

**Interfaith Dialogues:
A Method to Promote Peace in Southern Thailand
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*Islam in Thailand***

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Abstract

An interfaith dialogue can be loosely defined as a discussion among people from different religious backgrounds who work together in order to achieve a common objective. The appeal behind this peace-building tactic is that such dialogues can be flexible in terms of its purpose and how it is implemented. In addition, because conflicts are often complex and have multiple influencing factors, interfaith dialogues are useful because they provide a multidimensional outlook. One conflict I learned extensively about while studying abroad at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand is occurring in the country's southern provinces. Although religious discord may have been a catalyst in this conflict, other political, socioeconomic and cultural factors also play a significant role. Unfortunately, because of the media's portrayal, many believe the problem stems from differences between the Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims in this region. However, the origins of this conflict delve much deeper and even date back to when part of the Pattani Kingdom, a former state of Malaysia, was annexed under Thai rule. As a result, harsh assimilation laws have been passed in order for the Malay people to become Thai, thus causing friction that has lasted over a century. Though Southern Thailand has seen cycles of civil unrest and instability, the last decade has experienced the worst acts of violence since the country gained five of the Pattani states.

This paper will explore more thoroughly interfaith dialogues and discuss how such a tactic can be applied to the situation in Southern Thailand. Along with providing a brief historical overview of interfaith dialogues, there will also be a discussion on a mock interfaith dialogue I hosted in an academic setting at Thammasat University. Afterwards, this paper will look at the presence of interfaith dialogues in Thailand since this country's seemingly tolerant outlook juxtaposes with the reality of what is occurring in the southern provinces. Lastly, this paper will address the historical progression of this conflict and then provide nine recommendations if an interfaith dialogue is held in regards to this crisis.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUES: A METHOD TO PROMOTE PEACE IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

Over the past century, the world has seen what Gerhold Becker (2006) calls a *resurfacing of religion*. This powerful shift has challenged what many political theorists have hypothesized about a modern and democratic state requiring secularism (Becker, 2006). Although most countries in the West prefer to divide religion and politics in order to protect individuals' rights, religion continues to play a major role in many countries' governments that strive to be modern and democratic states. One evident example would include several countries in the Middle East that fuse government with religion. However, whether a country is considered secular or has an imposed state religion, religion's influence may be unprecedented because, as many argue, it ultimately satisfies humanity's need for a divine purpose (Becker, 2006). Whether this purpose is fulfilled, religious and cultural differences have nonetheless caused clashes for thousands of years. Unfortunately, such conflicts have also hallmarked the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from the perpetual conflict in the Middle East to what this paper will analyze: the conflict in the southern provinces of Thailand.

Fortunately, a promising and increasingly popular method to help combat clashes and ease tensions is the concept of *interfaith dialogues*. *Interfaith*—or the coming together of people from various religious backgrounds—officially began with the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893. This paper will, however, examine how *interfaith dialogue* serves more as an umbrella term for any and all discussions related to bridging religious and cultural gaps and instilling harmony. This analysis will also provide a more detailed definition of *interfaith dialogues* and include a brief historical background. Next, the purpose of *interfaith dialogues* will be discussed, along with a summary of the various types. This paper will then further cite an example of an informal and small-scaled version of an *interfaith dialogue* hosted by the researcher in an academic classroom. Following this will be a discussion on how *interfaith dialogues* can still be used as a tool in solving conflicts, despite some limitations. Next, there will be a historical overview on the present conflict in Thailand's southern provinces in order to provide necessary background for this analysis's proposal. Lastly, the overall current role *interfaith dialogues* play in Thailand will be included, followed by nine recommendations on using *interfaith dialogues* for Thailand's southern provinces experiencing the conflict.

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES

The definition of an *interfaith dialogue* is a discussion among people from various religious backgrounds who work together in order to achieve a common objective (Bagir, 2007; Brodeur, 2005; Garfinkel, 2004; Maluleem, 2005). Because religious ideology among groups of people can differ substantially, *interfaith dialogues* are implemented in order to create a safe haven for open, thoughtful and stimulating conversation among groups of people who, in other circumstances, may disagree or not show respect (Bagir, 2007; Brodeur, 2005; Garfinkel, 2004; Maluleem, 2005). In essence, *interfaith dialogues* strive peacefully to

advance relationships and interactions with people from different religious groups, and thus foster a coexisting society that does not tolerate prejudice (Bagir, 2007; Brodeur, 2005; Garfinkel, 2004; Maluleem, 2005). *Interfaith dialogues* achieve this by hosting a free-flowing exchange of ideas in a supportive setting. Consequently, they can reduce misunderstandings, break stereotypes, and, as Bagir (2007) cites, “rehumanize” parties involved in complex and volatile disputes.

VARIOUS TYPES, STRUCTURES, AND OBJECTIVES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES

The phrase *interfaith dialogue* is more of an umbrella term because there are many ways to carry out a dialogue, and reasons for holding one can vary (Bagir, 2007; Garfinkel, 2004). For example, they can include formal panels, workshops, or conferences held by, or composed of, government or religious leaders (Bagir, 2007; Garfinkel, 2004; Maluleem, 2005). Conversely, it can even include informal meetings with religious group members, non-religious group members, and civilians of any social or economic status. The number present at a dialogue can be as few as two people having a conversation. *Interfaith dialogues* can even take place in an academic setting, such as hosting one at a university in a classroom or public forum.

The purpose and content of the dialogue varies as well. For some dialogues, the objective is to focus on secular issues typically political or social in nature, such as healthcare or education (Bagir, 2007; Brodeur, 2005; Garfinkel, 2004). There have been dialogues in the past focused on broad topics, such as peace-building in particular regions of the world, and on specific issues, such as HIV/Aids awareness or environmental issues like global warming.

Interfaith dialogues are used for a variety of issues chiefly because their collaborative nature provides a multidimensional outlook on major world issues (Bagir, 2007; Garfinkel, 2004). This analysis focuses on utilizing *interfaith dialogues* in order to tackle a complex conflict with a variety of factors that are social, political, and religious in nature.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES

Although there has always been interreligious dialogue throughout the ages, the most official *interfaith dialogue* on a global scale and in modern times was during the World Columbian Exposition in 1893 set in Chicago, Illinois (Brodeur, 2005; Seagar, 1993). During this exposition—which commemorated Columbus’s discovery of the Americas in 1492—several organized parliaments covered different topics (Seagar, 1993). The most famous was the Parliament of Religions, in which delegates from various religions—though most were only from different Christian denominations—met to deliver papers and hold panels on the time’s current religious issues (Seagar, 1993). Admittedly, by today’s standards this conference would be considered heavily biased with very few representatives from religions hailing from the East and absolutely no representation of Islam (Seagar, 1993). However, this event in terms of *interfaith dialogue* on a global scale is still considered by

many religious scholars as a monumental achievement hallmarking the turn of the twentieth century (Brodeur, 2005; Seager, 1993).

During the 1970s and 1980s, according to Bagir (2007), there were increased numbers of *interfaith dialogues*. However, these dialogues were initially imposed by governments in order to influence religious leaders into agreeing upon political agendas, like family planning (Bargir, 2007). Then in the 1990s, a shift occurred in which the majority of *interfaith dialogues* were organized by nongovernmental agencies (Bagir, 2007). Interestingly enough, as the world saw a rise to *interfaith dialogues*, religious conflicts increased (Bagir, 2007).

Another historical moment for *interfaith dialogues* was the second meeting of the World's Parliament (Brodeur, 2005, Young, 2005). Again, it took place in Chicago and was held in order to hold a global panel of *interfaith* discussions as well as pay tribute to the centennial of the first parliament (Brodeur, 2005; Young, 2005). In contrast to the previous parliament, the 1993 assembly produced a document called "A Global Ethic," which highlights major themes various religious officials agreed were pertinent in terms of religion's role in modern society (Young, 2005). Such themes included self-accountability, absolute disregard for violence as a problem-solving tactic, selflessness, equality, and many more. (Young, 2005).

These revolutionary moments have acted as catalysts for several other major and more religiously inclusive World Parliament meetings, some of which were held in locations such as Cape Town, South Africa in 1999 or Barcelona, Spain in 2004 (Young, 2005). According to Brodeur (2005), the technology revolution has also played a systematic and integral part to the rise of *interfaith dialogues* hosted by nonprofit organizations. Because of the "network culture" that has been linked to the information systems on the internet, organizations in modern society can communicate faster and coordinate more *interfaith* movements (Brodeur, 2005).

A SMALL-SCALED EXAMPLE OF AN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The researcher of this report held a mock *interfaith dialogue* in April, 2011 in order to further educate students at Thammasat University about not only the current conflict in Thailand's southern provinces, but also the concept of *interfaith dialogues*. The setting for this dialogue was a classroom, and the course was entitled "*Islam in Thailand*," taught by Dr. Jaran Maluleem. The researcher proposed that by hosting her own simulated dialogue, she could not only teach others about the purpose and benefits of *interfaith* but also gain personal insight and experience.

The setup of this dialogue was to analyze two other major religions, Christianity and Buddhism, in the context of an academic class, which was mainly studying the religion Islam. The dialogue was divided into three parts: first, an overview of defining religion and outlining the importance and implications of religions; second, a summary of Christianity and Buddhism; third, a discussion on *interfaith dialogues* and how they can be applied to the southern provinces of Thailand.

Part I of the Mock Interfaith Dialogue

In order to explain why it is critical to study religions before analyzing conflicts associating with religious discord, the researcher gave a broad definition of religion. The definition she gave was consistent with that of Young (2005), who states that religion is loosely and collectively defined as providing people with a purpose and rationale for the present life and an account for the afterlife, or next phase. It typically includes general guidelines for behavior and can be related to the actuality and presence of angels, demons, spirits, or even spiritual ancestors (Hopfe & Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005). Next, the researcher discussed how there are different methods of studying religion, such as examining religions historically, socially, analytically, etc., followed by a discussion on why people are religious. As mentioned earlier, the researcher discussed how religion satisfies mankind's needs (Hopfe & Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005). To elaborate, religion provides a sense of "ultimacy" in which individuals' psychological needs for identity and purpose are met since religion gives them a reason that transcends him or her to the next phase after this present life (Young, 2005). Additionally, religion fulfills basic social needs in which strong relationships and groups are formed, thus granting an added layer of belongingness (Hopfe & Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005).

The next topic in the mock-dialogue was a more in-depth review of why religion should be studied. The researcher's reasons included the strong influence religion has over social, economic, political and even artistic spheres, all of which overlap and consequently complicate any and almost all conflicts associated with religious discordance (Hopfe & Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005). Aside from religions having an overwhelming impact on the world, the researcher also stated how religion is important for individual growth (Hopfe & Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005).

Next, the way in which religions perceive themselves and one another was addressed in order to give a perspective on how Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism relate. The first definition that was discussed was *exclusivism*, which is when member of a religious group ultimately views themselves as the only religion accurate and worthwhile to follow (Bishop, 1969; Young, 2005; Yusuf, 2003). On the other hand, *inclusivism* is where an individual believes that either there is an absolute truth amongst the religions that has yet to be formed or that in essence, all religions in the end adhere to one purpose (Bishop, 1969; Young, 2005; Yusuf, 2003). Lastly, *pluralism* is the concept of acknowledging that though religions may differ, respecting one another is key to establishing a peaceful and cooperative society (Bishop, 1969; Young, 2005; Yusuf, 2003).

Part II of the Mock Interfaith Dialogue

The second part of the presentation included a historical overview of Christianity and Buddhism as well as a general summary of both religions' basic principles. This included discussing how Christianity focuses on the birth, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth and how this religion is an extension of Judaism, yet for Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is the prophesized messiah and the ultimate sacrifice to God for humanity's sins (Hopfe &

Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005). In this discussion, there was mention of the major beliefs of Christianity. However, because there are over 34,000 denominations, the researcher emphasized how Christianity is difficult historically to analyze, especially given the time limit of this particular dialogue (Young, 2005).

Next, the major tenets of Buddhism were summarized, along with a historical overview of its founder, Prince Siddhartha. The researcher mentioned the Four Noble truths, the difference between the two branches—Theravada and Mahayana—and the significance of the Eightfold Path (Hopfe & Woodward, 2007; Young, 2005).

Part III of the Mock Interfaith Dialogue

The third portion of the mock dialogue included what was mentioned earlier in this analysis: the definition, purpose, and background behind *interfaith dialogues*. Lastly, the researcher gave recommendations for Thailand when implementing *interfaith dialogues*, those of which will be discussed later in this analysis.

Demographics and Feedback

The audience of those at the mock dialogue included six exchange students studying abroad at Thammasat University—three of which were from California in the United States, two from Japan and one from China. The other audience members present were three local Thai students, along with the professor of the class, Dr. Jaran Maluleem. Oral feedback from the class included compliments and a growing interest in *interfaith dialogues*. Two students in particular noted that they had never heard of this type of conflict-solving strategy before but appreciated how it strives for tolerance and religious pluralism.

Conclusion of the Mock Interfaith Dialogue

One objective of this small-scale version of an *interfaith dialogue* was to demonstrate how complex and arduous religions can be, much like the conflicts that involve religious differences. The mock dialogue demonstrated this by discussing two major religions, Buddhism and Christianity, and how there are many different ways to analyze religions. This dialogue, for example, mainly examined these religions' historical backgrounds. Another objective was to educate the class about how there are many types of *interfaith dialogues*. One such type the researcher tried to demonstrate was an informal method—but in an academic setting. Acknowledging that there are many types of *interfaith dialogues* is important because a dialogue's context and setting can affect what is being discussed, who is guiding the dialogue, the participants' comfort level and the participants' willingness openly to join in the discussion. If any of these components are negatively affected, then an *interfaith dialogue* will most likely not yield a successful outcome.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUES' LIMITATIONS

Though *interfaith dialogues* serve as a peaceful means for solving conflicts, there are still three major limitations this analysis will address. First, despite popular belief, *interfaith*

dialogues cannot instantaneously resolve conflicts or function as a panacea (Bagir, 2007). As many social and political theorists will explain, most conflicts, including the one in Thailand's southern provinces, are *multidimensional* and often times deal with more than a simple religious disagreement. Because religion, culture and politics heavily intertwine with one another, using *interfaith dialogue* as a way to handle only the religious aspect of the conflict will not lead to long term success (Bagir, 2007). *Interfaith dialogue* can instead be utilized as a public tool to start engaging people in discussions and inspiring change, especially at a grassroots level (Bagir, 2007; Brodeur, 2005).

The next limitation of *interfaith dialogue* stems from the first. One major barrier that *interfaith dialogues* cannot directly change is the political structures or governmental policies that can oftentimes sustain conflicts (Bagir, 2007). Though *interfaith dialogues* can undoubtedly ignite social movements or bring about grassroots organization within a society, they do not typically encourage political leaders to direct a structural change (Bagir, 2007).

Lastly, one limitation that must not go unnoted is *interfaith dialogues'* difficulty—or perhaps inability—to measure success. Though *interfaith dialogues* are capable of empowering people, there has been little concrete evidence to suggest they are infallible or an absolute impetus for change or a resolution for modern conflicts (Bagir, 2007). However, as Bagir (2007) suggests, perhaps the lack of regularity of *interfaith dialogues*, along with other factors, may be the root cause as to why this type of peace-building method has not been widely acclaimed or cited as a standard problem-solving strategy. Factors such as a lack of regularity will be discussed further in the *Recommendations* section of this analysis.

ROLE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES IN THAILAND

Internationally

Because Thailand has a seemingly pluralist society that tolerates all religions, the country has been active in hosting countless *interfaith dialogues*. Thailand participates annually in the Asia-Europe Meeting's (ASEM) Interfaith Dialogue, and in 2008, the nation even co-hosted the fourth annual meeting (Asia, 2008). To show further support of *interfaith dialogues* and religious tolerance, Bangkok hosted ASEM's Interfaith Cultural Youth Camp in February, 2009 (Asia, 2009).

The allure of Thailand possessing an overall pluralist society has even drawn other countries to host *interfaith dialogues* in order to hash out their own political conflicts. For example, religious officials from India and Pakistan met in October, 2010 in Bangkok to host an *interfaith dialogue* discussing peace-building strategies in that particular region (Interfaith, 2010).¹ Another example is when in 2010, a Japanese, Buddhist-based nonprofit organization Soka Gakkai International (SGI) also hosted its *interfaith dialogue* in Bangkok (Soka, 2010). The purpose of this nonprofit is to build stronger connections with Buddhists across the world, and according to their website, the dialogue included

¹ See Figure 1.

thirty members representing Christianity or Buddhism and concentrated on issues such as the responsibility religion has in light of the current economic situation happening globally (Soka, 2010).



Figure 1. *Indian and Pakistani religious representatives at an interfaith dialogue discussing peace-building tactics (“Interfaith,” 2010).*

Nationally

Within Thailand, the presence of *interfaith dialogues* is varied and can be seen on a public or private scale. Though it is difficult accurately to ascertain when *interfaith dialogues* launched in Thailand, they at least began to increase in the 1990s with the rise of nongovernmental organizations increasing (Bagir, 2007; Brodeur, 2005).

These dialogues hosted by NGOs, such as the Thousand Stars Foundation or the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, are considered to be the most common type of interfaith dialogue in Thailand (Sukrung, 2010). As with the nature of interfaith dialogues, these types cover an array of topics. For instance, in 2006, leaders representing Buddhism, Islam and Christianity met in Bangkok in response to the political upheaval and protests against Thailand’s former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra (UCA News, 2006).

Another example of Thailand hosting different types of dialogue occurred in 2009 when religious leaders from Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka met in Bangkok to talk about and promote more peaceful strategies in this particular area of the world (Sopaka, 2009)².

² See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Religious leaders from Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand meeting in Thailand to discuss religious tolerance and practical methods to strive for peace in the surround region (Sopaka, 2009).

Interfaith dialogues occur even on a private scale in Thailand, during which churches, mosques, and temples regularly schedule meetings with the religious community in order to sustain peace within Thailand's pluralist society. For example, the president of Bangkok's Foundation of Islamic Centre of Thailand, Dr. Pakorn Priyakorn, stresses the importance of *interfaith dialogues* and claims "it is an absolute must" (P. Priyakorn, personal communication, April 22, 2010).

Though these examples may indicate that *interfaith dialogue* is a successful method for reducing conflicts and building peaceful societies, there is still room for improvement. According to the *Bangkok Post*, the public and those not regularly affiliated with religious organizations have little access to these dialogues, and the media does not assertively report their presence (Sukrung, 2010).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THAILAND'S SOUTHERN PROVINCES

Before one can address resolution building methods in the South of Thailand, it is important first to explain how the current conflict began and how it has progressed. On a surface level, the conflict is thought to be a religious clash between the Malay Muslims and the Thai Buddhists (Bajunid, 2006; Becker, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). However, that notion is premature and does not address several other critical factors that must be considered. The conflict in the South is one social, political, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious in nature (Bajunid, 2006; Becker, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). Although the media produces the view that the conflict surrounds only two religious groups, it ultimately comes down to pressure placed on an ethnic minority, past assimilation policies imposed by the Thai government, and a long history between Thailand and Malaysia's borders (Bajunid, 2006; Becker, 2006; Yusuf, 2006).



Figure 3. Map of Thailand's Southern provinces. Before the Anglo-Siamese Treaty, the Kingdom of Pattani consisted of Satun, Songkhla, Pattani (the capital at the time), Yala, Narathiwat, Perus, Kedah, Perak, Kelantan, and Trengganu.

To explain further, in 1909, Thailand signed a treaty with Great Britain called the Anglo-Siamese Treaty (Yusuf, 2006). This agreement allowed Thailand to control five new Malaysian provinces that were once under the Pattani Kingdom: Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun (Yusuf, 2006)³. Since this critical point of redefining demarcation lines between countries, and thus affecting cultural groups and ethnicities, there have been countless uprisings over the past century from the ethnic Malays against the Thai government (Bajunid, 2006). The revolts increased during the 1930s and 1940s when the Thai government, headed by General Luang Pibulsonggram and Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, tried to enact strict assimilation laws that infringed upon the ethnically Malay-Muslim identity (Bajunid, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). Such laws included unfair and apparent targeting tactics, such as switching the language of the religious school—*pondoks*—from Malay or Arabic to Thai (Bajunid, 2006), which resulted in unrest. However, the Thai evolution towards a democratic state in the 1970s and 1980s, produced general calm (Bajunid, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). Unfortunately, when former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra came to power, tensions began to resurge at the turn of the twenty-first century due to implementing laws that again targeted the Malay-Muslim ethnicity (Bajunid, 2006; Yusuf, 2006).

The zenith of unrest was during 2004, which included the Krue Se Mosque and Takbai events (Bajunid, 2006; Becker, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). The Thai government subsequently initiated the National Reconciliation Commission in 2005 to investigate these incidents, yet unfortunately, the report remains futile and few of the suggestions made have been considered (Yusuf, 2006). Additionally, with the recent political outbreak in 2006, the Thai

³ See Figure 3.

government remained distracted from properly addressing how to solve the uprisings and violence. Because of the Thai government's enacted martial law and strong presence of military power in the South, tensions still remain strong between the insurgents and the opposing side. According to Omar Bajunid (2006), since 2004, there have been "over 3,000 violent events" and countless tragic deaths related to the conflict in Southern Thailand.

Lastly, it is important to note that the nature of this conflict is highly complex and consists of years of governmental policies and political turmoil, and the account here is merely a brief historical description. The main concept to underscore is that the issue lies within the people's ethnicity in addition to their religion. Several factors of the Malay-Muslim identity challenge the Thai nation, and these factors primarily include the people's language and religion (Bajunid, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). The language is first a challenge because most of the citizens in the South are ethnically Malay and in turn speak Malay, not Thai (Bajunid, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). Consequently, this ethnicity cannot assimilate fully or effortlessly into Thai society, which is considered to be united by the Thai language. Next, the Islamic religion factor, as mentioned earlier, can at times indirectly challenge the constitutional-democratic Thai state. For example, because the insurgents practice Islam, their allegiance to political leaders is a sensitive matter since their allegiance is always first toward *Allah*. Being asked to alter certain modes of their belief system in order for the ethnic Malays to assimilate into Thai society almost always causes tension (Bajunid, 2006; Yusuf, 2006). Nevertheless, the key concept to focus on is the "ethno-linguistic" feature of this conflict, and not just the religious aspect.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THAILAND'S SOUTHERN PROVINCES

According to Becker (2003), in order to practice fairness within a society and thus keep the peace, the ruling powers are required to give the public a *voice*. *Interfaith dialogues* can achieve this necessity because they simply grant individuals the option to speak their opinion in a safe and nurturing forum of free-thinking discussion. In turn, *interfaith dialogues* can empower individuals, shape movements, and create the change that people in Southern Thailand want to see (Bagir, 2007; Garfinkel, 2004). However, in order for *interfaith dialogues* to work, especially in the context of Thailand's southern provinces, this analysis suggests nine specific recommendations that will be addressed below.⁴

Recommendation One

First, when considering who should be present at an *interfaith dialogue* that addresses the crisis in the South, the answer is simple: *everyone* (Bagir, 2007). Although religious leaders and government officials are typically the ones present, it would be beneficial to include a vast range of participants because this situation includes an array of people

⁴ It is important to acknowledge that although interfaith dialogues are naturally associated with solving religious conflicts, as previously mentioned, in this instance, where using interfaith dialogues would be a tool to reduce conflict in the South, the situation is entirely religious in nature. As mentioned previously, this conflict is politically, socially, and religiously rooted. Therefore, interfaith dialogues would be used to address all factors, not just the face-value "Buddhism vs. Muslim" aspect.

spanning generations. This includes everyone from all socioeconomic backgrounds and, as Bagir (2007) suggests, those with all types of jobs, such as the fishermen, police, and others. This recommendation is critical because it provides a voice not only to those in power presiding over the decisions on the matter; this recommendation hints that those directly affected by and included in the conflict must be involved.

Recommendation Two

Building on the first recommendation, the ideal location for hosting an *interfaith dialogue* would not be in Thailand's political capital, Bangkok. Given the significant distance from the South, in order to include all of those affected by the conflict, it would be logical to host it in a central location. Again, the objective is to make sure all parties are equally given an opportunity to speak of their grievances, build relationships, and reduce tension.

Recommendation Three

A substantial number of those present at an *interfaith dialogue* should be from the South. Again, it is a matter of providing opportunities to build peace with the parties that are feuding. Therefore, not having a considerable number would be futile. Along with this, there should be an even number of ethnic Thais and Malays in order to keep representation balanced. However, it is important to note that there should undoubtedly be representatives from the national Thai government so that those parties, too, can learn from firsthand accounts about the conflict and determine what political measures need to be considered.

Recommendation Four.

When hosting an *interfaith dialogue*, each party needs to have a clear objective of what it would like to accomplish (Garfinkel, 2004). Without outlining a clear purpose for each meeting, there is the risk of not effectively addressing major concerns or issues at hand as well as instilling confusion if each member is not comfortably on the same page (Garfinkel, 2004).

Recommendation Five

This recommendation calls for each party to possess a deep and most sincere level of honesty (Maluleem, 2005). If any member has ulterior motives or deceptive plans at an *interfaith dialogue*, there is a great possibility for one party to instill more distrust, suspicion, negativity, and animosity. This may cause a greater divide between those feuding in the South, which is the antithetical purpose of an *interfaith dialogue*. The aim is to move forward through peaceful means and not regress.

Recommendation Six

Because the subject matter that would be addressed at these particular *interfaith dialogues* would be sensitive in nature, it is crucial for each member to possess strong levels of maturity. Each member should be able to handle hard facts and criticism so that they may learn and grow from the *interfaith dialogues* (Maluleem, 2005).

Recommendation Seven

Since one of the intentions of an *interfaith dialogue* is, Bagir (2007) states, to “rehumanize” individuals, it is critical for each participant to be able to express empathy. Both sides in the conflict of Southern Thailand have lost friends and family members in gruesome ways. Therefore, as Bagir (2007) suggests, members should not only concentrate on the differences but also—most importantly—on the similarities. By trying to envision the other point of view, members of opposing sides may even build friendships based on the fact that both parties have endured major losses.

Recommendation Eight

Though it takes careful planning to host an *interfaith dialogue* that consists of a large number and vast range of people, dialogues should still be held consistently (Bagir, 2007). The goal is to build meaningful relationships, which can only be done over time and by continuously peeling back layers. The more often dialogues are held, the more people can tend to new relationships, educate others, and thus instill progress.

Recommendation Nine

As with any organization, after each meeting there should be an evaluation of the progress that has been made or a prospective given on what needs to improve for the next dialogue (Garfinkel, 2004). Though it is difficult to measure the direct success or outcome of *interfaith dialogues*, there are still ways to gauge whether participants felt the dialogue was positive and worthwhile. Religious groups or neutral parties, such as nongovernmental organizations focused on human rights protection, could distribute brief surveys or even conduct interviews in order to attain qualitative feedback. Whichever way deems fit, it is crucial to see that progress is being made and that the people involved are regularly given a say in the decision making processes.

CONCLUSION

As with all conflicts, there are never quick or simple solutions. The path towards a peaceful resolution requires time, energy, patience, and cooperation. Along this path, there are methods that unconditionally discourage violence and endorse only peace and civil discussion. One such popular approach is called *interfaith dialogues*. Although this paper addresses how *interfaith dialogues* have some limitations, as long as these dialogues are carried out justly and adhere to the recommendations suggested in this analysis, they can provide those involved in a conflict with a public voice. As for the conflict in Thailand’s southern provinces, this is an issue layered with over a century’s worth of disputes, brutality, and injustice. However, though *interfaith dialogues* cannot structurally change many of the politically organized factors associated with this conflict, they can at least use the power of discussion to implement social and civic change. As Becker (2006) states:

“[T]he democratic state can only expect loyalty to its institutions when citizens have good reason to believe that their participation in public debate defining society’s fundamental principles is possible and encouraged” (p. 264).

Interfaith dialogues can then satisfy this necessity by allowing people from all corners of the conflict to come together in the middle and work towards ending the violence and instilling peace in the southern region of Thailand.

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