

# Religion and Civil Society: The Quest for Peace in Mindanao Through Inter-Faith Dialogue

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In a secular democratic country like the Philippines, the people are the source of sovereign authority. Thus, the first constitutional principle set in the fundamental law of the land is that

The Philippines is a democratic and republican state. Sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them.

(Sec.1, Art.II, 1987 Constitution)

In this principle, it is ascertained that every individual citizen is a receptacle of sovereignty. The popular will of the citizenry is the ultimate fountain of established authority. This is epitomized in the Latin Maxim, *salus populi est suprema lex*, which means, the voice of the people is the supreme law. Being a republican state, the Philippines envisions a representative government where, though the people do not directly govern themselves, they cause democratic governance through representation.

This means that the people select or elect from among themselves men and women who will run the affairs of government. Thus, governance is done through proper representation of the popular will, that officials and functionaries of the government hold and discharge their respective positions as a public trust for the promotion of the general welfare of the citizenry.

While it is an established principle of secular democracy that there is complete separation of church and state, in the actual operations of these two institutions in human society, we find intertwining and interweaving, confluence and congruence between the two. This makes us ponder over the question on whether or not religion is a factor that has to be seriously considered in shaping civil society.

## WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

Before attempting to define what civil society is and how religion is relevant to civil society, let us look at the preamble of the 1987 Philippine Constitution. It is stated:

We, the sovereign Filipino people, imploring the aid of Almighty God, in order to build a just and humane society and establish a Government that shall embody our ideals and aspirations, promote the common good, conserve and develop our patrimony, and secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of independence and democracy under the rule of law and a regime of truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace, do ordain and promulgate this Constitution.

(Preamble to the 1987 Constitution)

In these words, we find a manifestation of the recognition by the framers of the fundamental law of the rule of religion in establishing civil society. Likewise, we can glean from the preamble that civil society is a just and humane society. It is a society that gives importance to the voice of every individual citizen. It is a society where consensus and consultations abound in deciding matters of grave concern to and for the citizenry. It is a society where the rule of law prevails rather than the whims and biases of men. It is a society where justice and equality reign rather than injustice and oppression. It is a society where both the government and the governed are dedicated towards establishing political stability and civic order, where everyone strives in upholding moral values and work ethics, where the political leadership and the economic elite are equally committed for the common welfare. It is a society in which the affairs of the government are run by the people who feel accountable to God and to society. It is a society where a healthy atmosphere of political dissent is found where all voices are heard, if only to achieve the greatest good for the community. Civil society is one that is characterized by the virtues and values of truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace.

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

It cannot be denied that religion plays a very vital role in establishing and shaping a well-developed, responsive and responsible civil society. As earlier asserted, though theoretically, religion and governance are distinctively separated under the Philippine secular democratic system, in the actual operations of the two, they cross paths and are often times

interwoven. The case of the preamble to the Philippine Constitution indicates the need for Divine guidance and inspiration in establishing civil society. Also, in the practical sphere, we witness official government programs and functions being conducted or performed with the presence of religious leaders invoking the blessings of Divine Providence. One such example is the Independence Day celebrations last Saturday, June 12, 1999 at the Quirino Grandstand where three Christian religious leaders from different denominations and a Muslim Imam offered prayers before the President delivered his message.

One important aspiration of civil society is the attainment of peace. And in such endeavor, religion plays a very vital role. If religion is a means of attaining peace with God and with oneself, then civil society has to operate with men who are dedicated to that quest for peace.

#### MINDANAO AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE

As we are all aware, Mindanao, that island in the Southern Philippines oftentimes referred to as the land of the promise, has been a melting pot of political unrest and religious animosity. The centuries of colonial invasion and religious wars fought between the natives of Mindanao and the foreign invaders had developed a culture of resistance among the Muslims which, up to this day, has to be transformed into a culture of peace and understanding. The religious animosity that characterizes that atmosphere in Mindanao is further aggravated by the political ambitions of leaders who want to perpetuate themselves in power and who use the issues of religious differences in attaining that purpose.

While there were attempts in the past in making the two religious groups in Mindanao open their hearts to an atmosphere of understanding and peace through dialogue, it is in recent years that a concerted effort is being undertaken at the higher levels of the Christian bishops and the Muslim ulama (religious leader). The idea cropped up during the negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNL) on the establishment of the Special Zone of Peace and Development. There were opposing voices in Christian dominated areas on the pretext that such would be disadvantageous and prejudicial to non-Muslims. When the issue was about to reach uncontrollable bounds, the Muslim religious leaders led by Dr. Mahid M. Mutilan, the President of the Ulama League of the Philippines (and incidentally, the Governor of Lanao del Sur) and the Catholic Bishops

lead by Archbishop Fernando Capalla initiated a dialogue between their groups to tackle the issue. This was in November 1996. That initial meeting gave birth to the *Bishop-Ulama Forum* that regularly meets in February, May, August and November. The basic purpose of the dialogue is the creation of an atmosphere of peace and understanding among Muslims and Christians. It is believed that if leaders of both groups can create peace among themselves, then their congregations can also follow. Also included now in the Forum are religious leaders from the National Council of Churches of the Philippines based in Mindanao.

#### DIALOGUE: A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

As earlier stated, civil society is a peaceful society. And such can be better achieved if every person living in that society lives in and for peace, if every citizen of that society, no matter what his religion is, strives for the attainment of peace. And peace can be attained among the people composing the civil society if they communicate to each other, if they are willing to share information and understand each others thoughts and feelings.

I need not talk about your perspective—the Christian perspective—of dialogue. However, as a Muslim, let me share with you my own understanding of dialogue and how it can better shape civil society.

Firstly, Islam is a religion that advances religious tolerance. In Islam, there is no compulsion in religion, there is no coercion in matters of faith. Every person shall be made accountable for his own acts and beliefs. Thus we find in Islam respect for others' beliefs. In fact, among the values that Islam seeks to protect aside from life, intellect, honor, property and progeny, is religion.

Secondly, we find in the historical accounts of the early years of Islam a good relationship between the Muslims and the Christians. When the Muslims were persecuted by the pagans of Makkah, the Prophet instructed his followers to migrate to Ethiopia or Abbysinia because there was a Christian king in that place who was just and generous. And the handful of Muslims that migrated to that place were indeed welcomed and taken care of by the Abbysinian. king.

Thirdly, in the Holy Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, there is a statement of God telling the Muslims that they will find the Christians closer to them because they have religious leaders who are fearful of God.