

The importance of building interreligious understanding amidst political strife

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by Erwin Francis M. Gaerlan

First let me greet all of you with the Islamic greeting, Assalamu Allaikum. In English, it means God's Peace be with you. This is the very essence of all religions of the world--Peace. This is the very essence of why we engage in interreligious dialogue, because we all want Peace. This is the very essence of why all of us are here today.

I would like to thank the organizers of this event for inviting me. What I am going to share with you today are my insights on the importance of building interreligious understanding amidst political strife based on my personal experiences and reflections in the context of the Philippines.

As you may already know, I come from the most troubled part of the Philippines. I come from Mindanao. The island renowned all over the world, not for its good beaches and tourist spots, but for its troubled past and its present situation. Mindanao is beset with never ending strife. Many, for unfounded reasons, would like it to appear a religious strife between Muslims and Christians. It is a sad fact that even if religious differences were not the reason for unrest and strife, some sections within our society insist on maintaining the division between the Muslim and Christian population for selfish and mercenary motives. The age-old "divide and rule" tactic is still widely enforced by the powers that be as an effective weapon for maintaining political and economic clout over the island of Mindanao, which is rich in natural resources.

The roots of religious animosity and misunderstanding in the Philippines is by and large a conflict of a political nature, punctuated by historical religious bias and prejudice. The strained Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippines cannot be simply overlooked as though it is not without deliberate political motivations. In order to effectively address the issue on religious animosity it is important that one should understand its root cause.

The roots of Muslim-Christian animosity in our country can be traced back to the era of the Spanish colonization. The conquest of Spain of the Philippines was effected through the "sword and the cross". Our Spanish colonizers utilized native Christian converts to fight against the "Moros," the term coined by Spanish colonizers to identify the Muslims who already had established sovereign rule over Mindanao long before the Spaniards set foot in the Philippines. The term "Moro" comes from the word "Moors," the historical arch-enemy of Spain. Inspired by their reconquista, the Spaniards never failed to depict their fight against the Moros of the Philippines as a glorious crusade of the Christian faith against the Muslim infidels. One way or another, the Spaniards succeeded in demonizing the Moros by branding them as uncivilized, barbaric, traitors, pirates and slave raiders. As a result of such derogatory treatment and the eventual penetration of the Spanish crown in some Muslim territories in Mindanao, the Moros also developed an enduring hatred against the Christians. These historical circumstances had engendered this existing misunderstanding, bias and prejudice.

After Spain came a succession of colonization by other countries like the United States and Japan, before the Philippines became an independent state. What left by Spain was renewed and perpetuated by the succeeding colonial masters. The demonization of the Muslims continued, in fact it was a General from America who said, during the Moro-American Wars, that "a Good Moro is a Dead Moro". Religion was still used to divide and rule the peoples of Mindanao. The process of colonization of the Philippines left a lasting legacy, its having become the only predominantly Christian country in Asia. The once proud Muslim rulers of Mindanao, the Moro people, were reduced to the status of a minority nationality.

Contemporary animosities between the Muslims and the Christians in the Philippines now reflect an unresolved past. It is based largely on the political relations and conflict between the ruling Majority Christian Government and the Moro people, who continue to struggle for its legitimate and inherent right to self-determination. This conflict of political nature never fails to be highlighted as a religious conflict due to the historical and long standing religious biases and prejudices between the population of the two faith communities. This prevailing mentality is quite vulnerable to sinister political designs.

In the progress of time, the ravages of war and the wounds of conflict have brought about for a large number of adherents from both faith communities, the coming to terms and the realization that religion is not the reason of conflict. Drawing from this realization, a number of cause oriented organizations and individuals, coming from both the Christians and the Muslims, developed interreligious movements. It is from these organizations that I started to become an advocate of peace and interreligious dialogue.

Interreligious dialogue and understanding is of great importance especially in a new era where contemporary conflicts are more and more highlighted as clash of religions. It is very important because in the situation where the clash of ideologies cease to exist, religious differences is hyped as the new arena of global conflict.

In addressing this situation it is important that dialogues must not only limit themselves to understanding spiritual and theological dogmas of different faith communities. It is very important that dialogue must be expressed in concrete solidarity of different faith communities in frustrating attempts to ignite religious animosities. Only through solidarity can living dialogue be experienced and felt.

In our experience, religious biases are easily wiped out if one faith community feels the presence of other faiths showing solidarity for their cause and struggle. A case in point: it used to be very difficult for advocates of dialogue to penetrate a Muslim urban poor community in Manila. The Muslim residents of that community had a deep mistrust against the Christians. A time came when the Government ordered the demolition of that community. Advocates of dialogue and Christians coming from other urban poor communities went to the community to physically show solidarity and support for their fight against the demolition. Leaders of that Muslim community and leaders from other Christian communities jointly lobbied for the halting of the demolition. Because of that strong pressure and display of support and solidarity, the demolition never succeeded. Now, that Muslim community is actively involved in interreligious activities.

What I am trying to emphasize in this example is the importance of active solidarity as the key to understanding and dialogue. Although understanding of rituals and dogma of different faiths is important, it is active solidarity that can give living meaning to dialogue. Spiritual and theological sources of our faith provide the inspiration of its continuity.

One successful activity that we have experienced in interreligious dialogue which can be implemented anywhere, communities and campus alike, is the "Duyog Ramadhan Campaign". Duyog Ramadhan in the vernacular means, "to accompany during Ramadhan" or "solidarity in Ramadhan." This started as a campaign and later on developed as a movement. This campaign calls for all Christian advocates of interreligious dialogue to show solidarity by fasting as what the Muslim faithful observe during the period of the Holy Month of Ramadhan. During the Holy Month of Ramadhan there are activities like encouraging Christians to integrate in Muslim communities, to feel and experience Ramadhan. Series of educational activities about Islam are also conducted during this period. This activity was popularly accepted and became traditional practice amongst advocates of Muslim-Christian dialogue. Ramadhan is just one week away, this kind of activity can be replicated in your respective campuses. It will be an enriching experience for all advocates of dialogue.

Our involvement in interreligious dialogue is difficult yet fulfilling. It is an enriching experience yet full of challenges. But we will all persevere because we know that the key for attaining global peace is the understanding, cooperation and solidarity of all religions. Our work in interreligious understanding is the noblest of all worldly tasks and we are blessed for in it we are all transformed as instruments of peace.

Thank you very much and WASALAAM!