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REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH BILL
IN THE PHILIPPINES:
Sources of Conflict between the Church
and its Proponents

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Foreword

The goal of this occasional paper series is to help contributors integrate or link their research agenda and personal advocacies through social science research. In the three decades of its existence, the Social Development Research Center (SDRC), through externally-funded research projects, has established its niche in many areas of social science research such as, but not limited to, health policy, upland development and social impact assessments. However, because funding agencies determine



This paper stems from a presentation made by the author during a panel discussion on the RH Bill in the Philippines held during the Scientific Conference on Health Social Science on October 14, 2011 at the College of St. Benilde Hotel in Manila. It describes how th

Introduction

The Catholic Church has emphasized that the rejection of the RH bill is not about a Roman Catholic verdict but a reflection of the “fundamental ideals and aspirations of the Filipino people” (Sison 2011). The Church’s position is anchored on her disagreement with the proposal’s anti-life stance and problematic attitudes towards issues that affect religious expression. Christianity insists that artificial birth control methods are offensive to life because these tend to suppress the formation of life, particularly in the womb of the mother. In traditional Catholic positions, devices or means that directly hinder the development of life is offensive to life—hence, immoral. In reproductive health language, abortion cases reflect “unmet needs for contraception” which, if used, could have prevented unwanted pregnancies. While the RH framework identifies contraception as a necessary solution in the equation, the Church finds it problematic. It is in this perspective that the fundamental proposals in the bill are deemed immoral. The Church has gathered its forces to show its resistance to the proposal. The resistance has reverberated in many local churches in different parts of the archipelago. The local resistance offered by the Roman Catholic Church is now shared by the evangelical churches, and Islamic believers. These church communities in the country have used every means possible to disarm the threat provided by this proposal.

In response to this political and religious dilemma, this paper describes how the current debate between the Philippine Church and legal proponents on the proposed Responsible Parenthood Bill in congress is anchored on three problematic attitudes and presuppositions that have served to hinder the resolution of the case. The first is the belief in the separation of the Church and State. The second is the attitude towards the family. The third reflects the understanding of human sexuality and life. Data for this inquiry will primarily be taken from historical, doctrinal, and demographic sources and current scholarship on the issues.

The Bill as a Philippine Agenda

Against the voices of religious conservatism, the resistance is also echoed by MacIntyre (1981) who has expressed disagreement with notions of an ideal human nature while advancing virtue ethics. The Church clarifies, however, that the exercise of one's right as a person is a moral platform that the individual should consider in view of his/her natural orientation. This view critiques an understanding of human freedom that is identified with extreme views of human autonomy (Guerra 2008). One's natural orientation, the Church insists, is deeply religious. Individual choices, therefore, cannot remain indifferent from one's religious identity. Every personal decision is consummated in honor of one's identity. The unpopular position of secular explanations regarding the human person in Christian-oriented discourses explains the inability of alternative positions to topple Church-initiated ideas regarding the human person. This ethical pluralism either undermines religious perspectives or promotes them. In this regard, "... religious perspectives can compete or collaborate with other religious views or nonreligious views, attempting to persuade the dialogue partner of the value of their particular ethical outlook" (Lakeland, 44).

Separation of Church and State

The Church may have no direct political or economic mandate but possesses certain political and social responsibilities (Fabros 1988) to look after the needs of each member so that a just and peaceful condition willed by God prevails. Unfortunately, a just social order is regarded no less by Friedrich August von Hayek (1948) as being incompatible with individual freedom. The 1974 Nobel laureate's neo-liberal position makes his ideas the subject of an intense theological critique (Chang 2003). At about the same time that the establishment of the western principle of separation was formulated, the Vatican launched its vocal adherence for religious freedom through *Dignitatis Humanae* (P. Paul VI 1965). Embroiled in the democratic process to listen to the voices of the people but driven to demonstrate the separation of Church and State, the current Aquino government is challenged to respect the principles of religious freedom. Since the Spanish occupation in the 19th century, the Church has traditionally played a significant role in Philippine politics. Throughout Spanish rule "Church influence was so strong, thinking became uniform, unorthodox ideas were condemned, and original scholarship was non-existent" (Aprieto 1981, 23). However this influence was not the case under the American regime (Aguilos 1999, 206) where the separation of both institutions was emphasized. Should the Aquino government and the legal framers of the Bill hide under the mantle of separation and disregard any attempts to stop its enactment?

strength of this political engagement was well pronounced during the years of Jaime Cardinal Sin. The contentious issue of religion entering into the public realm— e.g. in public education, cultural life or political life—is reflected in the struggle to understand the extent to which religious participation in political life can be legitimized. The stake of the separation of Church and the State

The separation of Church and State is a traditional subject of discussion under the Church-State paradigm (Edge and Harvey 2000) within discourses of law and religion. Edge and Harvey consider two other paradigms falling under this area, namely the civil liberties and the individual-community religious paradigms. The debate revolving around the principle of separation includes positions that emphasize or describe the autonomy of either the State or the Religious communities. The recent case in France (Adrian 2009) regarding the banning of the Muslim veil reprises the issue of political autonomy at the expense of religious observances. While the separation is founded on moral, legal and political grounds (Audi 1989), the French experience voices out the State's prerogative to level the playing field among religious stakeholders. Scott Idleman has argued that "religious free exercise must often be subordinated to preserve the supremacy of civil law and government" (2000, 183). From an American experience, Stephen Feldman (2000) points out that the Christian religiosity of America is a manifestation of the looming dominance of religion in the secular sphere. Okuyama (2009) also presents the issue of religion and politics as a brewing problem in Japan. A sample from proponents insisting on extended religious autonomy from the law (Brady 2006/2007) is an important case. Within this discussion, Hamilton (2006/2007) offers counter arguments to Brady's position.

The debate generated by the principle of separation is made more intense by concurrent discussions on the resuscitation of the valued place of religion in the social sphere. The recurrence of religion as a factor in the political and cultural life of the state (Turner 2011; Habermas 2005; Molendijk, Beaumont, and Jedan 2010; Haynes 2009) has become the recent focus of discussions in the field of sociology and humanities. European scholarship underscores this point in many conferences. The failure of the Secularization Theory to pin the demise of religion in society has reluctantly been admitted (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 4). As a result, sociological discourse has crafted new directions globally when the orientation of their inquiries notes the shift from Christian centering towards discourses on the "post-secular". For Habermas (2005), the post-secular shift will have to contend with the need to understand the new religious orientation in a secular environment. Apparently the growing secularism in a given society exemplified in liberal democracies (Bader 2003) does not necessarily mean the loss or hindering of religion in the marketplace. The Philippine scenario is distinguished from this global movement as it continues to

heuristic roles" (Audi 2000, 75). Paul Hanson, the renowned Bible scholar from Harvard University, articulates the essential link that swings between worship and political life (2005a), manifest Christian behavior in political life (2005b) and the world (1981). This series of lectures positively points to the sound biblical basis of any political participation by a Christian adherent. These scholarly works determine the depths of the biblical perspectives of the relationship between worship and secular life.

Attitudes towards Family

Another area of contention in the RH debate is the attitude towards family. The family is dragged into the picture when programs of population reduction are pursued. For the Church, these initiatives intend to bring down family size through available contraceptive devices. While the RH proponents believe the program only seeks to "assist couples, parents, and individuals to achieve their desired family size" (Bill Sec.16), the Church believes otherwise. It posits that the overall intended legal structure will inflict moral, psychological and spiritual harm on the family. Against the plan to reduce the replacement levels to below 2.29 by 2020, this counter-argument is raised:

The effect desired by population controllers, the slowing of population growth, will not immediately take place, due to population momentum, decreased mortality and longer lifespan. By the time population growth will have slowed down, the Total Fertility Rate will be way below the replacement level, and the average population age will be extremely high (Gaston 2007, 85).

This aggressive defense of the family asserts "propagation of life" (Clowney 1979, 9) as the fundamental purpose of families, and the State as "the institution of God identified for this propagation" (Ibid.). Traditionally, the Church regards the family as the "domestic church" (Lumen Gentium #11; Caffrey Bourg 2004). The Christian concept of family rests on the fundamental equality in dignity and the inherent goodness of man and woman (CCC #369). Man and woman are meant for each other in a relationship (CCC #371-372). Hence, to be called a family means to live one's dignity as gifted husband and wife in relationship to another. Marital relationship is ordered towards begetting children. Contrary to popular interpretations, the notion of Responsible Parenthood in Catholicism is not wanton child-rearing by couples in response to the Scriptural command, but a religious and moral responsibility to be undertaken with respect to God's will

(*Humanae Vitae* #10). Christianity insists that married couples are not absolutely autonomous in matters of decision-making. Through time, when modern families have been shaken by internal and external troubles, the Church has committed an inclusive attitude towards problematic relationships. The imperfect character of marital relationships makes married life the subject of constant pastoral attention. In 1981, Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* (*Familiaris Consortio*) emphasized that the Church remain committed even to Catholics who have divorced and remarried. For Sociology (Norris and Inglehart 2004), these accounts prove how traditional religion pursues the preservation of the family and the encouragement of couples to have children. For the Church, the proposed RH Bill is an encroachment on these valued religious truths and the moral norms attached to them.

An imminent issue within discussions on family life is the issue of same seRhTe7ura,is

the 80s had noticeable self-centered issues in thinking and behavior (Xiaoying 2005, 185). The vulnerability of these children is observed in the lack of a sense of responsibility, and a deficiency in caring attitudes and socializing traits. This can be contrasted with a child who belongs to an average large family in the Philippines, and typically shows community-oriented attitudes.

Human Sexuality: Divine Gift and Cultural Constructs

The Church identifies the offensive upon families as also being an attempt to undermine the fundamental value of the person. Issues of gender and sex are attached to current discussions on human sexuality. In Feminist perspectives (Redfern and Aune 2010), these issues remain to be in need of significant attention from religious and political institutions. Traditionally, Sociology views "gender" as a cultural and social construct, while "sex" is generally considered as immutable and physically conditioned. However, current sociological theories (i.e. Butler 1999) assert that "biological sex and social gender" are constructs within a particular condition. This sociological shift in gender-sex distinctions vis-a-vis the current biblical interpretation of the basis of male and female inevitably forms a new stage of debate between Christianity and proponents of same sex marriages. Adding to this tension is the observed reactions to the educative aspects of the government information campaign on sex and reproduction. The mandated POPEd program covering sex and reproduction in the secondary education curriculum is, as numerous comments have it, regarded by the Church as "the fallopian tubes type of education" (Zosa-Feraniil 2003, 21). This packaging, the Church insists, does not necessarily address the essential relational dimension of sexuality and inadequately relates to expectations befitting a young student at the secondary level. In matters of sexuality, "parents have the duty and right to be the first and principal educators of their children" (Trujillo 1995 #5). Another problem in conversations on human sexuality deals with misperceptions of Church attitudes towards individuals. The Church maintains an inclusive stance towards all persons regardless of sex. It is to their actions that the moral judgment is rendered, not to their person. Even in their social status as "homosexuals," the Church deems that they are subjects of Christian compassion, not of judgment and ridicule.

The Cairo ICPD in 1994 affirmed that the rights of every woman are an essential aspect of human rights. This recognition is actually shared by the Roman Catholic Church in its fundamental moral teachings (CBCP 1992). The recognition of human rights is biblically based (Genesis 1 and 2) and is deemed a consequence of human dignity. This biblical foundation expresses two fundamental insights: (a) the "fundamental equality of man and woman who are made in the

image and likeness of God” (Lawler, Boyle and May 1998, 34), and (b) that man and woman are meant for each other. The second insight affirms the relational existence of the individual. It is also fundamental to the man-woman marital relationship, in which man and woman “‘give’ themselves to one another by a free act of irrevocable personal consent” (Lawler et al. 1998, 36). These insights affirm the relational character of human sexuality in Christian frameworks (ECCCE 2005). Lawler et al. (1998) have pointed out how Jesus affirms the goodness of sexuality and marriage in Gen 1:27 (thru: Mt. 19:4; Mk 10:6) and Gen. 2:24 (thru: Mt. 19:5; Mk 10:7). This Christian teaching grounds the notion of human sexuality in biblical text. While recognizing the fundamental equality of man and woman, the secular notions do not share the Christian religious platform for understanding human sexuality. While the Church recognizes the Thomistic autonomy of nature, the Bill adheres to the autonomy of human rights.

Human Life

The title of the recent pastoral letter on the RH Bill by CBCP President Bishop Nereo Odchimar (January 30, 2011) emphasizes that a rejection of the Bill means choosing life. This pastoral position has defined the debate as being either in favor of or against life. The Church position ultimately brings the argument towards a sacred obligation—to protect the unborn baby. For the Church, this obligation is raised when RH proponents cite among others the fundamental reason that poverty in the Philippines is linked to overpopulation or rapid growth rate. Theories behind this argument express the relation between per capita income and TFR (Total Fertility Rate) in this manner: (a) if per capita income increases, then TFR decreases; (b) if per capita income decreases, then TFR increases. Bearing in mind these variants, the study of Mapa, Lucagbo and Ignacio (2010) affirms that “increasing the per capita income indeed reduces the TFR but its impact is minimal”. The Church also rejects the theorized relationship between Philippine poverty and perceptions of overpopulation on the following grounds: (a) poverty in the Philippines is not necessarily due to overpopulation. On the contrary, the Church insists that the economic poverty of Filipinos arises from mismanagement and corruption in government. Corruption is arguably one of the seedbeds of the unequal distribution of goods and services. To this issue, the question of whether economic growth in the Philippines has benefitted the poor (Virola et al., 2010) remains a relevant point—the Benigno Aquino III administration has gradually shown that despite the current population growth rate, an increase in economic growth is possible with sincere government programs; (b) the population control strategy attached to the proposal is categorized

as immoral since it impinges on the sanctity of human life; and (c) the Bill is a front for a larger national US agenda based on a declassified document, the NSSM 200 (USNSC 1974) identified with Henry Kissinger. The document's problematic assertion is cited (Brewda 1995) for its plan to "control" populations in the developing world in favor of US national security.

The Church position appears to enjoy support from certain scientific views (AFFP 2011) or studies that reject (a) any correlation between population growth and development (e.g. Simon Kuznets); (b) population control as an ingredient for economic growth (e.g. Michael Spence); and (c) "under-population" as the real issue and not overpopulation. The following ideas summarize the Catholic viewpoint:

The causes of our poverty are: flawed philosophies of development, misguided economic

arguments on nature and life. Aquinas believed that “God is the efficient cause of nature, so the world is purposeful and designed” (Wilcockson, 10). Christianity also grounds this argument on biblical foundations (Mt 13: 44-52; Rom. 8: 28-30). By this understanding, life has a destiny, a purpose that everyone is morally bound to pursue. This purpose obliges everyone to respect life itself so that its noble purpose is attained in the end. Those who seek to undermine life's end commit a serious offense against this divine gift. This constitutes the primary basis of the Church's counterarguments to the RH Bill. Considering the religious bearing of the sanctity of life, this position is regarded as a religious position.

In contrast, the quality of life (Wilcockson, 14-19) argument is advanced by several other proponents who endorse the following positions: the utilitarian view e.g. Singer (Best n.d.); human autonomy; human rights and consciousness. These proponents believe that “the value of life has to do with external or extrinsic factors such as the desire to live and the right to die. The chief feature of the Quality of Life view is that it removes the absoluteness of life and argues that “people also have a right to die when they wish” (Wilcockson, 3), without negative moral repercussions.

The involvement of these ethical and theological positions claims the idea that the sanctity of life is a fundamental religious attitude prior to the recognition of the rival alternative. Besides Christianity, the Sanctity of Life doctrine is also shared by Hindu and Islamic teachings. The Sanctity of Life and Quality of Life debate is represented by local groups who claim to be “Pro-life” (Sanctity of Life proponents) and “Pro-choice” (Quality of Life proponents). The Pro-life group calls upon everyone to take the necessary steps to preserve life to honor its sanctity. On the contrary, Pro-choice groups believe that every individual possesses every right in relation to their reproductive systems. This may mean the exercise of the right of choice in observance of one's autonomy. Unfortunately, the basic points of conflict—e.g. presence of soul and subjectivity in the individual—between these groups with regard to life has not been resolved by secular science. The ongoing debate between the “quality of life” and “sanctity of life” (Kuhse 1987; Ramsey 1978; Kuhse and Singer 1986) appears to be irreconcilable on the grounds of metaphysical difference (Long 1988). On the contrary, Singer and Kuhse (1988) think otherwise.

In the midst of popular perceptions of overpopulation and population explosion as the root of the rising problems of the world, the Church insists on the inviolable sacred value of life. Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* (1968) to affirm the sanctity of human life and condemn any

attempts at justifying contraceptive use (Smith 1991) on account of the perceived bulging world population. The Catholic Social Teachings (CST) advances the view that human development should not compromise the dignity of life that resides in every person.

The thesis of overpopulation has reverberated in many academic papers (Demeterio 2007) using demographic data. Demographic data from these presentations are taken in terms of population density and population growth rate. But in its midst a brewing position citing current demographic and projected data reflects an alternative religious position pursued by the Church. Recent positions on the issue of overpopulation counts on Total Fertility Rates (TFR) as a significant demographic tool to counter the overpopulation thesis. According to the United Nations, TFR refers to the “number of children that would be born per woman” (unstats.un.org). The TFR is helpful in this regard to determine population projections, human replacement levels and human resources through the population pyramid. The average TFR for the Philippines is 2.29 children per woman (Dupâquier 2004). For 2005-2010, the UN listed the Philippines with a 3.23 TFR. The World Bank in 2009 released a list where the country also registered a 3.23 TFR. Below 2.29, the Philippines (Gaston 2007) runs the risk of duplicating the population crises currently experienced by Japan and most other western countries. The Church follows this thinking and considers as unrealistic every campaign to bring down the birth rate (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* #25).

Meanwhile, the slow fertility decline in the Philippines, despite consistent government policies (Herrin 2002), has been the subject of demographic attention (Costello and Casterline 2002; Cabigon 2002a). Demographers following this inquiry have failed to consider that Christian religious propositions towards life have found corresponding attitudes rooted in the hearts of an average Filipino family person. The affinity between the average Filipino appreciation of life and the Church's official position about life has, unknown to many, served as an antidote to this massive campaign to bring down the country's population. The theorized “overpopulation of the world” that projects world population to reach an alarming projected estimate of 11.9 billion people by 2050 (Gaston 2008, 1) is rejected as “misconceived”. The projected population estimate of the Cairo ICPD conference by 2050 is between 7.8 – 12.5 billion people (United Nations ICPD 1994). The rejection of the argued overpopulation thesis is sustained by experts (Meyer 2004, 58) who have sounded off, for some time now, an assertive rebuttal claiming that the world is actually going to face a downturn by 2050 due to a continuing drop in the TFR in many countries of the world. Instead of riding on the overpopulation claims, the thesis of an

(*Manila Bulletin*, August 30, 2001; *Washington Post*, March 18, 2001; *Friday Fax*, May 4, 2000; *Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 12, 2003; *Daily News Express*, Feb. 2, 2004; and *Daily Mail*, September 22, 2003).

Conclusion

that classic encounter, the Church in the end laid her claims upon authority over Galileo, to which the latter hesitatingly acceded. In discussing the Science and Religion relationship, McCann (2011) points out how the Galileo issue was a case of scientists in need of theological information, and of theologians in need of scientific understanding. The resurgence of religion and spirituality as influencing factors in the formation of the individual today cites the need of government policy makers and interest groups to consider the religious angles of the issue and to possibly strike a balance towards a workable compromise. Today, it must be noted that the manner by which the Church has pursued its arguments against the RH Bill has been done through the aid of theological and social scientific tools. The presentation of evidence, however, is now increasingly pushed with the aid of empirical data aimed at diffusing the argument raised by reproductive health proponents. This scenario has brought the offensive to their backyard. In this debate the Church has incorporated within its teaching function the task to inform the public not only about the basis of scriptural and theological reflection but about accounts of scientific evidence made available to social science. The application of empirical data in forming the moral positions of the Church was already in place in 1891, when the first Catholic Social Teaching *Rerum Novarum* was written by Pope Leo XIII.

Over and above all these academic and political arguments, a distinctive Catholic influence has remained anchored in the political life of the nation. After all, the post-secular period has not discounted the ruling impact of spiritualities and institutional religions in the social sphere. While some sectors clamor for the dismantling of this stronghold and have cited how Christian nations in other parts of the world have shifted in policies governing reproductive health and poverty alleviation, the Philippine Church has stood its ground—a testament of her communion with the aspirations and ideals of the Filipinos.

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