

HARMONY AMID DIVERSITY: NAVIGATING THE POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FOR PEACEBUILDING IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

Alma Bibon Ruiz¹

Department of Peace Studies, Payap University, Chiang Mai¹
Philippines¹

Email: almabruiz@su.edu.ph¹

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Abstract

Religious diversity, a prevalent aspect of Northern Thai society, can either serve as an opportunity for peaceful coexistence or pose a potential threat and trigger conflict. This study delves into the subtle landscape of interfaith dialogue, exploring both its benefits and barriers in the context of advancing peacebuilding efforts among faith practitioners. Conducted through a combination of fieldwork and literature research, this study sheds light on the multifaceted dynamics that shape interfaith interactions in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The fieldwork component involved informal dialogues with religious leaders and participants engaged in interfaith initiatives, complemented by observations conducted in Chiang Mai between the period of 2022-2023. **The findings of this study reveal that** interfaith dialogue initiatives have played a pivotal role in fostering harmonious relationships among diverse religious communities in Chiang Mai Thailand. The benefits derived from interfaith dialogue initiatives are manifold. Notably, they include the enhancement of cooperation and unity among religious groups, the cultivation of a culture of positive peace, education in breaking barriers, and personal and societal impact among others. However, challenges also emerge, such as organizational and structural in nature, social and cultural dynamics, attitudinal barriers, and preconceived ideas. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the effective societal change necessitates ongoing dialogue. Beyond dispelling religious preconceptions, addressing structural violence and cultural discrimination through open conversation is imperative for all parties involved. Further, a recommendation proposes the inclusion of representatives from all religions in the Chiang Mai Interreligious Relation Committee, fostering a more inclusive and representative platform for interfaith cooperation.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue; religious peacebuilding; faith practitioners; peacebuilding initiatives.

Introduction

The religious communities and faith-based organizations situated in Chiang Mai, Thailand have taken proactive steps by initiating interfaith dialogue activities, which have played an important role in fostering peace and communal solidarity in Thai society. Despite their importance, these initiatives are currently deemed insufficient in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by diverse religious groups. To date, prejudice towards diverse groups continues to be perpetuated by systemic violence, religious stigma, and continuous marginalization. Preliminary research and observations in Northern Thailand reveal a generally peaceful coexistence, yet beneath the surface, there exist unspoken conflicts, prejudices, and discrimination between and among various religions. The study of the community brought to light that certain groups are reluctant to engage in dialogue within their own religious tradition and exhibit hesitation towards those who practice different religions. While interfaith dialogue has proven practical and applicable, this paper seeks to delve into the intricacies surrounding it. What challenges and opportunities lie within interfaith dialogue? The lessons drawn from this research aim to contribute to the ongoing innovations in the field of interfaith dialogue.

The main purpose of the study is to identify and analyze the potential benefits and opportunities that interfaith dialogue can offer as well the obstacles and complexities faced in implementing as a means of promoting peacebuilding among different religious communities.

The study focuses on the geographical area of the province of Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. Data collection for this study was facilitated by a comprehensive review of the literature on interfaith dialogues from various religious groups and institutions, alongside fieldwork, and community immersion. Despite these efforts, literature related to interfaith dialogue in Northern Thailand remains limited, indicating the need for further discussion and exploration in this specific area of research. This paper aspires to become a valuable addition to the repository for interreligious peacebuilding and hopefully, is a future resource for the development of this field.

The term '*interfaith dialogue*' is a specific type of interaction between religious and/or spiritual groups intended to build bridges and foster understanding among religious groups (Hoffman & Thelen, 2014). In this specific context, interfaith dialogue refers to the interactions and relationships of

religious communities and faith-based organizations in Northern Thai society. The term “challenges” refers to the difficulties that faith practitioners frequently encounter, particularly those inherent in the faith-oriented nature of their work. The words “opportunities” and “possibilities” are used interchangeably, both referring to the various interfaith activities that faith practitioners undertake in the pursuit of peacebuilding.

Research Objective

1. To identify and analyze the potential benefits and opportunities that interfaith dialogue can offer as well the obstacles and complexities faced in implementing as a means of promoting peacebuilding among different religious communities.

Literature Reviews

Interfaith Dialogue for Peacebuilding: The terms “interfaith dialogue” and “interreligious dialogue” are used interchangeably in academic literature, reflecting both their similarities and distinctions. These terms denote conversations and interactions between various religious and faith communities. Scholars often choose one term over the other based on personal preference, with some discernable trends emerging in specific religious contexts.

For instance, the Roman Catholic Church officially adopted the term “interreligious” to indicate its involvement with representatives of other faiths and religions since the publication of the Vatican II Proclamation *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 (Pope Paul VI, 1965). The term expresses the Pope’s respect for non-Christian religions and implores people to put aside differences and come to an understanding to advance humanity. Other authors used the word “interreligious” simply to refer to interactions of two or more religions. Meanwhile, scholars like Merdjanova and Brodeur (2009) conceptualize ‘interreligious’ as encompassing the links and interactions between individuals, their thoughts, feelings, and both physical and immaterial constructs, within the context of two or more religions. Therefore, interreligious dialogue is “all forms of interaction and communication through speech, writing, and/or any kind of shared activities that help mutual understanding and/or cooperation between people who self-identify religiously in one form or another” (ibid. p. 23).

Similarly, various concepts and definitions exist for interfaith dialogue. The most recent addition is the idea that “interfaith dialogue serves as an aid or tool for furthering peacebuilding” (Headly, 2020). Interfaith dialogue has gained traction as a more inclusive term. The World Council of Churches (WCC, 2016)

suggests that interfaith encompasses philosophies and belief systems that extend beyond specific religious identities, even including humanists and secularists. It is a phrase frequently used in social and political circles to denote social cohesiveness, the value of people of all faiths and religions cooperating for the common good, and the elusive pursuit of religious peace (ibid. p.11).

The phrase "interfaith dialogue" is also more of an umbrella term as there are various ways to conduct a dialogue, and the reasons for holding one can vary (Bagir, 2007; Garfinkel, 2004). The application of interfaith dialogue is multifaceted, ranging from formal and informal meetings, workshops, and conferences to academic contexts like classrooms or public fora at universities (ibid.). Interfaith dialogues involve participants from religious and non-religious groups, government leaders, and individuals of diverse social and economic statuses. The inclusivity of these dialogues contributes to their effectiveness in fostering understanding and cooperation among diverse communities.

Interfaith or interreligious peacebuilding then is defined as “motivated by religion or representing a religious institution or confessional community and working between and across faith traditions to prevent, reduce or transform intergroup conflict” (Neufeldt, 2011). Religious peacebuilding is a subset of peacebuilding, involves “activities performed by religious actors and institutions for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict, with the goal of building social relations and political institutions characterized by an ethos of tolerance and nonviolence” (Little & Appleby, 2004 p.5). Within this context, the Interfaith Dialogue (IFD) is a type of peacebuilding that promotes mutual respect and collaboration among those who self-identify as religious “through speech and shared activities” (Merdjanova & Brodeur, 2009, p.3).

Peacebuilding Theories and Models Connected to Interfaith Dialogue: One of the peacebuilding theories useful in understanding interfaith dialogue is Lederach’s (2005) *web peacebuilding theory*. Lederach developed a peacebuilding pyramid highlighting the key role of relationships in preventing violence. This pyramid consists of three levels, evolving into a *networking web approach to peacebuilding*. Lederach’s web peacebuilding theory likens the construction of relationships to a spider’s web, emphasizing the importance of connections with those who may be hostile. Sustainable peacebuilding, according to Lederach, involves creating a network of interconnected relationships with adaptability and adjustment as crucial components (ibid. p.5, 35, 39, 78-86).

In my perspective, Lederach’s (2005) web peacebuilding theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of interfaith dialogue. Like the spider spinning its web, interfaith dialogue involves establishing

relationships not only with individuals well-versed in their cultural and theological backgrounds but also with those from various religions. This web, built on interconnected relationships, fosters intense engagement, drawing strength from unity among faiths and the potency of religious symbolism and ritual. This model envisions a network of interconnected relationships, similar to a spider's web, with adaptability and adjustment being key components for sustainable peacebuilding. While Lederach highlights the importance of adaptability and adjustment in sustaining peacebuilding efforts, the practical challenges of achieving such flexibility within entrenched religious traditions should not be underestimated. Religious doctrines and beliefs, often deeply rooted, may resist rapid adaptation. This raises concerns about the feasibility of creating a web of interconnected relationships that can adapt swiftly to changing circumstances, especially in societies with deeply fixed religious norms.

From Lederach's web peacebuilding theory '*strategic peacebuilding*' emerged. When peacebuilding works over the long term and in all levels of society, while building and maintaining ties between people locally and globally, it becomes strategic (ibid). Strategic peacebuilding connects those "on the ground" (local community and religious organizations, grassroots organizations, etc.) with decision-makers and influential individuals (governments, the United Nations, corporations, banks, etc.) It creates societies, institutions, policies, and connections that could better uphold peace and justice, not just limited to resolving conflicts (ibid.).

Merjanova's (2016) work supports Lederach's 'strategic peacebuilding' by stating that the theory and practice of interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding must not just focus on building bridges between religions but challenge and deconstruct unjust gender systems both within the religious communities and in the larger societies, and contribute to the creation of a more just and inclusive society. In addition to this, Merjanova proposed a "*repoliticization of Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding (IRDPB)*" which does not mean unhealthy alignment with the political forces. Rather, the Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding (IRDPB) needs to "articulate and act upon visions of peace and politics that critique unequal and unjust structures of power, address social grievances, oppose gender inequalities, and advance inclusive and active citizenship beyond religious, ethno-nationalist and other identity boundaries (p. 33). Merjanova's (2016) emphasis on challenging unjust gender systems within religious communities aligns with the contemporary need for a more inclusive approach to interfaith dialogue. However, the practical application of repoliticizing interreligious dialogue raises questions about navigating potential conflicts arising from the intersectionality of religious, gender, and political identities.

But how can we identify that an activity is an IDP or Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding? “If during the activity no one discusses their religious activities and identities and links them directly to the project that brings them together, then this peacebuilding activity is not interreligious in nature even though some or all of its participants have a religious identity, in one form or another. However, if religious identities are put forward, the peacebuilding activity becomes a form of IDP” (Merdjanova & Brodeur, 2009 p. 25). The criterion proposed by Merdjanova & Brodeur (2009) for identifying IDP activities based on the explicit discussion of religious identities may oversimplify the intricate nature of interfaith dialogue. It raises concerns about potential tokenism, where the mere mention of religious identities might not necessarily translate into meaningful engagement or contribute substantially to peacebuilding.

Interfaith Dialogue in Thailand Context: In the context of Northern Thailand, interfaith dialogue has emerged as a primary tool for conflict transformation within religious peacebuilding networks. It is worth noting that Thailand has a historical record of tolerance towards religious diversity. The relationship between religious communities in Thailand was considered ‘unproblematic’, particularly in the eyes of the majority Buddhist population (Yunyasit & Baybado, 2022). Muslims and Christians were granted residence permits and allowed to openly practice their religions during the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767), as long as they did not pose a threat to the Kingdom (ibid.).

Despite Thailand’s historical reputation for religious tolerance, particularly during the Ayutthaya period, a more nuanced reality exists. The southernmost regions, in particular, witness ongoing conflicts, challenging the perception of an “unproblematic” interreligious society. The impression of Thai society as welcoming and religiously tolerant is not always accurate; there may be masks concealing a different reality. Buddhism's role as the pillar of an interreligious society is questioned in several different ways. The ongoing violence in Thailand's southernmost communities continues to be covered in the daily news bulletins (Fleming, 2014). Religious minority groups have no choice but to undergo the integration process while seeking ways to preserve and transmit their ethno-religious identity given the political power imbalance Thai-Buddhists dominate (ibid). The dynamic realities between Buddhist-Muslim conflicts and Buddhist-Christians conflicts in Thailand are significantly complex matters in interreligious relations. Interfaith dialogue and other interreligious initiatives become necessary to manage such tension and advance social cohesiveness and peaceful coexistence.

However, interfaith dialogue was only introduced to Thai society in the 1960s with initiatives stemming from the Vatican Council II and influential figures like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (Phongphit, 1984). The first series of Interreligious Dialogues (IRD) in Thailand comprised consultation workshops and seminars jointly organized in 1969 by a small number of lay Buddhist leaders and Catholic priests. The Catholic Council of Thailand for Development (CCTD) was then established in 1973 and has been instrumental in organizing IRD and other interreligious events in Thailand addressing development issues (*ibid.*). Interfaith dialogue during that period tended to be Dialogues of Theological Exchange with the participation of senior Catholic religious figures and lay Thai Buddhist intellectuals (*ibid.*).

Over time, the model of interfaith dialogue shifted from the initial “Dialogue of Theological Exchange” to the more pragmatic “Dialogue of Action,” emphasizing issues like socioeconomic development, resource management, and education. The Dialogue of Action has remained the most widely used form of IRD in the majority of Thai society from the 1990s to the present (Yunyasit & Baybado, 2022). Interestingly, a recent study found that most Thais, especially government officials, view the Dialogue of Theological Exchange and any other discussion or exchange about fundamental religious principles as catalysts for conflict transformation but are reluctant to participate in or encourage it (Yacavone, 2012).

Notably, academic institutions, NGOs, and faith-based organizations have taken the lead in organizing and promoting interfaith dialogue in Thailand. However, challenges persist, with some reluctance from prominent Buddhist monks and organizations, indicating a need for broader societal engagement. According to a recent study, while the Catholic community has always been eager to engage in interfaith dialogue and other types of interreligious cooperation, prominent Buddhist monks or important Buddhist organizations like the Sangha Supreme Council (SSC) and the Religious Division of the Ministry of Education were notably unenthusiastic about these discussions. Despite serving as the majority group's official representatives, they made little progress on interfaith dialogue and other initiatives (Yunyasit & Baybado, 2022).

Research shows that in the Southern region of Thailand, interfaith dialogues are often organized by academic institutions, NGOs, and faith-based organizations tending to be small-scale. The majority of these Interreligious Dialogues (IRDs) typically include or are followed by field visits, workshops to enhance participants' capacity, or short initiatives to promote Dialogue of Life or deeper collaborations, allowing participants to learn more or participate in

activities taking place on the ground. Usually, IRD participants themselves are in charge of these modest projects, although IRD sponsors or organizers provide the funding (result findings: Yacavone, 2012; Yunyasit & Baybado, 2022). These initiatives address issues of poverty, unjust social systems, and exploitation, fostering connections among participants from different faiths (ibid).

In conclusion, this review navigates the intricate web of literature, weaving together diverse perspectives on interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding. It emphasizes how important it is to foster understanding between people of different religious backgrounds and beyond. Interfaith dialogue, rooted in strategic peacebuilding emerges with the power to reshape society, acting as a bridge between conflicting groups and creating a more inclusive and peaceful world.

Research Methodology

The methodology employed for this study relies heavily on a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach, encompassing fieldwork, the researcher's first-hand experiences, and an extensive literature review. The primary data collection took place during an immersive period from 2022 to 2023, where the researcher actively engaged with diverse religious communities in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Fieldwork involved direct observation and a subtle exploration through participant unstructured and semi-structured interviews. This approach aimed to capture the intricate dynamics of interfaith dialogue across a broad spectrum of religious affiliations within the region. The studied religious communities include practitioners of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Baha'i. By incorporating these varied data collection methods, this study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges and possibilities associated with interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The combination of direct engagement, observation, and insights from the researcher's own experiences adds depth the richness to the overall research methodology.

Results

The Possibilities and Opportunities of Interfaith Dialogue for Peacebuilding. Enhancement of Cooperation and Unity among Religious Groups: One of the main benefits of interfaith dialogue is that it fosters cooperation and solidarity among religious communities. This transforming process is made possible by allowing people to become familiar with and understand various faiths, including their cultural differences, rituals, and

beliefs. Initiatives led by the *Chiang Mai Interreligious Relations Committee (CIRC)* play a crucial role in fostering this cooperative spirit. Events like youth camps, interfaith prayers, cultural fellowships, and special holiday celebrations, including those honoring the King's birthday, Father's and Mother's Day, serve as dynamic avenues for participants to engage with one another, and transcend religious boundaries. Through these diverse activities, individuals are encouraged to cooperate and develop a profound appreciation and awareness of the richness of religious diversity. Interfaith dialogue fosters collaborative efforts that go beyond tolerance; they seek to create a shared space where people of all religions can actively connect, share experiences, and collaborate together in an atmosphere of mutual respect. A Buddhist monk further says that *"interfaith is to learn to come to share... and it was hard...it is one of the difficult paths in the interfaith, that's why interfaith take time."* Although it was difficult at first and takes time, as the monk states, encouraging a diverse range of participants in the events fosters an atmosphere that values inclusivity and stimulates interesting conversations. This diversity creates lively and insightful discussions as well as a deeper understanding of various religions. By strengthening ties that transcend affiliations with religion, this development in unity and cooperation helps to create a community that is more harmonious and connected. As a result, the impacts of such initiatives go beyond what is immediately noticeable; they have a long-lasting effect on the participants and lay the groundwork for mutual understanding and cooperation across the many religious communities in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Cultivating a Culture of Positive Peace: Interfaith activities undoubtedly provided a safe environment for interaction between individuals of different religions. Positive connections and perspectives are formed within the dialogue community, which is where micro-level transformation begins. Stronger relationships cultivated within the interfaith activity lowers their prejudice and encourages them to reach out with the faith groups. As the Orthodox priest wisely notes, *"If we show our smile and happiness to everyone, we share good things...we share love and peace to everyone"* emphasizing the importance of fostering connections among people irrespective of their religious affiliations.

Interfaith dialogue encourages not just the prevention of violent conflict or negative peace but the proactive pursuit of positive peace and the active seeking of justice as well. The dialogue often extends beyond actions and innovations, often involving collaborative effort across different religious groups for peace education and literacy initiatives, livelihood projects, charitable programs, and community work for the hilltribe people of Chiang Rai, in the far north of Thailand.

Christian Organizations such as the Church of Christ and Thailand (CCT) the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA), and the Sunshine House, among others, actively engage in initiatives designed to connect diverse individuals and involve them in actions that promote an inclusive and peaceful society. The diverse groups improved and built trust, fairness, respect for human rights, and respectful listening among themselves. The efforts of these organizations exemplify the transformative power of dialogue, demonstrating how it goes beyond words to cultivate enduring relationships that transcend religious boundaries.

Education in Breaking Barriers: Education provides people with the information about different religions they need to engage in discussions with an informed perspective. IFD's educational programs promote critical thinking and assist people in confronting beliefs and prejudices about various religions. In a community building project called “Stretch and Reflect” initiated by the practitioners of the Baha’i faith saw the importance of studying together as it helped build and strengthen interpersonal connections. A Bahai couple who started the project expressed how they implement it in the neighborhood further saying that “in our home, and based on individual initiative, we have brought together Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Buddhist friends and neighbors and exposed them to each other’s holy writing as related to studying specific virtues or themes...we also held a neighborhood conference to explore social issues in the community around family, children, youth, and the community together. The outcome from this was that people recognized a need to help youth develop self-confidence, the power of expression, and their virtues... so we organized a youth camp”. Education provides a platform for open communication and dialogue, allowing individuals from different religious backgrounds to share their beliefs and practices. It fosters a sense of cultural exchange, allowing individuals to appreciate the diversity of religious traditions and rituals. The exchange of ideas and insights contributes to personal growth, creating individuals with a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity in religious beliefs and practices.

Interfaith dialogue activities actively break down theological taboos and boundaries. By encouraging dialogue on previously sensitive topics, participants challenge traditional barriers and create an environment where discussions about theological differences become constructive rather than divisive. Interfaith dialogue promotes open and honest dialogue on topics that may have been considered taboo or sensitive within religious contexts. An example is the Interfaith project of the Christian Conference of Asia through the Ministry of the Church of Christ in Thailand in collaboration with the Japanese missionaries

started the Ban Sabaay Foundation in Thailand (The Happy Home). This is an interfaith project that caters the people living with HIV/ AIDS (PLWHA). Participants are encouraged to ask questions and engage in discussions that challenge traditional norms, fostering an environment where theological concepts can be explored without fear of judgment. This facilitates the breaking down of barriers that have historically separated these groups. While IFD encourages dialogue on sensitive topics, it also emphasizes a cautious and respectful approach to avoid causing unintentional offense. The training programs within IFD can include elements of cultural sensitivity to ensure that discussions are conducted in a manner that respects the diverse backgrounds of participants.

Personal and Social Impact: One of the most effective aspects of IFD that promotes positive transformation is the sharing of personal stories. Talking about their experiences, hardships, and challenges makes the conversation more comprehensible and fosters empathy. Personal narratives have the power to clarify beliefs, eliminate stereotypes, and encourage others to think critically about what they believe. The impact of IFD in promoting deeper connections and understanding among participants is further supported by this narrative method. A Buddhist monk shared his personal stories of struggles when he engaged in interfaith dialogue, some even challenged him but he says, “not to take it seriously or negatively, learn a lesson from it... for we cannot do interfaith with our ego, I learned from you, you learned from me, that’s were kindness, respect, and compassion, we journey together as a student of life”.

Interfaith dialogue (IFD) goes beyond intellectual discussions by actively promoting happiness and contributing to conflict prevention. By creating a space for open dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect, IFD addresses the root causes of potential conflicts rooted in religious differences. This respect fosters an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance, which builds the foundation for peaceful coexistence. A teacher from the Sikh religion expresses that “*all religion is good. No religion would teach you to do evil things.*” The shared experiences and common values discovered during the dialogue contribute to a sense of unity, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings that can lead to conflicts. On the other hand, understanding and valuing the uniqueness of every religion contributes to the elimination of misconceptions and promotes a culture of understanding. IFD has a profound impact on the faith of participants by providing opportunities for a deeper understanding of their own beliefs and those of others. we see the tremendous impact on relationships between neighbors. The Bahai couple who started the IFD “community building program” in their neighborhood saw the tremendous impact on relationships between neighbors as they noted *that “conversations have become deeper, and*

there is more heart-to-heart connection". Engaging in dialogue broadens perspectives, allowing individuals to see commonalities and appreciate the spiritual richness present in diverse religious traditions. This process of exploration and reflection often leads to a strengthened and more resilient personal faith. A significant principle of IFD is its universal teaching of love and peace. Through highlighting religious similarities, particularly the values of love and peace, IFD fosters a shared vision of a world in peace. Participants are encouraged to concentrate on the guiding principles that can lead both individuals and communities toward respect for one another, collaboration, and the pursuit of shared well-being through the application of this spiritual approach.

The Challenges of Interfaith Dialogue for Peacebuilding: Organizational and Structural Challenges. The absence of structured platforms and initiatives for interfaith dialogue presents a significant challenge. Without organized efforts, fostering meaningful interactions among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds becomes challenging. The Thailand legal framework officially recognizes five religious groups namely Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikh (World Faith Development Dialogue, 2019). Other religions that exist in Thailand like the Bahai, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism, animism, and others are not officially recognized. However, there is a provision for other religions to seek recognition, subject to certain conditions. These conditions include the distinct theological nature of the religion compared to others, a follower count exceeding 5,000 according to the national census, adherence to Thai laws and the Constitution, and the absence of a hidden political agenda (ibid). While these conditions aim to regulate the diverse religious landscape, they inadvertently create barriers for religious communities that do not meet the specified criteria. The criteria may limit the inclusivity of interfaith dialogue by excluding voices from religious minorities.

On the other hand, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental institutions run programs labeled as interreligious peacebuilding, yet these initiatives frequently have little to do with religious traditions. Although participants may come from a variety of religious backgrounds, the programs, the designs, and the processes frequently lack any sense of spirituality or faith. They only involve interreligious peacebuilders for a specific objective, but without using holistic religious peacebuilding. This disconnect raises questions about the effectiveness of such programs in fostering genuine understanding and collaboration among religious communities. To address this gap, there is a need for these organizations to incorporate a more comprehensive understanding of interfaith dialogue that acknowledges and values the spiritual dimensions of diverse religious traditions.

Social and Cultural Dynamics Challenges: One of the primary reasons why certain groups of people are reluctant to participate in interfaith is their adherence to exclusive beliefs. Although interfaith dialogue fosters peace, it is frequently criticized as a venue for religious conversion (D'Ambra, 2019). It can disrupt the spirit of open dialogue in IFD. The hesitation stems from their perception of the exclusivity of their religion and the fear of proselytization. Individuals may fear that engaging in such discussions will compromise the sanctity of their faith or expose them to unwanted attempts at conversion. Participants may feel pressured or resistant, undermining the principles of mutual respect and understanding.

Moreover, various challenges related to social interactions such as shyness, discomfort in diverse settings, language barriers, dispelling preconceived notions, lack of confidence, lack of knowledge about other religions, potential negative feedback, resistance from those considering their religion superior, and insufficient time and human resources create a challenge that hinders full participation in interfaith dialogue.

Overcoming these challenges requires patience, education, and a commitment to breaking down barriers through mutual understanding. Bridging this gap necessitates creating a secure space where individuals feel free to express their beliefs without the fear of pressure to change. A shift in mindset is necessary, emphasizing constructive conversations that promote understanding rather than reinforcing stereotypes. Dedication and a non-judgmental approach are emphasized as crucial components to achieve lasting peace through sustained engagement in interfaith activities.

Another obstacle in interfaith dialogue lies in the nature of organized religious institutions, often characterized by predominately male representation. This biased representation can impact the roles assigned in peacebuilding efforts. Women are often trusted as natural peacebuilders, but the authority is commonly given to men. This is a problem if gendered bias could hinder the validity of peacebuilding activities. The increasing presence of women peacebuilders in Thailand, exemplified by figures like Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, the country's first fully ordained Theravada Buddhist nun and abbess, signifies progress. However, there is still room for recognition and inclusion of more female peacebuilders, including Buddhist Bhikkhunis, Christian Roman Catholic nuns, Christian Protestant female pastors and deaconesses, and numerous other women religious peacebuilders who remain outside the limelight. This lack of recognition discourages them from sharing their valuable peace wisdom derived from their respective religious frameworks. Creating a secure and inclusive space, promoting constructive conversations,

and recognizing the contributions of women in organized religious institutions are crucial steps toward breaking down barriers and achieving lasting peace through sustained engagement in interfaith activities. Addressing these gender biases and fostering greater inclusivity will contribute to a more comprehensive and effective interfaith dialogue in Thailand.

Attitudinal Barriers and Perception Challenges: The challenge of overcoming judgmental attitudes and misconceptions in Interfaith Dialogue (IFD) is multifaceted, encompassing preconceived notions, extremist views, personal and social dynamics, and identity and communication barriers. Participants often bring preconceived notions about other faiths into dialogues, leading to biases and misunderstandings. The existence of extremist views within religious communities further complicates matters by promoting exclusivity, and hindering acceptance and cooperation during dialogues. Personal and social dynamics, including family influences and societal expectations, can also present challenges to IFD, with negative judgments from family members or feeling like an outsider in certain religious communities may deter individuals from actively participating. Additionally, challenges related to identity and communication barriers may arise during IFD as individuals may struggle to express their beliefs or feel misunderstood due to differences in language, cultural background, or communication styles.

This challenge is particularly pronounced in regions like Mindanao in the Philippines, where IFD is mainly initiated by Christians. A similar trend is observed in Thailand, where Christian organizations in Chiang Mai take the lead in initiating IFD. Faithfulness to one's religion often takes precedence over participating in interreligious efforts for change, highlighting the significant influence of personal and social dynamics.

Based on my research study in the Philippines, suspicion and distrust are commonly felt by participants in IFD. In Mindanao, most of the interfaith dialogues are initiated by Christians, a trend also observed in Thailand where most of the Christian organizations in Chiang Mai typically take the lead in initiating IFD. In many circumstances, faithfulness to one's religion often takes precedence over participating in interreligious efforts to bring about change. Convincing participants that maintaining religious identity while being open to dialogue is both challenging and rewarding as it contributes to cooperation and solidarity towards a shared goal.

Addressing this challenge involves fostering an environment where individuals can openly share their beliefs, dispel stereotypes, and engage in respectful conversations to promote mutual understanding. Interfaith dialogue

should remain a platform for collaboration rather than a source of internal division. Tackling these challenges involves promoting effective communication techniques and creating a space where participants can freely express their identities without fear of misinterpretation or coercion. Such environments allow individuals to share their beliefs openly and without fear, fostering a more inclusive and fruitful interfaith dialogue.

New Knowledges

The study reveals how interfaith dialogue can lead to the enhancement of cooperation and unity among religious groups by fostering a spirit of collaboration and solidarity. Interfaith activities create a safe environment for interaction among individuals of different religions, fostering positive peace by promoting respect for human rights, fairness, and trust. The study highlights how educational programs within interfaith dialogue promote critical thinking and open communication. By exposing individuals to diverse religious beliefs and practices, these programs foster cultural exchange and personal growth. This exchange of ideas helps break down theological taboos and barriers, creating an environment where theological concepts can be explored without fear of judgment.

The study identifies challenges such as exclusive beliefs, language barriers, and preconceived notions that can hinder participation in interfaith dialogue. Resistance to engagement may stem from concerns about proselytization or discomfort in diverse settings. Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to breaking down barriers through mutual understanding and creating secure spaces for open dialogue. A key challenge is the lack of structured platforms for interfaith dialogue, which hinders meaningful interactions among diverse religious backgrounds. The legal recognition of only certain religious groups in Thailand, while excluding others, creates barriers to inclusivity. Additionally, the limited representation of certain religions within interfaith committees may exclude voices from religious minorities, affecting the overall effectiveness of dialogue initiatives. Participants often bring biases and misconceptions into interfaith dialogues, leading to misunderstandings and potential conflicts. Extremist views within religious communities and identity barriers may further complicate the process. Tackling these challenges involves fostering environments that promote collaboration, open expression of beliefs, and mutual respect, allowing for more inclusive and productive interfaith dialogue.

Conclusions

Interfaith dialogue proves to be a powerful tool for peacebuilding, offering numerous benefits such as promoting collaboration across religious communities, cultivating a culture of positive peace, and breaking down educational barriers. Initiatives like those led by the Chiang Mai Interreligious Relations Committee create a space for diverse religious communities to engage in youth camps, prayers, cultural fellowships, and celebrations, fostering a spirit of cooperation that goes beyond mere tolerance. Positive connections formed within these dialogues lead to cooperative initiatives for peace education, livelihood projects, and humanitarian programs. Education plays a crucial role in breaking down religious taboos and encouraging open discussions on sensitive topics. Personal narratives shared during interfaith dialogues foster empathy and promote deeper connections among participants, having an impact on people's lives and communities that extends beyond intellectual debates.

Interfaith dialogue stands as a catalyst for positive transformation by fostering cooperation, understanding, and collaboration among diverse religious communities. Through initiatives that go beyond mere tolerance, such as youth camps, cultural fellowships, and educational programs, individuals engage in open dialogue, breaking down barriers and promoting a culture of positive peace. Despite its numerous benefits, interfaith dialogue faces challenges in terms of organizational and structural limitations, social and cultural dynamics, and attitudinal barriers. Overcoming these challenges requires inclusive platforms, addressing social and cultural dynamics through education, and fostering an environment that encourages open communication while respecting individual identities. Despite these obstacles, the potential of interfaith dialogue to contribute to lasting peace is evident, emphasizing the need for ongoing efforts to promote understanding and collaboration among diverse religious communities.

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