



## An Interreligious Dialogue in Mindanao Today

### INTRODUCTION

“Mindanao is the Land of Promise.” This is a famous slogan that people say so often. It means that Mindanao is abundant with trees, plants, animals, and vegetation. It, too, is the home of diverse cultures and religions. Despite the welcoming land and the colorful cultural-religious diversity, however, Mindanao presents to the outside world an image of struggling poverty, conflict, and violence. What happened to the “Land of Promise”? Can its peoples heal it from within?

This paper intends to present a picture of interreligious dialogue in Mindanao today. In developing this paper, the following questions will be treated: First, what is the context of Mindanao? Second, why is interreligious dialogue important in Mindanao? How can we promote and sustain interreligious dialogue in Mindanao?

There are three terminologies in this paper that need to be defined according to the purpose of the writer, namely: interreligious, dialogue, and Mindanao. *Interreligious* means a relationship among adherents of different religions and other faith traditions. *Dialogue* is understood not just a conversation between two people or groups of people. It is not a tool nor an approach to



solve conflicts and problems, but a spirituality. By spirituality, we mean living a “life according to the Spirit” or a “life in the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> It is a life grounded in “religious experience.” This is an experience that can transform the direction of one’s life towards a life that is led by the Spirit, led by God. *Mindanao* refers to the main island group in the southern part of the Philippines, which encompasses the whole of Regions IX to XIII, and the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).<sup>2</sup>

## CONTEXT

Mindanao is home to about twenty different indigenous (*Lumad*) tribes<sup>3</sup> and thirteen ethnic Muslim groups.<sup>4</sup> In the early twentieth century, during the American occupation of the Philippines, there were other ethnic groups from “Luzon and Visayas”<sup>5</sup> that migrated to settle in Mindanao. They came to be identified by their religion—thus, in the context of Mindanao, the term *settler* is synonymous with *Christian*. As these indigenous tribes and ethnic groups carry with them their own rich cultural and religious traditions, Mindanao today is a melting pot of so many cultures, religions, and faith traditions.

As mentioned earlier, the land of Mindanao is generally fertile and can be planted with almost any tropical variety of plants. It is in this environmental richness that Mindanao has been called

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Müller and others, eds., *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), s.v. “Spirituality” by Walbert Bühlmann, 413.

<sup>2</sup>The Regions of Mindanao are the following: Region IX – Isabela City, Zamboanga City, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay; Region X – Bukidnon, Cagayan de Oro City, Camiguin, Iligan City, Lanao del Norte, Misamis Occidental, and Misamis Oriental; Region XI – Compostela Valley, Davao City, Davao del Norte, Davao del Sur, Davao Oriental, and Davao Occidental; Region XII – Cotabato, Cotabato City, General Santos City, Sarangani, South Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat; Region XIII – Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Butuan City, Surigao del Norte, and Surigao del Sur; ARMM – Basilan (Excluding Isabela City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Mindanao Maps. 2008–2010. Mindanao Regions. [www.mindanaomaps.com/Mindamaps/MindaRegions.pdf](http://www.mindanaomaps.com/Mindamaps/MindaRegions.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>Leonardo N. Mercado. *Working with Indigenous Peoples: A Philippine Source Book* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1994), 9.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Luzon refers to the northern part of the Philippines and Visayas to the central part.

the Land of Promise. Until the colonizers and the settlers came, the concept of private ownership of land was alien to the Lumad and Muslim groups in Mindanao. Land registration and documents were not necessary. There was enough for everybody.

However, life is not always milk and honey, hence, there are challenges and controversies. Even way back in the sixteenth century, the peoples of Mindanao were already fighting for self-determination by bitterly resisting Spanish colonization. But it was during the American colonization period when the Christian “settlers started to register the lands they found as their own.”<sup>6</sup> “Despite the strong resistance of original residents who claimed to have owned the lands by rights of inheritance,”<sup>7</sup> the migrants which happened to be Christians pursued their demands. The Muslims in Mindanao who were deprived of their lands felt they were being cheated, not only by the Americans who promised the settlers ‘land for the landless,’ but also by many of their leaders.”<sup>8</sup> This issue of land brought about conflict, tensions, and eventually violence and wars between the Muslims and Christians of Mindanao.

The conflict between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao has created deep historical wounds and sown prejudices and suspicions. The land issue has become a religious, cultural, socioeconomic and political issue. Julkipli Wadi argues that “both Muslims and Christians consider each of their religions as their way of life, therefore, one cannot divorce the identity of religion from their life, their culture. Religion has become a major identity marker.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, some people highlight the plurality of religions and cultures as the root cause of the problems in Mindanao. Others even use religions to justify violence.

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<sup>6</sup>Camperspoint Philippines. “History of Mindanao,” <http://www.camperspoint.com/History-of-Mindanao>.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. See also Sebastiano D’Ambra. *A Path to Peace. Culture of Dialogue: Path to Peace, a Formation Manual on Dialogue and Peace* (Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publication, 2014), 108.

<sup>8</sup>D’Ambra, *A Path to Peace. Culture of Dialogue*, 108.

<sup>9</sup>Julkipli Wadi. “Mindanao Conflict and the Sabah Question: History and Dynamics,” *Silsilah Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (July-December 2013): 7.

Unluckily, the conflict between Muslims and Christians has become the center stage of the peace and order situation in Mindanao. Both Muslims and Christians have organized different groups to promote their ideals according to their faith conviction. There are fundamentalist groups that try to worsen the situation. “Fundamentalism is a narrow affirmation of the truth, not only of one’s own religion, but one’s own interpretation of it.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of using “religion as part of the solution, religion becomes part of the problem.”<sup>11</sup> Fundamentalism uses religion to justify evil acts that destroy people, communities, and the environment. Fundamentalism renders dialogue impossible. Michael Amaladoss posits that “one cannot dialogue with a religion which is no longer a religion but has become a political tool.”<sup>12</sup>

The foregoing realities are still happening in different parts of Mindanao today. There have been so many lives lost as well as families and communities destroyed in the years of conflict. Some people have lost hope and have taken up arms in opting for violence. Others have become indifferent to the situation. There is fear in the land.

### INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, A JOURNEY AND A RISK

However, in the midst of the dire situation in some parts of Mindanao, there is hope. There are people who begin to realize that it is also possible to stop the cycle of silence, indifference, fear and violence. Some of those who have been victims of discrimination, abuse, and violence have found the courage to talk about their experience.

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<sup>10</sup>Michael Amaladoss. “The Challenges of Mission Today,” in *Trends in Mission Toward the 3rd Millennium*, eds. William Jenkinson and Helene O’Sullivan (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 378.

<sup>11</sup>Ghazi bin Mohammed, “World Inter-faith Harmony Week,” <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2010/10/22/why-did-the-u-n-proclaim-world-interfaith-harmony-week/>.

<sup>12</sup>Amaladoss, “The Challenges of Mission Today,” 378.

The people who have experienced the ugliness of violence and war have found inner strength, and now are willing to tell their stories. In the experience of Comblin, a foreign missionary who worked in Latin America for many years: “Usually the poor are acted upon by others; now they take action.”<sup>13</sup> Comblin attributed this willingness to take action from the power of the Holy Spirit. Of course, other faith traditions might not understand when you talk about the Spirit as the source of energy to initiate an action. But, they will certainly understand when it is attributed to the “internal voice of our conscience.”<sup>14</sup>

This simple experience of telling and sharing of stories—both lights and shadows—can be vehicles to create a space to build friendships. People start to build bridges and break down walls that divide human relationships. Normally, when friendship is built, people are gradually willing to take the risk and journey together towards personal transformation: from suspicion to trust, from superiority to equality, from indifference to empathy, from exclusivity to inclusivity, from being a wall to being a bridge, and from being self-centered to being other-centered.<sup>15</sup>

Genuine dialogue starts to happen when one sees in “Others” their human dignity; that they too are persons. John Paul II was quoted to say: “Every child born into this world is formed in the image of God, is loved by God, [and] is respected by God.<sup>16</sup> God desires that each and every one of God’s children be brought to the joy of God’s Kingdom.”<sup>17</sup> The first letter of John 4:20 says: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” Edward Idris Cassidy argues that the quality of our love

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<sup>13</sup>Joseph Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 21, quoted in *Pneumatology* by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 155.

<sup>14</sup>D’Ambra, *A Path to Peace. Culture of Dialogue*, 119.

<sup>15</sup>Inspired by the lectures on Interreligious Dialogue given by the Silsilah Forum Davao Muslim and Christian coordinators, Nor Asiah M. Adilao and Hermes B. Sabud to various schools and groups in Davao City.

<sup>16</sup>The word in brackets is the writer’s own.

<sup>17</sup>Edward Idris Cassidy, Foreword to *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005), xii.

for God is the quality of our love for others. This brings us back to the commandments—“love of God and love of neighbor.” PHEME PERKINS posits that “there is really only one commandment, since one cannot claim to love God if one does not love others.”<sup>18</sup>

It is in the preceding atmosphere of relationship—a relationship of love grounded in the commandment “love of God and love of neighbor” that interreligious dialogue in Mindanao finds its inspiration.

### A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

In the summer of 2012, I visited Jolo, one of the havens of the Muslim fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf Group. While I was still planning my visit, my companions and even those who have already been involved in interreligious dialogue were discouraging me from pursuing my plan. They said: “It is too dangerous, too risky. Please do not go.” I did not listen to those who discouraged me from going to Jolo.

I took the ferry boat night trip from Zamboanga City to Jolo with a Muslim friend. His name is Dats, a public school teacher of Jolo. The boat was jampacked with passengers. Dats told me not speak a word so that people would not know my identity as a non-Tausog. Obediently, I followed what he said. I just smiled and nodded.

Nevertheless, I felt relaxed and comfortable. I slept very well on the collapsible bed and enjoyed the trip. When we arrived at 4.30 a.m., Dats said that he would take me to the parish convent, but I told him: “No, Dats, I am going with you wherever you go.” He was surprised and insisted on taking me to the parish convent. But he gave up and allowed me to go with him to his family. I said to myself that if I would go to the parish convent, I would not be

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<sup>18</sup>PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel According to John” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990). 992.

able to go out of the parish house without a bodyguard. It would be more dangerous!

I enjoyed my time in Jolo, and I was grateful for the hospitality and generosity of my Muslim friend, Dats. I did not experience any single moment of fear during my stay in Jolo. I trusted that Dats would look after me and protect me from any harm. It was indeed a beautiful experience of friendship and interreligious dialogue.

After a few months, I heard from people that my Muslim friend Dats had been sharing the experience of being trusted by a priest. He could not believe that a Catholic priest trusted him. When Dats came to Davao City, he stayed in our Marist house. Our friendship deepened, and we shared our experience of lights and shadows in interreligious dialogue. Often, he said, he received lots of criticism and misinterpretations among his own people.

The experience mentioned above is just one of the many experiences of interreligious dialogue in Mindanao. There are many other success stories of interreligious dialogue that are happening in the grassroots, but we do not hear of them. They are not publicized. During the year, there are varieties of interreligious dialogue initiatives in Mindanao, such as the World Inter-Faith Harmony Week that is celebrated every first week of February. The ongoing education formation programs that are happening in the different schools in Mindanao are also worth highlighting, especially as these concern young people of different faith traditions. These initiatives and celebrations have to be promoted. John Paul II initiated many interfaith and interreligious dialogue gatherings at the international level. He “believes that interfaith dialogue can help to repair and transform the world.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Harold Kasimow, “John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue: An Overview” in *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 1.

## LOVE AND HARMONY PROMOTE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

“A Common Word between Us and You: Love of God and Love of Neighbor”<sup>20</sup> was a letter signed by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars sent to Pope Benedict XVI and to other Christian religious leaders of the world on October 13, 2007.<sup>21</sup> This was probably the highest level of interreligious dialogue initiative done by our Muslim brothers from Mindanao. Normally, the interreligious initiative comes from Christians, but this one comes from the Muslims. Hence, the initiative is highly important and has to be promoted to all corners of the globe regardless of religions, faith traditions, and cultures.

This letter from the 138 Muslim leaders and scholars has been accepted with great hope among Muslims and Christians in Mindanao, especially those who are involved in the interreligious dialogue movement and other peace-oriented groups. The letter emphasizes that Muslims, Christians, and Jews talk about the love of God and love of neighbor in their religions. This commandment of love must be the common foundation for peace and harmony among the adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Genuine love always draws the goodness in others, and the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the other. For the Christians, this is much more demanding because we are commanded by Jesus to love as he has loved us (See John 15:12). Christians are called to go beyond the usual way of loving. Jesus moves on to say that the “greatest love you can offer is to lay down your life for your friends” (John 15:13). Jesus has demonstrated this kind of love in His own death on the cross.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Inter-Faith Council of Leaders, *A Common Word between Us and You: Love of God and Love of Neighbor* (Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publication, 2011), 14.

<sup>21</sup>See Sebastian D’Ambra, “New Stars of Hope and Signs of Love in the Letter from the 138 Muslim Scholars” in *A Common Word between Us and You: Love of God and Love of Neighbor*, by Inter-Faith Council of Leaders (Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publication, 2011), 7.

<sup>22</sup>Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel According to John” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990).



The love that Jesus has shown on the cross is the kind of love that can promote interreligious dialogue in Mindanao. But this kind of love is demanding and costly. There have been so many agents of interreligious dialogue in Mindanao among Muslims, Christians, and those from indigenous and other faith traditions who lost their lives and loved ones for the sake of dialogue, peace, and harmony. That is why dialogue has to be seen and understood not as a strategy but a spirituality. It is a life lived according to the Spirit; a life that is led by the Spirit—led by God. This is a life that is grounded in the religious experience that is transformative and life changing. Hence, whatever context is given, life in dialogue continues to be promoted and lived out.

## CONCLUSION

The context of Mindanao today is complex in many different aspects: culturally, religiously, economically, politically, and ecologically. It is complex because the situation is rooted and interwoven with lights and shadows, and deep historical wounds. Thus, interreligious dialogue is important in attaining peace and harmony in Mindanao. But, dialogue demands building friendships and living out the commandment of love that Jesus has shown. In this way, dialogue is not any more a process, strategy, method or approach, but a spirituality. Hence, it is a style of life that is guided, strengthened, transformed and sustained by the Holy Spirit. After all, “Dialogue starts from God, and it brings people back to God.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>This is a common and popular theme and saying of the Silsillah Dialogue Movement (SDM). SDM is a movement that tries to promote good relationships among Muslims, Christians, and other faith traditions and cultures.

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