Ethno-religious identity, Ethics, and Responsibility: Levinas's Critique of Religion

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Abstract: In the Christian, Moro, and Indigenous People's relation in the Philippines, religion is the foundation of ethnic identity and provides the legitimacy of their disparate notion of history, understanding of conflict, and meaning of peace. As the underlying motif of their relation, religion has contributed in their uneasy and at times violent encounter, which deepens their division. Following his critique on monotheistic religions and Judaism, Levinas challenges ethno-religious identity to transcend religion as a content discourse, ontology, and thematization to the ethical. By orienting religion as the ethical and God as the structure of the ethical relation, ethno-religious identity must be redefined as the responsibility for the other if the tri-people dialogue has to pursue social harmony and peace.

Keywords: *Religion, Ethno-religious identity, Responsibility, Ethics*

Introduction

Religion is the underlying motif in the uneasy relation among the Moros, Christians, and the Lumads (indigenous peoples) in the Philippines. It occupies the very foundation of their disparate notion of identity, history, understanding of conflict, and their search for peace. Kenneth Rose defines religion as "*the quest to relate to an immaterial dimension of beatitude and*

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deathlessness."[1] Based on this definition, the focus is to implement in human history the immaterial order of reality. The distinct and various notion of a transcendental order as a basis of establishing the structure of their respective communities is the strongest challenge in establishing a harmonious relation among the Moros, Christians, and the Lumads.

Levinas, in his discourse on God and Philosophy, argues that the structure of transcendence is expressed not by religious experience but by the ethical.[2] Levinas's attitude towards religion is articulated in his critique on the Abrahamic religions and his understanding of Judaism. He radicalizes the meaning of religion from ontology to the ethical, and reinterprets God from a transcendent reality to the very locus of that ethical relation. His critique on monotheistic religions leads him to recover the spiritual life of Judaism as the basis of ethical relation.

For this reason, it can be argued that Levinas is critical with the notion of religion as a foundation for dialogue among the Christians, Moros, and the Indigenous Peoples. Traditionally, religion is considered as the "most comprehensive of all the human disciplines," because it provides "an explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly."[3] Seen in this light, religion is approached in terms of its exclusivist-inclusivist aspects in the inter-religious relation. At the core of this dualistic framework of relation is ethno-religious identity. It is the social identity of a group of people that is rooted in a specific religion expressed in a particular history and socio-cultural context. This pap argues that Levinas's re-orientation of religion shifts the discourse of interreligious dialogue towards responsibility-for-the other.

Levinas's critique of religion questions the legitimacy of religion as the basis of identity, history, conflict, and the search for peace. In my view, following Levinas, it is the role of religion in the tri-people relation between the Muslims, the Christians, and the Indigenous Peoples that renders their encounter complex, difficult, and at times violent. In this section, we shall revisit the centrality of religion in the tri-people relation. How is religion expressed as the foundation of the relation and in what manner does it define the encounter? Then it proceeds with the discourse of Levinas's religion. Finally through Levinas's critical reading of religion, the paper re-evaluates ethno-religious identity as the ethical relation.

[1] Kenneth Rose, *Pluralism: The Future of Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 12.

[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 129.

[3] Leonard Swidler, "The History of Inter-religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-religious Dialogue* (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), p. 3. See also Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

Religion as the foundation of the Tri-people relation

The social landscape of the Filipinos in Mindanao is divided into three distinct identities defined by their own religious and socio-cultural traditions: the Christians, the Muslims or the Moros, and the Indigenous Peoples. Each ethno-religious identity is actually composed of various sub ethno-linguistic groups, for example, the Moros comprise 13, while the indigenous groups around 110 ethno-linguistics sub groups. Ethno-religious identity refers to religion as the key distinction of one's ethnic identity and the basis of cultural, political, and social life.

It is generally known that the indigenous groups are the original inhabitants of the Philippine islands. The indigenous peoples are the organized communities sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions, and other distinctive cultural traits, who have, through resistance to political, social, and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religions and cultures, become historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos.[4] History has paved the way to two additional distinct and separate dominant ethno-religious identities: the Muslims and the Christians.

The Moros are generally referred to as the believers of Islam. The draft of the Bangsamoro Basic Law defines them as "those who at the time of conquest and colonization are considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and 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 Bangsamoro by ascription or self-ascription. Spouses and their descendants are classified as Bangsamoro."[5]

Christians have three inter-related meanings in peace studies and inter-religious dialogue literatures.[6] The most obvious characterization of the word Christian is the central government in Manila. This notion originates historically from the time of colonization, to the American period up to the Philippine Republic.

[4] Republic ACT 8371, The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997, Chapter II, Section 3h.

[5] House Bill No. 5811 Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), Art. II, Sect. 1.

[6] Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding in Mindanao: Interfaith Approaches to Peace and Development in Mindanao, Sept 7 & 17, 2004 http://www.muslimmindanao.ph/peace_process/Interfaith%20Dialogue%20and%20Peacebuilding%20in%20Mindanao.pdf (January 6, 2016); Carmen A. Abubakar *Muslim-Christian Relations: A Moro Perception* (Quezon City: UP Institute of Islamic Studies, 2005); Konsult Mindanaw. *Voices, Visions and Values* (A Project of the National Ulama Conference, 2010); William Larousse, *Walking Together Seeking Peace: The Local Church of Mindanao-Sulu Journeying in Dialogue with the Muslim Community (1965-200)* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, Inc., 2001); Leonardo Mercado, *Interreligious Explorations: The Challenge and Rewards of Inter-religious Dialogue* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2004); Cesar Majul, "The Muslims in the Philippines: An Historical Perspective," In the *Muslim Filipinos: Their History, Society and Contemporary Problems*, ed. by Peter Gowing and Robert McAmis (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1974).

The central government alluded to as the imperial Manila is always referred to as the Christian-based government. The second notion, which is connected with the first, is the Christian population, which accounts the majority population of the country. The national government represents the will of and advances the welfare of the majority. Since the majority comprises the Christian population, it is perceived that the national government is always biased for the Christian. The third notion of Christian refers to the settlers from Luzon and Visayas who migrated to Mindanao.

The relation among the three ethno-religious identities is generally perceived as belonging to different races and that an invisible wall divides them.[7] Moreover, the ethno-religious identity is considered as the key underlying factor in all their encounters and relations whether at the social, cultural, political, cultural, economics, and other aspects. Religious identities, particularly for the Muslim-Christian relation, "take on a political nationalistic identity [which] revives ancient conflicts to serve the purpose of their agenda."[8] Thus, ethno-religious identity is a dominant issue because any encounter is seen either as advancement or curtailment of their separate notions of identities and distinct ways of life rooted in their own respective religions.

The view of separate origin and identity is expressed in the notion of colonization that dominates their historical relation. The Spanish conquest has made inevitable the meetings of Muslims and Christians. Colonization is the Christianization of the Philippines, and de-Islamization on the part of the Moros. This encounter is generally described as the "Moro Wars," because according to Majul there is a clear intention and policy on the part of the Spaniards to conquer Mindanao and Sulu [dominated by Muslims] and convert them as Christians.[9] Colonization has led to the formation of separate identities and defined future relation of Muslims and Christians.[10] Moreover, the colonial policy, which was later on called the policy of assimilation and integration, has resulted to further marginalization of the Moros and the Indigenous Peoples.

Due to this, conflict becomes inevitable in the tri-people relation. The central government is perceived as biased in favoring the Christian majority in terms of development and the freedom to practice their religion, while the Moros and

[7] Larousse *Walking Together Searching for Peace*, p. 78; Peter Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon.* Quezon City: New Day Publishers,1979), p. 40; Jose Mario C. Francisco, The Mediating Role of Narrative in Interreligious Dialogue: Implications and Illustrations from the Philippine Context. *East Asian Pastoral Revew* no. 2, vol 41 (2004), p. 40.

[8] Larousse, *Walking Together Searching for Peace*, p. 184.

[9] Cesar Majul, A. *Muslims in the Philippines.* 2nd edition (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1973), p. 343.

[10] Jose Mario Francisco, "The mediating role of narrative in interreligious dialogue : Implications and illustrations from the Philippine context." *East Asian Pastoral Review* v. 41 no. 2 (2004), p. 2.

the Indigenous Peoples are continually oppressed economically and culturally and suppressed to freely live their social lives according to their respective religions. From the perspective of the Moros and the Lumads, the term Christian refers to both the policies of the central government and the Christian population in general. The right to self-determination is the over-arching theme that summarizes their struggle. It is the self-determination for the Moros to live the Islamic way of life, and for the Lumads to live their cultural and indigenous identities.[11] The key component in the struggle for self-determination is the issue of land. Territory is considered as the most important factor for self-determination because it provides the space for the other religious communities to live freely their respective faiths. Self-determination has to take on the challenge of a "shared-territory,"[12] which continues to fuel the debate, negotiations, and dialogues. The three ethno-religious boundaries are the Moros, the Lumads, and the Christians.

The "violence that causes fears and anxieties arises from a complex interplay of many and varied factors."[13] It is an understatement to say that the conflict is between Muslims and Christians, which as a result, affected adversely the conditions of the Indigenous peoples. "The causes are neither merely religious nor merely cultural. Rather, historical, demographic, social, economic, and politico-military considerations are to be taken into account."[14] The religious dimension, however, clearly appears as the overarching foundation of the conflict. While this is precisely the main aspect of the tension and conflict, it remains true however that the foundational element of the Moros' right to self-determination is Islam and the Islamic way of life, and for the Lumads' is their cultural and indigenous way of life. It is the religious identity that underlies the conflict and legitimizes the right to self-determination and the perception that the "Christians" are the cause of the conflict that produces the tension in the Muslim-Christian or even in the tri-people encounters.

From distinct ethno-religious identities to separate notions of history leading towards conflict comes the various understanding of peace. Peace is the Islamic way of life for the Moros, the indigenous way of life for the Lumads, and the Christian way for the majority. While the way of the Christians seem to be interspersed with political and economic factors, such as in the perception of the Imperial Manila as a

[11] Abhoud Syed Lingga, "Assertions of Sovereignty and Self-Determination: The Philippine Bangsamoro Conflict," *Mindanao Horizons* vol. 1, no. 1, (2010), pp. 19-20.

[12] James Kho, "Mindanao: Land of Promise Once More," *Mindanao Horizons*, volume 3, No. 2, (2011), p. 56. See also Rodil, "Achieving peace and justice in Mindanao through the tri-people approach." *Mindanao Horizons* volume 1, no. 1, (2010), pp. 25-46.

[13] Ziselsberger, *The Vision of Bishop Bienvenido S. Tudtud: Interreligious Dialogue – a fundamental attitude of Christian life (*Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publications, 1990), p. 18.

[14] Ziselsberger, *The Vision of Bishop Bienvenido S. Tudtud*, p. 19.

Christian government, the Islamic and Indigenous ways tend to be more pronounced and distinct as a struggle. It is for this reason that religion is the soul of the search for peace in inter-religious dialogue. Interestingly, religion is considered only as the 6th and last path of the national peace policy of the government. The peace policy considers religion as important in providing the social conditions and environment to achieving a lasting and sustainable negotiated peace. From an inter-religious perspective, lasting peace is not through political and economic negotiations. There is no peace unless there is social harmony between and among Muslims, Christians, and Lumads. At the base of this search for peace is the meaningful relation of the three without undermining each other's ethno-religious identities and culture. There is, therefore, a strong link between peace and inter-religious harmony, in so far as, peace is defined by the quest to right for self-determination.

It is with this assumption that Konsult Mindanao enumerates 6 platforms for peace, namely sincerity, security, sensitivity, solidarity, spirituality, and sustainability. The Bishops-Ulama Conference admits that they are not the sure-fire formula solutions to the conflict, "but a kind of foundation and support for all our efforts to assert the struggle to understand and live in mutual understanding with each other."[15] At the base of the many notions of peace is the struggle "where Muslims, Lumads, and Christians live harmoniously with each other. Each of them live freely, and able to practice their faith and way of life, without external interference."[16]

It is very clear that the issues and problems that underlie the conflict run through ethno-religious delineations. Issues and problems are generally discussed from the framework of the Moros, Lumads, and Christians. As a framework, realities and its interpretations would come from distinct and at times separate interests. Thus, while there is a need to focus on other issues such as politics and economics in their relation, it cannot be denied that these issues return and take their justification and meaning from their ethno-religious identities. The common description used to designate these three frameworks is the "Tri-People of Mindanao" referring to the Moros, Lumads, and Christians. The "Tri-People" as a designation already indicates differences and diversity of the three parties. It must be understood that using the "Tri-People" implies that there are always three actors, three perspectives in whatever concerns, issues and programs, and activities, and finally three ways of life. The Tri-People seemingly implies three separate people, but they happened to live and share the same territory.

The search for peace at the pretext of ethno-religious identities with separate notions of history and a relationship mired with conflict and violence is either to

[15] Konsult Mindanaw, *Voices, Visions and Values*, p. 6.
[16] Konsult Mindanaw, *Voices, Visions and Values*, p. 17.

proceed towards a unity in diversity living in a shared territory or that territories will be divided accordingly to give birth to sovereign states where such ethno-religious identity can freely exercise its influence in all aspects of social life. Inter-religious dialogue as the process of bringing peace and harmony among the tri-people has to address this complicated issue, which, while essentially religious in nature, is very much political in character. The dialogue of the tri-people, while fundamentally an issue of religious discourse, cannot escape the complication of the struggle of the minorities towards self-determination. In whatever angle the issue will be considered, the constant in this reality is the dominance of ethno-religious identity as the overarching foundation of all layers and conditions of relations.

It is precisely this hegemony of ethno-religious identity in the dialogue discourse that renders the interreligious dialogue in the Philippines problematic in the philosophy of dialogue of Emmanuel Levinas.

Religion after Auschwitz

For Levinas, it is impossible to talk about religion today outside the specter of the Holocaust. In his discourse on *A Religion for Adults*, Levinas reminds us that theology and the notion of God among the Abrahamic religions can no longer be discussed outside the condition of the Jews of Europe between 1933-1945. He says that "[a]mong the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction. They experienced a condition inferior to that of things, an experience of total passivity, an experience of Passion."[17] Levinas is deeply troubled on how we can speak of God after the Holocaust. For the Holocaust renders religions, including Judaism, scandalous.[18] Amidst the "useless suffering" in the Holocaust, and the countless genocides in the twentieth century, religion can no longer assert its truth-claims as *an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly.*

This nature of religion is rendered by the experience of Holocaust empty and senseless. Religion as the relation of human beings with the divine is guilty of the death of millions of Jews and similar genocides and atrocities happening in today's modern world. For religion defined as human's rootedness in his faith to God is a failure of responsibility to protect the humanity of the "poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger."

[17] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore : The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 11-12.

[18] See Richard White, "Levinas, The Philosophy of Suffering, and the Ethics of Compassion," *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 53 (2012), pp. 111-123.

Their suffering, common to them as to all the victims of war, received its unique meaning from racial persecution which is absolute, since it paralyzes, by virtue of its very intention, any flight, from the outset refuses any conversion, forbids any self-abandonment, any apostasy in the etymological sense of the term; and consequently touches the very innocence of the being recalled to its ultimate identity.[19]

The certainty of God as the source of ultimate meaning and guide is rendered problematic by the realities of genocide, terrorism, and other abuses and violence committed against the other. In light of this, Peter Admirand calls for a post-Auschwitz understanding of religion. Religion can no longer be asserted as the certainty and triumphalism of the belief in God. Religion is, in the words of Peter Admirand, a "fractured faith," which echoes Greenberg's "wounded faith" and Wiesel's "broken faith."[20] A fractured faith entails the fragility of reason. This means that God is no longer situated in the rigid linguistic formula as the articulation of the faith, but as expressed in the sufferings and deaths of the victims and the marginalized. A fractured faith while questioning God because of the maladies of the "poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger," actually deepens such faith to commit to action. Thus, a post-Auschwitz notion of religion highlights the tension of the relation between God, while at the same time, strengthens such to respond to the needs and answer to the conditions of the other. For this reason, the ultimate truth is not the basis of approaching religion anymore. The post-Auschwitz and post-Vatican II approach of religion, Admirand insists, is necessarily to take the side of the victim and the oppressed. It is a religion described as the "preferential option for the poor," where faith in God is continually disturbed by the realities of suffering bringing triumphant reason to its knees, only to rise up again in humility that a genuine faith in God leads "to a greater reliance on our need for the Other and to respond to the needs of the Other."[21]

Religion as the foundation of human existence is the intimate relation between God and human being. As a basis of his identity, human perfection is demanded as the deepening of theological and spiritual intimacy with God. This process is the call towards holiness, the way to sainthood. Yet, this enthusiasm towards the sacred, Levinas denounces as an idolatry and describes "[T]he Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence."[22] This notion of religion

[19] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 12.

[20] Peter Admirand, "Amidst Fractured Faith and the Fragility of Reason, "*New Blackfriars*, vol. 92, no. 139, (May 2011), p. 271.

[21] Peter Admirand, "Amidst Fractured Faith and the Fragility of Reason," p. 284.

[22] Emmnauel Levinas, Difficult Freedom, p. 14

resonates the centrality of ethno-religious identity in the relation of the Muslims, Christians, and the Lumads. Ethno-religious identities are the "Sacred" that serves as the underlying framework and basis of all discourses whether political, socio-cultural, historical, economic, and others. Following Levinas, the reliance on ethno-religious identity is susceptible to becoming an act of idolatry. The "colonialism" discourse, for example, that pervades historical relation among the tri-people is the continuing specter of their separate religious identities. The violence committed is precisely the incapacity of this notion of religion as historical constants of identities to consider new experiences as expressions of God's revelation. Religion, in that sense, due to its ontological grounding in the "Sacred," is necessarily exclusive. The tragedy lies in claiming ethno-religious identities as the very condition for any value, experience, and discourse and that anything outside is the opposite. It is the classic case of sealing the destiny when the road going to it is still being deliberated and constructed.

Levinas' provocation of religion is expressed in the concluding remarks of his article on *Loving the Torah More Than God.* He says that "Loving the Torah even more than God means precisely having access to personal God against Whom one may rebel—that is to say, for Whom one may die."[23] The dialectic of rebelling against and dying for God points to a religious life where a transcendent God is absent and takes one's weakness and humanity as the very locus of God's presence exacting him/her to respond to the demands of others. For it is at this situation that a God is finally revealed. Levinas's insistence of "loving the Torah more than God," does not mean that the Torah is more important than God. It means, according to Purcell, that "the ethical life which the Torah prescribes is the only access to God."[24] The emphasis of religion is not the explanation that it provides but the ethical life it commands, not from the transcendental God, but that which arises from the very encounter with the other.

Levinas's critique of religion, therefore, has led him to re-orient too the understanding of the notion of God. This reorientation, he characterizes, is a new maturity, a religion for adults, and is based within the framework of Judaism. Such orientation shifts the emphasis of God as the absolute truths of religions to the very spirituality of religious life. This religious life, according to Levinas, describes the Jewish vision of a just society, which is "expressed in the Bible, but in the Bible as reflected by rabbinic literature, of which the Talmud and its commentators constitute the leading part."[25]

[23] Ibid., p. 145.
[24] Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 37.
[25] Emmnauel Levinas, Difficult Freedom, p. 30.

True Judaism is "by experiencing the presence of God through one's relation to man."[26] It is no longer possible to conceive of the human person outside of God. But God should not be understood as a transcendent external being, such as in the order of being from finite to infinite, where human beings are the finite and, God the infinite. In this kind of anthropology, knowledge of God takes doctrine and ethical principles important and the basis of being human. Yet, knowledge of the transcendental God remains the object of the consciousness. In the *Ark and the Mummy,* Levinas describes this kind of God as "powerless."[27] In *God and Philosophy*, Levinas insists that "the God of the Bible signifies beyond being, transcendence."[28] This means that God has no meaning in the sense that God is beyond every meaning conceivable. In the first place, God is not situated in propositions of faith, theology, and doctrines. Rather, God is the very experience of religiosity as expressed in welcoming and loving the neighbor. In the words of Hilary Putnam, "God is without a content apart from the relation to the other."[29]

Religion as Onto-theo-logy

Religion, as the underlying motif of the tri-people relation, can be described using Levinas' terminology as a "content of discourse."[30] It is a thematized religion, an onto-theo-logy because it reduces the good and human existence, the ethical relation into a "theme, a principle, a being, an arche."[31] As a "content discourse," religion can be described as a theological abstraction. The articles of faith refer to the codified rules and teachings that provide the explanation of the "ultimate meaning of existence and how to act accordingly." God is considered as an external reality that revealed these codified rules and teachings, and the way to holiness is precisely to transform religious experience as the mystical encounter with God.

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[26] Ibid., 16.

[27] Ibid., p. 54. Read also *Judaism and Kenosis* "…the power of the master of all powers is subordinate, to a certain extent, to the Human, as if omnipotence were not yet the privilege of the Divine! As if the master of all powers depended, in the words of *Nefesh Hahaim*, on a "food provided by man," a food made of actions reflecting the will expressed in the Torah." Emanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations (In the Time of the Nations.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 122.

[28] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings, p.* 130. Read also *Philosophy and Religion.* Levinas argues that the Bible, rather than interpreting it for having a common literary origin, but a confluence of different literatures toward the same essential content. Furthermore, he says that "the pole of this confluence is the ethical, which incontestably dominates this whole book." Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1997), p. 115.

[29] Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambrige University Press, 2002), p. 53.

[30] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and* Infinity, p. 12.

[31] Ibid.

This kind of religion is totalitarian. A totalitarian religion links representation and identity. In the case of ethno-religious identities, it must be understood that these identities are representations of a transcendental reality. This ultimately leads to their separate notions of the divine, which is *Allah* in the case of the Muslims, *Christ* for the Christians, and the *Magbabaya* for the Indigenous peoples. These notions of the divine are expressed in an elaborate variations of theologies, socio-cultural and historical structures of meaning and ways of life. Such understanding of God appropriates onto-theo-logy as the coincidence between thought and reality. "For thought, this coinciding means not having to think beyond what belongs to "being's move" ["*gestre d'etre*"], or at least not beyond what modifies a previous belongingness to "being's move," such as formal or ideal notions."[32]

The ideal or formal notion, which is expressed as the theological abstraction, is the ultimate reference of identities. It is the sacred that serves as the central gravity of anything and everything from individual concerns to the social, political, cultural, and historical. The politics of the sacred is expressed as the foundation of ethno-religious identity. The sacred does not only attain universality, but also an absolute status that breaking it is tantamount to a grave offense against God. Fidelity to God then is the struggle to fulfill the meaning and live the ways expressed in absolute truths.

Religious certainty shields conscience from history's changing fortunes. Like the universal truth of philosophers, the believer's truth tolerates no limits. But it turns not only against every proposal that contradicts it, but also against every man who turns his back on it. Its fervour is rekindled by the burning stake. The most serene truth is already a crusade.[33]

For this reason, living becomes an act of representation, the making-present of the theological. Coincidence is the need to actualize the sacred "thought," as it is understood as the ultimate reference of reality. In a sense, the struggle of a Moro towards self-determination is the persistent representation of the ideal in their everyday life. The ideal Islamic way of life becomes the absolute form of society that commands every Moro to actualize it in reality. This sense of mission is both the source of personal and social identities, at the same time, the force that commands every single Moro to participate in the attainment of the mission. It renders ethno-religious identity as an exclusive framework of understanding reality and of relating with the other. Onto-theo-logy is the ontological priority of beliefs

[32] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 130.
[33] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom,* p. 173.

and its social structure and history as the only way to live life to the fullest and the basis of encountering the other. It binds both the individual and the society that embrace such kind of religion to actualize the ideal reality, the *ummah* in the case of the Moros, the Christian community for the Christians, and the tribal community for the Lumads. For this reason, ethno-religious identity understood as onto-theology is fundamentally divisive and exclusivist. It sets the boundaries of the same as the basis of community, and considers the other the outsider and the stranger. In the same vein, it regards also the right to self-determination as the incessant desire of the outsiders – minorities – to establish the religion as the foundation, structure, and goal of society.

Following the sub-titles Levinas used in Chapter V of the *Otherwise than Being: Beyond Essence* which clearly describes the impact of totality, essence, and ontology to the subject,[34] we can paraphrase them to mean: The tri-people absorbed by their own respective ethno-religious identities; their own respective people serving the system; and their own respective subject who can only speak what has been said. The point is that the believers do not live the life their religions demand in the way Levinas would insists on "loving the Torah more than God." Rather, religion appears as a theological construct that sustains the exclusivist tendency of an already historically divided people sharing the same territory. It is the imposition of representation as a basis of reality. This is further aggravated by the tacit desire to assimilate the other in one's religious identity.

This is clearly expressed in the relation of historical constants and the discourse on colonization. Colonization defined as Christianization and "Moro Wars" or "de-Islamization" highlights two different views of history as separate foundation of ethno-religious identities on the one hand and the politics of integration on the other. The separate historical origin provides different and opposing framework in crafting their relation at the socio-cultural, political, and others aspects. The notion of colonization rests on the ontology of the Muslim-Christian relation. At whatever aspect and stage of the encounter, "colonization" revives the historical constants as the determining factor of meaning, conflict, justice, and peace. Thus, while there is a continuing historical attempt of social integration, colonization continues to become the rallying point of resistance against national assimilation. Following Levinas's notion of ontology as "the essence of every relation with beings and even of

[34] In chapter V of *Otherwise than Being: Beyond Essence,* Levinas clearly spells out the impact of totality, essence, and ontology to the subject. The subtitles already indicate the relationship, and describe them as "*The Subject Absorbed by Being*," "*The Subject at the Service of the System*," "*The Subject as a Speaking that is Absorbed by in the Said*." To understand the subjection of the subject under the power of totality, immanence, or Being, it is imperative to return to the meaning of Being as *conatus essendi*.

every relation within being,"[35] the relation between the Muslims, Christians, and the Lumads is not determined by their relationship per se, but by the "interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."[36] Ontology is the mediation of and the dominance of the discourse of colonization as intermediaries in all their relationships.

Colonization as intermediary pre-determines the relationship through the process of thematization, conceptualization, and generalization. Ontology arrests historicity as it reifies and solidifies future encounters under the specter of ethno-religious identities. Religion as an articulation of ontology provides the universal concepts and absolute truths. In doing so, ontology effectively negates the subject as by assuming a deeper reality that allows the subject to become a subject. In a sense, a subject, whether a Muslim, a Christian, or a Lumad, always appears as a representation of the absolutes or as an extension of historical claims. Their encounter, therefore, is the meeting of these assumed deeper reality, so that at the actual level, their relationship is, as Levinas describes, a reversible correlation.[37] The Muslim-Christian encounter is an encounter of absolutes and historical claims, and not between two concrete subjects. A universal structure is the ontology of the relation.

A religion that remains ontological after Auschwitz and amidst the global experience of terrorism, Islamophobia, genocides, and other forms of violence and wars, have "lost much of their influence over human kind. And with them the sense of a word perfectly and very simply ordained to god is also lost."[38] Religion has a crisis of meaning and its relevance has become remote, if not entirely useless. According to *Totality and Infinity*, "[T]otality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being. Religion, where relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole—the idea of Infinity—is the ultimate structure."[39] Religion as the "ultimate structure" of encounter between the Muslims, the Christians, and the Lumads, is the ethical life.

Religion as the Ethical Life

Religion as the ethical life is a dynamics of relation rather than a body of tenets and doctrines. Consequently, Levinas challenges religion as the basis of ethno-

[35] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 4.

[36] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority.* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), p. 43.

[37] Ibid., 35.

[38] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult* Freedom, p. 48.

[39] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p. 80.

religious identities to transcend from boundaries and walls of separation rooted in the notion of absolute truth to an ethical responsibility for the other.

The Holocaust, which represents the countless sufferings in the modern world, situates religion in praxis. "It is to privilege praxis as a point of departure for both philosophy and theology. Praxis is the situation in which one finds oneself when one encounters any other person."[40] Religion is no longer situated in the foundational belief of the supreme being, but as the structure of human relations. Religion in a sense is the relation, an encounter with the other as the very expression of God. God is the relation and not the transcendental Being that defines the relation. But what kind of relation? In his discourse "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Levinas says,

> The relation with the other (*autrui*) is not therefore ontology. This tie to the other (*autrui*), which does not reduce itself to the representation of the Other (*autrui*) but rather to his invocation, where invocation is not preceded by comprehension, we call *religion.* The essence of discourse is prayer.[41] What distinguishes thought aiming at an object from the tie with a person is that the latter is articulated in the vocative: what is named is at the same time that which is called.[42]

Religion is a response to the invocation of the Other (*Autrui*). In the tri-people relation, the invocation of the Other is expressed in the struggle for the right to self-determination of the Moros and the Lumads. It is the quest for peace expressed as the right to live freely their respective ethno-religious identities within the larger context of national identity. Religion properly speaking is not the quieting of the invocation; it is the mainstreaming of the marginalized and the oppressed. In short, Christians are challenged to reconsider their religion as the very mechanism by which such invocation, that is, the prayers of the Moros and the Lumads, is not only heard but realized as well. The Moros and the Lumads, on the other hand, are challenged to redefine the right to self-determination from an exclusivist goal of establishing the "umma" and "traditional cultural life" respectively to an openness to live in wider community.

In "Religion and Tolerance," Levinas describes the meaning of Judaism as a religion of tolerance,[43] and in "Judaism," religiosity is defined as responsibility.[44] "It is this exceptional human situation, where you are always in the face of the Other

[40] Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 34.

[41] "L'essence du discourse est priere." The translation does not express the ambiguity of the French *priere* (politely or insistently asking, imploring), which is also used between human interlocutors.

[42] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, pp. 7-8.

[43] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult* Freedom, p. 173.

[44] Ibid., 29.

(*Autrui*), where there is no privacy, that I would call the religious situation."[45] And, in "God and Philosophy," Levinas announces the "latent birth of religion in the other (*autrui*), prior to emotions or voices, prior to "religious experience," which speaks of revelation . . ."[46] The revelation, which is the invocation of the Other (*Autrui*) that gives rise to the religion in the other (*autrui*), is the very heart of Judaism. "The welcome given to the Stranger which the Bible tirelessly asks of us does not constitute a corollary of Judaism and its love of God, . . . but it is the very content of faith. It is an undeclinable responsibility."[47]

Based on this framework, Levinas radicalizes ethno-religious identity as an exclusive framework of welcoming the other. This requires ethno-religious identity to depart from the factors that legitimizes and restricts such exclusivist identity. For this reason, ethno-religious identity has to free itself from the clutches of absolute truths and historical claims by reorienting the notion of God as an ethical relation with the other. To welcome the invocation of the others would necessarily include a departure from the historical trauma that highlights identity and separation from the other. Ethno-religious identity is not a privacy that a community enjoys in a particular territory. It is in fact in that territory of one's ethno-religious identity that the other is welcomed and cared for. "To shelter the other in one's own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the landless and homeless on the 'ancestral soil,"[48] is the criterion of true religiosity.

Levinas situates religion and the notion of God as the ethical relation between human beings.[49] It is in this ethical relation that God is experienced, not as knowledge about God, but as the active engagement of a person in the everyday life of the other person. In this ethical relation, Levinas insists that "to know God is to know what must be done."[50] It is because "God reigns only by the intermediary of an ethical order, an order in which one being is answerable for another."[51] Religious life

[45] Ibid..

[46] Ibid., 143.

[47] Ibid., 173.

[48] Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the* Nations, p. 98.

[49] Theology, pursued from a phenomenological perspective, can have no other point of departure than in the subject who is capable of asking the question about God, or the subject from whom God can become a possible question. This does not mean that the subject is the absolute origin of theology, as if the question of God thereby become a projection. Rather, it means that the starting point for the theological reflection on God takes its point of departure in the *here* of human subjectivity. The process of reduction may thereafter lead on to a consideration of the question of God. Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, p. 47.

[50] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 17. "The practice of the law, like the study of it, is not the simple expression of faith, but the ultimate intimacy with a God who revealed himself in history." Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the* Nations, p. 142

[51] Levinas will emphasize again that the ethical connotes the subordination of God over man. He says, "More important that God's omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man's ethical consent. And that, too, is one of the primordial meanings of kenosis." Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, p. 125.

is precisely living out the ethical demand. Thus, Levinas is not really comfortable with Judaism that "designates a religion, the system of beliefs, rituals and moral prescriptions founded on the Bible, the Talmud, and rabbinic literature, and often combined with the mysticism or theosophy of the Kabbalah."[52] In fact, he insists that the monotheism that Judaism has brought to humanity, is a religious life and not a religion. And that, as Purcell expresses, "[T]he Religion of the Hebrew Bible is an ethical religion, and Torah has *ethical content.*"[53]

The fact that the relationship with the Divine crosses the relationship with men and coincides with social justice is therefore what epitomizes the spirit of the Jewish and the Bible. Moses and the prophets preoccupied themselves not with the immortality of the soul but with the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. The relationship with man in which contact with the Divine is established is not a kind of *spiritual friendship* but the sort that is manifested, tested, and accomplished in a just economy and for which each man is fully responsible.[54]

Judaism is a religion beyond piety. It is eminently a religion for action, a mechanism for social justice. Religious life is responding to the underprivileged and marginalized sectors of society. Religiosity is obedience to God. But obedience is defined as living the call to responsibility for the poor, widow, orphan, and the stranger. It is what a human person does to alleviate the miserable conditions and suffering of others that make him religious and not the rituals and piety he performs at the altar of the houses of worship.

The ethical life demands both the tolerance of and the responsibility for the other. The historical conflict shows that the policy of assimilation, which integrates the minorities within the ambit of national identity, culture and development, is necessarily repressive. Understanding religion as ethical challenges the dominant ethno-religious identity to welcome the minorities. The radicality of Levinas's notion of faith as welcoming the other is the ethical responsibility of the Christians to ensure that the ethno-religious identities of the Moros and the Lumads are tolerated, promoted, and even protected. It is because faith in God is the incessant pre-occupation for the good of the other. Is this not what Levinas mean when he said that the *I* is infinitely responsible for the other?

Levinas radicalizes religion further as an expression of freedom and responsibility to all. The notion of God is expressed as the urgent call towards

[52] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 24.
[53] Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, p. 37.
[54] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 19-20.

responsibility. In his discourse on *Judaism,* Levinas insists on this ethical responsibility towards the underprivileged as the expression of faith in God.

One follows the Most High God, above all by drawing near to one's fellow man, and showing concern for the 'the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the beggar', an approach that must not be made 'with empty hands.' It is therefore on earth, amongst men, that the spirit's adventure unfolds.[55]

Spiritual life is the uniqueness of existence. When Levinas speaks of an approach that must not be made 'with empty hands,' uniqueness connotes a subjectivity that is fully attentive and primordially-for-the other. Responsibility is not an extension of the person; it defines his/her personhood. It is because uniqueness "lies in the responsibility I display for the Other. I cannot fail in my duty towards other man, any more than I can have someone stand for my death."[56] Levinas is so radical here that even God cannot substitute me in my responsibility for the Other. "No one, not even God, can substitute himself for the victim."[57] The uniqueness of this spiritual life, Levinas emphasizes in *Otherwise than Being: Beyond Essence* is "without identity" and "already a substitution for the other."[58]

We are familiar with the admirable passages from Ezekiel in which man's responsibility extends to the actions of his neighbour. Among men, each responds to the faults of the Other. We even respond to the just man who risks being corrupted. We cannot push the idea of solidarity any further. Therefore, the aspiration to a just society which we find in Judaism, beyond individual piety, is an eminently religious action.[59]

The religious action is an expression of freedom. What differentiates a Westerner[60] from an authentic Jewish is the latter's freedom. And that freedom is rooted in inner morality and not on an outer dogmatism. It is the preeminence of action over doctrines. "The veritable position of the I in time consists in interrupting

[55] Ibid., 26.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 20.

[58] Emmanuel Levinas *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (*Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1997), p. 57. What prevents the self from identifying itself as substance, as ego and as a consciousness in the subject-object relationship is "[Not an identity, but beyond consciousness, which is in itself and for itself. For it is already a substitution for the other.]"

[59] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult* Freedom, p. 21.

[60] A Westerner is an expression of Western ontology. It could also mean Judaism that is influenced by the West. It also refers to Europe. defines Europe as "the Bible and the Greeks" and in the succeeding pages, the expression is defined as the Greeks in the following: "the manner by which universality of the West is expressed, or tries to express itself—rising above the local particularism of the quaint, traditional, poetic or religious." Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, pp. 134-135.

time by punctuating it with beginnings. This is produced in the form of action,"[61] thus says Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. He reiterates this again in his discourse in *Simone Weil Against the Bible*, when he asserts, "Israel is not a model people, but a free people."[62] In "*Judaism and Christianity,* Levinas shares his attitude towards Christianity and finds his identity as a Jew. He says "[E]ach one of us Jews retains his freedom of expression. We do not have, despite the rigor of the Law, any orientation dictated by the synagogue; neither obligatory nor even just official. So everyone is free, in a certain sense, to declare his "inner events."[63]

The Jewish freedom expressed in morality is an inescapable responsibility for the other rooted in understanding of a just God situated in the *I* and the others relation. This is the significance of being chosen as the people of God. The initiative to responsibility is the primordial duty of being a Jew; an act that does not expect any reciprocity. Levinas calls this the "original obligation, to which I am, in guise of *me,* devoted and elected, I am ordered me."[64] God's chosen people connotes the divine duty to care and love others more than anyone else.

It is not the identity of being a Jew, as a chosen people of God, that demands the ethical responsibility for all. In his understanding of *Judaism,* the idea of being chosen is not an indication of pride and closeness to God more than any race and nationality. Being a Jew "originally expresses the awareness of an indisputable assignation"[65] to a responsibility for others, which must be pursued as a manifestation of Divinity in one's humanity. Being the chosen people implies the primordial assignation towards responsibility for the others. Consequently, it connotes also the fundamental assignation of Israel as a nation to be responsible for all other nations. "Chosen" does not highlight the identity of the Jew, it is the eternal recurrence of the demand to be infinitely responsible for the others.

The notion of being "chosen" is not to be interpreted as the privilege of one religion over the others. In Difficult Freedom, Levinas locates religion in the proper understanding of the meaning of Jewish Universalism. "A truth is universal when it applies to every reasonable being. A religion is universal when it is open to all."[66] This does not indicate that religion falls back into onto-theology as a reference of relation. Rather, it should be interpreted, according to Hilary Putnam, that "all human beings

[61] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and* Infinity, p. 143.
[62] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult* Freedom, p. 135.
[63] Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, p. 161.
[64] Ibid., p. 110.
[65] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult* Freedom, p. 26.
[66] Ibid., p. 21.

are Jews."[67] The response to the invocation of the other is the religious experience. The structure of the religious experience is to understand Judaism, and its re-orientation of the meaning of God as a human encounter. Thus, being a Jew, in Levinasian sense, is to be free from Judaism in order to become responsible to all, an incessant demand to ethical life, an expression of true religiosity.

Conclusion

Levinas radicalizes religion from onto-theology to the ethical. He situates religion and the notion of God as the ethical relation between human beings. The ethical relation demands the welcoming of the other. The ethical life demands the infinite responsibility for the other. This is the meaning of being a chosen people, of being a Jew. The initiative to responsibility is the primordial duty of being a Jew; an act that does not expect any reciprocity. Being a Jew is to live the original obligation to serve the others.

By implication, the search for peace in the tri-people relation can only start by transcending their respective ethno-religious identities. The assertion of ethno-religious identity in the tri-people relation trivializes religiosity. It renders religion less religious because of its emphasis on onto-theo-logy and its rootedness in history and cultural context. The ethical relation can only be achieved by bracketing the identity as the basis of the encounter. To insist that religion is the responsibility for the other, the ethical life, is to bracket ethno-religious identity in the relation. To welcome the other is to pursue the otherness of the Moros and the Lumads outside the ontology of my being a Christian. It is alterity and not identity that renders proximity. Ethno-religious identity is not the way to relate with the other. Freedom is the liberation from one's identity as the structure of responsibility. "The ethical order does not prepare us for the Divinity; it is the very accession to the Divinity," [68] thus says Levinas. And he ends the discourse on *Place and Utopia*, by claiming that "All the rest is a dream." [69] PS

[67] Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," p. 34.
[68] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult* Freedom, p. 102.
[69] Ibid., p. 102.

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