit to move each one, that we may be one in Spirit so that Asia becomes truly the “continent of the Spirit.”

HARMONY: THE SPIRIT OF DIALOGUE

The orientation of dialogue is harmony. Harmony is the “convergent rhythm”²⁶ of the divergent forms of all reality. Differences are considered integral part of the Asian identity. The other integral part is unity. In short, unity-in-plurality or plurality-in-unity characterizes harmony as the spirit of dialogue. Harmony has been well reflected upon in the field of education, culture, interreligious dialogue, human development, family and youth, communication and even as a way of doing Theology in Asia of the different Offices of FABC.

Harmony refers to the relationship of the different parts with respect to the totality. Each part does not contain the totality, neither the only way to the totality. Henceforth, each part is equal, or better still, the many different ways of achieving the totality. This totality, of course, is referred to as the ultimate ground of being, God. Thereby, “Harmony evolves by respecting the otherness of the other and by acknowledging its significance in relation to the totality. Consequently, the unique significance of every religion is grateful and critically perceived within the context of the universal spiritual evolution of humanity.”²⁷

The recognition of plurality is not in itself recognition of the different parts as end in itself. Rather, it is the interrelationship of the parts comprising the whole that plurality is to be understood. Plurality, at best, is to be considered as expressions, ways, roads, paths to the “sacred, divine, or ultimate humanity.” Plurality, understood as an end, breeds division and strife. Plurality, outside its relationship to the whole, becomes the determining factor of “what is right and wrong, what is proper and improper, what is the name of God, etc” which maybe

²⁶ Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed, *For All the Peoples of Asia Vol. 2*, 157.

²⁷ Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed, *For All the Peoples of Asia Vol. 2*, 157.





inimical to other views. Plurality as separation is competition both in justification and veracity. In this sense, Asia becomes simply an aggregate of many things (cultures, religions and traditions) yet empty of character and spirituality.

Furthermore, FABC warns us that religions should not be taken in the simplistic sense. This means that harmony should not be considered in the categories of inclusivism and exclusivism. The BIRA v/3 document is very clear of what is not harmony. In the spirit of harmony, religions do not include other religions, but it does not exclude them either. “Where only similarities exists, there is no need of dialogue; where only differences exists, there is no possibility of dialogue. Inclusivism does not respect the identity of each religion, and exclusivism does not recognize the relationality of religions. The way of harmony does not unfold through aggressive indoctrination, which distorts reality. Dialogue aimed at ‘converting’ the other to one’s own religious faith and tradition is dishonest and unethical; it is not the way of harmony.”²⁸

Harmony, therefore, is founded on the recognition and appreciation of the uniqueness and fecundity of the different religions in Asia as the many paths leading towards full humanization. It is their final goal of, being the way, that will lead humanity towards justice and peace, that the understanding Harmony must be anchored with. For, as we already expressed above, these different ways are where the “Spirit is at work in Asia.” As path, way, expression, plurality does not suffer the error of skepticism or relativism. Relativism or skepticism happens when plurality or the various parts are taken individually as the final and ultimate criterion of truth, good and beautiful.

TRI-PEOPLE DIALOGUE AS EXPRESSION OF HARMONY

If tri-people dialogue is to become a mechanism for peaceful coexistence, then its primary job is to transform religion from a legitimizing factor of conflict and wall of division towards the justification of peace and as a mechanism to embrace the religious other. From an inter-religious perspective, lasting peace is not through political and economic negotiations. There is no peace unless there is social harmony between and among Muslims, Christians, and Lumads. But how is harmony to be achieved in an increasing volatile situation, made complicated by the continuing influence of religious extremism?

The tri-people shares a common territory Mindanao. They are bound to relate with one another. In fact, while we can speak of Mindanao conflict, we can also speak of Mindanao harmony where the tri-people has lived in mutual understanding, peace and harmony. That they share a common territory makes dialogue an imperative approach to address the Mindanao conflict.²⁹

“Rodil challenges these three disparate group to overcome the pain of their shared yet contentious history in order to restore the social and cultural dignity of the Moro and Lumad peoples, through meaningful reparations for past injuries, such as land grabs of ancestral territories, and a continuing commitment to peace.”³⁰

Based on the theology of harmony, the tri-people approach demands that no singular ethno-religious identity can impose its hegemonic culture over the others. In order to address the issues of conflict and violence, the tri-people approach must bring all the parties on an equal footing at the dialogue table. According to

²⁹ Rodil 2010; Kho 2011.

³⁰ Antonio Gabriel M. La Vina, “From Diverse Perspectives to a United Effort,” *Mindanao Horizons* 3, No. 2 (2010): 47.

²⁸ Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed, *For All the Peoples of Asia* Vol. 2, 158.





Bishop Benny, first Bishop of the Prelature of Marawi established by Pope St. John Paul for the purpose of dialoguing and reconciling with the Moros, it is this equality among the tri-people that should serve as the starting point of genuine dialogue. An equality that is driven by the desire to learn from the other and for the purpose of establishing social cohesion mainly because they are living on the same land, with common history both painful and joyful. Cornille describes this as an attitude of humility as one of the conditions for interreligious dialogue. It is the “humble recognition of the limited or finite way in which the ultimate trust is grasped or expressed within one’s religion.”³¹ “Each religious tradition holds a variety of moral and spiritual resources that can facilitate rebuilding trust, transform perception, and inspire a sense of engagement and commitment to the peace building process.”³²

In a sense, while ethno-religious identity provides the legitimacy of conflict, it can be harnessed at the same time to purge such legitimacy and serve as the resolution of the conflict. To harness ethno-religious identity is to transcend its particularity and locate such identity in its fluid relation with other ethno-religious identities. The tri-people dialogue is the overcoming of one ethno-religious identity as the angle for which encounter is defined. Rather, it is in the organic relation of the three that inter-religious dialogue has to be redefined.

The tri-people dialogue model demands a continuing reevaluation of the notions of self-determination, ethno-religious identity, religious values, and socio-religious and political

structures. Tri-people perspective requires a critical assessment of these notions from a unilateral to a tri-lateral framework for a genuine dialogue to take place and attain its goal of peace. To make dialogue as a peace building mechanism is for the tri-people dialogue to become a transforming process for all parties involve to embrace the tri-people horizon as the landscape of asserting their ethno-religious identity, while at the same time, humbly welcoming the religious other through mutual respect, appreciation, and cooperation.

³¹ Catherine Cornille, “Introduction,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-religious Dialogue*, edited by Catherine Cornille. (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), 21.

³² Mohammed Abu-Nimer, (2001). “Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 6 (2001): 686.



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