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## REVISITING THE PHILIPPINE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH POLITICS VIA THE LENS OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY: THE ROLE OF PROGRESSIVE CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT SECTORS

### Abstract

Being a traditionally religious country, the role of religion in Philippine politics is frequently neglected as scholars are used to frame religious actors based on either interest group politics or theological interpretations. This paper employs a new approach called public theology. Using the Reproductive Health Debate from 2010 – 2012 as a case to analyze, the public theology approach explores a marginalized religious sector which became influential in reshaping the religio-political discourse about the morality of a politician voting in favor of the Reproductive Health Bill. This marginalized sector, the progressive religious leaders both from Catholic and Protestant traditions, is influential for providing an alternative moral criteria which served as an opportunity for the President and Congress members to counter the moral and political threat posed by fundamentalist Christian groups which oppose the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill as lead by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

**Keywords:** religion, public theology, Philippines, reproductive health, progressive Christianity

### Introduction

The theory of secularization of the Enlightenment scholars have failed on its prediction: that societal modernization will lead to the reduction of religious influence in public life<sup>2</sup>. The end of the Cold War and the Global War on Terror campaign of the United States served as catalysts for the re-introduction of the role of religion in policy circles and academic inquiry; hence, coining the term, "global resurgence of religion"<sup>3</sup>. The re-entrance of religion in the public sphere spanned not only in traditional security concerns but also invaded issues such as but not limited to economic growth and development, environment and human rights.

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2 Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to International Relations and Religion Second Edition*, Routledge, New York, 2013.

3 Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty First Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005.

Human rights are a contestable issue. In common parlance, the discourse of human rights is usually expressed as universalistic and applicable to all human situations; however, recent intellectual movements provided critiques about its ontology. These critiques assert that human rights are relative since universal assumptions about reality is a futile attempt and modern conception of human rights tend to be Euro-centric and insensitive to local culture and historical experiences, respectively<sup>4</sup>. Specifically, one issue related to this argument occurs when the Western notion of empowerment is imposed to a country with a domestic culture contradictory to the norms being imposed.

This paper contextualizes the claim based on the Philippine experience. The Philippines is one of the remaining strongholds of strong Catholic influence in politics since several of major Catholic nations in Europe and Latin America were already overpowered by secular influence. The issue being inquired in this paper is how a controversial bill opposed by conservative Catholic leaders passed the Philippine Congress through a majority vote. It may be argued that there may be a large Catholic population but secular authorities do not advocate for the Catholic position in every policy issue. However, the fact that the Reproductive Health Law needed more than two decades to struggle in order to be legislated shows that the Roman Catholic bishops still wield a significant amount of power over the lawmakers. Consequently, a number of studies and unpublished interpretation were written about the topic; however, this paper is a novel attempt to systematically inquire a disregarded sector: the progressive Christian religious leaders who supported the bill. This paper argues that these Christian religious leaders served as an influential discreet bloc during the political battle since they provided an alternative moral discourse which were transmitted into all sectors of the society including the lawmakers themselves. Thus, this paper presents the question, "How did the Filipino Christian progressive religious leaders influenced the Reproductive Health debate from 2010-2012?" Arguing from the lens of public theology, this paper will narrate how these progressive religious actors did developed an alternative simplified theological arguments which were used by politicians to justify their vote of support to the bill.

For purposes of clarification, this paper asserts that religious reasoning played only a part on the passage of the reproductive health proposal. This alternative religious morality is not the sole reason behind the passage of the bill. In addition, this paper defines "progressives" leaders as those persons who are willing to dilute or de-emphasize religious teaching in order to achieve a social justice goal. On the contrary, the "conservatives" are those who believe that social justice is achievable by being faithful to religious orthodoxy.

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4 Andrew Heywood, *Global Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011.

## Accounting the Role of Religion in Philippine Politics

The role of religion in Philippine politics is a neglected topic probably due to the reason that social science researchers in the country are contented to view the religious sector based on interest group politics perspective. In a bibliometric tally conducted, the Philippine Political Science Journal (PPSJ) only contains one article about religion in Philippine political dynamics<sup>5</sup>. Upon checking this single article, the study is an analysis how the El Shaddai Movement belief affects the political behavior and values of its followers<sup>6</sup>. Upon checking other related journals, it was observed that there are two groupings of articles published on the topic. The categories are based on what approach were used in analyzing the political phenomenon being investigated, namely, social science and theological approaches. It should be noted that these categories are limited only on accounting the role of Christian groups in the Philippines. Other religious traditions were not included since they have different ontologies, advocacies and political teleology.

There is a scarcity of published research using social science methods. The earliest was the article applying the center-periphery model of Immanuel Wallerstein to the relationship between the CBCP and Vatican officials before President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in 1971<sup>7</sup>. It was followed by a case study of El Shaddai wherein a profile of the charismatic group and how its teachings are related to politics were narrated<sup>8</sup>. A long interval was present until the topic was revisited by a field study about populist religions in the Philippines specifically referring to charismatic groups in the country both from the Catholic and Protestant factions<sup>9</sup>. Two years after, an analysis of the internal politics and governance structure of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines was offered<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, a study about the dominance of Roman Catholic discourse on Philippine media was investigated; however, such study renders an impression that it is an application of the "religion reporting" practiced in the United States to the Philippines<sup>11</sup>. Recently, Buckley used the Philippine case as a sample to show a

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5 Julio Teehankee, The study of politics in Southeast Asia: the Philippines in Southeast Asian political studies, *Philippine Political Science Journal*, Vol. 35 Issue No. 1, 2014, pp. 1-18.

6 Grace Gorospe-Jamon, The El Shaddai Prayer Movement: Political Socialization in a Religious Context, *Philippine Political Science Journal*, Vol. 20 Issue No. 43, 1999, pp. 83-126.

7 Robert Youngblood, Structural Imperialism: An Analysis of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 15 Issue No. 1, pp. 29-56.

8 Grace Gorospe-Jamon, The El Shaddai Prayer Movement: Political Socialization in a Religious Context, *Philippine Political Science Journal*, Vol. 20 Issue No. 43, 1999, pp. 83-126

9 Christl Kessler, Jürgen Rüländ, Responses to Rapid Social Change: Populist Religion in the Philippines, *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 79 No. 1, 2006, pp. 73-96.

10 Rhoderick John Abellanosa, The CBCP and Philippine Politics: 2005 and After, *Asia Pacific Social Science Review*, Vol. 8 No. 1, 2008, pp. 73-88.

11 Eimor Santos, Religion: The Missing Beat in Philippine Media, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, Volume 23 Issue No. 1, pp. 101-119.

disconnection between clerical control of politics and public opinion<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, Cornelio examined Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), an indigenous Christian group in the Philippines as it repackages its image from a religious voting bloc into a religious organization concerned in civic engagement<sup>13</sup>.

Conversely, there is also the presence of articles about the role of the Christian religion on Philippine politics using reflexivist and philosophical methods in approaching the cases used in their study. The academic phenomenon mentioned is present among academic theses produced by seminary schools throughout the country; however, since research culture among these seminaries is not a priority, only the top theology schools<sup>14</sup> are perceived to have the initiative to publish their findings on theology journals. Using the 1986 People Power Revolution and implications of the Church of the Poor discourse on CBCP political participation, Cartagenas<sup>15</sup> and Abellanosa<sup>16</sup>, respectively, used the public religion perspective, however, there is no empirical method employed. There is also the prevalence of using the normative perspective of liberation theology. One example is Genato-Rebullida's paper on how the Philippine Church should approach development issues in the Philippines<sup>17</sup>.

This paper introduces a new approach reconciling the two convenient perspectives in approaching religious politics in the Philippines. The public theology approach offers a flexible mechanism combining the normative opinion of religious leaders and how it is transmitted to its intended audience to make an impact to the political discourse. The employment of the public theology approach reinforces the call for the creation of a distinct sub-field of "political science of religion" since public theology satisfies one of the inquiry subjects of the proposed discipline. As Jevtic mentioned, one of its areas of inquiry is the "notions, explanations, advice, behavior and constructs of a religious dogma, its teaching and practice which is visibly, directly or indirectly, related to politics"<sup>18</sup>. Public theology approach possesses the ability to explain the power of opposing interpretations about religious doctrines and their impact towards a policy proposal.

12 David Buckley, *Demanding the Divine? Exploring Cross National Support for Clerical Control of Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 49 No. 3, pp. 357-390.

13 Jayeel Cornelio, *Religion and civic engagement: the case of the Iglesia ni Cristo in the Philippines*. *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 45, Issue 1, pp. 23-28.

14 Such as University of Santo Tomas Faculty of Sacred Theology, Loyola School of Theology, Maryhill School of Theology and St. Vincent School of Theology.

15 Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Religion and Politics in the Philippines: The Public Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Democratization of the Filipino Polity*. *Political Theology*, Vol. 11, No. 6, 2010, pp. 846-872.

16 Rhoderick John Abellanosa, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping: The Deficit of the Philippine Bishops' Church of the Poor Discourse*. *Political Theology*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2015, pp. 226-246.

17 Maria Lourdes Genato-Rebullida, *Reconceptualizing Development: The View from Philippine Churches*. Paper presented at the Fall Colloquium 1990 of the Centre of Philippine Studies in University of Hawaii, pp. 44-66.

18 Mirosljub Jevtic, *Political Science and Religion*, *Politics and Religion Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, p. 64.

## The importance of public theology

The word public theology may sound as a concept from the ecclesiastical sciences; however, it has implications to contemporary social science research particularly on the context of political science and international relations. As defined by Nukhet Sandal, public theology is “a religious perspective on a public issue” which is produced by a religious institution, religious authority or a group of people who deviate on the dominant belief<sup>19</sup>. This perspective produced by any of the three sources mentioned should inform the discourse by political actors.

In short, the public theology approach argues that analyzing religion based on the literal interpretation of their sacred text or teaching is futile since religious groups function via the interpretations of their leadership. It assumes that religious groups are not static organizations but groups affected by history, geographical location and cultural context.

This approach will serve as the framework in explaining the role of progressive Catholic-Protestant cooperation in order for the Philippines to pass the Reproductive Health Law. This paper argues that these progressive Catholic and Protestant religious leaders provided an alternative public theology or interpretation about the morality of the Reproductive Health Law. The alternative moral exegesis offered by these progressive religious leaders coming both from the Catholic and Protestant tradition was utilized by lawmakers to justify their stand on the issue.

## The Reproductive Health Bill

The Philippines is a signatory of the previously concluded Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are a list of targets launched by the United Nations on specific concerned areas, namely,

1. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achievement of universal primary education
3. Promotion of gender equality and women empowerment
4. Reduction of child mortality
5. Improvement of maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other infectious diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

In relation, the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill in the country is framed by its advocates as needed in order for the Philippines to achieve MDGs

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19 Nukhet Sandal, The Clash of Public Theologies?: Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Global Politics, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 37, No. 66, 2012, p. 69.

3,5 and 6. The policy proposal will aid the country to achieve women empowerment since the proposed law compels local government units to inform women and their husbands about the biological cycles of female bodies as well as giving women the option when to consummate their marriage and perform birth spacing. On the other hand, with regard to improvement of maternal health, the bill allows women to have a freedom of choice what method of birth control they are going to implore whether it is the natural method or the use of artificial way involving the use of pills, objects, and direct organ operation. Finally, the RH bill will help to combat HIV/AIDS since it promotes proper sex education to adolescents to avoid teenage pregnancies and curb transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Thus, based on the complementarity of the bill to the aforementioned MDGs, different women's rights organizations and networks lobbied for its passage. Consequently, the bill also encompasses economic rights since women will have the choice when to have a child which yields economic implications since mothers may opt to go to work and advance on their respective careers as well as to contribute in solving the overconcentration of people in the urban areas of the Philippines.

### **The Philippine Catholic Church and the Reproductive Health Bill**

Among all development regimes<sup>20</sup>, it is the Millennium Development Goals which took a novel step: partnership with religious organizations particularly with faith-based organizations (FBOs). Faith-based organizations are potential partners for development projects since they are the main actors deployed on poverty stricken areas and their experience dealing with local communities provides a considerable amount of data and information towards state apparatuses and international organization<sup>21</sup>. However, since FBOs are created based on a religious ideal, not all religions are supportive towards some specific development agenda.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), as a transnational religious organization, engaged itself to alleviate poverty stricken communities and to contribute to modern global problems; however, it possesses reservations towards the contemporary methods in solving specific global issues. Two of these problems are the overpopulation phenomenon and HIV epidemic. The RCC is indeed supportive of family planning as long as married couples will choose to practice natural family planning methods. It is considered a mortal sin for practicing Catholics if they going to use artificial contraceptives such as pills, condoms, implants and related surgeries. Although there is still an on-going debate about the morality of the use of artificial contraceptives particularly on the argument grounded on mitigating circumstances, majority of

20 The term "regime" in this paper refers to regimes in international relations.

21 Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to International Relations and Religion Second Edition*, Routledge, New York, 2013.

confessional guides treat the use of artificial contraceptives as a sin that needs to be mentioned in order to be absolved. Consequently, the same standard is applied in solving HIV and other STD related epidemics. The RCC forbids the use of condoms but argues only for abstinence and chastity. Since Roman Catholic Bishops wield a strong influence towards politicians, the Philippine Congress took several decades and waited several presidential administrations until the legislative body successfully passed the law.

On the other hand, there are also some religious organizations in the Philippines which are supportive of the Reproductive Health Bill as a form of compliance to the MDGs. Majority of them are Protestants, and a number of Islamic clerics who decreed a *fatwa* in favor of the bill<sup>22</sup>. A large part of the progressive Protestant coalition supporting the RH proposal gathered as an institutionalized body under the Interfaith Partnership for the Promotion of Responsible Parenthood, Inc., a faith based organization (FBO) enjoying the support of various UN agencies particularly the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This faction, along with other rebel progressive Catholic leaders, served as an influential body in countering the politico-spiritual influence of the CBCP and other fundamentalist Christian groups towards policymakers and the public opinion.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Public Theology from Progressive Catholicism*

Progressive Catholics are diverse compared to their Protestant counterpart. In contrast to Protestantism, Catholicism is a hierarchical religion. Membership involves three classifications termed as “vocations”: the clergy, the religious and the lay persons. Frequently, it is the clergy (the priests) who are usually involved in doctrine formulation and official church administration.

During the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church started to look on what is happening in reality and started to recalibrate its efforts in cooperating with men of science. In 1964, Pope Paul VI called for a collegiate body of cardinals and lay people consisting of scientific experts and doctors to discuss about the issue of family planning and artificial contraception. There is a global expectation, especially in the Western world, that Catholicism will finally relax its teaching on family and sexuality; however, the opposite occurred. In 1968, the encyclical *Humane Vitae* was published and served as the primary document about Catholic teaching on family planning, sexuality and use of contraceptives. A group of 87 Roman Catholic theologians protested against the encyclical which was supported by another 600 in November 15, 1968<sup>23</sup>.

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22 Sandra Libunao, *Grounded Responses of Faith Based Organizations to Population and Development Issues and Interfaith Collaboration in Mindanao*, Philippine Center for Population and Development Inc., Taguig City, 2014, p. 3.

23 Shea, G. A., Burch, T. K., Perez, G., Ordones, M., Van Kemanade, J., Hutjes, J., & Hellegers, A. E., *Catholic Parish Priests and Birth*

As early as 1971, ecclesiastical circles have been found out of providing reinterpretations to the *Humane Vitae* encyclical. In a survey among Catholic priests in Colombia, Netherlands and the United States about birth control, researchers noted that “their collective views show substantial departure from official Church teaching” on the artificial contraceptive question. A significant portion of the respondents indicate that the *Humane Vitae* encyclical’s teaching on the moral guilt of couple using contraception is unclear (US: 23%, Colombia: 30%, Netherlands, 18%)<sup>24</sup>. The perceived ambiguity affirms the sense of possibility towards doctrinal reinterpretation and reformulation.

In relation, a similar study was conducted among Filipino priests, nuns and lay leaders. The study noted that Filipino nuns and lay leaders are more liberal in interpretation and practice with regards to the orthodox Catholic teachings specifically in the issue of family planning, use of contraception and homosexuality<sup>25</sup>.

Progressive Catholic religious leaders around the globe believe that the Church teachings on family planning and use of artificial contraception are fallible and can be lifted. They treat it not as a dogma since the teaching was only enshrined in a Papal encyclical only<sup>26</sup>. Fr. James Martin, a prominent Jesuit writer and commentator in the United States of America reminds Catholics around the globe about what theologians call as “hierarchy of truths”. This concept states that there are moral teachings that can be diluted or lifted depending on their importance<sup>27</sup>. Consequently, this thought is shared by other Jesuits stationed in the Philippines particularly Fr. Joaquin Bernas, one of those who drafted the current Constitution used by the Philippines<sup>28</sup>. The following are the public theology discourse strands provided by the progressive Filipino Catholics as shared by priests, religious and lay Church leaders.

### 1. Primacy of Individual conscience

This discourse strand simply states that the moral guilt of a Catholic depends upon the dictates of his own conscience even if there is an explicit Church doctrine prohibiting an action. This discourse provided an avenue for RH proponents to relativize and dilute the religious threat by the CBCP towards politicians and

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Control: A Comparative Study of Opinion in Colombia, the United States and the Netherlands, *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 2 No. 6., 1971, p. 121-136.

24 Ibid.

25 Frances Chua Luz, Peria Aragon-Choudhoury, *Looking Beyond the Debate: Finding Common Grounds Towards Quality of Life*, Filipino Catholic Voices for Reproductive Health, Quezon City, 2015.

26 In Catholicism, a teaching can only be considered as a dogma or an infallible truth if the Pope declared it *ex cathedra* (from the Chair of Peter). However, in the case of artificial contraception, Pope Paul VI bothered not to invoke the mentioned special office for the Roman Pontiffs.

27 Martin, James, Listening to the Pope, <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/listening-pope>, (accessed: 04.25.2017).

28 Bernas, Joaquin, My stand on the RH bill, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/5340/my-stand-on-the-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017).



the public. Fr. Bernas wrote, "...the human person is bound to follow his or her conscience faithfully, and must not be forced to act contrary to it"<sup>29</sup>.

Another Jesuit priest, Fr. Joel Tabora used the anecdote of the Final Judgment anecdote in the Bible to prove this point. He argued that God will primarily ask if someone loved his/her neighbor rather than if what is his/her stand on the use of artificial contraception<sup>30</sup>. Interviews with a feminist Benedictine nun<sup>31</sup>, lay liberation theologian<sup>32</sup> and a Jesuit moral theologian<sup>33</sup> shares this discourse.

To clarify, the CBCP also shared this belief; however, there is an offered reservation about this discourse strand. The bishops argued that a proper knowledge of the Faith and Church teaching is needed before an individual consult his conscience. In a pastoral letter circulated by the then CBCP President Socrates Villegas, he argued, "*The Church teaches us to follow our conscience, the inner sanctuary where we are alone with God **but such conscience must be formed and informed according to the universal values that are common to all human persons***"<sup>34</sup>.

## 2. Respect for religious freedom

This discourse strand is offered to remind the Catholic bishops that not all Filipinos are Catholics. In one of his columns, Bernas invoked his office as a legal expert in legitimizing the RH Bill by citing the separation of Church and state clause in the Philippine constitution. He clarified: "*The teaching of my Church is that I must respect the belief of other religions even if I do not agree with them. That is how Catholics and non-Catholics can live together in harmony. The alternative, God forbid, is the restoration of the Inquisition*"<sup>35</sup>

The historical allusion to the imagery of the horrors of Inquisition reminded the populace about the mistakes committed by some overzealous Catholic leaders during the Medieval Ages which is one of the scenarios being prevented at present by the Church after the Second Vatican Council. Recent popes after the Second Vatican Council had apologized for this unfortunate events in the history of Catholicism.

On the other hand, being the representative of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP) National Advocacy Commission in 2012, he defended the right to freedom of expression and thought of Ateneo professors

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29 Bernas, Joaquin, Bishops at war, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/35556/bishops-at-war#ixzz4Q8FPhlca>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

30 Tabora, Joel, Team Patay, Team Buhay: Unconscionable, <https://taborasj.wordpress.com/2013/02/24/team-patay-team-buhay-unconscionable/>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

31 Interview with Sr. Mary John Mananzan, O.S.B.

32 Interview with Prof. Michael Liberatore of Ateneo de Manila University's Department of Theology.

33 Interview with Fr. Eric Genilo, S.J. of Loyola School of Theology.

34 Villegas, Socrates, Contraception is Corruption! A CBCP Pastoral Letter on the Latest Decision on the Reproductive Health Bill, <http://cbcpcpwebsite.com/2010s/2012/contraception.html>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

35 Joaquin Bernas, When is family planning anti-life?, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/12831/when-is-family-planning-anti-life#ixzz4Q8FpoAti>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

who expressed their support to the controversial measure by citing the Church document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* which directly states that the Catholic Church respects academic freedom and autonomy of educators<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, Tabora also used an historical allusion on Catholic Spain during the Middle Ages, “*We live in a plural society... The days are gone also when a King Philip II of Aragon and a Queen Isabela of Castile could expel whole Muslim population from Spain simply because they refused to be ‘freely’ converted to the one, holy, apostolic Catholic faith*”<sup>37</sup>.

The cited statements were expressed before the final legislative voting on the reproductive health bill. After President Benigno Aquino III signed the bill into law, the former CBCP President Socrates Villegas decided to cooperate with Catholics who supported the law since the Supreme Court already removed the parts of the law which is detrimental to religious freedom and individual conscience of every practicing Catholic<sup>38</sup>.

### 3. Catholic teaching on sexuality and family is fallible

Since the prohibition to artificial contraception is mentioned in *Humane Vitae*, conservative Catholics tend to interpret this teaching as an unalterable doctrine. However, progressive Catholics refuse to do so. Fr. James Martin, a prominent Jesuit writer and commentator in the United States of America reminds Catholics about the tradition of “*hierarchy of truths*”. This concept states that there are moral teachings that can be diluted or lifted depending on their importance<sup>39</sup>.

Consequently, this thought is adopted by other Jesuits stationed in the Philippines. Bernas applied this concept in two of his opinion columns. He expressed his fidelity to Church teaching but followed by a reservation, “*even if I am aware that the teaching on the subject is not considered infallible doctrine by those who know more theology than I do*”<sup>40</sup>. The same verbatim phrase was reiterated in his column, *RH Bill: Don’t burn the house to roast a pig*, and followed with the sentence, “*I know that some people consider me a heretic and that at the very least I should leave the priesthood. But my superiors still stand by me*”<sup>41</sup>. On these passages, Bernas no longer speak as a legal expert but as an expert of Catholic theology.

36 Tabora, Joel, CEAP, PH Bishops and the RH Bill, <https://taborasj.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/ceap-ph-bishops-and-the-rh-bill/>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

37 Joel Tabora, Space to Discuss Contentious Issues, <https://taborasj.wordpress.com/2013/01/23/space-to-discuss-contentious-issues/>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

38 Esmaguél Paterno III, Move on, bishops urge critics of RH Law, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/54984-cbc-philippines-villegas-reaction-rh-law-upheld/>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

39 James Martin, Listening to the Pope, <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/listening-pope>, (accessed: 04.25.2017).

40 Joaquin Bernas, My stand on the RH bill, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/5340/my-stand-on-the-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

41 Bernas, Joaquin, Don’t burn the house to roast a pig, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/34153/rh-bill-dont-burn-the-house-to-roast-a-pig>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

In his blogpost *Team Patay Team Buhay*, Fr. Tabora noted that the Catholic Church does not have the monopoly of truth in all aspects, "...where is the truth?... not just in the bishops, the truth and imperatives of conscience can no longer be imposed on all by clerics and conservatives from on high...The Church can no longer impose its existence and message on the world..."<sup>42</sup>.

In addition, Eleanor Dionisio, a self-confessed progressive lay Catholic working in a research institute run by the Jesuits, admitted that the teaching on *Humane Vitae* may change but it will take decades or centuries<sup>43</sup>. This claim is supported by the Catholics for Reproductive Health (C4RH) organization<sup>44</sup>. Citing the book written by Bishop Raymond Lucker entitled *The American Catholic*, the organization argued that the teaching on contraception is one of the "authoritative but non-irreformable" teachings of the Church<sup>45</sup>.

#### 4. Reality is not black and white

This discourse served as a critique of the projected image of the Philippine Catholic hierarchy which offers a mentality of all-or-nothing stand with the Reproductive Health Law. It is necessary to mention that the opposition of the CBCP is not only grounded to the use of artificial contraceptives but also on related matters such as the redundancy of the law, the corruption entailed by budget distribution to the local government units (LGUs), and the coercion presented to a practicing Catholic to follow some sections which are against his/her faith. However, the media presented the CBCP's stand as narrow and archaic.

Corollary to this framing, Fr. Bernas popularized this discourse by arguing that, "*Christ came to save sinners, even defenders of the RH Bill*"<sup>46</sup>. This discourse is complementary to the first one, the primacy of individual conscience, because of the fact that what happens in reality is more complex in contrast to the dogmatic thinking of Catholic bishops.

#### 5. Learn from the laity

This discourse strand is a minor argument but influential because it supports the previous strand on the fallibility of Catholic teaching on artificial contraception. Bernas justified this strand by citing the historical event of the Second Vatican Council wherein the Church accommodated not only the clergy and the re-

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42 Joel Tabora, Team Patay, Team Buhay: Unconscionable, <https://taborasj.wordpress.com/2013/02/24/team-patay-team-buhay-unconscionable/>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

43 Eleanor Dionisio, On the sweet insidiousness of dialogue, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/7510/on-the-sweet-insidiousness-of-dialogue#ixzz4Q8lyBq1G>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

44 Interview with Francess Luz Chua.

45 Interview with Francess Luz Chua

46 Bernas, Joaquin, A war of religions, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/4746/a-war-of-religions#ixzz4Q8FycSSV>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

ligious but also included laypersons particularly women in Church discussions<sup>47</sup>. Meanwhile, Tabora maintained his rhetorical style of arguing based from the perspective of orthopraxis. He stated, *"But if the Bishop insists that the squatter issue is the most essential issue, informed citizens may respectfully agree. Informed citizens may see more than an uninformed bishop can"*<sup>48</sup>.

On the other hand, Dionisio, a progressive Catholic layperson, critically questions the authenticity of the bishops' position on the issue, *"...they may invoke the authority of divine revelation and of moral reasoning; but if they are faithful to their vows, they cannot invoke the authority of experience... But celibates are still aliens to the world of those who have sex and children... Inculturation requires evangelizers to immerse themselves in the cultural milieu of those to whom they are sent"*<sup>49</sup>.

Dionisio's perspective lies in empirical objective reality. Since bishops, priests and religious profess the promise or vow of chastity, they are not allowed to have sexual partners. Hence, they do not possess the luxury of sexual experience. They are clueless in managing sexual urges which is a criticism on the efficiency of their preaching in favor of natural family planning.

## 6. Middle Ground Position: Contribute for the betterment of the bill

The middle ground position indicates that the RH Bill is morally acceptable because it is a work in progress and religious actors should contribute to the improvement of the policy draft. Bernas made the following expressions: *"I have never held that the RH Bill is perfect. But if we have to have and RH law, I intend to contribute to its improvement as much as I can"*<sup>50</sup>. *"There are many valuable points in the bill that can serve the welfare of the nation and especially of poor women who cannot afford the cost of medical service... They should be saved"*<sup>51</sup>.

### *The Public Theology from Progressive Protestantism*

Before tackling the discourse strands offered by the progressive Protestant faction, it is necessary to establish the context of these organizations in Philippine domestic setting. First, Protestant groups do not have a unified and codified body of theology on social issues unlike the Catholic faction. Everything depends on the interpretation of the pastor or elder. However, they agree on the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (Bible alone) doctrine unlike the Catholicism which depends on the Sacred Scriptures, Tradition and Papal infallibility (Magisterium). Second,

47 Joaquin Bernas, Bishops in dialogue, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/36882/bishops-in-dialogue>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

48 Joel Tabora, Conscience and Vote Conscience, <https://taborasj.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/conscience-and-vote-conscience/>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

49 Eleanor Dionisio, Those who can't, can teach Natural Family Planning, <http://www.jjicisi.org.ph/?p=308>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

50 Joaquin Bernas, My stand on the RH bill, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/5340/my-stand-on-the-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

51 Joaquin Bernas, Once more the RH bill, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/42009/once-more-the-rh-bill#ixzz4Q8Eo0Fa>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

Protestant groups do not have strong ties with the Filipino political elites with the exception of two or three groups operating nationwide. They almost literally respect separation of Church and State doctrine in compliance to the Bible verse of Mark 12:17 (Give to Caesar what is to Caesar's) and Romans 13:1 (Let everyone be subject to governing authorities). However, there are still cases which are exemptions to the rule. Lastly, these Protestant groups are in competition with the Catholic Church in terms of followers and political influence. These contextual realities will reflect later why Protestant groups produced the following discourses in support of the Reproductive Health Law.

In addition, compared to Catholic arguments, progressive Protestants recognize the validity of the Malthusian theory of population which served as the initial motivation for the policy draft of the reproductive health proposal. Although the population measure tendencies of the bill was removed to accommodate fundamentalist Christian opposition<sup>52</sup>, these progressive Protestants argued in affirmation that family planning and population control is biblical.

### 1. Primacy of Individual Conscience

Similar to the progressive Catholic discourses, the Protestants also regard the primacy of individual conscience with utmost consideration. Responding to this policy debate, the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC), Inc. states that it *"unequivocally states its 'respect and support (of) the freedom and responsibility of every person to make decisions for his (or her) life according to the dictates of his (or her) conscience..."*. On the other hand, the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), a powerful religious group being courted by politicians because of their bloc voting practice during elections, released a statement which argued that it is a moral obligation of families to plan the spacing of their children and it is the freedom of the couple on how to fulfill this moral obligation whether they will use natural or artificial family planning methods<sup>53</sup>. Consequently, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines<sup>54</sup> also noted the characteristic of the bill of *"giving the right to couples to determine how to plan their family"*<sup>55</sup>.

Corollary, these statements reflect the stand given by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to the UN Population Fund in 1994 at the Cairo Conference which states that, *"Though there is a variety of positions among member churches*

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52 Interview with Edcel Lagman

53 Lira Dalangin-Fernandez, 6-million-strong Iglesia supports RH Bill, <http://interaksyon.com/article/2448/6-million-strong-iglesia-supports-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

54 The Council is composed of ten Protestant groups which are transnational and domestic in their operations, namely, Apostolic Catholic Church, Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches, Episcopal Church in the Philippines, *Iglesia Evangelica Metodista En Las Islas Filipinas*, *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, *Iglesia Unida Ekyumenical*, Lutheran Church in the Philippines, the Salvation Army, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

55 Helen Flores, Council of Churches pushes passage of RH Bill, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/636325/council-churches-pushes-passage-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

of WCC, many of them assert the right of families to practice fertility regulation by various methods...Dogmatic assertions which affirm the sanctity of life but ignore the context in which conception takes place fail to bring that assertion to bear on the real circumstances of life<sup>56</sup>.

This statement has a connection to the progressive Protestant actors during the RH debate because major Protestant groups are usually registered as members of WCC. Although among the three groups mentioned, Iglesia ni Cristo is the only group which is not participative to international Protestant alliances including the WCC.

## 2. Unmanaged Population Growth as a Cause of Global Social Ills

In the previous section, progressive lay Catholics argued the lack of experiential authority of the bishops in terms of family life and sexual activities since they are not allowed to marry. In contrast, the Protestant counterpart possesses this advantage since Protestant pastors and leaders do not follow the celibacy requirement. Hence, they claim that they possess a clearer view on population and poverty issues. The Interfaith Partnership for the Promotion of Responsible Parenthood, Inc. (IPPRP)<sup>57</sup> noted in their statement of support to *"focus on more proactive actions on how we can address the issues of poverty, hunger, humanitarian crises caused by natural calamities and hazards, gender inequality and other social problems brought about or exacerbated by unmanaged population growth"*. This coalition of Protestant churches indicates that unmanaged population growth as the primary cause of global issues of resource scarcity and insecurity. In addition, the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) shared the same assumptions by stressing on their letter to the House of Representatives that *"Many of society's worsening ills...[are] can be traced to families growing so large..."*. This religious group invoked the verse 1 Tim. 5:8 which characterizes parents who do not practice family planning as worse than non-believers<sup>58</sup>.

## 3. Reinterpretation of the Genesis story

To provide a background, the original Reproductive Health Bill proposed in the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress is both a reproductive health and population control measure through the use of contraceptives. However, this content was removed as interpellations occurred both in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

56 World Council of Churches, Statement of World Council of Churches at the UN World Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, [www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/ngo/940909231007.html](http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/ngo/940909231007.html), (accessed 12.16.2017).

57 The IPPRP is a broader umbrella of Protestant religions. It includes the ten members of the NCCP, United Church of Christ of the Philippines, Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, United Methodist Church, Philippine for Jesus Movement, Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Christian and Missionary Alliance Churches of the Philippines, Seventh Day Adventist, Salvation Army, Catholics for Reproductive Health, and Episcopal Church of the Philippines.

58 Lira Dalangin-Fernandez, 6-million-strong Iglesia supports RH Bill, <http://interaksyon.com/article/2448/6-million-strong-iglesia-supports-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

As a retaliation to the initial proposal, the Catholic bishops opposed the law based on the Creation story of Genesis 1: 1-31 wherein God told Adam and Eve to go forth and multiply, and on the story of God's punishment to Onan who spilled his semen during a sexual intercourse which is recorded on the Chapter 38 of the Book of Genesis. However, Protestant bishops of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), a Protestant alliance, reinterpreted these passages arguing that these stories are based on the time and context when humans are not yet scattered throughout the whole Creation. The NCCP bishops framed the discourse about the difference between the past and the present condition of human demographics. In two debates aired by the ABS-CBN News Channel<sup>59</sup> and GMA News Network<sup>60</sup>, an NCCP bishop raised the same argument.

### **Impact on the Alternative Public Theology**

The transmission of public theology of both progressive Catholics and Protestants occurred simultaneously especially progressive priests and nuns are supporters of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. Thus, it can be assumed that cooperation and exchanges occurred between the two factions especially several civil society organizations (CSOs) provide a space for interfaith perspectives in their respective advocacies. One concrete example is the IPPRP's Bishop Rodrigo Tano's frequent citation on the theological opinions of Fr. Joaquin Bernas, S.J., the leading Catholic leader who promoted a different theological perspective on the morality and necessity of the RH Bill.

The impact of the alternative public theology is difficult to measure. However, this paper offers three benchmarks on assessing the linkage between the produced theological exegesis and its impact to the Filipino policymakers.

First, by looking at the Presidential remarks, Benigno Aquino III noted in his message to Pope Francis during his visit to the country last January 2015, "*My understanding of the changes inspired by Vatican II, and of the influence of liberation theology, was the notion that temporal matters affect our spiritual well-being, and, consequently, cannot be ignored*"<sup>61</sup>. Aquino's mention of the term "liberation theology" is a manifestation that he shares the view of progressive Catholicism since liberation theology is a bottom up theology which looks at the reality before consulting dogma. It is an anti-thesis of the dominant conservative theology since liberation theology is banned by the Vatican; however, Jesuits and other progressive religious leaders are still teaching the ideals of this theology in their respective institutions.

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59 Joar Malig, Philippines still divided on reproductive health bill, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/-depth/05/08/11/philippines-still-divided-reproductive-health-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

60 GMA News Online. (2011). RH Bill: The Grand Debate, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/video/80222/rh-bill-the-grand-debate-part-1>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

61 Philippine Star, FULL TEXT: Aquino's speech in the presence of Pope Francis at Malacañang, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2015/01/16/1413584/full-text-aquinos-speech-presence-pope-francis-malacanang>, (accessed 12.16.2017).

On the other hand, the Philippine Constitution requires both the two Houses of the Congress to conduct three readings before passing a bill into a law. In the case of the Senate, the second and third reading voting occurred on December 17, 2012 which is three days after President Aquino sent his letter certifying the Reproductive Health bill as “urgent”. Both voting on the second and third reading yielded the same results: 13 senators voted in favor of enacting the bill while eight senators voiced their opposition<sup>62</sup>. The voting results present an overturn of initial predictions stating that only *eight* senators support the measure, *nine* against it and *three* undecided<sup>63</sup>. The researcher of this study attributes this overturn on the vital role of the progressive religious actors who joined the Reproductive Health Debate. The discourses offered by these progressive religious elite are reflected on the reasons why senators voted in favor of the bill. The table below provides a matrix on the reasons offered by senators why did they vote in favor of the measure. Although there are two senators who explained their vote not on the basis or influence of religious reasoning but based on science and data, the matrix below shows the number of senators whose justifications mirror the arguments offered by the progressive religious sector<sup>64</sup>.

**Table 1. Number of senators who voted in favor of the Reproductive Health Bill using the arguments of the progressive religious sector**

Progressive Religious Discourse Strand	Number of Senators (may be repeated)
1. Primacy of individual conscience	2
2. Respect for religious freedom	3
3. Fallibility of Catholic Teaching on Family and Sexuality	2
4. Reality is not black-and-white	2
5. Learn from the laity	1
6. Middle Ground Position	3
7. Reference to Scarcity Arguments	0
8. Biblical Justifications	0

Source: Tallied from the Senate of the Philippines Journal Session No. 44, December 17, 2012.

In the case of House of Representatives, a similar trend occurred. Aquino certified the Lower House version of the Reproductive Health Bill as a necessity bill

62 Maila Ager, Senate votes 13-8 for RH Bill on final reading, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/325857/senate-passes-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

63 Caroline Howard, Senators divided on RH bill, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/anc/09/07/12/senator-divided-rh-bill> (accessed October 7, 2018)

64 Senate Journal Session No. 44, December 17, 2012, Senate of the Philippines, [www.senate.gov.ph](http://www.senate.gov.ph)



on December 13, 2012<sup>65</sup>. It was four days after, December 17, when members of the Lower House proceeded on the final reading of the bill since the approval of the second reading occurred on December 12.

During the second reading, voting results showed the following results: 113 voted in favor, 104 disagreed and three representatives abstained out of the 217 representatives present. On the third reading which occurred on December 17, 133 voted in favor, 79 opposed and 7 representatives abstained out of 199 persons present on the assembly<sup>66</sup>. The results of the voting in the second and third reading are higher than the stakes estimated by Rep. Lagman during the initial filing of the bill wherein he predicted that *about 100 members* of the Lower House supports the measure<sup>67</sup>. Meanwhile, the discourses offered by the progressive religious sector were also reflected on the explanation of votes by some of the House representatives since majority only expressed their vote without explanation in order to save time. The table below provides a matrix of those representatives who reflected the discourses offered by the progressive religious sector. This table only considered the explanations expressed on the second reading of the bill since third reading explanations are no longer substantial enough since majority only reiterated their initial votes.

**Table 2. Number of members of the House of Representatives who voted in favor of the Reproductive Health Bill using the arguments of the progressive religious sector**

Progressive Religious Discourse Strand	Number of HOR members who shared the same view
1. Primacy of individual conscience	17
2. Respect for religious freedom	10
3. Fallibility of Catholic Teaching on Family and Sexuality	0
4. Reality is not black-and-white	1
5. Learn from the laity	0
6. Middle Ground Position	4
7. Reference to Scarcity Arguments	14
8. Biblical Justifications	

Source: Tallied from the Congressional Record Volume 2 No. 39a, December 12, 2012, Third Regular Session, p. 59

65 Patricia Denise Chiu, After narrow House vote, Aquino certifies RH bill as urgent, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/286362/news/nation/after-narrow-house-vote-aquino-certifies-rh-bill-as-urgent>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

66 Rappler, How solons voted on the final reading of RH Bill, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/18119-how-solons-voted-on-final-reading-of-rh-bill>, (accessed 12.16.2017)

67 Cruz, RG, Proponent sees RH bill passed to law soon, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/11/11/10/proponent-sees-rh-bill-passed-soon> (accessed October 7, 2018)

Another proof of the influence of the progressive religious sector on the decision of the Lower House members to vote in favor of the RH Bill lies in their style of rhetoric having this conditional format *"I am a Catholic but..."*. For example, Rep. Limkaichong indicated that he is a devout Catholic but his conscience dictates that he cannot use her personal religious beliefs in legislating laws that will also affect other Filipinos who do not share the same faith<sup>68</sup>. Some apologized to the Catholic bishops and their devout family members such as Representatives Siquian-Go<sup>69</sup> and Maranan<sup>70</sup> (during the second reading) and Representative Enverga<sup>71</sup> (as he shifted to the affirmative side during the third reading). Furthermore, there are those who explicitly admitted that they were influenced by certain religious actors to vote in the affirmative. For example, Representative Joson admitted that a Jesuit priest and a Cardinal whom he refused to name influenced him to vote according to his conscience while Representative Ledesma shared his experience and inspiration he received from the Jesuit priests Philip Bourret and Joaquin Bernas<sup>72</sup>.

In an interview with Representative Edcel Lagman, the main proponent of the RH Bill in the Lower House, the alternative moral discourses offered by Jesuit fathers Joaquin Bernas and Joel Tabora contributed to convince those undecided Lower House members to vote in favor of the Reproductive Health Bill because of the following reasons. First, they are considered Church leaders. Second, they are known to be experts of theology and moral issues<sup>73</sup>.

## Conclusion

With the global resurgence of religion and the perceived failure of secularization theory around the world, religious actors gained an interesting spot in the global political limelight. The Philippines is not an exemption to this phenomenon.

This paper deviated from the traditional approach of research in the Philippine nexus between religion and politics. Using a newly introduced approach by Sandal, the paper revisited the concluded Reproductive Health debate in the Philippines last 2012. The approach showed that the issue involved both international and domestic dimensions. In the case of international dimension, the paper reiterates that the Reproductive Health debate is not simply a policy pro-

68 Congressional Record Volume 2 No. 39a, December 12, 2012, Third Regular Session, House of Representatives of the Philippines, [www.congress.gov.ph](http://www.congress.gov.ph), p. 59.

69 House of Representatives Journal No. 39, December 11 and 12, 2012, Third Regular Session, House of Representatives of the Philippines, [www.congress.gov.ph](http://www.congress.gov.ph), p. 44.

70 Congressional Record Volume 2 No. 39a, December 12, 2012, p. 61.

71 Congressional Record Volume 2 No. 40, December 17, 2012, Third Regular Session, House of Representatives of the Philippines, [www.congress.gov.ph](http://www.congress.gov.ph), p. 21.

72 Ibid.

73 Interview with Edcel Lagman.

posal but a product of a political force coming from the international level as the RH Law is needed for compliance to the Millennium Development Goals. On the other hand, new dimensions on the domestic level revealed that an unexplored angle, the role of progressive religious actors, is a potential variable to flesh out more explanations for the case being studied. Moreover, since the paper accounted the role of a marginalized sector on religious circles, this paper provides critical challenges to the dominant narrative of secular explanations to modern domestic and international events.

The Filipino progressive religious sector is a marginalized sector located at the peripheries of the religious discourse. They were sidelined to the margins since they are few and their conservative counterpart possesses the leverage of institutional ecclesiastical advantage. Initially, these progressive religious leaders are hesitant to turn against the tide out of the fear of being reprimanded by their superiors or to be excommunicated; however, they were able to grab an opportunity to come out since the President, and a number of Congress members courageously showed their support to the bill. These progressive religious leaders were a breath of fresh air since they produced an alternative moral exegesis to the issue. This alternative moral exegesis served as an opportunity for lawmakers who support the Reproductive Health proposal to justify their stance and counter the dominant theological narrative of the Catholic bishops.

In addition, it should be understood that the goal of this paper is to understand the role of the progressive religious actors during the Reproductive Health debate. Although there are indicators presented on how this public theology impacted the decision making, these three benchmarks were based on a thematic analyses of the rhetorical reasoning why Filipino politicians favored the bill. A proper measurement of the total impact of the alternative public theology produced is recommended for future research.

Consequently, this paper possesses a loophole: it is only focused on specific factions of Christianity. This paper suggests that a similar study should be employed in pertinent issues with other states composed of deeply religious societies coming from another religious tradition such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Judaism. If we are going to expand the theoretical ability of public theology approach on issues regarding human rights debates and development issues, it is necessary to test the approach to other religious settings because every religion possesses its own unique identity and internal political sociology which affect its behavior in participating to modern political, economic and societal events.

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**РАЗМАТРАЊЕ ФИЛИПИНСКЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ РЕПРОДУКТИВНОГ ЗДРАВЉА  
ИЗ УГЛА ЈАВНЕ ТЕОЛОГИЈЕ: УЛОГА ПРОГРЕСИВНОГ КАТОЛИЧКОГ И  
ПРОТЕСТАНТСКОГ  
СЕКТОРА**

**Сажетак**

Иако традиционално религиозна земља, улога религије у филипинској политици је често занемаривана од стране аутора који су често анализирали верске актере само на основу њихових интереса или теолошких интерпретација. Овај рад се заснива на приступу јавне теологије. Користећи дебату о политици репродуктивног здравља (2010-2012) као студију случаја, јавна теологија као приступ приказује маргинализовани сектор верских актера који су постали утицајни у обликовању верско-политичког дискурса по питању моралности гласања политичара у корист закона о репродуктивном здрављу. Овај маргинализовани сектор, прогресивни верски лидери из редова католика и протестаната, нуди алтернативни модел моралних критеријума који су били корисни за председника и чланове Конгреса у циљу одбијања моралне и политичке претње од стране Филипинске конференције католичких свештеника.

**Кључне речи:** религија, јавна теологија, Филипини, репродуктивно здравље, прогресивно хришћанство

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