

## PHILIPPINE CATHOLICISM AND SECULARIZATION: FACE-OFF, DENIAL OR DIALOGUE?

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When the Second Vatican Council says in *Lumen Gentium* that it focuses its attention on the world of men [and women], calling it as the theatre of human history, an ecclesiological shift happened. The distinction between the Church “and” the world was reinterpreted in favour of a Church “in” the world.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the world which the Council Fathers call the theatre of humanity is practically the Church’s own theatre. The Church is not totally different from the world because it is in the world. It is not a perfect society that ontologically exists outside of the world’s premises but rather one that engages the various states and institutions within the same sphere.

After fifty years from the Council’s opening, we realize that there is still much to work for the attainment of its thrust. The Council was more of a vision rather than a statement of the Church’s real condition at the time of its convocation. The Council intended to send a prophetic message – a forth-telling of what the people of God should do and change if it were to be truly a leaven of human society.

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<sup>1</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 2 (henceforth shall be cited as GS).

Among the challenges it has been confronting is the reality of secularism. In Europe as well as in North America, such a change in the social landscape already happened hundreds of years before Vatican II. Asia however would come late. But as said, the Vatican II was prophetic and *Gaudium et Spes* was most apt in forth-telling for the Church of Asia that it must focus its attention on the “world of men.”

In what shall follow, an exploration cum exposition of how the Church should engage with a society that is growingly secular would be presented: the case of the Philippines. As will be elaborated, the choice of the case resonates in the fact that the country percentage-wise is the largest Roman Catholic country in Asia. It may not, strictly speaking, be the first Christian nation in Asia but it would not be incorrect to say that it is where Christianity gained stronghold in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Christianity Soon to be Thrown out from Its Cradle?**

The Philippines is the cradle of Christianity in the Far East. This statement has been repeated, time and again, in homilies, writings and even conferences. While many would interpret the statement as a known privilege of the archipelago’s role in the evangelization of Asia, some have also interpreted the same to mean as the country’s dormancy in terms of reaching out to others.<sup>3</sup> For more than four hundred years the Philippines seems to have been staying in that cradle, somewhat comfortably... but not for long.

The unfolding of events in the Philippines in recent years have shown its changing moral landscape that already indicate the solidification of secularism both in the people’s collective and individual lives. While there is no argument at this point that statistical data would show the predominance of Catholicism, a qualitative assessment of such a religious tradition particularly within the context of the reception of its own membership would show something different.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>In terms of percentage East Timor has around 98% Catholic population nevertheless in terms of population size still the Philippines has the biggest in Asia.

<sup>3</sup>See for example the Homily of Jaime Cardinal Sin during the Opening Liturgy of Fourth Centennial Celebration of Cebu as a Diocese [April 20, 1995] in Dennis Villarojo and others, Commemoration: Fourth Centennial of Cebu as a Diocese (1995), unpublished commemorative souvenir.

<sup>4</sup>According to the Pew Forum, the Philippines as early as 1910 already ranked number 9 in the world’s Top 10 countries with the largest Catholic population. In

We will reserve a full-blown discussion of the country's experience with secularism (of its secularization if we may) but perhaps it would also be helpful at this point to provide a backdrop for the discussion on Catholicism's current state if only to set this paper's landscape. Here we can mention a relatively recent survey of the Social Weather Station, the country's leading survey firm, on the decline of church attendance among Catholics (among other questions) early in 2013. In terms of the self-assessment on religiosity, only 29% among the interviewed Catholics believed that they are very religious while 59% believed that they are somewhat religious while there are 11% and 1% who believed that they are not very religious or do not have any religious belief, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of Church attendance among Catholics, only 37% would attend worship (Mass) weekly while 24% would attend around 2-3 times a month. 23% said they go to Mass only once month while 10% said they do so 2-11 times a year (that is less than once a month), and 6% said for those who would attend mass at least once a year or never.<sup>6</sup>

The figures however appear to be surprising though not really because in 2008 a survey titled *Family planning Education and RH Bill supported by Catholic and non-Catholics*, the same polling firm discovered that seventy-six percent (76%) of Catholics and 78% of non-Catholics support family planning education for the youth.<sup>7</sup> Such support is high regardless of frequency of church-going, and regardless of trust in the Catholic Church. Awareness of the RH Bill, and public support for it, do not vary by religion, regularity of

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2010 it was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> to Brazil and Mexico, with some 75, 570, 000 Catholics. It constitutes more than half of Asia-Pacific's 130, 520, 000 Catholic population. See The Pew Research Center, "The Global Catholic Population" in <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Catholic/The-Global-Catholic-Population.aspx#mostnow> <available online> [accessed: July 15, 2013].

<sup>5</sup>Mahar Mangahas, "Special Report" (7 April 2013) in <http://www.sws.org.ph/pr20130407.htm> <available online> [accessed: July 29, 2013].

<sup>6</sup>Mahar Mangahas, "Special Report."

<sup>7</sup>At the height of the RH Bill controversy in 2008, the Social Weather Station conducted a survey from September 24 to 27. Among others, the survey was intended to measure the people's opinion on the necessity of a law that requires schools to teach the youth family planning. The same survey sought to identify based on social class and religion the Filipino people's approval of the proposed RH Bill in 2008. See Social Weather Station, "Third Quarter 2008 Social Weather Survey" (16 October 2008) in <http://www.sws.org.ph/pr081016.htm> <available online> [accessed: October 10, 2013].

church-going, and trust in the Catholic Church. Seven of ten Catholics (71%) and non-Catholics (68%) favour the passage of the RH Bill (before it became a law in 2012).

In 2012 the Philippine bishops and those Catholics who vehemently opposed the then proposed law, experienced defeat when Congress finally approved the Reproductive Health Law. President Benigno Aquino III ended the state's long battle with the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church when he signed the law, a truly depressing gesture for the Philippine bishops just a few days before Christmas. In a country whose history of democratization was partly an investment of its Catholic leaders, it would be truly difficult to just say "no" to some if not most of their political agenda. However, as this paper once more argues, this may not be the case anymore. This point brings us now to the discussion on secularization in the Philippines.

### **Figuring Secularization in the Philippines**

For us to eventually see the bigger picture of how the Church in the Philippines should engage with the growing secularization of the state, we need to contextualize its current status which has become very different from its erstwhile privileged position some years ago. We also need to frame our analysis using a specific understanding of secularization as discussed in current literatures.

Current literature highlights the nexus between modern democracy and secularization.<sup>8</sup> Although secularization may be understood in several senses, this essay agrees with Jose Casanova's definition: the process which societies undergo in order to differentiate the function of religion from those that belong to other institutions. This means that as an institution among others, religion has been subjected to (what Casanova calls) the "functional differentiation" of society. This further means that in a secular society religions have a specific function and it is clearly distinguished from that of the state. In a secular state certain activities are proper to religion but not all.<sup>9</sup> Thus

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<sup>8</sup>Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," in Judith Butler, J. Habermas, C. Taylor and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York: Columbia, 2011, 34.

<sup>9</sup>Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: Chicago Press, 1994, 15. In the words of Jose Casanova secularization refers to "the actual historical process whereby the dualist system within the world and the sacramental structures of mediation between this world and the other world progressively break down until

legislation as well as any political process must not favour a specific religious group. Instead, it must be able to provide what is minimally needed in life by all persons regardless of any religious orientation including non-believers.

If secularization is the hallmark of democracy, then religious freedom is its main indicator. To use the words of Taylor, "the State cannot be officially linked to some religious confession... no one must be forced in the domain of religion or basic belief" and "there must be equality between people[s] of different faiths... no religious outlook... or Weltanschauung [world view] can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official view of the state."<sup>10</sup>

The secular state therefore does not subscribe to the reason of a single religion so as not to favour one group over another. This does not mean that religion should be banned so that the secular state may flourish. Philosophically, religion may still contribute to the development of the secular state but it must compete, in doing so, vis-à-vis plurality discourses in the public sphere. As what the American political philosopher John Rawls said: "[t]he idea of public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government's relation to its citizens and their relation to one another. In short, it concerns how the political relation is to be understood."<sup>11</sup>

Jurgen Habermas agrees with Rawls when he suggested that religious members of a liberal community should learn to accept that certain arguments of theirs do not count for other believing and non-believing fellow citizens.<sup>12</sup> The bottom line of these points is that a secular state that operates in the spirit of Constitutional Democracy allows not just one reason or idea to prevail in society.

It is thus understandable that public reason should be a product of rational deliberations and judgments through its agencies. While admittedly, the reason of the State may sometimes be compatible with that of the religions (and in this case both therefore may work

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the entire medieval system of classification disappears, to be replaced by new systems of society" (p. 15).

<sup>10</sup>Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 34-35.

<sup>11</sup>John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, 3 (Summer 1997) 766.

<sup>12</sup>Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, "Dialogue," in Judith Butler, J. Habermas, C. Taylor and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 68.

for the same cause of the common good) there are unavoidable situations however wherein both influential institutions would clash.

Hence, the state should subscribe to a non-sectarian position grounded on universal values that are at the minimum acceptable to all peoples; not just by the various believers themselves but also those who consider themselves as non-believers or sceptics. Both the state and the church, for example, may *be one in saying that "murder" is a violation of the right to "life" but as to "when" life begins is a matter where the former may differ from the latter.*

We may therefore interpret recent events involving religion in the Philippines (Catholicism most particularly) as the "figuration" of a secularization which should have been completed contemporaneously with its establishment as a republic. As Philippine historians generally agree however, the adaption of the American-inspired constitution however did not fully secularize the county, the "function differentiation" of Casanova in other words did not happen and Rawls' "public reason" remain eclipsed by the overwhelming reason of the Catholic majority represented generally by its hierarchy.

Even a not so meticulous survey of Philippine history would show that there were several events that ruptured the expected and eventual achievement of a secular republic immediately after the independence from the Spanish Crown in 1898. It would make sense therefore why the ghost of secularization haunts the Catholic Church specifically the hierarchy up to this point in time. The contestation of hierarchical Catholic discourse on the issue of the so-called morality bills are nothing but the continual budding of protest against the leaders of the Philippine Church who up to this point in time – are hesitant to yield their monopoly of discourse in areas which are not even within the province of its competence. In most recent years the leaders of the Church have been seriously criticized by certain individuals who took by heart seriously the struggle for secularization.

The moves by the president and the Philippine Congress which transpired in the last four years or so are nothing but symptoms of a growing attitude in the Philippines. Despite the more than eighty percent Roman Catholic population<sup>13</sup> there has been a brewing desire

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<sup>13</sup>Based on the 2011 data of the National Statistical Coordinating Board (NSCB) Roman Catholics in the Philippines are 82% of the total population.

among some in the academia and the government to free the state from the upper-hand of the Church specifically the notably influential Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. We may further add, for the purpose of theoretical distinction, that the currents of secularization in the country come in two ways: practical and theoretical. On the one hand there are those who would like the Philippine state to be institutionally free from religious interference in matters of legislation, policy making and other similar state-functions. Legislators like Representative Edcel Lagman sought to concretize the state's secular nature by defending freedom of choice, freedom of religion and other secular principles as the basis for the legality of the RH Law. As the clamour for legislations favourable to divorce, LGBT<sup>14</sup> and sex education heightened, groups that strongly lobby for secularization emerged such as the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) and the Filipino Freethinkers, both of which have been more visible in the last few years.<sup>15</sup>

At this point there might not be much need to stress how the government, particularly the president in his agencies, have impressed on the public their seriousness to perform government functions without religious influence. We may look into however, the academic discourses that have strongly espoused the broadening of secularization in the state.

Raul Pangalangan, a former Dean of the country's premiere state university pointed out how a highly politicized Church-State doctrine defeats the essence of the separation of both institutions – that is clearly provided in the 1987 Philippine Constitution.<sup>16</sup> He traces the origin of the Philippine Constitution's "separation clause" and identified the ironies which no less than Philippine history attests in how the supposed to be separation of the institutions would be carried out. For example, the document which established the separation was enshrined inside a Roman Catholic Church. For Pangalangan this was the original sin of Church-State doctrine in Philippine legal history.<sup>17</sup> He concludes his essay by saying that "the

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<sup>14</sup>LGBT=Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders.

<sup>15</sup>Practical and theoretical secularization are the writer's categorization of the common approach or response to religious engagement with public affairs. See their site in <http://filipinofreethinkers.org/about-ff/>; <http://patas.co/patas/about-patas/>

<sup>16</sup>Article II, section 6 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution.

<sup>17</sup>Raul Pangalangan, "Transplanted Constitutionalism: The Philippine Debate on the Secular State and the Rule of Law," *Philippine Law Journal*, 82 (2011) 1-2.

persistence of religion-based power merely shows the failure of a secular politics that marshals political loyalists but offers no compelling vision to match the dreams of their people."<sup>18</sup>

Pangalangan of course is not alone in this crusade. Florin Hilbay, another law professor of the University of the Philippines has been adamant also in fighting (through theoretical discourse) for secularization in the Philippines. In an essay he wrote at the height of the Reproductive Health Bill controversy, this lawyer-academician argues that above all else, the greatest merit of the bill's passage would be the victory of secularism itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> His position therefore implies an observation that the secular state despite the constitutional provision of the separation of the Church and State is more of a principle (or a legal fiction?) rather than a statement of fact. It is for this reason that the likes of Hilbay are so strong in their fight against Church-interference in the sphere of lawmaking. The same author says that "the passage of the RH bill packs the potential to pave way for a powerful precedent, a documented instance of the rejection of a purely religious objection to a secular legislation."<sup>20</sup>

Academic discourse that supports freedom of choice as well as freedom of conscience does not just come from professors, like Pangalangan and Hilbay, who teach in the country's state university. Around 160 professors from the Jesuit run Ateneo de Manila University and a few others from De La Salle University expressed support for the RH Bill during its legislative deliberations.

How then should the Church especially the Philippine bishops – respond to these kinds of objections or critiques? This brings us now to another major chunk of the discussion, which requires a discussion-framework. We begin therefore with Vatican II which, some fifty years ago already said something about the Church and its role in the modern world.

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<sup>18</sup>Raul Pangalangan, "Transplanted Constitutionalism," 23.

<sup>19</sup>Florin T. Hilbay, "Reproductive Health and Democracy: Some Thoughts on the Struggle for a Secular Republic," *IBP Journal* 36, 1 (April 2011) 59.

<sup>20</sup>Florin T. Hilbay, "Reproductive Health and Democracy," 61.



## Framing the Discussion: Vatican II as a Post-secular Critique

This study considers Vatican II, particularly the theology of the Church in the modern world, as a post-secular critique to the challenge of secularization posed to the Church. As such the conciliar self-understanding and vision provides a response to the criticism of the *societas perfecta* model thereby basically highlighting that secularization may not be totally incompatible with the Church's stand and interest. The very opening statement of the *Gaudium et Spes* states:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.<sup>21</sup>

One may therefore interpret the Council's emphasis of the Church "in" the world as its response to those who (influenced by the enlightenment project's antithetical stance towards religion) wish to exclude the spiritual (and the Church for that matter) from the social, political and economic affairs of the world. The Church in Vatican II is not theologically obsessed with its ontological privilege vis-à-vis society. It acknowledges that the history of salvation is not separate and outside the history of the world precisely because the history of the world is the same terrain where the history of God's salvation is unfolded. Thus, as the same document continues: "We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics."<sup>22</sup>

Apparently, the Church in Vatican has a distinct understanding (a philosophy if we may) of the world. Unlike the pre-Conciliar emphasis (especially that which was heavily influenced by St Augustine) of the world as a product of man's fallen nature, the Fathers of the council look at the world, that is the "secular" as having value in itself. The world is not a dumpsite of the residues of the spiritual because, in fact, it is its habitus. This reminds us of what the great French theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu once said: "[f]or the Christian, the historicity of man, of which we now have become

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<sup>21</sup>GS, 1.

<sup>22</sup>GS, 4.

aware, corresponds to the historicity of God in Christ... Christianity is not an abstract system meant to explain the world nor the model of an "order" which we are supposed to copy or restore."<sup>23</sup>

In a way, Vatican II refutes those who believe that the secularization of the world leaves little room for Church. Thus, while functional differentiation was indeed established as a consequence of the secularization, nevertheless this does not in any way make the Church insulated from the concerns of the world. The Church deals and engages with the world because this is the only way for her to be relevant to the lives of the people. It is in this light that Vatican II would already be a post-secular critique as early as the 60s precisely because it antedated the current post-secular thinkers who also believe that no matter what religion (and the Church for that matter) cannot be relegated to the realm of the private.<sup>24</sup>

When the Church asks in *Gaudium et Spes*, what does it think of man? What needs to be recommended for the upbuilding of contemporary society? What is the ultimate significance of human activity throughout the world?<sup>25</sup> She has made it clear that if her mission or duty is to save man, it simply cannot do so by focusing only on the non-material welfare of society and the persons that comprise it. But isn't this a mere repetition of the Church's self understanding as a divine institution whose mission is to save the world? How does this fare with John Rawls' arguments that in a secular society, "all citizens are free to decide whether they want to use religious language in the public sphere."<sup>26</sup> If we read *Gaudium et Spes* very carefully, we'd realize that it is not the Church that insists on the use of religious language in the public sphere. What the Church says in Vatican II seems to indicate that it would not worry much with Rawls' suggestion that the public sphere should accommodate discourses that are acceptable by public reason and neither should it worry with what Charles Taylor says about the inseparability of democracy and secularization.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The Need for a Theology of the World," in *The Great Ideas Today. Should Christianity be Secularized*, Chicago: Britannica, 1967, 61-62.

<sup>24</sup>See Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 38.

<sup>25</sup>GS, 11.

<sup>26</sup>Habermas, "The Political," in Judith Butler, J. Habermas, C. Taylor and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 25.

<sup>27</sup>See Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason," 783 and Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," 34-35.

Basically the Church, articulating itself in *Gaudium et Spes*, clearly believes that it must “dialogue with the world” on the basis of its appreciation of the dignity of the human person, the human community and the profound meaning of human activity.<sup>28</sup>

What many have not seen in or appreciated with Vatican II, which actually is its post-secular critique, are the very principles of engagement identified in *Gaudium et Spes*. For example, the value it sees and respects in Christian Churches and ecclesial communities.<sup>29</sup> The same document expressed of her conviction that world can abundantly and variously help Church in the matter of preparing the ground for the Gospel. The Council in fact adds that she can gain this help “from the talents and industry of individuals and from human society as a whole.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the Church also highlights the importance of respecting rights<sup>31</sup> as well as recognizing the worthy elements that are found in today’s social movements.<sup>32</sup>

If we try to understand the Church’s role in relation to continually expanding secular society, the problem would not be much of the fact that such a society demands for public reason in the common discourse but rather how the Church should make itself understandable to those who are not part of her flock. This brings us now to an exploration of its options when confronted with criticisms and resistances by those who espouse a secular state (understood as a political entity that is free from the dictates of religion/s). In order to expound this case in the succeeding discussion we shall take the case of the Philippines, a predominantly Roman Catholic country whose hierarchy has been beset with criticisms and attacks by sectors that espouse secular values.

### **Face-off, Denial or Dialogue?**

When President Benigno Aquino III finally signed the RH bill into a law, his gesture surely saddened many bishops and priests some of whom supported her mother’s de facto presidency against the late strongman Ferdinand Marcos. Should this be the proper attitude of a Church or more properly of bishops who live in a post-Vatican II age? An age in the Church’s running history which teaches us that, “The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified

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<sup>28</sup>GS, 40.

<sup>29</sup>GS, 40.

<sup>30</sup>GS, 40.

<sup>31</sup>GS, 41.

<sup>32</sup>GS, 42.

in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.”<sup>33</sup>

Philippine history shows that bishops generally resort to either of these two modes or responses to secularist challenges: face-off or denial. Face-off commonly happens when the Church is confronted with a move on the part of the government to implement or policy that goes against its teachings. A specific case in point is what happened between the bishops and the Aquino administration when the debates on the Reproductive Health bill reached its threshold.

(A) *Face-off*: At this point, we will try to explore concrete events wherein the Catholic hierarchy got into face-off with the state or its agencies or representatives. One very classic example happened a few days after the RH Law was (finally) signed and incidentally a shooting incident happened in the United States. Grabbing the issue, Archbishop Arguelles, out of desperation, likened President Aquino’s approval of the law to the Connecticut massacre that happened weeks earlier. The only difference, according to Arguelles, is that Aquino would kill twenty million lives simply with the use of his fountain pen. Unlike what the Archbishop had in mind, many sectors were happy and hopeful not because of the excitement to murder the unborn. Arguelles did not think of the gradual changes that would benefit ordinary citizens through the RH law.

In terms of mobilization, the CBCP has been very active in calling for participation in the campaigns against RH Bill. Catholic schools and parish groups can be easily mobilized in order to muster the needed number in order to impress strong and popular opposition. The crusade against the attempt to legislate a comprehensive reproductive health program reached the point of gathering signatures from the parishioners nationwide, the CBCP monitor published articles that castigated Catholic universities that supported the proposed legislation.<sup>34</sup> In the Archdiocese of Cebu, Congressmen who were believed to have been Pro-Life were bestowed with an esteemed papal award through the recommendation of its then

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<sup>33</sup>GS, 76.

<sup>34</sup>Jaime Achacoso, “The Duty to Observe the Authentic Magisterium,” in *CBCP Monitor*, 13, 25 (December 7–30, 2009) B2. This article was written partly as a response to the press release of the open support to RH Bill by some of Ateneo de Manila faculty members.

Archbishop, Ricardo Cardinal Vidal.<sup>35</sup> There is nothing like this however when it comes to the battle against poverty. The CBCP could easily say that economics and development studies are not their competence. Indeed, the 2005 disclaimer in a way abandoned what it envisioned in PCP II.

Jesuit theologian, Eric Genilo observed that some Bishops even sought the support of congressmen and mayors with political track records mired with controversies. Consequently, tactic of this kind has put the Church's preferential option for the poor in a compromised position vis-à-vis the ruling classes and local bosses of Philippine society. As Genilo observed and pointed out:

It is ironic, therefore, that while the CBCP denounces the growth of political dynasties that concentrate power and economic opportunities in the hands of a few families, some members of the Church would use the motivation of protecting one's access to political power as a basis for voting against the RH Bill. A congress representative whose family wishes to preserve political power in their district would heed their bishop's threat to vote against the RH Bill or else face defeat in future elections. In their use of coercion in their campaign against the RH Bill, some church leaders actually contribute to reinforcing bad politics in the country.<sup>36</sup>

Another interesting incident that showed the extent of the hierarchy's capacity to boldly confront their critics happened after the proposal to legalize absolute divorce surfaced as a banner headline in one of the national dailies just a few days after the RH bill was signed into a law. Bishop Gabriel Reyes then started to forecast that it would not be long before the anti-discrimination bill (or LGBT) and perhaps even abortion will be taken action in the House. Reyes' statement seems to be an extended reprisal against Congress' decision to legalize the RH bill.

Yet the face-off could happen not just between the hierarchy's critics ad extra as it may also happen ad intra (meaning within the Church itself). The best case in point is the debate between the bishops and their supporters and the professors of two prominent universities in the country owned by the Jesuits and the La Salle brothers. When the Ateneo and DLSU professors expressed their

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<sup>35</sup>*Bag-ong Lungsoranon*, July 11, 2010, 1.

<sup>36</sup>Eric Marcelo Genilo, SJ, "Crossing the Line: Church Use of Political Threats against Pro-RH Bill Legislators," *HAPAG, A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 7, 2 (2010) 67.

personal views on the RH bill, the bishops took their exercise of academic freedom as some sort of an overboard that cross-bordered to a violation of their Catholicity as faculties of Catholic institutions. Apparently, freedom of conscience remains to be an issue within the Catholic Church.

And no less than CBCP President Archbishop Jose Palma chided the Ateneo professors. Palma seems to suggest that if these professors would like to teach matters that are against Catholic doctrine they should do so in a secular university. The professors however maintained their stand invoking academic freedom. Allies of the CBCP also came to the rescue and invoked several reasons as to why the professors should recant their position.

An Opus Dei Canon Lawyer, Fr Jaime Achacoso, even went as far as devoting several pages of his regular column in the CBCP's Monitor just to highlight where and how the professors violated the Canon Law.<sup>37</sup> He notes that especially notorious was the case of some Ateneo de Manila University professors who openly supported the RH Bill and whose stand was denounced by the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines. In view of that he opines that "Canon Law indeed has enough provisions to protect the integrity of Catholic doctrine and identity of officially Catholic educational institutions."<sup>38</sup> The issue, for this Canon Lawyer, could even be stretched to the Jesuit administrator's failure to categorically reprimand its professors. The absence of any explicit condemnation skirts the implicit tolerance of the Society of Jesus towards their dissident professors.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Jaime Achacoso, "The Duty to Observe the Authentic Magisterium," B2. A good discussion on this may be read from Eleanor Dionisio, ed., *Becoming a Church of the Poor: Philippine Catholicism after the Second Plenary Council*, Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011, 24–41.

<sup>38</sup>Jaime Achacoso, "The Duty to Observe the Authentic Magisterium," B2.

<sup>39</sup>"Mga Jesuita nagsuporta sa CBCP" in *Bag-ong Lungsoranon*, September 2, 2012, 1 and 11. It is not fair of course to say that just because certain Jesuits were vocal with their opinion that the whole religious order did not side with the Church. The Society's provincial, Jose Cecilio Magadia, SJ clarified that the group's intention and preference "is not to lead [the bishops]... but to follow..." Copies of the letter were also given to Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle, Abp. Soc Villegas who chairs the Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education, Bp. Gabriel Reyes who chairs the Episcopal Commission on Family Life and the local ordinary of Cubao Honesto Ontiongco (who has the diocesan jurisdiction over the Ateneo de Manila University). Also given copies were Emeriti Archbishops Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales and Ricardo J. Cardinal Vidal.

In his article in the *CBCP Monitor* Achacoso suggests that, working within the framework of Canon Law, there is a mechanism for Catholic Church authority to ensure that professors in Catholic schools and universities adhere to, if not respect the integrity of Catholic doctrine. The article was written as a response to the press release of the open support to RH Bill by some of Ateneo de Manila University faculty members.

Achacoso's stand reminds us of the possible dangers that may engender from the disregard of religious freedom particularly the freedom of conscience. When law and authority are used in order to superimpose one's conscience over another, the consequences are intolerance and exclusion on the pretext of objectivity. Intolerance and religious exclusivity may seriously affect, among others, a person's right to employment and would surely have repercussions to his financial stability. For example, it may just be easy for Palma (who by the way is not a family man) to say that these professors "better resign" without thinking how "unemployment" would seriously affect the life of a labourer or an employee.

(B) *Denial*: There have been instances also when the Church or the hierarchy would not directly confront its interlocutors but instead resort to denial. This happens when the Church or the hierarchy is met with a critique from institutions or persons that are not only polemical but serious, such as the findings of the Social Weather Station on the declining number of mass attendees among Catholics.

When the result of the SWS survey came out, reactions among bishops and certain lay persons apparently expressed denial. "If more Filipino Catholics were indeed leaving the Church, how come parishes are continuously sprouting across the country and some priests celebrate more than five Masses on Sundays?" This was the reaction of Peachy Yamsuan, communications chief of the Archdiocese of Manila. She raised these challenges to the SWS survey showing that one out of 11 Filipino Catholics sometimes considered leaving the Church and more were no longer attending Mass.<sup>40</sup>

Other than Yamsuan however, the bishops were above all in denial of the findings. Their apparent disregard for scientific data ended up in anecdotal arguments such as if the survey is true then how come

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<sup>40</sup>See Philippine Daily Inquirer in: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/388527/clergy-spokeswoman-challenge-sws-survey-on-catholics-wishing-to-leave-church>. <available online> [accessed: 1 June 2013].

there are still people attending masses every Sunday. This line of thinking was evidenced by no less than the view of Archbishop Angel Lagdameo who could not accept the findings because “the nine Masses in Jaro Cathedral (in Iloilo) are still filled to capacity. Priests maintain their Masses also in the barrios.”<sup>41</sup> Speaking like a statistician, Lagdameo further said that “it’s a matter of minus and plus. There are those who no longer go to Sunday Mass but there are also new Catholics who started to go to Sunday Mass.”<sup>42</sup> It’s as if Lagdameo’s method of ascertaining is more accurate than that of SWS which used rigorous and tested instrumentation.

The SWS issue however was just one among other instances where the Church’s response was more of a denial. Another specific incident was when certain bishops were dragged into a controversy over requests for sports utility vehicles (SUVs) from the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO). Bishop Juan de Dios Pueblos of Butuan was particularly identified to have asked former president Gloria Arroyo, an SUV for a birthday gift.

The scandal reinforced the suspicion of some that the bishops compromised their positions during the Arroyo administration one that apparently damages the vision to become a COP. When Benigno Simeon Aquino III assumed the presidency in 2010, he took for a political slogan cum agenda “*matuwid na daan*” (Filipino for straight path); a signal and propaganda of his objective to reduce corruption in the country. One of the government offices that were targeted within the first two years of his wipe-out corruption campaign was the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO). Incidentally, some bishops representing their dioceses were recipients of PCSO’s donations.

The controversial part of the issue however was the discovery that about seven Bishops asked for sports utility vehicles (SUV, Pajero as it is known in the Philippines). An excerpt of a bishop’s letter that went on circulating in the media reads: “I hope you will never fail to give a brand new car which would serve as your birthday gift to me...

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<sup>41</sup><http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/388527/clergy-spokeswoman-challenge-sws-survey-on-catholics-wishing-to-leave-church>. Also see ABS-CBN News in: <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/04/11/13/catholic-bishops-deny-drop-church-attendance> <available online> [accessed: 1 June 2013].

<sup>42</sup><http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/04/11/13/catholic-bishops-deny-drop-church-attendance>



For your information, I have with me a seven-year-old car which is not anymore in good running condition. Therefore, this needs to be replaced very soon."<sup>43</sup> The controversial bishops came to be known as the Pajero Bishops or the Pajero 7 and were summoned to the Philippine Senate for an investigation, which fortunately turned out to be a venue for them to be exonerated.

It must be fairly noted though that there were exaggerations in the said allegations. The bishops returned the vehicles and at least one SUV was actually identified as second hand and in fact dilapidated. The damage in the hierarchy's reputation has been done however and again the incident gave the public an image of their leaders that is totally different from what it desired the Philippine Catholic Church to become, a Church of the Poor.

No less than the conference president Bishop Nereo Odchimar admittedly said in a pastoral letter that the Church "has been deeply wounded by the controversies in the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office."<sup>44</sup> The letter however did not address the essential matters behind the issue. For example, the bishops have not said of anything about the economic-context of the Church and its relationship to the existing power structure. This apparently can help people understand why the hierarchy remains to be beholden to economic and political interests.

### **Towards a Church that is in Dialogue with Society**

Earlier it was said that Vatican II's theological vision also serves as a post-secular critique. Profoundly, this means that the Church responds to the challenge of secularization not by insisting on the reinstatement of its triumphalist structure but by reaching out to society in the light of, to borrow from *Gaudium et Spes*, its principles of engagement: learning "from the talents and industry of individuals and from human society" as well as dialoguing with people of other faiths.

Discerning the deficiencies of the cases presented above, there is one thing that stands as a preferable option for a Church renewed in

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<sup>43</sup>Karen Davila, "Bishop asked GMA for new car as b'day gift" Retrieved on March 1, 2011 from <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/-depth/07/05/11/bishop-asked-gma-new-car-bday-gift>.

<sup>44</sup>Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, "A Time of Pain, A Time of Grace" Retrieved on December 30, 2011 from <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/226082/news/nation/full-text-cbcp-apology-for-pcso-controversy-church-has-been-deeply-wounded>).

the spirit of Vatican II and that is the path of dialogue rather than a reprisal or denial. Dialogue however is more than just sitting beside each other in the negotiating table. It happens when one allows the other to enter into that sphere of understanding. If we may borrow the words of Richard Rorty on truth, dialogue is basically the search for the widest possible intersubjective agreement.

Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* concludes that “[d]rawn from the treasures of Church teaching, the proposals of this sacred synod look to the assistance of every man of our time, whether he believes in God, or does not explicitly recognize Him.”<sup>45</sup> This means that after such a great Ecumenical Council, the Church took more efforts in bringing people much closer to herself not by way of directly converting them even if it’s against their will or through polemics that will brittle their current faiths and thereby win them to Catholicism. This is something the Church has abandoned in favour of an approach that favours openness not only in communication but also of the heart and mind.

A notable accomplishment of the Philippine Church on this regard was the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991. In the said gathering the Church engaged society in the spirit of reflection and self-critique. The thrusts “preferential option for the poor”, “value of human work”, “peace and active non-violence” and “the integrity of creation” among others signalled the Church’s willingness to enter into dialogue with society specifically in those areas where its competence may be of great help. In PCP II, the Philippine clergy and the representative lay leaders did not just reflect about society but also of itself as part of society; it reflected with society.<sup>46</sup>

Another remarkable example of a dialogue with society that is faithful to the spirit of Vatican II is the advocacy that has been taken by some of the clergy and laity in the area of social justice (e.g. agrarian reform, workers’ rights and prison ministry) although there is yet much to be done before we can confidently say that the conciliar vision has finally been made concrete in the Church’s life.

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<sup>45</sup>GS, 91.

<sup>46</sup>*Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*. Pasay: St Paul’s, 1992. See for example Title VI (Special Social Concerns of PCP II) in Acts and Decrees, 242. In the said section the council identifies politics, responsible Christian parenthood, industrialization, ecology, rural poor and the sick and handicapped as the areas of engagement and dialogue. Also see Title X, on the Laity, 245.

In many ways we can speak of the same in the area of “Muslim-Christian dialogue” where some bishops and lay leaders have struggled for a sustainable peace in the Southern Philippines although apparently things are far from over. For while some of the clergy and lay faithful have advanced the spirit of the council in their advocacies, Bishops in general remain close in some areas where some degrees of progression are needed in order to address long-standing pastoral concerns.<sup>47</sup>

Given the growing attraction to atheistic and agnostic principles (e.g. Freethinkers), for example, one can ask how the Church, the Bishops in particular, should address young people in a manner that would send a signal of compassion without necessarily compromising the essential aspects of the Christian faith? With the increasing demand for the legalization of divorce, how should the Philippine hierarchy reach out to couples who are not canonically wed or those living as partners outside of marriage – in a manner that is inclusive and compassionate without compromising the Christian tenet of conjugal love? And how should the Church, especially the Bishops, dialogue with those who advocate broader application of women’s rights and same sex unions?

Due to the limitations of this paper’s objectives we cannot, as of yet, identify the ideal situation for the Church, particularly the clergy, and society to dialogue and address the above concerns. We may however identify the different sectors in the country whose agency have been indispensable in the secularization process. To them, the Church should reach out: lay persons who are in the field of development work/studies, medicine, policy making, academics and researchers in universities (e.g. sociologists, economists) among others. The Church should also reach out to leaders of the different Christian sects and other faiths in order to advance its advocacies in those areas where common ground is available for dialogue (e.g. migrants’ rights). Much should be done also in the area of ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue.

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<sup>47</sup>For the advances and setbacks of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the south, particularly a Catholic perspective, see Ruben Mendoza, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Kingdom: A Reflection on the Catholic Church’s Role in the Public Sphere in Muslim Mindanao,” A Paper Presented in the 2012 IASACT Conference, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

## Conclusion

The Church in the Philippines with its experiences of secularism should consider the challenge of engaging with the same in a manner that is non-confrontational and without resorting to denial. We do not deny the fact that any reductionist understanding of secularism also breeds intolerance and a certain degree of misunderstanding of religion's contributions to society. But neither can we deny that some of the values it has promoted like humanism have freed society from the so many forms of oppression caused by dogmatism. Secularism has facilitated the advancement of the rights of labourers, women, children and those who are most disadvantaged in society. The truth is that those who are working for the country's secularization may not like or agree with the Church in many ways but they may also be people of goodwill whose cause or vision is not anything different from what Jesus envisioned of his follower's salvation. They too, the Church must reach out and talk to. The Church, especially the bishops, however, must try to learn their views as well so as to meet half-way whenever there is a dialogue.

If we try to understand the Church's role in relation to continually expanding secular society, the problem would not be much of the fact that such a society demands for public reason in the common discourse but rather how the Church should make itself understandable to those who are not part of her flock. A necessary ingredient of this however is trust because no dialogue would go earnest and sustained without trust from the end of both parties. For the Catholic Church in the Philippines, whose membership as the numbers would show start to fall apart, this means trusting in its people and their capacity to make sound judgments and being trusted in return by the very flock it is duty-bound to serve.

The leadership of the Philippine Catholic Church also needs to do more self-assessment and critique of its own internal power struggle as well as in its positioning in the country's own political landscape. A hierarchy that still wields wide latitude of power, concrete in the lack of accountability among bishops and priests and transparency in ecclesial governance, projects an image of an institution that is at the very least difficult to dialogue or penetrate. Such a political image would repel critiques if not invite more confrontational strategies from Catholicism's detractors.

A Church that is always reforming cannot be stuck in its own categories without admitting the perspectives of its interlocutors. Bishops, for example, are challenged to answer questions concerning economic development or politics not just from the viewpoint of Catholic tradition but also informed by (at least) the most basic principles of economics or politics. Just because they are bishops does not mean that their positions are privileged discourses over those of social scientists. Parish priests should learn to trust their parishioners and show the same by creating venues that would invite more people participation not just during fiestas but in the more serious processes in the parish such as financial or resources administration. As for the religious administrators of schools, much has to be improved in the area of employer-employee relations. Some religious orders who run the country's universities still treat their decently trained professionals and faculty members merely as hired workers rather than as lay partners in the advancement of genuine Christian education. Reflecting on all of these brings to our mind no less than the words of the Second Vatican Council, to offer assistance "to every man of our time, whether he believes in God, or does not explicitly recognize Him," which, if adopted, "will promote among men a sharper insight into their full destiny, and thereby lead them to fashion the world more to man's surpassing dignity, to search for a brotherhood which is universal and more deeply rooted, and to meet the urgencies of our ages with a gallant and unified effort born of love."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>GS, 91.