

The Role of Religion in Peace Making¹

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Context: Religion and Peacemaking

Two weeks ago, the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) held its 14th “Talks on the Hill” in Davao City, Philippines. ASEF has been acting as a bridge between the diverse peoples and states of Asia and Europe, supporting the Asia Europe Meetings or ASEM. Interfaith dialogues, bringing together cultures and civilizations, became a major interest of the ASEAN and the European Union after 9/11. ASEM has organized 4 conferences on interfaith dialogue over the last 10 years, involving governments and the religious. The ASEF “Talks on the Hill” are dialogue retreats organized around selected issues, reflecting the common concerns of Asia and Europe. ASEF is planning up to six dialogue retreats around religion and interfaith issues. Why religion and interfaith issues?

As ASEF explains, “Religion is, and will continue to be, a powerful element in the tensions and polarization between and within societies with differing cultural and religious values. Tensions where religion is invoked, either in its own right or as a proxy

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for political battles, arise not simply between adherents of different religious practices and beliefs, but also between religious and secular groups. It is therefore essential to include both religious and non-religious actors in dialogue efforts to bring about mutual understanding towards the mitigation or reconciliation of conflict”.

Discrimination and violence in the name of religion, along with some of the worst injustices in the name of religion has, in fact, been going on throughout the centuries. Religion, in this sense, is a key element underpinning certain conflicts. However, although many conflicts and acts of violence were created because of religious differences, religion has also offered unexpected avenues toward peacemaking.

Although violent conflicts have erupted ostensibly in the name of religion (Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, the Balkans, Sudan, East Timor, and Sri Lanka are examples), what has largely been ignored is the fact that religious approaches to peacemaking which include the expanded role of religious leaders and religious institutions in peacemaking and peace building (like that in Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Macedonia, Nigeria, and Sudan) have been particularly effective in complementing traditional/secular peace diplomacy.

Appleby writes, *“Religion is a source not only of intolerance, human rights violations, and extremist violence, but also of non-violent conflict transformation, the defense of human rights, integrity in government, and reconciliation and stability in divided societies”* (Appleby, 1996).

David Smock cites as recent examples the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches mediation of the short-lived 1972 peace agreement in Sudan as well as the leadership of various churches in the struggle against apartheid, and the peaceful transition in South Africa. The most dramatic and most frequently cited case, of course, is the successful mediation the Rome-based Community of Sant’Egidio achieved to help end the civil war in Mozambique in 1992. (Smock, *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religions Bring Peace, Not War*, 2006).

What we need is to avoid the trap of focusing solely on religion's divisiveness, but on its potential for contributing positively to peacemaking. Hence, I argue here that while the participation of religious leaders and institutions does not guarantee the success of peace processes, neither can it be ignored.

What is the basis of the assertion that religion can play a positive role in peacemaking? What is it in religious leaders and religious institutions that make it particularly suitable in addressing conflicts? I think it has to do with how religion functions in so far as the individual and the community are concerned.

Religion is a strong basis for identity, particularly when religious difference coincides with other demarcation lines such as political, ethnic, economic or geographic. Religious identities are more or less inclusive or exclusive in relation to outsiders. Religious belief systems have a particular identity forming potential. Religion is also social, offering the individual a belonging to an experienced or sensed community of fellow believers. In this sense, religion is a 'compass' for the individual as well as the religious community; it tells you where you belong and where to proceed. It is this social dimension that allows religions to bring people together, discuss matters that affect their lives and develop processes to address issues and concerns, e.g. peace building processes.

Any successful attempt at maximizing the role of religion in peace making must therefore be predicated in our ability to locate the role of one religion within the individual practicing it and the community it creates.

Religious leaders and organizations offer credibility as trusted institutions; a respected set of values; moral warrants to oppose injustice; unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties; capability to mobilize community, nation, and international support for a peace process; and a sense of calling that often inspires perseverance in the face of major and otherwise debilitating obstacles.(Smock, Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace, 2008).

Scholars of peace and conflict studies (Appleby, 2006; Johnston, 2007; Abu-Nimer, 2001), aware that religion is at times the instigator or the catalyst of conflict, also point out that it contributes to peacemaking. Religious conservatism has encouraged activism in the service of a range of social causes like peace education, health care, environmentalism, and expanding educational opportunities for all, including women. It is in this second aspect that I would like to focus on in this brief presentation. I wish to discuss with you today the critical role played by religion in achieving peace through a discussion of our own experience in engaging the Ulama---Muslim religious scholars and leaders--- in our attempt to address the decades-old conflict in the southern Philippines.

Philippine Experience: The Role of Ulama in Peace Building

Since August 2008, armed conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government has resulted in over 600,000 displaced persons, the majority of whom are Muslims. Hundreds have been injured or killed, as the signing of a key agreement, the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain, was stopped by the Supreme Court in response to the petition of 3 Christian local government executives. The communities in Mindanao have been lobbying for the resumption of the peace process.

In the Philippines, we in the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID) have been wrestling with issues that radicalize our communities and contribute to armed conflict as well as the factors that can mute or mitigate these forces. What actions can be taken to dull the leading edge of extremism, particularly in the local communities? What role does religion play in all these? We need to find the answers to these questions if we are to deal with the radicalization and the growth of extremism in our Muslim communities.

The changes in geopolitics over the last decade have not only contributed to armed conflict, these have also put our liberties at risk. The Bush administration's support of military counter-terrorism training for the Philippine government has been feared and opposed by peace and human rights advocates as well as by Muslim religious and civil society leaders. Since the military are largely Christians who are not part of the Muslim communities, their expanding role in Mindanao places Muslim-Christian relationship on a slippery slope. Further, the presence of US troops in the areas of conflict in Mindanao added stress to the good relations between the US government and the Muslims of the Philippines.

In the Muslim areas of the Philippines, our liberties are at risk from internal ethnic conflicts with central government, wrongly billed as a "Muslim-Christian conflict". In Mindanao, the ethnic conflict has been taken to a new level by the fear of an all-out-war strategy or the possibility of the return of Martial Law, purportedly to deal with terrorism in the South, attributed to Muslim extremists.

The expansion of an extremist religious interpretation of Islam does not help us. We are at risk from within and from without. Thus, we are increasingly focused on the role of religion in war and peace.

There are thousands of ulama in the Philippines who provide spiritual assistance to communities. Each ulama reflects the diverse and unique socio-cultural and political orientation of the community he serves. Aligned together, a network of unified ulama can bring about a celebration of this diversity and at the same time a collaborative coalition that can bring about positive change and progress for Muslims.

The Ulama are very influential in the communities. A survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) in 2006² reported that over 80% of the Muslim respondents indicated that they had "Much Trust" in their religious leaders: 89% trusted the imam

² SWS Filipino Muslim Survey on Law and Social Justice, November 25–December 6, 2006

and 85% in the ulama as compared to 79% for the elected barangay (village) captain and 69% trust rating for the traditional leaders.

There have been active engagements by the Ulama in peacemaking and conflict-resolution. At the grassroots level, some religious leaders play a significant role in addressing the problem of *rido*. *Rido*, or feuding between families and clans, is a type of conflict characterized by sporadic outbursts of retaliatory violence between families and kinship groups as well as between communities. It can occur in areas where government or a central authority is weak and in areas where there is a perceived lack of justice and security. *Rido* is considered one of the major problems in Mindanao. *Rido* has wider implications for conflict in Mindanao primarily because of the tendency for it to interact in unfortunate ways with separatist conflict involving the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and other forms of armed violence.

A study conducted by The Asia Foundation in the Philippines showed that the variety of innovative or hybrid mechanisms that combine the mainstream or formal government framework with the traditional ways of resolving conflicts have been particularly successful in addressing rido. These include the following examples: Joint Ulama Municipal Peace and Order Council in Barira, Maguindanao, the *Walay na Bitiara* in Sultan Kudarat municipality in Maguindanao and the Mayor's Council "tri-people" conflict resolution body in North Upi, Maguindanao. In Sulu, local government units have integrated traditional conflict resolution processes and customary laws into municipal and provincial executive policies. Government, ulama, and traditional Moro leaders have also collaborated in resolving conflicts under the auspices of the Reconciliation and Unification Council of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (Torres, 2007). In most LGUs, ulama and priests are members of peace and order councils, led by local government executives.

At a broader level, dialogue among the Christian and Muslim clergy has been an enduring element of interfaith dialogue in Mindanao. Experiences in the field

demonstrate that the involvement and support of religious actors is critical to the success of peace building in the region. When they truly espouse the goals of dialogue, religious leaders - the priests, the imams, and the pastors, among others - have the capacity to guide and motivate their members to move from fear and distrust towards greater understanding and mutual tolerance. And because they are trusted and respected in their communities, their involvement lends credibility to the process and more importantly provides a positive example for the members of their communities, some of whom may not be as inclined to participate.

Often, these dialogues are venues for theological exchange among the clergy. All religions - Christianity and Islam included - advocate peace and yet religious language is often manipulated to rationalize episodes of violence and to portray the conflict in Mindanao as a clash between Islam and Christianity. In the face of misconceptions about the different faith traditions, these extreme views of the conflict can all too easily dominate more rational discourses of the problem. Dialogue then becomes an opportunity for sharing among the clergy, for mutual learning and understanding of the true nature of each other's religion. In the process of knowing, each side can overcome their misconceptions and discover that in spite the inherent differences in their practices, there is much in their respective religions that link them together.

In this respect, the PCID is encouraging the religious in the Philippines to engage in discussions of "A Common Word"³, which appealed to believers not to let differences cause hatred and strife between Muslims and Christians. Instead of focusing on what divides, *A Common Word* stressed what is common between the two religions:

Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbor form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are

³ On October 11, 2007, a group of 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals sent an open letter, entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, to Pope Benedict XVI and the leaders of other Christian denominations, in response to the speech delivered by the Pope on September 12, 2006 at the University of Regensburg, Germany that sparked widespread protests by Muslims around the world. *A Common Word* argued that "if Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace."

founded. As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes, (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an [*Al-Mumtahinah*, 60:8]).

Rather than fight each other in conflicts where there can be no victor, the document urged Muslims and Christian to “vie with each other only in righteousness and good works.” It asked both religions to be good neighbors “be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.”

In other instances, dialogues among the clergy are organized in direct response to certain issues and events - so-called "crisis points" that can easily be manipulated by certain groups to advance their own interests and have the potential to further polarize the Muslims and Christians in the region. The dialogue, for example, between Muslim and Christian religious leaders in the provinces of Lanao del Norte and del Sur was first convened by the Lanao Muslim-Christian Movement for Peace and Development (LMCMPD) in light of a series of violent incidents that threatened to reignite religious animosities in these provinces. In these instances, dialogue provides a neutral forum for religious leaders to publicly affirm their solidarity, in certain cases to jointly condemn acts of violence, and to appeal to their respective congregations for restraint and greater understanding. In the recent kidnapping of three members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), several ulama from Sulu helped in securing the release of two of the hostages.

At the national level, one of the highly visible examples of the role of religious leaders in peacemaking in the region is the Bishops-Ulama Conference of Mindanao (BUC) formerly, the Bishops-Ulama Forum. The BUC itself evolved from a 1996 meeting (at the behest of former President Fidel V. Ramos) between Muslim clerics or Ulama and Catholic Bishops of Mindanao to discuss controversial issues of the 1996 peace agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front. Critical and opposing voices from the Christian communities, who feared the proposal

prejudiced non-Muslims, threatened to undo the peace gains brought about by the conclusion of the negotiations between the warring parties.

From that initial dialogue emerged this unique partnership between the Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the region. The BUC is an interfaith forum that brings together the Catholic as well as Protestant Bishops and the Ulama of Mindanao for regular interfaith dialogue meetings. At times, these dialogues have been occasions for discussions of the spiritual dimensions of the peace process. But by far the more constructive contributions of the Forum to peacemaking in the region have come during periods of open conflict and violence when the religious leaders collectively and openly advocated peace and at key moments during the negotiations between government and rebel groups when their intervention facilitated the return of both parties to the negotiation table. The effectiveness of the BUC draws in large part from the nature of its membership. Because it is comprised largely of mid- to high-level Christian religious leaders, the Forum has managed to put a high-profile face to interfaith dialogue in Mindanao. This high-level example of interfaith cooperation has sparked public interest in and support for the role of religious leaders as an integral component of peace building. Moreover, the joint activities of the bishops and ulama under the BUC catalyzed parallel efforts among the local clergy in various communities across Mindanao (Rasul, 2004). However, the weakness of the BUC lies in its lack of access to majority of ulama organizations, a weakness that can be addressed by our initiative to help the ulama establish their national network.

Empowering the Ulama in Peace Building

Despite the success of some interfaith efforts, however, there is still a wide gap in harnessing the capacity of the ulama in peacemaking. Recognizing the crucial impact and the influential roles of the ulama as catalysts for peace and development, Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID) and the Magbassa Kita Foundation, Inc. (MKFI) has always involved the ulama in consultations and forums. In response to their request as well as PCID's continuous advocacy work of furthering and enriching the

study of Islamic and democratic political thought and the search for peaceful solution to the conflicts affecting the Muslim communities of Mindanao⁴, PCID has embarked on a three (3) year *Empowering the Ulama Project*. The main thrust of the project is to facilitate national and regional networking among the numerous ulama in the Philippines. By building strong links, the ulama will be more efficient in tackling Islamic matters and its potentials as spiritual leaders, and as champions of peace, will be boosted.

In January 2009, around 212 Muslim religious scholars and leaders, representing more than 100 organizations from 26 provinces and cities, attended the 2nd National Summit of the Ulama in the Philippines where they approved the charter and a set of bylaws that paved the way for the creation of the historic NATIONAL ULAMA CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES (NUCP)---the first truly national network of Ulama organizations in the country working for peace and development in Mindanao. The NUCP is envisioned by the Summit participants to be the vehicle for the unity of the Ulama, thereby harnessing their role in the development of Muslim communities in the Philippines.

A new initiative begun this year, the “Empowering the Aleemat (Muslim women religious scholars) as Peace and Democracy Advocates Project”, will provide the Aleemat with their own forum to form common ground in the search for peace and development. Through this project, the aleemat – who have 2 seats on the NUCP Board - could provide gender perspective in the implementation of NUCP programs and activities.

The Ulama is now on the process of developing a holistic and comprehensive sustainable development paradigm in fleshing out their role as peace and development advocates/workers through partnership building and networking, capacity and capability development, advocacy and lobbying, and other related development skills.

⁴ For additional information about Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, see: <http://www.pcid.org.ph>

Along with this effort, the PCID implements other related efforts since year 2000 which provide a holistic development paradigm and process for the empowerment of the Ulama and Aleemat. The PCID initiatives bring various sectors of the Muslim communities together – civil society, ulama, women, youth, Balik-Islam (converts), political activists and political leaders, government, representatives of the military. Further, PCID has also brought Muslim communities of Luzon and the Visayas in contact with the groups in Mindanao.

PCID has recently developed and published a manual, “Islamic Model for Peace Education”, intended as reference material for the madaris and other related publications are the backbone of all its capacity building initiatives. Developed with the assistance of our ulama, the manual can also be used by the ulama and NGOs in their peace-building initiatives.

Despite the success of PCID’s efforts for peace and development in Mindanao, i.e. its emerging lessons and best practices, there is still much to be done along the sustainability of what has been started and achieved particularly the significant role of the Ulama in peace and development given the fact that they are the respected leaders of their communities. Strengthening of their roles as peace and development advocates is imperative to fulfill most significantly in realizing the kind of development we envision for Mindanao.

The seemingly endless cycle of violence and conflict in the southern Philippines indicates that traditional approaches have very limited success in addressing the problem. Many people now recognize the need to try creative solutions to peace. One creative solution is harnessing the role of Muslim religious leaders. The so-called War on Terror should not really be understood in military terms but in terms of looking at the battle in winning the hearts of minds of people. In many Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines, the key is to give the moderate Muslim groups stronger voice to counter radicalism with peace. In particular, Muslim religious

scholars, whose moral authority is unassailable, have to be given the chance to lead their communities towards peace.

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