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The Call of the Digital Age for Lay Participation:
An Answer to Transparency of the Church

Brang Mai Lazing

Abstract

Due to the many Catholic Church scandals and abuses recently uncovered, Church transparency has become an important topic. This paper examines how, in the age of digital media, Church members are becoming independent media sources in order to raise their voices on digital platforms, calling for greater Church transparency regarding these abuses and scandals. Employing literature analysis as a methodology, this paper analyzes sources from scholars in Church communication, systematic theologians, philosophers, ethicists, moral theologians, media ecologists, and other sources such as Church documents and papal messages. The paper finds that while secrecy plays an important role in religious settings, the secretive handling of abuse cases may also derive from or devolve into clericalism, and the participation of laity in the process may help overcome this and ensure the transparency of the Church. The findings of this paper support the conclusion that transparency does not mean that everything should be uncovered but that lay people should be offered a proper administrative channel to actively participate in handling cases of abuse.

Keywords: *Abuse, Digital Media, Church Communication, Lay Participation, Secrecy, Transparency.*

Brang Mai Lazing is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. His current research is on the topic of transparency of the Church in the contemporary digital culture.

Introduction

Due to the many Church scandals and abuses recently uncovered, Church transparency has become an important topic.[1] In view of this, numerous scholars have made proposals and suggestions to tackle this issue. In order that a greater transparency can be enforced, a democratic ruling system in the administration of the Church has been proposed.[2] Another suggestion is that the Church should employ the Seven Principles of Public Life, or the Nolan Principles,[3] to build up a transparent Church.[4] While calling for transparency, other scholars take an unorthodox position dissenting from the Catholic position by proposing to amend the seal of confession so that priests may report sexual abuse cases through the information received from confession.[5] On the other hand, one paper contends the Church should not practice transparency because of socio-cultural demands, but because transparency is linked to the mission of the Church.[6] One historian has claimed that the credibility of the Church has not been shaken primarily due to the cover-up of abuses, but that the cause should be seen as

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[1] Greg Erlandson and Gretchen R. Crowe, "Church communication highlights 2015," *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2016):15, https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181309.

[2] Marcin Lisak, "Democratisation of a Hierarchical Religion: The Roman Catholic Church in the Time of a Credibility Crisis Caused by Sexual Abuse Misconduct," *Studia Religiologica* 45, no. 1 (2012): 7-19, https://doi.org/10.4467/20844077SR.12.001.0793.

[3] These principles, which are prescribed in the UK for those who are in authority, include "selflessness", "integrity", "objectivity", "accountability", "openness", "honesty", and "leadership".

[4] Nuala O'Loan, "Transparency, Accountability and the Exercise of Power in the Church of the Future," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 99, no. 395 (2010): 267-275, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746135.

[5] Michael Andre Guerzoni and Hannah Graham, "Catholic Church Responses to Clergy-Child Sexual Abuse and Mandatory Reporting Exemptions in Victoria, Australia: A Discursive Critique," *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4, no. 4 (2015): 58-75, https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v4i4.205.

[6] Cristian Mendoza and Carl Beekman, "Transparency Culture & Ecclesial Responsibility: Reflections on Institutional Communications," *Communication, Society and Media* 1, no.1 (2018): 1-19, http://doi.org/10.22158/csm.v1n1p1.

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stemming mainly from four factors: from dissonance (e.g. whether the role of a parish priest is the same as a manager), from Catholic myth (e.g. when Catholics see other Christians as "different Christians"), from lack of accountability, and from the lack of transparency.[7] From the perspective of theological ethics, stress has been placed upon the importance of lay participation in dealing with sexual abuses and bringing justice and transparency to the Catholic Church in India.[8] Without accounting for every one of the above perspectives, from the perspective of Church communications, this paper argues that greater transparency can be one of the solutions, and it presents how laypeople, using digital platforms themselves, can play a helpful role in calling for the transparency of the Church.

According to Robert Logan, a media ecologist, digital culture offers a condition in which "the producer and the consumer are actually the same agent."[9] Therefore, in this contemporary digital era more than ever before, individual users themselves have become producers independent from mainstream media and granted the power to raise their voices through digital platforms. At the background of this cultural shift brought about by digital media, this paper presents that abuses and scandals in the Church can easily go viral on digital platforms. Further, this paper aims to show that, in the digital era, rather than being a problem between Church and media, the real problem often lies between Church leaders, who represent the Church, and lay members of the Church, who have become independent on digital platforms raising their voices against those abuses and scandals. Often, the new media is culpable of exposing information which should not be revealed because of an individual's right to privacy. Nevertheless, because the

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[7] Thomas O' Loughlin, "The Credibility of the Catholic Church as Public Actor," *New Blackfriars* 94, no.1050 (2013): 129-147, https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12011.

[8] Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, "The Sexual Abuse Scandal and a New Ethical Horizon: A Perspective from India," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (2019): 931-949, https://doi-org.kuleuven.ezproxy.kuleuven.be/10.1177%2F0040563919874517.

[9] Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (New York: Peter Lang, [2]2016), 8.

increased lay involvement in the media makes further dissemination of scandals unavoidable in the age of digital media, Church authorities may often need to be especially open with the faithful in order to avoid the accusations of clericalism, of unwarranted cover-ups, or of hidden agendas. This increased involvement on the part of laypeople therefore calls for the Church to respond with transparency.

Methodology

In this paper, I use literature analysis as the primary research methodology. The literature sources that I analyze can be divided into five groups: (1) Church documents and papal messages; (2) scholars in Church communication such as Franz-Josef Eilers, Frances Forde Plude, Jim McDonnell, Phyllis Zagano, Patrick Granfield, and Russell Shaw; (3) scholars in systematic theology and philosophy such as Edward Schillebeeckx, then Joseph Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI, Pope Emeritus), Michel Foucault, and Jonathan Malesic; (4) moral theologians and ethicists such as Germain Grisez, Richard M. Gula, Sissela Bok, and Shaji George Kochuthanra; and (5) media ecologists such as Marshall McLuhan and Robert K. Logan.

First, I start with the concept of secrecy practiced in the Church, explaining its importance and why it can also become a problem, offering a solution to overcome that problem of secrecy in cases of abuse. In this regard, I propose the two concepts of "participation" and "transparency" as a solution to overcome clericalism which is closely related to the abuse of secrecy in cases of clergy abuses. Second, I deal with the topic of digital media related to abuses and scandals in the Church, explaining how users, who remained passive consumers before the digital era, have become independent in the age of digital media. In this cultural shift, I highlight how members of the Church or laypeople themselves are granted power to raise their voices on digital platforms regarding cases of abuse in the Church, calling for transparency of the Church. Third, I enter into dialogue with Church documents and papal messages. Fourth, I propose that lay participation can be a solution to

tackle the problem of abuse cases and bring transparency to the Church. Finally, I make a concluding remark.

Importance of Secrecy in the Church

There is a sharp distinction between religion and certain modern philosophies regarding the concept of secrecy. In his study of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Jonathan Malesic, Professor of Theology at King's College, finds that religion accepts secrecy while Kantian philosophy rejects it. According to Kantian philosophy, respecting another person's autonomy is essential, and as a consequence, there are two reasons why "secrecy" is rejected in the Kantian philosophy: (1) secrecy creates an inequality between the one who keeps secrets and the one who does not have access to those secrets; and (2) secrecy abolishes "the free communication" that should be provided for those who need to be informed in order to give their consent.[10] On the other hand, religion allows keeping secrets because, unlike Kantian universal ethics, religion has a particular sphere that determines the existence of secrecy. An example of this is the story of Abraham's relationship with God. Malesic explains, "Abraham does not speak the truth of his secret to Isaac because, at the same time, he holds in his inwardness an unspeakable secret, his relation to God."[11] In the same vein, according to Sissela Bok, an ethicist, one aspect of secrecy is "the sacred, the uncanny, and the mysterious."[12] Therefore, while secrecy is rejected in Kantian philosophy, it is allowed in a religious setting. Indeed, in many contexts, it is a moral imperative.

Secrecy has an important role in the life of the Church. C*ommunio et Progressio* (no. 121) expresses that while the Church should maintain

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[10] Jonathan Malesic, "A Secret both Sinister and Salvific: Secrecy and Normativity in Light of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 74, no.2 (2006): 448, www.jstor.org/stable/4094040.

[11] *Ibid*., 459.

[12] Sissela Bok, *Secretes: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 6.

integrity, truth and openness in her proclamation of the Gospel, the requirement of secrecy cannot be ruled out in the Church as it is in other civil affairs.[13] In our societies, we have our own secrets that we cannot or must not tell others. We do not share the pin codes of our bank cards with strangers. Medical doctors must keep secret the information of their patients in accordance with prescribed rules and regulations. The President of the United States is provided secret Gold Codes to launch nuclear weapons.[14] These examples show that secrecy cannot be ruled out in our civil societies. Similarly, in the Catholic Church, priests are strictly obliged to keep secret any information they receive from confessions in accordance with the confessional seal. This obligation to absolute secrecy is even graver than any civil secret because it concerns matters of a person's internal forum to which God alone has the right to access. To violate this secret would violate the trust between a penitent and the priest who acts as the mediator between him and God. Because other personal information is also private, and it is often even connected to the internal forum and the sacramental life of a person, according to Canon 535, those in charge of parish archives are "to make sure that the contents of the archives do not come into the hands of outsiders."[15] According to Mt. 6:17-18, our good deeds performed in secret will be rewarded by the heavenly Father. Therefore, as claimed by Russell Shaw, former communications director for the U.S. Bishops, secrecy has an important place in the life of the Church.[16]

Problem of Secrecy in the Church

Although there are occasions when guarding secrecy is prudent, or even obligatory, secrecy can become a problem when strongly linked with a cult of elites, or clericalism, in the Church, especially in the cases of covered-up abuse which leaves the innocent vulnerable and justice unfulfilled. One of the three reasons why the exact numbers of abuse cases cannot be obtained is due to "the culture of confidentiality and secrecy in the Catholic Church," as noted by Frances Forde Plude.[17] This abuse of secrecy, especially in the case of clergy sex abuses in the Church, is closely related to clericalism, defined by Russell Shaw as an "elitist mindset."[18] In this case, Plude agrees with Shaw as she writes that one of the issues causing abuses is because priests and bishops prefer fraternity among themselves over accountability.[19] How clericalism contributes to the abuse of secrecy is clearly mentioned in the report by the National Review Board on clergy sex abuses in the Catholic Church of the United States:

Clericalism also contributed to a culture of secrecy. In many instances, Church leaders valued confidentiality and a priest's right to privacy above the prevention of further harm to victims and the vindication of their rights. Both confidentiality and privacy are valuable, and obviously it is important to take steps to ensure, to the extent possible, the privacy and rights of the accused. But these values should not be allowed to trump the duty to keep children safe from harm or to investigate claims of sexual abuse against clerics and respond appropriately.[20]

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[13] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "*Communio et Progressio*," pastoral instruction for the application of the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Means of Social Communication, May 23, 1971, in *Church & Social Communication: Basic Documents 1936-2014*, introduced and edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD (Manila: Logos Publications, ³2014), 139.

[14] GlobalSecurity.org, "The Football," Accessed March 25, https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/nuclear-football.htm.

[15] John A. Renken, "Parishes, Pastors, and Parochial Vicars," in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, with a Revised English Translation of the Code, commissioned by The Canon Law Society of America, ed. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 708.

[16] Russell Shaw, *Nothing to Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 119.

[17] Frances Forde Plude, "The US Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Scandal: A Media/Religion Case Study," in *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, ed. Peter Horsfield, Mary E. Hess and Adán M. Medrano (Hants GU, England: Ashgate, 2004), 183.

[18] Russell Shaw, *Nothing to Hide,* 14-15.

[19] Frances Forde Plude, "The US Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Scandal," 189.

[20] National Review Board for the Protection Of Children and Young People, *A report on the crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States* (Washington, D.C.:

The report by the National Review Board presents how the abuse of secrecy is related to clericalism in cases of clergy abuse. Out of a culture of clericalism, Church leaders have, on occasion, preferred to protect the confidentiality of abusers to the detriment of the suffering of victims.

One reason why this abuse of secrecy and clericalism are related is due to an unwillingness of one within a select group to accept criticism from others outside of the group. Members of any group are susceptible to this because individuals often group together based upon special competencies, and therefore judge themselves worthy of standing in judgment over others outside of their group. This danger is particularly great with clerics who are, by profession, the primary interpreters of the moral law. Nevertheless, no group or individual stands wholly above error or moral accountability. This unwillingness to accept any criticism can weaken one's courage to make the right judgment, leading to the person's moral decay. In this regard, secrecy "can debilitate judgment, first of all, whenever it shuts out criticism and feedback, leading people to become mired down in stereotyped, unexamined, often erroneous beliefs and ways of thinking," as Sissela Bok has argued.[21] As a consequence, not being able to face criticism, there will be a moral decay within and secrecy can corrupt.[22] The link between such abuses of secrecy, an unwillingness to accept criticism, and clericalism can be discerned in the same report by the National Review Board. On the topic of clericalism, the report says, "Some bishops did not want to be associated with any problem for fear of criticism because a problem arose on their watch. As a result, problems [of abuses] were left to fester."[23] The report also informs us that bishops are involved in denying abuse cases and keeping the information secret.[24]

In addition, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also implicitly links clericalism to clergy abuses. In 2019, during Passiontide, Benedict issued a letter, *The Church and The Scandal of Sexual Abuse*, which was divided into three main parts: (1) a presentation of the situation characterized by the sexual revolution from 1960 to 1980; (2) the impact of this sexual revolution on priestly formation; and (3) the response that the Church should take to this situation. In the second part, the Pope drew special attention to how, by the abuses of clerics, victims have not only suffered physical abuse, but the faith of common believers has also been destroyed.[25] Benedict claims that the faith of ordinary laypeople have been damaged by clerical abuses,[26] and in this way, he points out the damage done by clerical abuse on the faith of common believers. Even though Benedict does not use the term clericalism, instead quoting Mark 9:42, he nevertheless identifies "the little ones" with the common believers and acknowledges that the common believers are those "who can be confounded in their faith by the intellectual arrogance of those who think they are clever."[27] In this way, Pope Benedict implicitly links clericalism to cases of clergy abuse.

Based on the discussion of Plude, Shaw, and the National Review Board report, it can be seen that clericalism is a significant factor closely related to the abuse of secrecy. Additionally, Bok pointed out that one negative aspect of secrecy can be an unwillingness to accept criticism and feedback. As it was also affirmed by the report by the National Review Board, this unwillingness to accept feedback is also a regrettable feature present in clericalism. The Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has gone even further by discerning that not only the physical body of victims, but also the faith of common believers has been damaged by clerics, thus implicitly linking clericalism to cases of clergy abuse.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 104-105, http://www.usccb.org/about/child-and-youth-protection/the-national-review-board.cfm.

[21] Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, 25.

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] National Review Board for the Protection Of Children and Young People, *A report on the crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States*, 104.

[24] *Ibid*., 105-106.

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[25] Benedict XVI, "The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse," trans. Anian Christoph Wimmer, in *Abuse of Sexuality in the Catholic Church* (Place of Publication not specified: Divine Providence Press, 2018), 151.

[26] *Ibid*., 153.

[27] *Ibid*., 151.

Overcoming Abuse of Secrecy through Participation and Transparency

One way to overcome this culture of clericalism, which is closely related to the abuse of secrecy in clergy abuses, is perhaps by acknowledging the important role of lay members of the Church. Such practice of participation can overcome clericalism and enhance transparency of the Church. We shall see why this is true in this section.

In general, it is morally acceptable that Church leaders should handle clergy abuse cases because bishops are responsible for appointing their priests. Germain Grisez, a moral theologian, explains that keeping a secret has limitations as there must be a "*morally acceptable reason*" to do so, and keeping secrets should not be a means of wrongdoing.[28] In this regard, says the scholar, in order to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent, it is important that "authorities (parents, superiors, managers, police, and so on)" are obliged to seek those secrets.[29] According to Grisez' view, in the cases of Church abuses, those who are in authority in the Church are morally allowed to seek those secrets related to abuses and handle them properly and there is no reason for ordinary members or laypeople to intervene.

Yet, the problem is that, as shown above, the trust in Church leaders has been shaken due to clericalism or an elitist mindset regarding abuse cases. In addition, in her speech at the USCCB[30] meeting in Dallas TX in 2002, *The Present Crisis through the Lens of the Laity,* Margaret O' Brien Steinfels, the editor of the *Commonweal*, claims that there is little "trust" by the laity in Church leaders in handling abuses and scandals in the Church.[31] Similarly, in his analysis of the two research projects

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[28] Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1993), 415. [Italic in the original source]

[29] *Ibid*., 416.

[30] USCCB = The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

[31] Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, "The Present Crisis through the Lens of the Laity" (Paper presented at the USCCB Meeting, June 13, 2002), http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/archives.cfm.

done by NOP[32] and James M. Cross, Jim McDonnell, a specialist in reputation and crisis management, discovered that younger Catholics have a significant decrease of confidence in clergy due to scandals.[33] In this regard, as there is a considerable reason why trust in Church leaders has been decreased, we must consider the method of co-responsibility or lay participation in the handling of abuse cases.

Moreover, clericalism can create a situation where abuse of power can occur in cases of sexual abuse, as pointed out by Richard M. Gula, Professor of Moral Theology.[34] Similarly, arguing that clergy sexual abuses against adults occur not because of the vulnerability of victims but because of power abuse by perpetrators, Stephen E. de Weger[35] and Jodi Death, Senior Lecturer of Legal Studies at Queensland University, explain how clericalism is related to abuse of power in sexual abuse cases and offer a better understanding of this power abuse by distinguishing the characteristics of positional power and personal power.[36] In addition, in their empirical research, Diana R. Garland, Professor at Baylor University School of Social Work, and Christen Argueta, Research Associate from the same university, point out that it is also the responsibility of the community to prevent such abuses of power.[37] By this, it is understandable that lay participation in the

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[32] NOP is a British polling organization.

[33] Jim McDonnell, "Desperately Seeking Credibility: English Catholics, the News Media and the Church," in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 38.

[34] Richard M. Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 147.

[35] He is a PhD student at Queensland University of Technology and his current project (PhD) is "Institutional responses to clergy sexual misconduct against adults".

[36] Stephen E. de Weger and Jodi Death, "Clergy Sexual Misconduct Against Adults in the Roman Catholic Church: The Misuse of Professional and Spiritual Power in the Sexual Abuse of Adults," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 30, no. 3 (2017): 229, 237, and 238. http://dx.doi.org.kuleuven.ezproxy.kuleuven.be/10.1558/jasr.32747.

[37] Diana R. Garland & Christen Argueta, "How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts," *Social Work and Christianity*

sharing of the community's responsibility could play an important role to tackle this kind of power abuse issue.

In this respect, Grisez points out that authentic communication exists where there is sharing responsibility or co-responsibility between two parties. The scholar claims, "Every act of communicating and receiving communication tends to draw the parties into an interpersonal relationship or to carry on and perhaps deepen an existing relationship. If the acts are motivated by charity, they will be open to genuine community and will tend to establish or build it up."[38] To have an authentic relationship between those in authority and ordinary members of the Church, it is necessary that there must be genuine communication between them. This genuine communication can be built up by establishing a two-way communication channel between them. In the words of Grisez, "All communication should be open to community."[39] In this regard, members of the Church should be provided a proper place to intervene when there is little trust in Church leaders so that there may not be any skepticism in the Church's handling abuse cases. Only then, the Church, as a community of God, can be considered as a genuine community.

Such a genuine community, where there is co-responsibility between Church leaders and members, can be discerned in the concept of the mystery of the Church included in the Dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II. In his analysis of the mystery of the Church, Edward Schillebeeckx explains that though the church of Christ is present in the Catholic Church in a very concrete way, it does not mean that the Catholic Church is without sin.[40] The Church is the worthy bride

of the Lord, but she must be in a state of constant renewal through the action of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, writes the theologian, regarding the sinful nature of the Church, there is no official distinction between believers and ministers in the Dogmatic Constitution. In other words, human sinfulness is applied both to believers and ministers as the people of God as a whole. Therefore, Schillebeeckx claims, "…both the hierarchy and believers stand under the constant admonition to incessant renewal and a Christian 'return to the sources.'"[41] Applied to handling cases of abuse, the idea of the theologian supports the method of cooperation between Church leaders and members of the Church. Cases of clergy abuse are a sign that the Church must be in a constant state of renewal. In this constant renewal, it is reasonable that Church leaders and laypeople should be united in the battle against abuse cases caused by human sinfulness.

Having discussed the concept of participation, we shall now turn to the topic of how participation can ensure transparency in the Church. Franz-Josef Eilers, former Executive Secretary of FABC-OSC,[42] stresses the importance of maintaining transparency in the Church by acknowledging the co-responsibility between the hierarchy and members of the Church. This idea can be discerned from Eilers' summary considerations of the Bishops' Conference for Social Communication, based on the meeting of FABC-OSC Bishops in 1996 in the Philippines. Even though the summary document is not explicitly concerned with abuses and Church scandals, it clearly mentions the concepts of co-responsibility and transparency that the Church should employ as a new way of being Church in Asia. In this summary (no.2), the scholar stresses that a truly participatory Church must employ a communication style that supports co-responsibility in all the dimensions of Church activities.[43] As mentioned above, what Eilers points out is in line with

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37, no. 1 (2010): 24, https://search-proquest-com.kuleuven.ezproxy.kuleuven.be/doc view/230169195?accountid=17215.

[38] Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life*, 390.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 194.

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[41] *Ibid*., 196.

[42] FABC-OSC = Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference – Office of Social Communication

[43] Franz-Josef Eilers, "New Way of Being Church in Asia: Communication Challenges," *Mediaforum* 2 (1998), 9.

the idea expressed by Grisez and Schillebeeckx, suggesting how to overcome clericalism or elitist mindset through participatory practice in the Church.

Moreover, Eilers links this participatory practice in the Church to the concept of transparency that a witnessing and dialoguing Church should employ. Quoting BISCOM I,[44] in the summary (no.3), the scholar notes that communication must be dialogical. By this, he means communication should be "transparent, dialogic, [and] marked with candor."[45] This theoretical concept of transparency should be realized at the practical level by eliminating communication gaps, establishing relationships, developing equality, co-responsibility, and interpersonal communication.[46] In addition, the dialogical communication calls for trust, openness, and transparency not only within the Catholic Church but also among other religions.[47] According to the summary of Eilers, the Church needs to employ the concepts of co-responsibility and transparency which can be considered as a new way of being Church in Asia to support lay participation. This concept of Eilers can also be applied to overcome clericalism which is closely related to the abuse of secrecy in cases of clergy abuse.

Transparency means making sure that members of the Church have trust in Church leaders regarding their handling of abuse cases. Only when that kind of trust can be established, can we eliminate communication gaps and imagine the Church as a genuine community, as explained by Eilers and Grisez, respectively above. As Cardinal Reinhard Marx has suggested in his Vatican presentation on the protection of minors, *Transparency as a Community of Believers*, transparency does not mean that everything should be uncovered but that "administration should take place in such a way that people feel accepted in administrative procedures, that they feel appreciated, that they can trust the system of administration, that they feel secure and fairly treated, that they are listened to and their legitimate criticism is accepted."[48] In Marx' view, establishing trust between Church leaders and members plays a pivotal role in ensuring the transparency of the Church. This trust can be established only when lay people are convinced that the administrative system of the Church, regarding abuse cases, is trustworthy. In this regard, authentic administration in the handling of abuse cases can be achieved, not through clericalism, but through listening to the concern of members of the Church at the grassroots level, building the trust that has been broken. In this way, transparency, which is another name of trust, can be reinforced by co-responsibility and participation.

In this section, as we have gone through the sources of Grisez, Schillebeeckx, Eilers, and Marx, we can observe that the method of co-responsibility or participation of laypeople can establish a genuine community, overcome the culture of clericalism that is closely related to the abuse of secrecy, and bring transparency to the Church. In this regard, transparency does not mean that everything should be uncovered as pointed out by Marx. Rather, it means re-establishing trust between Church leaders and members of the Church through co-responsibility or participation.

One of the significant issues in the Church in this era has resulted from the Church's failed response to abuses and scandals, which calls for transparency in this regard, as mentioned in the article *Church Communication Highlight 2015*.[49] Because there are many obstacles

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[44] BISCOM I = the first assembly of Bishops and Secretaries responsible in Bishops' Conferences for Social Communication

[45] Franz-Josef Eilers, "New Way of Being Church in Asia," 10.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] *Ibid*.

[48] Reinhard Cardinal Marx, "Transparency as a Community of Believers" (paper presented at the meeting on the protection of minors in Vatican, 23 February 2019), http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_card-marx-protezioneminori_20190223_en.html.

[49] Greg Erlandson and Gretchen R. Crowe, "Church communication highlights 2015," *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, no.1 (2016):15, https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181309.

and to help resolve these problems at the grassroots level, a main point of this paper is to argue that, regarding Church scandals and abuses, the voices of members of the Church on digital platforms should be heard. Below, we shall see how members or laypeople of the Church have come to utilize digital platforms to raise their concerns regarding abuses and scandals in the Church, calling for transparency in the Church.

Before the Digital Era: Users as Passive Consumers

In the past, cases of scandal and abuses in the Church were strongly covered-up by Church leaders and situated in a well-managed protected area where few could raise questions. This culture of secrecy can be clearly discerned in the official document of the Church on scandals and abuses, *Crimens Sollicitationis*, issued by Pope Pius XI in 1922, and revised and reissued by John XXIII in 1962. The 1922 and 1962 documents are the same in essence except a few minor additions.[50] *Crimimens Sollicitationis,* a document that provided canonical guidelines on how to deal, under strictest confidentiality, with clergy sex abuses committed within or outside of confessional settings, remained effective until 2001.[51] According to this document, dismissal of any abuser could rarely happen without his consent and the only thing that the abuser had to do was to say sorry and would remain as a priest.[52] Moreover, all those who were allowed to access information about abuse cases had to observe strict confidentiality and would be excommunicated automatically, had anyone of them broken this strict confidentiality.[53] We can therefore observe from the document *Crimimens Sollicitationis* that while secrecy and threat

prevailed regarding clergy abuses, the topic of transparency of the Church remained unknown to the public at that time.

Before the emergence of digital technology, with the advent of mass media such as the press, TV broadcasting, and radio, secular mainstream media appeared as the counter agent against the Church by reporting scandals and abuses happening in the Church. Yet, users and customers were perceived only as passive receivers unable to contribute to the content of the news. In this case, Jim McDonnell analyzed two research projects: the first conducted by NOP (already mentioned above) to know how Catholics in England and Wales consumed religious and secular information, and the second by James M. Cross to access how Catholics and non-Catholics perceived the Catholic Church in England. According to the analysis of McDonnell, it is clear that Catholics, as consumers of the news, remained passive receivers of the reports on Church scandals and abuses, and secular media played a pivotal role in disseminating clergy abuses.[54]

In 1998, Eilers suggested that because the secular media were "not always people-oriented," the Church should employ a communication style that centers on the initiation of people at the grass-root level.[55] This shows that media users simply remained passive consumers and they had to depend on secular media for news reports. In a similar vein, in 1996, Phyllis Zagano, Professor of Communication at Boston University, claimed that religious leaders needed to make use of secular media because there was an increase of dependence on secular media by individuals for religious information.[56] From the writings of Eilers and Zagano, it is clear that users had to depend on secular media for religious information. Therefore, it is no surprise that, as already

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   [50] John P. Beal, "The 1962 INSTRUCTION Crimen sollicitationis: CAUGHT RED-HANDED OR HANDED A RED HERRING?" *Studia canonica* 41 (2007): 201.
   [51] Kieran Tapsell, *Potiphar's Wife: The Vatican's Secret and Child Sexual Abuse* (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2014), 13 and 27.
   [52] *Ibid*., 54.
   [53] The Office of Sacred Congregation, "On the Manner of Proceeding in Causes of Solicitation," 16 March 1962, http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_crimen-sollicitationis-1962_en.html.

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   [54] Jim McDonnell, "Desperately Seeking Credibility," 38.
   [55] Franz-Josef Eilers, "New Way of Being Church in Asia: Communication Challenges," 10.
   [56] Phyllis Zagano, "The Presentation of Religious Information via Media," in *Media, Culture and Catholicism*, ed. Paul A. Soukup (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 30.

mentioned by McDonnell above, Catholics as users remained passive media consumers, depending on secular mainstream media for reports on Church abuses and scandals.

The Digital Age: A Shift of Power from Secular Mainstream to Individual Users

With the advancement of digital technology, the spreading of Church scandals has become more intensified than before. There seem to be three reasons for that phenomenon. The first reason is because digital technology can transcend time. Jim McDonnel points out that, in the age of the Internet, Church scandals from the past can easily be traced on the web links.[57] With a click on weblinks, people can easily trace the stories they want to look for, switching quickly between the past and the present. Everything can be searched easily within a second. Because of this searchability[58] characterized by the digital links, hidden sexual abuse by Christian leaders can be exposed to the public attention by the new condition created by digital media.[59]

The second reason why the spreading of Church scandals has become more intensified in the digital age is because digital technology can transcend space. This transcending nature of the digital technology over space provides survivors of abuses the ability to create a network across continents and raise their voices out of their pains and sufferings. Therefore, Marci Hamilton, a leading expert on child sex abuse cases, points out that such collaboration among survivors of abuses is intensified by the Internet.[60]

The third and most significant reason why the spread of Church scandals has intensified is that the transcendent power of digital technology over time and space has been granted to individual users who have become independent from secular mainstream media. Therefore, Robert Logan, a media ecologist, claims that users have freedom over space and time in the age of digital media.[61] In this regard, individual users of social media have the ability to make sexual scandals of Church leaders go viral and this can be perceived as an "action against powerful social institutions."[62] Similarly, McDonnell explains that social media have a significant impact on the spread of abuse cases on the internet, especially because individual users have more power to create their own content and raise their voices on these social media platforms.[63] In short, with the advance of digital technology, individual users have become independent from mainstream media and have obtained the power to raise their voices through digital platforms, without being limited by time and space.

Long before the digital age, Marshall McLuhan had already introduced an idea that users would become independent and contribute to the content of the medium. In this case, I would like to draw particular attention to one of McLuhan's famous concepts: the medium is the message.[64] According to this concept, the medium is more important than the content of that medium because the medium has a greater influence on people's lives.[65] From this concept, we can obtain more

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[57] Jim McDonnell, "Desperately Seeking Credibility," 41.

[58] Lynn Schofield Clark, *The Parent App: Understanding Families in the Digital Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

[59] Peter Horsfield, *From Jesus To the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 267.

[60] Marci Hamilton, "The Internet, Religion, Transparency, and Battling Tyranny," *Verdict* (blog), *Justia*, November 13, 2014, https://verdict.justia.com/2014/11/13/internet-religion-transparency-battling-tyranny.

[61] Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (New York: Peter Lang, ²2016), 58.

[62] Peter Horsfield, *From Jesus To the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 267.

[63] Jim McDonnell, *Managing Your Reputation*: *A Guide to Crisis Management for Church Communicators* (Aachen, Germany: CAMECO, ²2015), 36.

[64] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2001), 7.

[65] W. Terrence Gordon, *McLuhan for Beginners*, illustrations by Susan Willmarth (Danbury, CT: For Beginners LLC, 2012), 45.

than one meaning.[66] However, for this paper, I will focus on only one meaning derived from that concept which is more relevant to my topic of discussion: The user is the content of the medium. According to this meaning, McLuhan sees media as the extensions of men and women.[67] As media are the extensions of human beings, what the human user perceives can make an essential contribution to the content of a medium, "according to his or her own need."[68] In this regard, Paul Levinson claims that McLuhan's idea is similar to that of the literary critic I.A. Richards, according to whom, the interaction between a text and a reader is more important than the intention of the author of the text.[69] Moreover, this interpretative role of users is literally significant in the digital age because, as argued by Logan, any "user can literally add to the content of a medium such as a blog."[70] Therefore, the digital environment creates a condition in which users become independent actors and have more power to raise their voices. In the language of McLuhan, the user is the content of the medium.

The Call of Laypeople for Transparency on Digital Platforms

We have seen above that ordinary media users have more opportunity to raise their voices against Church abuses and scandals in the digital age. Now, we shall see that these individual users are no other than laypeople or members of the churches. There are many examples of individual media users who are lay members of churches across denominations, and who raise their voices calling upon their church for transparency regarding scandals and abuses. Cheryl Cooney, who was sexually abused by a minister from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, created a website (https://www.ceaseabuse.org/) and calls for transparency of religious

leaders. The mission statement of this website claims, "Abuse is made possible by secrecy and shame; healing can be made possible by the honesty, courage, pain and anger …"[71]

There is also a website covering Catholic clerics (http://www.bishop-accountability.org/), where individuals can raise their voices and which also calls for transparency of the Catholic Church. This website quotes Aquinas Walter Richard Sipe, an author of several books on sexual abuses in the Church, saying "secrecy and accountability cannot coexist."[72] Plude explains that this website, started by Bill Mitchell, a former journalist who served on the board of the *National Catholic Reporter*, and hosted by the Poynter Institute, an organization which provides ethical guidelines for journalists, has 1,000 visitors per day, giving service even to journalists and the Church.[73] The reason why Mitchell initiated this kind of job is, writes Plude, to show how clergy abuse cases also have impact on small-scale entities such as parishes.[74]

In an online review article "A Tangled Web: New Media and the Catholic Scandals" published by the University of Southern California Annenberg School, the author, Stephen O' Leary, Professor at the USC Annenberg School of Communication, claims that the Internet has made an enormous impact on media institutions and more traditional powers as the Church by causing a significant decrease in power that they once enjoyed in disseminating religious information because lay people at the grassroots level have more opportunity to raise their voices on digital platforms. Leary writes, "Faithful Catholics who once submitted meekly to the hierarchy are now actively using the Web to lobby for profound changes in the Church."[75]

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[66] Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan*, 427.

[67] Marshall McLuhan & B. Nevitt, *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (Toronto: Longman, 1972), 90.

[68] Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media,* 541.

[69] Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (London: Routledge, 1999), 39.

[70] Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (New York: Peter Lang, ²2016), 451.

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[71] Ceaseabuse.org, "Our Mission," last modified March 5, 2020, https://www.ceaseabuse.org/.

[72] BishopAccountability.Org, "Who we are?" accessed December 9, 2019, http://www.bishop-accountability.org/Who_We_Are/.

[73] Frances Forde Plude, "The US Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Scandal," 187.

[74] *Ibid*.

[75] Stephen O'Leary, "A Tangled Web: New Media and the Catholic Scandals,"

An example from the Mormon Church also shows that the involvement of the members of their Church on digital platforms plays an important role in disclosing the real image of their founder, Joseph Smith. In the interview conducted by Laurie Goodstein, a religious correspondent of *The New York Times*, Elder Steven E. Snow, the historian of the Mormon Church, acknowledged that the real image of Joseph Smith to be a polygamist had gone viral on the Internet and the congregation could no longer conceal his story, but sincerely revealed it to their members, who had been seeing this issue on the Internet.[76]

The calling for transparency by lay people on digital platforms, as shown in the above examples, should be seen through the lens of *Parrhesia*, the Greek word (παρρησία) which etymologically means "free speech"; and accordingly *Parrhesiastes* means "the one who uses *Parrhesia,* i.e., the one who speaks the truth."[77] According to Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, *Parrhesiastes* is the one who, without using any rhetorical device and even at the risk of his/her life, clearly raises his voice for the truth to those who are in authority.[78] Foucault writes, "In *Parrhesia,* the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy."[79] As mentioned earlier, clericalism and power abuse are ongoing problematic patterns within the community of the Church. In this situation, digital platforms have culturally accommodated a space of *Parrhesia,* where people can freely raise their voices against sexual abuse cases in the Church. In other words, abuse cases which occurred in hidden and uncommunicable settings have been communicated through the *Parrhesia* of digital platforms. In the

next section, we shall see, through Church documents, the concern of the Church to tackle sexual abuse cases.

Dialogue with Church Documents and Papal Messages

Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the 45th World Communications Day, wrote, "The clear distinction between the producer and consumer of information is relativized ..."[80] The document *The Church and Internet* (no.6) also expresses the same idea.[81] Therefore, it is clear that the Church fully recognizes a situation created by the digital technology where producers and consumers are relativized. In the same document, *The Church and Internet* (no.6), references to the two other documents, *Lumen Gentium* (no.37) and *Communio et Progressio* (no. 128), are made to highlight the fact that members of the Church should raise their voices and opinions to Church leaders regarding their needs and desires. More specifically, *Communio et Progressio* (no. 120) encourages a two-way communication between Church leaders and lay.[82] Therefore, in the digital era,[83] the Church fully agrees on these two points: (1) the distinction between producers and users has become blurred; and (2) members of the Church should raise their voices whenever it is necessary to do so.

August 6, 2002, http://www.ojr.org/ojr/ethics/1028655580.php.

[76] Laurie Goodstein, "It's Official: Mormon Founder Had Up to 40 Wives," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/us/its-official-mormon-founder-had-up-to-40-wives.html?_r=0.

[77] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 11.

[78] *Ibid*.,12-19.

[79] *Ibid*., 20.

[80] Benedict XVI, "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age: Message for the 45th World Communications Day, 24 January 2011," in *Church & Social Communication: Basic Documents 1936-2014*, introduced and edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD (Manila: Logos Publications, 3 2014), 495.

[81] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and Internet, February 22, 2002," in *Church & Social Communication: Basic Documents 1936-2014*, introduced and edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD (Manila: Logos Publications, 3 2014), 350.

[82] Id., "*Communio et Progressio*: Pastoral instruction for the application of the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Means of Social Communication, May 23, 1971," in *Church & Social Communication: Basic Documents 1936-2014*, introduced and edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD (Manila: Logos Publications, 3 2014), 139.

[83] In fact, not only in the digital era, but also in the older age, the Church already recognized these two points. Therefore, *The Church and Internet* (no.6) says, "The technology is new, but the idea is not." In this sense, we can say that digital culture has strengthened these two points.

In his pastoral letter regarding Church abuses addressed to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict XVI reminded the bishops that the credibility of the Church can be regained only if they would handle abuse cases with transparency.[84] Moreover, in the same letter (no.11), the Pope acknowledged a failure of leadership in handling these cases of abuse, and encouraged lay participation. He urged the bishops that lay people should have a proper role to play in the building of the Church.[85]

In his address concerning young people at the opening of the synod of bishops, Pope Francis explained that "Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation, that interprets the ministry received as a *power* to be exercised rather than as a free and generous *service* to be given."[86] Francis' description of clericalism appears in the final document of the same synod (no.30), according to which, clericalism, among other factors, is one of the sources of abuses in the Church.[87] In other words, clericalism encourages cases of cover-up abuses in the Church. The document also confirms that clericalism or elitism can be overcome through the practice of a participatory and co-responsible Church, which values "the charisms that the Spirit gives according to the vocation and role of each of her members, through a dynamic of co-responsibility."[88]

In addition, the same document of the synod on youth expresses three special concerns: the digital environment, migration, and Church

abuses. Here, I will focus only on the digital environment and Church abuses, which are relevant to this paper. Concerning the newness of the digital environment, the document (no.22) acknowledges that digital technology can "facilitate the circulation of independent information that can provide effective protection for the most vulnerable, publicizing violations of their rights."[89] Therefore, in the age of digital media, individual users are empowered to independently access, control, comment, and circulate information and raise their voices against injustices done to the most vulnerable people. In this case, abuses in the Church can easily fall under media scrutiny in the digital environment. For this reason, the same document (no.24) notes that the reputation of Church leaders can easily fall in danger in the Internet age.[90] The Church fully understands that church abuses and scandals can become viral on digital platforms where individual users are granted the power to raise their voices. Regarding the topic of Church abuses, the synod points out, "The desire to dominate, the lack of dialogue and transparency, forms of double life, spiritual emptiness, as well as psychological weaknesses are the ground on which corruption thrives."[91] Lack of transparency is one of the root causes of abuses in the Church.

After the Vatican meeting on the protection of minors held from 21 to 24 February 2019, Pope Francis issued on May 7 of the same year a set of new norms on how Church leaders must report sexual abuses committed by clerics or members of Consecrated Life or Societies of Apostolic Life. In the new norms, a section (Art.13) is devoted to Involvement of Qualified Persons, according to which bishops can include lay faithful in the lists of qualified persons to assist the respective Bishops' Conference in the investigation of abuse cases.[92] However, this set of new norms is approved *ad experimentum* for three

[84] Benedict XVI, "Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland," March 19 2010, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html.

[85] *Ibid*.

[86] Francis, "Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment," 3 October 2018 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html

[87] Synod of Bishops on Young People, "Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment," Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly, October 27 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html.

[88] *Ibid*.

[89] *Ibid*.

[90] *Ibid*.

[91] *Ibid*.

[92] Francis, "Vos Estis Lux Mundi," May 7, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html.

years, meaning that the new law will be effective only for three years subject to review and renewal.[93] Yet, this can also be considered as a welcoming approach towards lay participation in handling abuse cases in the Church.

Through Church documents and papal messages, we can be certain that Church members should raise their voices when it is necessary to do so. In abuse cases, laypeople should be offered a proper channel in handling these cases. By implementing this, the Church can overcome a culture of clericalism that is closely related to the abuse of secrecy. This way, the transparency of the Church can be enforced by maintaining trust between hierarchy and members of the Church.

Proposed Solution: Participation of Laypeople

Regarding lay participation in dealing with abuse cases, this paper proposes four points. First, before an actual abuse crisis ever happens, dioceses should have a strategic plan on how lay participation should be organized. In his book *Managing Your Reputation: A Guide to Crisis Management for Church Communicators*, McDonnell devotes a section on how to prepare for a crisis, which can be caused by clergy abuse cases. In planning for a crisis, one important element is securing the cooperation of key people or stakeholders, who, in a diocesan context, may include not only Church leaders but also other people such as parishioners, benefactors, and local politicians.[94] The author suggests that clear instructions should be provided for these key people and the crisis can be better controlled by planning ahead.[95]

Second, as we have seen before that clericalism is closely linked to abuse cases and people at the grassroots level have little trust in Church leaders, lay participation should ensure that the voices of victims are clearly heard. Eilers expresses a similar concern in his summary document on how the Church should take up a communication style as a new way of being Church in Asia, even though that document is not directly concerned with clergy abuses. The scholar writes,

If we are a Communion of Communities, our communications must aim at community building. We need to create a new style of leadership which is enabling and facilitating, being real leaders and not mere followers. The voice of the laity must be heard louder and clearer. The marginalized and the poor too have a voice to be recognized in the Church.[96]

If we truly consider victims of abuses as "poor", their voices on digital platforms should be heard louder and clearer. Through the participation of laypeople in dealing with abuse cases, the Church can overcome clericalism and become more transparent in her administration and regain her credibility.

Third, lay participation in dealing with clergy abuses does not mean everything should be uncovered but it does mean ensuring a sense of belonging in the Church. Regarding sexual abuses in the Church, Kochuthara points out that clericalism is a fertile ground for abuse of power and proposes to form a "participatory church" in which laypeople can share responsibility. He writes, "If people begin to abandon the Church today, this is due not only to the abuse scandals, but also to the fact that they do not feel that they belong to a church where they cannot actively participate in all aspects of its life."[97] By implementing lay participation, writes Kochuthara, the Church can bring justice and transparency in dealing with abuses and scandals.[98] Ensuring a sense of belonging is equal to creating a genuine community and making people feel accepted in the administrative procedures of the Church, as

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[93] *Ibid.* [Italic in the original source]
[94] Jim McDonnell, *Managing Your Reputation,* 18.
[95] *Ibid.*, 17.

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[96] Franz-Josef Eilers, "New Way of Being Church in Asia: Communication Challenges," 9.
[97] Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, "The Sexual Abuse Scandal and a New Ethical Horizon," 942.
[98] *Ibid.*, 943.

explained earlier in this paper by Grisez and Cardinal Marx.

Fourth, lay participation should promote accountability. Patrick Granfield, a scholar in Church communication, elaborates the relation between Church and communication. After explaining that a human being is by nature a communicating person and that the Church is a group of communicating persons, he presents ten ecclesiological issues related to communication. Among them, regarding ministries in the Church, the scholar contends that each charism is related to one another in the Church. He writes, "A variety of offices, tasks, roles, and ministries exist in the Church and are exercised by clerics, religious, and laity."[99] In addition, claims Granfield, those who administer these ministries are accountable to the people they serve and to God.[100] Applied to the cases of abuse, through participation, Church leaders as well as lay people can overcome clericalism and remain accountable to the people they serve.

Concluding Remark

The call of the digital era for lay participation is a key to tackling cases of abuses and scandals in the Church. Voices of victims on digital platforms should be heard. At the same time, transparency does not mean that everything should be uncovered. Rather, the proper way to solve the problem is to offer laypeople an active role participating in the administration of handling these cases of abuse. By doing this, the transparency of the Church can be ensured, her credibility can be regained, and trust between Church leaders and laypeople can be rebuilt.

In the past, ordinary users had to depend on secular mainstream media for reports on abuses and scandals in the Church. This situation has changed in this contemporary digital environment, where the gap between producers and consumers has become minimized. Individual users, who themselves are members of the Church, have become independent and are granted the power to express freely their needs and desires to the institutional Church on digital media platforms, whenever they consider it is necessary to do so. One of their significant desires and needs expressed on digital platforms is that they call for Church transparency regarding abuses and scandals in the Church. These unrestrained online digital platform activities may not be acceptable for some people, but their magnitude cannot be ignored, and they may be considered as a sign that laypeople should be offered active participation in handling abuse cases. The cry for transparency is not only from outside of the Church, but also from the inside. Therefore, the Church should consider a proper channel for laypeople in the handling of abuse cases. This will be a possible way to ensure transparency of the Church.

For further research, we will have to consider detailed qualifications of those laypeople who can actively participate in the administration of handling abuse cases. The detailed description of lay participation (e.g. the role of lay canon lawyers, theologians, psychologists, etc.) in handling abuse cases should be clarified in a very concrete way. We will also need to reconsider a theology of the priesthood in order to overcome clericalism or the elitist mindset. In this way, we can look forward to imagining a participatory church in which co-responsibility is practiced, trust is built, and transparency is ensured.

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[99] Patrick Granfield, "The Theology of the Church and Communication," in *The Church and Communication*, ed. Patrick Granfield (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 8.

[100] *Ibid.*, 9.

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Q.R Codes of Deities: Digital Medias @ the Service of Religion in Taiwan

Paulin Batairwa Kubuya

ABSTRACT

During the last fifty years, as a result of economic and technological development, Taiwan has evolved from an agricultural into a full-fledged industrial society. Because of this change, cities and urban agglomerations have replaced the traditional village setting which marked the daily and religious life of Taiwanese. To the present, Taiwan Media-Tek ranks fourth in the world and digitalization is a trend taken for granted in the island, especially among younger generations. Taiwan remains yet a home for a variety of old, traditional religious expressions. Customarily, as guardians of tradition, religious organizations are apprehensive to novelty; they even resist changes.

The present paper will illustrate initiatives of some temples and shrines to respond proactively to the novelty of social communication in Taiwan. To cater to the needs of a "digitalized" generation, the institutions have integrated QR code deities; temples and shrines are on Facebook, Line, Instagram, and other applications enabling believers to experience, enjoy and share their religiosity in real time. By these practices, they are redefining, re-inventing, extending, and transplanting old religious space into the universe of millennials and android generation. They are engaging traditional and popular religions into a process of inculturation, adaptation, transplantation of religious space in the modern digitalized culture.

Paulin Batairwa Kubuya, Ph.D teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at Fujen Catholic University, Taiwan. He can be reached at 085227@mail.fju.edu.tw.

Background

I would like to start this sharing, recalling my reaction to a Daoist scholar from Hong Kong, who during a conference in Fu Jen, was calling on local religions, Daoism, to inculturate. I was perplexed and sternly challenged by his choice and usage of the concept. In my understanding, inculturation was an exclusive necessity for foreign or imported religions. It is the compulsory process through which foreign religions negotiate their insertion and acquire their 'homeness' in their new contexts. How could that be said of traditional local religions? My interlocutor, in a witty and persuasive way, spoke of the impact of new technologies in society. It creates domains for obsolete things, antiquated fashions and displaced lifestyles. He further pointed out that traditional religious expressions unfortunately, are among the first social elements to fall under those categories. Unless they could shape up, they would easily be outdated and alienated by the new trends of fast growing technological development. To survive, they had to continuously reinvent themselves. That is what he meant by inculturation.

Years later, Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD was implicitly reminding me of the same thing. As I continue my intervention, allow me a word of gratitude to Fr. Franz Joseph Eilers, SVD. He invited me to the 7th Round Table of ARC (Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication) in Bangkok in 2014. The round table was calling the attention of participants to the communication need inscribed in religion. Participants were encouraged to study the various forms of communication Asian religions have developed as adapted responses to modern technological development in the field of media.

Needless to say, that meeting opened my eyes to an unexplored, yet intriguing and engaging field in religious studies. In fact, from the roundtable on, I have not ceased pondering contextually questions on the intersection between media and religion. How did the religious context I was immersed in accommodate or react to the technological novelties that are sweeping throughout the Taiwanese society? In fact, during the last fifty years, as a result of economic and technological development, Taiwan has evolved from an agricultural into a full-fledged industrial society. Because of this change, cities and urban agglomerations have replaced the traditional village setting which marked the daily and religious life of Taiwanese. Moreover, to the present, Taiwan Media-Tek ranks fourth in the world and digitalization is a trend taken for granted in the island, especially among younger generations. Meanwhile, Taiwan remains a home for a variety of old, traditional religious expressions. Customarily, as guardians of tradition, religious organizations are apprehensive to novelty; they even resist changes. For one interested and involved in religious studies in the context of Taiwan, pondering on the dynamics at the intersection of religion and new technology is a necessity. Where do these technologies fit in Taiwanese religious circles? Are they used as shields protecting the ideals religions stand for as society moves toward modernity, or are they perceived as threats religion should oppose in their strive for survival?

As an application of the calling of the 7th Roundtable, in this paper I will illustrate initiatives some temples and shrines have taken in Taiwan, as proactive responses to the novelty of technologies. To cater to the needs of a "digitalized" generation, those institutions have provided e-temple services, opened temples and shrines accounts on Facebook, Line, Instagram and other applications enabling believers to experience, enjoy and share religiosity in real time. Some have even integrated QR code deities making the temple deity ubiquitous and reachable beyond the barriers of time and space. Evidently, these practices are redefining, inventing, extending, and transplanting old religious space into the universe of millennials and of an android generation. They are engaging traditional and popular religions into a process of inculturation in the modern digitalized culture.

The Impulse of the 7ᵗʰ Round Table

The proceedings of the 7ᵗʰ Roundtable directed my attention to projects that could see links between the world of religions and that of media technology. The first of the kind was a course by Lin Fu-shih, professor and Senior Researcher at Academia Sinica. Prof. Lin has been interested in factors counting for successful spread and expansion of some religious groups. He spoke of religion as a consumable product in need of a market. This is the gist of his thought. How does one sell religion? Which are the mechanisms and strategy one uses to make a religion more attractive than others? And most important in the present context of Taiwan, which tools work better in marketing religion? He pointed out that media is one of the determining elements of their success. Moreover, he noted that religious groups well acquainted with new technology and using it in ways appealing to and consumable by people, not only attracted people but also encountered less difficulty in persuading their followers to commit themselves to the causes of the religious group. His course on marketing of religions was designed to let people see the correlation between the use of technology and religion, prompting more consumption of technology among religious groups. In fact, Prof. Lin was among the masterminds of a digitalized religious map of Taiwan. Needless to say, that his idea was met with apprehensions, especially by those who feared the map to be a handy tool to monitor or to manipulate activities occurring in those religious locations.[1] Now the project is working out as an interdisciplinary endeavor involving several sectors.[2]

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[1] Perhaps some of those apprehensions were founded if one considers the political, cultural and commercial motives local authorities might have into the projected digital religious map. In the end, religion will need to defend itself from too much commercialization and identity claims as those prompted in programs such as « Temple Stay in Taiwan » https://www.taiwangods.com/html/home/5_001.aspx

[2] The project intends to increase the accessibility and visibility of religious places. It consists of creating an interactive map providing directions and basic information on the intended religious places. Once accomplished, it should be considered like a google map, conceived from and for religious purposes. The project involves different sectors. On the side of scholars, there are people from departments of religious studies. They gather information (pictures, a concise historical presentation, calendar of activities); religious practitioners provide data and additional explanation to make them understood. Finally, computer technicians

The second interest following the 7th ARC was towards the research project of Prof. Lin Wei-ping, a professor of anthropology at the National Taiwan University. Unlike Lin Fu-shih, Lin Wei-ping has no direct interest in new technology or digitalization of religion. Her attraction instead is on the adaptations, negotiations, and re-inventions that believers engage into as they move from their traditional/ rural village settings into urban/industrialized areas. Her book, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities,*[3] ponders on the adaptability and reinvention of religious praxes as they confront socio-economic changes. The story in question is that of migrant workers from Wannian and Sanliaowan in the South of Taiwan, who have moved to the industrial setting of Bade, a district of New Taipei. She dresses a comparison between village and city life, displaying means through which migrant workers transplanted and reinvented their religious practices to make them fit to urban setting. They created branch statues of village deities fit for city-setting, established an urban shrine, selected and trained new spirit medium who acted in accordance to the needs and circumstances of a larger socioeconomic setting than that of their original village.

Though not marginal to her research, her findings reveal media technology, especially social media, the Internet and digitalization as playing a role in the process of resettling. According to Lin Weiping, "Internet is the best medium for understanding the young people of Bade and their relationships with the shrine."[4] She refers to the pages on Facebook and Yahoo, as well as to the blog that kept track

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store those data, ensuring they are accessible to users and researchers through different kinds of search engines. Curiously, the analogy of the working process and the rationale to Pokémon is interesting. Just as in the game, players go hunting for Pokémon, the luckiest capturing Pikachu; students, in this project, are sent in the streets for a hunt of locations hosting religious buildings, the luckiest identify the less known, or ... The pictures are later uploaded on the net and linked to the place where the picture was taken for directions and information. The hunt for locations of religious buildings is producing a religious cartography that can be used in real time for directions and other basic information.

[3] Wei-ping Lin, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press Asian Center, 2015).

[4] Wei-ping Lin*, 121

of the activities of the Jingming shrine and where youth could freely exchange any kind of information regarding the life of the shrine.[5] She also alludes to the consultation spirit medium made on the Internet to ensure that the result of divination "is better adapted to the complexity of modern society."[6]

The third area of interest came as a natural consequence of the broadened horizons that the observation had led me into. I need to reflect deeper on many other instances wherein technology negotiates its path within traditional religious practices, with innovations and creativity that bring new breath to ways religion used to be articulated. Meanwhile, I cherished an increased curiosity on the on-going discussion and studies regarding media and religion. I came across prominent scholars and researchers in the field and committed to follow their publications. The list includes scholars such as Brenda E. Brasher,[7] Lorne E. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan,[8] Heidi A Campbell.[9] I realized how much those scholars could offer to the interpretation of phenomena I have been observing in the Taiwanese religious space. In fact, they have been pondering on the linkage between religion and digital technology in their respective contexts. I found that their studies were leading to unveil analogical phenomena in Taiwan. I wish the presentation and treatment of those phenomena to be an addition to the monumental work of August E. Grant and his companions, in their efforts to compile

more essays on *Religion in Cyberspace.*[10]

Cyberspace Religion in Taiwan

Speaking of ways religious communities handle new technology, H.A. Campbell notes a tendency to "negotiate and reconstruct technology to serve their purposes while simultaneously working to prevent the corruption of their members."[11] One illustration of this dynamic in Taiwan is the emergence websites offering online religious services. Accordingly, the first of the kinds were created in 1999. They were publicized as potential remedies, designed for people who find it difficult to maintain their tradition in today's fast, busy, industrialized and commercialized society. Electronic temples supply for the limits of traditional temples.[12]

Websites such as http://www.baibai.com.tw/ http://jigong.baibai.com.tw/ offer all kinds of services available in a traditional temple. The sites provide similar opportunities as those available to temple goers. Services depend on the times rituals are celebrated in the temples and according to festivities. Blessings and special protection (*antaisui)* are given for Chinese New Year, and tomb sweeping, and floral services are offered during Qingming Festival (Chinese Memorial Day). Moreover, the consumer could also access to the range of blessings and petitions seekers pray for in traditional temples: on passing an examination, searching for a life partner, praying for health, for good luck in business,

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[5]   Wei-ping Lin*, 121…125.*

[6]   Wei-ping Lin*, 161*

[7]   Brenda E. Brasher, *Give me that Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

[8]   Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

[9]   Heidi A. Campbell is a prolific scholar on media and religion, a field she has been investigating from the 70s. Of her many publications, the ones with direct impact on this presentation include: *When Religions Meets New Media* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010); "The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion," introductory chapter to *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds,* edited by Heidi A. Campbell (New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 20

[10] August E. Grant, Amanda F. C. Sturgill, Chiung Hwang Chen, and Daniel A. stout, eds., *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray.* Vol 1. (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2019).

[11] Anthony Hatcher, "Review of *When religion meets new media."* in *Journal of Media and Religion,* 11 (2012), 51

[12] «在這忙碌的工商社會，空不出時間去拜拜或掃墓、祭祖，腦筋動得快的業者陸續推出「網路掃墓」、「網路祭祖」和「網路電子廟」等服務，為出門在外不能返鄉掃墓或是想避免掃墓塞車之苦的人解決難題，可以足不出門，在線上獻花、點燭甚至點歌給往生者聽，表達內心真誠的追思，這種e化的掃墓、祭祖型態既環保又方便。 » https://www.epochtimes.com/b5/7/4/5/n1669197.htm

etc. Almost everything could be done here, with the only and main difference that it was away from the walls and smells of the temple. For e-consumers, e-temples are effective substitute of traditional temples, for they cater to their religious needs.

An Accepted and Lauded Development

In media records, e-temples and religious e-services seemed to be a well-received phenomenon. They stand as mitigated solutions to the tension between progress brought by the technological boom and the moral demands to safe keep traditions. Ancestor veneration and tomb sweepings are the most eloquent examples. Because of Confucian heritage, Chinese cultural and religious traditions require that every individual and every family must find concrete ways of expressing filial piety. Traditional settings facilitated the observance of filial piety while it has become more difficult in modern society. Those who want to safeguard tradition feel that modern changes should not annihilate the legitimate need of venerating one's ancestors. "With the changes in the mentality and lifestyle of people, the disappearance of family altars, ancestral veneration has been losing ground. Though 'not matter how far is the ancestor tablet, the veneration still has to be sincere.' Now we can commemorate our ancestors through the Internet. At every festival, at the rising of every new moon, at any time, we can express our sincere and heart-felt respect and feelings of nostalgia to our ancestors." Thanks to e-technology, ancestor veneration will always be an available option.

In March 2007, a Christian Daily was lauding the marvels of e- religious services. Referring to e-ancestor veneration and tomb sweeping, there was no need to fly back home, or waste time in heavy traffic to get the resting place of a deceased parent clean, or to adorn it with new flowers. All those preoccupations could be solved at a distance with few (paid) clicks.[13] Internet has thought and provided solutions and alternatives to incoming problems.

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[13] https://www.epochtimes.com/b5/7/2/18/n1625954.htm

A Different Interpretative Frame

Despite their proliferation, e-religious services did not ignite much debate and polemics as those, scholars in the West, have been addressing. There was no question on whether the rituals rendered were virtual or real. The issue seems less important to the mental framework of Chinese religion. In fact, for practitioners, real/virtual are not the categories used to make sense of the religious practices they engaged in. They think instead in terms of "effectiveness." What is important is to ensure that the rituals have worked, that they have produced the expected result. The real question is not *zhenzhende/xujiade*真真的/虚假的 but *lingbuling* 靈不靈。

Online service providers are aware of this hermeneutic dimension. As in traditional temples, the online service provides all the steps to be followed to perform a ritual, starting from filling one's identity and address, the intended service or prayer, the presentation of offerings desired (incense, flowers, etc.). There are also the divinatory blocks casts either to get divine response or to ensure the effectiveness of the rituals. Hence, the online service provider sets a mechanism of verification and validation of the effectiveness of the ritual performed. In the case of a memorial ceremony, for instance, the practitioner casts the divination blocks online, asking the ancestors for a confirmation. A *xing bui* is a sign that they are pleased with the treatment.

However, looking at the interaction of digital and traditional religion, the emergence and proliferation of e-religious services are not hermeneutically problem free. The process enables the emergence of temples whose affiliation is not easily traceable.[14] How does one establish the hierarchy of the e-temples providing those services? How and from where do they claim their power? Some conservative leaders would rather look at those as virtual centers providing virtual

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[14] The lineage of temples is established through the sharing of the ashes. Figuratively, it is as if an old temple give birth all the time it shares its ashes to newly created ones.

services. Comments of this kind are from real temples managers and clerics who notice that the leading figure of e-temples often happen to be the internet server, collecting fees and keeping up the webpage. In fact, e-temple services require a different kind of expertise than that of the common cleric. They need more a computer expert than a certified cleric. Supposedly, a temple should be a certified location where believers come to encounter their deities. In some cases, involving e-religious services, the process of certification is not always possible.

QR Coding Deities

The first time I came across the phenomenon of a QR Coding deities was during a visit to Wumiao, a temple of Guang Gong in Yanshui, Tainan, South of Taiwan, in May 2016.[15] In preparation for the festivity of the Temple Deity, the organizing committee had prepared a kit containing a small token of the deity and a leaflet on which appeared a QR code. While taking interest in the small token, I was reminded that the leaflet was more important. It had a QR code of the Application of the Deity of the temple. In scanning it, one was connecting to the temple in real time. The application enables to tour around the temple, to see the different deities. Within one click, one could have the entire temple in the pocket. The application bore the portrayal of the deity who in fact directed the users to his own temple.

Asking them why they have put Guanggong online, they answered that being a deity, he transcends time and space, his benevolence and care could reach out to his followers at any time and in every corner. They considered however, that their temple was the starting point from where those blessings were being dispatched.

Their explanation of QR-deity-coding corrected most of the limitations incurred by current e-religious services. The online Wumiao temple which the QR code leads to is not a completely new reality,

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15 www.wumiao.idv.tw

created of nothing. It is rather a duplication of the traditional temple, empowered with the possibility of transcending the confines of time and space. The deities worshipped and mediating services remain the same; the managerial body is the same, with the addition of a personnel catering to the extended part of the temple, monitoring and keeping track of the online activities of the temple. In a nutshell, the online Yanshui is a continuous extension in time and space of the traditional temple. With such an organization, they would not suffer the problem of certification I mentioned earlier. I saw in this case an example of the successful usage traditional religious communities can make of digital technology. It has made Wumiao, a temple here and there, catering to the needs of people in and off the confines of Wumiao temple.

Besides Wumiao in Yanshui, there are other temples moving in a similar direction. To catch up with Yanshui, Bao An Gong uses QR Codes, but mostly to publicize the activities of the temple. Zhinan Gong in Taipei had similar plans to QR codify its deities. Initial experiences were successful but, due to technological deficiency, sometimes, the code is not readable, a fact which interpreted from a religious perspective, can bear grave consequences.

Conclusion

As a result of my participation to the 7th Roundtable of the ARC, I extended my curiosity towards Taiwanese local religions and started paying careful attention on how these religions accommodated or used media in general, and electronic and digital media in particular. The present essay offers a commented review of what I did observe. Religions are continuously communicating, and they need media to reach out to their followers, help them connect with the Ultimate, with natural realms, and with their fellows. Taiwanese religious landscapes have developed their own media, and the present reflection has pondered on their latest efforts to domesticate and use digital technology. The explosion of the Internet brought along the creation of online temples, which provided online (e-religious) services. To the present, QR

coding deities and temples seems to be the trend which will enable more contextualized accommodation of online and digital technology of local religions. QR Coding deities is a cutting age usage of digital technology that corrects and supplements the limits/deficiencies of earlier online religious services in Taiwan. It ensures continuity with the past by setting traditional practices in the ever open space of the web.

Understanding the Role of Thai Aesthetics in Religion and the Potentiality of Thai Christian Aesthetics

L. Keith Neigenfind, Jr.

ABSTRACT

Thailand has a rich history of using aesthetics as a means of communication. This is seen not only in the communication of basic ideas, but aesthetics are also used to communicate the cultural values of the nation. Aesthetical images in Thailand have the tendency to dwell both in the realm of the mundane and the supernatural, in the daily and the esoteric. Historically, many faith traditions have used aesthetics as an effective form of communication, including Buddhism, Brahmanism, as well as other local expressions of deities across the country. Art plays a large role in the daily communication of religious values and concepts.

While Christianity has a rather long history in Thailand, the large-scale impact that Christianity, and specifically Protestantism, has had is rather minimal. There can be a myriad of reasons for this, but one potential possibility is Christianity's lack of an aesthetical engagement upon and within Thai culture. This potentially is not an issue of only the Protestant church in Thailand but also stems from some of the Western Christian roots throughout its faith tradition. One finds a chasm between aesthetical practices and faith from the Heidelberg Confession,

L. Keith Neigenfind Jr is a PhD candidate at Assumption University in Bangkok, Thailand, where he is currently researching pacifism and nonviolence in Buddhism and Christianity. In addition to completing his studies, Keith has been working in the religious field in Thailand as an ordained minister with the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

in which Christians became so worried about the ramifications of idol worship, that they threw out the proverbial 'baby with the bathwater' and basically condemned the use of icons and other forms of art in western Protestantism.

Therefore, this paper examines the relationship between Thai culture and Christianity, offers critiques of the Western biases in Christianity, and attempts to suggest new ways that the Thai Christian church may develop organic, indigenous Thai art that can be used as a more effective means of communication. If Christianity wants to effectively convey its concepts into Thai culture, it must value traditional aesthetics as a means of communication. Is it possible that Christianity could not only communicate a more effective message in Thailand, but also that Christianity could experience a more robust self-analysis of its core concepts through Thai aesthetics? Therefore, one needs to explore the ways that Christianity may be able to better understand itself through current Thai aesthetical practices. These concepts will be explored to develop a more robust and organic paradigm of communicating Christian concepts in the Thai context.

Keywords: *Thai Buddhism, Thai Christianity, aesthetics, interreligious dialogue*

In every country and ethnic group, the arts are impactful in conveying culture, meaning and ideas. Philosophers and sociologists have a long history of critically analyzing the arts to determine its value, meaning and relevance to social and cultural development. This is certainly true in the Thai context, in that much can be understood through observing and analyzing Thai aesthetics. When one observes daily life and culture in Thailand, it becomes evident very quickly that aesthetics play an important role in Thai people's life. From the architecture of buildings, to carved images, to paintings, one never has to venture far to see the impact that the arts have upon Thai society. To gain proper understanding of Thai society, values, and religion, one must consider Thai aesthetics as a gateway to a greater understanding.

Therefore, as Christianity continues to make inroads into Thai culture, one must address the question of aesthetics as well. Specifically, what are the differences between Thai aesthetics and Christian aesthetics, and how then can Christianity better engage Thai culture? Can a bridge be built between Thai culture and Christianity through aesthetics? Or does Thai Christianity have any contributions for aesthetics in Thailand? These topics will be addressed in this paper.

Christian presence in Thailand, or the Ayutthaya Kingdom as it was known, began in the 1500s when the Portuguese first sent Catholic missionaries to the kingdom. The first work among the Thai population by Protestants was around 1816, through missionaries working with the Thai population in Burma, and then in 1828 Protestant missionaries first arrived on Thai soil, which opened an era for many future missionaries to come.[1] Despite the relatively long presence, Christian conversion growth has been rather slow. Today the Protestant Christian population by most estimates sits somewhere around 1 percent, which is represented by virtually all Protestant denominations. Some of the key represented groups are the Church of Christ in Thailand (which has Presbyterian roots), the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Baptists, Charismatic groups as well as many others.

Buddhism, particularly the Theravada tradition, on the other hand is typically thought to have entered Thailand during the reign of King Asoka, then was established as the official state religion during the era of the Kingdom of Sukhothai. Buddhism from its very beginning experienced rapid growth, and ever-growing influence. There is a myriad of different factors which one could point to in order to explain the difference in growth between Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand, but one of these factors could be the lack of the use of communication by aesthetics in Thai Christianity, and the embrace and promotion of aesthetical practices in Buddhism. When Buddhism entered Thailand during the 3rd century, Buddhism did not

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[1] Alex G. Smith, *Siamese Gold: The Church in Thailand* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 2004), 11-15.

fully reject the previous animistic practices, but instead found a place for them in its cosmology. Specifically, Buddhism realized the power of the aesthetic in promoting religion, and built upon the use of pre-existing idols and images. Buddhism, as well as historical animistic and Brahman traditions have consistently incorporated aesthetics into daily practice and teachings. On the contrary, Christianity, specifically Protestant Christianity, did very little to engage or affirm the aesthetical practices in Thailand, therefore, missing out on an effective way of communication that touches the heart of the Thai people.

Aesthetics can be an extremely broad field. To clarify, this paper will not just be talking about art appreciation, or art criticism, but is choosing to use the term aesthetics. This is due to some of the connotations that are referred to by the word "aesthetic." For example, Alexander Baumgarten specifically used the term aesthetics as a way to link art and the experience of art as a means of knowing.[2] This is therefore what we are looking at, trying to get a deeper glimpse into the meaning of Thai art, the role of beauty and what the experience can mean. Also, when referring to the term "Christian," unless specified the paper is referring to Protestant Christianity. It must be noted that Protestant Christianity is broad and is made up of many subgroups, so it may seem overly broad to refer to the "Protestant church" as one unit. Yet this speaks to the overarching commonality in that almost all Protestant churches, from high church mainstream congregations, to low church evangelical groups, are not properly engaging and employing aesthetics. To sharpen the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the visual arts. This seems to be especially important when thinking about the relationship between Christianity and Thai aesthetics. Historically the Christian church in Thailand has helped to produce some organic Thai forms of art, such as music, but it has neglected a strong engagement in visual aesthetics.

The Role of Aesthetics in Thai Culture

As stated above, Thai visual art is simply everywhere, and is a large part of daily life. If one is to take a deeper look, one will also notice that the vast majority of Thai aesthetics are tied to some form of religious symbolism. Much of this is tied to Buddhism – (temples, amulets, images of the Buddha), but as Thailand consistently operates under a sort of syncretistic landscape, one will find aesthetic expressions of various other strains – (spirit houses, images of the Naga, Chinese ancestor worship, decorations of holy trees, images of the Yak, etc.) co-habituating alongside Buddhist art. The abundance of these items can point to a variety of different things. One initial observation is simply the perpetual realization of syncretism found in Thai society. Buddhism is fused with other religious expressions; therefore, other aesthetic offerings to different religions are not only tolerated but also are celebrated. Religious aesthetical expressions are the dominant art forms. Thailand owes some of its artistic lineage to the Dvaravati and Khmer periods from around the 7th to 12th centuries. However, as one author states, in fact, it is "Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially the latter, to which the art, architecture and literature of the Thai owe their birth."[3]

Secondly, one can see the impact that these images have on the daily life of the Thai individual. These religious images will typically be bowed to, be offered gifts, and used as objects that impact a person's daily life. The great value ascribed to these images does not only simply come from the traditionalists, people in the rural regions, or the elderly. Even among the new generations in urban spaces reverence and respect are bestowed upon these images. James Taylor comments, "In the disconcerting and disorienting postmodern urban spaces, the Buddha and his religion are being recast in discreet and sometimes not so discreet spaces in a new religious logic, to conform to the values

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[2] Nina Odegard, "Crows," in *Social, Material and Political Constructs of Artic Childhoods*, eds P. Rautio and E. Stenvall (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 122.

[3] Phaya Anuman Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies* (Bangkok: Chareonwit Printing Ltd., 1986), 15.

of post modernity."[4] Various spaces have modern religious art forms, which are adapting to the changing culture, and are still prevalent.

For Thais, traditional aesthetics are not only expressions of natural pride and beauty, but also contains a communicative component. For example, in Thai Buddhism during the reign of Rama III, it was agreed that there would be 40 different postures of the Buddha that would be officially recognized.[5] Each of these postures has specific meanings to convey. The aesthetical forms contain beauty and, but they also have functionality, in that they instruct and influence.

From a Southeast Asian cultural context, and also from a philosophical and religious perspective, one can clearly see that truth, meaning, and consciousness is something that can be communicated through aesthetics. Mircea Eliade, who spent significant time examining the role of arts in religion and religious aesthetics, realized that religious art can "open up a higher or deeper kind of consciousness," and is something in which "the individual or group participates in sacred time and space and in this way discovers transcendent, timeless meaning."[6] Aesthetical practices open up a different area of understanding and consciousness. In Thai religious settings, aesthetics is used to instruct and communicate ideas that are not simply communicated by oral or written instruction.

Finally, and perhaps most insightfully, many forms of Thai visual aesthetics are frequently viewed as images that have innate power and supernatural potential. Some are supposed habitats of spiritual beings, such as spirit houses, or holy trees. Some are believed to have the power to grant wishes or offer protection. One needs to only spend some time

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[4] James Taylor, *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 67.

[5] Kenneth E Wells, *Thai Buddhism, Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: The Police Printing Press, 1960), 40.

[6] Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 190.

in a Thai cultural environment to see local people bowing to, saying a prayer to, offering sacrifices, or performing a ritual around these aesthetic images. Oftentimes, even images of the Buddha are believed to have power and are worshipped in Thailand. Although this practice is contrary to classical Buddhist teaching, in Thai society, this element of religiosity exists. In his work on Thai Buddhist images, one Thai Buddhist monk asserts, "The Buddha images were made to be worshipped and to remind us of his doctrine"[7]

This theory of the power of images is rather broadly recognized. According to William J. Klausner, "In general, Buddha images are conceived of as symbolic representations of the Buddha's teaching, and, in paying respect to them, one recalls the teaching and finds peace of mind. However, there are a few special images, usually located in temples in provincial capitals, which are viewed as possessing magical potency to grant requests for the curing of sickness, a child, wealth etc."[8] One can see the connection of Thai art and aspects of the divine fused together as one entity. This concept tends to be at odds with secular Western art, but not necessarily with Christian art. Christian artists of the past, before the time of the Protestant church, viewed their act of making art as something sacred, a form of worship and a way to be in touch with the Divine. It should be noted that although Christian art at times is lumped together with Western art, its origins, practices, and means are in some ways actually closer to the Thai concept than the Western concept.

Christianity's Engagement with Thai Aesthetics

Christianity has a long history of art and of aesthetics being a part of daily life. Especially during the early Christian period, art was a means of communicating truths about God and about the Christian scriptures.

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[7] Ven. Kandarapanguwe Dhammasiri, *The Buddha Images and Pagodas in Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya Buddhist University Press, 1997), 12.

[8] William J. Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture* (Bangkok, Thailand: Prachandra Printing Press, 1983), 169.

Regarding early Christian images, in the book *Understanding Early Christian Art*, Robin Margaret Jensen states, "These images, however were not derived from the myths or even shored up by philosophical argument, they were drawn from events that really happened in the concrete past. For this reason, the expectation was firmly anchored to reality and not a mere fanciful hope"[9] Early Christian art was a grounded representation of Christian beliefs expressing its history, and it was the means of teaching and educating the people. From the designs of paintings, to even the way they painted Jesus posing, Christian art was used as a means of communicating the teachings of God in daily life. Images comforted, instructed, inspired and helped push the community to deeper spirituality.

Somewhere along the road, these concepts shifted. The created images began to take place of the Creator, and like Thailand, the images were at times ascribed power and were worshipped by laypeople. When the Protestant Reformation occurred, most Protestant groups took an extreme stand and completely got rid of all visual art forms in the church. The Heidelberg Catechism, (which almost parallels the Islamic view of images that completely forbids art that represents forms of the divine or divine concepts), strongly forbade any images depicting God or having any likeness of Him, as well as banning any form of visual aesthetics in the church. The reasoning was that the preaching of the Bible was all that should be needed.[10]

The Reformed Protestant tradition, in attempting to prevent the false perception that icons themselves had power, threw out something important along the way. They threw out the proverbial "baby with the bathwater." As many Orthodox scholars would say, icons are windows to the Divine and are not something that are divine in themselves.[11]

Christian art was not intended to replace the Creator, just to be used as an aid to the Creator. In its drastic reaction, the Protestant church lost a vital expression of faith. While some theologians such as William Dyrness assert that the Protestant Reformation actually enhanced interest in the arts for modern people,[12] in modern times, theologians tend to ignore the impact of aesthetics within Christianity. Although theologians such as Tillich, Schleiermacher, and Berdyaev have made some contributions, they are not the norm, and concepts of aesthetics have been more or less overlooked.[13] For example, "Dorothy Sayers laments what she takes to be the fact that, although there are writers on aesthetics who happen to be Christians, there is 'no Christian aesthetic – no Christian philosophy of the Arts.'"[14] Moreover, at the same time that there is inadequate actual theological work done on aesthetics, there is also a lack of religious practice and expression.

This is certainly true when it comes to Christian impact and influence in Thailand. For the Protestant church there has been no aesthetical engagement in Thailand. For example, if one were to go visit a Protestant church in this country, the first thing one might notice is a complete lack of architectural beauty. Churches may be nothing more than converted storefronts, or industrial or residential buildings that have simply been rented out. Even churches which have been purchased or built, and have significant membership and resources, will typically be buildings with architectural style devoid of any aesthetical sensibility, focusing primarily on functionality. When one enters the church, there is little atmosphere of it being sacred space. Instead it feels as though one is entering an office complex, completely devoid of religious aesthetics.

Comparing the Christian churches to the Thai *Wat* (Buddhist temple), there is a stark contrast. Thai temples are ornate, not haphazardly

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[9] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 181.

[10] Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford. Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 27.

[11] McGrath, *The Christian*, 239.

[12] William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[13] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics,* 3.

[14] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics,* 19.

created, and they reflect the marriage of both form and function. The space, architecture and design are well conceived, whether it is a local *wat* from an obscure village or an urban *wat* of great importance. While there are certain traditional motifs that are present in all Thai *wats*, there has also been some progression and allowance for modern designers to put their aesthetical twists on classical concepts, as is seen in temples such as *Wat Rong Khun* in Chiang Rai, *Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew* in Sisaket, or *The Sanctuary of Truth* in Chonburi.

One issue concerning Christianity's engagement with cultural aesthetics relates to the Protestant church's global relationship with some of its eastern and southern counterparts. Due to longstanding tradition, and more access to many theological works, the West has had the tendency to dominate the theological landscape. This can be an issue in that the West has the tendency to be a society that is more focused on reading, and learning through literary means, but this is not as true in other countries that have more oratory or visual ways of learning. For a religion that perpetually speaks about concepts such as contextualization, Protestant Christianity has failed at times to contextualize aesthetically. Taiwanese theologian Choan–Seng Song faults Western theology for being "a theology of rationalism, and its lack of imagination."[15] In many other countries the church has engaged the culture aesthetically, in a much more effective manner through inculturation and contextualization. Even in Thailand, the Catholic church has made some aesthetic contributions to the country's religious art. Notable examples of attempts at aesthetic inculturation by the Catholic church includes the St. Raphael Cathedral in Surat Thani, various art pieces at Assumption University, and the chapel of the Redemptorist Congregation in Pattaya. However, in this area, the Protestant church remains un-engaged and seemingly uninterested.

For Christianity, creating these aesthetical expressions should present no theological difficulties. If Christians believe that God has created them in his own image, then Christians should use art forms as a work of engagement that comes from the Divine. Makoto Fujimura, a prominent artist and founder of the *International Arts Movement*, when asked in an interview about whether or not the visual arts have a role in the church, he responded:

> The arts provide a comprehensive picture of both humanity and God. What I mean by this is, it's not a theological statement. I'm not saying that the arts replace the divine word of God or the expression of the church. But what I am saying is that the arts are fundamentally connected with the realities that God has created in the universe, as well as in communities of his people. Look at everything from the Genesis account of Adam being asked to name the animals to passages in Revelation that are full of images -- and maybe, in some ways, only artists can understand that. All those things are the language of the arts. It's more than arts being used. I think in some ways you can't use the arts any more than you can use a human being. So we want to have a language that fully celebrates both the artist and the gospel. And in my mind, they are two intertwined realities. The reason that we need the arts is not so we can have more artists in the church, but for the sake of the gospel. The arts are a cup that will carry the water of life to the thirsty. It's not the water itself; it's the vessel. What we are doing in the church today is we are just picking up water with our bare hands and trying to carry it to the thirsty. We can still do it, but the effect is minimized by not fully utilizing what God has given us. We have to do what we can to carry the full cup, rather than be satisfied with waters that slip through our fingers."[16]

The Need for Employing Aesthetics in Evangelization in Thailand

If Protestant Christianity wants to fully engage Thai culture, it must not neglect the tool of visual aesthetics. In short, Christianity

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[15] Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 280.

[16] Makoto, Fujimura, "The Function of Art", https://www.faithandleadership.com/makoto-fujimura-function-art, accessed on 12/10/2018.

needs to return to some of its roots if it intends to engage Thai culture. In the early church, arts were vital to the proclamation of Christian truths and helped reach people in ways that words simply could not. In today's world, the arts should be vital to the Christian faith. Robin Margaret Jensen writes, "No matter how frustratingly enigmatic they may seem to those primarily trained in interpretation of words, visual images provide an extraordinary testimony to the aspects of the hopes, values, and deeply held convictions of the early Christian community."[17] This could especially be true today in Thailand. While the West tends to be a society which gains understanding through linguistic and logical communicative means, much of the East tends to learn through different means, orally, socially and visually through spatial understanding of concepts.[18] Therefore, Christian art could be beneficial in all societies, but specifically in Thai society.

In an article titled "Music in the Arts" Steven R. Gurthrie states, "If Christian spirituality is the domain of lived Christian experience, then clearly the arts are a valuable asset in the spiritual life."[19] When Christians live out their faith through cultural artistic expressions, they are worshipping the Creator by making use of their God-given gifts, and in the process they are able to experience the Divine as well as enabling others to have a similar experience. When artists use their creative power to make things, they are collaborating with the Creator who made humanity and gave women and men the ability to create beautiful things. The Christian church needs to make artistic creativity a priority in its relation to the world and specifically in its engagement with the Thai culture. Art can be used to teach, instruct, comfort, affirm, and communicate Christian themes in ways that do not make them to appear so foreign. To this end, a serious endeavor must be undertaken to

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[17] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 31.

[18] Sally Lam-Phoon, "A Comparative Study of the Learning Styles of Southeast Asian and American Caucasian College Students on Two Seventh Day Adventist Campuses" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1986).

[19] Steven R. Guthrie, "Music and The Arts," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality,* ed. G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids. Zondervan. 2011), 187.

commission and create indigenous Christian Thai artworks that are not mere replicas of Western art. Because of the domination of the Christian church by Western theology and cultural and aesthetic expressions, people have at times been too quick in condemning new non-Western Christian expressions as heterodoxy. Nevertheless, the Christian scriptures give much room to cultural expression. When the Apostle Paul along with other New Testament writers interact with Gentiles and people from other ethnic groups, there is no expectation of them adapting to Jewish cultural norms; instead there iss an overarching theme of freedom, and the realization that Christ is above culture.

Thai Buddhist art tends to relate values that are important in Thai society. For example, in the book, *Transformation of the Thai Concept of Aesthetics*, Mattani Mojidra Rutnin states, "Most traditional Western artists follow the system of creating a balance between horizontal and vertical lines, or grouping the characters in a triangular space, whereas in Asian art, like that of the Thai, the artist prefers flowing, continuous lines which create another type of balance and unity. These qualities of harmony, restrain, moderation, and temperance in Thai arts and literature have probably been ingrained through generations through Buddhist teaching of the Lokiya Dharma which helps us to lead a successful and peaceful life on earth."[20] These themes put forth in Thai art are not simply qualities and values that are beneficial for adherents to Buddhism, but can found throughout all of the major religions, and across societies. In other words, Thai art can help teach universal values. One can learn quite a bit from Thai aesthetics, not only about the forms and styles, but also one can learn some of the values of Thai society that are conveyed through Thai aesthetics. The acceptance and use of Thai aesthetical lens to interpret and depict Christian theology frees it from being dominated by Western culture. This would not only have a positive impact on Thai culture and people, but would also contribute to building a more enriched and robust theology throughout Christendom itself. Thai Buddhists find value in displaying images of the Buddha and

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[20] Mattani Mojidra Rutnin, *Transformation of the Thai Concepts of Aesthetics* (Bangkok, Thailand: Thai Khadi Research institute Thammasat University, 1983), 17-18.

other spiritual artifacts in their homes to express their religiosity. There is great loss and disconnect when one becomes a Christian and finds that such activities could no longer continue. In order to support Thai Christians in living out their faith, artistic religious expressions must be available. However, this style of religiosity cannot be realized unless there is a new paradigm of envisioning the role of Christian art that is expressed distinctly through Thai cultural and aesthetic sensibilities.

The creation of contextualized religious art means that there cannot simply be an importing of classical Western Christian art and aesthetical practices. Instead, there must be an incorporation and allowance of organic Thai aesthetical contribution to the visual expressions of the Christian faith. Thailand has a rich cultural and artistic heritage that can serve as a resource for enriching the local Christian church. The ability to make use of this wellspring of aesthetical richness can help transform Christian churches in Thailand to be places of not just functionality, but places of tremendous aesthetical and spiritual value, which as pointed out by Eliade, can "lead to higher consciousness." The Christian churches in Thailand can serve the same purposes as the great cathedrals of Europe, which fulfilled both form and function. For example, when one considers Gothic Cathedrals, Gordon Graham states:

> It has been pointed out many times that everything about a Gothic cathedral, but especially the spire, draws our attention upward, just as the minds and souls of those who worship in it should also be drawn upward. The gigantic nave of the cathedral at Rheims must fill those who stand in it with a sense of how small and fragile they themselves are. The important point is that this is an attitude singularly appropriate for those entering the presence of God.[21]

Indeed, the role that the Gothic cathedrals played in the life of European Christians can be replicated when the concept is thoughtfully

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[21] Gordon, Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 151

applied to the Thai context.

Aesthetical Christian adaptation could also include the use of other visual arts, including paintings and statues. These are not in contradiction with the church's teachings, but to the contrary, should be a way of opening up the religious imagination and can be used as a tool of instruction and confirmation of the church's presence. That way, Thai Christian art could perform a similar role as with respect to Buddhism. Finally, work must be done on trying to discern and contemplate on developing theological aesthetics in a Thai concept. This could not only contribute to developing a more robust local theology, but also open up a whole new framework of interreligious dialogue through an aesthetical lens.

Although there is a need for contextualized Christian aesthetics, one cannot simply water down or twist Christian concepts in order to penetrate Thai society. Christianity is not looking to seduce people into changing religions but is offering people an opportunity to hear and respond to the message of Jesus. In doing so it is necessary to build relational bridges and practice enculturation on an individual as well as church wide level. When it comes to the issue of ascribing power to Christian art, Christians must remain firm on the stance that no power comes from images themselves; power can only come from the One who created the greatest aesthetical work – the world itself. As earlier stated, the Orthodox position could serve as a good basis for Christian approach to aesthetics, in affirming that Christian art may act as a "window to the Divine," but cannot be the Divine itself. That being said, there can be aspects of the Divine that are found in humanity and through the creative artistic expression of humanity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Thailand has a rich history of visual aesthetics. From early roots in animism, to Brahminism, to Buddhism, Thai culture has expressed itself and made its art relevant and beneficial to society. As other forms of religious thought have entered the kingdom

and have adapted their religious art to the Thai context, the Protestant church should be no different. One must realize that people can be aesthetically conditioned, depending on a myriad of factors, but one of the key factors will be culture. Thai people have a deep appreciation for the role of aesthetics not only in daily life, but also in their spirituality and religiosity. Therefore, Christianity must accommodate this thinking if it wishes to gain a stronger foothold among the Thai people. Frank Burch Brown states, "What theological neo-aesthetics prompts us to emphasize is that such diversity is not so much an option as a necessity, that there are theological grounds for incorporating considerable diversity within every major Christian group or denomination, and that an important dimension of the diversity of Christian 'performance' is aesthetic."[22]

Today's Thai society features a plethora of religious aesthetical forms. Perhaps it is time for Christianity to take a seat at the religious roundtable, and produce genuinely Thai, genuinely spiritual, and genuinely Christian art. For the Christian, art as a form of expression is a gift from the Divine. Potentially Thailand, through its organic local aesthetics, could be the place that demonstrates the balance between the cold rationalism that tends to plague the West and the creative aspect deep within the Christian tradition. Through aesthetics, the various religious traditions present in Thailand could enter into a new dialogue. When culture and religion make their encounter, new ideas and aesthetical forms tend to arise. Imagine the richness that would come about as a result of the meeting of a combination of religious and indigenous cultural concepts, expressions and forms. Therefore, a more robust Christian and Thai aesthetic would not only assist the Thai Christian church but could contribute to Thailand's greater cultural development as well.

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[22] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics,* 184.

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Paradox of COVID-19: Communication Opened, Religion Closed and Social Distanced and Its Implications

Sebastian Periannan

Abstract

Corona is not a catchy or patchy word, but it is a virus from the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) family. The etymological meaning of the word comes from Latin. It has affected the entire world with due exception to just a few small countries. Looking at the pandemic pages of history, it is nothing new but is "novel Corona Covid-19". This paper tries to look at the scenario from the areas of modern media world taking into account religion as a prism and social context as a concept. A critical observation from a communication aspect of the coronavirus leads to images such as, fear, faultiness, fight, family, faith, and finance. The paradox of communication is being opened one side, and numerous fake news on the other side, with strict orders to religious centres of worship to be closed, but the heart, mind and helping hands of the faithful are opened; and being social animals, people living and moving in close proximity are requested to move with distance. The challenge of this virus calls for a natural way of life, reverence for humanity,

Rev. Sebastian Periannan, Ph.D. is currently the secretary and correspondent of Annai Vailankanni Arts and Science College at Thanjavur, India. Formerly, he was the Rector of St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary, and as Professor and Head of the Department of Social Communication in St. Peter's Pontifical Institute Bangalore. He has worked as a director and producer of Tamil Broadcast in Catholic International Radio Veritas Asia, Manila, Philippines for seven years (1989-1996). He lectures on Social and Pastoral communication in India and abroad. His book *Social Research Methodology: An Introduction* has been published by the University of Madras.

and politics for a common good and with an ethical connotation. As a consequence of the coronavirus, some future considerations are offered ranging from the environmental and indigenous knowledge to futuristic research orientations.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic which has changed our life plans, span, and shaken our systematically and scientifically constructed certainties, and which shakes the world with its dramatic scenes of the dead, of the infected, of forced isolation, of broken relationships, and of working in crisis has also revealed the limitations of our almost infallible algorithms. We ask ourselves: How was it possible that it got so out of hand? What went wrong? What must we do or not do? How long will this last? How many will die? Fear, faith, truth, mistakes, pain and hope have all been expressed. We carry out rituals and gestures of generosity; we express our needs, we continue to care for the sick; we bury and cremate the dead; but in all of this, how is truth expressed? Religiously speaking, where is God? Socially analysing, what is "distance"? All kinds of news, views, and opinions about the Covid-19 pandemic are spread freely via the social media with its multitude of open communication channels.

At least more than half of the world population believes in the existence of a loving and almighty God, but the question raised in this crisis is: Where is that God now? All the places of worship are being closed for entry. Distance could be biological, emotional, social and spiritual; we are called constantly to keep watch on social distance. Is it going to be the new norm? To what extent will it still be human to alienate other human being just because of a virus? Further, amidst our separate insularities, South Asians should take the pandemic as wake-up call beyond public health, placing our attention also on ills

ranging from plastic pollution to global warming, extinction of species, hijacking of commons, dirty water, toxic air, a weakening of the welfare state, infrastructural exceptionalism, and the rapid conversion of our demographic diversity into the worldwide sameness of a suburban mall.

The pandemic is a physical exam of the social body, and never has public trust been put to a greater test. In democracies, compliance must be elicited. Asking citizens to stay at home, to give up work, and to trust that the individual sacrifices they make now are essential to preserving the well-being of the community going forward is never easy to do, and especially not against an invisible enemy.[1] In this background, the following questions are raised: (1) What is the role of media? (2) What is the response of religious followers and leaders? (3) How will social recovery take place?

In light of the overall theme of the paper, the following objectives have been formulated:

1. To observe the Covid-19 pandemic from a communication point of view based on recent news and opinions expressed via media, including the role of numerous fake news and facts.
2. To analyse the coronavirus event from the mediatised messages, religious responses, and social aspects of the paradoxes.
3. To propose a few considerations from a communication, religious and social stand points as social recovery measures.

Defining the Area of Concern

Four concerns are identified, namely, media, religion, social context and virus.

1. Media as one of the main components of communication: a) Personal, that is oral media; b) Inter-personal, namely family and assembly called group communication; c) Mass modern electronic and social media including the digital media platform.

2. Religion as a prism:

    a. Good, relevant, soul searching, forming and reforming, uplifting, other centred and service oriented;
    b. Needed to some extent, useful for some noble purpose of social cause, inclusivist;
    c. Pragmatic, extravagant religiosity, utilitarian, narrowly one-sided, exclusivist;
    d. Irrelevant, opium, outdated, vain glory, supra feelings and lunatic fringe.

3. Social context as a concept:

    a. Social development has to be addressed as an agenda to offer health and well being.
    b. Social democracy could be practiced at all levels of Covid-19 testing, treating and comforting.
    c. Social justice as a principle has to find a place in human society to fight the virus.
    d. Social harmony is desired to avert the pandemic.

4. Corona as virus:

a) Virus is a natural part of nature; b) could be a chemical component; and c) might have been created and spread; d) a term coined by the World Health Organization (WHO) to denote the disease that has led to a pandemic. On 11 February 2020, WHO announced the official name for the mysterious disease originating in China, caused by a new coronavirus! Dealing with Covid-19 is not easy.[2] Even countries with advanced healthcare systems are struggling. As of date, no one knows how the end of this virus would come.

History Repeats Itself

Epidemics, pandemics, and "syndemic" are nothing new to the planet earth. The globe has experienced 20 or more terrible pandemics in the past.[3] Table 1 below shows the most ancient and worst hit in terms of mortality.

Table 1: Pandemic History

Name of the Pandemic	Era	Mortality
Prehistoric epidemic	Circa 3000 B.C.	Neolithic decline
Plague of Athens	430 B.C.	Death toll as high as 100,000 people
Great Plague of London	1665-1666	About 100,000 people died, including 15% of the population of London.
Spanish Flu (did not originate from Spain)	1918-1920	100 million people died (17 Million in India).
Asian Flu	1957-1958	1.1 million worldwide deaths

As a particular reference, the ten plagues of Egypt are well-known. We do not know how many people were killed in these events. But we do know that the Black Death of 1324 decimated around 200 million people when the world population was just about 475 million. The outbreak of this plague shook Europe and caused social, political, economic, and cultural upheavals of an unprecedented magnitude. The Spanish Flu of early 20th century killed 100 million people, and there have been other pandemics of lesser proportions. Millions throughout Indian history fell victim to the recurrent outbreak of smallpox, and people flocked to the goddess of smallpox – Mariamma or -Śītalādevī – who both causes and put an end to the epidemic.[4]

Furthermore, there were several Great Plagues in the past. One that occurred in the Istanbul area in the 6th century saw deaths at a rate of 10,000 a day. But at the end of each devastation the world returned to what it was before. However, with this current pandemic, it will be a new world to which survivors return. In the past, we shaped our world. Now the world will shape us in ways to which we will have to adjust whether we like it or not.

Source of the Virus as Observed from Media

Much of the public understanding about the coronavirus has come from reports in the media. Examples of widely promulgated information include:

i) The coronavirus was transferred from birds to other animals, then to human in Wuhan, China. It was originally identified in 1950 as a virus belonging to the SARS family.

ii) Virus testing got uncontrollably busted out of lab in Wuhan, China.

iii) China has accused America of creating the virus and spreading it through military personnel (a kind of bio or chemical warfare strategy).

iv) America pointing finger at China to be responsible for the "Wuhan Virus". The US accuses the UN's health agency of helping China conceal the pandemic's gravity.

v) The scientific community believes that the virus, which is part of the corona group of virus spontaneously got activated.

vi) Scientists identify three Covid-19 disease phases under Degrees of Symptoms.

vii) Some medical experts are of the opinion that this virus is present in everybody's body as SARBECO virus, and that when the level of attack goes high, the virus becomes a pandemic.

viii) The *Global Burden of Disease Study* shows that one in five people globally is at risk of severe COVID-19, and 11 categories of underlying conditions may increase the risk. At the time of this article being written, nearly 12 million people worldwide have been stricken with confirmed cases, and at least 562,769 have died.[5]

ix) A number of scientists challenge WHO, asserting that virus transmission is airborne.

x) A segment of DNA that was passed down from Neanderthals around 60,000 years ago has been linked to an increased risk of a severe form of the Covid-19.

xi) The latest Nielsen survey shows that television viewership increased 40% for India, 34% for Australia, 20% for France and 17% for UK during the 15th week of the pandemic in April, as compared to the pre-Covid period.[6]

Vital Information on Viruses

Viruses have been around far longer than humans and will likely outlast them. There are millions of types and thousands of species of viruses. A virus does not reproduce, but replicates on contact with a living cell. A virus is not capable of auto mobility, but must be transported between living organisms by direct or indirect contact. In the 21st century, the fear of the virus moves at the speed of what the screen shows.[7] According to Rudolf Steiner quoted by Thomas Cowan, "Viruses are simply excretions of toxic cells. Viruses are pieces of DNA or RNA along with toxic proteins."[8]

Scientist have identified nearly 200 genetic mutations in the SARS, CoV-2 that causes Covid-19 by analysing virus genes from over 7,500 people infected with the disease.[9] Nonetheless, with so little known about its origin and pathogen emission rate, SARS-CoV-2 presents a great challenge to humankind.[10] Presently, no reliable and applicable scoring system exists to predict outcomes for patients with Covid-19.

Critical Questions of Coronavirus: Dynamic Model of Epidemics

In this section we discuss a few contemporary dynamic models to assimilate the spread of epidemics as a function of time with special reference to Covid-19 in India. It is a known fact that during the onset of any pandemic the spreading rate follows the exponential trend and eventually drops down. Thus if the number of infected individuals **(I)** over time *t* is known one can find the growth rate / spreading rate *r* from the equation written as,

$$\frac{dI}{dt} = rI$$
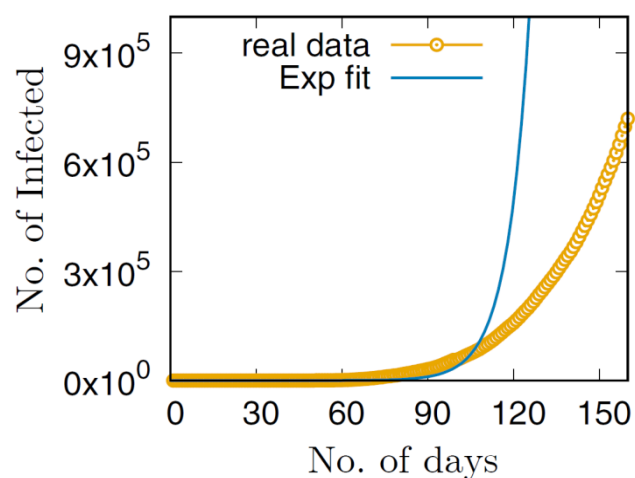
Figure 1: Real data of Covid-19 spread in India (line with open circles) fitted exponential curve (solid line). The x axis denotes the time duration in days since the onset of the disease.

Upon integrating eq. 1 we get **I(t) = I₀ exp(rt)**, where **I₀** and **r** can be found by fitting the equation to the existing real data. Here we have made an attempt to fit the data concerning Covid-19 in India to the equation above, to arrive at a rough estimate of the spreading rate of the disease. The data was collected from *https://covid19india.org*

and cross verified in *www.who.int/india*. Fig. 1 shows the evolution of number of infected individuals from the onset of disease in India (03 Jan 2020) until 07 Jul 2020 (line with open circles). The fitted exponential curve (solid line) does not completely agree with the real data due to the effects of lockdown and the fact that we are in the midway of the spread. The calculated coefficients are $I_0 = 0.3686$ and $r = 0.1284$. This is also known as an Exponential Model.

This unprecedented event has created a chaotic situation all over the world. As human beings, we may have some critical questions with regard to the future, livelihood, job opportunities, economic development, family conflicts, domestic abuse, company disputes, social injustice and fundamentalism. The following critical questions and concerns of the coronavirus pandemic may be identified.

Fear

There is enough reason to fear a combination of Covid-19 with existing illnesses and medical complication. The public's fear of the virus is allowing presidents and prime ministers to press on with top-down rule, whereas the lockdown should be the time to generate momentum towards more efficient, just and humane administration. There is fear of health and death. What to eat? What not to eat? How to touch? And how not to touch? What to wear and how to wear? And also fear of do's and don'ts.

While alertness or appropriate medical care is important, we often tend to fall into the trap of fear, particularly in an age when Whatsapp messages, far from generating strength, spread negativity. Psychologists are even talking of an 'epidemic of despair' arising from a fear of unknown causes, resulting in serious anxiety and mental problems. Extended isolation, according to specialists can trigger a different kind of pandemic even leading to possible suicidal tendencies, fits of anger, depression, alcoholism and eccentric behavioural patterns.[11]

Faultiness

The first fault line that was exposed is between the rich and the poor; the second fault line is even more dangerous though not as glaring. That is, community leaders and democratically elected office holders must play a key role in preventing dangerous rumours. Adequate information and preparation must proceed before any announcement of curfew or lockdown. Due to unplanned lockdowns in India, thousands of migrant workers were put to unimaginable difficulties and trials before reaching their destinations.

Covid-19 is not Force Majeure (FM) per se. It is the lockdowns, not the virus, which has made it impossible for the airlines, hotel, automobile, construction, hospitality, retail industries, insurance sectors, and caterers to deliver as promised. There are also other fault lines:

- Environmental degradation leading to climate change cannot be ignored;
- Soil depletion and sea erosion also represent a fault line in environmental conditions;
- Lack of food security;
- Proliferation of fake news resulting in mental contamination and misconception;
- Religious hate speech.

At any rate, the national experience with a lockdown makes it clear that it is a blunt weapon, useful only for a brief period.

Fight

Early protection, early detection, early diagnosis, early isolation need to be emphasised during this fight against the virus. Nonetheless, many issues remain:

- Can antibody tests help tackle Covid-19?

- When will a Covid-19 vaccine be ready?
- No country for migrant workers? Migrant workers are fighting for livelihood.
- Hunted by the virus, ignored by the government? Six feet away or else, six feet inside!
- People have faced heavy burden of social suffering.[12]

Family

Many family members feel that there is more natural bonding and relationships are more strengthened during the lockdown. However, domestic abuse reports doubled during lockdown. Domestic helpers battle the virus and class discriminations. One person reported, "Employers expect me to shower before entering their house, but I am not allowed to use their bathrooms, what do I do now?"

Faith

A celebration of faith amid the darkness took place on 22 March 2020 when several groups of people hit the streets to 'celebrate' the 'Janata Curfew' in India. They practised intense social proximity and banged metal utensils merrily and mercilessly. Did this action increase the danger of the community spread of the virus? Although faith helps to cope with the pandemic, there are also many pseudoscientific solutions to the pandemic floating within the digital media system.

Finance

None of the epidemics in history ripped open the persistent inequality and callous injustice of our world to the extent Covid-19 has done. This epidemic is the symptom of an unjust world whose heavy tilt of balance forebodes calamity of apocalyptic proportions. The economic crisis that has besieged the world since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemics has led to some searching questions about the future of globalisation which is becoming "slowbalization". The very

attack of Covid-19 on the green planet has highlighted, once again, both the bad shape of financial burden and the precariousness in the lives of millions of people in the world. Alas, absolute poverty will increase once again, while economic inequality will rise further.

Paradoxes of Coronavirus

Tim Leberecht identifies at least four paradoxes of the coronavirus: 1) the enemy is us; 2) we are confined but overwhelmed; 3) the future has a future again; and 4) to win we have to stop resisting.[13] Newspaper headlines and chats on social media made it appear that the virus had 'a religious' affiliation. Why we call it a paradox is because of its unpredictability and chaotic nature, inconsistency in symptoms, and incongruity in patterns of spreading.

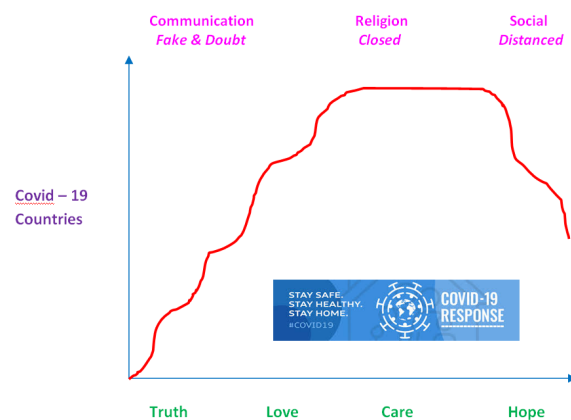## Covid-19 : Paradox Chart

Figure 2: Paradox Reality

Fig.2 shown above tries to drive the point on the paradox reality. Almost all the countries in the world have experienced the pandemic. Communication is rampant, bringing sometimes fake news, rumour and doubt. Religious places of worship are under lock, at least for some time. Social distance has become mandatory. But the core of

communication is truth; the essence of religion is love and care, and finally the substance of the social context offers hope. The challenge of this virus calls for a natural way of life, reverence for humanity, and politics for a common good and with an ethical connotation. This vision is what is being explained in Table 2 shown below with more poignant pointers of paradox:

Table 2: Paradox

Coronovirus Paradox	Natural	Reverence for Life	Political	Ethics
Communication - *News* - *Marketing* - *Medical Feasibility*	✓ *Virus identified* ✓ *News spreads* ✓ *Panic buying* ✓ *Where to go?*	✓ *Authentic clinical solution* ✓ *Reliable home system*	✓ *Collective global action* ✓ *Shared vision from UN / WHO*	✓ *Truth to be told* ✓ *Justice to be practiced*
Religion - *Failure* - *Loneliness* - *Curfew*	✓ *Close the door* ✓ *Open the heart* ✓ *Helping hands*	✓ *Virtual worship* ✓ *Meditation* ✓ *Obedience*	✓ *Control* ✓ *Responsibility*	✓ *Share the talents* ✓ *Time* ✓ *Treasures*
Social - *Education* - *Distancing* - *Policing*	✓ *Distanced Human affairs* ✓ *Family fear* ✓ *Police action* ✓ *Food shortage*	✓ *Facilitating medical services* ✓ *Co-operative measures*	✓ *Leadership* ✓ *Civility* ✓ *Cross country collaboration*	✓ *Care for the under privileged* ✓ *Migrant workers*

➤ Diseases do not care about religion, race or class; but whenever there is a pandemic, deep-rooted social prejudices resurface.
➤ There is a possibility of community transmission of the virus; doctors are not entirely wrong in advising people to remain in isolation, and refrain from other social transactions.
➤ How our idea of community and boundaries has changed. On the one hand everyone is confined within the tiniest spaces, but on the other, the crisis has also urged us to community action.
➤ Moving away from the political and economic consequences of COVID-19 are other concerns arising from an extended lockdown, social distancing and isolation.
➤ With the advent of computer based learning across the globe and in particular among toddlers who are exposed to such gadgets, it should be easy to implement some of the learning modules in education.

Analysis from Theoretical Underpinnings

1. **Theologically speaking:** Some people are of the opinion that it is a punishment from God. God has punished the world (or people) for its style of life, superstitious faith and indifferent attitude. It is also viewed as a purifying act of God.

2. **Sociologically observing:** It is a permissive will or mistake of someone who is in a position of responsibility; fortunately or unfortunately, knowingly or unknowingly, he or she has spread it. Perhaps a scientist, a popular politician, a technical giant, or a social miscreant have engaged in the havoc influenced by the signs of the time.

3. **Civilization process:** The occurrence of this virus may be a perfection process from nature and culture, that can be further explained,
   • As correction or a kind of correcting the faulty methodology of the wrong way or evil way of life.

   • Suffering and death of patients, health specialists, migrant workers, affected children and poor people in the aftermath has a meritorious value.
   • Repentance and reconciliation because individually and in some cases collectively, people have taken a path to reform their life orientations and motivations for a better standard and quality of life.
   • Eliciting philanthropy and offering a helping hand through volunteerism and cooperation.

4. **Scientific approach to this pandemic:** Viruses are pieces of DNA or RNA along with toxic proteins. To encounter this malady, science and technology play a vital role and pivotal responsibility in researching, analysing and offering solutions for the situation of uncertainty, severity, and rapidity of the virus. Scientists and medical community have plunged into various ongoing researches and trying to devise a medical solution depending on the innovation of vaccines. All the efforts are being made to address the issue at hand—that is to save the infected persons as well as developing a remedy for the future.

5. **Historical lessons:** Every effect has a cause. Every fruit has come from the root of the tree. Thus, history stands tall to teach what happened and how a particular problem was tackled and how the events unfolded. A century ago, when Hyderabad, India was devastated by the bubonic plague, it transformed itself from being a medieval citadel to modern city. In any case, the lessons we have learned from the past include:

   • Face masking
   • Hand washing
   • Social distance
   • Quarantine
   • Containment

Lessons from Hubei, China (February 2020): a lockdown followed by aggressive screening, testing and hospitalisation brought beneficial results.

Response as Challenges to the Virus

Table 3 shown below is self-explanatory. The very role of communication is to disseminate news, views, opinions, and reports. Religions must serve encourage one another in difficult times; and social responsibility is imperative to cope with the pandemic. The response of communication has to be networking, religiously engaging and socially expressing gratitude to the health specialists, security, police and all the departments who render service. We can hope to recover from this pandemic when communication is truthful, religions ensure peace and harmony, and society acts in accordance with scientific understanding.

Table 3: Role, Response and Recovery

Response as Challenges to Virus

Covid – 19	Role	Response	Recovery
Communication	News	Networking	Neutral, Objective
Religion	Encouraging	Engaging	Ensuring Peace
Social	Responsible	Gratitude	Scientific

Communication – a Changing Reality

How has the coronavirus transformed the way we communicate? Our relationship with voice and video chat is changing in the Covid-19 era. How should those who dislike phone and video chat handle the

influx of calls? According to Ami Rokach, "Since we are having more meaningful, deeper conversations, we feel more connected to the person we are speaking to." The pandemic, says Rokach, provides a common topic for everyone to talk about, which in turn leads to reconnections. Because of the lockdowns and restrictions, people are becoming more acquainted with phone calls and video chats.[14] In the field of education, online learning and assessment has become a viable alternative. Since multiple online assessment modules are available to gauge individual performances in several areas (psychometric tests), it should not be difficult to create a robust platform to help understand the learning outcomes. Some educators fear the virus might bring about new divides because access to technology is uneven in many parts of the world, which would affect the quality of education that individuals might get.

Religious Introspection

At this point in time, religious leaders and religious practices need not be mocked or looked down at the cost of the pandemic lockdown. According to Jørn Borup, the coronavirus puts world's religions under pressure. While religious assemblies that defy restrictions can contribute to spreading the virus, faith may also be a coping strategy during these difficult times. For some, religion is more important than government action in curbing health risks. The Greek Orthodox Church issued an official announcement that the virus is not transmitted via communion (the holy consumption of wine and bread). Muslim scholars cite the Koran to 'overrule' assembly bans and point out that the prophet Muhammad went to mosque during disasters. In reality religion is also a phenomenon that is prepared for disaster. Religion has always been prepared for, perhaps even based on, threats to life.[15]

In these critical times, religions must prioritize:

1. Assess your current economic and social situation: why do you do what you do?
2. Promote honest conversation with your donors and

stakeholders: what supports what you do?

3. Sustainability factors and capacity needs include leadership, adaptiveness, collaboration and technology.

4. This moment calls for a new way forward for religious philanthropy—one that prioritizes dismantling oppressive systems, redistributing resources, and amplifying power for the people most affected by the pandemic.[16]

Thus, this time of crisis calls for the discovery of God everywhere and meaningful faith in the divine. Faith in this case is not just faith professed with the head, with human reason, but faith that is embodied in concrete daily life activities that display abandonment and surrender to God.

Social-Innovation and Service

Addressing the pandemic calls for embracing transparency, accountability and exchanging insights and experiences. Pathogens do not look for a particular race or place; they are happy with any human body that is warm, moist and nutrient-rich. Unfortunately, even the scientific understanding of hosts, vectors and carriers has been appropriated to reinforce social prejudices.

To prevent community transmission, wearing masks, exercising physical distancing, hand washing, personal and social hygiene remain the troika of personal protection measures during an active epidemic. Anyone who listens and adheres to these guidelines renders greater service not only to him/herself but also to the nation.[17]

The inability of social institutions to cope with a crisis warrants experimenting with a socially innovative approach that effectively brings together government, civil society, and the private sector. In this effort, the following actions must be implemented:

1. Providing community-building tools that work;

2. Creating different levels of engagement and bringing together various levels of skills and commitment;

3. Supporting the formation of balanced teams who have sufficient knowledge and expertise;

4. Establishing a range of groups to select ideas and opening challenges to the groups can generate many ideas; selecting, scaling up and transferring ideas.

5. Celebrating collective accomplishments and successes.

Future Considerations

The coronavirus has inspired us to adopt a known model of approach for the future, that is, "Stop-Think-Proceed". The entire world had to "stop" because of the spread of the virus. It has forced us to "think" in various ways and means. Now, we can "proceed" with caution, courage, confidence, compassion and concern for each other. Here below, the paper offers some considerations for future study, research, and way of life.

1. **Knowledge**: Environmental, agriculture and indigenous knowledge must be further explored, expedited and expressed. Natural settings and evolution is the bedrock of the environment. The environment embraces its first and the most important activity– agriculture. The ancient environmental agriculture has produced indigenous knowledge, which can never be underestimated or undervalued. Nature is the first book God created. All the written scriptures, novels and creative writings help us find meaning and purpose in the wonderful creation in the universe. It is from here that we gain a whole gamut of information, ideas, and knowledge for our traditional medical approach and technology. The village is still relevant. The novel coronavirus has demonstrated how unsustainable this socio-economic arrangement was, apart from being ethically indefensible.[18]

2. **Value Formation**: Observing and analysing the behaviour and attitude of people all over the past few months indicates that a serious undertaking on an authentic human value formation is desired. Formation has to take into account cultural understanding, family upbringing, influence from teachers and friends, and media literacy. Family as a social institution has the moral obligation to care for the children. Biological, relational, cultural, educational and intrinsic value orientations are also related to knowledge of family impacts on the nation.

3. **Religion**: World population can be broadly classified into theists, atheists, and animists. For our consideration here, the paper concentrates on religion, meaning all those who profess some form of adherence, membership and identity with a particular faith group and fellowship. But in reality and rhetoric, one notices there is a tendency in people to adopt the supra model, possessing a superiority consciousness, and looking down on others. As a result, people engage in competition and even spread messages of hatred and violence. It is important to emphasize that if a religion does not engage in peace and service oriented activities to humanity, then worship and paying homage to God cannot be considered as a religious act or way of life.

4. **Education**: What is the purpose of education? Education is for life. Whether it is formal, non-formal, alternative education, or online learning, education has to address and be relevant to the signs of the time. A life oriented education must aim towards utilizing personal skills, talents, management, and scientific methods.

5. **Leadership**: A leader is the one who goes the way, knows the way, and paves the way. We have experienced a kind of global leadership crisis during this pandemic. The type of leadership that we envisage is that which will inspire the people at large to become law abiding citizens. At the same time, leaders are called to work towards building peace, and having a people centred and service oriented outlook.

6. **Civility and Polity**: The law of the land must give due attention to ensuring human right, social justice, freedom, equality and solidarity. It must be present in household environment, work place ethics, relational arenas, transactional dealings, and government regulations; in all cases, there is importance given to individual freedom and dignity.

7. **Science and Technology**: Medicine is traditional as well as modern. "India may appear to be doing better but the fact is little is known about timing of the so called 'peaking of infections'. Science, it would seem, has been put in isolation. And Reason it has been quarantined."[19] Science is not infallible, but it has the power of self-correction. In a new epidemic, there are many knowledge gaps early on. As fresh information is accumulated and analysed, scientific recommendations do undergo change in order to respond to new data.[20]

8. **Ideology**: Thinkers who do not profess any religion normally hold on to some ideology. Human beings are eligible and capable of having their own ideology. That ideology must be based on good will, fair play, honesty, participatory democracy, social justice and harmony.

9. **Communication**: As the famous saying goes, "No man is an island." We are born and created to communicate with ourselves, with others, and with God. The first and last activity of any human being is nothing but communication. This communication must be aimed at truth centred media of communication.

10. **Research**: When we create a vaccine for Covid-19, it will be the hard labour and fruit of medical and scientific research. The application of the research result must be aimed at a larger and

wider population in the world. For all that is being said and done, "knowledge" on a particular subject or field is created only through scientific research. Any research must be aimed at this goal in point.

In this research connection, to circumvent the shortcomings of the above mentioned exponential model, we adopt a universal compartmental model, namely SEIR.[21] Many diseases have a latency period in which the person can be exposed to the disease but remains asymptomatic. Therefore considering the exposed compartment in the dynamic modelling of Covid-19 will be more appropriate. Here, S is the number of susceptible individuals, E the exposed, I the infected and R the recovered. This model is assumed on the grounds that if an individual gets infected and recovered they may incur lifelong immunity to the disease. The model equations can be written as,

$$\frac{dS}{dt} = \frac{-\beta SI}{N}$$
$$\frac{dE}{dt} = \frac{\beta SI}{N} - \sigma E$$
$$\frac{dI}{dt} = \sigma E - \gamma I$$
$$\frac{dR}{dt} = \gamma I$$

where β is the transmission rate, γ is the recovery rate and σ is the parameter determines the latency period of the virus, wherein the case of Covid-19 it is around 5 days. We have fitted the real data with the model by optimizing the parameters to predict the evolution of the disease. Fig. 3 depicts the evolution of I in agreement with the real data. The fit parameters are given as $\beta = 0.367$ and $\gamma = 0.159$. In general, the basic reproduction rate can be given by $R_0 = \beta/\gamma$. In our prediction we found $R_0 = 2.308$, which is consistent with the many results available for Covid-19.
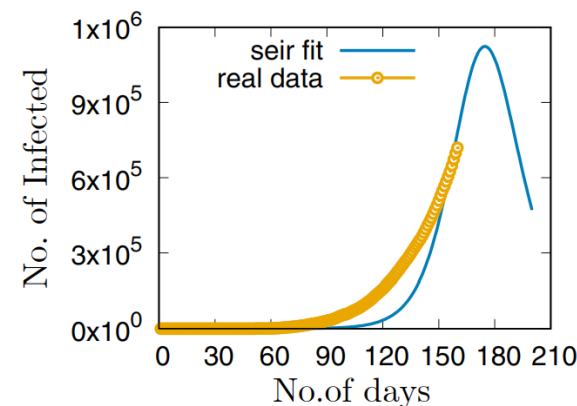

Figure 3. Real data of Covid-19 spread in India (line with open circles) fitted I curve (solid line) associated with the model. The x axis denotes the time duration in days since the onset of the disease.

Conclusion

Two hundred years ago, those who had "**G**old" were considered to be the rich and famous. After that, those who owned "**O**il" wells (Petrol) were the richest people in the world. However, today those who will have the "**D**ata" for Drugs/Medicine would make a greater impact in the world. Thus, it may be called the "**GOD**" principle for the coronavirus. We have also experienced the Industrial Revolution in the world which was marked by the survival of the fittest with no other option at hand. Later part of 1980's came the informational era signed with standard of life with few options. The present era, from 2008 onwards known as the Social and Digital Revolution, aims to offer quality of life with multiple options. Therefore, in a truthful way, communication can be open and disseminated. In a spirit of sincerity and honesty, religion need not be closed with fear and trembling. Finally, the socio-cultural reality of the future must be aimed with wisdom and compassion to recover from the social distance. As a case in point during Covid-19, the story of a fifteen-year-old young girl, Jyoti Kumari, who peddled a cycle 1,200 kms from Gurugram Delhi to Bihar in India, carrying her ailing father to reach home is a story of courage, confidence and hope. All that the

paper envisages is to promote human and sustainable development—tolerant, dialogical religious approach and offering creative solutions from a scientific standpoint.

(ENDNOTES)

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REPORT

11th ARC International Roundtable: Report

The 11th ARC International Roundtable, which commemorated the 20th anniversary of the founding of ARC, an important milestone, took place as scheduled on 9-12 March 2020 at St. Louis College, Bangkok, Thailand amidst growing anxieties related to the Covid-19 pandemic spreading around the world. ARC leaders in consultation with the administrators of St. Louis College decided not to postpone the event because at that time, the Covid-19 situation in Thailand was still mild. In the days leading up to the Roundtable, Thailand only saw several dozen infections and one death. Moreover, all of the invited international participants were coming from, at that time, low risk countries, and many invited presenting as well as non-presenting participants were already in Thailand.

Near the date of the event, however, a number of participants expressed their regrets for not being able to attend due to the uncertainty of the situation in their own countries. Some participants were forbidden to travel overseas by their institutions while others faced mandatory quarantine by their home country upon return if they were to come. Because of the sudden changes in travel plans, the Roundtable organizers decided to offer the opportunity for participants to present online either by live streaming or by a pre-recorded video. In this respect, 9 international participants accepted the offer and gave their talks online. This marked the first time in ARC International Roundtable history that there was online participation.

The quick adaptations made to the program were most appropriate in light of the theme of this year's International Roundtable being "Religion and Social Communication Research in Asia: Basic and Practical Considerations in a Digital World." The reality of the Covid-19 pandemic wreaking havoc on essentially every aspect of society from politics, to economics to religion, and forced the organizing

committee to incorporate online participation into the program made the considerations being raised in the research presented timely and pertinent. The very logistics involved in implementing the program itself reflects the role and ramifications of digital technology to religion and social communication in the modern age.

Participants in this year's Roundtable came from India, Myanmar, Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, the United States, Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. The research presented covered a range of topics related to Internet culture and religiosity, intercultural and environmental communication, film and aesthetics, online religious media, and models of religious and pastoral responses in the digital age. Consistent with outlook of the program, some papers were more theoretical in nature, while others addressed particular cultural and geographical contexts within the theme. The wide range of topics demonstrates that digital information and communication technology (ICT) affects a vast spectrum of human life and society, and religion is undoubtedly affected and even transformed by technological progress in very profound ways. Some of the salient points that were raised in the conference include:

- The democratizing of information production and access forces traditional seats of power in society and in religious institutions to exhibit more transparency in the way they operate in order to minimize scandals and lack of public trust.

- ICT must be utilized in matters that affect the human future, for example environmental communication, intercultural communication, and interreligious dialogue.

- As ICT development further advances, especially with the increasing prevalence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in human society, religion must contribute to the directions of this development not only because religion can offer a different perspective from the technocratic mindset and Big

Data fundamentalism but because religious theologies and practices could be dramatically altered due to technological developments.

- Religious media must take cues and lessons from secular media practitioners in order to gain viewership and influence; however, religious media must resist tendencies of sensationalism and clickbait methods in order to maintain the integrity and seriousness of religious content.

- At the same time that religious institutions are experiencing disruptions brought about by communication technologies, for example, the decrease in people entering the monkhood and church attendance, ICT must be incorporated into the mission and vision of religious institutions if they want to overcome these disruptions.

- Religious practices are increasingly being transformed as a result of communication technology as the divine is accessed not only by going to temple or other sacred sites, but accessed by scanning QR codes and logging into Internet accounts.

In evaluating the outcome of this year's Roundtable through examining the results of the evaluation instrument given to all participants both physically present and online as well as from the perspective of organizational logistics, a number of conclusions can be made:

- In the present milieu, physical distance does not have to be an impediment to participating in a program where there is available digital communication technology to facilitate such participation.

- Event organizers that intend to resort to digital communication technology should be prepared and well equipped so as to

prevent disruptions to the flow of the event due to technological errors and failures. The ARC Roundtable faced a number of technological issues, although minor, that affected the quality of the online presentations.

- As online participation in meetings, conferences and symposiums are increasingly becoming the norm in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars in every field should acquaint themselves with digital communication technology and have the necessary instruments in order to better participate and engage with the other participants in the event.

- Organizations with limited budget can resort to partial online participation as a way to reduce costs of travel, board and lodging in the case that these expenses are subsidized by the organizing entity.

- Individuals who need to attend international conferences as part of their academic and professional requirement but cannot afford to do so due to high costs of participating in such an event can request online participation if such an option is available.

- Online participation is a good way of bypassing difficulties related to visa application for people from certain countries.

- Although online participation is a real and valuable option in the modern age, and in some ways is necessary in certain situation, the value of physical presence and direct engagement in discussions cannot be underestimated, especially in the Roundtable format.

The research presented in the conference indicates that all the religious traditions, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Hinduism, etc. must deal with the challenges presented by the digital milieu as well as take advantage of its benefits. Even though there has been a lot of research related to this theme and there have been many conferences organized, it seems that the topics for investigation remain unexhausted. Because information and communication technology is changing so fast, religions are barely keeping up with reflections on ICT's implications for religion and for interreligious relation. In this regard, themes related to ICT and religion and social communication will continue to occupy the mind of religion scholars far into the future.

ARC Staff

On the Communication Structures of Religions

Communication is an existential element of Religions. Without communicating convictions and experiences, Holy Religions cannot exist. Thus they must be considered as essential part of any society and of course also of Religions which cannot be neglected.

One important field within these communications are the *rituals* which belong to every Religion. They grow out of traditions, needs, and expectations and are essential part of any religious life and practice. They can be considered and studied as elements of religious practices but are also one way or the other 'realized' and 'regulated' through proper communicative expressions. This includes the persons involved in ritual processes either as 'actors' or also participants. All this needs beyond proper means and actions also a proper structures and regulations which involve people but also refer to their ways and attitudes of life expressing their expectations, experiences with the 'Holy' as expressed in rituals and related to life.

Rituals are special communicative expressions of the Holy and no Religion can live without them. This 'need' and reality, however, refers also to other and more general proper communication elements with their proper structures without which Religion cannot properly 'function'. This refers not only to respective 'media' but also needs dispositions of persons and proper communication structures including

proper means but also their practice, purpose, and goal. It refers, beside others, also to special groups of people like priests, monks, and similar facilitators being responsible for proper arrangements and execution of rituals, prayers and other related religious practices. Such reality and communication need a proper structure for persons and activities serving as professional 'ground' and a solid 'backbone'. Here beyond proper structures also qualified persons are needed with professional communication abilities and skills. It seems to be not very clear if and where in the different Religions of Asia such proper structures and qualified persons do exist. There are probably some possibly in related positions but are they sufficiently qualified, recognized and supported in their 'work'? The awareness for such needs might be not very much in those responsible for their religious practices.

We seem to lack proper academic studies, structures and respective research about such needs and a clear vision and concept, which proper initiatives are to be taken. Where are the qualified communication secretaries with their proper structures and activities? They are even more urgently needed in a time where the means and ways of communication at different levels of society are increasing and involve practically everybody in our growing digital world which goes far beyond traditional 'media'.

Usually, communication follows and is related to existing social structures of Religions: how are they organized and practice ways and means of social communication according to their social structures and 'activities' and religious needs? This might be seen in their 'way of life' but also in their teachings: what is the role of Buddhist monks and their communities in the daily life and practice of people and even whole populations? For analysis and better understanding, one might look at different levels of living and spiritual activities: how do they share and even 'teach' their Religious insights and convictions? When and where? How is the communication dimension of such 'activities' to be handled and developed? How do visions and worldview look like under social communication perspective? Does it 'influence' or even determine the way people and societies live and develop?

There seems to be a growing conviction that also Religions with their 'structures' and activities need proper qualified communicators with respective 'offices'. How should such communications structures look like? How should they 'work' and what qualities for persons and structures are needed for a proper program and setup?

Religions and their activities are related to special geographical areas but also to the 'social' structures of their 'organization'. How is communication working and structured on a secular level of a society? Who communicates with whom and how in daily life and community concerns? What is the role of Religion and religious practices within a community and culture? What, for example, is the role of a religious community like a monastery and group of monks under communication aspects? Who determines in a Buddhist society the content and practice of communication also in view of the common way of life of people? What is, for example in Buddhist society, the role and communication dimension of the morning collection of food by the monks? How is it 'organized' under communication perspectives? Who is responsible? How is such an activity and its purpose seen under a communication perspective? Is it a 'free moving' activity or are there certain 'structures' beside the activity and who is responsible for this? Are there any studies and/or 'guidelines' for this and related activities? Are such communication activities part of a possible "Buddhist structure"?

For the Roman Catholic Church, the structure would start with the local parishes or similar organizations which are organized mainly in geographical terms within 'dioceses'. They further become part of a 'national' or/and regional Bishops' Conference, which does, however, not exclude in addition 'private' activities of religious orders or congregations within a diocese as addition but not as 'competition' but should rather be seen as part of a 'bigger plan' ('enrichment') of a single or group of dioceses within national Bishops' Conferences or also for a 'regional' conference as is the case of Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia.

For Asia, all national dioceses cooperate in the continental Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), which exists in a similar form also in other parts of the world. For all of them also respective communication offices are foreseen (cf. Vatican II: *Inter Mirifica*) whose role, however, is not to be 'production centers' like diocesan offices in this field which also produce programs and 'outcomes' for their local and even national needs. Continental offices are rather to coordinate, promote, animate, refer to proper training, formation and planning programs and conferences. They are to help to develop and promote proper visions and formation in the service of their respective regions.

A continental office has more of an advisory function and facilitates programs, which cannot be easily developed for a diocese only or a regional 'unit' whose main concern is 'production'.

After 15 years of experience as the FABC Continental Social Communication Office/Officer the following qualifications and activities seem to be essential and needed:

Communications secretary for continental/regional Bishops' Conference

The Communications Officer of a continental Bishops' Conference is to stimulate, facilitate and promote communication initiatives but never is him/herself a 'producer' somehow in competition with local initiatives or projects. S/He rather promotes initiatives and consults but is never a 'competitor'…

The main initiatives of the continental Communication Secretary—who is expected to have a sufficient professional background—might include the following:

- To develop a "familial atmosphere" between the different national communication offices and their bishop chairmen and secretaries—which can be done through an annual *Bishops' Meet* which is confined to respective bishops and their communication secretaries;

- Additional conferences treating special subjects and concerns where a limited number of additional persons (bishops, communication secretaries, etc.) specialized in the subject are to be invited for a deeper understanding and study of relevant issues: e.g., *Biscom*;

- Develop and initiate study and research for projects and policies of common interest and need;

- Provide assistance to research and planning but also joint formation for persons responsible in different fields and on different national levels;

- Provide seminars and study sessions for bishops and their animation officers from different countries providing, for example, information on new technical developments and their consequences for the Church and ministry and developing respective formation and 'production' programs;

- Reflections and insights into theological, formational new ways of communication in view of ministry and mission – especially also seminary formation;

- Provide joint sessions and discussions with communication professionals from different levels and with different concerns in view of the communication dimension in pastoral and evangelizing ministries and formation;

- Organize ecumenical studies and sharing between different Christian groups but also other (main) Religions like Buddhism, Hinduism groups ("interreligious Dialogue"!) under communication perspective (What and how are they seeing and practicing communication? Any possibilities for joint projects, mutual support for the good of the Community?);

- Any possibilities for joint study and formation programs with existing universities on national or international level—also for 'formation' and development of own professional personal;

- Animate, promote and assist universities and academic institutions as well as qualified persons to develop proper and needed research (possibly with some scholarship!)… programs, courses etc.);
- Provide international communication formation and research also for church communication officers (diocesan, national level)… Relate to respective universities…
- Propose research and study for pastorally important ways and means of communication on national, international level;
- Help discover and promote talents for formation and further studies in the field; and
- Provide data and information on existing and needed research to clarify situations and pastoral needs like to investigate the feelings and needs of young people below 20 years old and consequences from this for ministry and 'sharing faith' with them in a 'ground up' and not "top bottom' approach.

As *background* for all this also the more general considerations for Religion and Communication as presented for Christianity in the volume on *Communicating in Ministry and Mission* (Manila 2018) might be helpful:

- Corporate communication of the Church (pp. 46-48)
- Relation to "Media" (pp. 55-57)
- Church approaches to media communication (pp. 60 f.6-68)
- Communication formation (pp. 76ff.)
- Church communication structures (pp. 98-100)
- From diocese to national/international offices (pp. 166-169..)
- New developments (p.170 f)

Franz-Josef Eilers, svd

BOOK NOTES

Conley, Willy: Visual-Gestural Communication. A Workbook in Nonverbal Expression and Reception. (New York/London: Routledge, 2019). 242 pp.

This publication is somehow unique as it does treats 'communication without sound'. It confines itself to "visual-gestural communication" (WCG) from an American perspective as American Sign Language (ASL) : express yourself beyond voice.

It introduces first the history and ways of sign-language: gestures and relates them to different applications. The main part of the book, however, (p.41 ff.) presents specific ways of sign language in a textbook-like listing of exercises followed by quite a listing of "visual-gestural communication assignments" (pp. 131-186) and 'projects'. The publication is actually a teaching book with 'lessons' to be given to students in the field with many illustrations which make it easier to comprehend and practice. It concludes with a 'final project' (p. 212ff) which the instructor proposes. The bibliography (pp. 238-242) contains not only books but also articles and other sources.

This publication reflects a broad field which seldom is addressed beyond our usual professional considerations.

BOOK REVIEWS

Wright, N.T. *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath.* **London: Zondervan Reflective, 2020.**

The unraveling events of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing intensity of its effect continue to stun the world in every way imaginable. The small and inconspicuous coronavirus has devastated globalization and air travel, exposed the vulnerability of our economic and financial structures, stagnated our social interaction with one another, and caused an exponential amount of suffering and death. At first, the pandemic problem was that of China, and then it became something that Italy had to deal with. Now, the pandemic has reached almost all continents on earth, "and suddenly, there was no safe place on the planet" (1).

The brunt force of the crisis has gotten the world into a frenzy, trying to figure out explanations for what is happening and solutions to end the crisis. Questions began to arise: Why is this happening now? Does this have to do with God's judgment on the world? Addressing these more profound existential questions, N.T. Wright's recently published book, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*, offers an acute optic to interpret "the signs of the times" rather than hastily grabbing superficial explanations. Wright, a highly respected New Testament scholar wisely proposes that we need to resist the "knee-jerk reactions" that come naturally with fear and anxieties; instead, we need to spend time in prayer to grieve and lament. The brief five chapters of the book do not give solutions to the pandemic, but rather offer readers biblical wisdom to fathom deeply the pain and suffering of the world so as to respond with faith and hope.

Naturally, major disasters prompt responses. Wright identifies the common responses or "knee-jerk reactions" from the ancient world in the face of a catastrophe, which still reverberates in most of the modern world today. The contemporary equivalent of the Stoic response would say that there is nothing that people can do amid the coronavirus pandemic, so just bite the bullet. If you get the virus, so be it! The Epicureans would say that you can't change the pandemic, so just make yourself comfortable in the midst of it. Why not make yourself at ease during the lockdown and self-isolation with plenty of Netflix and wait out the storm? The platform for the Platonist's response rests upon the idea that the present life is just a shadow of reality. The pandemic is terrible, but we are all destined for a different world anyway. There are many explanations and conspiracy theories in news outlets and mass media that continue to adopt some version of these types of responses.

Wright suggests that the Christian response is radically different. In dealing with the crisis of the Plague, the early Christians did not run away, or make their lives more comfortable, or hide away in prayer. The early Christians stayed behind to care for the sick as everyone else fled to safer grounds. They risked their lives like many healthcare workers on the front line with the Covid-19 crisis today. Wright recognizes that there are Christian "knee-jerk reactions" and different conspiracy theories that use Scripture as proof-text. Wright points out that one cannot peruse through the Bible looking for headlines to promote one's agenda.

In some Christian circles, the Covid-19 crisis sparks the age-old image of an angry God in the Old Testament. What is happening is God's judgment on the world for all of its sins. Judgment day has come, and sinners are to blame. Many texts of the prophets were used to buttress these responses. Wright firmly attests that the blame game is less than helpful as a response to Covid-19: "What do we say then? Try explaining to someone dying of coronavirus in a crowded refugee camp that all this is because of sin. Blame the victim, in other words. That's always a popular line" (9).

For an authentic Christian response, one must resist these "knee-jerk reactions" by entering into Scripture with a listening and discerning heart. Beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, Wright compares the Covid-19 crisis with that of the Babylonian exile. The

Book of Lamentations speaks of an abandoned city – the devastated Jerusalem – and the scattered people of Israel wailing and crying out for God's help. Wright guides readers through the book of Lamentation, the Prophet Daniel, the Psalms, and ultimately with the Book of Job to highlight the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Instead of a strange angry God, readers will recognize that God works differently than what popular culture assumes. Through the darkness of the exile, God brings about restoration and a new way of life filled with God's loving-kindness and mercy. How does the Hebrew Scripture teach us in our present situation? Wright poignantly depicts what a Christian response is like:

> We are simply to know that when we are caught up in awful circumstances, apparent gross injustices, terrible plagues –or when we are accused of wicked things of which we are innocent, suffering strange sicknesses with no apparent reason, let alone cure – at those points we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God (13).

A Christian response to Covid-19 has to take Jesus and the Gospels seriously. Wright begins moving into the New Testament with John 9, where Jesus and his disciples come upon a man born blind. The people ask Jesus about the cause of his blindness: Is it his sins or that of his parents? The question is not so different from what many people are asking today with the coronavirus. Wright indicates that Jesus is not concerned with the hypothetical cause or ruminate on God's punishment for sin, rather "… [Jesus] look forward to see what God is going to do about it" (17). Jesus heals the man, of course, attesting to the fulfillment of time that Jesus is the ultimate sign. The breaking in of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness is here, now, in the person of Jesus. So, those who are wondering whether the Covid-19 is the sign of Judgment Day or a sign of repentance should really turn back to Jesus. The "knee-jerk reactions" are jumping to conclusions about what God is doing in the pandemic without careful consideration of the Gospels. Wright vigorously asserts that "From now on, the summons to repentance, and

the announcement of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven, come not through wars, earthquakes, famines, or plagues. They come through Jesus" (21).

Wright continues with Acts 11, indicating how the followers of Jesus in the early church in Antioch responded to the imminent famine crisis. They were not hysterical or impulsive in interpreting the event as Jesus' second coming or the call to repentance. They were not particularly interested in playing the blame game. Instead, the followers of Jesus asked questions: "Who is going to be at special risk when this happens? What can we do to help? And who shall we send?" (31). The key theological principle to consider is that God works through people: "[God] sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hungry-for-justice people" (34). Wright appeals that the Christian response to Covid-19 is not racking one's brains on the question of "why" but rather asking, "What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things with and through those who love him" (34).

Continuing toward the end of the book, Wright considers the Christian response to Covid-19 as the Christian vocation: We are called to be co-workers with God. A faithful response begins with lamentation – "to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain" (45). He elaborates further, "To pray… is to hold the vision and the reality side by side as we groan with the groaning of all creation, and as the Spirit groans within us so that the new creation may come to birth" (74). A Christian response is not one that simply sits and waits to see. It is not about casting blame or judgment. Wright emphasizes the fact that God is with those who are suffering and in pain; with those on the front line caring for the sick and dying; those who put their lives in danger to stop the spread of the virus. As with the early Christians and throughout history, the Christian response is attending to the needs of those in the community. So, Wright encourages readers not to mull over on the "why" of the Covid-19, but rather respond with the Christian vocation and act to meet the needs of those who are suffering.

Wright's *God and the Pandemic* aims to reach a wide audience in a time when the world needs some age-old biblical wisdom. Major crises and pandemics have occurred throughout history, and the modern world is not exempt. The book offers an alternative to the doomsday conspiracy theories, which generate more fear and anxieties. Wright's scriptural commentary refutes the superficial reading of those who aim to cast blame on sinners and those who want to prove that the coronavirus is God's judgment on the world. The book is well-grounded in the Christian tradition. So, it is helpful for those who are perplexed or baffled with the noises surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. This timely book helps readers find clarity amid all the commotion, to find solidarity with those who are affected and suffering, and to act with courage and trust.

Truong T. Le, svd

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