Building Peace through Online Interfaith Dialogue:
The Kusog Mindanaw Yahoo Group

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JOHN PAUL II, in his message for the 39th World Communications Day, emphasizes that "the media have enormous potential for promoting peace and building bridges between peoples. . . . Accurate knowledge promotes understanding, dispels prejudice, and awakens the desire to learn more (no. 2)."[1] The sociologist of cyberculture Brenda Brasher points out, in particular, the potential of the Internet to foster understanding and cooperation among people of various religions.[2]

A type of Internet-based religious encounter is online interfaith dialogue that involves "more fully conversation activities, in which two or more people of different religious affiliations consciously engage one another for purposes of greater understanding."[3] This interfaith dialogue may be hosted by a neutral entity or one religion's adherent but with the participation of other religions' believers.

This chapter explores the Kusog Mindanaw Yahoo Group (in short, Kusog) and examines its distinctive features as an Internet-based platform for peacebuilding in comparison with other online interfaith dialogue groups as Beliefnet and Middle Eastern Internet-based planned projects.[4] The main religious groups represented in Kusog are Christians, Muslims, and the indigenous peoples (IPs).

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1 John Paul II, "The Communications Media."
2 Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion*, 6–7, 29.
3 McCarthy, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace," 173.
4 Permission was requested from Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI, to become a member and study the Kusog Mindanaw Yahoo Group in 2012, after which the researcher was approved as a member.

Studies on Interfaith Dialogue Online

Not many studies have been done on the scope and character of online interfaith dialogue.[5] A few researches done on interfaith dialogue online are those on Beliefnet and on Middle Eastern peace projects on the Internet.

Beliefnet

Among religion sites on the Web, Beliefnet is the second largest, next to Gospel.com. It offers information on various faiths, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others. It has different fora for conversation that match various needs, such as visitor centers where one can learn about other faiths; discussion forum where one can dialogue and debate; and a multifaith topics forum that focuses on the relationships between faiths. Its rules of conduct prohibit proselytizing in the discussion forum. All of its moderators have advanced academic degrees and experiences in facilitating interfaith dialogue.[6]

Kate McCarthy, who studied Beliefnet, notes that most participants are Christians. However, 12 percent identify themselves as multifaith, or belonging to more than one religion, a relatively large representation of self-identified pagans,[7] as well as those without religious affiliation, all of whom would normally not find a place in offline interfaith dialogues.[8] There is also relative equality in gender representation as compared with face-to-face dialogues that are generally male dominated. Interestingly, 17 percent are teenagers. Some of the most active in the fora are people one would not expect in concrete interfaith conversations. For instance, a disabled homeless man named Thermariev enriched discussions on issues such as the wealth of churches and the nature of God.[9] Nevertheless, even as

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[5]   McCarthy, "Interfaith Encounters in America," 5. For a list of websites related to interfaith relations, see pp. 172–73 of this same source.

[6]   Beliefnet is also distinctive as a site for interfaith encounters as it receives commercial sponsorships to maintain the site, as well as engages in business through the sale of e-books and online dating services.

[7]   Pagan theology here is characterized by polytheism, animism, and pantheism.

[8]   McCarthy, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace," 191.

[9]   Ibid., 182.

Beliefnet tries to be as inclusive as possible, there are gaps as exemplified by a member of an African traditional religion who commented on the absence of her religion on the Beliefnet's encyclopedic religions board.[10] There are more subtle forms of exclusion too inherent in the Internet being text-based, thus privileging the skilled writer. McCarthy states, "Those whose sentences don't parse properly are frequently accused (usually very politely on Beliefnet) of presenting unclear ideas, and often drop out of the conversation. It is possible that these participants would have fared better, and had their ideas 'heard' more successfully in face-to-face encounters." Lastly, there remain a lot of people who, bypassed by information and communication technologies, have no access to the Internet.

On Beliefnet, there are exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists; with exclusivists being least active and welcomed in online dialogues.[11] Those without religious affiliation, however, may not find themselves in any of the above classifications of attitudes toward other religions, and thus pose a challenge to these paradigms. In addition, McCarthy points out that

> [t]he very structure of Beliefnet, in which participants are offered a vast menu of religious options from which to choose (and from which an unlimited number may be selected as self-designators when setting up a personal profile), privileges a very particular view of religious identity as fluid and syncretic, one that is not hospitable to those whose view is characterized more by permanence, particularity and commitment.[12]

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[10] Ibid., 183.
[11] Exclusivism holds that Jesus and the church constitute the exclusive path to salvation or expressed in another way, "Outside the Church there is no salvation." Christocentrism/ inclusivism holds that the grace of Christ brings about salvation but this grace is also accessible to those of other faiths through Christ. A more open position says salvation is not only mediated through Christ though Christ is the "superior and ideal type" by which the other mediators are assessed. In theocentrism/pluralism, Jesus becomes just one among many mediators of salvation, placing God as the meeting point of all religions.
[12] McCarthy, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace," 193.

Beliefnet, which started two months after 9/11, hopes to help in peacebuilding by providing or correcting misinformation people have of other religions. Actual interviews of participants, however, reveal that for them the most significant consequence of the dialogue was not a change in their view of the religious other, but greater knowledge of themselves, for example, their deep conditioning and opinions. As one participant exclaimed, "The thing that interacting on b-net has caused me to see in myself, over and over again, is how deep my conditioning and opinions do run."[13]

Middle Eastern Internet-based Dialogues

A different type of online interfaith dialogue characterizes the Middle Eastern Internet-based encounters that started in early 2000. The encounters are planned, the participants are young Israeli Jews and Palestinians, or Jews-Arab in Israel, and the dialogue is localized, set in a concrete place of conflict.

Ronit Kampf probed into the reasons for the differing effectiveness of Internet-based encounters of Israeli and Arab youth,[14] employing Ifat Maoz's four socio-psychological models of planned intergroup encounters. These are the coexistence model, joint projects model, confrontational model, and the narrative storytelling model.

The coexistence model focuses on similarities, long-term interpersonal interaction of parties, and promotes cooperation of participants toward a common goal. In this way, the model aims to reduce stereotypes and foster positive group interaction. The joint projects model underlines the need for collaboration on a super ordinate goal (e.g., mixed choir or soccer teams, online classes that involve collaborative work) to develop empathy and sympathy toward the other and foster a shared identity. Both models, however, may be viewed as irrelevant by those who wish to discuss the conflict, and the coexistence model is criticized for ignoring the asymmetrical power relation of participants.

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[13] Ibid., 196.
[14] Kampf, "Internet, Conflict and Dialogue," 72–88.

The confrontational model, developed by Arabs, focuses on the political conflict through direct discussion of discrimination and national identities in order to empower the minority group. It can help conscientize both groups on sensitive political issues, but the confrontational stance can threaten Jewish participants and lead to negative communication between the two groups.

The narrative storytelling model by McCarthy, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace," integrates both the coexistence and the confrontational models by encouraging participants to tell their personal and collective stories of suffering in the midst of the conflict. It is able to develop empathy, acceptance, and mutual understanding, without ignoring the unequal power relations between the parties.

These models were conceptualized based on a twenty-year experience of face-to-face reconciliation-aimed encounters and now applied by Kampf to online interfaith encounters. Kampf points out that those Internet-based planned encounters that adopted a coexistence and/or joint projects model are more successful in helping develop a better understanding of the other. Examples of a coexistence model are the Internet-based dialogue on religious practices by Israeli-Jewish and Palestinians from the West Bank, as well as the Yablon and Katz-led Internet-based peace education project for high school Israeli Jewish and Arab Bedouin students.[15] The latter consists of three complementing strategies: workshops led by experts in mediation and bridgebuilding; a two-day-long, face-to-face meeting; and the weekly e-chat room and e-mail session for the entire duration of the project. The result was a more positive attitude of Jewish students toward the Bedouin students while the latter maintained their favorable attitude toward the former.[16]

The narrative storytelling method was employed by Oliviero Stock, with others. Through a collocated interface, dyads composed of a Jew and an Arab come up with a joint narrative based on photos

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[15] Yablon and Katz, "Internet-based Group Relations."

[16] Ibid., 181. Furthermore, the participants expressed learning from each other, especially in the opportunity given to clarify misconceptions first in an intragroup workshop before the intergroup encounters were held, where sensitive and contentious issues were discussed.

depicting positive and negative aspects of the conflict and showing their points of agreement and disagreement.[17] This approach also seems[18] to help reconciliation as participants viewed the construction of a story together as a positive experience.

The confrontational model is likely to be the least successful in fostering a spirit of dialogue and in helping develop a nuanced understanding of the conflict. In a confrontational model encounter, employing text-based interaction between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian high school youngsters from the West Bank, the students failed to develop more nuanced positions and fell into the trap of hostile disagreements.

The Internet as a medium is a significant factor in the success or failure of these encounters. On the one hand, text-based discussion of sensitive issues devoid of the "face" of the other (e.g., bodily reactions and cues) heightens the confrontational nature of the discussion. On the other hand, as the conflict between the two sides escalates and it becomes more difficult for them to meet face-to-face, the Internet provides a neutral and safe meeting ground for the students.[19]

Kusog Mindanaw Yahoo Group

Having briefly reviewed studies on online interfaith dialogues, we are now ready to look at Kusog which, as its website description states, is

> a *platform* that provides venue for Mindanao leaders and stakeholders to address, discuss, and arrive at consensus on relevant and strategic issues and concerns that affect Mindanao. The Kusog Yahoo Group is *inclusive* of all peoples who identify and [are] in solidarity with the aspirations and dreams of the peoples of Mindanao.

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[17] For a video illustrating the process, see "Reconciliation of Conflicts through Collaborative Storytelling."

[18] More research is needed to establish this conclusion.

[19] Yablon, "Feeling Close from a Distance."

It started in May 2008 and has therefore been in existence for six and a half years (as of this writing). It is the e-counterpart of the multisectoral coalition Kusog Mindanaw (lit. Mindanao force) organized in 1994.[20]

Membership and Moderatorship

Classified under church-state issues, Kusog currently has 424 subscribers. The webmaster is Fr. Eliseo "Jun" Mercado, OMI, a well-known expert on Islam in Southeast Asia and the Philippines, who has extensive engagement in the peace process in Mindanao. Many of the seventy active subscribers to the Yahoo Group, unlike the members of aforementioned interfaith platforms, are leaders in Mindanao. At least twenty-one are involved in the Bangsamoro autonomy process, and about twenty-two are engaged as well in face-to-face interfaith dialogues. However, a large majority (83 percent) are lurkers (silent observers) like myself. Membership in the group requires approval, but the messages are not moderated. Members know each one's real name, and no one can hide his/her e-mail address. Some would know each other personally in official and informal gatherings, meetings, symposia, and other community-level efforts.

Focus on Peacebuilding Issues and the Peace Process

To probe into how Kusog Yahoo functions as a platform for peacebuilding, I studied the postings from January 11, 2013, to September 29, 2014, which span more than a year and eight months.[21] This period is, in a way, crucial as it belongs to the years of preparation for drafting the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL)

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[20] The multi-sectoral coalition has the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC, formerly referred to as Forum) on board. Silva, "Fr. Eliseo 'Jun' Mercado Jr., OMI." The BUC, composed of Catholic and Protestant bishops in Mindanao and the ulama (Muslim religious leaders) from the Ulama League of the Philippines, has been leading the interreligious dialogue in Mindanao.

[21] I had been subscribed to the Yahoo Group since January 4, 2012. Because of personal time limitations, I decided to limit the study to a period of one year and eight months instead of two years and eight months. I was a nonparticipant observer.

toward the establishment of a Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. On October 15, 2012, the Framework Agreement was signed; it provided that the current Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) would, by mid-2015, be dissolved and replaced by the Bangsamoro autonomous region that would possess more powers and territory.[22]

In one year and eight months, there were approximately two hundred and seventeen main postings, which generated 315 responses, thus a total of 530 messages.[23] Threads in the Yahoo Group ranged from two to fifty-nine messages.[24]

Based on an analysis of the main postings, Kusog is a space for

1. sharing perspectives on issues relevant to promoting peace in Mindanao (40 percent);
2. sharing information on the peace process and national issues (28 percent);
3. exchanging greetings on religious holidays, inviting the other to religious celebrations, sharing information on religious practices (8 percent);
4. posting and inviting for peacebuilding activities, or to sign petitions pertaining to national issues (8 percent);

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[22] Within the period of study, the following important events occurred that threatened to derail the peace process. On February 9, 2013, Sabah, Malaysia, was invaded by followers of Jamalul Kiram III, a Sulu sultan's descendant, resulting in a hundred deaths and hundreds of arrests. In July and August 2013, there was an increase in violence in central Mindanao, seemingly aimed at derailing the framework agreement, by "an alleged new terrorist alliance" between the Abu Sayyaf, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement, and the Khilafah Islamic Movement. In September 2013, the Zamboanga Siege occurred when a faction of the MNLF battled with the military for a week, resulting in 140 dead and 120,000 displaced. See Bryony Lau, "The Southern Philippines in 2013," 264, 266.

On Oct. 15, 2012 the Framework Agreement was signed, which provides that the current Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao will by mid-2015 be dissolved and replaced by the Bangsamoro autonomous regions which will possess more powers and territory. The Congress and Senate version of the bills were not voted on and are now subsumed under a proposed shift to federalism.

[Editor's note: Finally in July 2018, the president signed the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, or BOL, Bangsamoro Organic Law.]

[23] The decrease in postings last year may be due to the fact that the group opened a Kusog Mindanaw Facebook page as well on January 28, 2014.

[24] A thread refers to a series of posted messages that are replies to each other. By following a thread, one sees how a discussion develops.

5. expressing international solidarity—for example, calling people to sign a petition for solidarity with Palestine, providing updates on the Syrian war, among others (4 percent);
6. posting job and/or funding opportunities in institutions engaged in peace advocacy (2 percent); and
7. miscellaneous, such as change of e-mail addresses, birthday greetings, messages of sympathy for deaths, and others (1 percent).

Thirty-two percent of main postings are related to the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region.

Unlike in Beliefnet, the discussion in this e-group is not about members' respective faiths, and it is minimally about their religious practices. It is mainly focused on peacebuilding activities and the Bangsamoro peace process, which are super ordinate goals toward a shared identity.

A Close Look at a Kusog Mindanaw Dialogue

As in Beliefnet, there are a lot of false starts—that is, a posting initiating a conversation which does not get any response or which is diverted to a nondialogical topic. McCarthy has noted that the "informality and lack of structure of online dialogues," as compared to face-to-face dialogues, allow for more false starts.[25]

Nevertheless, there have been passionate discussions in Kusog, as when users discussed who are included/excluded in the single word "Bangsamoro." Thirteen people posted a total of fifty-nine messages from January 13 to January 24, 2013. This is an important issue since there are not only Muslims but also Christians, as well as indigenous peoples in the Bangsamoro region that will be established. In the definition of the framework agreement, Bangsamoro (BM) refers to

[t]hose who at the time of conquest and colonization were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and

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25 McCarthy, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace," 183.

the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands including
Palawan, and their descendants whether of mixed or of full
blood shall have the right to identify themselves as BM by
ascription or self-ascription. Spouses and their descendants
are classified as BM. The freedom of choice of other
indigenous peoples shall be respected.[26]

This definition, however, does not settle the issue. Divergent
perspectives emerged in the discussion. Definitions along the lines
of the framework agreement, but further elaborated, were underlined
by a number of Muslims in the group: "a historic and unconquered
people which is not premised on any particular religious affiliation,"
including their spouses and descendants regardless of cultural or
religious affiliation. Others would expand this further to encompass
those who have historical presence in the Bangsamoro homeland
for a century or more, or at least since before the 1946 Philippine
independence, embracing Christians "who have served the region
and the people." And still others would say it incorporates even more
recent personages who are Christians, but have been prominent figures
in the political development of the Bangsamoro.[27]

One Muslim countered, though, that Bangsamoro refers only to
the Muslims who are the original inhabitants of Mindanao; that those
who converted later to Christianity are no longer Moro. Bangsamoro
is therefore, for him, a problematic term that was introduced by
the MILF, the political group that is currently leading the negotiations
with the government. He asserted, too, that all the original inhabitants
of Luzon and the Visayas were Muslims. This intervention redirected
the discussion on whether Lapu-lapu—the first Filipino to be successful
in resisting Spanish colonization and, thus, the first Filipino hero—
was a Muslim and whether the terms "rajah," "datu," and "sultan,"
used in precolonial times, are all Islamic titles.

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[26] See also House Bill 4994, Bangsamoro Basic Law, Article 2, Section 1; Lau, "The Southern
Philippines in 2013," 262.
[27] Examples are Leon Fernandez, Sulu governor in the 1950s, and Fr. Eliseo Mercado, called
by one as a "brother Moro."

The conversation thread also led to the question of the status of the non-Islamized indigenous peoples. Is it now the proper time for the indigenous peoples within the Bangsamoro region—the Tiduray, Lambangian, and Dulangan Manobo—to clamor for autonomy within the autonomous region that is being formed?[28]

Two Muslims and a Christian in the group opined that this may not be the proper time to make this demand: "Let us first unite our efforts in catching the chicken before dividing it . . . . what was [*sic*] the use of dividing the chicken. . .if we will not be able to catch the chicken." The MILF can negotiate with the government and then, later, the MILF and IPs can negotiate among themselves as they had done in the ancient past.[29]

Others, especially the IPs in the group, would say it is necessary that IP autonomy be included already in the BBL, which will become the basis for "crafting a later law." Furthermore, there is a need, according to one IP, to talk about the resources because the "mining hotspots" are located in their ancestral domain areas. The IP's concept of development should be entrenched in the BBL or else there could be complications later. He also raised the need to talk in the BBL about the women's sector and stated that more women should be invited to this online dialogue.

How Conflicts are Mediated Online

The discussions are not moderated, therefore the discussants moderate themselves. In the Philippines, and in many countries of East Asia, sensitivity to the "face" of the other[30] has generally led to a preference for indirect modes of talking about what can be painful

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[28] Indigenous peoples do not necessarily self-identify as Moros. See the opposition of the MNLF—the other major political group in Mindanao—to the MILF definition of Bangsamoro. Petalcorin, "Reasons Why MNLF is Against BBL."

[29] See Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS), "Teduray-Lambangian Position Paper."

[30] See, for instance, Dagmang, "Hiya [Shame]." See also Mollov and Schwartz, "Towards an Integrated Strategy," 220.

remarks. Most of the time, the discussants express their disagreement in the form of a question, a way of disagreeing that allows the other to save face.[31]

If a direct critique or opposition is ever expressed, it is done cautiously: "Hmmp. . . just a slight reaction," quips one Muslim; or, it is preceded with courteous expressions[32] using terms like "brother," "salaam," or "peace"; or, a high-ranking official of the Catholic Church says, "Respectfully: unless I am wrong." The Muslim, in turn, responds by saying, "with due respect, *po* [a term expressing respect for an elder]."

One factor that also explains the level of courtesy exhibited even in the midst of a passionate discussion is the fact that the discussants are leaders who have been exposed, if not directly involved, in peace negotiations. A high-ranking official in the Catholic Church even asked for an apology for opening a debate on a sensitive topic:

> Am almost sorry I raised an innocent question about personalities in precolonial history in order to help sift facts from beliefs. The answers are quite passionate, sincere, from the heart. I deeply appreciate the postings. Very sorry for disturbing some positions on the issue. . . .This is my last post on the subject! I will rely on what historians will say. Prayers and God bless!

To resolve differences in opinions (e.g., whether all those who defied the conquerors and who were called Moros by the Spaniards were Muslims, or whether Lapu-lapu and Rajah Humabon were Muslims or not), five of the discussants appealed ten times to refer to the writings of historians and the historical facts. A Muslim, however, also pointed out the difficulty of trusting history because of the "divide and rule" tactic of the conquerors, suggesting implicitly that as history is written by the victors, they have also effectively employed it as a strategy to "divide and rule."

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[31] For example, it has been asked, "Is it not the proper way to solidify efforts in entrenching a successful Bangsamoro before arranging for a Bangsa Mamalo Autonomous government?"

[32] De Leon Jr., "Paliguy-ligoy [Indirect Communication]," 145, 149.

The next three postings after this thread were articles by Filipino historian Rudy Rodil, which clarified certain issues as well as identified the questions that lingered. He noted the inclusive definition of Bangsamoro in the framework agreement, which refers to original inhabitants regardless of religious affiliation, but which, on the other hand, is exclusive—that is, not incorporating the migrant population. It also says that the "customary rights and traditions of IPs shall be taken into consideration in the formation of the Bangsamoro's justice system" and that "vested property rights shall be respected." It is not clear, however, whether collective ownership of ancestral domain is considered a vested property right.[33] And will "autonomy within autonomy" be allowed in the BBL?[34] Lastly, to what extent can the IPs participate in the formulation of the BBL?

As this conversation thread occurred two years ago, one of the IPs engaged in this discussion eventually became a member of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, which drafted the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) that was submitted to Congress. The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), which allows IPs to own and manage their ancestral land, is not explicitly affirmed in the BBL, not even in the revised 2015 version.[35]

Learning from Each Other

From the online conversation, one observes certain people learning new information, modifying their views, or nuancing their positions. A Muslim thanks another Muslim for his "enlightening presentation of historical facts on the Moro issues." After a Muslim pointed out

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[33] The IPs included here are at least two: the Manobo in North Cotabato and the Teduray-Lambangian-Dulangan Manobo group in Maguindanao.

[34] The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA) shall protect rights of indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples "to their ancestral domains to ensure their economic, social and cultural well-being and shall recognize the applicability of customary laws governing property rights or relations in determining the ownership and extent of ancestral domain." Albert Alejo, SJ, who has been active in the peace process in Mindanao, argues that, for the BBL to be inclusive and just, it must honor and implement the IPRA which is a peace agreement in itself with the indigenous peoples. Alejo, "Peacetalk."

[35] Tauli-Corpuz, "BBL Falls Short."

that there are also resources in Ligawasan and oil reserves in Sulu, Tawi-tawi, and other areas, an IP said, "I stand corrected . . ." to admit his mistake in saying that all strategic natural resources are located in the IPs' ancestral domain. The Muslim, in turn, clarified that if the point is to ensure that the IPs' rights would be protected in the BBL, then he is definitely in favor of this.

A key informant expressed, however, that some comments do not lead to mutual understanding of the religious other. Since the discussion is not moderated, it is the screening process of members that should be controlled.

Online Character of Interfaith Dialogue

Beliefnet's creator Steve Waldman claims that "the anonymity of the Internet is what makes it work so well for religion." One is not embarrassed to ask one's question in places of conflict as in the Middle East and in Mindanao. However, knowing the background or social indicators[36] and even the e-mail address of the other (in the case of Kusog) is important in ensuring authenticity and accountability. As a result, it promotes networking, and fostering empathy toward the religious other.

In Kusog, dialogues online spill over into face-to-face encounters such as in the Bangsamoro Study Circle that has been meeting twice a month to tackle each issue in depth. In the opposite direction, the results of the Kusog Mindanaw[37] annual conferences are also posted in the e-group for further discussion.

McCarthy has noted the privilege given to the written over the spoken word in online dialogues and so those who cannot express themselves well in writing eventually drop out. In Kusog, there seems to be patience and effort to properly understand the posts, the discussants being fully aware of the more developed oral culture

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[36] Kampf, "Internet, Conflict and Dialogue," 80.

[37] Kusog Mindanaw holds annual roundtable conferences to discuss the peace and development agenda for Mindanao (e.g., Mindanao 2020 Peace and Development Agenda). See Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines Office, "Kusog Mindanaw Conference."

of some of the particpating groups. Nevertheless, the IPs as well as the women are underrepresented among the active members of Kusog,[38] reflecting the marginal participation of women and IPs in offline dialogues.

An advantage of online dialogue, according to one key informant, is that it does not require physical presence. As such, more people can be invited to participate, and there is "unlimited opportunity to interact." So, people like me who come from outside Mindanao can join the group and be informed of the issues affecting the region. This informant also said that with online dialogue, there is "much lesser [*sic*] tension. One can prepare more the thoughts to be expressed . . . [it is] easier to 'edit.' Physical contact, on the other hand, 'sometimes fosters animosity.'"

Even as a lurker, just reading the dialogues was very enriching for me, allowing me to be in touch with the burning issues in Mindanao. It exposed me to a multidimensional view of the religious other.

Kusog Yahoo, Religious Identities, and Dialogue as Conflict Resolution

In Kusog, people's identities are not as fluid as in Beliefnet. In Beliefnet, a person engages "as an individual, and the religious identity one represents there can be as eclectic as one chooses and can change as often as one logs on."[39] Using the words of Daniel Franklin Pilario, "[t]heir leisurely contexts allow them to play, as it were, to imagine, invent, dream with concepts and words without life and death consequences in their actual lives."[40] In places of intractable conflict, ethno-religious identities tend to become more defined or even rigidified. In the Middle Eastern and Kusog dialogues, the participants represent traditions that are trying to find their proper place in a shared land. Moreover, their primary concern is neither which religion

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[38] Seventy-seven percent of active members are men, while 23 percent are women. The IPs comprise only around 4 percent of the active members.
[39] McCarthy, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace," 193.
[40] Pilario, "Back to the Rough Grounds," 25.

is the true path to salvation, nor personal spirituality, but social transformation toward sustainable peace.

In terms of the Kampf's classification of online interfaith dialogues, Kusog is a mixture of the joint projects and confrontational models. Although its starting point and focus are the common concerns affecting Mindanao, and the goal is consensus on relevant concerns, it is unlike the joint projects model for it deals directly with political and sensitive issues.[41] It is able to avoid the limitations of the online confrontational model. The discussants know each other's real names and backgrounds, and it does help that these subscribers are experienced in interfaith dialogue offline.

The Kusog model may be closest to what Michael Amaladoss calls dialogue as conflict resolution. Here, "[t]he goal of interreligious dialogue is [precisely] to build up a public that is multireligious. . . . Multireligious groups will have a special role, not only in shaping the consensus of the community through discussion, but also in conflict resolution when religious communities come into conflict for whatever reason."[42] Kusog is such a multireligious public that aims to shape consensus in the community. Its role in conflict resolution may be indirect as there are no conflicts that are directly being resolved in the discussion threads. However, several of the active members are in strategic positions in the community and the Bangsamoro autonomy process, where these conflicts can be addressed.

Conclusion

Compared to Beliefnet and the Middle Eastern initiatives, Kusog represents another form of Internet-based platform for peacebuilding. Its active subscribers are political and religious leaders engaged in offline interfaith dialogues as well as the state-led peace process. Its main concern is peacebuilding and not which religion

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[41] As Mollov and Schwartz note, ". . . while dialog and communications, which directly address charged political issues, are likely to fail; completely ignoring political issues render such dialogs ineffective." "Towards an Integrated Strategy for Intercultural Dialog," 213.

[42] Amaladoss, "Dialogue as Conflict Resolution."

is the true path to salvation. Kusog is primarily a space for sharing information and perspectives on issues relevant to promoting peace in Mindanao.

Our review of studies on online interfaith dialogue has revealed that the Internet in itself does not foster interreligious understanding; this depends on how it is used. In its way of combining the joint projects and confrontational models, Kusog is an example of a model of dialogue as conflict resolution. Kusog online dialogues spill over into offline meetings and vice versa toward shaping a consensus in the community. This is facilitated by the requirement that discussants reveal their real names so that they do not remain anonymous. Kusog's online character allows for more literate people to join and encounter a variety of voices in the religious other. In the hands of experienced dialogue partners, intergroup tensions seem to be lessened and people are allowed to better express themselves.[43] However, as the e-group is composed primarily of those engaged in face-to-face dialogues, it reflects very closely the minimal representation of women and indigenous peoples.

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[43] Since this research is only exploratory, there are other areas that can be studied further about Kusog, such as how the active members themselves evaluate the effectiveness of the online discussions in terms of personal or group enlightenment/conversion.

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