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Synodality as a Framework for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Asia

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Abstract

In Asia, where Catholicism constitutes a minority religion except in the Philippines and Timor-Leste, Catholic Christians face the complex task of integrating into a culturally diverse and politically unstable landscape while preserving and asserting their distinct identity. This challenge mirrors the broader experience of minority religious communities coexisting with a dominant religion, particularly in contexts where the majority faith aligns with state or national identity. The interplay between the state and the majority religion often complicates integration efforts or deepens the isolation of the minority faith, while simultaneously fostering distrust among minority adherents toward both the majority and the state apparatus. This article investigates these tensions through a comparative analysis of Christian-Muslim relations in the Philippines (majority Christian, minority Muslim) and Indonesia (majority Muslim, minority Christian). The article explores potential avenues for mitigating these challenges through the implementation of the concept of 'synodality'. Synodality is a process employed by the Catholic Church for renewal and adaptation to contemporary demands. Synodality not only serves as a mechanism for Christian revitalization but also offers a robust theoretical framework for analyzing these issues in Indonesia and the Philippines, aiming to foster an effective interreligious dialogue that promotes mutual respect and cooperation across religious communities. By employing synodality as a relational paradigm, this study argues for the dismantling of the majority-minority binary, progressively eliminating barriers to authentic dialogue and collaborative engagement.

Keywords: Minority religion, majority religion, state and religion, synodality, interreligious dialogue



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Introduction

Asia is home to major religions and is teeming with cultures. The immense differences and uniqueness of each culture, which are expressed, in most cases in the various religious practices, have made Asia a continent of extreme diversities. With other factors such as politics, western influence, and globalization, such diversity has at times become an arena of irritations, which challenges mutual coexistence and social harmony at various levels of relationship from individual, community, national and regional relationships. In these irritations and complex relationships, religions play a major role as the sources and drivers of conflicts and violences, but as peacemakers too. True to its nature as a divine expression on earth, religion has the fundamental role to play in pursuing peace and social harmony.

In the context of this religious diversity with high vulnerability of conflict and violence, studies show that interreligious dialogue can play a vital role in providing a mechanism to facilitate peace, manage conflict, and promote social harmony and mutual existence. According to Yunyasit and Baybado, “Interreligious dialogue can create the infrastructure for peace, contribute to the cross-community trust and relationship building and serve as a great platform for interreligious actions tackling root causes of the conflict.”¹ In his book, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, Goddard characterized such relations as a history of dialogue and confrontation. He also emphasized that the confrontations between the two religions, in most cases, have been influenced by political context. Thus, politics and the politicization of religion is a key factor in the analysis of Muslim-Christian relations. It is also from this context, he would assert, as the very condition of analyzing the rise and fall of the various dialogue movements focusing on Muslim-Christian relations. Based on his analysis of the vacillation of dialogue and confrontation as a mechanism of relation,

¹Yunyasit and Baybado, 2022.

Goddard proposed the model of fellow-pilgrims as a model for future interreligious dialogue.²

The Christian-Muslim relationship is also impacted by the international community. Both in terms of the issues and conflicts happening in the Middle East, and at the same time, the continuing negative reception of the West to the integration of Muslim communities. The West, while largely secular, is also considered as the old Christendom. Even perhaps with this duality of identity, there seems to be a perception that the values and policies of the West are in keeping with Christianity. Such perceptions have influenced too the global relations of Christians and Muslims, and in most cases, impact regional as well as national relations.³

The influence of the religious actors, either as religious leaders or the common people in the analysis of Yunyasit and Baybado, or the quest for a new model as fellow-pilgrims in the case of Goddard, clearly indicate the need for more robust discourse for Muslim-Christian relations in Asia. In fact, a good way to situate this particular concern is to look into the dynamics of such relations in the Philippines context where Muslims are the minority, and Christians are the majority, and in the Indonesian context where such situation is the exact opposite. Interestingly, the model fellow-pilgrims' seem to have anticipated what I consider as an appropriate framework to pursue the analysis of Muslim-Christian relations in the above contexts: 'synodality'.

For this reason, the Church, through the process of synodality, is undertaking a global consultation to find pathways, among other things, on how precisely the relationship among religions can be improved, as "Churches live in increasingly multicultural and multireligious contexts. This necessitates finding ways to create dialogue between religions and cultures, with which Christians should engage alongside the many groups

² Goddard, 2000.

³ See Siddiqui, 1997.

that compose a society.”⁴ Synodality is a process employed by the Catholic Church for renewal and adaptation to contemporary demands, revitalizing interreligious dialogue as a peacemaking and peacebuilding mechanism. It addresses unjust structures of relation and pursues the areas of communion, participation, and mission as way of establishing collaboration and cooperation to walk together towards a common goal. From this perspective, the article presents the convergences and divergences that produce the irritations, issues, and challenges in the minority-majority relations. Based on the framework of synodality, the paper explores new pathways of performing interreligious dialogue to overcome majority-minority relations in the Philippines (with majority Christian and minority Muslim) and Indonesia (with majority Muslim and minority Christian).

The study is particularly significant for the Catholic Church in Asia to contextualize its approach to interreligious dialogue. The Bangkok Document, which is the final statement of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 50 General Conference, in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, emphasized that inculturation and interculturality are the best expressions of doing dialogue in Asia. Such an approach, however, should not come unilaterally from the side of the Church, but should arise as a communal reflection with the other religion.

Methodology

The methodology used to analyze the problem is the synodal process of encounter, listening, and discernment. Encounter takes into account the current state of the Muslim-Christian relations in the two countries based on recent publications and discourses. In particular, the study will look into the influence of politics into this current relation, and how politics has shaped the on-going discourses in both countries. Listening takes into account the on-going political sentiments on

⁴ Synod on Synodality, 2023.

Christian-Muslim relations from these countries. It will only cover those general policies and political assertions that have influenced the state's approach to this particular issue. Through thematic analysis, discernment is to highlight the key important points that would account Muslim-Christian relation based on the model of synodality or fellow-pilgrims model of doing interreligious dialogue. Discernment is the approach of allowing the discourse to speak for itself, and direct the movement of discourse by looking into convergences and divergences. These valuable points will be used to theorize the challenge for the Church to define and clarify its synodal approach to interreligious dialogue.

History, Colonialism, and Irritations in Muslim-Christian Relations

In his book of historical analysis, *Christian-Muslim Relations in Southeast Asia (1600-1800)*, Riddell concluded with two interrelated elements: 1) suspicion and antipathy and 2) accommodation and inquiry.⁵ It can be said that the attitude of suspicion and antipathy generally springs from the fact that Christianity arrived in Southeast Asia through Western colonization. For the Philippines, it was the Spaniards then later on the Americans, while for Indonesia, it was the Portuguese and later on the Dutch. While the initial reason for colonization was trade, it soon became clear that the missionaries who came with the colonizers were aggressive workers seeking to convert the natives to Christianity. For this reason, encounters between Muslims and Christians often turned into conflict and violence. Interestingly, there are also stories of friendly relationships, with historical events indicating that Muslims and Christians accommodated each other and co-existed.⁶

In both countries, colonization is essentially equated with Christianization, which consequently became the process of de-

⁵ Riddell, 2022.

⁶ See LaRousse, 2001.

Islamization.⁷ This has become a source of continuing tension and conflict in Southeast Asia. In the case of Indonesia, for example, Qudir and Singh trace the long-standing tension between Muslims and Christians on conversion and the celebration of Christmas. These two issues are constantly associated with religious politics in Indonesia.⁸ Colonization is seen as the arrival of the Western domination, not only through trade and the introduction of its ideologies such as democracy and liberalism, but fundamental as a mechanism to convert Muslims to Christianity. For these reasons, Christian practices and celebrations are frowned upon by Muslims with much suspicion and doubt, for in the past they have become vehicles to lure Muslims to the Christian faith.

Siddiqui, in his work *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*, claimed that the historical origin of dialogue can be traced to the inner problematic of the Christian mission and the Western forces of imperialism and colonialism.⁹ These two factors have influenced Muslim perceptions and sensitivities in relation to Christianity. Siddiqui points to the Qur'anic injunctions in an age informed by the intellectual climate of modernity, which denied the legitimacy of all religious values and world-views. According to Siddiqui, Muslims were faced with the choice between resorting to a new *ijtihad* and, adopting the world-view of modernity, reinterpreting their religion, or ignoring the issue of *ijtihad* altogether and keeping their religion 'unaltered'.¹⁰

What is clear in the colonization process is that the initial encounter between Muslims and Christians did not start positively and amicably. While it includes many layers to unpack such relations, colonization has become an enduring historical element in the quest for mutual understanding and harmonious co-existence in both countries. If dialogue between Muslims and Christians is the process to be taken, then it must

⁷ Baybado, 2017b; Baybado, 2017a.

⁸ Qudir and Singh, 2021.

⁹ Siddiqui, 1997.

¹⁰ Siddiqui, 1997, p. xiv.

seriously consider understanding the continuing impact of the historical tensions and conflict in Southeast Asia, for it has been shown that religious legitimacy can influence the formation of grievances and irritations by ethno-religious minorities.¹¹ And this is further complicated by the politicizations of religion, making use of religious texts and teachings to justify the hegemony of a particular religion over a specific culture, mindset, and way of life in general.

Tracing the historical and geographical relations of Muslims and Christians, Goddard concluded that the encounter and interchange led not to mutual understanding and sympathy but to conflict.¹² Goddard insisted on taking the historical context of the relationship as a key to understanding not only the tensions and irritations, but primarily in charting the key elements of dialogue that would constitute in reshaping the relationship towards harmony and mutual existence. A better understanding of the past, of the history of the relationship between Christians and Muslims, may help to promote deeper mutual comprehension in the present and a greater measure of collaboration rather than conflict in the future.¹³

It is important, therefore, to understand the historical dynamics of the relationship in majority Christian-minority Muslim Philippines and majority Muslim-minority Christian Indonesia in determining the future dynamics of dialogue. In fact, based on this historical overview, the two other key factors, namely social dynamics and political influence, exacerbate the difficulty of the inquiry.¹⁴ Religious freedom, interfaith marriages, and religious-based cultural differences have widened the tensions between Muslims and Christians. This is further made complicated by government policies and political agendas that can either facilitate or hinder the already volatile Muslim-Christian relations.

¹¹ Marty and Appleby(eds), 1991, p. 685.

¹² Goddard, 2000.

¹³ Goddard, 2000, p. 5.

¹⁴ Cf: Burhani and Bustamam-Ahmad, 2019; Susan, 2020; Yakin, 2022.

At the political level, both the Indonesian and Philippine states, while claiming to be democratic, actively influence Muslim-Christian relations. In the case of the Philippines, for example, the long-protracted war between the independence-seeking Muslim minority and the Armed Forces of the Philippines successfully ended with the enactment of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (2020), creating the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. This political autonomy allows the Muslim minority a type of governance structure to exercise greater control of their political, economic, and social affairs consistent with the Islamic faith, while still adhering to the national constitution. It remains to be seen, however, how this government approach can pave the way of improving Muslim-Christian relations in the country. The fact is that the state plays a key role for any practical and successful dialogue and encounter to happen. While it is still in the beginning phase of its implementation, tensions remain in communities in certain areas due primarily to economic concerns and the presence of radical groups.¹⁵ Siddiqui noted that the “most striking feature of the Christian-Muslim debate is the absence of Muslim institutions that can legitimately represent Muslims in this encounter,” while Christians have institutional personalities in engaging dialogue.

Thus, Muslim-Christian dialogue is mired with so many issues and concerns, and deeply shaped by many factors such as politics, history, culture, and socio-economics. In these contexts, the literature has consistently shown asymmetrical dialogue as their mode of relationship. It is precisely this encounter, which is seemingly insurmountable due to a confluence of many factors, that requires an analysis of how synodality can be utilized as a useful framework for encounter, listening, and discernment.

¹⁵ Cf: Franco, 2020, pp. 136-149; Abubakar, 2019, pp. 1-11; Curato, 2021, , pp. 187-209; Banlaoi, 2019.

Irritations and Challenges for Interreligious Relations

Indonesia has a population of approximately 280 million, with around 242 million (87 percent) being of Muslim faith and 29 million (11 percent) of Christian faith, with Protestants comprising around eight percent and Catholics three percent. Indonesia's Christians are scattered and make up majorities of the countries' least populous provinces, such as in Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, and North Sulawesi. In the Philippines, on the other hand, the total population is 117 million. Christianity (92 percent) accounts for the majority (including 82 percent Catholic), and Muslims (about six percent) who reside mostly in the southern Philippines, with the following provinces having a primarily Muslim population: Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu, Tawi-tawi, and Basilan.

Both countries have historical circumstances that have led to unhealthy relationships between Muslims and Christians. In Indonesia, Mamahit told us that "For the past few decades, Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia have not progressed smoothly."¹⁶ This was also the observation of Arifianto, who said that "Within the last decade, Indonesia has experienced numerous incidents of communal violence between conservative Muslims, who are the religious majority in the country, and the Christian minority."¹⁷ In the case of the Philippines, Muslim-Christian relations are often described as the 'Moro problem' or 'Mindanao problem', where since the beginning of colonization (1521), there have been tensions leading to suffering and armed struggles for justice.¹⁸ In both countries, the majority religion has been historically the hegemonic power in almost all aspects of social life that has led to disenfranchisement, frustration marginalization and oppression of the minority. Thus, counter hegemonic action from the minority Muslims in the Philippines and Christians in Indonesia have become a natural

¹⁶ Mamahit, 2020.

¹⁷ Arifianto, 2009.

¹⁸ Baybado 2017a; Baybado 2017b; Majul 1985; Majul 1987.

reaction, thereby fomenting further tension and division, leading to bloody conflict.

Anugra, however, noted that this type of analysis tends to generalize Muslims and Christians, and reduces them into a purely ideational cultural explanation. He claimed that such type of basis for analysis is passe because it has led to what he called ‘intellectual exhaustion’.¹⁹ While Anugra’s study covered only discourses on Islam in Indonesia, I think it applies equally to the context of the Philippines. While we can agree with Anugra, there is a value of looking at the general conditions and situations of the interreligious relationship in the two countries to map out possible areas for a synodal framework for Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Intersection of National Identity and Religion

As Indonesia ushers in a new era with Prabowo Subianto as its president, the Pew Research Center²⁰ highlighted the intersectionality of national identity and religion as a key factor in Muslim-Christian relations. According to the study, Muslims and Christians disagree on the importance of religion to being truly Indonesian. While 86 percent of Muslims say it is very important to be truly Indonesian, just 21 percent of Christians say that being Muslim is key to being truly Indonesian.

In the case of the Philippines, being a Filipino is equated with being a Christian, and being a Muslim is considered as a separate nationality by Muslims in the southern Philippines.²¹ As Constantino writes, “Filipino Catholics see their faith as a call to action, fostering national consciousness through shared values.”²²

¹⁹ Anugra, 2015, pp. 105-116.

²⁰ Pew Research Center, 2024.

²¹ Baybado, 2017b.

²² Constantino, 1982; Iletto, 1979.

This propensity, of course, is not unique among Indonesians and Filipinos. The same sentiment is prevalent in Malaysia, another majority-Muslim country, and in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand where there is a close link between national identity and Buddhism.²³

This clearly indicates the essential link of religion and national identity in Southeast Asia, which has paved the way for marginalization and exclusion of minorities. With the identification of the majority religion with national identity, national integration has been a very difficult process, and a source of conflict and violence. It has also impacted relationships at the level of communities and individuals, which in most cases is expressed through social and cultural division and exclusion.

Law and Religion

Both Indonesia and the Philippines are democratic states. Religious freedom is core to their laws and policies. Indonesia's constitution guarantees Indonesians the right to choose their own religion and the freedom to worship according to their own beliefs. At the same time, the constitution and the state philosophy of Pancasila²⁴ promotes faith "in the One and Only God". Each Indonesia adult must list a religion on their identity card; 'no religion' is not an option. Indonesians who leave the field blank or who choose a religion other than the six mentioned in Article 156(a) of the Penal Code (Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu or Confucian) may have difficulty accessing government and financial services.

²³ Pew Research Center, 2023.

²⁴ Pancasila is the foundational philosophical theory of the Indonesian state. The term comes from Sanskrit, where *panca* means five and *sila* means principles or values. The Five Principles of Pancasila are 1) Belief in the One and Only God (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*); 2) Just and civilized humanity (*Kemanusiaan yang adil dan beradab*); 3) The unity of Indonesia (*Persatuan Indonesia*); 4) Democracy guided by the inner wisdom of deliberations among representatives (*Kerakyatan yang dipimpin oleh hikmat kebijaksanaan dalam permusyawaratan/perwakilan*); 5) Social justice for all Indonesian people (*Keadilan sosial bagi seluruh rakyat Indonesia*).

The Constitution of the Philippines, on the other hand, holds that there is a separation between religion and the state. The Constitution upholds the “separation of Church and State shall be inviolable” in Article II, Section 6. This means that there is no state religion and that, as an application, the government cannot establish or favor a religion. Furthermore, individuals are free to practice their faith without interference. Within the doctrine of religious freedom, it is interesting to note that sharia is an acknowledged legal framework in the Philippines. Presidential Decree No. 1083, otherwise known as the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, allows Muslims to observe sharia in personal and family matters, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and customary law, without contravening national law.

In terms of public perception, 64 percent of Indonesian Muslims agree that sharia should be used as the law of the land. A majority of Muslims in the country likewise support making Islamic law the official national law, at least when asked in 2011-2012.²⁵ In the Philippines, while there is a separation of Church and state, many Filipinos see Christian values as the basis and foundation of governance, social justice, and laws on family, marriage, and education, among others. This means that despite the fact that there is freedom of religion in both countries, the dominant religions tend to influence political, social, and cultural landscapes. The minority religions are generally expected to conform with these national policies, which are largely influenced and consistent with the values, norms, and cultures of the majority religion. This is clearly expressed in the strong influence exerted by the Philippine Catholic Church on the Philippines’ government, and the two biggest Muslim organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah on the government of Indonesia. These strong religious organizations are very influential in crafting national policies and programs favorable to their respective religions.

²⁵ Pew Research Center, 2023.

In Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, Christians can face challenges related to laws that prioritize Islamic norms, particularly in areas such as family law and public conduct. For instance, building Christian churches in certain areas may require approval from local Muslim authorities, which can be a prolonged and contentious process. Additionally, Christians sometimes struggle with the application of sharia in regions like Aceh, where Islamic practices influence the legal system. In Christian majority countries like the Philippines, Muslims continue to face difficulties and discrimination, such as access to social services and discriminatory hiring practices. According to the International Alert, young Filipino Muslims feel that they are discriminated against because of their religion. A survey indicated that 54 percent of young Muslim Filipinos in the village of Maharlika in the City of Taguig, and 45 percent in the City of Baguio “feel abused because of their religion”.

While the law is clear, historically it has been also abused and misused by authorities. Despite the legal protection provided by the law for religious minorities, minorities remain vulnerable targets for discrimination and violence. For example, in Indonesia, laws around blasphemy (for example, the 1965 blasphemy law) have been used to silence minority voices and prosecute individuals for alleged religious offenses. Notable examples include violent attacks on Christian communities and restrictions on the construction of non-Muslim places of worship.²⁶ In the case of the Philippines, religious freedom laws have not prevented the deep-seated stereotyping of Muslims as inherently violent or untrustworthy in predominantly Christian areas. This social bias has negatively impacted the Muslim population in terms of job discrimination,

²⁶ See Jan et al., 2024. This article presents the regulatory hurdles and difficulties that Christians face in managing and constructing houses of worship in a majority Muslim community. Interestingly, another study indicates that a harmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians would entail a smooth construction by easily addressing those regulations. This is the result of the study of Warnis et al., 2020. A thorough investigation on this issue that analyzes the discriminatory requirements for building churches in Muslim-majority areas is the work of Setara Institute. See Setara Institute, 2019.

difficult access to housing, and societal inclusion.²⁷ Following the studies of Cesar Majul, this social discrimination has perpetuated the cycles of poverty and isolation.

In essence, the widening gap between majority and minority religious groups stems from either the law's failure to adequately protect minorities or its unfair and poorly executed application, which disadvantages them, fostering disenfranchisement, conflict, and ultimately violence. Finally, it appears that despite the equality provided by law in both countries, Indonesia's law promoting 'religious harmony' actually favors Islam as the majority religion, while the Philippines' church and state separation has paradoxically supported and promoted the Christian religion, and Catholicism in particular. These unwritten state policies manifest through political leaders and government structures and systems and have unnecessarily created and reinforced institutional biases against religious minorities.

Religious Freedom and Religious Practice

Another key issue is religious freedom and practice. Religious freedom is fundamentally the right of individuals and religious communities to practice, express, and change their religion or belief without coercion or discrimination. The landmark basis of this right is the Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."²⁸

²⁷ See the following studies and reports about the discrimination and the persistence of negative biases and prejudices against the minority Muslim by the majority Christians. Abanes and Kanas, 2024; Majul, 2010.

²⁸ United Nations, 1948.

Challenges in Christian-Muslim relations are generally about religious freedom and religious practice. Sidney Jones, an expert on Southeast Asian conflicts, cited the systematic discriminations against Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadiyya Muslims. She also pointed out the bureaucratic hurdles for constructing places of worship, like churches, which require permits often blocked by local majority-Muslim communities. This is affirmed by the Setara Institute, who argue that "the construction of Christian places of worship often faces opposition from Muslim-majority communities, citing concerns about proselytism or neighborhood harmony".²⁹ Meanwhile, an article from *The Diplomat* in 2022 stated that Indonesia is "becoming increasingly inhospitable for members of religious minorities".³⁰

The Muslim minority in the Philippines, especially those living in urban centers such as in Metro Manila, face abuses and violations of religious freedom and practices. These forms of discriminations are the result of the historical injustice, and in most cases, are based on national security concerns. The 2007 *Report on International Religious Freedom*³¹ indicates that Muslims encounter discrimination in employment. Muslim Filipinos also have difficulties integrating themselves in the wider Christian dominated communities³², such as renting rooms or renting apartments or being hired for work if they use their real names or wear distinctive Muslim dress. As a result, they are forced to use Christian pseudonyms and wear 'Christian' (Western) clothing to avoid discrimination. Under the banner of national security, Muslims have been subjected to religious and ethnic profiling based on their names, dress, or places of origin. This is aggravated by their negative portrayal in the media, which contributes to their marginalization and exclusion in the national identity narratives.³³ Muslims' specific needs are also often ignored, such

²⁹ Setara Institute, 2021.

³⁰ Arman, 2022.

³¹ US Department of State, 2007.

³² See Regadio, Jr, 2018; Eder, 2010.

³³ See =Cruz and Casanova, 2024.

as a lack of prayer spaces and ablution facilities, and inappropriate state-provided food, such as in prisons and military camps, where there have been cases reported of Muslim detainees being served pork, which is strictly forbidden in Islam. It is interesting to note, though, that Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are national holidays in the Philippines. According to Tagoranao and Gamon, there is a strong link between religious rights of the Muslims and the quest for justice and peace in the country.³⁴ These various forms of discriminations have their roots from the historical injustice brought about by colonization.³⁵

Synodality as a Framework for Interreligious dialogue

Synodality as a process of renewal

Synodality defines the on-going renewal of the Catholic Church worldwide. At the opening of the Synodal process in October 2021, reflecting on the biblical narrative ‘The Rich Young Man’, Pope Francis spoke of the three elements of the global renewal, namely, encounter, listen, and discern.³⁶ These are the phases of the process by which the Church intends to journey together with humanity in bringing vibrancy and relevance to its fundamental mission of contributing peace and harmony in the world today.

According to the International Theological Commission, ‘Synod’ is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation [...]. It indicates the path along which the People of God Walk together. Equally, it refers to the lord Jesus, who presents Himself as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6), and to the fact that Christians, His

³⁴ Tagoranao and Gamon, 2019.

³⁵ For a comprehensive historical treatment of the origins, development, and challenges faced by Muslim communities in the Philippines, see Majul, 1973; Majul, 1985.

³⁶ Pope Francis, 2021.

followers, were originally called ‘followers of the way’ (cf. Acts 9,2; 9,23; 22,4; 24,14.22).

Simply put, synodality is walking or journeying together. This basic description, at least, requires two aspects to be clarified, which are interrelated. First, a journey implies that there is a destination. Without the clear vision of what lies ahead, then a movement cannot be considered as a journey. For any place in the entire due course of the movement can be an end at the same time. Hence, the question, what is the projected end or aim or goal of the journey? Secondly, the walking or journeying indicates the means to achieve the desired goal. The means, of course, is the walking or journeying together. Following Pope Francis, the means is the very process of encounter, listening, and discernment as the mode of walking or journeying together.

Synodality, it must be emphasized, is not a political nor cultural movement in the Church. It is a spiritual awakening, which can only be done and undertaken within the scope of the tradition and faith of the Church. This is the third and most significant aspect of synodality. As the *Vademecum*³⁷ clearly states, “The whole synodal process aims at fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where a diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church’s mission of the world.” More importantly, the *Vademecum* insists that:

³⁷ The *Vademecum* is designed as a handbook that accompanies the Preparatory Document at the service of the synodal journey. In particular, the *Vademecum* offers practical support to the Diocesan Contact Person(s) (or team), designated by the diocesan Bishop, to prepare and gather the People of God so that they can give voice to their experience in their local Church. This worldwide invitation to all the faithful is the first phase of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the synod of Bishops, whose theme is For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission.

In this sense, it is clear that the purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make the people dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (PD, 32). Thus, the objective of this synodal process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop, but rather a journey of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium."³⁸

The FABC celebrated its 50th founding anniversary in 2022 by holding a General Conference, gathering more than two hundred bishops from all over Asia to review the past and chart the future of the Church in Asia. The three-week long listening, dialogue, and discernment process is summarized in their Final Statement, "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia... and they went a different way" (Mt. 2:12), FABC 50 General Conference, published on 15 March 2023, is known as the FABC Bangkok Document. As a testament of their collective discernment, the FABC Bangkok Document, provides the new pathways of the Church in Asia, connected with the Universal Church, to contribute to a better Asia, to a more peaceful, just, and harmonious humanity and the protection of nature.

The FABC Bangkok Document is the blueprint of the renewal of the Church in Asia, which is its articulation of its response to the call of Pope Francis in becoming a synodal Church. In a sense, the Bangkok Document is the synodal platform and direction of the Church' journey with the peoples of Asia towards common goals and a shared future. Most noteworthy, as early as the introduction in the Bangkok Document, is

³⁸ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, 2021.

already the recognition and acknowledgment of the multi-cultural and multi-religious nature of Asia as the very context of this desire for becoming a synodal Church. According to the Bangkok Document,

Asia is the continent of great religious traditions and multicultural peoples who share in the common quest for Peace, Justice and Harmony. Drawing on the Gospel, the Catholic Church shares in this common quest. As a minority in Asia, the Churches shares the joys and sufferings of our peoples. United with all social forces, organizations, civil society and all people of good will, we contribute our efforts to move from the present socio-economic-political life situation to a world in which the dignity and rights of all are promoted and respected.³⁹

The Bangkok Document provides churches in Asia with various pathways on how precisely they can journey together with neighboring religions. While this is easier said than done, the challenge is precisely the concrete application of these new pathways that the Bangkok Document set out, in specific cultures and situations. As a minority religion in Asia, the acknowledgement of Catholicism's approach of journeying together with the peoples of Asia is definitely a departure from the historical-missiological approach of conversion to the Christian faith. The Bangkok Document challenges its churches in Asia to give concrete expressions to its commitment of being a "bridge-builders and bridges, instruments of dialogue, and reconciliation in Asia."⁴⁰ This approach is calling for the Church to engage in an intense self-assessment to improve its relations with its neighbor religions, and it provides a new way of approaching Muslim-Christian dialogue.

³⁹ FABC, 2023.

⁴⁰ FABC, 2023.

The Bangkok Document clearly indicates the significance of synodality as the essence of the life, nature, and mission of the Church. In Asia, this renewal towards synodality has at its context the multireligious and multicultural realities and richness. Synodality can be utilized as a mechanism of peace through interreligious and intercultural dialogue that will find its concrete expression, articulation, and application in Asia. In short, while synodality challenges the churches to renew themselves, at the same time, it calls on them to work together in collaboration with their neighboring religions.

Synodality and Interreligious Dialogue

A majority-minority based relationship of religions is inconsistent with the principle of synodality. It is an obstacle to genuine dialogue. The interfacing of synodality and dialogue, which is clearly expressed as the nature and life of the churches in Asia, has its origin in the Second Vatican Council documents. Foremost of this as a basis for interreligious dialogue is the document *Nostra Aetate*, stating that "The Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."⁴¹ From a Christian perspective, this acknowledgment and recognition of the existence of truths and holiness in other religions as pathways to God clearly indicate the attitude of Catholics towards their neighbor religions. This implies that one does not take the center stage in the historical progression of humanity, as if taking the lead for other religions to follow towards God. *Nostra Aetate* has demonstrated the necessity of recognizing the value of other religions as equal partners in seeking God and collaborators to work together for the common good. The recognition of truth as present in each and every religion places each religious

⁴¹ Second Vatican Council, 1965.

tradition equal with one another. Equality is based on uniqueness and differences, where one religion is irreducible to the categories of the other. This is the fundamental precept of synodal dialogue among religions.

In his recent visit to Singapore in 2024, Pope Francis went viral on social media during his dialogue with youth at the Catholic Junior College for saying that “all religions are pathways to God.” While this indicates a concern in the internal theology of Christianity, the statement lends to a fresh expression of what the Church has been teaching and promoting all along since *Nostra Aetate*. It appears that Pope Francis’ insistence of synodality as dialogue with and journeying together with the peoples of Asia is fundamentally grounded on the principle that there is only one God and that all religions, including the Catholic religion, are various roads that will lead us to God.

Based on this, synodality does not only pursue dialogue based on differences and uniqueness, but also insulates such differences from any national and cultural particularities. What complicates majority-minority relations is precisely their susceptibility to and entanglement with ethno-religious identities, politics, and cultural expressions and practices. They render the ethnicity, politics, language, and cultural practice of the dominant religion as the norm of social, cultural, and political life. A dialogue as an expression of synodality should be able to provide a mechanism of relationship that will lead to mutual co-existence, social harmony, and peace. Both groups, therefore, must strive to work through dialogue and mutual cooperation to gradually replace majority-minority relation into becoming one human family with different set of beliefs and unique practices. This resonates in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, where Pope Francis emphasized that “religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society.”⁴² An earlier document, which accounts for the joint statement of Pope Francis and the

⁴² Pope Francis, 2020.

Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, in Abu Dhabi, manifested how synodality and interreligious dialogue converge in the Church's mission of promoting fraternity between and among all religions: "We declare that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood."⁴³

The principle of shared humanity expressed through uniqueness and differences as a basis synodal dialogue is the very message of the tunnel of peace. This is the heart of journeying together to promote peaceful co-existence is the tunnel of peace, emphasized by the physical tunnel that connects the Our Lady of Assumption Cathedral of the Catholic Church and the Istiqlal Mosque in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta. Also known as the tunnel of friendship, it has become the symbol of the growing need for collaboration and cooperation between Muslims and Christians in combating discrimination, religious extremism, and other forms of conflict and violence. The Istiqlal Joint Declaration of 2024 was aptly entitled as 'Fostering Religious Harmony for the Sake of Humanity', and it highlights the "values shared by our religious traditions [which] should be effectively promoted in order to defeat the culture of violence and indifference afflicting our world. Indeed, religious values should be directed towards promoting a culture of respect, dignity, compassion, reconciliation and fraternal solidarity in order to overcome both dehumanization and environmental destruction".⁴⁴

The Asian Bishops, recognizing the multireligious and multicultural context of Asia, call on synodality as a framework of doing dialogue. Following this pathway, synodality requires the dynamics of listening, discerning, and transcending the "otherness of the dialogue partner so that s/he becomes a neighbor and partner in communion. The purpose of

⁴³ Pope Francis & Al-Tayyeb, 2019.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis & Umar, 2024.

dialogue is more eloquently spelt out by synodality, which encompasses the aspiration for communion, participation, and mission.⁴⁵

Synodality as a framework for dialogue is gaining wider interest in the ecumenical and interreligious disciplines. McPartlan⁴⁶ investigated the synodal process as a mechanism for communities with members coming from various religions to increase interaction and encounter with the end view of achieving mutual respect, and how such an approach can provide new ways of understanding and doing ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Phan, on the other hand, explored the synodal process of communal discernment for lay people and clergy in arriving at a shared vision and common action. Following this approach,⁴⁷ Phan extrapolated this as a key element of interreligious dialogue, where all parties are on an equal footing in arriving at a consensus for collaboration and cooperation. Phan criticized the tendency of interreligious dialogue as an exclusive arena for religious leaders. Synodality challenges interreligious dialogue to become inclusive, and to bring the peripheries and the marginalized as equal partners in engaging into dialogue. In order to do so, Melloni claimed that mutual listening, an essential component of the synodal process, should be a key aspect of interreligious dialogue.⁴⁸ Communal discernment necessitates an open space where every participant, in various forms of dialogue, is both welcomed and feels safe to bare their souls, sentiments, and sufferings. Mutual listening is the door to mutual understanding.

With these dynamics of synodality enhancing interreligious dialogue, synodality as a framework appropriates what Cornille argued on interreligious dialogue as a peacebuilding mechanism.⁴⁹ The most important concern for any dialogue is the consensus on common good, as

⁴⁵ FABC, 2023.

⁴⁶ Partlan, 2012, pp. 611–637.

⁴⁷ Phan, 2003, pp. 378–412.

⁴⁸ Melloni, 2021, pp. 56–66; Küng, 2005, pp. 123–136.

⁴⁹ Cornille, 2017, pp. 35–42.

a foundation for attaining a common goal and shared vision. Thus, synodality, expressed through dialogue, is the way to build peace. Cornille went on to say that such dynamics of dialogue will enable parties to work together to address common social concerns such as injustice and environmental problems. Synodality, therefore, as a pathway of doing interreligious dialogue, can provide the mechanism of fostering friendship and fraternity in humanity and care for the environment. According to Reda, synodality highlighted the communal journey as the process of achieving shared vision, which is enacted through shared responsibility and cooperation.⁵⁰

Synodality as a framework, however, must navigate the warning of Kung in doing interreligious dialogue, which is the pitfalls and cliff-hanger impacts of differences in doctrinal beliefs, historical tensions, and even the influence of politics and socio-economic factors.⁵¹ Differences in belief and practices influenced by majority-minority relation renders consensus building, friendship, and fraternity unsustainable and unattainable. Thus, majority-minority relation has, therefore, is a fundamental challenge of doing interreligious dialogue. Thus, synodality, both as a nature and mechanism for dialogue, rethinks and reshapes our view of Muslim-Christian relations in the context of the majority-minority relations. At the end, such application of synodality is also the very test of its nature and efficiency in revitalizing the Asian churches towards their goal of journeying with the peoples of Asia to pursue a shared vision and common future through interreligious dialogue.

Towards a synodal framework of dialogue

The document 'A Common Word Between Us and You', an open letter from Muslim and Christian Leaders, as a response to the Regensburg Lecture of Pope Benedict XVI in Germany in 2006, starts with the assertion

⁵⁰ Reda, 2021, pp. 150–168.

⁵¹ Kung, 2005.

that “Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.” The way to that peace can only take place when both of them, through their own respective faith decide “to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved”.⁵² Such meaningful peace can only be achieved by overcoming the power-based majority-minority relationship through the establishment of genuine fraternal human relations.

The challenges of Muslim-Christian relations cannot be reduced to religion and religious relations alone. While acknowledging that conservative, exclusivist doctrinal claims often stir tensions in Muslim-Christian relations, it is typically the deeper interplay of religion and politics that undermines national unity and religious tolerance, according to Franz Magnis-Suseno.⁵³ The politicization, of course, is an approach implemented by some group to advance a particular agenda. While recognizing *Pancasila* as a distinctive approach to fostering unity in diversity in Indonesia, Azra notes that political and communal tensions, driven by exclusivist religious perspectives, have generated divisions and strained relations between Muslims and Christians.⁵⁴ Arifianto’s claim of the root causes of the tension in Indonesia equally applies to the Philippines, who claimed that “Muslim-Christian Conflict is caused by mutual prejudices and suspicions that have gradually developed between the two groups. It argues that the origins of tensions between the two religions date from the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia and persisted throughout Indonesia's post-independence history.”⁵⁵

In the case of the Philippines, Muslim-Christian tensions can be traced from the colonial era, which started and perpetuated the historical

⁵² A Document on Human Fraternity, 2019.

⁵³ Magnis-Suseno, 2020.

⁵⁴ Azymardi, 2006.

⁵⁵ See Arifianto A.R. (2009). “Explaining the cause of Muslim-Christian conflicts in Indonesia

injustices committed against Muslims.⁵⁶ According to Majul, “The struggle between the Muslim Filipinos and the central government is not only a matter of religion but also one of ethnicity, culture, and political identity.”⁵⁷ This tension did not stop after the end of the Spanish colonial period, as “The process of Christianization of the Philippines during the Spanish colonial era has left a legacy of division, one that has shaped relations between the Christian and Muslim communities to this day.”⁵⁸ In the case of the Philippines, “the source of the conflict is the uneasy relation of the Moros, Christians, and the Lumads, which is called the Mindanao problem. It is the historical struggle of the Moros and the Lumads towards self-determination, against the hegemony of Christian national identity, assimilation, and integration.”⁵⁹

A listening majority; a trusting minority

It has been established that one of the key major issues in the majority-minority relationship is really the exclusivity of both because of their claim to religious fidelity confined and equated with their national identities. Synodality, which admits the possibility of walking together, can only take place when the majority takes the initiative to listen to the minority. Deep listening requires that the majority set aside their socio-cultural and religious disposition so that they are able to fully understand the grievances and claims of the minority. On the other hand, such listening can only take place when the minority places their trust in their counterpart majority.

⁵⁶ Majul, 1973.

⁵⁷ Majul, 1973.

⁵⁸ Majul, 1973.

⁵⁹ Baybado, 2017a.

The role of interreligious partnership and cooperation

In both countries, as a result of religious tensions, there arose several interreligious dialogue movements, such as ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference. In order to prevent these interreligious dialogue movements from decaying into dialogue industries, it is important that cooperation goes beyond the relationship of multireligious leaders. The partnership achieved by senior religious leaders should be translated into grassroots dialogue programs. The influence and moral authority of religious leaders, built through their friendship and cooperation, should guide the review and enhancement of programs and activities, including those within each religious community, to ensure they are inclusive, respectful, and actively promote the value and beauty of other religions. In this interreligious engagement, the question should shift from mere cooperation to collaboration. The focus should be on what the majority can change in terms of values, cultures, and attitudes so that the minority can live freely and practice their religion. But in the same manner, the minority needs to have a reciprocal self-critical attitude, in order to start asking themselves what to change in order to integrate themselves in the wider society. In this way, the task is to finally overcome the divisive nature of the majority-minority relationship.

Moreover, interreligious dialogue movements should advocate for the depoliticization of the majority-minority relations and the enactment of national laws that would promote social harmony and tolerance through their multireligious moral influence. It has been shown that the influence of the government, through its state laws and mechanisms, tend to take advantage within the majority-minority relationship to pursue political agendas. The decoupling of politics and religion is a must where politics has found its way as one of the sources and drivers of the tension. Moreover, as part of the listening and dialogue process, interreligious dialogue movements and organizations must work hand and hand with state actors in defining each other's roles and, through consensus

building, with the active presence of minority religions, discern national laws that would promote integration and unity.

Interreligious dialogue movements can act as transformative agent of the society, in cooperation with state actors, using Gramsci's principle, through consensus and dialogue. Synodality expects equal participation from all, if they have to walk together toward prosperity and peace. Thus, it is ensuring the active participation of the minority in all levels of discussion and decision that make everyone co-responsible in achieving peace and security.

Enlarging the Tent: A Common Mission of Love

The document 'A Common Word Between Us and You' provides the fundamental principle of overcoming the hegemonic majority-minor relationship found among Muslims and Christians. Both Muslim and Christian leaders agree on the foundation of their respective faiths, with 'Love of God and Love of Neighbor' as the fundamental goal of their relationship. As already indicated above, one of the key stumbling blocks of division, according to Hans Kung, is the differences in doctrinal beliefs, historical tensions, and even the influence of politics and socio-economic factors. In terms of the understanding of mission, "The critical issue hampering Christian-Muslim relations is the matter of religious mission (*da'wah*) found in the two Abrahamic traditions. Both claim to be the bringer and spreader of religion to people of the world so they can be saved from their digression".⁶⁰ The Common Word document recognizes a deeper understanding of the Islamic and Christian faiths by asserting that love of God and love of neighbor act as their core tenet and foundation.

One important image that synodality provides is the image of 'Enlarge the space of your tent'.⁶¹ In the words of Pope Francis,

⁶⁰ Qudir and Singh, 2021.

⁶¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, 2022.

“Indeed, this passageway allows for encounter, dialogue and a real possibility for “finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, mingling and encounter [...] stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage” (EG 87). I encourage you to continue along this path so that all of us, together, each cultivating his or her own spirituality and practicing his or her religion, may walk in search of God and contribute to building open societies, founded on reciprocal respect and mutual love, capable of protecting against rigidity, fundamentalism and extremism, which are always dangerous and never justifiable.”⁶²

One way that Indonesian and Filipino Muslims and Christians can improve relations is to put into practice the resolutions of the Joint Declaration of Istiqlal 2024, signed by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Nasaruddin Umar during the interreligious meeting in Jakarta. The document calls on religious leaders, inspired by their respective spiritual narratives and traditions to cooperate in defeating the culture of violence and indifference, which underlies the majority-minority mindset.

Conclusion

The interactions between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines and Indonesia have been profoundly shaped by majority-minority dynamics. These dynamics are fundamentally driven by power imbalances, specifically cultural hegemony, which manifest as tensions and conflicts, occasionally escalating into violence. Within this framework, the minority group frequently finds itself in a precarious position, marked by vulnerability, insecurity, and fear. This asymmetrical relationship is embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of each nation-state. This asymmetry is often either implicitly reinforced or explicitly legitimized by

⁶² Pope Francis, 2024.

state policies. Despite these strains, both communities express a shared yearning for peace, justice, and social harmony. While numerous studies have explored this issue, this article contends that synodality is a valuable framework for improving relations because it is characterized by the themes of encounter, listening, and discernment. Synodality, as modeled by the Catholic Church, offers a compelling theoretical framework for reimagining and addressing the complexities of majority-minority relations in these contexts.

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