

Religions, Symbolic Violence, and Peace

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MANY OF US have heard about the siege in Zamboanga, but few knew about the place called Sta. Catalina. *Sta. Catalina* is a Rappler documentary¹ about the armed occupation of a Zamboanga City barangay called Sta. Catalina by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a group that felt left out of peace negotiations then taking place in Mindanao. On September 8, 2013, MNLF members marched into Zamboanga, a bustling regional center in southern Mindanao, and held ordinary people hostage for twenty days. The year after saw as many as 40,000 people in evacuation centers and provisional housing. Relocation and, more important, rebuilding the city seemed a long way off. Moreover, long-term peace still remained far from view.²

There is a host of problems connected with the so-called Zamboanga Siege. My interest is on the symbolic role of religion in conflicts and peace-making, not only in Mindanao, but also as a general phenomenon. I chose this documentary film to introduce the subject because somewhere in the narrative, the couple George

¹ *Sta. Catalina*, Rappler Documentary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bwq0MUj1ofQ> (accessed August 4, 2015).

² "Enduring Pain After Muslim Rebel Attack Zamboanga City," <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/636144/enduring-pain-after-muslim-rebel-attack-zamboanga-city> (accessed August 4, 2015); "Philippines Zamboanga Siege Survivors Feel Forgotten," <http://www.irinnews.org/report/100588/philippines-zamboanga-siege-survivors-feel-forgotten> (accessed August 4, 2015); "One Year After Siege Zamboanga Critical to Peace Agreement," <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2014/09/10/one-year-after-siege-zamboanga-critical-to-success-of-any-peace-agreement/> (accessed August 4, 2015).

and Michelle face a dilemma. As residents in the besieged barangay, they were bound to be asked about whether they were Christian or Muslim. According to George: “I wanted to say we were Muslim, but I couldn’t because they might ask us to pray. So I told them we were Christians. He said, ‘You’re Christian? Go inside.’ I knew then that we were hostages.” The crucial questions on the ground then were: Which religion will likely assure survival? Which one is a more effective symbol of peace?

It was difficult to make a choice because in that very violent space, religion had already been compromised. While the couple had to choose in the end, their choice did not save them, after all. Peace, or the semblance of it, had to be sourced from elsewhere. As seen in the film, some few hours before their son Ethan’s death, he was singing, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” and “Zamboanga *Hermosa*” (Beautiful Zamboanga). In the end, at least in this case, the symbol of hope was not in religion for, in this concrete context, it has lost its capacity to generate meaning. Peace came from somewhere else, for example, from the memory of an innocent and happy childhood symbolized by a nursery rhyme or from the once peaceful and familiar place of one’s birth, Zamboanga *hermosa*.

This chapter argues that our religious symbols and worldviews are dual-faced. They can either promote symbolic violence or present visions of peace; thus, also making “the sacred” quite fragile and ambivalent. If we want religions to be liberating, religious agents need to be doubly sensitive and reflexive; otherwise, what we consider our most sincere beliefs ironically engender a violent world. I will try to discuss this in three steps. First, I will outline the different approaches to the relationship between religion and violence in contemporary studies. Second, I would like to argue for a constructivist-symbolic approach as a more viable way to understand this relationship. Third, I will try to point to some areas where religions/theologies can help in the pursuit of peace, but also deeply conscious of their propensity to contribute to symbolic violence.

Religion and Violence

There is a proliferation of literature on the relationship between religion and violence to date.³ In order to understand these myriad discourses, I will map them out in three areas: primordial, instrumentalist, and constructivist-symbolic approaches.⁴

The primordial approach argues that religions are violent in themselves. A host of contemporary events can be rallied as examples in order to support this assertion—from 9/11 to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) terrorism, from Al Qaeda bombings to Boko Haram attacks on villages. Most common is the media's correlation of violence with Islam. However, we only need think of the medieval Crusades or the indiscriminate killing of Muslims by the Christian right in Mindanao (e.g., by vigilante groups like the Ilaga Gang or the Tadtad). We also hear of the destruction of mosques by Buddhist monks in Myanmar and Sri Lanka or the burning of churches by Hindus in Orissa, India.⁵ All these spell violence done in the name of religion, all established religions. The examples are too numerous to be ignored such that popular consciousness rushes to affirm that all violence is in fact religious in nature. The primordial approach is not only widely appealing among barbers, taxi drivers, and radio talk show hosts. It is also present in the discourse of famous theoreticians. British philosopher Terry Eagleton talks of a “holy terror” and its accompanying notions of “death, evil, sacrifice”—something which is not merely political, but also metaphysical; not only located on

³ See, among others, Bryan Turner, ed., *War and Peace: Essays on Religion and Violence*; J. Harold Ellens, ed., *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 4 vols.; Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and War*; Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*; L. Weinberg, and A. Pedahzur, *Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism*.

⁴ I have adopted these categories from Sabina E. Stein, “Competing Social Science Perspectives on the Role of Religion in Conflict.” Cf. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Politorbis-52-21-26.pdf> (accessed August 5, 2015).

⁵ Jeffrey Maitem, “Dreaded Ilaga is back,” <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20080828-157221/Dreaded-Ilaga-is-back> (accessed August 5, 2015); “Aftermath of the anti-Christian violence in Orissa State, India (June 2009),” <http://www.cswusa.org/filerequest/1119.pdf> (accessed August 5, 2015); David Feith, “Why Tamils Flee Sri Lanka,” <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?acid=41671#.VcIO6BOqqko> (accessed August 5, 2015).

the material level, but also in the sublime, the unconscious. “Terror begins as a religious idea,” Eagleton observes, “as indeed much terrorism still is today. And religion is all about deeply ambivalent powers which both enrapture and annihilate.”⁶ When Samuel Huntington talks about the “clash of civilizations,” what he actually means is “the clash of religions and cultures.”⁷ Now that the ideological battle is over in the post-Cold War context, he argues, we revert to the normal clashes of civilizations. “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.”⁸ What he calls “the fault lines between civilizations” are also the “flash points of crisis and conflict.”⁹ Civilizations are differentiated by individual histories, languages, cultures but most importantly religion. In Huntington’s mind, civilizations clash because religions constituted each of them to be distinct and absolute. When absolutes meet, they naturally collide.

Many thinkers, however, have already disproven this to be a myth, i.e., the myth of religious violence. In *Fields of Blood*,¹⁰ Karen Armstrong argues that many of the violent events in history were in fact caused by economic and political factors. For example, the Crusades were intended to extend the power of papal monarchy in the East; the violence of the Inquisition was intended to restore order to Spain after a civil war; or the European wars of religion were in fact corollary to the foundation of the modern nation-state. In short, even as religions can be used to foment violence, it is not violent in itself.

Another leading work in this field is William Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence*.¹¹ He asks: If religions are not basically violent—if religious violence is a myth—why does this discourse

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror*.

⁷ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” 22–49; S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

⁸ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*.

¹¹ William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*.

persist? His answer straightforwardly unmasks a racial bias against other civilizations—mostly Islamic—which does not concur with Western secular modernity.

[T]he myth of religious violence is so prevalent because, while it delegitimizes certain kinds of violence, it legitimates other kinds of violence, namely, violence done in the name of secular, Western ideals. The argument that religion causes violence sanctions a dichotomy between non-Western, especially Muslim, forms of culture on the one hand, which—having not yet learned to privatize matters of faith—are absolutist, divisive, and irrational, and Western culture on the other, which is modest in its claims to truth, unitive, and rational. This dichotomy, this “clash of civilizations” worldview, in turn can be used to legitimate the use of violence against those with whom it is impossible to reason on our own terms. In short, their violence is fanatical and uncontrolled; our violence is controlled, reasonable, and often regrettably necessary to contain their violence.¹²

Against Huntington, it can be asserted at this point that religions are not homogeneous, unchanging, and monolithic essences. Religious adherents (Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, etc.) exhibit plural transformations and complex conversions with their developing societies. If we persist to view violence as primordial to religions, Amartya Sen argues, another danger can ensue: that such become a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹³

The second approach to understand the relationship between religion and violence is the “instrumentalist” perspective. This view rejects the primordial argument that religious differences are causes of conflict. For its proponents, violence is not religious but material, economic, and political. “If the world is witnessing a rise in violent religious

¹² Ibid., 16–17; also William Cavanaugh, “The Violence of Religion: Reexamining a Prevalent Myth” [Kellogg Institute Working Paper], <https://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/310.pdf>, 2–3 (accessed August 5, 2015).

¹³ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*.

movements, we should not attribute this to any dogmatic dispute but, rather, to growing economic, social, and political inequalities in and between nations.”¹⁴ The arguments of Karen Armstrong in the foregoing are a good example of this approach. Applying this to the Muslim-Christian conflict in southern Philippines, this perspective argues that the violence does not proceed from the majority’s practice of the Islamic faith or their Muslim identity, as some argue. The deeper reason comes from centuries of neglect by the imperialist, Christian, and Manila-centered governments. Historians call this historical subjugation the “multiple colonialism of the Moroland”¹⁵—first, under the Spanish colonizers; second, during the American occupation; third, under the Filipino elites in the post-American era; fourth, under the Manila-centered and Christian-dominated government; and last, under the present Western “war on terror.” These sociohistorical processes have systematically marginalized the Muslims in Mindanao, and as a result, also effectively relegated them to the economic, political, and cultural peripheries. In recent surveys, the poorest and most deprived region in the country is the Muslim Mindanao.¹⁶ One can transpose the same instrumentalist argument to the global scale where one finds a viable explanation of 9/11.

Another work that applies this approach to the terrorism discourse is Eli Berman’s *Radical, Religious and Violent*¹⁷ (2009). The author tries to debunk the myth that radical religious terrorists are religiously motivated, for instance; that terrorists believe in the promise of heaven as reward for jihad. In Berman’s analysis of the phenomenon, what poses as the greatest threat to the world is not so much the radical and violent global terrorism, but unbridled capitalism that systematically denies billions of people basic services

¹⁴ Sabina Stein, “Compelling Social Science Perspectives on the Role of Religion in Conflict,” 23.

¹⁵ Julkipli Wadi, “Multiple Colonialism of the Moroland,” *The Moro Reader: History and Contemporary Struggles of the Moro People*. See also Daniel Franklin Pilario, “Restorative Justice Amidst Continuing Violence,” 64–73.

¹⁶ “SWS Survey: Families Rating Themselves as Poor (July 5, 2015),” <http://www.sws.org.ph/pr20150507.htm> (accessed August 7, 2015); “Hunger on the Rise in the Philippines,” <http://focusweb.org/node/520> (accessed August 7, 2015).

¹⁷ Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*.

enjoyed by the few rich minority. One commentator of the book writes: “The more we can help poor governments provide basic services to their citizens, the less space we allow for radical rebels to fill the void.”¹⁸

In this approach, religion is, of course, useful to the self-interested elites (both the defenders and subversives of the status quo) who would frame the conflict through religious values in order to gain support from the masses. One’s religious identity is usually summoned as the threatened “common good” that needs to be defended and for which individuals are willing to take arms. Because they defend the “common good,” suicide bombers are thus proclaimed as martyrs and militant crusaders as saints. In the end, however, it is not about religion. It is about economy and politics. Religion has only been instrumentalized.

Though this approach is very helpful to address the socioeconomic and political inequalities of any conflictual situation, it also has the tendency to misread how people think or act, what motivates them, or where their resources are located. Since its view of religion is instrumentalist, religion’s actual influence in everyday life is sidelined, misunderstanding the real situation on how social agents think, act, and are motivated through their religious lenses. This approach could lead one to think that people are passive victims of political and economic elites, or seen to have lost all their critical abilities. Totally brainwashed and indoctrinated, social agents are portrayed as victims of social or religious propaganda and are just blindly following what the political and/or religious elites dictate. The truth is people in grassroots communities, even as they are fanned by religious motives, actively discern their actual options in everyday life. For example, ordinary fathers and mothers want to avoid violence as much as possible because they have everything to lose. Social change is achieved by negotiation not by violence because the stakes are quite high. When people decide to resort to violence, it must be for greater and more valid reasons; when

¹⁸ Andrew Leigh, “The Economics of Terrorism.”

people are pushed to the wall, as it were, most often it is their only and last resort. For instance, revolutionaries do not just offer their lives in defense of a flag; they moreover fight for communal political or religious ideals connected with their actual lives and inviolable cultural identities.

The third approach towards understanding religion and violence is what I call “constructivist-symbolic approach” that does not negate, but combines the gains of the previous frameworks. According to social constructivists, people are not only influenced by the structures in their environment; they are also active in the construction of these structures. Vice versa, the structures for their part are likewise active in the construction of reality around them. To use a constructivist term, actors are in fact engaged in the “social construction of reality.”¹⁹ The “cognitive structures” (ideas, worldviews, cultural symbols), and in our case, religions, are actively created by peoples in their relations with one another, in the process also defining their social identities. In other words, people are not just formed by their religions; they are also active in forming religious beliefs. Applied to our problematic, this means that if some religions turn violent, this does not come from their primordial origins, or that the people are merely “used” to advance the elite’s sociopolitical and economic interests. While religious ideals are being created in the consciousness and bodies of people, the same social agents are also actively creating them. While being structured, religions are also structuring. While a number of religious beliefs display some propensity to violence, they also give an opening of hope for social actors to change it. In the same vein, religions do not only necessarily push people to violent options; they can also inspire people to work for peace. Whether conflict is promoted or prevented substantially depends on the socially constructed religious worldview and interpretation at a given sociohistorical context. This assertion places religion in a very precarious situation. It can either be an instrument of peace or a

¹⁹ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*.

vehicle of war. This is crucial for religious practitioners (i.e., theologians, catechists, church leaders). There is a need to examine our theologies, religious discourses, and church structures because we know that the kind of symbols we use can either effectively promote conflict or create energies for peace among peoples.

Symbolic Power, Symbolic Violence, and Religions

In order to better clarify the constructivist-symbolic approach to religions, a framework forwarded by a foremost French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu might be of help. In his writings, Bourdieu asks about matters that preoccupy us.²⁰ How do we understand power and violence in society? What is the role of cultural or religious language in it? His answer is found in his theory of symbolic systems.

For Bourdieu, symbolic systems have three characteristics. First, like the constructivist framework mentioned above, Bourdieu also thinks that cultural and religious symbols are “structuring structures.” They are means of knowing and constructing our world, expressing our social identities, and producing meaning as we navigate society. Following the neo-Kantian tradition of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), Bourdieu thinks that myths, cultures, language are not only passive representations of things, but also vehicles of expression in the active human structuring of reality. Further, it is a manifestation of the personal and subjective that also transforms the external and the objective. Second, like the instrumentalist view, Bourdieu thinks religious worldviews are “structured structures,” product as they are of the socioeconomic and political structures of a given age. Following the structuralists—Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), for instance—Bourdieu argues that the *conscience collective* is not only a summary of what each individual believes, but are also socialized beliefs structured and inculcated into individual consciousness. In the words of Bourdieu, “symbolic structures can exercise a structuring power only because they themselves are structured.”²¹

²⁰ For a recent treatment, see Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy*.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 166.

Third, beyond the two approaches, Bourdieu moreover argues that symbolic systems (which include cultures and religions) are political vehicles for reproducing power and domination. In the spirit of the Marxist theory of “false consciousness,” Bourdieu thinks that the dominant class “contributes to the fictitious integration of society as a whole, and thus to the apathy (false consciousness) of the dominated classes; and finally, it contributes to the legitimation of the established order by establishing distinctions (hierarchies) and legitimating these distinctions.”²² Thus, what Durkheim actually calls as “conscience collective” (which in his mind is the source of social cohesion) is, in fact, social interest of the dominant masquerading itself as the interest of all. Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic forms can be summarized thus: Cultural symbols (which includes religious symbols) are not only expressions of our human meaning-making, but also products of hegemonic dominant structures misrecognized as universal values. This is what is meant by “symbolic power” which, when effectively imposed, turns itself into “symbolic violence.”

Symbolic power—as power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific of mobilization—is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is, *misrecognized* as arbitrary.²³

Central to the concept of symbolic power is the process of “misrecognition” (*méconnaissance*). “Méconnaissance[is] the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in the form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder.”²⁴ Instead of giving an abstract explanation, let me

²² Ibid., 167.

²³ Ibid., 170.

²⁴ Richard Nice, “Translator’s Notes,” in P. Bourdieu and J.-C. Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. R. Nice, xxii.

give an everyday example. For instance, why do we take out the price tag when we give gifts? Why do we wrap our gifts? Why is it better to buy a gift than to just give cash? The answer to all these is what Bourdieu calls the “denial of economy.”²⁵ We take out the price tag of an object, wrap it or spend time to buy it in order to show our friend that he/she is special and that the gift is “beyond price.” In these social rituals, the fact of economic exchange is effectively denied, to the consent of all parties involved—the giver and the recipient. This social alchemy of “gift exchange” and “unconditional friendship” also entails that, when one accepts the gift, one is always indebted to the giver (and this is where the violence is!) until one has returned the gift. In reality, it is an exercise of symbolic violence to which the debtor also agrees as he/she receives the gift. “Symbolic violence,” writes Bourdieu, “is the coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator (and therefore to the domination).”²⁶

The gift, generosity, conspicuous distribution...are operations of social alchemy which may be observed whenever direct application of overt physical or economic violence is relatively sanctioned, and which tend to bring about the transmutation of economic capital into symbolic capital. Wastage of money, energy, time, and ingenuity is the very essence of the social alchemy through which an interested relationship is transmuted into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship, overt dominant on into misrecognized, “socially recognized” domination, in other words, *legitimate authority*.²⁷

Society is full of examples of these rituals of misrecognition, this denial of politics and economy. In schools, for instance, academicians are said to pursue “knowledge for knowledge’s sake.” But we also know that research projects, our arguments, our decisions are ruled

²⁵ For a summary of Bourdieu’s theory of gift-exchange, see Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu*, 154–59.

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 170.

²⁷ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 192.

by factors other than knowledge or science alone. Artists, for their part, should also be guided by the principle of “art for art’s sake.” But we are also too familiar with the politics and economic considerations that rule the knowledge production or valuation of artworks. Yet since these fields belong to what Bourdieu calls “disinterested universes,” they have social rituals like togas, investitures, graduations, and others to misrecognize what otherwise are real violent economic exchanges.

Religions, churches, and theologies also proclaim themselves to be “disinterested fields.” As religious practitioners, our supposed motive is to solely work “for the greater glory of God.” However, Bourdieu also unmasks the misrecognition happening in the religious field through a sculpture in the Auch Cathedral near Toulouse, France: a figure of two monks quarreling over the abbot’s staff. “In a world which, like the religious universe, and above all the monastic universe, is the site par excellence of *Ausserweltlich*, of the extrawordly, of disinterestedness in the naïve sense of the term, one finds people who struggle over a staff, whose value exists only for those who are in the game, caught up in the game.”²⁸ To recognize the legitimacy of its imposition, churches also have rituals for misrecognition. When people disagree with imposed theologies, there is the power of excommunication or denial of sacraments—all done through rituals—in order to impose institutional power. Because churches have enough cultural capital to impose its meaning through these rituals of denial, all eventually agree, the violence is forgotten and life goes on as usual. It is misrecognized, thus, recognized as legitimate and everyone eventually takes it for granted.

If symbols are both structured and structuring, if gift exchanges are both generous cycles of reciprocity and exercise of symbolic violence, if the so-called disinterested fields are both interest free and power laden, then symbolic universes are dual-faced. Cultural and religious symbolic goods are intrinsically ambivalent as they exhibit what Bourdieu calls *double-vérité* (double-truth). “Because of this repression [of

²⁸ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, 78.

economic interests], the strategies and practices characteristic of the economy of symbolic goods are always ambiguous, two-sided, and even apparently contradictory (for example, goods have a price and are ‘priceless’).”²⁹ In order to understand “practice”—cultural, intellectual, artistic, or religious—one needs to hold this dual truth in tension, one needs to be sensitive to its ambivalence, the resolution of which is only understandable on the actual grounds of its specific sociohistorical conditions.

How is this related to our problem of religious violence? We notice that symbolic violence has been inflected into believers through religious indoctrination, catechetical instruction, and propaganda by cult leaders leading to acts of terror against other religions. We also observe that symbolic violence has also been inflected by the state so that its population rallies against its army and the war it wages. In both cases, the symbolic world of religion (where both economy and politics are denied) is summoned to legitimize violence—in economic, political, and religious institutions. In this process of mystification, we also realize that the people are not willing victims but active agents. Regardless of hegemonic impositions from forces that foster conflict, people either accede to the invitations of violence or fight for peace regardless of its countless difficulties.

On the one hand, Mark Juergensmeyer investigates how terrorists are socialized into the theological language of “cosmic war” as being performed in their own acts of violence. “What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless,” Juergensmeyer argues, “is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle—cosmic war—in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation.”³⁰ On the other hand, despite the everyday experience of violence and prejudices that abound in the conflict in Mindanao, there are people who pursue dialogue among neighbors making religious beliefs to

²⁹ Ibid., 120.

³⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd edition, 149–50.

be crucial factor of unity not division.³¹ A story is told of a group of Christians who had just settled on Sitangkay, a small island of a predominantly Muslim populace. They wanted to build a small chapel for themselves but met some vigorous resistance from the Muslim authorities and neighborhood—until a local policeman, a Muslim, volunteered to intercede for the Christian settlers. He told them he was once a student at a Catholic school of a nearby island and assured his fellow Muslims that he had not been subjected to proselytizing.³² I have personally seen this small chapel on the island and it still stands today.

There is a need to bring back religious symbols into the actual sociohistorical situations where they exercise influence. Sometimes, it is not the ordinary people, but those in power who try to impose their religious symbolic power on the local population. I once went to an island near Sitangkay called Tongehat. On the night of my arrival, they told me the story of how a *tabligh*—a sort of Muslim missionary trained in the Middle East—came to be expelled from their small island.

Tongehat is a small community with around fifty small houses on stilts, where both Muslim and Christian families live. On one side of the island is a small mosque; on the other a Catholic chapel; and in between, a clearing where both Muslim and Christian children play. During Ramadan, Catholic children also fast; or if they eat, they hide in their kitchens in order not to offend their Muslim friends. At Christmas, Muslim families join their Christian neighbors in the celebration. Each one appreciates and values the other; no judgment, no condemnation. Until the *tabligh* came and preached to them that their religion is the only true religion. That the rest were wrong and were on their way to hell. The next day, the local Muslim population threw him out of the island.

When I was about to sleep that night, I asked myself: Why did they tell me this on the day of my arrival? Maybe they wanted to tell me that “if you do the same, you will end up with him.” I looked at the horizon and the next island I saw was Borneo (Indonesia)—which was a little bit too far for me to swim!

³¹ Cf. William LaRousse, *Walking Together Seeking Peace*, 325–422.

³² *Ibid.*, 356.

Toward a Theology of Peace

What concrete repercussions do these have for the church and theology? Let me mention three: (a) the need for an analytic of power; (b) the need for religious reflexivity; and (c) an active search for some recognizable margins of peace.

The Need for an Analytic of Power

If violence is neither a primordial element of religion nor a mere product of socioeconomic forces, whatever we make of it therefore resides in people's hearts, cultures, and ways of life. But to locate it within human agency also makes the sacred ambivalent, to use the phrase of a recent book.³³ The philosopher Raymond Williams said a long time ago: "There are ideas and ways of thinking, with the seeds of life in them, and there are others, perhaps deep in our minds, with the seeds of general death. Our measure of success in recognizing these kinds, and in naming them making possible their common recognition, maybe literally the measure of our future."³⁴ In order to do this, we need an analytic of power to discern where symbolic violence—in our particular case, religious and spiritual violence—is located; thus, making it possible for us to recognize and name it. In the analysis of Bourdieu, symbolic violence is exerted by those who have the power to do it, in particular, those who possess economic and cultural capital.

Let me cite a contemporary example from the situation of Muslim Mindanao.³⁵ At present, since the Muslims in the Philippines have "more" (politically, economically, culturally), they are listened to and are seriously engaged by those in power. Political consultations and interreligious dialogues with the Islamic communities abound. On the contrary, since the indigenous peoples do not have enough social,

³³ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*.

³⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, 338.

³⁵ See Daniel Franklin Pilario, "Religion as Social Capital for Building Peace," 99–105. See also Victoria Tauli-Corpus, "BBL falls short on indigenous people's right," <http://www.rappler.com/views/imho/93758-bbl-falls-short-un-indigenous-peoples-rights> (accessed August 11, 2015).

economic, and cultural capital, their concerns are not taken up in the national political agenda. They are thus forced to retreat inland into the forests in order to protect themselves from being caught in the crossfire between the more powerful contending forces. While the new Bangsamoro autonomous government is about to be set up in Muslim Mindanao, the indigenous peoples feel that they will be eaten up again into another dominant political and discursive formation—previously by the Christians, now by the Muslims. Without this critical analytic of power, there is no instrument to recognize this ambivalence; thus, no end either to this exclusionary violent process.

Religious and Theological Reflexivity

If ever we realize that we have exercised symbolic violence in whatever form, the way of reflexivity is the way of peace. Reflexivity is the recognition that our existence—our mere existence alone—can be an exercise of symbolic violence. Reflexivity is the acknowledgment that we cannot impose ourselves because we do not possess the last word and we need to collaborate with others in the pursuit of peace and well-being. Reflexivity is a permanent act of openness to the other.

The social sciences refer to it as reflexivity. Religious universes call it humility or theological modesty. Felix Wilfred writes: “The harsh realities of daily life forced me to rethink the way I had understood what theology is and it also led me to understand the limited role theology can play. Theology cannot solve all the problems of humanity. *Theology needs much modesty*. It requires humility to seek with many others how the problems and issues of the world, the society in which we live can be tackled in solidarity with the victims, with its suffering humanity.”³⁶

A concrete example of religious reflexivity is shown when Pope Francis requested a blessing for himself and “for the Church of Rome” from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Orthodox Church

³⁶ Felix Wilfred, “Response to Questionnaire,” *Theologie im III. Millennium—Quo vadis?*, 298–301, 299.

in Istanbul.³⁷ We know that the Eastern Schism (1054) was not only about the debates on the “filioque,” or the use of unleavened bread. It was also about territorial jurisdiction and Roman imposition leading to mutual excommunications and religious division. There was a time in history when Patriarchs were made to kiss the pope’s feet. For the pope to bow to the Patriarch is a deepest act of reflexivity. Only within a reflexive position can people together search for peace, in this case, to plead for the lives of persecuted Christians in Iraq and Syria in our times. In the words of Richard Brosse, when “the truth absolutely renounces violence to impose itself, the only way still available to say [reveal] the ethical face of the Absolute is the way of praxis.”³⁸ This brings me to the last point.

Search for Fragile Spaces of Peace in the Margins

No matter how difficult, there is a need to actively search with others for fragile spaces of peace in the margins. If the world is replete with violence—economic, political, or symbolic— signs of hope are found in marginal places where symbolic power is less exercised, and real peoples continue to resist in order to survive.

To illustrate this point, let me cite the example of a famous Christmas carol in these parts, called “Payapang Daigdig” (Peaceful World) by Philippine National Artist for Music Felipe de Leon.³⁹ Originally, it was not written as a Christmas song. In the devastation that followed the indiscriminate bombing of Manila by American “liberation” forces bent on destroying the Japanese in February 1945, the artist-composer found hope in his heart’s deep longing for peace. Amidst the total destruction of the city and a hundred thousand civilian deaths, a song dreaming of peace was born, now immortalized as a symbol heralding the season of hope.

³⁷ Nicole Winfield and Suzan Fraser, “Pope Francis Bows and Asks Blessing from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Extraordinary Display of Christian Unity,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/30/pope-francis-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-n_6243414.html (accessed August 11, 2015).

³⁸ Richard Brosse, “The Infinite Mediation: In Search of an Ethical Subject for Theology,” 113.

³⁹ Cf. “Payapang Daigdig,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4_y6F-33qA (accessed August 12, 2015).

And then there are the small but powerful attempts at imagining an alternative world in a war-torn Muslim Mindanao. In many places in the margins, the grassroots communities themselves—composed of both Muslim and Christian families—got together to create local sanctuaries immune from ongoing violence called “zones of peace” (*daru-ul salaam*).⁴⁰ Peace zones are intended to ward off externally imposed violence on the local population with the people themselves, some of them women’s groups, doing the peacekeeping job. They agree to impose curfew hours, prohibit firearms within the community, promptly resolve local conflicts, and others. Schools also proclaim themselves to be zones of peace. These initiatives are meant to give a clear and straightforward message to warring factions: If they could not yet lay down their arms and talk peace, then they have no place in these immediate territories that the grassroots communities have claimed for themselves.

Another sign of hope in the margins is the practice of using “peace tables” in classrooms.⁴¹ When small everyday conflicts arise among the schoolchildren, they are asked to solve these differences among themselves on the “peace table.”

Prejudices, misunderstandings, animosity can only thrive in spaces where dialogue is not a way of life. These seemingly insignificant practices are aimed at inculcating the spirit of dialogue and reconciliation among young minds and bodies. These basic structures at the margins provide a vision that a different world, other than one wracked by war and violence, can also exist.

While the dominant media, politics, academe, or religions are replete with violence—be it physical or symbolic—these spaces of peace in the margins manage to give us signs of hope that a different world

⁴⁰ Pushpa Iyer, “Peace Zones in Mindanao, Philippines: Civil Society Efforts to End Violence,” <http://www.cdacollaborative.org/media/88171/STEPS-Peace-Zones-of-Mindanao-Philippines-Civil-Society-Efforts-to-End-Violence.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2015); “Overview of Peace Zones in the Philippines,” <http://scar.gmu.edu/zones-of-peace/overview-peace-zones-philippines> (accessed August 12, 2015); Tilman Wörtz, “Philippines: Peace Zones,” <http://www.peace-counts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Philippines.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2015).

⁴¹ “Welcome to the Peace Table! A Report for Basilan Island, Philippines,” http://ahi-japan.sakura.ne.jp/news_letter/children/No.57.pdf (accessed August 12, 2015).

is possible. Raymond Williams writes: “No mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention.”⁴² There are spaces, no matter how small, where the imagination and practice of an alternative humane world emerges and thrives. If symbolic systems are not only structured but also structuring, if social agents are not only passive victims but also creative actors, there can be spaces of hope and peace at the margins of violence and power where people courageously assert their human right to survive and live a humane life.

I call these “fragile spaces” because peace is not really there yet in all its fullness—but the signs point to it. It is fragile because anytime, the situation can also turn in the opposite direction if people are not vigilant. If religions are not reflexive enough, like what happened in Sta. Catalina or to the *tabligh* in Tongehat, people can also expel religion’s relevance from their lives and look for sources of hope and meaning elsewhere—in nursery rhymes, in songs close to their hearts like “Zamboanga *Hermosa*,” or openings they themselves create that would give them life and well-being.

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⁴² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 125.

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