

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN THE SEARCH FOR PEACE IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to critically analyze the role that Christianity and Islam have played in the search for peace in Mindanao as represented by various Christian and Islamic religious organizations which have been deeply involved in the Mindanao peace process since post-colonial era up to the present. The identified common values and principles of peace and justice inherent to Christianity and Islam could be harnessed toward the establishment of a shared theological and political agenda, upon which, cooperation and collaborative works for peace and development in Mindanao should be anchored. Analysis of the socio-economic, political, religious, and cultural context reigning in Mindanao as well as the role that Christianity and Islam has played in the peace process was made from the perspective of a Christian and Islamic theology of liberation. The study employed a dialogical model of interpretation which took into account specific themes and texts that are central to the teachings of the Bible and the Qu'ran. Likewise, the novel was used in the understanding of Christian and Islamic concepts of peace and justice as well as in identifying common theological and political agenda for peace in Mindanao. The study identified at least five areas of theological and political convergence between Christianity and Islam. These areas can be harnessed toward the formulation and establishment of a peace project in Mindanao that is historically and contextually relevant. The study showed that the roots and causes of conflict in Mindanao are rather complex than simple. Thus, there is no single explanation or solution to the problem. Not discounting the significant contributions that the previous peace initiatives have made in the peace process, the study suggested three political programs for lasting and genuine peace in Mindanao, namely: Economic, Cultural, and Political restructuring and transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to critically analyze the role that different religious organizations in the Philippines have played in the Mindanao peace process since the start of post-colonial era up to the present, in order to determine how far each of these organizations has addressed vital issues and problems that contribute to the Mindanao conflict and how religion could be harnessed positively towards the establishment of lasting peace in Mindanao.

The armed conflict in Southern Philippines has continued for more than four centuries and is considered one of the world's "longest" and "bloodiest" running armed conflicts (Philippine Free Press, May 27, 2000 issue). It is also known as the "largest and most persistent armed conflict in Southeast Asia" (Tan, 2003). It affects not only the people in Mindanao but also the entire Philippine society. It also contributes tremendously to the political, social and economic instability of the country.

Since the outbreak of war between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front in the early 1960s, various religious and civic organizations have intervened and explored peaceful means of resolving the conflict. Unfortunately, peace initiatives have not gained popular support among the general populace and their impact had been very minimal.

Historically, religion with its own ambiguities has suffered some negative setbacks having been identified with imperialism and colonization and the state's instrument of pacification and subjugation. The relationship of Islam and Christianity in the Philippines has also been described in polemical terms and therefore viewed as "enemies" and "rivals" rather than partners in the pursuit of peace for Mindanao.

This raises moral and political questions about the credibility and legitimacy of religion, and whether or not, religion could become a positive force in conflict mediation and in the pursuit of peace in Mindanao.

However, despite the prevailing negative perceptions about the role of religion in the Mindanao peace process, some sectors have expressed confidence that religion, if given a chance could become a potent force towards change and in the attainment of peace in Mindanao. This optimism is based on the conviction that peace is founded on the greatest values and traditions of every religion and that there are common values and principles inherent to Christianity and Islam which could be harnessed toward the establishment of a unified theological and political agenda for peace in Mindanao.

For example, the Bishop-Ulama Conference of the Philippines (BUC) in one of its recent national gatherings expressed the need to find a common and "unifying ground" and to locate the spiritual bases for peace from different religious traditions. They were also one in their observation that the "missing component in many failed peace efforts is the affirmation of the CONVERGENT SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL BASES for peace. They believe that, for the peace process to succeed, it should be anchored not on a vague and undefined desire for peace but on a clear theological and contextual foundation. Thus, there is a need to come up with a well-defined and comprehensive theological and political bases (both Islamic and Christian) that is informed and validated both by the precepts and teachings of the scriptures (Bible and Qur'an), and the prevailing social, cultural, economic and political conditions in Mindanao if genuine cooperation and solidarity among different religious communities and the suffering masses of Mindanao is to be achieved.

This research was geared towards that direction. On a theoretical level, it raised the question whether or not it is possible for Christians and Muslims to identify and establish a common theological and political agenda that could

bring about peace in Southern Philippines. On a practical level, this research explored whether or not it is possible for Christians and Muslims to create structures and functional programs of cooperation and collaboration in the pursuit of peace and development in Mindanao.

Objectives of the Study

This study specifically aimed:

1. to briefly describe and analyze the history and roots of conflict in Southern Philippines.
2. to identify and critically analyze the roles that religious leaders and their respective organizations have played in the Mindanao peace process.
3. to study and analyze the theological and political implications of Christian and Islamic concepts and visions of peace on specific economic, cultural, and political conditions that contribute and perpetuate conflict in Mindanao, and to the role that religious leaders and organizations have played in the Mindanao peace process.
4. to identify and establish a shared and common theological and political agenda that could serve as foundational basis upon which all collaborative works for peace between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao could be anchored.

Significance of the Study

This research will contribute to the studies already made on the issue of conflict and struggle for peace in Mindanao. The findings of this research will provide a much broader and deeper understanding of the source and nature of the conflict. It will also help to define the significant role that Christians and Muslims play in the peace process and the attainment of peace for Mindanao. This research will also suggest new ways of dealing with the problem and a

kind of dialogical model or approach that could be developed in resolving the conflict. Moreover, research will also serve as a springboard for further studies towards the development of a Christian and Islamic theology of religions that is historically, theologically, and contextually relevant.

Scope and Limits of the Study

The main focus of this study was to identify and establish a common Christian and Islamic theological and political agenda that could serve as foundational basis for a practical and collaborative peace program for Mindanao. Thus, basically, its main consideration was to discuss a theological conception that addresses the texts and the major convictions of at least one interpretation of Christianity and Islam as well as the construction of a theology that addresses concrete social, cultural, and political realities reigning in Mindanao.

Assessment and analysis in this research were focused on the “praxis” of five (5) widely known Christian and Islamic organizations in the Philippines namely: (1) The Catholic Bishops Council of the Philippines (CBCP); (2) the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP); (3) the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID); (4) the Ulama League of the Philippines (ULP); and (5) the Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC).

These religious groups were chosen because they are known to be the only religious organizations in the Philippines that have established and have continuing programs for peace in Mindanao and consistently overtime participated in the Mindanao peace process. These groups are national organizations composed of members representing smaller local groups that have played a very crucial and significant role in the peace process for quite a number of years now.

The study described and analyzed critically the role that these five religious organizations have played in the Mindanao peace process since post-colonial times up to the present, to see how far each of these organizations has addressed vital issues and problems of historical and political domination, social injustice and discrimination, and cultural and economic deprivation which are prevalent in Mindanao. A critical analysis and evaluation was made on their visions and mission, methods and approaches, programs and actions, theological assumptions, and their over- all impact in the Mindanao peace process based on their documents and other written sources that were available in published or unpublished articles and documents.

METHODOLOGY

To provide answers brought to the theological problem that this research sought to address, and to meet the requirements set in its objectives, the researcher chose to analyze and give a theological perspective on the problem of conflict in Mindanao from the vantage point of a Christian and Islamic liberation theology which takes into serious account the voices and perspectives of the poor and the oppressed. Hence, the method for analyzing the conflict in Mindanao is from “below”, that is, from the perspective of the marginalized, not from the macro dominant and prevailing narratives of the government and the powerful sectors of Philippine society. In this respect, much of the accounts reflected in the narrative of the roots and causes of conflict in Mindanao were deliberately taken from the side of the marginalized. This is not to deny however, that there are other valid views and perspectives from other sides which are maybe useful in analyzing the problem of armed conflict in Mindanao, nor to imply that all the faults belong to the government and the powerful.

As a scholar using a liberationist approach, the researcher is interested both with Christian and Islamic theologians who share the same perspective, thus, selectively choosing two widely known Christian and Islamic theologians, namely, Gustavo Gutierrez and Farid Esack, in concurrence with some other well-known Christian and Islamic scholars whose theological perspectives and emphasis on a contextual reading of the texts and preferential option for the poor and the oppressed, are found very relevant in addressing prevailing issues of socio-economic, cultural, and political deprivation and injustice in Mindanao. A combination of Gutierrez's and Esack's theological perspectives are deemed necessary, to provide a more comprehensive and balanced view of a Christian and Islamic theology of liberation that is meaningful and relevant in a heterogeneous context like Mindanao.

This study employed liberation theology perspective in selectively identifying and analyzing Christian and Islamic themes and texts in the Bible and the Qur'an which are found meaningful and relevant to the issues of economic, cultural and political marginalization and injustice in Mindanao and in the construction of a common theo-political agenda that is informed both by the Biblical and Qur'anic visions of peace and the existing realities in Mindanao.

The study gathered data and information from written documents such as: books, theses, dissertations, articles, position papers, circulars and unpublished documents dealing with the issue of conflict and the search for peace in Southern Philippines. Other main sources are the works of Gustavo Gutierrez and Farid Esack who seem to be the most representatives of Liberation Theology (Christian and Islamic perspective) and whose thoughts are most valuable and significant in providing a theoretical and theological framework by which available data and information on the subject are analyzed. The research also relied heavily on hermeneutical works of some well known Christian and Islamic scholars on peace which are utilized in the

formulation of a common theological and political agenda towards the attainment of peace in the Southern Philippines.

Personal interviews with key informants representing various smaller religious groups and organizations in the Philippines were conducted to provide space for “smaller voices” to be heard and analyzed in the light of prevailing views on the peace process. Oral accounts gained from personal interviews are considered vital sources of information as they reflect experiences from the grassroots. They also provide information and data which are not made available in written documents.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Results of the study showed that the nature of the Mindanao armed conflict is quite complex and much more complicated. No single description can provide accurate explanation of its roots and causes. As a whole, the study revealed that the Moro struggle in Mindanao has historical, political, economic, ethno-cultural and religious causes. It started with the Moro people’s struggle against Spanish and American rules and is fed by their continuing experiences of political, cultural and economic injustice and marginalization, the failure of the state to address their grievances, and the large-scale military operations in Mindanao which threatens their existence and identity as a people. This situation has given rise to popular discontent which led to persistent armed conflict.

The dominance of the rich and the powerful and the subjugation and marginalization of the weak and the poor have been the pattern of relationship that characterizes Philippine society. It can be said that the conflict is not between Muslims and Christians but between the dominance of the rich and the powerful and the powerlessness of the weak and the poor. The Moro struggle in that sense, must be understood from below (the underside of Moro

history), from the very core of the poor and struggling Muslim and other indigenous communities, not from the macro perceptions of the Philippine Government's national interests and the macro liberationists' political agenda.

The study and analysis of the role of Christian and Muslim leaders and their respective organizations in the Mindanao peace process revealed both positive and negative findings. No doubt, interfaith dialogues and other collaborative works undertaken by different religious groups and organizations have in one way or the other contributed to efforts towards the attainment of peace in Mindanao. Small scale livelihood projects, financial assistance to displaced families in times of war, "peace zones", "peace sanctuaries", peace-building programs, interfaith dialogues, position papers and calls for a negotiated peace agreement between disputing parties are important and have served their purpose. However, in as far as how these programs have addressed vital issues of equitable distribution of land and other resources, wider participation of the marginalized masses in the political processes, and the establishment of a just social order in Mindanao, remains uncertain.

As observed, elements of division, competition, doubts, mistrust and conflict brought about by sectarianism, absolutism, and narrow sectoral interests, are still present within and among different religious organizations. Moreover, as the study shows, there is a lack of a clear common theological and political agenda upon which all peace efforts and collaborative works between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao could be anchored.

In spite of negative perceptions that pits Islam and Christianity as "natural enemies", the study showed that the identification of a common theological and political agenda for peace in Mindanao that is informed both by Islamic and Christian faiths is a viable project. However nuanced, Christianity and Islam share common values and principles such as, the universality of God, interrelatedness and interdependence of all reality, love, righteousness, justice,

equality, and peace. These can be harnessed to serve as foundational basis in the formation of a unified theological and political agenda that could bring about genuine and lasting peace in political injustice reigning in Mindanao. This study, therefore, recommends a three-pronged peace agenda (based on Christian and Islamic visions of peace) namely: 1.) Economic transformation; 2.) Cultural transformation, and 3.) Political transformation.

As shown in the study, the economic marginalization of the Muslim masses is at the center of the peace challenge in Mindanao, thus, peace-building in Mindanao would mean, inclusion of key issues of reparations, economic redistribution, and land reform. To address the issue of landlessness which significantly contributes to poverty among the Muslim masses, the Philippine government needs to legislate laws to regulate and limit the size of the family holding of land and in the process implement land redistribution program to cater the needs of the landless masses in Mindanao. Peace-building in Mindanao would also mean exploring and pursuing a fair and inclusive economic policy that serves the best interests of the poor and the marginalized.

Social and cultural reforms are also one of the key ingredients of lasting peace and development in Mindanao. To address the problem of conflict in Mindanao, a culture of peace and mutual recognition of both Islamic and Christian values and culture, has to sink deep into the social fabric where cultural openness, social unity and pursuit of peaceful means to resolve conflict is appreciated and practiced by all. The solution to the Mindanao problem is anchored on the creation of a national consciousness sensitive to cultural diversity. This means, the government and the majority Filipino populace should recognize the value and distinctiveness of Moro cultures and identities. Consequently, it also means that the government needs to adopt culturally-sensitive policies that seek to honor and preserve Islamic cultural heritage.

The Mindanao problem is also a political and structural problem. Thus, it requires a political and structural solution as key dimension. No significant changes in so far as addressing the problem of conflict in Mindanao can take place unless policies change; and for these change to happen, the country's politics needs to change toward more participation, involving especially the marginalized sectors in making decisions that affect them.

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