"The Five-Finger Framework for Peacebuilding" – The Guidelines for Conflict Management in Multi-Religious Societies in Northeastern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore approaches to conflict management in multi-religious societies in Northeastern Thailand. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study focuses on both community and individual levels across Khon Kaen, Mukdahan, and Bueng Kan provinces. Key informants include 30 representatives from government agencies, religious organizations, religious heirs, and community leaders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations and analyzed using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. The findings reveal that conflicts in the region predominantly stem from ideological differences and disputes surrounding the construction of new religious sites in areas with contrasting religious contexts. The proposed management strategies encompass five key approaches: (1) fostering interpersonal interactions; (2) promoting interfaith engagement; (3) encouraging mutual non-interference; (4) implementing legal enforcement; and (5) employing non-legal social mechanisms. The study recommends promoting interreligious dialogue and public awareness on religious pluralism, supported by both legal frameworks and community-based norms, to effectively mitigate conflict.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Religious Conflict, Multi-Religious Society, Northeastern Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Although religion is generally considered a positive force, as an institution it inevitably carries certain latent risks, particularly when it is practiced or interpreted inappropriately. Religions in their nascent stages are often grounded in internal moral principles. However, as they are institutionalized and handed over to religious leaders—whether individuals or groups—religions tend to take on more concrete forms. This institutionalization fosters a sense of communal belonging among followers. As religion becomes increasingly institutionalized, it begins to influence local traditions and cultural practices, thereby exerting greater control over its adherents. It can thus be argued that religion today has evolved into a fully developed institution, each with its own unique characteristics that distinguish it from others. Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, for example, each maintain distinct religious identities that are visibly recognizable (Somporn Promta, 2006).

Religious differences and religious conflict are among the key factors impacting society and politics, especially when divergent beliefs give rise to social unrest or violence. Understanding religious conflict is essential to uncovering the underlying causes of confrontation between groups with differing beliefs. Examples include discrepancies in doctrine, interpretation, or religious practice, all of which can generate tensions both at the individual level and across communities. Managing religious conflict is therefore critical for promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence in religiously diverse societies (Gopin, 2002).

In Thailand, religious conflict rooted in religious differences has a long history. A notable example is the ongoing unrest in the three southernmost provinces, which can be attributed, in part, to religious differences. Such conflicts in Thailand are significant in that they create tension between groups with different belief systems, most notably between Buddhists and Muslims in the South. These conflicts affect not only interpersonal relationships but also broader issues of social security, as well as economic and political development. Hence, fostering understanding and effectively managing religious conflict is essential for promoting cooperation among different groups and achieving peace at both community and national levels. Studying religious conflict in the Thai context thus provides a foundation for developing strategies for conflict resolution and prevention (Chaiyachit, 2010).

In the northeastern region of Thailand (Isan), Buddhism plays a central role in shaping local culture, traditions, and way of life. For many Isan people, Buddhism is deeply intertwined with their identity and is seen as integral to both the region and the country. As such, other religions are often viewed as secondary or less significant, which can lead to religious tension in certain areas, such as Bueng Kan, Mukdahan, and Khon Kaen. These conflicts may stem from misunderstandings about religious principles, cultural differences, or perceived threats to Buddhist dominance. Efforts to foster interfaith understanding and peaceful coexistence in Isan communities are therefore vital for promoting social harmony and improving relations between different religious groups. Religious conflict studies play an essential role in developing strategies for managing such conflicts in Thai society (McCargo, 2008). Accordingly, this article aims to propose a typology of religious conflict in the multi-faith society of Northeastern Thailand. The objective is to illustrate the specific contexts in which religious conflicts arise in the region. By understanding these dynamics, it becomes possible to identify effective approaches for addressing such conflicts and fostering mutual understanding among people of different faiths living in the same pluralistic society.

Objective

To explore approaches to conflict management in multi-religious societies in Northeastern Thailand

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research adopts Conflict Theory as its conceptual framework. The theory posits that social behavior can be understood through the lens of conflicts between individuals and groups, driven by competition over scarce and valuable resources. The key elements are as follows:

Definition of Conflict

Webster's Dictionary traces "conflict" to the Latin root *configure*, meaning "to fight," encompassing war, discord, incompatibility, and mutual opposition (Arun Ruktham, 1980). Sociologists and anthropologists view conflict as a product of social environments. Economists interpret conflict as a struggle among actors over scarce material resources. Political scientists define conflict in terms of power dynamics, decision-making, and institutional interactions within and between states, private sectors, and social systems—highlighting power relations and decision-making processes as sources of conflict (Arun Ruktham, 1980).
Ekachai Keesukphan (1988) defines conflict as a situation in which individuals or groups misunderstand one another, leading to dissatisfaction or frustration in collaborative efforts. Thai scholars have provided additional insights. Somyot Nawiwan (1997) defines conflict as a disagreement arising from differences between individuals or groups, potentially obstructing organizational goals. Noppong Boonjitradul (1991) defines conflict as a situation that causes frustration but may be resolved through negotiation or mutual agreement. Pongpan Pongsopa (1999) views conflict as a disruption—within or between individuals and groups—stemming from incompatible needs or interests. Sirivan Serirat et al. (1999) define conflict as a form of disagreement arising from interpersonal or intergroup differences.

Levels of Conflict

According to Karl Marx (1897–1958), social change occurs in five historical stages of development, each defined by a specific mode of production. These involve the forces of production (labor, land, capital, and technology) and the social relations of production (owners vs. workers). Each production system entails class conflict, particularly between those who control production and those who labor within it. These conflicts

transform the economic base (substructure), ultimately affecting the societal superstructure—including institutions like government, family, education, religion, as well as societal values and norms.

Marx's dialectical process of social change involves: Thesis: A prevailing condition; Antithesis: A contradiction or opposition to the thesis; and Synthesis: A new condition resulting from conflict and resolution. This leads to class struggle, political representation of class interests, and eventual revolution driven by increasing inequality.

Lewis A. Coser (1913–2003), a major conflict theorist, argued that conflict has both constructive and destructive outcomes. He viewed conflict as a natural part of socialization. No social group enjoys complete harmony; conflict arises from inherent human dualities—love and hate, unity and hostility. Conflict can address internal divisions and strengthen group cohesion by clarifying group boundaries and shared interests.

Coser believed that conflict fosters social change, allowing societies to transition from one state to another. When people are dissatisfied with existing conditions, conflict becomes a vehicle for transformation. He further asserted that conflict promotes group differentiation, reduces hostility, and encourages structural complexity, thereby enhancing cooperation alongside opposition.

Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009), a German sociologist, rejected Marx's emphasis on ownership of production as the basis of class. He argued instead that social inequality arises from disparities in authority. Society consists of groups with and without authority, each with latent interests. These quasi-groups eventually become interest groups, each seeking to protect their benefits, often represented by leaders who negotiate on their behalf.

The intensity of conflict depends on how well interests are coordinated and managed. Dahrendorf posited that conflict often stems from external pressures and that it can be mitigated through compromise. He also argued that conflict leads to structural transformation—the type, pace, and scale of which depend on factors such as group power and external constraints.

This study employs Conflict Theory as its guiding framework to analyze, interpret, and expand upon the concept of conflict in the sociocultural context of Northeastern Thailand. The framework supports an in-depth examination of the nature of conflict in the region and helps identify strategic approaches to managing interreligious tensions. It also seeks to highlight the distinctive patterns of conflict management that enable multi-religious coexistence in Isan society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on examining the nature of religious conflict within multireligious communities in Northeastern Thailand. The objective was to gain foundational insights for developing appropriate models for conflict management in such societies. The research was grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks, particularly Conflict Theory, and guided by existing literature related to conflict analysis and resolution.

The study utilized multiple levels of unit analysis: Organizational level (e.g., governmental and religious institutions), Community level, and Individual level, in order to capture a comprehensive understanding of the conflict dynamics across different social strata.

The research was conducted in three provinces of Northeastern Thailand: Khon Kaen, Mukdahan, and Bueng Kan. These provinces were selected due to the presence of interreligious tensions between followers of different faiths.

The key informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on expert recommendations, and categorized into three main groups:

1. Representatives from state agencies and religious institutions consisted of individuals from state agencies responsible for religious affairs, as well as representatives or committee members of major religious sites in the three provinces. Four informants were selected from each province, totaling 12 informants.

2. Community leaders selected from communities located near significant religious sites in Khon Kaen, Mukdahan, and Bueng Kan. Two informants were selected from each province, totaling 6 informants.

3. Religious Successors and Civil Society Leaders included individuals actively engaged in managing religious sites and coordinating with external individuals, groups, and institutions. Four informants were selected from each province, totaling 12 informants.

All informants were selected purposively, with guidance from experts, to ensure their relevance and insight into the research focus.

The data for this study were collected using two primary qualitative methods: in-depth interviews and both participant and non-participant observation. The research team employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants from the three aforementioned groups. An interview guideline was used as the primary research instrument. All interviews were conducted directly by the researchers. Before beginning the interviews, we introduced ourselves to the key informants and clearly explained the purpose and objectives of the study, as well as the potential benefits of the research. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed that all data would be used

solely for academic purposes. The researchers then initiated casual conversation with general, non-sensitive topics to establish rapport and put participants at ease, avoiding abrupt or invasive questioning at the outset. The conversations were allowed to proceed naturally, with careful attention paid to participants' facial expressions, tone of voice, and verbal cues, to foster mutual understanding and trust.

Once mutual comfort was established, formal permission to proceed with the interview was sought. Interviews were conducted according to the research guidelines but maintained a conversational tone, rather than a strictly formal structure. This natural style of engagement not only enriched the quality of data but also provided opportunities to verify previously collected information and observe nonverbal emotional cues that may not have been expressed directly. During interviews, the researchers remained attentive to their own behavior, ensuring that communication was respectful, consistent, and sincere. If signs of fatigue or disinterest were observed, the researchers shifted the conversation toward lighter or mutually interesting topics to re-engage the informant. When the participant was ready, the interview continued. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the context and availability of each informant. Before concluding the interview, the researchers and the informants jointly discussed the possibility of follow-up interviews, based on the informants' availability and consent.

In addition to interviews, the researchers employed both participant and non-participant observation to gain a deeper understanding of the natural characteristics and contextual relationships of the social phenomena and human behaviors under study (Srisantisuk, 2008). Observations were conducted during field visits to interview informants in the selected research areas. During these visits, the researchers observed environmental and social contexts associated with interreligious conflict and local conflict management practices. This approach allowed for the collection of complementary data that enhanced the richness and completeness of the overall analysis.

In both data collection methods described above, the researchers employed field notes as well as audio and visual recordings of the interviews. Prior to each recording, explicit consent was obtained from all relevant participants. If permission was granted, the conversation was recorded; otherwise, only handwritten notes were used. On each day that qualitative data were collected through participant and non-participant observation, the researchers organized and edited the field notes during the evening to ensure data completeness and contextual accuracy.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, the researchers utilized data source triangulation, drawing from interviews with multiple informants across diverse locations, including religious sites, communities, and relevant institutions as previously described. During the data collection phase, cross-checks were conducted multiple times daily. These included repeating the same questions at different times, rephrasing questions during interviews, and using hypothetical scenarios to elicit in-depth perspectives from informants.

In addition, data validation was reinforced through cross-referencing key informants' responses, daily reviews of field notes, and constant comparison of data to prevent inconsistency. Inductive reasoning was employed to synthesize findings, and expert review was conducted to verify the content validity. These procedures ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. For data processing and analysis, data were reviewed daily throughout the data collection period to identify any missing or incomplete information that required follow-up. Upon verification, the data were systematized by categorizing them according to the main themes of the study. Comparative analysis was conducted across thematic categories to derive analytical conclusions. Interview data were first organized through manual transcription (in cases where audio recordings were permitted), along with edited field notes. The processed data were initially typed using Microsoft Word and then imported into ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) compatible with the Windows operating system and capable of handling Thai-language texts.

The data were coded by assigning line numbers, extracting key quotations, labeling them with codes, and grouping them into thematic categories through network mapping. This process enabled content analysis, which facilitated the identification, interpretation, and comparison of data patterns, leading to inductive conclusions relevant to the research themes.

The findings were presented using analytical description, which involved narrating and explaining empirical facts in accordance with the study's conceptual framework. This approach highlighted the formation processes of religious conflict, its characteristics, and impacts within the studied areas, ultimately contributing to the development of a model for interreligious conflict management.

I addition, this research project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Khon Kaen University, following the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and Good Clinical Practice (GCP) in Social and Behavioral Research. The project received ethics approval under protocol number HE673183, dated July 23, 2023.

FINDINGS

The study found that conflict management approaches in multi-religious societies in Northeastern Thailand can be categorized into two main themes: (1) the context of religious conflict, and (2) strategies for managing conflict in multi-religious societies. The latter includes: approaches to fostering interpersonal interactions; interfaith

dialogue and engagement; mutual non-interference among religious groups; enforcement of legal mechanisms; and non-enforcement or flexibility in applying legal measures. The details are as follows:

Context of Conflict in Multi-Religious Societies in Northeastern Thailand

Conflict over the Construction of Religious Sites

One notable context of conflict in the Northeastern region involves the construction of new religious facilities, particularly mosques and Islamic cemeteries. Tensions have arisen due to the perception that local Muslim communities lack meaningful interaction, communication, and participation with long-established local communities. This perceived social distance has fueled dissatisfaction among local residents when new religious structures are introduced into the area.

Initial stages of mosque construction witnessed symbolic acts of resistance, such as public opposition and signage calling for the project to cease. Authorities eventually intervened and removed protest signs. However, the conflict resurfaced once the mosque was completed and formally inaugurated. At this stage, public protests emerged— primarily involving individuals mobilized from outside the community—accompanied by further signage and negative publicity campaigns. This highlights how conflict is not only localized but can also be amplified by external actors and social dynamics.

Conflict Arising from Personal Attitudes

Personal-level conflicts are found to stem from individual attitudes that seek to create ideological divisions within multi-religious societies. These attitudes are often expressed through antagonism, aggressive and violent behavior, the stigmatization of individuals from different religious backgrounds, and acts of intimidation aimed at driving them away. Such expressions contribute to the fragmentation of multi-religious communities and foster divergent religious influences in the Northeastern region. Moreover, these personal conflicts are sometimes instrumentalized as tools to undermine local belief systems and traditional cultural practices by instilling fear and suspicion among community members.

Approaches to Conflict Management in Multi-Religious Societies in Northeastern Thailand

The approaches to managing conflict in multi-religious societies may be categorized into five main approaches: (1) fostering interpersonal interactions; (2) promoting interfaith engagement; (3) encouraging mutual non-interference; (4) implementing legal enforcement; and (5) employing non-legal social mechanisms. The details are as follows:

Approaches to Promoting Interaction

In relation to fostering interaction, it was found that strategies for preventing and resolving conflict within the study area involve various levels of actors, including the community, local administrative bodies, district-level administrative units, provincial-level institutions, and religious leaders. The following outlines these levels:

Community Level: At the community level, emphasis should be placed on organizing joint activities that promote positive interaction among individuals. Such activities should encourage participation from all residents, making them active contributors—for example, community meetings, significant local events, or annual festivals. These initiatives aim to enhance mutual engagement, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and cultivate a sense of shared belonging. Moreover, harmonious coexistence should be embedded within everyday life practices, emphasizing mutual understanding, respect for religious differences, and the recognition of diverse belief systems.

Local Government Level: Local administrative organizations should formulate and integrate development plans that explicitly promote harmonious coexistence within multi-religious communities. These plans should be incorporated into the municipality's official development framework. Both community-initiated activities and ongoing administrative programs should be consolidated into specialized project plans with corresponding regulations that require the participation of each community. These plans must emphasize broad-based participation from local residents, community leaders, religious leaders, and all relevant stakeholders.

District or Administrative Authority Level: Based on interviews, it was revealed that district-level authorities have initiated planning and activities whereby administrative officials engage directly with local communities. These efforts are intended to foster mutual understanding and social harmony, with knowledge dissemination on appropriate conduct, conflict prevention strategies, and risk mitigation measures. Additionally, mechanisms for emergency response or communication during conflict-related incidents are developed—not only for religious disputes but also for other risks and issues within the jurisdiction of administrative bodies.

Provincial Level: At the provincial level, relevant agencies such as the Provincial Office of Buddhism and the Provincial Office of Culture play significant roles. These institutions are mandated to promote and support harmonious coexistence in multi-religious societies through regular activities, formal mechanisms such as the

Interfaith Committee, and various support programs. In addition to fulfilling their statutory responsibilities, these institutions actively contribute to the formation of formal conflict management networks at the provincial level.

Religious Leadership Level: At this level, conflict resolution must be grounded in religious principles. Leaders of each faith tradition should strive to understand the doctrines of other religions and foster accurate comprehension among their followers. This mutual understanding helps reduce prejudice, prevent misunderstandings, and minimize the risk of conflict. Moreover, interfaith dialogue among religious leaders—covering doctrinal issues, practices, current religious affairs, and peaceful coexistence—should be regularly conducted to build trust and promote interreligious harmony.

Approaches to Fostering Interreligious Interaction

In addressing approaches to fostering interreligious interaction, it is evident that conflicts in multi-religious societies often stem from a fundamental lack of mutual understanding. Typically, religious activities serve as social events that bring people together, allowing for interpersonal communication and the promotion of unity and shared identity. These engagements cultivate positive interactions among individuals, nurtured through religious teachings. However, in the context of a multi-religious society, it is frequently observed that each religion exists in isolation, with minimal interreligious engagement. This absence of interaction fosters unfamiliarity and alienation, which may ultimately escalate into conflict. Consequently, fostering interreligious interaction emerges as a crucial conflict management strategy—one that enables members of different faiths to learn about and respect religious differences.

Based on interviews with key informants in Mukdahan Province, the following strategies for fostering interreligious interaction were identified:

Promotion of Dialogue and Encounter: Constructive interaction can be achieved through regular dialogue, which helps build familiarity and mutual empathy. A central factor contributing to conflict in multi-religious contexts is anxiety arising from ignorance and misunderstanding, often compounded by exposure to negative or misleading information. This environment fosters suspicion and mistrust. Thus, creating opportunities for individuals of different faiths to engage in conversation is a critical initial step in building familiarity and mutual understanding.

These efforts should involve multiple sectors:

State Sector: According to the interviews, the government plays a pivotal role in fostering interreligious interaction through the formulation of national policies and strategic frameworks. It is the responsibility of the state to develop policies that promote national reconciliation and unity. Relevant policies should support interreligious cooperation through various programs and activities, grounded in the nation's core institutions, to ensure inclusive participation by all religious groups. Government-driven initiatives can expand platforms for interreligious dialogue and collaboration, serving as a model that all sectors should adopt. Furthermore, these efforts contribute to fostering a civic culture that encourages all religious groups to engage in shared activities as responsible citizens.

Administrative Authorities: Authorities must uphold principles of justice and equality among all religious groups, refraining from favoritism or discriminatory practices. They are tasked with creating fair processes for decision-making regarding the construction of religious sites or the organization of significant religious events. This includes facilitating community forums or consultations to establish mutually agreed-upon guidelines. Moreover, local administrators should actively participate in and support religious activities of all faiths, thereby fostering a positive atmosphere and reducing apprehension between majority and minority religious groups.

At the provincial level, key responsible agencies include the Provincial Office of Culture—which directly oversees the support and promotion of all religions under the Ministry of Culture—and the Provincial Office of Buddhism, which coordinates and facilitates Buddhist affairs. In addition to their administrative roles, these offices are charged with implementing state religious policy. They serve a crucial function in creating spaces for interreligious dialogue through initiatives such as the Provincial Interfaith Relations Program, interreligious exchange programs for youth, activities tied to national religious holidays, and forums addressing religious issues. These events typically involve the participation of religious leaders and the general public, fostering dialogue, understanding of religious practices, and deeper knowledge of the beliefs and traditions of diverse faith communities.

Role of Religious Leaders: Religious leaders not only perform the duty of proselytization but also serve as role models in demonstrating respectful attitudes and behavior toward other religions. They should adopt inclusive and friendly perspectives toward all faiths, as this can influence community behavior toward interreligious respect and harmony. Religious leaders are also encouraged to participate in significant societal events, engage in interreligious charitable efforts, provide educational outreach, and, where doctrinally permissible, participate in religious events of other faiths. Their openness can expand psychological and social boundaries, encouraging their

followers to engage with others not as outsiders defined by religious difference but as fellow members of a shared society committed to peaceful coexistence.

Role of the General Public: Ordinary citizens also play an important role in fostering interreligious engagement by practicing respectful, polite, and friendly interaction. This includes avoiding discriminatory gestures or aggressive behavior and responding politely to invitations to religious events—even if one cannot attend. When members of other religious communities face hardship, offering appropriate assistance promotes mutual support. These day-to-day behaviors reflect the responsibilities of all members of society to uphold good relations and contribute to a peaceful and inclusive community.

Approaches to Non-Harmful Coexistence among Religions

With regard to the guidelines for non-harmful coexistence among religions, interviews reveal a shared understanding that each religion should practice its beliefs without causing negative impacts or encroaching upon others. This includes refraining from actions such as slander, defamation, false accusations, or denigration of other religions. Religious leaders across all faiths are encouraged to guide their followers in adhering to their respective religious doctrines, with an emphasis on principles that promote peaceful coexistence, mutual support, and social compassion as members of the same society. Moreover, identifying common ethical teachings—such as the universal value of moral integrity—can serve as a shared framework for religious instruction. Since all religions fundamentally encourage individuals to become good people, it follows that no religion should promote harm or hostility toward fellow human beings.

This perspective is reflected in the words of a religious leader from Mukdahan Province, who stated:

> *"…All religions teach not to harm one another, to live peacefully, and to follow doctrines already in place. Therefore, if we each practice our faith independently while supporting one another, it will enable everyone to coexist peacefully without harming one another…"* (Interview conducted on 27 June 2024)

Approaches to the Enforcement of Legal Measures

The enforcement of legal measures in managing conflicts within multi-religious societies can be categorized into two main approaches: the application of existing legal provisions and the implementation of specific religious-related legal instruments, as outlined below:

Application of Existing Legal Provisions: This approach involves utilizing existing laws, general regulations, and fundamental legal principles as mechanisms for conflict management. Only the relevant provisions related to religion, religious conflict, or interfaith disputes are applied. For example, constitutional law guarantees the right of individuals to freely practice the religion of their choice. In the event of a conflict, the relevant legal procedures are followed as prescribed. This is reflected in the testimony of one group of local informants:

> *"...Because it's about people's beliefs, there will naturally be those who agree and those who disagree. But there are also specific fears: what Buddhists are afraid might happen, what Muslims are afraid might happen, and what Christians are afraid might happen. If we don't want those things to occur, shouldn't there be laws in place to regulate them? That's the question we need to address..."* (Interview conducted on 7 July 2024)

Implementation of Specific Legal Measures: This approach calls for the development of specific laws designed to address interreligious conflict. These laws should be created through participatory processes involving all religious communities, ensuring mutual understanding and acceptance. The aim is to foster peaceful coexistence and prevent future conflict, with legal measures integrated into community practices. For instance, legal provisions may prohibit religious criticism, ensuring that each religion practices within its own domain without interfering in others. Respect for all religions must be upheld, and no actions should be taken that exceed appropriate boundaries or insult differing beliefs. Each religion should also agree on shared codes of conduct. This perspective is evident in the following statement from a local informant:

> *"...Yes, I agree—there should be laws prohibiting religious defamation, and laws that protect all religions. But it depends on the nature of the insult—whether it's intended to destroy or distort religious beliefs..."* (Interview conducted on 16 June 2024)

Approaches to the Non-Enforcement of Legal Measures

The guideline concerning the non-enforcement of legal measures arises from the recognition that many interreligious conflicts stem from misunderstandings among individuals of different faiths—misunderstandings that can often be resolved through dialogue and mutual understanding. Religion, being a matter of personal belief and individual faith, should not be subject to legal coercion. There are concerns that introducing legal enforcement into religious matters may exacerbate problems rather than resolve them, given the sensitive and nuanced nature of religion. Therefore, legal measures are seen as unnecessary; open communication and interpersonal engagement are considered more appropriate. As reflected in the views of local informants:

"...Religion is ultimately a matter of belief. It transcends law; it predates law. Religion is about belief, faith, and personal conviction. It doesn't necessarily require legal provisions. However, when certain situations arise, there might be a need for laws as safeguards. Still, they must be handled delicately, because this is about people's deeply held beliefs..."(Interview excerpt)

"...It's difficult to codify religion clearly into law because beliefs vary from person to person. We can't fully know the inner thoughts of others. Religion isn't like civil law that applies to everyone uniformly—it's a personal ethic. It's about how one chooses to live harmoniously, and that shouldn't be restricted..." (Interview excerpt)

Nevertheless, there are groups that strongly oppose the use of religion-specific laws. These individuals express concern that legal regulation of religious matters may lead to unintended consequences. They argue that religion is an individual matter of belief and conscience, which should not be controlled or coerced by legislation. Instead, they advocate for the application of political science principles—emphasizing coexistence and social harmony. Furthermore, concerns are raised about the ambiguity of legal interpretation and the potential for misuse by law enforcement, which could generate conflict. The enforcement of religious-specific laws is perceived as coercive, undermining goodwill and interreligious trust. For these reasons, it is suggested that existing general laws are sufficient for resolving conflicts, and the introduction of religion-specific legislation may, in fact, harm interreligious relations.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

It can be concluded that conflict management in multi-religious societies in Northeastern Thailand consists of five main approaches:

Approach to Interpersonal Interaction: At the community level, interreligious activities are organized to foster understanding of differing viewpoints and to promote mutual respect. Government agencies support and plan initiatives that enhance understanding among community leaders, religious leaders, and relevant stakeholders. Additionally, mechanisms and networks are developed to promote cooperation in religious affairs.

Approach to Interreligious Engagement: Both formal and informal dialogues are encouraged to build mutual understanding among different religions. Efforts are made to ensure fairness for all parties in cases of conflict, while the state also promotes interreligious understanding to raise public awareness about the pluralistic nature of society. This is consistent with the study by Paloutzian & Park (2013), which found that shared historical learning and perspective-taking contribute to empathy and reduce fear stemming from religious differences. Managing religious conflicts thus begins with understanding the teachings of each religion, fostering acceptance and respect for diversity.

Approach to Non-Harmful Coexistence among Religions: This approach emphasizes religious principles that promote peaceful coexistence, mutual support, and compassionate assistance as members of a shared society. Each religion should be free to conduct its religious activities without causing harm or infringing on others. This is aligned with the work of Lewis A. Coser (2003), who viewed conflict as having both positive and negative consequences, describing it as an inherent part of socialization. No social group experiences complete harmony, as conflict is a condition intrinsic to human nature. Love and hate alike involve elements of conflict. Conflict, therefore, can resolve internal divisions and foster unity within groups, as both friendship and enmity coexist—ultimately leading to a state of non-harmful coexistence.

Approach to Legal Enforcement: This involves the application of existing legal provisions specifically related to religion, religious conflict, or interfaith disputes, such as constitutional laws that guarantee the right to practice any religion. Moreover, there are proposals for the development of religion-specific laws created through interreligious collaboration and mutual agreement. Such laws aim to establish frameworks for peaceful coexistence and to prevent future conflicts.

Approach to Non-Enforcement of Legal Measures: Some groups oppose the enforcement of laws in religious matters, citing concerns about potential negative consequences. Religion is viewed as a personal belief system that should not be subject to legal regulation or coercion. Instead, a political science-based approach emphasizing peaceful social coexistence is preferred. Legal gaps and ambiguities in enforcement are also a concern. This perspective is consistent with the research of Johnstone (2011), who explained that effective conflict management must respect individuals' rights to religious belief and practice. States and organizations should develop laws that protect religious rights and promote freedom and equality in religious practice across all faiths.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Based on the findings, the study reveals that conflict management involves fostering mutual understanding and establishing interreligious engagement among the public, communities, and relevant agencies. These stakeholders collaborate to develop a shared understanding and jointly address religious conflicts. Therefore, at the community level, it is essential to establish conflict management networks composed of representatives from all sectors and religious groups. The composition should not be dominated by any single religion to ensure the highest degree of equity and inclusiveness.

2. The research indicates that at the local and provincial levels, there are efforts to promote relationship-building activities. However, disparities remain, as some areas implement these activities continuously, while others do so only in a limited capacity. Consequently, local and provincial agencies—such as local administrative organizations, provincial offices of Buddhism and Culture, and other relevant institutions—should develop budget plans and incorporate sustained and expanded programs aimed at enhancing interreligious understanding more consistently than at present.

3. The research shows that conflict management in multi-religious societies in Northeastern Thailand involves both proposals for legal enforcement and for non-enforcement approaches. Therefore, ministries responsible for religious legislation must consider adapting existing laws to address religious conflicts effectively. Additionally, the enforcement of social regulations should align with local contexts to manage emerging issues and ensure the legal framework is responsive to the needs and dynamics of each area.

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