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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF INTERFAITH ORGANIZATIONS TO COEXISTENCE AND THEIR POSSIBLE ROLE IN THE PEACE PROCESS BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES (GRP) AND THE MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT (MILF) IN MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

Mindanao, the second largest island of the Philippines and a frontier of the country, is home to three major groups—Muslims (Moro), Christians, and Lumads (indigenous peoples)—collectively referred to as the island's "tri-people," whose diverse cultures embody divergent beliefs and practices. The long years of conflict in Mindanao have left many communities bereft of the peace and development they rightfully deserve. Although the roots of this unrest are political, economic, territorial, and historical, conflict resolution practitioners have described the Mindanao conflict as a social problem marked by deep-seated prejudice, mutual distrust, and mutual suspicion, compounded by a long history of colonization. Religion has nonetheless remained in the limelight because the principal actors in the conflict happen to represent two different faiths. This study examined the contributions of two interfaith organizations—the Silsilah Dialogue Movement (SDM) and the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC)—to peaceful coexistence among the tri-people; the obstacles and challenges confronting interfaith dialogue in Mindanao; and the possible role of interfaith organizations and religious leaders in the peace process between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Employing a historical-descriptive qualitative design, data were gathered during a three-month internship with SDM (June–September 2009) through four focus group discussions, participant observation of activities in several Silsilah Forums across Mindanao, formal and informal semi-structured interviews with 27 key informants (including SDM officers and members, BUC members, MILF commanders, and non-participants in interfaith dialogue), and documentary analysis. Data were analyzed using Fitzduff's meta-conflict approach. Findings show that interfaith organizations have contributed substantially to peaceful coexistence among the tri-people, particularly among those who have engaged in interfaith dialogue, chiefly through the personal transformation of participants. Moreover, an individual's commitment to and in-depth knowledge of his or her own religion deepens commitment to practicing and propagating peace, and religious leaders are key to harmonious relations among followers of different religions when they model dialogue and spread the values of their own traditions. However, interfaith work remains largely Christian-led, limited in reach, perceived by some as aligned with government, and weakly engaged with issues of justice and human rights—factors that sustain hesitancy among Muslims and Lumads. The study recommends equal tri-people representation in interfaith organizations, systematic documentation of the impact of dialogue, the involvement of local government officials, education of the tri-people on their right to participate in the peace process, and the impartial participation of religious leaders as advisers or consultants acceptable to both the GRP and the MILF.

Keywords: *interfaith dialogue, peaceful coexistence, peace process, Mindanao, Bangsamoro, Silsilah Dialogue Movement, Bishops-Ulama Conference, religious peacebuilding*

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The Philippines is made up of some 7,100 islands and islets divided into three groups: Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao. Mindanao is the second largest island of the Philippine archipelago and was once one of the richest areas in Southeast Asia (George, 1980, p. 221). It has a land area of 102,043 square kilometers, constituting around one-third of the country's total, and is home to roughly 21 million inhabitants, about one-fourth of the Philippine population, based on the 2000 census. As Conciliation Resources (1999a) observes:

Mindanao evokes contrasting images of bounty and want, of war and peace, of rapid development amid the increasing impoverishment of its people. Colonial rule started a process that was to alter Mindanao's demographic composition. It deprived the indigenous inhabitants of their land and spawned deep-seated prejudices among the different ethno-linguistic groups. It also marginalized an Islamized people with their own distinct history. In the early 1970s, the Bangsamoro people united in a struggle for self-determination, which has invariably, although erroneously, been referred to as a "Muslim-Christian" conflict.

The Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination has been described as one that has spanned the centuries of Spanish, United States, Japanese, and Filipino colonization (Toohey, 2005). For political and administrative purposes, Mindanao was divided into three regions—Western, Northern, and Southern Mindanao—in 1972 under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos.

Because of its long history of conflict, Mindanao has been a critical area of focus for conflict resolution practitioners both within and outside the Philippines. Numerous studies have identified the root causes of the Mindanao conflict as political, social, economic, cultural, and land-related. Unfortunately, religion—specifically Islam and Christianity—has consistently been one of the most effective motivating factors in exacerbating the conflict. Religious leaders will therefore always play a critical role in either ending or prolonging it, and it is in this context that interfaith organizations and religious leaders can offer their best to make or break the peace. In the words of Douglas Johnston (as cited in Martin & Tuminez, 2008, p. 3):

In promoting peace and reconciliation, 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.

Interfaith dialogue therefore has the potential to be an effective way of addressing the Mindanao problem. The challenge facing interfaith organizations in Mindanao today is to bring the movement to the communities—to the very people whose faith has often been shaken by painful experiences. The Silsilah Dialogue Movement (SDM) and the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) have been actively engaged in interfaith dialogue and in finding ways to heal the deep-rooted wounds of the tri-people regardless of religious affiliation. Much, however, remains to be done to effect change from the grassroots to the highest echelons of government. This study examines the exemplary activities of these two movements and explores the critical role that interfaith organizations, and religious leaders generally, could play in the peace process between the GRP and the MILF.

Statement of the Coexistence Problem

Mindanao and Its People

What makes Mindanao uniquely different from the other two island groups, Luzon and the Visayas, is the persistence of armed conflict that has lasted for centuries up to the present. This conflict can be traced back to

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Spanish colonialism. The combination of successful subjugation and Hispanization in the north and failed attempts to subjugate and Hispanize the south created unprecedented political, social, religio-cultural, and economic distinctions between Christian Filipinos and Muslim Moros, despite their underlying ethno-cultural similarities. This circumstance "helped to define [Moro] attitudes and relations to all non-Muslim foreigners as well as non-Muslim Filipinos" (Majul, 1974, p. 7).

Historically, Mindanao was predominantly inhabited by the Moro people and the Lumads, or indigenous peoples (IPs). However, they were displaced on a large scale from their ancestral lands during the colonial periods of the 20th century, and Bangsamoro lands were thereafter seized through reinforcing programs of land conversion and military-backed land grabbing (Askandar, 2005). The Moro and the Lumad share a common origin: according to oral history, they descended from two brothers, Apo Tabunaway and Apo Mamalo, who lived in present-day Manobo territory. When Islamic missionaries arrived in the 13th or 14th century, the former embraced the new faith while the latter clung to the traditions of their forefathers. The two brothers agreed to live in separate communities with their own people, but pledged support, cooperation, coexistence, and mutual assistance in times of adversity and aggression. Their relationship deteriorated, however, after the outbreak of the civil war between the Moros and the Philippine government in the 1970s, when Lumads were recruited by the military into the armed forces and paramilitary units. Moros and Lumads thus met on the battlefield, which bred resentment and hatred between them in later years. Earlier, under the 1898 Treaty of Paris, Spain had ceded the Philippines—including Mindanao—to the United States as part of the settlement of the Spanish-American War. American colonial authorities introduced a resettlement program that the Philippine government continued after independence in 1946. This resettlement policy contributed substantially to later conflict among settlers from the north, the Moros, and the Lumads (Catholic Relief Services [CRS], 2005).

According to Rodil (2003), present-day Mindanao is composed of the "tri-people": the Moro, the Lumad, and the Christian settlers. Muslims, who call themselves Moro or Bangsamoro, comprise about 20 percent of the total population of Mindanao and Sulu. The Lumads consist of various ethno-linguistic groups, many of whom are Christianized or partly Christianized and some partly Islamized; they made up approximately five percent of Mindanao's population according to the 1990 census. Christian settlers and their descendants constitute the majority, at roughly 70 percent. Nationally, "the overwhelming majority of citizens are Christians, above all Roman Catholics, making the Philippines the only predominantly Christian country in Southeast Asia" (McKenna, 1998, p. 2). This would not necessarily constitute a problem, but "the historical process by which the Christians came to dominate the Moros politically, demographically, socially, economically, and to some extent culturally has created a legacy of bitterness that persists to this very day" (Bale, 2003).

The terms "Muslim" and "Moro" have generally been used interchangeably to refer to the various Islamized ethno-linguistic groups in Mindanao. While "Muslim" refers to a universal religious identity, "Moro" denotes a political identity distinct to the Islamized peoples of Mindanao and Sulu. The Spanish colonizers originally applied the term to the peoples of Mindanao who shared the religion of the Moors, who had ruled the Iberian Peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal) for centuries. "Moro" was used in the same derogatory way as the epithet "Indio" for the Filipinos whom the Spaniards converted to Christianity. At least 13 ethno-linguistic groups indigenous to Mindanao have adopted Islam as a way of life. The three largest and politically dominant are the Maguindanaon ("people of the flooded plains") of the Cotabato provinces (Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, and North and South Cotabato); the Maranao ("people of the lake") of the two Lanao provinces; and the Tausug ("people of the current") of the Sulu archipelago. The remaining ten are the Yakan, Sama, Badjao, Kalagan, Sangil, Iranun (or Ilanun), Palawani, Melebugnon, Kolibogan, and Jama Mapun. There is also a growing number of Muslim converts from various ethno-linguistic groups throughout the Philippines (Conciliation Resources, 1999a).

When combined with the Malay word *bangsa* (nation), as in "Bangsamoro," the term denotes a nationality distinct from that of the majority of Filipinos. For this reason, both the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) apply the term Bangsamoro to all native inhabitants of Mindanao and

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Sulu—whether Muslim, Christian, or Lumad—who accept the distinctiveness of the Moro as a nationality separate from that of the Filipinos of Luzon and the Visayas. With the rise of the MNLF in the early 1970s, the term "Moro" gained favorable connotations among Muslim youth, expressing their distinctiveness as a people who had resisted foreign domination (Conciliation Resources, 1999a).

Historical Background of the Conflict

A former Cabinet official once described the conflict in Mindanao as essentially "self-containing." Quezon (2008) explains the pattern as follows: the military launches an offensive; the leadership of whichever Muslim group is targeted melts away, seeking safe haven in Palawan or Sabah; Muslim families in affected areas move to evacuation centers; the centers are overwhelmed; the United Nations (UN) begins to speak of a "humanitarian crisis"; foreign media arrive to cover it; foreign and public scrutiny becomes so intense that military offensives must cease; and peace, for the time being, is restored. It is, in his words, a tired, old, predictable, and tragic script—but one that prevents violence from spiraling out of control.

This description captures the present situation in Mindanao. The immigration of Christian Filipinos to Mindanao created a social landscape in which Moros and Lumads became minorities in their own homeland. Violent encounters between Moros and Christians, and between Christians and Lumads, over rights to ancestral land became common. Both Moros and Lumads felt that they were losing not only their access to ancestral lands and other productive resources but also their cultural identities. It was during this period that the national government's view of the ethno-linguistically diverse Muslim (Moro) Filipinos as "religious minorities," and of the equally diverse non-Muslim, non-Christian (Lumad) Filipinos as "cultural minorities," sharpened (Russell et al., 2004).

Moreover, stark material inequality among Mindanao's tri-people provides a perpetual impetus for conflict. Statistics suggest that Lumads and Moros are generally poorer, less secure in land tenure, less educated, less literate, and in poorer health than their Christian peers. Strong ethno-religious affiliation has also been a critical catalyst for violence. Ethnic and religious differences alone, however, do not lead to conflict; they become explosive only when they coincide with class or status inequalities. In Mindanao, relationships have been badly strained by an ethno-religious status hierarchy—introduced by the Spanish and perpetuated by the American regime and the independent Philippine government—in which Lumads and Moros occupy the lowest positions. More than three decades of violence have further exacerbated biases and resentment among the tri-people (Catholic Peacebuilding Network, n.d.). Ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians, combined with economic disparities, has contributed to persistent conflict in certain provinces of Mindanao (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2005).

Fr. Roberto Layson (2003) described Muslim-Christian relations as follows:

A Muslim baby girl was born in the evacuation center in the 1997 Rajamudah war. Three days later, the baby died. I told a group of mothers what happened to the baby. To my surprise, one of them remarked, "Good for them." During psychosocial activities, the kids are usually asked what they want when they grow up. A Muslim boy usually says he wants to become a rebel in order to fight the military and a Christian boy to become a soldier in order to fight the rebels. Hatred, prejudices, biases, suspicion, distrust, traumas, intolerance, polarization and inability to forgive are the little wars that are going on in the hearts of Muslims, Christians and Indigenous people of Mindanao that prove to be bigger than the real war itself.

This kind of deep-seated mutual distrust and hatred has produced a form of "Muslim-Christian conflict" that remains visible in some areas of Mindanao today. Elsewhere, Layson (n.d.) lamented that "in some instances, religious leaders on both sides have not been of much help in promoting Interreligious Dialogue. Some of them have even become builders of fortified boundaries and engineers building thick walls of division instead of being builders of bridges of reconciliation and unity."

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The Americans exacerbated these historically contingent distinctions. To prevent first the Spaniards and then Filipino nationalists from forging an anti-U.S. alliance that included the Muslims, they initially promised not to interfere with Moro autonomy. U.S. colonial policies in the early 20th century, however, planted some of the seeds of future conflict between the Muslim minority and the Philippine government. To integrate the Moro Province into the larger framework of the Philippines, the U.S. colonial government encouraged non-Muslims from other parts of the country to settle there, and vast tracts of arable land occupied by Moros and Lumads were sold or leased to settlers and plantation companies (Conciliation Resources, 1999a); millions of Christian Filipinos were eventually resettled onto Moro lands. After independence, Manila continued the Spanish and American colonial policies of integrating and assimilating the Moros into the majority Christian and Hispanized culture. Over roughly six decades, from 1913 to the early 1970s, the Moros became a political, demographic, and landowning minority on territory they had dominated for centuries. Their inability to protect their culture and way of life, together with the Moro elite's discontent over political disenfranchisement, fueled a violent rebellion and calls for independence in the early 1970s (Martin & Tuminez, 2008).

The beginnings of the current conflict hark back to the 1968 Jabidah Massacre, the 1971 Manila Massacre, the 1971 elections, and the declaration of martial law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972 (Che Man, 1990, p. 74). Full-scale war with the government followed in the early 1970s, interrupted by a peace agreement in 1976. That agreement, however, failed to address Moro grievances, and intermittent clashes between Moro forces and the army continued for the next two decades. International factors have been key contributors to conflict in Mindanao since Spanish colonial times and continue to influence its course. International religious groups also continue to play a role: just as the Spanish conquistadors appealed to the Catholic Church to mobilize support for armed conflict, Muslim extremist groups have drawn moral and material support from Islamist extremists internationally (Martin & Tuminez, 2008).

In 1996, after lengthy negotiations facilitated by Indonesia and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the GRP and the MNLF signed the Final Peace Agreement on the implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement at Malacañang, Manila, on September 2, 1996 (Government of the Republic of the Philippines & Moro National Liberation Front, 1996). Heralded as a breakthrough, the agreement gave MNLF leaders the chance to govern some Moro-majority provinces within the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). However, the Organic Law later passed by the Philippine Congress to implement the agreement weakened many of the concessions given by the executive branch to the MNLF. MNLF leaders, for their part, proved to be ineffective stewards of the ARMM and had little positive impact on Moro lives. The MNLF later split into factions, many of whose leaders continue to assert that the government has not fully complied with the terms of the 1996 agreement (Martin & Tuminez, 2008).

The MILF refused to sign the 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement. Its leaders instead began their own talks with the government in 1997, but these were suspended after President Joseph Estrada launched an "all-out war" against the MILF in 2000. The MILF had formally split from the MNLF in 1977 under the leadership of a Muslim scholar, Hashim Salamat. Ideologically, Salamat distinguished the MILF from the MNLF by declaring, "We want an Islamic political system and way of life and can be achieved through the effective *da'awah*, *tarbiyyah*, and *jihad*" (Tiglao, 1996, p. 25). A further split occurred when an extremist group, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), led by another Muslim scholar, Abdurajak Janjalani, emerged with the declared goal of complete independence and the establishment of an Islamic state in Mindanao (Bauzon, 1991, pp. 165–166). This splinter group later resorted to kidnappings and bombings and was listed by the U.S. government among terrorist organizations.

In 1997, the MILF agreed to negotiate with the GRP and subsequently engaged it in dialogue at the negotiating table. There was only one agenda: to solve the Bangsamoro Problem. According to the MILF, it agreed to negotiate because it sincerely believed that the Bangsamoro Problem should and could be resolved through a negotiated political settlement (Alonto, 2008). In the language of contemporary conflict resolution, the Bangsamoro Problem is a political, sovereignty-based conflict involving two principles that the parties hold as sacrosanct and that are

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on a collision course: on one hand, the Philippine nation-state's principle of national sovereignty and territorial integrity; on the other, the Bangsamoro people's equally sacrosanct right to self-determination and freedom. These colliding principles underpin the armed conflict that has engendered a "state of unpeace" in Mindanao. The MILF and the GRP sought to resolve this problem peacefully when they began peace talks in 1997, and again in 2001, committing themselves to reach a compromise. For eleven long years—interspersed with ceasefire violations on the ground, deadlocks in the talks, and two all-out wars—the MILF and GRP peace panels painstakingly searched for, debated, and eventually crafted a formula to end the conflict. The last four years of that period were devoted to giving flesh and soul to the Ancestral Domain Aspect—the political aspect and therefore the "meat" of the 2001 GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace. The end result of this laborious work in Malaysia, which acted as chief facilitator and venue of the talks from 2001, was the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) (Alonto, 2008).

The Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD)

Ancestral domain was the third and final item on the agenda of the GRP-MILF peace negotiations. As Martin and Tuminez (2008) explain, it is arguably the most important and thorniest issue to be resolved before a political settlement can be reached. Ancestral domain refers to the Moros' demand for territory that will constitute a Bangsamoro homeland, sufficient control over the economic resources in that territory, and a structure of governance that will allow Moros to govern themselves in ways consonant with their culture and with minimal interference from Manila. Underlying the talks is the desire of the Moro ethnic groups, collectively known as the Bangsamoro, for a measure of restorative justice. They have lost lands that had belonged to their forebears since time immemorial, and decades of conflict and marginalization have inhibited their socioeconomic development. As a people, the Bangsamoro seek arrangements that will facilitate genuine self-determination, economic development, and cultural and social renaissance. Yet Moro leaders, particularly those represented by the MILF, recognize the demographic and territorial realities in Mindanao that constrain their aspirations; accordingly, they have relinquished claims to all of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan as Moro ancestral domain.

The agreement on ancestral domain did not simply happen; it has been a fundamental part of the conflict from the beginning. In the context of the current talks, it was to be the third step in implementing the June 2001 Tripoli Agreement on Peace between the GRP and the MILF. The first step was the implementation of a ceasefire in August 2001. Second, in May 2002, the two sides agreed on guidelines implementing the humanitarian, rehabilitation, and development aspects of the Tripoli Agreement. The final stage was to be a Comprehensive Peace Compact outlining the specific modalities of the relationship between the GRP and the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE), the official designation of the proposed Bangsamoro homeland. The MOA-AD recognized that the powers and jurisdiction to be granted to the BJE would require changes to the Philippine Constitution and committed both sides to negotiating the terms of the compact within 15 months of signing, which would have placed its completion in November 2009. All sides understood the significance and controversial nature of the ancestral domain issue. Exploratory talks began in February 2005, and formal talks on the topic were under way from February 2006. The original agreement on the contents of the MOA was reached in November 2007, and the two sides agreed to meet in Kuala Lumpur in December, only for the GRP to back away over concerns about constitutionality. Talks on ancestral domain resumed in earnest after Malaysia announced in late April 2008 a phased withdrawal of its contingent from the International Monitoring Team (IMT), which began on May 10, 2008 (Institute for Autonomy and Governance, 2008). The three longstanding sticking points were the size of the area to be included in the BJE, its degree of autonomy, and the need for Manila to reconcile that autonomy with the Philippine Constitution (Pacific Forum CSIS, 2008). MILF spokesperson Eid Kabalu expressed the hope that "both sides would be able to sign an agreement beneficial to all" (ABS-CBN News, 2009b).

Unfortunately, the MOA-AD—initialed by the parties on July 27, 2008, and slated for formal signing in Kuala Lumpur on August 5, 2008—was halted by a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) issued by the Supreme Court of the Philippines on the eve of the signing ceremony, and was subsequently struck down in a final decision

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declaring it unconstitutional on October 14, 2008 (*Province of North Cotabato v. GRP Peace Panel on Ancestral Domain*, 2008). According to Alonto (2008), when the MOA-AD was leaked to the media by the GRP before the aborted signing, an anti-Moro and anti-MILF hate campaign was gradually and deliberately built up throughout the country. This campaign intensified after the MOA-AD was aborted, demonizing the MILF and the Bangsamoro people to such an extent that even those who had claimed to be friends of the Moro, save for a handful, distanced themselves and joined the national chorus denouncing the agreement as unconstitutional and unacceptable to the Filipino nation. This development affected negatively not only the future of the peace process but, even more, the fragile situation on the ground (Alonto, 2008). The court ruling came in response to petitions filed by a number of Catholic politicians who opposed the deal and claimed it would carve up Mindanao into Muslim enclaves. For several days, thousands of Catholics took to the streets in two southern cities to protest the pact; in Zamboanga City, church bells pealed and businesses closed in protest (IslamOnline, 2008).

On August 18, 2008, the commander of the MILF's 102nd Base Command, Bravo Macapaar, raided military and government installations in the coastal municipalities of Kauswagan and Kolambugan in Lanao del Norte. Alonto (2008) attributes the raid to extreme frustration over the aborted signing; outrage at the nationwide demonization of the MILF and the Bangsamoro; provocation by the aggression of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the armed militias of Vice-Governor Manny Piñol against MILF forces of the 105th Base Command under Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato in North Cotabato, which had begun as early as July 1; and saber-rattling calls by Iligan City Mayor Lawrence Cruz and Congressman Varf Belmonte for Filipino settlers to take up arms against the MOA-AD. This fateful raid opened wide the door to war, providing the opportunity and pretext for the Arroyo administration and the "hawks" in the AFP to turn their backs on the peace process and to resolve the Bangsamoro Problem no longer at the negotiating table but on the field of armed combat (Alonto, 2008).

The intermittent skirmishes produced large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in conflict areas. According to the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), over 610,000 people fled their villages, a level amounting to a humanitarian crisis (Amnesty International, 2008). On September 3, 2008, President Arroyo dissolved the GRP panel negotiating with the MILF—the last nail in the coffin of the 11-year process that had produced the MOA-AD. As a group of former U.S. diplomats and analysts observed (Bosworth et al., 2008), the suspended agreement would have gone far toward resolving longstanding disputes over the ancestral domain claimed by Mindanao's competing ethno-linguistic and religious communities. It would have given communities substantially more autonomy in conducting local affairs and using local resources while remaining part of the sovereign national entity; enabled the Muslim minority to better preserve its culture and identity in the face of the majority's dominant culture; allowed Manila to reduce military expenditures and devote more resources to poverty and social problems; and allowed both parties to reap the rewards of increased stability once peace reigned.

The stalled peace talks formally resumed in Kuala Lumpur on December 8, 2009 (ABS-CBN News, 2009b), following the agreement of the MILF and the government to establish an International Contact Group (ICG) composed of Britain, Japan, Turkey, and civil society groups. MILF chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal said the ICG would serve as a guarantee that both parties would comply with all signed agreements and "prevent a repeat of the debacle" of 2008 (ABS-CBN News, 2009b).

In a nutshell, Moro ancestral lands were forcibly taken and strategically dispossessed by the government through land titling. The Moro people had an indigenous mode of land ownership rooted in the Islamic belief that human beings are stewards of God's creation and in customary law under which land was communally owned. Many scholars, including non-Muslims, recognize these facts. Professor Randy David of the University of the Philippines, for instance, has said that war in Mindanao and its insidious cousin—land grabbing—have forced Muslims out of their homeland (Espiritu, 2008). Yet the Philippine government has either silenced or ignored this issue because of political and economic interests. Moreover, economic disparity resulting from imbalanced ownership of natural resources has provoked the Bangsamoro toward separatism; as Slack (n.d.) argues, despite

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a long history of non-assimilation with the other peoples of the archipelago, peaceful coexistence within a Philippine state might have been possible had the designs of development brought them proportionate prosperity.

Review of Related Literature

This section reviews relevant scholarly works and publications by foreign and local authors and conflict resolution practitioners. It aims to identify the key models and approaches of interfaith dialogue (IFD) and to examine the strengths, weaknesses, and accomplishments of this process.

Interfaith Dialogue as Peacebuilding

Abu-Nimer, Khoury, and Welty (2007) conclude that "focusing on dialogue and interreligious understanding is necessary for creating a culture of peace in divided societies. However, addressing gross injustices requires specific mechanisms and a different type of interreligious peacebuilding" (p. 230). Examining the impact of religious leaders on peace, they argue that religious nonviolent resistance teachings, movements, and leaders have been highly effective in gaining moral authority for causes of liberation, especially in violent contexts. They therefore espouse religious pluralism and tolerance: while recognizing important differences among world religions, they affirm the potential of religious traditions to overcome fragmentation and violent conflict and, contrary to popular assertions that religion is merely a source of conflict, maintain that it is also a source of peace and conflict resolution. Examining the various approaches associated with IFD, the authors develop numerous models within two broad categories, the cognitive and the affective. These include the Abrahamic theological dialogue model, which emphasizes confession and forgiveness and values ritual; advocacy or action models, which focus on practical outcomes; and their favored religious transformation model, which has an evolutionary underpinning.

In a similar vein, Cilliers (2002, p. 50) describes constructive interreligious dialogue as "a peace-building and conflict transformation process that provides opportunities for people from different religious backgrounds to address central values such as justice, reconciliation, truth, mercy, and forgiveness from their respective traditions," a process that can be illustrated metaphorically as building bridges for the understanding of interfaith differences. Cilliers cautions that these concepts should be viewed within the context and uniqueness of each religious tradition, since every religion has its own perspectives and symbols; these values therefore carry complex meanings. Assefa (1993) and Cilliers (2002, p. 50) both maintain that religious communities should lay the foundation for peace through direct engagement in building bridges between people separated by conflict, reconciling adversaries, and creating community among former enemies. Cilliers further notes that religious groups are often exploited by political, economic, or social forces that promote their own fanaticism and intolerance, and that "religious groups can resist such forces only when they are deeply grounded in their religious traditions around the elements of justice, reconciliation, truth, and forgiveness."

Smith (2007) identifies several models of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the United States: the dialogue of persuasion; the "get to know you" model; dialogue in the classroom; theological exchange; ethical exchange; dialogue about ritual; dialogue about spirituality; and the cooperative model for addressing pragmatic concerns. Despite their strength in bringing together Muslims, Christians, and even Jews to discuss their beliefs and practices, these models have proved problematic where they turn on theological argumentation. Smith examines recent Catholic and Protestant theological writings on dialogue and pluralism and shows that, since September 11, 2001, a few Muslim scholars in the West have also begun writing on these issues. She argues that many Christians and Muslims wish to move beyond theological discussion toward what is often called the "dialogue of engagement," pointing as evidence to initiatives among young people, women, and African Americans who seek ways to work together on local projects for justice and community service. She cites Amina Wadud of Virginia Commonwealth University, long active in Muslim-Christian encounters, who holds that traditional dialogue "isn't

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really going anywhere" and has therefore moved toward interfaith work for justice and peace (Smith, 2007, p. 149).

Interfaith Dialogue in the Mindanao Context

In Mindanao, people are often suspicious of missionary work because of the old perception that it is really evangelization. The experience of Fr. Sebastiano D'Ambra, PIME, founder of the Silsilah Dialogue Movement (SDM), suggests otherwise. In his view, missionary work must be rethought in the context of a pluralistic society and a globalized village. His experience offers a synthesis of how and why one should engage in IFD: theories and knowledge are not enough and must be complemented by lived experience, such as immersion in communities of people of different faiths. Through friendship, he managed to clarify misunderstandings and to deconstruct old mindsets and beliefs conditioned by unfortunate historical events.

Fr. D'Ambra does not try to persuade people to convert from one religion to another, but to be living witnesses of their own faith. Echoing Gandhi, he writes: "I do not try to give up my religion to others, but only that they should see God's presence in me. To this I add I should see God's presence in them" (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 2). To deepen their religiosity, he calls on people to rediscover their own faith, both for their own salvation and for peaceful coexistence with people of other living faiths. His means of gaining the trust of people of other faiths are sincerity, purity of intention and purpose, and a willingness to risk his own life. His path was not easy: he was criticized by Christians for devoting much time to Muslims and was even suspected by the military because of his commitment to dialogue and peace alongside Muslims.

Moved by the experience of conflict between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao and inspired by God's dialogue with people of all cultures and religions, Fr. D'Ambra, together with a group of Muslim and Christian friends, founded the SDM in Zamboanga City on May 9, 1984. The movement was initially called the Islamo-Christian Silsilah Dialogue Movement. Years later, when the word *Silsilah* had become well known in dialogue circles in other countries, the group dropped the words "Islamo-Christian"—a clear sign that Silsilah, as a dialogue movement, is open to all religions, although special attention is still given to Muslim-Christian dialogue. All Muslim and Christian members are invited to be fully part of one family whose guiding principle is to live a "life-in-dialogue." The movement aims to bring together people at the grassroots to work for harmonious relationships and peaceful coexistence regardless of faith.

Along the same lines, the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), an interfaith body composed of Catholic bishops and ulama (Muslim scholars) in Mindanao, has promoted the application of religion to the quest for peace and development in a region troubled by poverty and rebellion. The body was launched in Cebu City in November 1996 as the Bishops-Ulama Forum by Archbishop Fernando Capalla of Davao, the late Dr. Mahid Mutilan, president of the Ulama League of the Philippines (ULP), and Protestant Bishop Hilario Gomez Jr., after the government signed its peace agreement with the MNLF (Peace Insight, n.d.). It was later renamed the Bishops-Ulama Conference; the name "Bishops-Ulama Forum" was still in use in 2003 (John Paul II, 2003), so the change postdates 2003. It was created in the aftermath of the national controversy over the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD), the transitional mechanism established for the MNLF under the peace agreement signed on September 2, 1996. The BUC was also instrumental in breaking the impasse in the negotiations between the government and the MILF.

Research Objectives and Questions

The paramount role of religious groups in the attainment of peace cannot be overstated, especially in the context of the Mindanao conflict. Recognizing this pivotal role, the government recently called for their participation in the peace process; this development prompted the choice of topic for the present field research. Proceeding from the assumption that the SDM and the BUC have not yet involved the larger majority of the population in IFD

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owing to a lack of appropriate strategies, the study sought to examine the work of these organizations and to recommend measures and strategies to close this gap. Despite their efforts to engage people in promoting peaceful coexistence, new, innovative, and effective strategies and approaches are needed.

Specifically, the study addressed three principal research questions:

RQ1. What are the contributions of interfaith organizations, particularly the SDM and the BUC, to peaceful coexistence among the tri-people of Mindanao?

RQ2. What are the obstacles and challenges to interfaith dialogue in Mindanao?

RQ3. What is the possible role of religious leaders and interfaith organizations in the peace process between the GRP and the MILF?

The following guiding questions informed the fieldwork:

- How could the larger majority of Muslims, Christians, and Lumads be actively involved in IFD?
- In what ways does involvement in IFD transform negative attitudes toward other faiths into positive ones?
- Why are many people hesitant to participate in IFD, and what major factors hinder them from cooperating with the SDM and the BUC?
- What role could religious groups play in the present conflict between the GRP and the MILF?

Based on its analysis of the approaches of the SDM and the BUC, the study aimed to propose programs that could support their work in promoting peaceful coexistence among Muslims, Christians, and Lumads, and to recommend measures to the parties to the conflict regarding the role of religious leaders vigorously engaged in interfaith dialogue in the peace process.

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METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative, historical-descriptive design. It is historical in that it traces the evolution and development of interfaith organizations in Mindanao, and descriptive in that it lays out and assesses the objectives, experiences, strategies, and approaches of the SDM and the BUC, which provided the principal material for analysis.

Research Setting and Fieldwork Schedule

Fieldwork was conducted through a three-month internship with the SDM from mid-June to mid-September 2009, based at Harmony Village, the movement's main office in Zamboanga City, during which the researcher observed and participated in the movement's various activities and spoke with participants and key actors actively involved in IFD. Through the SDM, the researcher visited five Silsilah Forums (SFs) that are very active in conducting IFD activities. The program of activities, prepared by Ms. Aminda "Minda" Sano, program officer and president of the SDM, is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Program of fieldwork activities, June–September 2009

Activity	Place	Researcher's role
Participation in activities of the various SDM programs	Zamboanga City	Participant-observer
Launching of SF-Marawi	Marawi City	Participant-observer
Interfaith Council of Leaders gathering	Isabela City, Basilan	Facilitator
SF-Basilan gathering	Isabela City, Basilan	Resource person
Seminar-workshop for Basilan madaris gurus and catechists	Zamboanga City	Facilitator
SF-Jolo core group gathering	Jolo, Sulu	Resource person
Jolo SilPeace Youth Formation	Jolo, Sulu	Resource person
SF-Sibugay gathering	Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay	Resource person
Other activities: interviews, FGDs, immersion and exposure, meetings, and consultations	All SFs visited	Facilitator/interviewer / participant-observer

Note. Prepared by A. Sano, SDM program officer and president.

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Participants

Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each with eight to fifteen participants who were active members of interfaith organizations. FGDs referenced in the findings were held in Marawi City, Cagayan de Oro City, and Jolo. In addition, 27 individuals were interviewed, as summarized in Table 2. Non-participants in IFD were purposively included to elicit their views on the subject of the study.

Table 2. Key informants interviewed

Category	Number	Type of interview
SDM officers	3	Formal / semi-structured
SDM members	7	Formal / semi-structured
BUC members	4	Formal / semi-structured
MILF commanders	2	Informal
Professionals not participating in IFD	6	Formal / semi-structured
Laypersons not participating in IFD	3	Formal / semi-structured
Religious leaders not participating in IFD	2	Formal / semi-structured
Total	**27**	

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Empirical data were gathered through FGDs, participant observation, and formal and informal interviews. Participant observation of SDM activities in different SFs in Mindanao provided an opportunity to observe participants' reactions regarding the contributions of IFD to their personal and social transformation. FGDs and semi-structured interviews, guided by the questions in Appendix A, were used to gather respondents' personal views on the contributions of IFD to peaceful coexistence in Mindanao. Informal interviews with MILF commanders and key officers provided first-hand information on their opinions about the role of religious leaders in the GRP-MILF peace process. Secondary data were gathered from library and internet resources, including SDM and BUC publications.

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The SDM framework (Figure 1) helped to contextualize the research problem in several ways. It served as the fundamental guide in framing interview questions and FGD topics, and it informed the researcher's understanding of the SDM's methods and approaches to IFD. This was important because the study relied mainly on SDM materials and activities concerning IFD in Mindanao.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the Silsilah Dialogue Movement: Culture of Dialogue Path to Peace

Starting point and stages	**Culture of Dialogue (COD) path to peace**	**Elements and spirit**
Starting point of Silsilah spirituality: Divine harmony, the "style" of God, as inspiration for a spirituality of life-in-dialogue. **Stages:** 1. Call of God — God takes the initiative of dialogue. 2. Our response — answering God's will through a life-in-dialogue. 3. Our vocation — any mission in life is a challenge to dialogue and peace. **Pillars of life-in-dialogue:** dialogue with God; with oneself; with others; with creation.	**Life-in-dialogue: Personal Transformation (PT) → Culture of Dialogue (COD) Path to Peace → Life-in-dialogue: Social Transformation (ST).** Moving from reactive to proactive toward active harmony; a new paradigm of peace sustained by a spirituality; a new style of life to face issues toward peace. The COD, or in short "dialogue and peace," is a holistic approach answering the signs of the times—the call for unity in diversity amid pluralism. It does *not* aim to create a super-religion or one super-culture; it invites people of different cultures and religions to know, understand, respect, appreciate, and learn from the beauty and uniqueness of others, and to see in them the sign of God's dialogue with humanity and all creation. It is a style of deeper relation that can change people to build together a society where God's values and ethics guide them toward harmony, solidarity, and peace.	**Spirit of HOPE:** H—Hospitality, starting from the heart; O—Openness to the signs of the times; P—Prayer, meditation, silence, listening; E—Experience, sharing the experience of life-in-dialogue. **Ten elements of COD:** (1) vision inspired by God's dialogue; (2) mission for people of sincere hearts; (3) experience of life-in-dialogue; (4) commitment to intercultural and interreligious dialogue; (5) challenge rooted in the culture and faith of all; (6) search for peace based on common ethics; (7) journey of education and formation; (8) habitat to nurture the culture of peace; (9) pathway to solidarity; (10) hope to bring God to the center of society.
"Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God."		

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Data Analysis

Data obtained from respondents were critically analyzed using the meta-conflict approach of Fitzduff (2004), which can address the many facets of a conflict, whether "structural … or psycho-cultural," in "a comprehensive and complementary manner." Findings are presented in a historical-descriptive manner: the contributions of the interfaith organizations to peaceful coexistence are discussed first, together with brief backgrounds of the organizations, followed by the obstacles and challenges to IFD and the role of religious leaders in the peace process, drawing on interview and FGD data and printed materials.

Researcher's Positionality

The researcher's prior experience shaped the inquiry. In 2008, he attended the one-week special course on IFD conducted by the SDM, which prompted him to explore innovative approaches to strengthening the effectiveness of IFD for peaceful coexistence among different faiths, and which revealed how vital members of religious communities are to the attainment of peace and harmonious relationships. In 2007, he participated in a four-week training on inter-ethnic dialogue at Northern Illinois University (NIU) with students and professionals from different parts of Mindanao—Muslims, Christians, and Lumads—which provided extensive information on how other Mindanaoans understand the causes of the conflict and helped him approach the situation holistically. As a member of a religious community and a Mindanaoan from Basilan, the researcher is aware both of how religious leaders' active participation in IFD could bring about radical change in communities where religion is a focal point of struggle and self-determination, and of how deep the root causes of the Mindanao conflict are—causes that, in his view, must be addressed by Mindanaoans themselves. In his assessment, religious leaders can exacerbate the conflict because, while knowledgeable about their own religion, they may fail to understand and respect other faiths; yet they can equally serve as peacemakers. The fieldwork also served the researcher's long-range goal of engaging in interfaith dialogue, especially among young people.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher originally planned to conduct FGDs and interviews in all Silsilah Forums in Mindanao but was unable to do so owing to the risks involved in travel, including bad weather, and to the limited availability of respondents in remote areas. This limited the range of respondents. In terms of analysis, some respondents were hesitant to answer questions on political issues such as the GRP-MILF peace process, which constrained a holistic analysis of critical issues related to the peace process. Finally, because the study relied mainly on SDM materials and activities, the findings on the BUC draw more heavily on secondary sources and a smaller number of interviews.

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RESULTS

Overview of Key Findings

FGDs and interviews with people actively engaged in interfaith dialogue surfaced two issues crucial to the promotion of peaceful coexistence among the tri-people of Mindanao. First, interfaith dialogue has contributed substantially to personal transformation and has changed people's outlook toward other faiths. Second, interfaith dialogue should be conducted on an equal footing by the tri-people. The data show that interfaith work in Mindanao is usually spearheaded by Christians, with Muslims and Lumads largely following. As a result, criticism is often heard, especially from the Muslim community—for instance, that "Muslims are just used by the Christians to further their ends." With regard to the role of religious organizations in the GRP-MILF peace process, one important issue emerged: respondents recommended that religious leaders of different faiths involve themselves in the peace process, in whatever capacity, so that the principle of equal representation of all faiths is upheld.

Most interviewees and FGD participants believed that IFD is one of the many ways of bridging the gap between the tri-people and of healing the centuries-old wounds in the hearts of Mindanaoans. Respondents stated that through IFD, enmity and distrust could gradually be minimized, if not eradicated. For them, the only way to gain mutual trust and confidence is through mutual understanding—of one another's cultures, beliefs, and feelings. This is easier said than done, but respondents' willingness to find ways of living peacefully and harmoniously offers hope for the future of Mindanao and for an end to mutual enmity. Consequently, respondents believed that peaceful coexistence among the tri-people would eventually materialize.

Contributions of Interfaith Organizations to Peaceful Coexistence

The efforts of religious organizations and other peace advocates in Mindanao are ongoing in war-torn regions. They are becoming stronger and increasingly outspoken in pursuing peaceful coexistence, helping to enforce ceasefires, and pressing the GRP and the MILF to return to the negotiating table. Abubakar (2007) groups peacebuilding initiatives in Mindanao into nine broad categories: peace movements and alliances; peace education and research; relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction; truth commissions and investigative missions; grassroots ceasefire monitoring; peace journalism; dialogue and consultations; interfaith dialogue; and arts and culture for peace advocacy. Rood (2005) includes interfaith or interreligious dialogue under church-based groups in his list of civil society actors forging sustainable peace in Mindanao. He argues that interreligious dialogue in Mindanao began in the 1970s but gained impetus only in the 1990s, and attributes this to government policy, quoting LaRousse (2001, p. 407): "A real turning point in Church consciousness was brought about, not by the Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue [established in 1990] itself alone, or any specific Church action, but it was the creation of the National Unification Commission (NUC) in 1992." Since this study focused on the SDM and the BUC, the following subsections examine the programs and activities through which these movements contribute to peace and peaceful coexistence in Mindanao.

The Silsilah Dialogue Movement

Vision, formation, and structure.

The SDM envisions a life-in-dialogue for all Muslims, Christians, and peoples of other living faiths, marked by respect, trust, and love for one another and by a shared movement toward harmony, solidarity, and peace. As instruments of dialogue and peace, SDM members commit themselves to live the essence of their respective faiths and bear witness to the values of their own religious traditions; to be in dialogue with all peoples, regardless of culture and faith, promoting a Culture of Dialogue with particular emphasis on spiritual values; and to be in solidarity with all peoples to uplift the less privileged in building a progressive, just, humane, and ecologically sound society (Silsilah Dialogue Movement, n.d.).

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The movement encourages members to renew their commitment in groups where they live. Once a year, usually in December, selected members, alumni, staff, and friends are invited to a weekend of prayer and reflection at Harmony Village, the main office, to renew themselves in the spirit of the SDM's vision and mission. The movement's major programs focus on education and formation: internalizing the SDM vision and mission, deepening values and attitudes toward a life-in-dialogue, helping people appreciate differences of culture and religion, and helping them grow in conviction and in witnessing to their own religious and cultural traditions—thus developing wholeness in becoming men and women of dialogue. In the SDM's view, a journey of personal transformation is necessary to effect any social transformation in answer to the needs of the times. Formation is provided to staff, members, volunteers, groups, and communities in the SDM family, usually with Muslim and Christian members together and occasionally separately, to help them deepen their respective faiths, become more open to dialogue, and share their experiences of faith and commitment (Silsilah Dialogue Movement, n.d.).

The Silsilah Dialogue Institute (SDI), the movement's education and information arm, provides enrichment programs through long- and short-term courses, seminars, workshops, training, and immersion for individuals and groups. Its principal activity is the Silsilah Summer Course, focused on Muslim-Christian relations and divided into three live-in modules conducted at Harmony Village: a basic course, a special course, and an intensive course. The *basic course* is a month-long live-in program covering the Arabic alphabet, the culture of dialogue, the Qur'an and the Bible, the basic teachings of Islam and Christianity, and the history of both religions with particular attention to the Philippine context. Three weekends are spent in immersion with foster families in the city: Christians live with Muslim families, and Muslims with Christian families. According to the institute's experience, this pedagogy is very effective in correcting participants' mutual presumptions, biases, and prejudices against the other religion. The *special course* lasts one week; its content changes yearly, with topics selected according to social issues affecting dialogue and peace. A research study is usually conducted on the chosen topic, and its findings serve as the starting point for discussion. The *intensive course* is an abbreviated, one-week version of the basic course without the immersion component; Christian participants visit a mosque on Friday to observe the congregational prayer, and Muslim participants visit a church to observe the celebration of the Eucharist. In response to requests, the intensive course has recently been conducted outside Zamboanga City, in Davao City and Cagayan de Oro City.

After many years of formation and training, the movement has thousands of alumni, mostly Muslims and Christians from Mindanao, other parts of the Philippines, and other countries. These alumni carry the spirit of the culture of dialogue into their workplaces—government, private organizations, schools, religious communities, and churches—and many share their Silsilah experience whenever opportunities arise. The movement began providing formation to alumni in their own areas to sustain their commitment, but it was only in 2004, on the SDM's 20th anniversary, that the Silsilah Forum (SF) was formally launched. Its focus is the formation of the heart and person of the man and woman of dialogue. The movement wishes to be identified not merely as a non-governmental organization advocating dialogue and peace, but as presenting dialogue not as a strategy but as a style of life—a spirituality of life-in-dialogue springing from God and bringing people back to God (Silsilah Dialogue Movement, n.d.).

The SF program includes all members, friends, and alumni, who are encouraged to gather regularly for fellowship, sharing of experiences, and prayer, and to strengthen and sustain one another's spirituality and commitment to dialogue and peace. To maintain the "chain" (*silsilah*), forum coordinators are invited to a regular assembly twice a year, or more often as needed, and each coordinator tries to meet local members at least once a month for shared reflection, prayer, and planning. A monthly newsletter maintains communication among forum members. The growth of these groups across Mindanao is a new reality and challenge for the movement. Many were formed in recent years and are now present in Tawi-Tawi, Siasi, Jolo, Basilan, Sibugay, Pagadian City, Iligan City, Cagayan de Oro City, Opol, Bukidnon, Cotabato City, Davao City, Kidapawan, Midsayap, Pikit, Siocon, Cebu, and Antipolo City (Silsilah Dialogue Movement, n.d.), and most recently in Marawi City, whose launching the

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researcher attended during the internship. Other forums are still being formed, while others are consolidating their membership.

Tulay Bata for Dialogue and Peace.

The SDM promotes the Culture of Dialogue path to peace through many programs, among them "Tulay Bata for Dialogue and Peace," in which the values of peace education and the spirituality of dialogue are integrated into the curriculum of schools operated by the movement. *Tulay* is the Tagalog word for bridge and *bata* means child; the program thus aims to instill the importance of dialogue and peace in the minds of Muslim and Christian children. It is a peace education program integrated across subject areas and involving not only children but also their families and communities (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 84). One FGD participant recounted that before she joined interfaith dialogue, her children were unfriendly toward classmates of a different faith; when she became actively involved in IFD programs and taught her children about relating to people of other faiths, their attitudes began to change.

Forming children to become bridges of peace. Children are the most vulnerable victims of violence and conflict, but they can also be effective instruments for touching the hearts of adults in building a culture of peace. Silsilah believes that education for peace must begin in early childhood, and since its early years, it has educated children in Silsilah kindergarten and elementary schools. What distinguishes these schools from other government and private schools is that Silsilah taught dialogue and peace education even before peace education was mandated by executive order. Dialogue and peace education values are integrated into all teaching materials and activities, so that children exposed to this holistic program may become future men and women of dialogue and bridges of peace in Mindanao, the country, and the world (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 84). Silsilah's experience is that the social, religious, cultural, and political decisions that most affect daily life happen at the local level. It therefore seeks an education that equips children and young people to be aware of social realities, to "think and act locally and globally," and to be conscious that they are children of their families, future citizens of the Philippines, and inhabitants of the globe. Simple activities, such as connecting them with children or schools in other parts of the world and sustaining these friendships, help make them aware of their identity and role as bridges of dialogue and peace (D'Ambra, 2008, pp. 84–85).

Helping youth to become peace movers. Zamboanga City has many schools and several universities with mixed populations of Muslim and Christian students drawn from the city and from neighboring provinces such as Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. When Silsilah opened its center in the heart of the city, it set up a small library open to all. A number of students, some from Western Mindanao State University (WMSU), a public university, came to use it. The university administrator at the time later invited Silsilah to establish a center on campus, staffed by two Silsilah youth workers, one Muslim and one Christian, through whom Silsilah learned about students' problems, preoccupations, and aspirations (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 85). One reality Silsilah confronted was the influence of fraternities and sororities. Many young people join these groups, some of whose initiation rites are violent and inflict physical or emotional trauma; some groups have engaged in gang wars that disturbed the peace inside and outside campuses. WMSU was not spared, and the situation was aggravated by the division of the groups along Muslim and Christian lines. The administration asked Silsilah to help by working with the group leaders and other students involved in the disturbances. Silsilah took up the challenge, gathering the groups separately at first—Muslims on the first day, Christians on the second—and then bringing both together on the third day. The approach proved very effective; the WMSU president himself remarked that "a kind of miracle happened." The school atmosphere became so positive that students decided to form a "Peace Movers" group at WMSU. Asked after the workshops, a student known as a leader of the troublemakers said: "We experienced in Silsilah how it is to be loved and to be listened to" (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 85).

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Silsilah Peace and Development Services.

The Silsilah Peace and Development Services (SPDS), the social arm of the movement, formally began in 2004 as a way of bridging groups and serving people. It seeks to link government and non-government agencies with people in need of assistance. Silsilah staff began regularly visiting the local prison, helping deportees from Sabah, Malaysia, and responding to emergencies such as community fires. Through these efforts, Silsilah identified two special challenges: Harmony Zones and Filipino Overseas Workers.

Harmony Zones. Another of Silsilah's major achievements is the establishment of "Harmony Zones," communities in which Muslims and Christians live together and commit themselves to living in peace. With the help of a Council of Leaders composed of Muslim and Christian elders, community needs are identified and addressed by the movement, and regular formation on the value of cooperative work for community improvement is provided. One effect of this formation is the restoration of *bayanihan*, the Filipino value of communal cooperation practiced long ago by the forebears of both Muslims and Christians regardless of faith, as Fr. D'Ambra has noted. Community members are also encouraged to promote dialogue, peace, and development, and to help one another in emergencies. Two residents interviewed—one Muslim and one Christian—both attested to the program's positive impact, not only on their relationship as Muslims and Christians but also on their social relationships as members of the community.

Filipino Overseas for Dialogue and Peace. Millions of Filipinos work abroad, most seeking a better future for their families. There are many tragic and painful stories of abuse suffered by migrant workers, as well as stories of sacrifice and love for the families left behind; in the Philippines these workers are called "unsung heroes." Their remittances in dollars, euros, riyals, ringgits, and other currencies help keep the local economy stable and appear to be among the country's foremost sources of income. Zamboanga City is the regional center for Region IX government agencies and NGOs serving Filipino Overseas Workers (FOW), and those leaving from Zamboanga are roughly half Muslim and half Christian. Silsilah dreams of a time when Filipino workers going abroad will be regarded as heroes not because they bring money into the country, but because they are instruments and bridges of dialogue and peace in their countries of destination, able to build dialogue among civilizations by sharing the best of their cultural identity and religion (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 90). This dream has been formally entrusted to a special SPDS desk, Filipino Overseas for Dialogue and Peace (FODP). The desk does not ignore the many problems faced by Filipinos abroad; rather, its task is to share the dream that, even while struggling with economic and emotional problems, they can be instruments and bridges of dialogue and peace. Silsilah believes that by offering this vision, the kind, helpful, religious, and good-natured disposition of Filipinos can be challenged to go beyond personal problems and build a new image of Filipinos abroad—an effective pedagogical way to build their pride and to prepare new heroes for dialogue and peace in the world (D'Ambra, 2008, p. 91).

The Silsilah Summer Course: Testimonies of transformation.

The Silsilah Summer Course, offered annually, has proved an effective mechanism for producing men and women of dialogue, as its alumni testify. Muslim and Christian lecturers are invited to explain the beliefs and teachings of both religions. During the FGD in Marawi City, a Christian participant described his family as a "military family": his father, brothers, cousins, and several relatives were members of the AFP. When they returned home from military operations, each would be asked, "How many *muklu'* [a derogatory term for Muslims] did you kill in the combat?" Stereotypes such as "Muslims are traitors and therefore cannot be trusted" were often heard in his home. He was warned by his parents and siblings not to befriend Muslims—he was then living in a predominantly Muslim area—and never to let a Muslim walk or stand behind him in line, lest he be stabbed in the back. Although he sometimes sat and walked with Muslim classmates, as this could not be avoided, his parents' advice remained constantly on his mind. When he attended the summer course, however, he was amazed by the teachings of Islam and discovered, contrary to what his family believed, that Muslims are not all the same: just as there are good and bad Christians, there are good and bad Muslims. From then on he began to befriend Muslims;

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his biases and prejudices gradually diminished, and he is now active in interfaith dialogue at the university where he teaches. Similarly, a Muslim participant in the same FGD came from a family of rebels—except for her father, who had married a Christian woman, her mother—whose members largely shared the same mindset against Christians. Ironically, the two participants became good friends and are now both active in conducting interfaith dialogue at the university with which they are connected.

Another Christian respondent, a priest, admitted that before his active participation in interfaith dialogue he had been a "Muslim hater." He said: "If I have one person whom I really hate so much in this world, it is your Prophet—Muhammad (peace be upon him). To my mind he was responsible for spreading terrorism in this world," because some history books claimed that Islam was spread by the sword. At one interfaith dialogue, however, a Muslim scholar explained clearly and thoroughly the personality of Muhammad, and the priest was "extremely surprised" to find that he was not as he had imagined. The lecturer cited the testimonies of non-Muslim intellectuals, among them Gandhi, Michael Hart, and George Bernard Shaw, regarding Muhammad's greatness and integrity. "My engagements in interfaith dialogues provide a venue to erase my biases and prejudices against other religions, particularly Islam," he said. He had also believed that Muhammad was a "womanizer" because he had several wives, but learned from a Muslim co-participant that, apart from A'isha, none of his wives were virgins at marriage and many were widows; had he been a womanizer, the co-participant argued, he would have chosen virgins rather than widows, since women of his time aspired to marry him and be honored with the title *Ummul Mu'mineen* (Mother of the Believers) as wives of the Prophet of God.

A Muslim woman interviewed in Davao City admitted that before attending the summer course she was not as religious as a Muslim should be; her knowledge of Islam was limited, and she was content to be Muslim in name. The course sparked her curiosity about all aspects of her religion, and she began devoting much of her time to reading Islamic books and related materials, since interfaith dialogue involves sharing one's own beliefs and traditions. "You cannot give more than you have," she explained. "I want to give them [Christians and Lumads] the correct concept of Islamic beliefs and teachings drawn from my readings of authentic Islamic materials." One thing she would never forget, she said, is that "SDM made me more aware of my being Muslim. As a Muslim I have obligations to fulfill, such as conveying the message of Islam" to non-Muslims. As her knowledge deepened, she abandoned tribal practices that she came to regard as un-Islamic, such as arranged marriage: "It is a common practice in our tribe as Maranaw to have an arranged marriage with someone you don't know. When I learned through my readings and research that it is not Islamic, I confronted my parents and told them that I would no longer recognize the arranged marriage that they made." Although her decision was hard for her parents to accept and required much discussion, she persuaded them to respect it. Her parents initially suspected that this was the result of her joining the SDM, but she explained that it was the result of knowing more about Islam. They came to admire her involvement in SDM activities, as she had become a more practicing Muslim than before. She is currently the Muslim coordinator of the Silsilah Forum in Davao.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference

Origins and structure.

The September 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement and the creation of the SPCPD generated more controversy than solutions to Mindanao's problems. Created under President Fidel Ramos as a mechanism for promoting peace and development in war-torn Mindanao, the SPCPD was regarded as either a boon for Muslims or a bane for Christians. From religious leaders to ordinary people, communities were polarized, and most of the Christian population reacted negatively to an agreement they considered one-sided. Catholic and Protestant leaders reached out to each other and to the ulama to find ways to keep the situation from worsening. The result was the Bishops-Ulama Forum, launched in Cebu City in November 1996 (Rebollos, 2005) and later renamed the Bishops-Ulama Conference.

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Since then, the BUC has worked closely with the government for peace and development in Mindanao. Its assemblies meet two or three times a year, and its Tripartite Committee meets every three months. The BUC is a venue for high-level religious leaders not only to dialogue but also to set an example of interreligious tolerance for their constituents. It has also partnered with faith- and church-based organizations such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) in local interfaith activities with community religious leaders and the grassroots. Localized interfaith formation in parishes and communities at the municipal and barangay levels—in Davao, Cotabato, Kidapawan, and Basilan, for example—has given Muslims, Christians, and Lumads opportunities to interact while deepening their understanding of religious and spiritual perspectives on peace and conflict (CRS, 2005).

Programs and activities.

At its November 29, 1996 meeting, the BUC identified the following areas of concern for sharing with its respective communities (MindaNews, 2006): How can we work together to ensure security for Muslims in Christian areas and for Christians in Muslim areas? How can we minimize criminality and other social problems such as drug trafficking, robbery, and illegal logging? How can marijuana plantations be eradicated? What are the key provisions of the SPCPD? How can we help our MNLF brothers who will not be integrated into the military return to regular community life? How can we maintain the momentum of peacebuilding and promote a culture of peace? How do we change deep-seated prejudices on both sides? How do we bring about value formation and maximize the role of schools in this effort? How do we relate with the MILF? How can we campaign for what is right and true for genuine peace and development? How can we concretely share our common beliefs, values, practices, doctrines, and traditions? How can we distinguish between what is observed in practice and the official teaching behind it? How can we work together to correct the media's negative image of Muslims?

These issues are important components of the BUC platform. However, the agenda did not mention the plight of the Lumads, who are likewise rightful and legitimate native inhabitants of Mindanao, and the omission of their concerns fed strong sentiments against the Moros. In an April 1999 interview, Ramon Moambing, Executive Director of the Lumad Development Center (LDC), stated (Conciliation Resources, 1999b):

There is a peace agreement with the MNLF and a ceasefire agreement with the MILF, but indigenous peoples are being exploited and disempowered. Just the same they are still marginalized. There have been no changes, whatever the agreements with the Moro groups. The process the government is undertaking is not addressing the issue, which is the right to self-determination. It's just a political accommodation, not solving the problems. … There is a Vice Chair of SPCPD for Lumads. But the Lumad peoples were not the ones recommending Mai Tuan to be our representative. He was handpicked by Misuari [MNLF Chairman]. In the SPCPD Consultative Assembly, there is one Lumad member. But we did not recommend him either. … There is still misrepresentation. The MILF and the government are talking about peace, but the fighting is still going on. … We just know about the evacuation of innocent civilians, who are being displaced because of the skirmishes, while negotiations go on.

The BUC may not have intentionally excluded the Lumads; indeed, in later activities described below, Lumad people—particularly youth—became participants, albeit in limited form.

Achievements.

According to MindaNews (2006), the BUC held 30 general assemblies in various parts of Mindanao during its first ten years and listed eight milestones over the decade. These include inspiring the First Asian Bishops-Ulama Conference, attended by Christian and Muslim delegates from 19 countries at the Westin Philippine Plaza Hotel in Manila; the annual celebration of the Mindanao Week of Peace since 1999 (an expanded version of the Peace Week of Peace Advocates Zamboanga); the biannual Tripartite Youth Peace Camp, which gathers 200 to 300 Muslim, Christian, and Lumad youth for a five-day camp; an assembly in which, for the first time, the wives and

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children of Protestant bishops and Muslim ulama spent three days discussing how families could support the BUC's peace activities; a symposium on Maryam in the Qur'an and Mary in the Bible in Cagayan de Oro City on August 29, 2001; the convening of the Indonesia-Mindanao Bishops-Ulama Network (IMBUN) on August 15–16, 2006, in General Santos City; and the All-Mindanao Leaders' Peace Consultation in Davao City on October 9–10, 2006, which sought to help break the impasse in GRP-MILF negotiations. Another milestone was the 28th General Assembly, on the theme "Women and Youth: Partners in Peacebuilding," where, for the first time in nine years, the BUC exchanged views on doctrinal issues and reached a surprisingly unanimous agreement on important teachings of Christianity and Islam—a consensus facilitated by the atmosphere of trust established among members. The BUC also cited international recognition from Pope John Paul II, who, in his September 25, 2003 address to bishops from Mindanao on their *ad limina* visit, specially recommended that the Bishops-Ulama Forum emphasize at the local level the joint "Commitment to Peace" presented at the Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi on January 24, 2002 (John Paul II, 2003; MindaNews, 2006).

At its 30th assembly, the BUC took up a new area of concern that, while not directly a matter of human conflict, affects human life: the environment. About 120 Catholic and Protestant bishops, ulama, priests, and government and diplomatic officials attended the November 28–30, 2006 assembly at the Marco Polo Hotel in Davao City, themed "In the Name of the Almighty God of Harmony, Care for the Earth." Addressing the assembly on November 29, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo praised the BUC's "pioneering work in building interfaith dialogue" as "an instrument in defending the national community against extremism," called its members "the sentinels of trust, understanding and goodwill" among Muslim, Christian, and indigenous peoples, and credited their leadership in "great interfaith solidarity" with preventing a communal war along religious lines in Mindanao (Union of Catholic Asian News, 2006). This illustrates the breadth of the BUC's program.

The BUC has also called for ceasefires. In a statement issued on April 26, 2000, signed by six Catholic bishops and four members of the ULP, it underscored the distinction between the hostage crisis in Basilan and the conflict in Central Mindanao, condemned the formation of extremist vigilante groups as polarizing cultural communities, and sought the continuation of the peace process. The signatories were Archbishop Fernando R. Capalla of Davao, Bishop Generoso C. Camiña of Digos, Bishop Wilfredo D. Manlapaz of Tagum, Bishop Patricio H. Alo of Mati, Bishop Romulo G. Valles of Kidapawan, Bishop Antonio J. Ledesma of Ipil, Dr. Mahid M. Mutilan (president, ULP), Aleem Mahmod Mala Adilao (ULP-Davao), Aleem Edris Abdulsamad (ULP-Cotabato), and Aleem Abu Ali Cadhie (ULP-Marawi). The statement declared: "As religious leaders of Muslim and Christian communities, we, bishops and ulama, offer to take a proactive role in pushing forward the peace process through consultations with our grassroots communities and attending to the root causes of conflict. There is a need for the service of a neutral but concerned third party, acceptable to both sides in the conflict, for accelerating the peace process through sustained peace talks" (Philippine European Solidarity Centre, 2000).

Following the Supreme Court's TRO on the MOA-AD, the BUC supported the CBCP's call for solidarity from Luzon and the Visayas to end the conflict in Mindanao, expressed in the week-long "Duyog Mindanao" caravan from Baguio to Cotabato (GMA News, 2008). *Duyog* is a Cebuano term meaning solidarity; Duyog Mindanao was a convergence of initiatives to address the humanitarian crisis and call for a cessation of hostilities. Its organizers warned that "the danger of a slide to 'all-out war' is lurking in the wings with 'spoilers' from both camps and some quarters jumping on the confusion and fanning the flames of conflict," while thousands of civilians—women, children, and the elderly—were evacuating yet again to crowded relief centers and relief goods were being hijacked by armed groups. The initiatives expressed solidarity from institutions, groups, and communities in Metro Manila, Luzon, and the Visayas with all the peoples of Mindanao, amid a public opinion grossly apathetic to the situation and ignorant of the roots of the conflict. The campaign had four components: a People's Caravan for Peace and Solidarity for Mindanao; resource and political support generation; international people's solidarity action to stop the war; and continuing Mindanao peace and human rights education. It stressed the pressing need for the Filipino "masses" of Luzon and the Visayas, including large segments of the settler

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community in Mindanao, to understand the root causes of the conflict, and recognized that prejudices rooted in ignorance could be amplified by the media to dangerous proportions: “An anti-Moro, anti-peace rhetoric has dominated the public discourse of late. Ironically, the elite opposition, mainstream media and elements in the government—from local government units, the military and national officials—are on this same bandwagon” (GMA News, 2008). In another report, CBCP president Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, referring to the CBCP’s stand against the government’s all-out war policy toward the MILF, said, “I think this is also the effort that our Bishops-Ulama Conference and pastors are doing for the last 34 dialogues that they have been having since 1996. … Bishops-Ulama goes beyond the economic, political, and military solution by reaching out to each other in interreligious dialogue”.

Criticisms.

Despite these achievements, the BUC has weaknesses that limit its popularity. Rood (2005) observes:

The Bishops-Ulama Conference has been deliberately supported from the beginning by the OPAPP. The fact that the Bishops-Ulama Forum is supported by the government, as well as Catholic Church sources, leads to obvious questions about its ability to enter into impartial dialogue with the Muslim community. Other critics note that it is of limited reach—on the one hand, the Muslim component, the Ulama League of the Philippines, does not speak for all ulama. On the other hand, the Catholic bishops have difficulty reaching the wider community of Catholics. In a Davao City function of the Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue, it was noticed that all priests attending were from religious orders (Jesuits, Oblates, and the like), while none were from the more numerous secular or diocesan priests. Diocesan priests, rooted in localities and often echoing the prejudices of their parishioners, are less comfortable with efforts to bridge communal divides.

Obstacles and Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in Mindanao

Several factors explain why peacebuilding, and interfaith dialogue in particular, has not been fully accepted by the tri-people despite its positive effects. According to the Philippine Youth Leadership Program (2008), there is, first, a severe imbalance in peacebuilding activities, in which Christian groups dominate Moro and other non-Muslim, non-Christian indigenous groups; owing to decades of war and disruption, few Moro and indigenous people have experience with scholarly work compared with Christian Filipinos, who dominate interfaith activities and peace-related NGOs. Second, the overlapping Moro social mosaic of established rebel groups, “terrorist” groups, and criminal gangs or private armies of politicians and warlords poses significant and complex challenges for civil society peacebuilders, including religious organizations.

This imbalance was evident across the peace and religious organizations studied. One respondent observed that Christians actively involved in interfaith dialogue are better trained and more professionally equipped, in terms of knowledge and preparation, than Muslims and Lumads, in addition to outnumbering them. At the 2008 Silsilah Summer Course, the researcher observed how disadvantaged the Muslim participants were: only a few could articulate Islamic teachings thoroughly. Some, though practicing Muslims, lacked in-depth knowledge of Islam; others had the necessary knowledge but lacked the confidence and communication skills to express it. There are many Muslim scholars in Zamboanga City, Jolo, and Basilan, for example, but many lack the professional skills to articulate Islam to non-Muslims.

The presence of lawless elements and politicians’ private armies is both a challenge and an obstacle for peace advocates and interfaith practitioners. A stark example is the Maguindanao Massacre of November 23, 2009, in which 57 civilians were brutally killed, implicating the Ampatuan clan. The clan had reportedly been allowed to build up its forces as part of a government strategy to contain the MILF, whose separatist insurgency in Maguindanao and other parts of Mindanao has left over 150,000 people dead since the 1970s, according to Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno and other Malacañang officials. Puno added that the history of

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Mindanao, "where Muslim rebels have waged battles for independence from Manila-based Christian governments for centuries," needed to be understood (ABS-CBN News, 2009a). Such framing poses problems for interfaith dialogue: by emphasizing "Muslim rebels" and "Christian governments," it implies that the war in Mindanao is a war between Muslims and Christians—tantamount to a religious war. It is partly on this assumption that rebel groups such as the MNLF and the MILF have continuously garnered support from Muslim constituents and recruited young people into their forces. Muslims value their religion greatly, including those who do not actively practice it, and many would sacrifice everything to preserve and protect Islam. In this context, religion is perceived as a complicating factor in disputes. As Human Rights Watch observed: "Religion has been a part of bloody conflicts that have engulfed dozens of countries in the last fifteen years. In Ireland, Cyprus, the Balkans, Rwanda, Burma, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Sudan, Israel/Palestine, the Philippines (Mindanao), and Indonesia, individuals acting in the name of religion have played an important role in crystallizing group hatred and violence" (Marthoz & Saunders, 2005).

The labeling of the Philippines as the "only Christian country in Asia"—sometimes specified as the only Catholic country in Asia—is another factor. It points to the central dilemma of Muslims in the Philippines: if this is true, how can Muslims be considered Filipinos? Only in 2002 was a Muslim holiday, Eid al-Fitr, declared a national holiday for the country as a whole rather than confined to Muslim regions, whereas Christian holy days such as Christmas and Holy Week have always been national holidays. The conventional characterization of the conflict pits "Christians versus Muslims." Moreover, there is little evidence that interreligious dialogue is significantly influencing public opinion, and even among religious leaders it is not widespread; despite talk of interreligious harmony, the overall situation remains one of considerable distrust, particularly of Muslims by ordinary Christians (Rood, 2005).

Some religious leaders hesitate to join peace initiatives involving interfaith dialogue because of differing theological interpretations. A priest from Cagayan de Oro City who participated in an FGD said: "I think one factor why people from both religions [Islam and Christianity] are hesitant to join interfaith dialogue is because of theological interpretation—that Christians believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, whereas Muslims do not concur with that." In an informal interview, a Muslim scholar evidently opposed to Muslim engagement in interfaith dialogue stated: "This [interfaith dialogue] is part of their [Christians'] strategies in converting Muslims to Christianity. If not by following their faith, there will be a tendency for Muslims, most especially the young ones, to adopt Christian culture that is against Islam, such as dancing and intermingling with the opposite sex." His fears were echoed by an incident narrated by an FGD participant in Jolo: "In one of their interfaith dialogue activities [a youth camp], participants were told to present a number in which men and women were holding hands." According to Muslim scholars, holding hands with a member of the opposite sex, with or without malicious intent, is not condoned in Islam because it gives Satan (*Shaytan*) an opportunity to whisper encouragement toward lewdness—common knowledge among most Muslims. Dancing is likewise considered prohibited under Islamic *shari'ah* (jurisprudence). It appears that some on both sides avoid mingling with one another because of differences in belief and culture.

On the part of the Lumads, CRS staff observed that obtaining the support of local governments was a particular challenge in indigenous communities, as many local officials were "unresponsive" to initiatives on governance, ancestral domain claims, and environmental protection. Furthermore, although some religious leaders were among the most enthusiastic participants in the CRS program, many others, Muslim and Christian alike, were wary of peacebuilding efforts. Some Church leaders protested that CRS funding was granted to Muslims, arguing that Catholics should be the priority beneficiaries—a manifestation of a larger problem: many Church leaders, in Mindanao and elsewhere, still do not subscribe to the concept of interfaith dialogue or even to general openness toward other religious groups. The same is true among Muslims: fear of being converted or Westernized has held many Muslim scholars and grassroots Muslims back from participating in peace initiatives, particularly interfaith dialogue (CRS, 2005).

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There is also an inevitable degree of asymmetry in interreligious dialogue. Islam has no hierarchy, whereas the Catholic Church is highly bureaucratic, with Protestant churches somewhere in between. Muslims are immersed in the predominantly Christian culture of the Philippines, while Christians have largely ignored Muslim culture. The distrust Christians feel toward Muslims is greater than Muslim distrust of Christians, perhaps because virtually all Muslims have interacted with the Christian majority while many Christians have had little interaction with the Muslim minority. The task of overcoming mutual mistrust thus lies largely on the Christian side; to the extent that attitudes must change, it is Christian attitudes that must change (LaRousse, 2001, pp. 418–420). As Rood (2005) remarks, although "it is natural that the initiative in this work lies on the Christian side, it is dismaying that the reach of interreligious dialogue is so limited." He adds that the entire discourse of interreligious dialogue assumes that the issues are framed as a contradiction between two religiously defined communities.

The Role of Religious Leaders in the Peace Process

Layson (2003) writes: "A lot of people think that Peace Talks are the sole business of the GRP and the MILF, in which they do not have any right to participate. Many are satisfied with their role as bystanders. Others, out of frustration, would even readily support a protracted war instead of a protracted Peace Process. They said that the GRP and the MILF always talk and talk about peace, but they always fight." This observation holds not only for ordinary people; a number of those engaged in interfaith dialogue share the same feelings. Many interfaith practitioners no longer concern themselves with the peace process, and, as noted, some were hesitant to express views on the role of religious leaders in the GRP-MILF talks.

One FGD participant in Jolo expressed apprehension that religious leaders might simply be used by the government to further its agenda. This view was echoed by an MILF commander from Basilan: "Many a time, religious organizations are being financed by the government for their activities. So how can you expect them to be fair in joining the peace process?"—referring first and foremost to the BUC. A case in point is the BUC's 35th General Assembly, held at Notre Dame of Jolo College on November 18–21, 2008 and sponsored by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), then headed by Jesus Dureza. Although the assembly was held successfully, it was criticized by some Muslim religious leaders not participating in IFD, members of the *jama'ah* (congregation), students, academics, and civil society groups in the province for its "one-sided program of activities" and an allegedly "malicious and suspicious" organizing process (Halud, 2008). A Muslim youth said: "These bishops are using our ulama to tell the world that they are organizing an interfaith activity, but if you take a look at their program, manipulation and control are clearly evident. There is only one unnamed Muslim religious leader in the program," who was later found to be the Mufti of Sulu, Ustadz Jul-azri Abirin, who had left for a scheduled pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia a few days before the assembly (Halud, 2008).

Another criticism, especially from militant groups and human rights advocates, concerns the silence—intentional or not—of religious organizations in general regarding human rights violations committed by some members of the AFP. In the war against terrorism, there were incidents in which human rights were palpably violated, yet no condemnation or action was initiated by religious groups or leaders. In 2001, for instance, during military operations that followed the Abu Sayyaf Group's Dos Palmas kidnapping and the Lamitan siege, mass warrantless arrests were carried out against suspected ASG members and supporters in Zamboanga City, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Several innocent civilians were arrested by the military without probable cause other than being relatives or acquaintances of members of the group, and hundreds were illegally apprehended and detained for days before cases were filed in court. In Basilan alone, more than seventy people, known as the "Basilan 73," were arrested within a matter of weeks. Yet no protest or condemnation was heard from any religious organization. This created a backlash and made many Muslim communities hesitant to join interfaith activities. As former Costa Rican president Rodrigo Carazo (2002) put it: "Culture of peace is a way of life in which mutual respect produces social integration. There can be no peace if the respect for the other's rights does not prevail. There can be no peace unless true justice prevails among persons" (p. 6).

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On the other hand, a majority of FGD participants and interviewees who expressed views favored religious leaders' participation in the peace process, albeit in different forms. In an interview in Marawi City, a member of the BUC Tripartite Committee considered such participation a good idea but recommended that religious leaders not sit on the peace panels and instead serve as advisers to both parties, with representatives of both religions, chosen by the majority of their respective followers, sitting together as advisers to ensure equal representation. Other respondents supported this view. In the FGD in Cagayan de Oro City, most participants said that religious leaders have an important role in the GRP-MILF peace process; they "can contribute a lot for the peaceful resolution of the problems" not yet agreed upon by both parties, one participant said. Other respondents, however, argued that the presence of religious leaders on the peace panels might merely complicate the process.

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DISCUSSION

Interfaith Dialogue as a Pathway from Personal to Social Transformation

The findings indicate that, to a considerable degree, IFD has made significant contributions to peaceful coexistence in a conflict-ridden setting such as Mindanao. The common denominator among both Muslim and Christian participants is personal transformation, as the testimonies of SDM alumni show: the son of a military family who learned to befriend Muslims, the priest who abandoned his hatred of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Muslim woman whose encounter with dialogue deepened her own faith. These accounts reflect the SDM's framework, in which personal transformation is the necessary precondition of social transformation (Figure 1), and they demonstrate that collaboration between Muslims and Christians in pursuit of peace is possible when it begins, first and foremost, with the transformation of individuals. Personal transformation through IFD is extremely helpful in creating good rapport between conflicting parties.

These results are consistent with Cilliers' (2002) view that a deep commitment to justice, reconciliation, truth, and forgiveness builds bridges that sustain IFD, and that religious groups can resist manipulation by fanatical and intolerant forces only when they are deeply grounded in their own traditions. The Davao respondent's statement—"You cannot give more than you have"—captures this insight: deeper knowledge of one's own religion was associated with stronger commitment to practicing and propagating peace. This also echoes Fr. D'Ambra's (2008) insistence that dialogue is not a means of conversion but an invitation to become a living witness of one's own faith. The immersion pedagogy of the Silsilah basic course, the Harmony Zones, and the WMSU "Peace Movers" likewise resemble what Smith (2007) calls the "dialogue of engagement," in which people move beyond theological discussion to cooperate on concrete concerns of their communities; the restoration of *bayanihan* in Harmony Zones illustrates how such engagement can revive shared cultural resources that predate communal division. The SDM's experience also suggests that the affective dimension of dialogue identified by Abu-Nimer et al. (2007)—the experience of being, in one student's words, "loved and listened to"—can be as decisive as cognitive learning.

In the researcher's view, the Tulay Bata program is particularly laudable. Children are, in the words of the Filipino national hero Dr. José Rizal, the "hope of the fatherland." Because young minds are easily exploited and prone to indoctrination, teaching children the value of dialogue and peace early can break the cycle of inherited mutual hatred described by Layson (2003)—in which Muslim boys aspire to become rebels and Christian boys soldiers—and help form future interfaith practitioners and peaceful citizens.

At the leadership level, the BUC has mobilized high-level Muslim and Christian religious leaders to work together and to urge the government and rebel groups to return to dialogue, as in the 2006 All-Mindanao Leaders' Peace Consultation convened to help break the GRP-MILF impasse. In the author's assessment, such efforts contributeto the momentum of negotiations that culminated in the MOA-AD]. Although the agreement was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court and hostilities resumed, it remains reasonable to expect that dialogue involving religious groups of different faiths can help address the conflict through nonviolent means.

Representation, Asymmetry, and the Limits of Reach

The second major finding concerns imbalance. Interfaith organizations in Mindanao are led mostly by Christians, and by Catholics in particular, and Christian participants tend to be better trained and more articulate than their Muslim and Lumad counterparts. This pattern corroborates the imbalance described by the Philippine Youth Leadership Program (2008) and the asymmetries identified by LaRousse (2001) and Rood (2005). It helps explain the suspicion, voiced by respondents and by the Muslim scholar interviewed, that interfaith dialogue is a vehicle for proselytization or Westernization, and the perception that "Muslims are just used by the Christians." The omission of Lumad concerns from the BUC's founding agenda, and the Lumad testimony that peace arrangements

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with the Moro fronts have not changed their marginalization, show that the "tri-people" framing is not yet fully realized in practice. At the same time, LaRousse's (2001) observation that Christian distrust of Muslims exceeds Muslim distrust of Christians implies that Christian leadership of dialogue is not in itself the problem; rather, the challenge is to pair Christian initiative with genuine shared ownership.

The obstacles identified—theological disagreement over doctrines such as the Trinity, fear of conversion, and cultural practices such as mixed-gender activities and dancing that conflict with Islamic norms—point to the importance of culturally sensitive program design. Activities that disregard such norms can confirm the very fears that keep Muslims away from dialogue. What is often forgotten, however, is that despite their differences both Islam and Christianity encourage their followers to engage in dialogue, as the two scriptural passages at the head of this paper attest. Strengthening the capacity of Muslim scholars and Lumad leaders to articulate their traditions to others, as the summer-course observations suggest, is therefore as important as expanding participation.

The broader national framing of the conflict also constrains interfaith work. Official discourse that pits "Muslim rebels" against "Christian governments," the characterization of the Philippines as the "only Christian country in Asia," and the late recognition of Eid al-Fitr as a national holiday all reinforce a religious reading of what is fundamentally a political conflict over sovereignty, self-determination, land, and resources. The hate campaign surrounding the MOA-AD and the anti-Moro rhetoric noted by the Duyog Mindanao campaign illustrate how quickly ignorance-based prejudice can be amplified, underscoring the need for peace education reaching beyond Mindanao.

Justice, Impartiality, and Credibility

Abu-Nimer et al. (2007) caution that while dialogue is necessary for a culture of peace, addressing gross injustices requires specific mechanisms. The findings bear this out. The perceived silence of religious organizations on human rights violations—such as the mass arrests of the "Basilan 73"—and the perception that the BUC is government-funded and government-aligned (Rood, 2005; respondents' accounts of the 35th General Assembly in Jolo) have undermined the credibility of interfaith organizations among Muslim communities. As Carazo (2002) argues, there can be no peace without respect for the rights of others and without true justice. For Muslims in general, justice, whether restorative or retributive, is an essential ingredient of peace. In the researcher's view, restorative justice is the more applicable and beneficial at present: unlike retributive justice, grounded in the principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," it teaches forgiveness, love, and patience. This resonates with the Bangsamoro's own search for a measure of restorative justice through the ancestral domain negotiations (Martin & Tuminez, 2008). Interfaith organizations should therefore include justice-oriented components in their programs if interfaith dialogue is to succeed in the years ahead.

Religious Leaders and the GRP-MILF Peace Process

Johnston's account of the assets religious actors bring to peacemaking—credibility, moral warrant, leverage for reconciliation, and capacity to mobilize support (as cited in Martin & Tuminez, 2008)—is reflected in respondents' largely favorable view of religious leaders' participation. Respondents, however, preferred an advisory role over a seat on the negotiating panels, with representation chosen by the faithful of each tradition to ensure equality. While the presence of religious leaders might complicate the work of the actual negotiators, it could, in the long run, provide a sense of ownership that would enable these groups to build stronger peace constituencies in Moro and Christian communities. Indeed, the key to resolving the conflict lies in widening the peace negotiations to include the entire Bangsamoro constituency, not simply the MILF and the MNLF (Abubakar, 2007)—including religious leaders of the different ethno-linguistic groups of Mindanao. The BUC itself, in its April 2000 statement, recognized the need for "a neutral but concerned third party, acceptable to both sides." The concerns raised in Jolo and by MILF respondents about government funding and one-sided programs indicate that such a role will be credible only if impartiality is demonstrably maintained.

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Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings should be read in light of the study's limitations: fieldwork was confined to five Silsilah Forums and a three-month period; respondents were drawn largely through the SDM and were therefore predominantly active IFD participants; findings on the BUC rely more heavily on secondary sources; and some respondents declined to discuss political questions. The testimonies reported are illustrative rather than statistically representative. Future research should include systematic empirical studies of the impact of interfaith dialogue on attitudes and behavior, broader sampling of Lumad communities and non-participants, and longitudinal follow-up of program alumni.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Interfaith work and the peace process in Mindanao continue to move forward, albeit sluggishly. In the words of Fr. Layson (n.d.), "real dialogue and peace-building in Mindanao is often a very slow and tedious process. It is like building blocks. No one builds by placing the blocks at the top. It has to start from the bottom up." Nonetheless, interfaith dialogue has undoubtedly had a great and positive impact on those it has reached. There is therefore a dire need to bring dialogue and the peace process to the grassroots. Peace talks cannot guarantee instant peace in communities as long as an unseen war continues in the hearts of the tri-people. Lumad, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders must take the lead in rallying their own people to support interfaith dialogue and the peace process (Layson, 2003), and the BUC and the SDM in particular must be actively involved in harnessing this support. The study offers the following recommendations:

1. **Strengthen interfaith organizations with equal tri-people representation.** Interfaith organizations in Mindanao are run mostly by Christians, specifically Catholics. This is not to question the integrity of the Christians spearheading these organizations, who have proved to be efficient leaders, but a matter of equal opportunity for other religious groups who also have the capability to lead. Equal representation would help Muslims and Lumads who harbor suspicions of Christian proselytization to see more clearly the objectives of interfaith dialogue.

2. **Expand empirical documentation of the impact of interfaith dialogue.** Data show how interfaith dialogue has transformed individuals personally, socially, and religiously, yet these positive impacts are, with few exceptions, neither thoroughly documented nor publicized. Since many Filipinos are moved by personal stories and readily persuaded by their good results, well-documented testimonies could be a powerful means of encouraging wider participation.

3. **Involve local government officials.** Local officials should be engaged in interfaith dialogue and encouraged to work with religious organizations to influence larger numbers of Christians, Muslims, and Lumads to support interfaith efforts. Local leaders are key to peaceful coexistence and development; their actions and decisions are highly regarded and mirrored by their constituents, and their participation would likely encourage their people to follow.

4. **Educate the tri-people on their right to participate in the peace process.** As Layson (2003) states: "Education plays a very important role in mobilizing people. Education of their rights is a source of power. If there is going to be a real participation of the people in the Peace Process, then both the government and the MILF must observe transparency. A back-channeling approach that leaves many people in confusion must not be condoned. The public must assert their right to know and to be informed regarding what the GRP and MILF talked about in private."

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5. **Integrate justice and human rights into interfaith programs.** Interfaith organizations should include justice-oriented components and speak out impartially on human rights violations affecting any community, as their silence has eroded trust among Muslims.

6. **Involve religious leaders in the peace process impartially.** Religious leaders and interfaith organizations should take part in the peace process in whatever capacity they can—most likely as advisers or consultants acceptable to both the GRP and the MILF as representatives of their constituents. Great care must be taken to avoid taking sides; impartiality should be the guiding principle in pursuing this objective.

In all of this, religious leaders play a fundamental and intrinsic role by uniting for a common cause—peaceful coexistence regardless of religious affiliation. As Hans Küng (1991) famously argued, there can be "no peace among the nations without peace among the religions" —a phrase he first used in 1984. Fr. Layson (2003) echoes this idea: "We can only have peace in the world when there is peace among religions. But we can only have peace among religions where there is authentic dialogue among peoples. And there can only be authentic dialogue among peoples when there is respect for one another. Dialogue seems to me to indicate two groups facing each other, but I like to think of us all side by side facing the world and its problems".

The Mindanao conflict is a complex problem that cannot be resolved by a single entity or individual; it requires complex solutions, and every Mindanaoan has a role to play. This study concludes that interfaith dialogue is one of the potential solutions that should be adopted and employed. The challenge is to bring interfaith dialogue to all sectors of the community, including those directly and indirectly involved in the conflict, in order to broaden its scope and impact.

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