# Religion and Social Communication

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*"Back to Ashes" by Dean C. Vu*

# RELIGION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

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Address all reviews, communications, manuscripts and journals for exchange to:

Anthony Le Duc, SVD, PhD
Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication
St. John's University
Ladprao, Bangkok 10900 Thailand
Email: arcstjohns.bkk@gmail.com

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# BOOK REVIEWS

# EDITOR'S COLUMN

Over the past few years, the publication *Religion and Social Communication* has been primarily concerned with issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first article addressing the pandemic was published in the first installment of the journal in 2020, and other articles related to the pandemic continued to comprise a significant portion of the journal's content in subsequent issues, up until the most recent issue in 2022, which focused on the theme of "Religion and Environmental Flourishing: Lessons from the Pandemic Experience." This issue went hand in hand with a webinar of the same theme organized by ARC as part of our International Roundtable.

In the current issue, there is a noticeable decrease in attention devoted to the pandemic, reflecting a larger trend as the global community begins to shift focus away from one of the most devastating health crises of modern times. Attention is now being directed towards other equally important and life-changing issues such as international and interreligious relations, technological advancement, and a wide range of other topics of concern. Nevertheless, there remain numerous critical reflections to be made regarding the pandemic, particularly in the Asian context, and our journal continues to serve as a platform for researchers to share their investigations for the foreseeable future.

In this current edition, we are delighted to present a diverse collection of research that delves into topics of relevance not only to the Asian context but also beyond. The article by Renalyn G. Padoginog and Benjamina Paula G. Flor examines the issue of vaccine hesitancy within a Christian community in Sinayawan Valencia City, Bukidnon, Philippines, particularly within the Jesus Christ the Eternal Savior International Ministries (JESIM). Their study aimed to explore how JESIM members perceive COVID-19 vaccination and how these perceptions shape their reluctance towards vaccination. The research findings revealed that individuals' faith significantly influenced their vaccine perceptions and subsequently influenced their decision to decline vaccination. The study also highlights the need for effective communication strategies to increase public health awareness and foster trust and confidence among individuals.

In another article dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, Christian U. Solis investigates the rise of community pantries in the Philippines, which spontaneously emerged as a means of providing assistance to those in need. Solis contends that the roots of this phenomenon are grounded in the values of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* and *bayanihan* spirit, which express the strong sense of responsibility that characterizes Filipino culture. Drawing on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, Solis explores how Filipinos are capable of being responsible and how their sense of responsibility is manifest in the community pantries that arose during the crisis. Therefore, Solis argues that the lived experiences of Filipinos during the pandemic, through the expression of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* and *bayanihan* spirit, illustrate that the Filipinos' sense of responsibility is consistent with Ricoeur's notion of the capable human being as a responsible self.

Moving beyond the pandemic, the article by Rey Ty offers a comprehensive examination of the conflict in Ukraine, with a focus on the military operation by Russia since February 2022 and the responses of key players to the conflict. The author notes that prevailing literature on the subject has a tendency to present one-sided explanations of the conflict. Therefore, this paper aims to provide alternative perspectives through a qualitative case study, utilizing an inductive approach to analyze news articles. The study reveals multiple, conflicting narratives surrounding the causes, current situation, and aftermath of the armed conflict in Ukraine. Ty's work highlights the need to consider multiple perspectives beyond those presented in mainstream media and promoted by media controllers. It also underscores the fact that alternative narratives can be found if one is willing to search more deeply.

Batara Sihombing and Desri Maria Sumbayak's paper examines the Epistle of 1 Peter and the struggles of its recipients, who were considered aliens and strangers in the Roman Empire due to their sectarian Christian faith. The paper draws parallels between the experiences of the recipients of the Epistle and contemporary Indonesian Christians' challenges in establishing places of worship in areas dominated by Muslims. The authors suggest that the spirit espoused by the writer of 1 Peter can serve as a model for Christians in their present challenge. In addition, the authors propose an approach to interreligious dialogue

specific to the Muslim-Christian situation in Indonesia. The paper highlights the importance of historical context and its relevance to contemporary religious struggles, and offers practical insights for those seeking to engage in interreligious dialogue.

Thi Ngoc Anh Nguyen's article presents a study conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam that focuses on the religious practices of Catholics who have migrated to study and work in the city. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to investigate the religious practices of Catholic migrants. The findings reveal that Catholic migrants in Vietnam are actively engaging in various religious practices despite being geographically distant from their homeland. The research suggests that participating in religious activities helps migrants integrate into society and form networks that can aid them in accessing better employment, education, and information. The study provides insights into the significance of religious practices in facilitating the adaptation of migrants to new environments and underscores the role of religion in shaping social connections and improving individual outcomes.

Gian Lloyd Jacoba's article examines the potential of social media as a tool for the Catholic Church in the Philippines to better serve the faithful. Jacoba suggests that organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church, can leverage data analytics and machine learning to collect and process social media data to inform decision-making processes. Specifically, the paper proposes the use of Twitter data to identify societal issues that Filipinos discuss, offering a data analytics and machine learning solution. By utilizing social media as a source of information to gauge public concerns and opinions, the Church can identify social issues and be more in tune with societal problems, ultimately building a more synodal Church.

Le Ngoc Bich Ly's article explores the communication strategies employed by the Buddha in his teachings, specifically with individuals who may have questioned or challenged his ideas. The author argues that by applying these strategies, interreligious dialogue can be more effective. The article adopts a qualitative content analysis approach by examining scholarly literature and Buddhist texts, including the

*Anguttara Nikaya*. The findings suggest that the Buddha's approach to effective dialogue includes giving the interlocutor the freedom to respond, avoiding binary criticism, using techniques to stimulate curiosity, and presenting analytical arguments based on concrete criteria.

The final article comes from Ankita Patra, who investigates how the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is creating a new visual culture in Odisha, India, through the use of calendar art and God-posters. Patra argues that these new images provide an alternative identity for believers and introduce novelty into the popular imagination. The article also examines how this new visual culture blends with the existing religious-cultural imagination in Odisha and presents an in-depth study of devotees and their engagement with this new genre of art. Overall, this paper highlights the importance of understanding how religious organizations use visual culture to shape identity and attract followers.

The publication of these articles in the first installment of 2023 highlights the ARC journal's ongoing commitment to providing a valuable platform for relevant, timely, and eclectic research at both the local and global levels.

Lastly, in this issue, we would like to pay tribute to Dr. Binod Agrawal (1942-2023), an influential scholar and supporter of ARC since its inception. Dr. Agrawal had been ARC's long-time collaborator and coordinator for South Asia and had contributed significantly to the Center through his scholarly research, friendship, and active engagement in ARC activities. We are forever grateful for Dr. Agrawal's dedication to ARC and his invaluable contributions to the field of religion and communication.

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

# Buddhist Approaches towards Effective Interreligious Dialogue: A Study of the *Anguttara Nikaya*

*Le Ngoc Bich Ly*[1]

**ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this paper is to address the question: How to make interreligious dialogue effective. It answered the question by looking into the scholarly literature on the topic and the Buddhist wisdom in the Pali Canon particularly the* Anguttara Nikaya *through a qualitative content analysis method. Based on literature review of scholarly views on effective interreligious dialogue, the paper grouped them into three approaches: the truth paradigm approach, the non-duality approach, and the procedural approach. Each has its own contributions to effective dialogue and its limitations. From the study of the Buddhist text, the study listed four strategies that the ancient Buddha used for effective dialogue: (1) Giving the other freedom to respond and setting rules for dialogue; (2) Avoiding the binary of criticizing other and self-exaltation by focusing on one's internal teaching; (3) Using various techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truth; and (4) Speaking analytically rather than one-way and speaking with concrete criteria. The study hopes to enhance our knowledge of effective interreligious dialogue.*

**Keywords:** *interreligious dialogue*, Anguttara Nikaya*, Buddha, effective dialogue*

## 1. Introduction

Interreligious dialogue has been argued as an important tool for building a peaceful multi-religious society since it enhances understanding,

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[1] ***Le Ngoc Bich Ly*** is Acting Chair of the Department of Peace Studies at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She teaches courses on religion, gender, and peacebuilding for the PhD Program in Peacebuilding. Her research and publications focus on Gender Issues, Interfaith Dialogue, Buddhism and Peacebuilding.

relationship-building across differences, and also contributes to conflict resolution (Asghar-Zadeh 2019; Abu-Nimer 2002; Smock 2002a; Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009). There is a vast body of literature produced on interreligious dialogue. Different scholars have proposed many principles on how to make dialogue more effective. Therefore, it is helpful for our understanding by systematizing them. This is the first purpose of this paper. The second purpose of the paper is to contribute a Buddhist perspective to the topic with a study of ancient Buddhist wisdom in the Buddhist Pali Canon. This paper addresses the question: How can Buddhism enhance the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue? The findings of this study hope to enrich our knowledge and skills of how to make interreligious dialogue more effective.

The Buddhist Pali Canon or the *Tipitaka* is used by Theravada Buddhism. The *Tipitaka*, 'three baskets [of teachings],' has been generally considered as the oldest, most original, most complete, and most accurate record of the Buddha's teachings until today. It was orally transmitted since the time of the Buddha and first written down during the Fourth Rehearsal conducted in Sri Lanka around the year 460 of the Buddhist Era (Payutto 2003, 1–6). The Buddha's dialogues are mostly recorded in the second basket, the *Sutta Pitaka* which contains the Buddha's discourses or specific teachings, sermons, and explanations of the Dhamma or Norms, together with compositions, narratives, and stories of early Buddhism. The Buddha is portrayed as a dialogue expert who skillfully communicates with different types of people from different backgrounds in various situations. Through this special ability, he was able to transform the attitudes of several of his dialogue partners, even those who initially viewed him as a rival or enemy, into a positive one. With an experience of forty-five years of dialogue with people from numerous social and cultural backgrounds, he accumulates and passes down many of his dialogue insights to his disciples. Therefore, it is worth learning from the Buddha's experiences in order to enlighten the work of dialogue in our time.

This study focuses on the fourth major collection of the *Sutta Pitaka*, or the *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN) 'The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha' for the analysis of the Buddha's strategies for effective dialogue. The AN organizes the Buddha's discourses according to a numerical scheme from one to eleven. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the English translator of this

collection, this was a helpful technique to aid memorization when written tradition did not exist yet. It is hard to ascertain the number of *suttas* in the collection. In his own numbering, there are a total of 8,122 *suttas* and they were originally not given titles. Later editors gave them titles. AN consists mostly of short *suttas*; connected texts of a single theme are grouped together. The collection covers various themes which are not arranged in a systematic and comprehensive manner except the numerical headings. The majority of the *suttas* deal with Buddhist practice ranging from basic ethical observances for the busy layperson to the highest meditative state (Bodhi 2012, 17–63). I chose this collection for my study because the dialogue narratives cover a wide range of people from different social and religious backgrounds. This helps to see a variety of the Buddha's dialogue strategies.

## 2. Interreligious Dialogue in the Buddhist Perspective

### 2.1. Defining Interreligious Dialogue

The term "interreligious dialogue" was used during the 1960s to describe the encounter between different religions (Swidler 2014b, 379–80). Interreligious dialogue is variously defined by different scholars from narrow to wider scope. For example, Donald K. Swearer defines dialogue as "an encounter of religious persons on the level of their understanding of their deepest commitments and ultimate concerns" (1977, 35). Some others such as Wesley Ariarajah, T.K. Thomas, and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican view dialogue as "a way of life" which is embedded in relationship and interaction of people from different religious backgrounds in all walks of life (Ariarajah and Thomas 1986, 3; Borrmans 1981, 28). There are various types of interreligious dialogue such as dialogue of life, dialogue of doctrinal exchange, dialogue of social action where people of different faiths collaborate to address a common cause, and dialogue of religious experience where people experience another religion through participating in its rituals and other religious forms.

In this paper, I focus on the verbal aspect of interreligious dialogue. Based on the nature of the dialogue narratives in the Buddhist

scriptures, interreligious dialogue in the context of this study is defined as "verbal communication" between the Buddha and people of other religious views and worldviews for various purposes in which the Buddha uses his religious view to address the issues raised. In my usage, effective dialogue means that the dialogue brings people toward transformation of attitudes into more positive ones towards better understanding of the truth. Consequently, individuals who engage in dialogue experience emotional fulfillment, intellectual growth, behavioral maturity, and spiritual transformation.

## 2.2. Scholarly Studies of the Buddha of the Pali Canon and Interreligious Dialogue

Studies of interreligious dialogue concerning the Buddha of the Pali Canon have been few and mostly influenced by the Western Christian paradigm and philosophical debates. Scholars place the Buddha's position toward other religions from exclusivism to somewhere between inclusivism and pluralism. For example, Richard P. Hayes (1991) argues that classical Buddhism holds an exclusive attitude toward other religions. His evidence is that the Buddha views *nibbana* (the Buddhist highest stage of liberation) and the Noble Eightfold Path as the only one ultimate goal and method of attaining it. Contrary to Hayes' perspective, J. Abraham Velez de Cea (2013) argues that the classical Buddha holds a pluralistic inclusivism perspective. It means that the Buddha recognizes different teachings of other religions as long as they are compatible with the Dhamma and the Noble Eightfold Path. He is only exclusive of specific teachings rather than the whole tradition. Different from the above, Elizabeth J. Harris (2013) argues that the Buddha of the Pali texts responds to the religious others with five faces: respectful debate, teaching ideas that opposed those taught by others, ridicule of the 'other', subordination of the 'other', and appropriation of the 'other'. There are few other studies exploring the Buddha's views that diverge from the Western Christian paradigm by passingly or selectively focusing on some positive aspects of Buddhist teachings such as "deep listening", respect for different views, non-argumentative attitude, non-dogmatism, rationality, tolerance, openness, and loving kindness (Jayatilleke 1987; de Silva 2009; Sek 2017). All the above studies are helpful to understand the Buddhist perspectives toward the religious other and Buddhist values that foster dialogue. My study is interested in specific communication strategies that the Buddha employs to make his dialogue effective.

## 3. Research Methodology

The study employed the Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) method to study narratives of dialogues between the Buddha and people of other faiths or beliefs in the AN. QCA is "a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material" that requires some degree of interpretation. It is best suited for describing the selected aspects of the material guided by the research questions (Schreier 2012, 1–9). This method was suitable for this study because the study only focused on the Buddha's communication strategies in his effective dialogues. Based on my survey of the *suttas*, there are a total of 46 dialogues that include the Buddha and people of other faiths or beliefs. There are 5 pairs of repetitive narratives (the content is mostly the same with little different) (AN 3.51 = 3.52; 4.39=4.40; 6.47=6.48; 10.119 = 10.167). Among the 46 dialogues, 14 dialogues do not have any stated results; and 32 dialogues have stated positive results. These 32 dialogues can be considered as effective dialogues for this study purpose. Below is the summary table of both types of dialogues.

**Table 1: Summary of the Buddha's interreligious dialogues in *Anguttara Nikaya***

| Themes | Suttas |
|---|---|
| Dialogues without stated results (14) | 3.35; 3.51=3.52; 3.54; 3.57; 3.61; 4.22; 4.39=4.40; 4.185; 5.143; 8.19; 9.38; 10.117 |
| Dialogues with positive results (effective dialogues) (32) | 3.53; 3.55; 3.56; 3.58 = 3.59; 3.60; 3.65; 4.35; 4.100; 4.111; 4.183; 4.184; 4.187; 4.193; 4.195; 5.192; 5.193; 6.38; 6.47=6.48; 6.52; 6.53; 7.44; 7.50; 7.57; 8.11; 8.12; 10.119 = 10.167; 10.176; 10.177; 10.209 |

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1. Approaches to Effective Interreligious Dialogue

Literature on interreligious dialogue is complex. There are many detailed rules proposed by scholars. However, for the purpose of clarity and systematic understanding of the topic, this study simplifies the findings into three major approaches: truth paradigm approach, non-duality approach, and procedural approach. This categorization should be seen

as preliminary rather than final. Each approach has its own contributions and limitations.

### 4.1.1. The truth paradigm approach

Since modern interreligious dialogue began with the Western Christian awakening of the reality of religious plurality, interreligious dialogue has been shaped and influenced by the development of Christian theology of religious pluralism. This theology classifies the relationship between Christianity and other religions into three truth paradigms: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism asserts that only Christianity is the true religion and others are wrong. Inclusivism espouses that Christianity has the fullest truth while other religions have partial truth. Pluralism affirms that Christianity is one equal and among different ways of expressing the ultimate truth. These three views are present in other religions as well. Within Christianity, the first view is popularly held by the conservative circles; thus, interreligious dialogue is mainly for the purpose of evangelism. The second view is the most favorable among mainlined churches; interreligious dialogue is most sustainable here in practice. The third view is the least popular and confined to academic circles. These are just simplified positions while reality is more complex. These positions intersect, overlap and blur (McCarthy 2000). Richard Penaskovic observes that these positions have dominated interreligious dialogue theory and practice in the past fifty years (2016, 31). The truth paradigm approach believes that the possibility of interreligious dialogue engagement is determined by the individual's truth perspective. The more inclusive the view is, the more open the person is for dialogue. Therefore, most scholarly works under this approach focus on developing theology of religious pluralism and comparative theology (Hick 2004; 1982; Panikkar 1964; Perry 2017; Knitter 1996; 2013; Fleming 2002; Abe 1995). Some scholars also propose guidelines for dialogue practice (*Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* 1979; Cobb 1998; Suwanbubbha 2004; Swidler 2014a; 2000).

In my reflection, the truth paradigm model is most effective when it has a top-down approach. When the religious institutions embrace inclusivism and pluralism and promote the dialogue practice, this will create a favorable environment for the enthusiastic believers to freely

practice dialogue with the religious others. It can foster confidence and a culture of dialogue for the religious community. However, if we look deeply at the individual level, it might not be true that a person with inclusivist or pluralist religious view is more effective in dialogue than a person with an exclusivist view. Being able to engage in a deep and transformative dialogue depends on many factors including knowledge, attitudes, communication skills, and a special factor which Buddhists call the right condition for the heart to change. The Buddhist Pali Canon has many stories about dramatic transformation of religious view and conviction of people with exclusive truth paradigm after a dialogue with the Buddha. The individuals who approach the Buddha for dialogue have various motives, ranging from intending to insult and defeat him, to accusing him, to debating with him on particular religious views, to showcasing their own beliefs and challenging the Buddha to respond, to seeking his judgment on certain religious views, and even to finding the truth amid confusion and doubt. However, after the encounter with the Buddha, they experience conversion. Therefore, being effective in dialogue depends on more factors than just a religious truth paradigm.

### 4.1.2. Non-duality approach

While the truth paradigm approach implies the attachment of a person to a religion, the non-duality approach assumes a free human subject who goes beyond any religious form and uses religion as a tool to serve his or her own purpose of emancipation. This approach is often held by advanced spiritual leaders especially from Buddhism such as Sotaesan (1891-1943) of Korean Won-Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) of Vietnam, and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) of Thailand.

This view holds that all religions, despite their different expressions sometimes to the point of contradiction, have a highest common essence which Buddhadasa calls "Dhamma" or the stage of "no religion"; Thich Nhat Hanh and Sotaesan refer to it as the reality of "non-duality", "interconnectedness", or "no-self". The differences between religions are viewed as different manifestations of this same essence. People tend to view different religions as distinct and sometimes even as adversaries because they have yet to comprehend or reach the highest level of their own religion. Once they have reached this highest

level, the problem of religious differences and conflict will be solved. People of this level will be able to penetrate the superficial different forms of religions to appreciate and embrace the best values of all. All these religious leaders believe that authentic and successful dialogue must begin with the self-awakening of the individual to this ultimate reality by living deeply in one's tradition. Therefore, interreligious dialogue must first start with the self-transformation (Song 2012, 381–87; Thich 1995, 2–10, 194–97; Bhikkhu 2532, 3–6).

Thich Nhat Hanh sees that the truth paradigm approach does not make people free. He argues that people should come to dialogue with a free heart or an attitude of "non-self" to be able to listen deeply to each other and allow oneself to be transformed by the best values of the other tradition (1995, 6–9, 35).

In my opinion, the non-dual approach holds promise as it enables individuals to engage in deep and meaningful dialogue. When one has thoroughly explored and delved into the tenets of their own religion, they become capable of expressing it fully to those of other religions. However, this approach is only feasible for a select few who have the necessary conditions to examine their religious values and practice rationally. For most religious adherents, their lives are preoccupied with various worldly issues, leaving little time for religious contemplation and reflection.

### 4.1.3. The procedural approach

Unlike the above approaches that center around truth issue, the procedural approach focuses on the process and procedure of organizing effective dialogue. This approach is mostly found among scholars of interreligious peacebuilding which is an emergent field. Based on literature written by scholars of this field, principles for effective dialogue concern the following issues. The principles are not fixed answers but remain issues of debate.

(1) **Purpose:** This revolves around the debate of whether the purpose of interreligious dialogue should be explicitly defined and structured, as well as determining what that purpose should

entail. For some people such as David Bohm, dialogue should not have a set purpose or agenda because people should be free to communicate (1996, 16–17). In contrast, David R. Smock argues that "dialogue sessions that do not have a clearly defined purpose are almost inevitably doomed to ineffectiveness" (2002b, 7). Most scholars assert that the purpose of dialogue is for mutual learning, understanding, and transformation (Kozlovic 2003; Swidler 2014a; Clapsis 2016).

(2) **Participant**: This is concerned with the questions: Who are qualified to participate in the dialogue? What are the specific qualifications? How to identify them and get them involved? For example, David Steele argues that dialogue participants should be well selected. They must be people who are willing to participate in dialogue, being open-minded and committed to dialogue. It is best to have middle-level people since they can influence both the top and grassroots levels; individuals are better than representatives of organizations (2002, 76). Smock also agrees that the right participants should be selected for dialogue. They should have the qualities of sincerity, commitment for peace, good listener, and having an influential position in their wider faith committee (2002a, 129).

(3) **Content**: This includes the debate of what should be discussed during the dialogue. All scholars agree that discussing common universal peace values in different religious traditions is a good start. Some scholars argue that differences, biases, and prejudices should be dealt with in order for the dialogue to be deeper. Some others believe that doctrinal dialogue should move from addressing individual issues to social issues of justice and peace (Abu-Nimer 2002, 18–26; Cilliers 2002, 49–50; Smock 2002a, 129–30).

(4) **Method**: This involves the issue of what approach to take such as workshop, scriptural study meeting, camps, and so on; the extent of the third-party's involvement, i.e., the facilitator or organizer of the dialogue; and the issues of whether or not the dialogue should be designed, how to deal with problems

during the dialogue, how to lead dialogue to reach the desired goal, and so on (Abu-Nimer 2002, 21–26; Smock 2002b, 7–8; Ochs 2015).

(5) **Process**: This is concerned with interaction during the dialogue and the procession of the dialogue: what are the phases; how to plan each phase and what are expected to happen in each phase for an effective dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2002, 24, 27–29).

(6) **Effects**: This is concerned with the impact of the dialogue on the participants such as what kinds of changes taking place in attitude, behavior, interpersonal relationship, and communal action (Abu-Nimer 2002, 15; Ochs 2015, 494; Cilliers 2002, 47–48, 50–55; Steele 2002, 76–84).

This procedural approach is helpful for the third party as organizer of interreligious dialogue rather than individual practice of dialogue. Interpersonal dialogue often takes place naturally rather than planned.

In summary, each of the three approaches mentioned above offers valuable insights into understanding and resolving issues related to interreligious dialogue, ultimately leading to a more effective and meaningful dialogue. Each approach has its own limitations and needs more reflection to improve practice. Since the factors that lead to the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue are complex and even mysterious (which can be called "the way of the heart"), this study will contribute some more knowledge on effective dialogue from a Buddhist perspective. Below are some of Buddhist strategies for effective interreligious dialogue as found in the *Anguttara Nikaya*.

### 4.2. The Buddha's Strategies for Effective Interreligious Dialogue

Based on the research findings, there are many communication strategies used by the Buddha in the dialogue narratives. This paper will present four strategies: (1) Giving the other freedom to respond and setting rules for dialogue; (2) Avoiding the binary of criticizing

other and self-exaltation by focusing on one's internal teaching; (3) Using various techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truth; and (4) Speaking analytically rather than one-way and speaking with concrete criteria.

### 4.2.1. Giving the other freedom to respond and setting rules for dialogue

A common characteristic of the opening of the Buddha's dialogues with people of other faiths is that the Buddha gives freedom to his dialogue partner to answer his questions as they see fit. For example, in *Sangarava Sutta*, AN 3.60, the brahmin Sangarava comes to see the Buddha and criticizes the Buddha's path of practice as selfish. The Buddha replies to him, "Well then, brahmin, I will question you about this matter. You should answer as you see fit. What do you think, brahmin?" (Bodhi 2012, 262). By giving freedom to the other to respond, the Buddha allows his dialogue partner to feel comfortable and respected for their opinion.

However, giving freedom to the other to respond does not mean that everything goes. The findings also show that the Buddha has his own rules for the type of dialogue that he feels worthy and meaningful to get engaged. The Buddha is known by his religious contemporaries as someone who does not participate in dialogue involving metaphysical questions because in his view, such a dialogue is unprofitable and does not lead to the purpose of tranquility and liberation (*Uttiya Sutta*, AN 10.95). Therefore, one of his dialogue rules is that discussion of truth must be based on honesty, reality, and rationality. For example, the *Vappa Sutta* (AN 4.195) relates a situation with Vappa who is a disciple of the *Niganthas* or the Jains. He has a view that a completely self-controlled person or an enlightened person would still suffer because of past *kamma*. Before proceeding the dialogue, the Buddha says to him, "If, Vappa, you would admit what should be admitted and reject what should be rejected; and if, when you do not understand the meaning of my words, you would question me about them further, saying: 'How is this, Bhante? What is the meaning of this?'; then we might discuss this" (Bodhi 2012, 572). By telling this to Vappa, the Buddha sets the requirements that Vappa must be honest as to what he is able to

accept and what wishes to reject. In addition, he must intend to reflect rationally on what the Buddha says to him. If he does not understand something, he should ask the Buddha for clarification. Without the other's acquiescence to these rules, the Buddha would not proceed. This shows that these principles secure the dialogue toward the inquiry of the truth based on reality as the primary purpose. On occasion, when appropriate, the Buddha implements rules during dialogues, such as quieting the audience to prevent interference or exerting pressure on others to answer foundational questions at the appropriate moment (*Ambattha Sutta*, *Digha Nikaya* 3).

Besides the explicit rule the Buddha requires of his dialogue partner, he also has some internal rules and insight to help his disciples become wiser in dialogue. For example, in 'Bases of Talk' (AN 3.67), the Buddha describes in details signs to recognize who is fit or unfit to talk. The first way to recognize them is by how they answer to different types of questions: a question that requires a categorical answer, a question that should be answered after making a distinction, a question that should be answered with a counter-question, and a question that should be set aside. If a person does not answer these questions according to what the questions require, this person is unfit to talk. The opposite is fit to talk. Besides this method, there are other signs to recognize the person unfit for talking: (1) avoiding the question by asking another question; (2) changing the topic; (3) showing anger, hatred, disappointment; (4) responding to a question with cursing, beating, insulting, and taking advantage of the weakness of the other; (5) talking with hatred, prejudice, and pride; (6) self-assertion; (7) not paying attention; (8) being interested in finding faults, and listening to gossips about people who are cheated, confused, defeated and harmed.

From the same *sutta*, the Buddha also describes characteristics of people who are learned and capable of dialogue: (1) knowing the right time; (2) talking about things relevant to the purpose and holy stories; (3) having no hatred, no pride, no prejudice, no self-assertion; (4) having full attention; (5) speaking out right view; (6) being happy with nice words, and not happy with bad words; (7) not criticizing, not taking advantage of people's weaknesses; (8) not cursing, not speaking words without purpose, not beating; (9) teaching with joy; and (10) speaking with humility.

The Buddhist wisdom of employing external and internal rules to initiate and evaluate the continuation of dialogues is advantageous for promoting effective interreligious dialogue in contemporary times. The absence of this wisdom may lead to unfavorable outcomes, rendering the dialogue a futile exercise. For instance, if our dialogue partner exhibits signs of being unsuitable for conversation, such as demonstrating hateful, prejudiced, or arrogant attitudes, without the requisite knowledge to identify these characteristics, we may find ourselves being drawn into a negative discussion replete with debates and heightened emotions. This negative outcome will adversely impact both individuals instead of achieving any positive outcome. Conversely, if we possess the expertise and discernment to identify unsuitable dialogue partners, we can approach them cautiously and discontinue the interaction when the situation appears to be devolving into negativity. Buddhism regards this as a discriminating wisdom that is necessary for preventing unwholesome states and suffering.

### 4.2.2. Avoiding the binary of criticizing the other and self-exaltation by focusing on one's internal teaching

The second strategy that the Buddha employs is avoiding the binary of criticizing the other's belief and self-exaltation of one's own by focusing on one's internal teaching. This strategy is explicitly revealed in the Buddhist text through the mouth of a disciple of the *Ajivakas*, a contemporary religious sect during the Buddha's time, recorded in the *Ajivaka Sutta* (AN 3.72). In this *sutta*, a householder and disciple of the *Ajivakas* approaches the Venerable Ananda, who is the Buddha's favorite disciple. This householder asks the Venerable Ananda, "Bhante Ananda, whose Dhamma is well expounded? Who in the world are practicing the good way? Who in the world are the fortunate ones?" Instead of answering the question directly, Venerable Ananda presents the Buddhist Dhamma and those who achieved the Dhamma or enlightened Buddhists, and asks the householder to judge if the Buddhist Dhamma and the achievers of the Dhamma with such qualities meet the standards of the questions. The householder acknowledges that both meet the standards of his questions. The householder then makes a statement: "It is astounding and amazing, Bhante, that there is no extolling of one's own Dhamma nor any denigration of the Dhamma of others, but just the

teaching of the Dhamma in its own sphere. The meaning is stated, but one does not bring oneself into the picture" (Bodhi 2012, 304–5). This communication strategy is employed by the Buddha in some *suttas* such as the *Kesaputtiya Sutta* (AN 3.65), the *Vassakara Sutta* (AN 4.35), and the *Potaliya Sutta* (AN 4.100).

This strategic approach is prudent because it mitigates various problems that may arise during interreligious dialogue. Firstly, criticizing another's beliefs can elicit a strong defensive response, resulting in emotional reactions that hinder critical thinking and attentive listening, even if the critique is logical and valid. Secondly, in contemporary times, it is unclear who possesses the authority and moral standing to pass judgment on another's beliefs. In the past, the Buddha was revered for his impeccable wisdom and virtue, yet he exhibited great caution when addressing the religious beliefs of others. The Buddhist texts have some narratives in which the Buddha confronts and criticizes the other's religious beliefs such as in a number of *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN 7, 14, 74, 79, 80, 96, 101, 152). In these *suttas*, the Buddha employs reasonable criticisms grounded in his direct enlightened knowledge and religious virtue, demonstrating his skillful approach to sensitive issues. In accordance with Buddhist standards of virtue, wisdom, and skillfulness, it is a daunting task for anyone wishing to criticize another religious belief. Conversely, self-exaltation is already an action not favored by the knowledgeable.

In Buddhism, a distinction is made between "self-exaltation" and "self-confidence". Self-exaltation refers to the act of praising oneself while belittling others and is considered a defilement that satisfies one's ego while making others uncomfortable or offended. As such, it should be avoided. In contrast, "self-confidence" involves a clear understanding of oneself and the ability to accurately and rightfully speak of one's own merits based on concrete wholesome criteria and evidence, with the purpose of edifying others rather than gratifying one's own ego. This was the approach taken by the Buddha when speaking of himself, his teachings, and his community of disciples. He always presented a framework and specific criteria before drawing a conclusion about his own qualities and achievements. This type of expressing "self-confidence" can be found in a number of *suttas* such

as the discourse of Sexual Misconduct (AN 7.50), *Kassapa-Sihanada Sutta* (The Naked Ascetic) in *Digha Nikaya* 8, *Pasadika Sutta* (The Delectable Discourse) in *Digha Nikaya* 29, and *Cuḷa Hatthi-Padopama Sutta* (Lesser Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint) in *Majjhima Nikaya* 27. This means that self-praise can enhance the effectiveness of a dialogue if a person can fulfill the above conditions according to Buddhism. Otherwise, focusing on one's internal teaching by presenting its best qualities for the other to judge is the middle way to avoid negative consequences that may arise from criticizing the other and exalting oneself.

### 4.2.3. Using various techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truth

The third strategy employed by the Buddha is stimulating the other's curiosity to know more about the new truth by using various techniques. The Buddha is the one who admits possessing the wonder of instruction (*Sangarava Sutta*, AN 3.60). According to the Buddha's view in *Lohicca Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya* 12), a praise-worthy teacher is the one who does not only achieve the higher spiritual fruit himself but also skillfully conveys the path and successfully trains others to achieve the same fruit. For the Buddha, a teacher who lacks the skillfulness in conveying the teaching is blameworthy. Some scholars in the field of Education have explored the Buddha's teaching methods to benefit education. They have found several methods such as lecture, discussion, gradual or step method, problem-solving, adaptation, illustration, analytic, practical, question and answer, logical explanation, and seminar (Ong Puay Liu and Ong Puay Tee 2014; Rev. Mediyawe Piyarathana 2019; Thero 2019). Here I will present the method of stimulating curiosity for new truth in interreligious dialogue. In this study, I also found a similar method (question and answer) and various ways of using language: the use of elicitive language, strong and even shocking language, and playing with negative language to convey positive meaning (AN 8.11, 12).

An example of using question and answer as the method to stimulate curiosity to learn new truth is *Siha Sutta* (AN 7.57). In this *sutta*, Siha who is an army general, comes to ask the Buddha a question: "Is

it possible, Bhante, to point out a directly visible fruit of giving?" The Buddha does not give a lecture as he often does but uses the question-and-answer method to help Siha learn the truth. Below is an extract of their dialogue:

> *"Well then, Siha, I will question you about this matter. You should answer as you see fit."*
>
> *"What do you think, Siha? There might be two persons, one without faith who is miserly, mean, and abusive, and another endowed with faith, a munificent giver who delights in charity. What do you think, Siha? To whom would the arahants first show compassion: to the one without faith who is miserly, mean, and abusive, or to the one endowed with faith, a munificent giver who delights in charity?"*
>
> *"Why, Bhante, would the arahants first show compassion to the person without faith who is miserly, mean, and abusive? They would first show compassion to the one endowed with faith, a munificent giver who delights in charity."*
>
> (Bodhi 2012, 1054)

The above *sutta* shows that the question-and-answer method can help to stimulate critical thinking and curiosity to learn new truth by engaging oneself in the process skillfully led by the Buddha.

Besides the question-and-answer method, the use of elicitive language is another technique to stimulate interest and curiosity for the dialogue partner. Some elicitive words that the Buddha employs are "difference" and "but there is/are also…". For example, in the *Tikanna Sutta* (AN 3.58), the brahmin Tikanna is proud of sharing the brahmin's threefold knowledge to the Buddha. After listening to the brahmin's sharing, the Buddha says to the brahmin: "Brahmin, a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One's discipline is **quite different from** a brahmin who is a master of the threefold knowledge as the brahmins describe him" (my emphasis in bold). When hearing this, the brahmin becomes curious and asks the Buddha: "But in what way, Master Gotama, is one a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One's discipline? It would be good if Master Gotama would teach me the Dhamma in such

a way as to make clear how one is a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One's discipline." (Bodhi 2012, 257).

The Buddha uses this technique in other dialogue narratives (AN 10.167; 10.176). In the *Fearless Sutta* (AN 4.184), the Buddha uses a different phrase "but there are also" to stimulate desire in the other to discover something new. In this *sutta*, the brahmin Janussoni comes to the Buddha and says, "Master Gotama, I hold the thesis and view that there is no one subject to death who is not frightened and terrified of death." To the brahmin's surprise, the Buddha replies, "Brahmin, there are those subject to death that are frightened and terrified of death, but there are also those subject to death that are not frightened and terrified of death" (Bodhi 2012, 550). Certainly, this stimulates the brahmin's curiosity to learn something beyond his knowledge. Another advantage is that this method does not offend anyone but leaves the comparison and judgment to the listeners.

Concerning using strong and shocking language to stimulate the other's curiosity to learn new things, the *Kesi Sutta* (AN 4.111) is an example. In this *sutta*, the Buddha has a dialogue with Kesi, a horse trainer. The Buddha opens the conversation by asking Kesis how he trains his horses. Kesi replies that he uses four methods: gentle, stern, gentle and stern, and killing the horse if it is untamable. Then Kesi asks the Buddha how the Buddha disciplines a person to be tamed. The Buddha replies that he also employs similar methods: gentle, stern, gentle and stern, and killing the person if the person would not submit to any of the first three methods. When hearing that the Buddha would "kill" a person, Kesi is shocked and does not understand. He asks the Buddha, "But, Bhante, it isn't allowable for the Tathagata to destroy life. Yet he says, 'Then I kill him.'" To this, the Buddha explains that the meaning of "killing" implies that the person is not worthy being "spoken to and instructed" (Bodhi 2012, 493–94).

The last language technique the Buddha uses is playing with negative language to convey positive meaning. The two *suttas*, *Veranja Sutta* (AN 8.11) and *Siha Sutta* (AN 8.12) are examples. These two *suttas* have similar dialogue content but are different in contexts. In the first *sutta*, the Buddha dialogues with the brahmin Veranja who uses all negative words to accuse the Buddha and his teachings such as "tasteless", "not convivial", "non-doing", "annihilationist", "repeller",

"abolitionist", "tormentor", and "retiring". To the brahmin's surprise, the Buddha admits it first but then explains how such negative terms are applied in his teaching to abandon all unwholesome states. Finally, the brahmin changes his attitude, praises the Buddha, and wants to become a lay follower. In the *Siha Sutta*, it is the dialogue between the Buddha and Siha, a lay leader and disciple of Nigantha Nataputa (founder of the Jains). Siha has heard good reports about the Buddha, so he is curious to meet the Buddha. But he is prevented by his teacher three times. However, he decides to meet the Buddha regardless of his teacher's objection. He meets the Buddha and clarifies the rumor that the Buddha taught about non-doing. The Buddha also plays with negative words and gives a full picture of the Dhamma teaching: negative for unwholesome things and positive for wholesome things. After having heard the explanation, Siha praises the Buddha and converts.

Whether or not the responses of the characters in the dialogue narratives are historical is beyond the scope of this paper. What we can learn from the Buddhist dialogue narratives is some helpful strategies to make dialogue more effective. The two methods, question and answer, and the use of elicitive, strong and shocking language and playing with negative language to convey positive meaning are helpful tools for modern dialogue practitioners.

### 4.2.4. Speaking analytically rather than one-sided and speaking with concrete criteria

The fourth strategy used by the Buddha to make dialogue effective is his capacity to speak analytically and speaking with concrete criteria. The Buddha is the one who refers to himself as an 'analytic speaker' or a speaker of reason (*vibhajja-vadi*). Analytic speech (in Pali: *vibhajja-vada*) means "discerning speech", "discriminative speech", or an "analytic system of teaching". According to Venerable Payutto, analytic thinking or speaking has the distinctive attribute of expressing the truth "by analyzing all aspects and features of specific phenomena" rather than only grasping a single aspect or a limited number of aspects in order to draw a conclusion. This type of speaking also avoids hastily judging something by just looking at a single feature or at limited features. The opposite of analytic speaking is 'one-sided speech'(*ekamsa-vada*)

in which the speaker only looks at one aspect or part of a phenomenon and then draws a conclusion about the entirety of the phenomenon. It also means speaking based on stereotypes. The Buddha provides concrete frameworks and criteria for analytic thinking. Venerable Payutto lists seven frameworks for reflection: (1) on perspectives of truth; (2) on component factors; (3) on sequence of momentary events; (4) on interrelationship of causes and conditions; (5) on prerequisites and qualifications; (6) on alternatives and other possibilities; and (7) detailed analysis as a response to questions (Payutto 2018, 1156–64). This way of thinking and speaking in dialogue will avoid deadly mistakes of generalization, hasty judgment, biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. With concrete framework and criteria, the dialogue can provide a direction for deep reflection and engagement. The *Vassakara Sutta* (AN 4.183) is an example. In this *sutta*, the brahmin Vassakara approaches the Buddha and they engage in a dialogue:

> *"Master Gotama, I hold the thesis and view that there is no fault when one speaks about the seen, saying: 'Such was seen by me'; no fault when one speaks about the heard, saying: 'Such was heard by me'; no fault when one speaks about the sensed, saying: 'Such was sensed by me'; no fault when one speaks about the cognized, saying: 'Such was cognized by me.'"*

> *"I do not say, brahmin, that everything seen should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing seen should be spoken about. I do not say that everything heard should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing heard should be spoken about. I do not say that nothing sensed should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing sensed should be spoken about. I do not say that everything cognized should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing cognized should be spoken about.*

> *"For, brahmin, if, when one speaks about what one has seen, unwholesome qualities increase and wholesome qualities decline, I say that one should not speak about one has seen. But if, when one speaks about what one has seen, unwholesome qualities decline and wholesome qualities increase, I say that one should speak about what one has seen."* (Bodhi 2012, 549–50)

The preceding dialogue showcases two distinct modes of thinking and communicating: the brahmin has a one-sided approach, whereas the Buddha employs an analytic approach that involves a concrete framework for reflection. The brahmin believes that honesty in expressing what one perceives, hears, feels, and thinks is not inherently wrong, without considering the potential consequences of such speech. The Buddha, on the other hand, employs a moral cause-and-effect perspective. He believes that one should reflect and discern what to speak based on a framework: speech that results in more negative than positive outcomes should be avoided, while speech that leads to more positive than negative results should be spoken. When religious beliefs are discussed, it is easy for individuals to become biased and attached to their own views, treating them as absolute truths. This is known as one-sided speech, which can lead to extremes such as self-pride and self-defense. Therefore, employing an analytic approach with a concrete framework and criteria for reflection is a useful tool for effective dialogue when expressing one's beliefs.

The Buddhist approach to effective interreligious dialogue remains pertinent in our contemporary world. Despite its development over the past century, interreligious dialogue remains a challenging practice fraught with difficulties. As it addresses individuals' deepest religious convictions, it is prone to triggering intolerance, prejudices, resistance, and defensiveness from participants of one religious group towards those of another during the dialogue process. (Smock 2002a, 128). Tensions between religious groups are high when they get involved in confrontational dialogues or doctrinal debates (Smith 2007, 64–65). David Bohm observes that religious people are the hardest to get together and once they are divided, they hardly get together again (1996, 12). Another obstacle for participating in dialogue is the fear of losing the zeal of evangelism, of syncretizing one's faith, and of being the target of evangelism through interreligious dialogue (Ariarajah and Thomas 1986, 3–11; Smith 2007, 70–74). Smith's study also shows that most people respond to doctrinal dialogue with avoidance and see it as the job of religious leaders, or they are simply not interested and regard it as a waste of time (2007, 70–74, 86–95, 149).

The Buddhist approaches to effective dialogue can contribute to addressing some of the above problems. Buddhism offers a valuable

approach to reducing tensions in doctrinal dialogue through the avoidance of binary criticism and self-exaltation, instead emphasizing internal truth and allowing the other to experience it for themselves. Employing analytical and concrete criteria can facilitate rational and objective discussions of truth, preventing the propagation of prejudice and generalization. Additionally, techniques designed to pique the other's curiosity and promote the pursuit of new truths can foster interest in interreligious dialogue. However, without learning and practicing these strategies, individuals may struggle to implement them. Fortunately, Buddhism's dialogue skills can be leveraged as a resource for training interreligious dialogue competency.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has endeavored to answer the question of how to facilitate effective interreligious dialogue through a systematic analysis of scholarly literature and Buddhist scripture, specifically the Anguttara Nikaya. Drawing from the former, three distinct approaches have been identified: the truth paradigm approach, the non-duality approach, and the procedural approach. Each approach posits unique solutions for promoting effective dialogue, as well as limitations. The study of Buddhist texts has yielded four strategies for facilitating effective dialogue: (1) Allowing the other party freedom to respond and establishing dialogue rules; (2) Prioritizing internal teachings over binary criticism and self-exaltation; (3) Employing a range of techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truths; and (4) Using analytical language and concrete criteria to promote rational and objective dialogue. These strategies represent applicable methods that can be implemented across different religions and contexts. The findings of this study are intended to expand knowledge and skills for more effective interreligious dialogue in the future.

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# Using the Twitter Data Classifier Web Application (TDCWA) to Identify Social Issues for the Philippines' Synod of Synodalities

*Gian Lloyd B. Jacoba*[1]

## ABSTRACT

*Social Media has become one of the most reachable platforms for Filipinos to communicate with one another and share news and trending topics being discussed in the Philippines. Therefore, organizations can utilize a vast data collection and processing opportunity to help in their decision-making through Data Analytics and Machine Learning. One of the organizations that can benefit from Data Analytics and Machine Learning is the Roman Catholic Church. As the Church is currently holding its Synod of Synodalities, the Synod needs to be provided with unbiased societal issues that the Church must tackle as it moves towards an uncertain future. The paper offers a Data Analytics and Machine Learning solution using Twitter Data as the primary source of data to be processed. The study first scraped data from Twitter using a data-scraping application called Twint. Overall, 12,000 tweets were collected but had to be preprocessed. Descriptive analytics was utilized to determine the most frequently used words in the collected tweets. The social issues processed by the machine learning algorithm and discussed in the study can be used to augment and support the information already gathered by the Synod.*[2]

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[1]**Gian Lloyd B. Jacoba** is currently pursuing his Masters in Information Technology at Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Philippines. He recently graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Information Technology in the same school. His research interests are Backend Development, Data Analytics and Cybersecurity.

**Keywords:** *data analytics, machine learning, Synod of Synodalities, Roman Catholic Church, social issues*

## 1.  Introduction

### 1.1. The Church and Synodality

In October 2021, the Catholic Church began the long journey of one of the most significant consultative processes in human history aimed towards addressing various issues being faced by the Catholic Church (Sanem 2022). The process, called Synod on Synodality, allows the Catholic Church to listen intently to connect deeply to the Body of Christ (CBCP News 2021). A Synod usually only lasts about a month and involves different bishops around the universal Church. However, the Synod of Synodalities that Pope Francis has called is very special in that everyone baptized in Christ is invited to participate. The Synodality is a "journeying together," meaning "one listens to one another." Pope Francis writes in the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 that the Church aims to be a Synodal Church, a listening church because we all have something to say and contribute. In today's world, where technology and communication have become more accessible and widespread, the Church recognizes the importance of listening to the voice of the faithful who express their opinions and experiences on various platforms, such as social media.

### 1.2. Social Media and Data Analytics

Social media has become an integral part of modern society. Millions of people use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to share their thoughts, experiences, and opinions. As the popularity of social media has grown, so has the need for sophisticated tools and techniques to analyze the vast amount of data generated by these platforms. Other social media sites like Twitter are specialized in sharing short messages (Hudson 2020). Twitter is a microblogging platform that allows subscribers to send and receive quick notifications, known as tweets. Tweets can contain up to 280 characters and links to related websites and resources. It is considered the Internet's pulse, providing a fast and straightforward way to discover

what's happening worldwide. Users can find the most recent news, events, and trends on Twitter (Arigo et al. 2018).

As social networking sites have expanded, data analytics techniques have been increasingly used to conduct research in fields such as politics, sociology, and finance by leveraging public data on these sites. Twitter data has become a particularly valuable source for social media analytics due to its accessibility and availability. Social media analytics involves analyzing data extracted from social media sites to generate useful information for various sectors of society, as Andryani, Negara, and Triadi (2019) point out. The business sector has primarily used social media analytics to understand the impact of their products and services on their customers. As the amount of data from social networking sites continues to grow, businesses have also realized the potential to improve their customer relations and marketing strategies by tapping into these resources (Carlson et al., 2018). With the increasing demand for social media analytics, the need for advanced data analytics techniques, such as machine learning, has risen, as noted by Alloghani et al. (2019).

According to Sandhu (2018), machine learning is a subset of artificial intelligence that employs automated methods to resolve issues based on historical data without needlessly changing the primary procedure. Creating algorithms and using other computing methods to make machines smarter is the essence of artificial intelligence. It includes algorithms that use techniques, usually beyond human grasp, to think, act, and carry out tasks. Machine learning aims to resolve issues based on historical or previous examples. This includes discovering hidden patterns in the data (data mining) and then using the practices to categorize or forecast a problem-related event. In other words, machine learning provides the information that intelligent machines need to maintain their functionality (Kadhim 2019).

Additionally, current research articles show that social media significantly impacts organizations (Bergström and Belfrage 2018). Organizations have identified data-driven methodologies as the perfect growth strategy (Salloum et al. 2017). After all, organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church can take advantage of Twitter's data to learn

people's reactions regarding social issues popping up without asking them individually. Twitter is ideal for knowing the consensus of a group of people. Organizations are allowed to see the public's sentiment (Anber, Salah, and El-Aziz 2016). The Roman Catholic Church, through Pope Francis, has maintained a presence in social media via his Twitter account, and the official Twitter account of the Pontiff has more than 19 million followers.

### 1.3. The Church and Social Media

On the part of the Body of Christ, where it refers to one of the images of the Church, social media has become ubiquitous and is beneficial in engaging them in evangelization, liturgical participation, and social responsibilities the Church promotes. They can express their opinions and views on how the Catholic Church addresses such social issues (Díaz 2021). Since technology is fast-changing, the Church should always pay attention to discussions taking place on social media platforms. The document entitled "CBCP Pastoral Guidelines on the Use of Social Media" released by the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines (CBCP) Episcopal Commission on the Laity exists for this reason. Social Media platforms, like Twitter, have become an integral part of modern communication and have a significant impact on public opinion and social trends.

Twitter and other social media platforms have revolutionized how people exchange information and interact. They've developed brand-new forums for discussion and debate that can sway public opinion and affect societal trends. Particularly on Twitter, people can post and debate current affairs as they happen, thanks to its quick-paced and real-time nature. The Church may better comprehend the issues and demands of its members and the larger society by participating in social media debates. It may also use these venues to spread its message and teachings, dispel rumors and untruths, and encourage harmony and understanding.

Moreover, social media sites like Twitter have a global audience. They may assist the Church in connecting with people everywhere, even those who might not have access to conventional means of communication. Pope Francis, for instance, emphasized the value of social media and digital communications in his message for World Communications Day 2021

to encourage intercultural conversation, understanding, and encounters (Pope Francis 2021). The Pontifical Council for Social Communications' document "The Church and Internet" highlights the Church's responsibility to evangelize through new media and use the Internet and social media to spread the Gospel and promote unity and understanding (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002). Pope Benedict XVI's message for World Communications Day 2009 emphasizes the potential of new technologies and social media to promote dialogue, understanding, and friendship among people and urges Catholics to use these tools to spread the message of the Gospel (Pope Benedict XVI 2009).

The Roman Catholic Church has not fully adapted to technologies such as Data Analytics and Machine Learning. Still, it relies on traditional media forms to obtain information and gain awareness of current social issues (Díaz 2021). But the Church has called on its members to use science and technology fully and constructively, provided it is for the common good and the inner purpose of creation (John Paul II 2002). Pope St. John Paul II also stated that using these technologies to spread the Christian Message and the Church's authentic teaching is not enough. It is essential to integrate the Church's message into the 'new culture' created by these modern communications (John Paul II 1990). The introduction of Data Analytics and Machine Learning toward knowing the consensus of the Body of Christ can significantly help the Church identify sectors that need attention (Pope Francis 2014).

## 1.4. Aim of the Study

While many research studies examine the use of social media data, such as Wyrostkiewicz, Sosnowska, and Wójciszyn-Wasil (2022) article discussing "The Catholic influencer as a challenge for spiritual leadership in the age of social media" and Brazal's (2023) "Synodality and the New Media," there are limited discussions that specifically tackle the use of machine learning for the use of the Synod on Synodality of the Roman Catholic Church. Machine learning has increasingly become an essential tool for analyzing large amounts of data and making predictions. Still, its use in religious institutions like the Roman Catholic Church remains relatively unexplored. As the Church seeks to engage with its followers and address pressing social issues through the Synodality, there is an opportunity to

explore how machine learning can be used to understand better the needs and perspectives of the Church's members and how it can help inform decision-making and policy development.

The current study aims to provide new insights into how the Catholic Church can enhance its provision of services to its followers in the contemporary era through the integration of data analytics and machine learning methods, utilizing Twitter data as the primary source of information. Twitter was selected as the primary data source due to its unique characteristics and relevance to the research objectives. Specifically, Twitter is a real-time social media platform where users generate and interact with content, making it an advantageous source of data for studies interested in investigating how people respond to unfolding events or issues. Additionally, Twitter users discuss a diverse range of topics, rendering it a valuable source of data for research endeavors that seek to explore a wide array of issues. Moreover, the majority of content on Twitter is publicly available, facilitating the collection and analysis of substantial data volumes. Finally, Twitter provides researchers with access to a wealth of user demographic data, which can aid in comprehending the sample and controlling for certain variables in the analysis.

Utilizing social media data analysis, the Church can gain a deeper understanding of the needs and concerns of its members, which can inform its decision-making processes and pastoral efforts. This approach can be a valuable tool to support the Synod on Synodality's emphasis on collaboration, dialogue, and a synodal approach to decision-making. The data collection period spanned the second quarter of 2021 and focused on the Twitter ecosystem in the Philippines. A significant proportion of Filipinos utilize Twitter as a platform to express a diverse range of concerns and opinions relating to the Church's social issues.

To achieve the goal of the study, the following goals were determined:

a.   To describe the pressing social issues faced by the Catholic Church in the Philippines to provide supplemental information to the Synodal process;

b.   To develop a machine-learned model for the classification of Filipino social issues;

c.     To develop a web application that integrates the developed machine-learned model.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the methodology used in the paper. Section 3 will discuss the results. Section 4 will discuss the conclusion, and section 5 introduces the limitations and future work for the topic.

## 2. Methodology
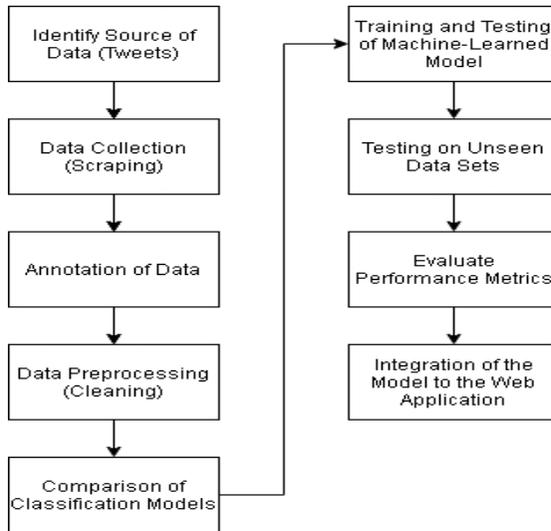


Figure 1: Framework of the Web Application

To achieve the aforementioned research goals, the study will need to start with identifying the tweets that will be used as the basis of the machine learning to identify and classify new Tweets into different topics. Therefore, the study has identified three criteria for the selection of Tweets for the training dataset of the machine:

1. Tweets that are written by reputable sources
2. Tweets that are relevant to the Philippines
3. Tweets are readily available

The study has identified two reputable sources of Tweets that will be fed into our machine-learning algorithms: GMA News and CNN Philippines. The Tweets that come from these sources will be utilized mainly because of their credibility and experience in writing trustworthy news and Tweets. GMA News and CNN Philippines have different journalists and fact-checkers available to verify the credibility of the news that they are about to Tweet, thus eliminating the doubt that the Tweets might not be credible, which can severely affect how the machine learning algorithms classify the Tweets that we will feed it later on (Li, Zhan, and Li 2018).

The research primarily selected secular news sources to guarantee the credibility and impartiality of the data. The study's objective is to leverage machine-learning algorithms for tweet classification, thus necessitating the use of unbiased and dependable information sources. Although Catholic news sources may offer valuable insights and viewpoints, they could also be influenced by religious biases and interests. Conversely, secular news sources are known for keeping their best at dedicating and providing factual and unbiased reporting. However, it is impossible to entirely eliminate bias as it is inherent in human interpretation and presentation of information. Therefore, this study aimed to employ credible and dependable news sources in the Philippines recognized for their commitment to unbiased and factual reporting. GMA News and CNN Philippines are generally considered to have a lower degree of bias in the Philippines (PUBLiCUS 2022).

The study does not assume that these sources are entirely unbiased but recognizes that they are known for their impartial and factual reporting, which will significantly reduce bias impact and enhance the accuracy of the algorithms. To mitigate bias, the study employed two data sources instead of one, although it acknowledges the need for more data sources that represent diverse perspectives on various categories. It is crucial to note that the selection of news sources was not influenced by any ideological leanings but rather their reputation for accurate and factual reporting.

Before being fed into a machine for text categorization, tweets should be reliable and credible since the accuracy of the machine learning

algorithm depends on the quality of the data it is trained on. The algorithm may learn to make erroneous predictions or classifications based on erroneous information if the tweets being fed into it are untrustworthy, meaning they contain fake information, rumors, or misleading claims (Dreisbach et al. 2019). This is crucial when actions based on incorrect forecasts might have serious repercussions, including news analysis.

After which, data collection will follow, followed by annotation and data preprocessing. After the data is cleaned, it will be fed into several classification models to identify the best model to use. After placing the model used, the data will undergo training and testing of the Machine-Learned model. Rigorous testing on data sets not present during the previous iterations will be undertaken, then finally, the evaluation of the performance of the said model will be done. Lastly, this information will then be passed onto the web application to show the product of the process. The study will utilize data mining techniques and text classification using Natural Language Processing (NLP).

## 2.1. Tools and Technologies

Before delving into the program's technicalities, it is crucial to discuss the tools and technologies used. The data used in the program was collected from Twitter using Twint, an advanced Twitter scraping tool in Python that enables scraping tweets without using Twitter's API. Twint was preferred over other data scraping tools due to its unlimited scraping capability, which is advantageous for cost-effective data collection in large-scale projects. Twint uses Twitter's search operators to scrape tweets from specific users or those related to particular topics, hashtags, and trends. The program's ability to extract sensitive information such as email and phone numbers from tweets makes it an excellent data processing tool.

Python Programming Language was used to create the machine learning models as Python is one of the best languages for developing a machine learning model (Raschka 2015). The model was then integrated and turned into a Web Application prototype, which can be seen at the end of the paper. Other open-source tools and technologies for Python

that was also utilized can be seen in the table below.

*Table 1: Tools and Technologies*

| Technology | Description |
|---|---|
| Scikit-learn | An open-source Python library for machine learning containing features such as regression, clustering and classification. Scikit-learn has split the data set into training and testing sets, logistic regression, count vectorizer, and TF-IDF. |
| NLTK library | A natural language processing tool for Python. This library was used for the tokenizer of words, and removing of stop words. |

## 2.2. Data Collection

The study collected 12,000 tweets from chosen trustworthy news sites, GMA News and CNN Philippines, on the 13th of April, 2021. These collected tweets were only scraped via credible news outlets to guarantee that the data collected is trustworthy and is not tainted with noisy data. The tweets collected serve as the primary foundation for the machine-learning process and guide the device in predicting and categorizing the tweets for our web application. However, there are inherent risks when collecting tweets based on hashtags to gain insights into a specific topic or event.

One potential risk is that certain hashtags may be associated with inaccurate or misleading information, especially if promoted by individuals or organizations with particular agendas. Such hashtags could disseminate false information, conspiracy theories, or hate speech, leading to the inadvertent acquisition and use of erroneous or damaging information.

Another risk is that hashtags may be taken over or controlled by bots or trolls who use them to disseminate false information or highlight specific points of view. Because of this, it can be challenging to categorize tweets appropriately based on their content, resulting in a misleading image of the debate surrounding a particular issue. Although news organizations are often held to higher standards of accuracy and trustworthiness, collecting tweets from news organizations can offer a more trustworthy source of information.

### 2.3. Annotation

The data analysis process involved the individual examination of each dataset with the help of some volunteers, who then added tags (i.e., categories) to each item to facilitate classification. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the annotations, the volunteers also compared the annotations made by volunteers and deliberated any discrepancies to determine the appropriate category assignment for a consistent outcome. The resulting annotated dataset was subsequently utilized for both model training and testing.

### 2.4. Preprocessing

Extracting the features from the documents was essential in training the machine learning models. Each unique word in the dataset is considered a feature when using the "bag of words" approach in data preprocessing. In this way, the number of columns within the data frame has the exact dimensions as the number of unique words in the data set. Count vectorization is applied to the processed data wherein the number of occurrences of the word in a text is assigned to its respective feature. As a result, count vectorization cannot represent the specific ordering or combination of words.

The term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) approach is used in text mining, where each word is quantified and a weight that determines the importance of a comment in a text is computed (Scott 2019). It combines two metrics: Term Frequency and Inverse Document Frequency. Term frequency is computed by dividing the number of occurrences of that specific word over the total number of words within a text or document. On the other hand, inverse document frequency helps in identifying the most important and relevant terms within a document or corpus of documents. Words that are used frequently across many documents are considered to have a lower relevance than words that occur rarely but are specific to a particular document. The resulting TF-IDF score for each term can be used to rank and retrieve documents based on their relevance to a given search query.

For the first part of the preprocessing, a standard cleaning of data was performed, such as removing duplicate data, noisy data, and anomalous data that were unintentionally scraped. Noisy data are tweets that are

meaningless. An example of noisy data is the tweet "Read more:  https://t. co/VNgHsw7FQ8".   Anomalous data are outliers in the dataset. An example of anomalous data from the tweets is "*Nagtira pa ng 8.97 pesos*. https://t. co/HL2tKljIIW" (They left 8.97 pesos). The tweets were also cleaned by removing several stop words, special characters, and punctuation marks. Stop words are the commonly used words in a language that does not affect the meaning of a sentence even if it is removed such as, "is," "are," "the," "were," and "at." (Teja 2020). Additionally, the tweets will also be made into lowercase and lemmatization of the words will be implemented. Lemmatization is a process of extracting a root word by considering the vocabulary. For example, "good," "better", or "best" is lemmatized (changed) into "good." The stop words are specified by a library called NLTK, which was discussed earlier in the tools and technologies used.

To illustrate, a sample tweet extracted from the dataset reads, "A group of health professionals is demanding urgent changes to the government's COVID-19 response to prevent a 'vicious cycle' of surge in infections." After subjecting this text to data cleaning techniques, the resulting dataset would contain the following cleaned data: "group health professionals demanding urgent changes government covid response prevent vicious cycle surge infections." Notably, stop words like "of" and "the" were removed, punctuations were omitted, and capitalized words such as "COVID" were converted to lowercase.

## 2.5. Descriptive Analytics

The descriptive analytics used in the data collected by the group included the most frequently used words for each category. With this, text classification was utilized. Text classification is an iterative process or perhaps a linear process. The statistical patterns and trends identified during the predictive model training phases should be applied to data preprocessing and, conversely, the predictive model to determine optimal parameters and anticipate high accuracy.

## 2.6. Data Analysis

The tweets were analyzed using a data classification technique

which will group the data into several categories. These categories were various topics that are commonly talked about on social media platforms. The project team used several classification algorithms, such as Stochastic Gradient Classifier, Support Vector Machine (SVM), and Logistic Regression.

In the initial phase, the first dataset was partitioned into two subsets: a training and testing datasets, with 80% and 20% of the data, respectively. This partitioning aimed to determine the most suitable algorithm for training the machine. Subsequently, iterative machine learning was carried out in the study, where new and previously unseen tweets were obtained and inputted into three algorithms for classification. The algorithms' performance metrics, including accuracy and confusion matrix, were evaluated through multiple iterations to enhance their performance. Following this, the project team compared the accuracies and the outcomes of the confusion matrices of the algorithms to identify the optimal algorithm for classification in the web application.

## 2.7. Web Application

After the data is analyzed and categorized, it is displayed in a web application, primarily built on Django, a Python framework. The plan in creating the web application was to see the trending category, and the user will be able to see the tweets in the category that will be selected. The user can also input a number of how many tweets the web application will scrape.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Categories

The data collected from Twitter were analyzed and manually classified into several categories. The group did the categorization manually, as it would be used to train the model for organizing unseen data. The categories determined by the group were based on the news categories that were identified by Jahara, Sharif, and Hoque (2022), and HuffPost (2014), an online news aggregator website. These categories can be seen below:

*Table 2: Categories*

| Categories |
| :---: |
| Crimes, Accidents, and Human Affairs |
| Health and Wellness |
| Politics |
| Business, Finance, Economy & Tourism |
| Travel and Transportation |
| Religion |
| Education and Literacy |
| Environment |
| Others |

The categories used in this study were selected based on common problems encountered and discussed in the country. Originally, there were nineteen categories, but the research team narrowed them down to nine main categories considered the most relevant for ranking purposes. Unfortunately, the distribution of tweets across the different categories was highly uneven, with the most populated categories being politics and health. In contrast, the travel and transportation category had the least number of tweets. These findings were based on data gathered during the second quarter of 2021.

Moreover, the Religion category was one of the least discussed topics in Twitter based on the tweets that were collected. This may be attributed to the fact that societal, political, and health issues dominated the public discourse during data collection, while discussions about the Church and religion were relatively scarce. This is consistent with previous researches (Woodward and Kimmons 2018; Hosseinzadeh 2011; Cheong 2016), which found that individuals are often reluctant to discuss religious topics on social media due to concerns about causing tension or arguments (Barna Group 2016). Furthermore, some people may not feel knowledgeable enough to discuss religious topics or may not be interested in such discussions.

The reason behind this is that according to "Why People Are Reluctant to Discuss Faith" by the Barna Group (2016), people using Twitter may be afraid of talking about their faith in Twitter for mainly two reasons: avoidance and ambivalence. Avoidance because majority of the respondents in the said study said that "Religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments". Ambivalence because they either "do not know enough to talk about religion" or "I am not religious, and don't care about these kinds of topics". In the tweets that the study reviewed during the data cleaning phase, it has been found that tweets that discuss religion, particularly the Catholic Church, are some of the places where people usually argue.

## 3.2. Training and Testing

In order to prepare for the next stage of the process, the first set of tweets was utilized to train a machine learning model. The tweets were sourced from various verified accounts, manually categorized, and limited to English only. Any Tagalog tweets were translated to ensure consistency. To improve the accuracy of the model and reduce noise, several preprocessing steps were taken on the tweets. This involved removing punctuation, converting text to lowercase, and eliminating stop words using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK). The study also employed lemmatization to extract root words based on vocabulary, after which the preprocessed tweets were vectorized using the TF-IDF (Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency) technique.

During the dataset annotation process, the study initially relied on manual annotation, but it was discovered that some items were not correctly annotated, which led to reduced accuracy of the results. To address this issue, the study reduced the number of categories in the dataset. Categories such as "fashion and beauty" and "entertainment" were deemed irrelevant and removed. Some categories were merged because of their similarities, such as merging "travel" with "transportation," "human affairs" with "crimes and accidents," and "tourism" with "business, finance, and economy."

Lastly, the text classification framework was trained into several classifiers with several features created previously. The study' approach

was to explore traditional machine learning models first such as SVM, Stochastic Gradient Classifier, and the Logistic Regression. The training and testing had been split into 80% training and 20% testing.

### 3.3. Model Metrics

A preprocessed data set was used to train the models in the first iteration of machine learning. The models were then tested and results of its performance metrics (accuracy and confusion matrix) were matched with the expected output. If the output did not meet the desired values, then the models were then fed new, unseen data to further improve and refine the results of its performance metrics.

These models went through a word embedding layer. Word embedding was described as a form of representing words and documents through dense vector representation. These were the different tools that are needed to build the embedding:

1. Use tokenizer methods from the TF-IDF vectorizer,
2. Make a vocabulary of words,
3. Make the text into a sequence to convert the words to numbers,
4. Make fixed-length sequences.

| | model | accuracy |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | SGD | 68.56 |
| 1 | SVC | 66.24 |
| 2 | Logistic Regression | 86.44 |

Figure 2: Accuracy

```
Confusion matrix :
 [[458  39  29  31  37  31  28  26  13]
 [ 28 846  62  68  57  54  49  64  26]
 [ 32  44 834  76  45  53  54  62  26]
 [ 33  59  65 868  68  57  47  64  27]
 [ 29  56  57  60 851  46  57  64  22]
 [ 31  55  52  47  49 844  43  58  15]
 [ 31  58  53  50  56  42 820  50  24]
 [ 35  70  52  66  58  52  53 902  23]
 [ 15  27  22  22  21  15  33  21 433]]
Outcome values :
 458 0 0 0
Classification report :
              precision    recall   f1-score    support

           1      0.66       0.66       0.66        692
           0      0.00       0.00       0.00          0

   micro avg      0.66       0.66       0.66        692
   macro avg      0.33       0.33       0.33        692
weighted avg      0.66       0.66       0.66        692
```

Figure 3: Confusion Matrix for SGD

```
Confusion matrix :
 [[417  49  27  31  38  41  32  46  11]
 [ 49 770  45  83  70  57  59  91  30]
 [ 36  64 749  75  57  67  66  81  31]
 [ 37  74  89 778  81  62  65  72  30]
 [ 32  69  73  77 777  61  59  63  31]
 [ 35  59  74  55  62 763  60  63  23]
 [ 28  53  68  70  63  64 739  62  37]
 [ 47  86  72  75  67  60  68 811  25]
 [ 11  30  29  44  27  19  36  22 391]]
Outcome values :
 417 0 0 0
Classification report :
              precision    recall   f1-score    support

           1      0.60       0.60       0.60        692
           0      0.00       0.00       0.00          0

   micro avg      0.60       0.60       0.60        692
   macro avg      0.30       0.30       0.30        692
weighted avg      0.60       0.60       0.60        692
```

Figure 4: Confusion Matrix for SVN

```
Confusion matrix :
 [[ 598   13   12   11   11   11    8   23    5]
 [  13 1081   15   39   24   27   21   25    9]
 [  12   15 1069   32   23   19   23   20   13]
 [  11   39   32 1099   20   21   25   31   10]
 [  11   24   23   20 1074   28   22   32    8]
 [  11   27   19   21   28 1033   21   24   10]
 [   8   21   23   25   22   21 1030   22   12]
 [  23   25   20   31   32   24   22 1126    8]
 [   5    9   13   10    8   10   12    8  534]]
Outcome values :
 598 0 0 0
Classification report :
              precision    recall   f1-score    support

           1      0.86       0.86       0.86        692
           0      0.00       0.00       0.00          0

   micro avg      0.86       0.86       0.86        692
   macro avg      0.43       0.43       0.43        692
weighted avg      0.86       0.86       0.86        692
```

Figure 5: Confusion Matrix for Logistic Regression

Based on the figures above, the study had decided that Logistic Regression will be used for the project. After which, the study had then proceeded to produce the data, starting with the top five most frequent words used per category. The top three categories are presented below with their respective top 5 words based on their frequency being present in tweets.

The study initially had 19 categories for classification but due to the limited number of datasets, the accuracy level was low. To improve the accuracy, the study decided to reduce the number of categories to 9 and increase the number of datasets for training. The volunteers manually classified 12,000 tweets, but after data cleaning, only 10,000 tweets were left to train the model.

Prior to training the model, the collected tweets underwent a rigorous process of data cleaning to remove any irrelevant or noisy data that could adversely affect the model's accuracy. The data cleaning process involved several steps, including the elimination of duplicate tweets and tweets written in languages other than English. Additionally, tweets that did not fall within any of the predefined categories were removed, and any unnecessary words or punctuations were eliminated while spelling errors were corrected. These measures ensured that only relevant and high-quality data were utilized in the model training phase, thereby contributing to more precise outcomes.

Subsequently, the study developed a prototype web application capable of categorizing and classifying tweets according to the designated categories. The web application demonstrated commendable capabilities in terms of classification and categorization. However, the paper did not present the results of preliminary experiments that were conducted.

### 3.4. Top Three Topics

*Table 3: Top Five Terms for Crimes, Accidents, and Human Affairs*

| Terms | Frequency |
|-------|-----------|
| kill | 124.576891 |
| police | 110.473147 |
| city | 112.339649 |
| suspect | 104.761438 |
| dead | 100.013144 |

*Table 4: Top Five Terms for Health and Wellness*

| Terms | Frequency |
|---|---|
| covid | 265.567243 |
| vaccine | 143.095385 |
| health | 141.673592 |
| Philippines | 134.100935 |
| DOH | 132.803924 |

*Table 5: Top Five Terms for Politics*

| Terms | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Duterte | 225.870495 |
| sea | 123.889451 |
| China | 113.204521 |
| Philippine | 111.421589 |
| roque | 111.067942 |

Based on the results obtained by the study last 2021, the issues with the most frequent tweets were about Health and Wellness, Crimes, Accidents, and Human Affairs, and Politics. In the category of Health and Wellness, the terms that came up frequently were "COVID" and "vaccination." Given the current situation regarding the global pandemic crisis, it was evident that these terms were frequently posted on Twitter by the news platforms the study collected the data from. 2021 was a year when vaccines were starting to roll out in the Philippines and initially, there were fears among the faithful of the side-effects that it brings because of the apparent "fast" and "experimental" the development of these vaccines underwent (Quibranza III 2021). There was also opposition from other religious communities because getting vaccinated "shows a lack of faith," which, unfortunately, hid their vaccine hesitancy behind religious reasons (Quibranza III 2021).

### 3.5. Health and Wellness

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has expressed their willingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to encourage people to get inoculated (Patinio 2021). The CBCP has also offered church facilities as venues for vaccination activities and partnered with local government units to allay people's fears of vaccines. The government has commented that the CBCP's sphere of influence could help in the vaccine roll-out (Parrocha 2021). However,

the CBCP's Bioethics chairman Ricardo Baccay has also stated in a pastoral letter that some COVID vaccines were manufactured using the remains of an aborted fetus, and people should be free to decide to be vaccinated or not according to their conscience (Aquino 2021).

In nations such as the Philippines, the utilization of vaccines derived from aborted fetuses has become an inevitable circumstance. In light of this, the Vatican has issued a statement acknowledging that in certain countries, access to ethically uncontroversial Covid-19 vaccines may prove challenging due to factors such as limited availability, inadequate storage and transportation, or a lack of options for citizens to select their preferred vaccine. Given these circumstances, the Catholic Church recognizes the moral acceptability of receiving Covid-19 vaccines that employed cell lines from aborted fetuses during their research and production stages, provided that no other viable options exist. This decision was grounded on the principle of the common good, which places a premium on safeguarding oneself and others from the spread of the virus (Aquino 2021).

The Pontifical Academy of Life has already been advocating the use of vaccines even before the COVID Pandemic started, stating in their document entitled "Clarifications on the Medical and Scientific Nature of Vaccination" dated July 31, 2017, that vaccines do not come from freshly voluntary aborted fetuses nowadays because the vaccines that are being developed are far from the cell lines that were originally aborted back in the 1960s. Therefore, it no longer implies a "bond of moral cooperation indispensable for an ethically negative evaluation of their use" (Pontifical Academy for Life - National Office for Health Pastoral Care (CEI) - Association of Italian Catholic Doctors 2017). They went on with their argument saying that vaccination is a very urgent concern to safeguard the safety of others especially toward immunodeficient and pregnant women.

### 3.6. Crimes, Accidents and Human Affairs

The category of Crimes, Accidents, and Human Affairs has been the topic of discussion in the twitter verse in 2021 with the following keywords of "kill", "police", "suspect", "dead", and "city". Ever since

Duterte stepped into office last 2016, the amount of people being killed was growing and being labeled as extrajudicial killings. Last 2021, the issue of police killings was once again brought up after a drunk police officer killed a 52-year-old mother, which led to several reforms in the Philippine National Police because of the swift public outcry (Aspinwall 2021).

Regrettably, the Duterte Government has been criticizing the Philippine Roman Catholic Church because of its stance against drug users and pushers since these both organizations have contradicting ideas on how drug abuse can be stopped in the Philippines (Willis 2019). The Catholic Church is one of the most prominent voices as time and time again, the CBCP has been voicing out the extrajudicial killings that were happening ever since former President Duterte has been voted into office. A pastoral letter by the archbishops of Nueva Segovia, Lingayen-Dagupan, and Tuguegarao in northern Luzon has urged its faithful to resist the "culture of murder and plunder" (CNA 2021). The pastoral letter has condemned the killings of journalists, political opposition members, lawyers, and priests. The Church has been attempting to propose a non-violent solution to the helpless killings by initiating peaceful assemblies wherein the issues of the Filipino people, via sober discussion that the Gospel guides must be the path that must be chosen.

The topics identified by the study, namely human affairs, crime, accidents, politics, and health and wellness, are intricately linked and exert a significant influence on individuals and communities. These matters are particularly relevant to the Catholic Church's pursuit of a synodal mode of being. Synodality seeks to address these challenges in a holistic and comprehensive manner by fostering participation, dialogue, and collaboration, recognizing their interdependence and integration into a broader system. This approach is of critical importance in the Philippines, where these issues are particularly acute and exert a significant impact on the lives of millions of individuals.

The spirit of synodality upholds the inherent dignity and freedom of each individual, acknowledging their intrinsic worth regardless of their social standing, background, or situation. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for the Catholic Church to deliberate

on its stance concerning vaccination and public health matters, a topic that can be fruitfully examined in the Synod of Synodality, facilitating a more sophisticated and informed approach. In the healthcare domain, a synodal process prioritizes patients' well-being and dignity above business or political considerations, enabling them to participate actively in treatment decisions, securing access to high-quality healthcare services, and promoting preventative health measures conducive to a meaningful existence.

Embracing synodality as a guiding principle can likewise enhance the Catholic Church's response to human concerns such as crime, accidents, and other issues. By engaging diverse perspectives and expertise, including those of laypersons and those directly impacted by these challenges, the Church can formulate more efficacious and empathetic solutions. A synodal approach places a premium on the common good over partisan interests and accords equal weight to the distinct contributions and viewpoints of all segments of society. This paradigm may entail advocating for legislation that fosters social equity and parity, collaborating constructively with politicians from divergent ideological persuasions, and empowering marginalized groups to participate actively in decision-making procedures.

### 3.7. Politics

The Politics category revealed that the terms "duterte," "government," and "sea" frequently appeared in the collected tweets, with most issues relating to the government's handling of the West Philippine Sea dispute and the previous administration's governance. It's worth noting that the Philippines won its case against Mainland China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. This territorial dispute was also significant to the Philippine Catholic Church. The Catholic Church's advocacy for peace in territorial disputes is rooted in its concern for the welfare of people who depend on the sea for their livelihood, and because of how important the sea is to us, Sea Sunday is celebrated every second of July by many Catholic Churches as an "International Day of Remembrance, prayer and celebration, and an opportunity to thank seafarers and fishermen who work tirelessly throughout the year" (Gorecho 2021).

Bishop Broderick Pabillo, the CBCP's President, has been critical

of the government's treatment of Filipino fishermen harassed in the West Philippine Sea. In line with this, Pope Francis also acknowledged the vital role of seafarers and fishermen, stating that "without the people of the sea, many in the world would starve." The Church advocates for peaceful dialogue between the Philippines and China to resolve this long-standing conflict (Torres and Saludes 2016). The Church may actively contribute to advancing social justice and the common good by encouraging communication and cooperation among various political actors and interaction with the larger society.

Based on the presented findings and discussions, it is recommended that the Catholic Church accord priority to engaging with its congregation through social media and actively solicit their feedback and insights on pertinent issues. Social media platforms can serve as a valuable tool for gathering data, fostering collaboration, and augmenting communication among the laity. It is important to note, however, that the Synod on Synodality did not explicitly address the role of social media in information gathering and analysis. To realize a synodal decision-making process that values cooperative and inclusive deliberations among all members of the Church, it is proposed that the Church ensure the transparency, responsiveness, and inclusivity of its decision-making procedures. By embracing this approach, the Church can prioritize the active involvement and engagement of all members of its community in the decision-making process.
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## 4. Conclusion

The innovative use of data analytics and machine learning in this study provides valuable insights into the social issues being discussed on Twitter, which can supplement the Catholic Church's traditional means of data collection. By leveraging technology and data analysis tools, the Church can better understand the needs and concerns of the people it serves and prioritize its efforts accordingly. This study highlights the importance of the Catholic Church addressing social issues such as health, politics, and human affairs. The Church's mission is not limited to faith and worship but extends to the broader social and political sphere. By prioritizing these issues, the Church can better serve the needs of the

people and work towards the common good. In addition to serving as a supplement to traditional data collection methods, the findings of this study can also inform the Church's approach to synodality. Synodality is a matter of ecclesial governance and a way of living out the Church's mission in the world. A synodal approach that prioritizes the dignity and freedom of every human person can help the Church to fulfill its mission of eliminating evil and achieving the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

Furthermore, the Synod of Synodality provides a platform for the Church to engage with the wider community and address these issues holistically and integrated manner. Through the synodal process, the Church can listen to the voices of the people and work with them towards common goals. This can lead to greater unity and collaboration and a more effective and efficient use of resources. In conclusion, the use of data analytics and machine learning in this study is a promising development that can help the Church better serve the people's needs. By prioritizing social issues, embracing a synodal approach, and working towards the common good, the Church can continue to fulfill its mission of bringing the Kingdom of God to Earth.

While the Twitter Data Classifier and similar tools can provide valuable insights into the opinions and concerns of Church members on social media, they should be viewed as a supplemental tool to the Synod on Synodality. The Synod emphasizes the importance of fostering greater collaboration and dialogue among all members of the Church, including the laity, clergy, and hierarchy, in order to ensure that decision-making processes are transparent, participatory, and reflective of the needs and concerns of all members.

## 5.  Limitations and Future Work

The primary focus of the study on social issues as presented on Twitter may constrain its ability to fully capture the "sensus fidelium" of the Roman Catholic Church. The term "sensus fidelium" refers to the collective voice of the faithful, which conveys the Church's beliefs

and teachings. While social issues hold significance, the Church is also concerned with other internal matters, including but not limited to women's ordination, faith, church leadership, and other pertinent topics. Hence, it is recommended that future studies broaden their data sources and subject matter to provide a more comprehensive comprehension of the "sensus fidelium."

In addition to the limitations of the study's focus on social issues presented on Twitter, there is a potential oversight of important topics that are not as popular or frequently discussed on social media. The study's focus on "trending" topics on Twitter may exclude critical issues that are not receiving as much attention, such as ecological concerns, which may not garner as much attention on Twitter compared to other social issues. It is essential to note that the Roman Catholic Church has consistently expressed its concern about ecological issues, such as climate change and environmental degradation, through official statements and encyclicals. Thus, future studies that explore the "sensus fidelium" of the Church should consider a broader range of issues, including those that may not be as popular or trending on social media. To address this limitation, future studies could explore ways to identify and incorporate a more diverse set of topics relevant to the Church's teachings and beliefs. For example, they could use a variety of data sources beyond social media, such as official Church documents, surveys, and interviews with the faithful. By including a more diverse set of issues and data sources, studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the "sensus fidelium" of the Roman Catholic Church.

Furthermore, while Twitter may be an important source of information and preoccupation for the Church, relying solely on tweets may not provide a complete picture of the issues that matter most to the Church's members. The use of social media as a data source has limitations, such as the exclusion of groups that are not active on these platforms. Therefore, future research could explore how social media can be utilized alongside other sources of information and perspectives to create a more synodal Church. For instance, combining data from official Church documents, surveys, interviews, and social media could provide a more nuanced understanding of the collective voice of the faithful. Moreover, understanding the limitations and strengths of

different data sources can help guide the Church's decision-making. For example, social media can provide real-time insights into the concerns and opinions of the faithful, allowing the Church to address emerging issues promptly. However, it is also essential to consider the broader context, such as the historical and theological perspectives, when making decisions that impact the Church and its members.

Lastly, as the web app is still in its development and enhancement stage, future work could focus on improving its functionality and usability, as well as exploring ways to integrate it with other tools and platforms that the Church uses to engage with its members and the wider community. Doing so will enable the Church to better serve its members and engage with them on important issues.

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# Aliens and Strangers (1Pet 2: 11-12) in Indonesian Context

*Batara Sihombing[1] and Desri Maria Sumbayak[2]*

## Abstract

*This paper examines the Epistle of 1 Peter and the experiences of its recipients, who were labeled as aliens and strangers living in Asia Minor during the Roman Empire. The paper explores the reasons for their labeling and the struggles they faced due to their faith in the first century, including persecution from non-Christians and those in power. The paper also delves into the literal and contextual usage of the terms and elaborates on the persecution faced by the recipients. The author of the letter uses the paraenetic style to communicate his admonition to the recipients, encouraging them to live good lives in the hope that their opponents would be ashamed. Furthermore, this paper draws a parallel between the experiences of the recipients of 1 Peter and contemporary Indonesian Christians in establishing their places of worship. A minority of Indonesian Christians face difficulties when moving from their homeland to areas where Muslims are the majority. Establishing places of worship requires permits from non-Christian neighbors, and their sanctuaries are often closed and attacked by radical Muslims, possibly due to political motivation. The paper suggests that the wise response for Christians is to live good lives and establish harmonious relationships with other religious followers, in the hope that their non-Christian neighbors will understand the importance of their need to worship God.*

**Keywords:** *aliens, strangers, persecution, paraenesis, religious discrimination, religious minority*

[1] ***Batara Sihombing, PhD*** is a lecturer at Abdi Sabda Theological College in Medan (STT Abdi Sabda), Indonesia. He was the former of HKI Church General Secretary, 2015-2021. He is a member of International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) and also Society of Asian Biblical Scholar (SABS). His email address: batarasihombing@gmail.com

[2] ***Desri Maria Sumbayak*** is an English literature lecturer at North Sumatera University (USU) in Medan. Her concerns are literature, teaching methodology, communication, ecology, and gender justice.

## 1.  Introduction

The Church is sent into a world where believers exist as outsiders and foreigners, consequently exposing them to inhospitable treatment and persecution from their surroundings. Coping with such negative behaviors requires the adoption of wise strategies. This paper aims to examine how the Epistle of 1 Peter exhorts its recipients, who are foreigners and strangers, to conduct themselves honorably and responsibly in the face of persecution. This analysis will be used to underscore how Indonesian Christians should respond to hostile treatment from their surrounding community. The paper will first discuss the Epistle of 1 Peter, including its epistolary form, the concept of foreigners and strangers, and their interaction with non-Christian outsiders. This examination will provide insight into how the author utilized the epistle as a means of admonishment to his recipients. The paper will approach 1 Peter 2:11-12 literally and contextually in order to gain an understanding of the text's voice within its first-century situation. Secondly, the paper will examine how Indonesian Christians navigate their shared struggle of existing as a minority and seeking permission to construct churches. This section will draw comparisons between the struggles of first-century believers and contemporary Indonesian Christians, using synonymous parallelism.

## 2.  First Peter as a Paraenesis Letter

1 Peter is an epistle with a conventional opening (sender, addressee, greeting) and closing (greeting, doxology, benediction). The sender of the epistle is identified as being in Babylon (5:13), and the recipients are in Asia Minor (1:1). Although it contains a homily, 1 Peter is unmistakably an epistle.[3] In the first century, personal letters were a common means of communication used by preceptors to connect with their followers over long distances for the purpose of encouraging, consoling, teaching, and so on.[4] The debate surrounding the recipients

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[3] T.W. Martin, *Metaphor and Composition in 1 Peter* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1992), 41-42.

[4] D.F. Watson, "Letter, Letter Form," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Leicester:

of the letter indicates a growing consensus that they were Gentile Christians. Several texts within 1 Peter identify the recipients as Gentiles (1:14; 1:18; 2:9; 4:3-4). In particular, the use of the phrase *ethnos agion* ("holy nation") in 2:9 refers to the recipients as Gentiles, with the wor*d ethnos* being a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament *goyim* which is used as a technical term for the Gentiles. By contrast, the term *'am* is used as a technical term for the holy people or Israel.[5]

There is a scholarly consensus that the epistle was written to Christian communities in Asia Minor who were experiencing affliction and suffering. The author's purpose was to provide strength and comfort to the recipients during this difficult time through the medium of the epistle.[6] The paraenetic genre of the letter reinforces this idea. T.W. Martin[7] asserts that, from a form-critical perspective, there are three characteristics of 1 Peter that establish it as paraenetic work. Firstly, the letter contains twenty-eight imperatives, which along with their corresponding participles, shape much of the content of the epistle.

Secondly, 1 Peter exhibits prescriptive language, which is an essential feature of paraenesis. This prescriptive language can be found in motivational statements (1:16; 1:18; 1:23; 2:13,21; 3:18; 4:1) that are based on and supported by Christological statements. The letter also contains moral examples where the readers are encouraged to imitate the Christian model that the letter describes (2:18; 3:18; 4:1). Thirdly, the character of 1 Peter as a piece of a paraenesis is further demonstrated by the use of the term *parakalo* (2:11; 5:1,12) which means "I encourage you". This term is an important indicator of the paraenetical genre of the document. In 5:12 the author comments on the epistle, starting that he wrote it to "exhort" and "testify" to the recipients. Both of these terms indicate that the author intended to write a paraenetic epistle.

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Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 649-650.

[5] Betram, "Ethnos," *TDNT* 2: 365.

[6] E. Lohse, "Paraenesis and Kerygma in 1 Peter," in *Perspective on First Peter*, ed. C.H. Talbert (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 42; T.W. Martin, *Metaphor*, 105-106; E. Richard, "The Functional Christology of First Peter" in *Perspective on First* Peter, ed. C.H. Talbert (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 136.

[7] Martin, *Metaphor*, 85-102.

Further, the paraenetic genre of the letter can be seen from its social context.[8] There are two factors that indicate the social setting of the letter as paraenesis. The first factor is that 1 Peter demonstrates a relationship between the preceptor and those who are exhorted (1:1). The author relates himself to the recipients in a fraternal language such as "I encourage you" (2:11; 5:1,12), "dear friends" (2:11; 4:12), and "brotherhood" (5:9). He is qualified to give this paraenesis because he is a co-worker and a witness of the suffering of Christ, as well as a partner of the glory, to be revealed (5:1). This brotherhood relationship between the preceptor and the readers is a crucial indicator of the epistle as paraenesis. Similar relationships are also observed between philosophers and their students in the Greco-Roman world.

The second factor indicating the social setting of the letter as paraenesis is the separation between the preceptor and his students. Due to this distance, the recipients may be at risk of experiencing moral decline as a result of persecution. The preceptor communicates with them through his paraenesis letter to provide comfort and encouragement. References to the trials, persecution, and suffering of the recipients are mentioned (1:16; 2:12; 4:12; 5:9), and yet the preceptor persists in exhorting them to live according to their Christian beliefs. The approach of paraenetic exhortation differs from that of Paul, who often expresses his intention to visit his followers (Rom 15:22-25; 1 Cor 16:5-9). In contrast, the preceptor in 1 Peter hints at their future meeting in the eschaton, when the glory of Christ will be revealed (1:7,11; 5:1). This means that the author of 1 Peter encourages the recipients with an eschatological motivation.

The paraenetic genre of 1 Peter can be discerned through the concept of "glory". In Greco-Roman society, the primary function of paraenesis was socialization, in which one could attain a state of glory through good conduct. However, in 1 Peter, the attainment of glory is distinct from this traditional Greco-Roman concept, and instead reflects the unique eschatological focus of Christian paraenesis in the New Testament. The most prominent means of paraenetic socialization in 1 Peter is the use of persuasion and dissuasion to encourage the recipients towards a state of glory (1:7,11; 5:1). In its attempt to persuade and

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[8] Martin, *Metaphor*, 103.

dissuade, 1 Peter only recommends principles of conduct that are generally accepted and uncontroversial (1:12).[9]

The use of metaphors in 1 Peter is emphasized by Martin[10] in order to see the thematic motif of the letter. This is rather different compared to J.H. Elliott[11] who understands the metaphors in 1 Peter as literal speech. According to Martin,[12] the controlling metaphor of 1 Peter is the "diaspora". This metaphor is announced in the prescript and reiterated in the greeting section of the epistle. The word "Babylon" at the end of the epistle is simply the counterpart to diaspora at the beginning. So, from the beginning of the epistle to its end, images and concepts from the Jewish diaspora dominate the material. The term "diaspora" denotes those Jews who for one reason or another were domiciled in foreign countries and abounded in Asia Minor from an early date.[13]

## 3. Aliens and Strangers (1 Pet 2:11)

The author of 1 Peter sends a letter containing words of exhortation and confirmation (5:12) to fellow Christian visitors and resident aliens (1:1; 2:11) in five Roman provinces or regions of Asia Minor who are currently suffering from various types of hostility, conflict, and trials of faith (1:6; 2:12,19-30; 3:14-16; 4:1,4,12-16,19: 5:9). In the letter, the author admonishes his readers to "abstain from the desires of the flesh" and to "conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentile," urging them as "aliens and strangers" (2:11-12; NRSV). According to Elliott,[14] who approaches 1 Peter from a sociological-exegetical analysis, the designations of the recipients as "aliens and strangers" (*paroikos kaiparepidemous*; 2:11) indicate the readers' interaction within their social environment. Thus, both terms provide insights into the social condition of the recipients and the socioreligious response offered by the epistle.

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[9] Martin, *Metaphor*, 108-112.

[10] Martin, *Metaphor*, 141.

[11] J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 129.

[12] Martin, *Metaphor*, 311.

[13] Charles Bigg, *The Epistle of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 70.

[14] Elliott, *A Home*, 22-23.

In a broad sense, the term *paroikos* refers to an individual who is a stranger, foreigner, or alien. They are individual who lack a sense of belonging or native roots in the language, customs, culture, or political, social, and religious allegiances of the people among whom they reside. The term *par-oikos* derives its meaning from the *oik*-root and related terms such as *oikos, oikia, oikeo*, and *oikeios.* The term *oikos* (home) represents one of the most fundamental social, economic, political, and personal realities of the ancient world. It refers to a house and home with all its personnel and property, family, and lineage as well as an individual's identity, place of belonging, and exercise of personal and communal rights, responsibilities, and moral obligations. In contrast, *paroikos* (alien) depicts the displaced and dislocated person, the curious or suspicious-looking alien or stranger. Schmidt[15] notes that the term *paroikos* is specifically used with a technical, political-legal meaning to denote the fate of a resident alien without civil or native rights.

In the Septuagint, the combination of "alien" and "stranger" (Gen 23:4; Ps 38/39:12) is present, and there is evidence to suggest that in certain cases, "alien" is used as an equivalent of diaspora. This precedence is reflected in the later text of 1 Peter (1:1; 2:11). While "alien" specifically designates the resident aliens with their attendants with restricted rights and social status, "stranger" refers more generally to a transient visitor who is temporarily residing as a foreigner in a given locality. Selwyn[16] correctly notes that "stranger" highlights the transitoriness of the sojourner's stay in a place, whereas "alien" emphasizes their legal status as a non-citizen.

The *paroik-* root appears in only two other New Testament texts aside from 1 Peter 1:17 and 2:11, specifically in Ephesians 2:19 where the Gentiles Christians addressees are declared to have ceased being "strangers and resident aliens" to the people of God and have become "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God". This usage conveys the conventional sense of living as a resident alien in a foreign environment or away from home. It is also clear that the political, legal, and social limitations of *paroikos* status were understood to constitute the conditions according to which union with and fidelity

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[15] K.L. and M.A. Schmidt, "Paroikos," *TDNT* 5:842.

[16] E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 118.

toward God were tested, relinquished, or affirmed. 1 Peter 1:17 and 2:11 similarly acknowledged the political-legal and social condition of the recipients' situation as resident aliens in Asia Minor and encourage their acceptance in faith and obedience to God's will. Furthermore, the resident aliens and transient strangers should use their situation as an advantage in establishing their distinctive religious identity.

Thus, following an elaborate description of the readers as the elect and holy people of God (2:4-10), the author exhorts them to manifest the religious dimensions of their social stranger hood: "Beloved, I exhort you as resident aliens and visiting strangers to keep apart from the fleshly passions (of their Gentile background and environment) which wage war against you" (2:11). This negative warning is followed by the positive encouragement: "Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles (as in 1:17), so that although they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12).

As resident aliens and strangers, they experienced a shared the same vulnerable condition in Asia Minor and throughout the Roman empire. Legally their status within the empire, according to both local and Roman law, imposed restrictions on intermarriage, commerce, property succession and land tenure, participation in public assembly and voting, taxes, and tribute, the founding of associations, and susceptibility to more severe forms of civil and criminal punishment.

The recipients' denotation as aliens and strangers connotes their social strangeness. Additionally, the use of the term diaspora, which is associated with strangers in 1 Peter, implies historical and religious aspect of their situation. The term diaspora is used three times in the New Testament (Jn 7:35; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1), to geographically and socially circumscribe a group of people living beyond the borders of Israel. In John 7:35, it identifies either Greek in whose territories the Jews live or Hellenistic Jews from abroad currently in Jerusalem. However, in James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1, the term diaspora is used for the first time as designation for Christian who, like their Jewish counterparts, now also live outside Palestine. Thus, the designation of Christians as the people in the dispersion indicates their religious identity and roots, as well as

their social condition of displacement and estrangement. As the heirs of Abraham, Christians share in the fateful history but also the unique honor of the people of God.

Several scholars (Beare, Kummel), as noted by Elliott,[17] take the contrast in 1 Peter 2:11-12 as the cosmological one in which between present life on earth and a future life in the heavenly one. The phrase "the desire of the flesh" is understood as belonging to the order of earthly existence, now alien to readers, and must be given no place in their new, heaven-centered life. However, Elliott[18] understands the contrast as a sociological one. This means that the Christian community is set apart from and in tension with its social neighbors. The phrase "the desire of the flesh" refers to the typical lives of the Gentiles who are non-believers (cf. 4:1-6). Here the contrast is drawn between the Christian conduct in accordance with the will of God and living by "selfish desires" which characterized the recipients' former pre-Christians behavior.

In 1 Peter 2:11-12, the author provides a balanced approach to the Christians' socioreligious stance as strangers in their unbelieving social environment. The negative admonition in verse 11 urges the readers to abstain from the vices of their Gentile background and environment. The positive thrust in verse 12 encourages them to maintain good conduct among the Gentiles and let their good works lead to the glorification of God, despite the slanderous accusations they may face. Both verses emphasize the importance of the Christians' exemplary behavior and distinguished conduct among the unbelievers in their midst. Elliott[19] argues that in addition to their condition as strangers and aliens, it was their religious allegiance, with exclusiveness that such allegiance required, which had incited the suspicion and hostility of their neighbors. Bearing the name "Christian" at that time had already been declared a crime by official Roman policy (cf. 4:14-16).

It is clear from 1 Peter that outsiders were not neutral in their attitude or behavior toward the Christian sectarians. The nature of the popular reaction against the Christians in Asia Minor was due to their

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[17] Elliott, *A Home*, 42-44.
[18] Elliott, *A Home*, 42-44.
[19] Elliott, *A Home*, 73.

novelty and exclusivity, which bred contempt rather than familiarity. The public reactions that the Christians encountered and suffered included ignorance (2:15), curiosity (3:15), suspicion of wrongdoing (2:12; 4:14-16), and aggresive hostility (3:13-14,16; 4:4). The outsiders seemed to have little specific or accurate knowledge concerning the religion or morality of these strangers. Even where the good conduct of the believers was evident (2:12; 3:16), the deliberate "ignorance of foolish men" (2:15) had led to the suspicion of immorality, including civic disloyalty (2:13-17). For bearing the name and professing faith in Jesus as the Christ, the outsiders found them worthy only of reproach (4:14). Such ignorance, suspicion, slander, and reproach had engendered sorrow (1:6; 2:19), fear (3:14), and suffering (2:19,20; 3:14,17; 4:1,15,19; 5:10) on the part of the Christians.

The specific terminology of these references and contexts of these refences do not refer to anything other than the social pressure, religious discrimination, and local hostility that natives typically directed against inferior aliens and exotic religious sects. Colwell, as cited by Elliott,[20] notes that such incidents were typical of the popular reactions against Christianity in the early Roman empire. These reactions were prompted not because of any official proscription of Christianity by Rome but by the sectarian exclusiveness of Christianity itself.

From the Biblical exegesis point of view,[21] it seems to be clear that the author of 1 Peter wrote his paraenesis letter as means of consoling and comforting the recipients in facing their difficulties and suffering in Asia Minor. In the first century, personal letters were one of the most common means of personal communications, which was written in a straightforward manner and vary in content and form depending upon the degree of familiarity existing between the senders and receivers and the content to be communicated.

From the discussion above, the author of 1 Peter and his readers shared a common world, common frames of reference, and a common understanding and use of words particularly "aliens and strangers".

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[20] Elliott, *A Home*, 80.

[21] John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 7-9.

Therefore, by encouraging the Christians to abstain from the desires of the flesh and to maintain the good conduct among the Gentiles, the author of 1 Peter kindly asked them to be inclusive and let the outsiders openly know the good fruits of their fellowship. This will serve as a means of communicating their existence as believers among the Gentiles, with the hope of receiving hospitality from the surrounding people. In other words, believers were not only expected to be good ambassadors of Christ Jesus but also good communicators of their presence through their good behaviors in their respective context.

## 4.  The Common Struggle of Indonesian Christians

As minority groups in Indonesia both Catholics (3.07 % = 8,5 million) and Protestants (7.26 % = 20,5 million),[22] face a common problem: difficulty in building churches. This difficulty is shared by other minority groups in Indonesia, such as, Buddhists, Hindus, and Confucians, who struggle to construct places of worship in a predominantly Muslim country. In fact, Muslims make up 87% of Indonesia's population of 275.77 million in 2022 and making Indonesia the largest Moslem country in the world.[23] As such, the voice of Indonesian Moslem carries significant weight within global Muslim community, and they expected to serve as a beacon for Islamic civilization around the world.

The main difficulty for Christians in building their places of worship lies not in finance, but in obtaining permits from local authorities and communities. This struggle has persisted since Indonesia's independence in 1945 and has continued to escalate, with thousands of churches being burned by irresponsible persons since the reformation era that began in 1998 after President Suharto stepped down.[24] According to the report issued by the Councils of Protestant and Catholic Churches, from 2004 to 2007, there were 108 churches

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[22] *"Kekristenan di Indonesia" (Christianity in Indonesia)*. https://id.m.wikipedia.org. Accessed on February 6, 2023.

[23] Monavia Ayu Rizaty, "BPS: Jumlah Penduduk Indonesia Sebanyak 275,77 Juta pada 2022" (Center of Statistic: The Indonesian Population is 275,77 millions in 2022),  https://dataindonesia.id

[24] *Sinar Indonesia Baru* (Newspaper) (2015). "Hentikan Kekerasan di Aceh Singkil!" (Stop the Violence in Aceh Singkil), October 15, 2015.

destroyed in Indonesia including those had fulfilled the necessary regulations.[25] Despite the Indonesian Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion and worship for all citizens, this is still a significant challenge for Christians. In fact, President Jokowi[26] lamented the difficulties that religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians, still face in carrying out their worship. He urged governors, regents, and mayors to implement the constitution within their respective administrative areas to ensure religious freedom. Therefore, the struggle for Christians to practice their religion freely in Indonesia is far from over.

The difficulty arises in provinces where Christianity is a minority. Out of 35 provinces, only four have a Christian majority: Papua, West Papua, North Sulawesi, and East Nusatenggara. All these four provinces are located in the eastern part of Indonesia and have populations less than 7 million. There are only two provinces where Christians make up around 50% of the population – North Sumatera and Maluku. Many populations from these provinces move to other provinces and islands in search of employment. For example, there are more Batak Christians to which the writer belongs, living outside the Batakland in North Sumatera than inside it. When they move to new places, they always establish their own churches. For Batak Christians,[27] the understanding of the Church as the assembly of saints, who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit in them, serves as a strong motivation to build their churches in their new locations. In addition, cultural motivation such as the use of the Batak language in worship are also factors. This is the main reason why churches are scattered throughout Indonesian archipelago, whether in cities or villages.

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[25] Ahmad Gaus AF, "Kebebasan Beragama dan Hak-Hak Minoritas in Indonesia" (The Freedom of Religion and the Rights of Minorities in Indonesia), 4, in http://www.pdf-search-engine.com/pluralisme-beragama-pdf.html. See also *Suara Pembaruan* (Newspaper), December 16, 2007.

[26] Wardhany Tsa Tsia, "Highlights on the Prohibition of Building a Place of Worship, Jakowi: Sad, Hard to Give People to Worship?" https://voi.id/en/news/245370/hignlights-on-the-prohibition-of-building-a-place-of-worship-jokowi-sad-hard-to-give-people-want-to-worship.

[27] See Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 173, See also Sutan M. Hutagalung, "The Church in the World," *Africa Theological Journal* 9, No. 1 (1980): 46-64.

The challenge faced by Christians in Indonesia pertains to obtaining a permit to construct a church, as regulated by a joint decree issued by the Minister of Interior Affairs and the Minister of Religion Affairs in 1969, which was subsequently revised in 2006.[28] The decree stipulates that both Christians and Muslims must fulfill specific requirements for building their prayer houses such as churches and mosques. However, in practice, Christians often face obstacles in obtaining permits from their Muslim neighbors, especially in provinces where Muslims are the majority. In accordance with the decree, 90 adult Christian members must prove their identity cards to construct a church, and obtain 60 signatures from the local society, including Muslim neighbors, in support of their plan.

Research done by Amos Sukamto[29] and his colleagues reveals that the joint decree issued in 1969 was a response to the rapid growth of the Christian population in the mid-1960s, following the attempted coup by the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965. To curtail Communist power, the Indonesian government mandated that every citizen join to one of the five state-recognized religions, namely, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Consequently, many nominal Muslim groups, known as *abangan*, who supported the Communist Party, converted to Protestantism or Catholicism to escape persecution. The sudden rise in the Christian population caused dissatisfaction among some Muslim groups, who accused the Churches of exploiting the political situation for their benefit. This led to attacks on Christian Churches in some areas, resulting in conflicts and chaos in Indonesia. These conflicts that emerged called for state intervention to manage religious life in the country, leading to the formulation of a policy decision in constructing places of worship. The policy aimed to regulate religious life and had a significant impact on the development of Christianity in Indonesia, which is still felt today in obtaining permits to build churches.

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[28] *Peraruran Bersama Menteri Agama Dan Menteri Dalam Negeri No. 9 Tahun 2006 Tentang Pendirian Rumah Ibadat* (The Joint-Regulations of Minster for Religion Affairs and Minister for Interior Affairs No. 9 the year 2006 Regarding the House of Prayer).

[29] Amos Sukamto, Nina Herlina, Kunto Sofianto, Yusak Soleiman, "Impacts of the Religious Policies Enacted from 1965 to 1980 on Christianity in Indonesia," *Mission Studies* 36, no. 2 (2019): 191,199, 213.

The challenge encountered by Christians in establishing a place of worship outside their homelands, such as Batak land, Ambon land, Papua land, etc., is widely recognized as a common struggle. This observation is not intended to generalize the issue throughout Indonesia, but rather to highlight the shared difficulties experienced by Indonesian Christians. The Department of Religious Affairs has conducted research in several major islands in Indonesia, which appears to acknowledge this struggle encountered by Christians in establishing their place of worship.[30]

The majority of churches in Indonesia are built without the necessary licenses, rendering them illegal.  These unauthorized places of worship are at risk of being demolished at any moment by radical Muslims, and authorities such as the police and military are often unable to prevent such violent acts.[31] A recent study conducted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide attributes the rise of religious intolerance in Indonesia in recent years to additional government rulings, such as the 2006 joint ministerial decree pertaining to houses of worship and the 2008 joint ministerial decree banning the Ahmadiyah, a minority Islamic sect, from spreading their beliefs.[32] The state's apparent inability to prevent acts of violence has caused significant concern and fear among Christians who must worship in these illegal prayer houses.

The central question at hand is whether it is feasible for Christians to obtain permission from Muslim neighbors to construct a church? According to the research conducted by PPIM in 2007,[33] 51% of Muslims in Indonesia object to the idea of a church being built in their vicinity, and 55% oppose Christian worship taking place in their neighborhood. Muslim citizens provide several justifications for their refusal to allow churches in their communities. Firstly, Christianity is

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[30] Wahyu Iryana (ed.), *Persoalan Pendirian Gereja di Indonesia* (The Problem of Building a Church in Indonesia) (Jakarta: Litbangdiklat Press, 2020).

[31] Bambang Muryanto, "Residents, Muslim Groups Attack Yogyakarta Church," in *The Jakarta Post*, June 2, 2014.

[32] Bambang Muryanto, "Study Blames Govt for Rising Religious Intolerance," in *The Jakarta Post*, June 11, 2014.

[33] "Islam dan Kebangsaan. Temuan Survey Nasional" (Islam and Nation: The Finding of National Survey). Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM). Universitas Islam Nasional, Jakarta, 2007.

associated with the Western world, which elicits a sense of resentment since Indonesia was colonized and exploited by the Dutch for an extended period. Secondly, their memory of the Crusades lingers, reminding people of the historical animosity between Muslims and Christians. This animosity is exacerbated by the interpretation of Quranic verses that highlight differences between the two faiths. These factors contribute to the demolition of unlicensed Churches, which is often perceived as an act of religious obligation.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that many Muslims in Indonesia have limited knowledge about Christianity, particularly with regards to the concept of a church. Their understanding of Christianity is often vague, and they tend to rely on hearsay rather than factual information. In this regard, many Muslims are perplexed as to why Indonesian Christians insist on building numerous church buildings even though their congregations consist of fewer than 100 members. Muslims typically gather in the same mosque for Friday prayers, and they fail to comprehend why Christians require separate churches for different denominations, languages, and cultures. Consequently, the proliferation of church buildings is often interpreted as an attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity, which is vehemently rejected.

An Alvara Research Center[34] study reports that "the majority of the Muslims in Indonesia supports the construction of worship places of other religions in accordance with applicable procedures." However, as previously discussed, obtaining a permit from Muslim neighbors is one of the procedures that poses a challenge. The study found that 45% supported the establishment of worship places of other religions, while 24.3% were neutral, and 19.2 % did not support it. In other words, two of ten Muslims in Indonesia did not support the establishment of worship places of other religions in their vicinity. This research also highlights that the older generation is less supportive of the construction of worship places of other religions than the younger generation.

It is evident that the constitutional provision differs from the

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[34] Hasanuddin Ali and Lilik Purwandi, *Indonesia Moslem Report 2019: The Challenges of Indonesian Moderate Moslem* (Jakarta: Alvara Research Center, 2019), 35-36.

actual situation on the ground in Indonesian society. The practice does not align with the theory, which presents a challenge for Indonesian Christians and other minority groups. Despite this, the Churches in Indonesia are committed to promoting harmonious coexistence with other religions. For instance, the Communion of Indonesian Churches (PGI) conducts an inter-faith dialogue with the Muslims, and other religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and local religion. However, this approach is not commonly adopted by other Protestant Churches, including Evangelical and Charismatic ones. The mainline Churches in Indonesia, which are the members of PGI, argue that the Muslims' misunderstandings about Christianity can be resolved through dialogue, which aims to clarify that Christianity is not a Western religion, building a church is not an attempt at Christianization, and the construction of churches is due to denominational, linguistic, and cultural preferences. These dialogues have helped improve Muslim understanding of Christianity. Nevertheless, achieving a harmonious life among followers of different religions requires time and concerted efforts.

The preservation of harmonious religious coexistence can be disrupted abruptly by radical groups, often fueled by political motivations. A recent incident that made national and international news was the burning of a Lutheran Church (HKI Church) in Aceh Singkil on August 13, 2015. The attack resulted in one fatality and five injured among the radical attackers and forced over 6,000 Christians refugees from Aceh province to flee to North Sumatera Province.[35] Following the burning of the HKI church in Sukamakmur village, the mobs proceeded to Dangguran village to burn another Lutheran church (Pakpak Church). However, the Pakpak Church members attempted to protect their church by pleading with the mobs not to burn it. When their pleas went unheeded, they reportedly shot one of the attackers, resulting in the attacker's death and escalating the already tense situation. The incident had the potential to provoke a religious conflict similar to what happened in Maluku Province in the 2000s. As a result, most of

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[35] "One Dead in Aceh Brawl Over Church Burning," *The Jakarta Post,* October 13, 2015. See http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/10/13/one-dead-aceh-brawl-over-church burning.html#sthash.4jnsRFll.dpuff. See also Imran, "Tragedi Aceh: Isak Tangis Kala Gereja Dibongkar" (The Crying out When the Churches were Demolished) in *Tempo*, October 20, 2015.

the local people, who were predominantly Christians, fled the Singkil District in North Sumatera Province for four days. Finally, it led the local people, mostly Christians, to move out from the Singkil District in Aceh Province for Manduamas District in North Sumatera for four days, from Tuesday to Friday, August 13-16, 2015. They only returned to Singkil Aceh after the government and security personnel, including the military and police, ensured their safety.

The Singkil Aceh refugees comprised Lutherans, Catholics, and Evangelicals, with the majority being Lutheran. Upon their arrival in Manduamas, they were warmly welcomed by their Christian brothers and sisters in the district. In this location, the Lutherans worked hand in hand with Catholics to assist the refugees by providing their accommodation, cooking their meals, and attending to their needs. Undoubtedly, the diaconal ministry performed by Lutheran Churches in Manduamas demonstrated their identities as a loving, caring, and cooperative Church.

However, the problem still remained intense for Christians after returning to Singkil.[36] The local government had demolished 8 Lutheran and 2 Catholic churches, stating that they would only grant permits for 10 out of the 23 churches belonging to all Christians in Singkil District, under pressure from their Muslim counterparts. This meant that 13 churches would have to be demolished, despite the fact that there was only one church that had been granted permission since before independence in 1945. These 9 churches, including the burnt church, had six months to fulfill the requirements according to the regulation in Aceh province. If they were unable to meet these requirements, their churches would also face demolition.

Rev. Ewen Silitonga, a Lutheran Pastor whose church was burnt on August 13, 2015, in Singkil Aceh, sent a message to the HKI Church Head Office informing them that they had gone to the local government office to apply a permit for their church, as they had 90 signatures from and 60 signatures from Muslim supporters, as required

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[36] Rev. Ewen Josua Silitonga, *Tragedi Intoleransi Singkil, Aceh* ("Intolerance Tragedy in Singkil, Aceh"). A paper report presented at the meeting of Church Leaders in North Sumatera, in Pematangsiantar, November 9, 2015, 1-6.

by the joint Minister regulations. However, the local government firmly told him that since they lived in Aceh, which has autonomous policies to apply the Muslim sharia, they had to follow the regulations of the Aceh Province. The number of signatures, that is, 150 signatures, must all come from Muslims. This Pastor felt weak and confused due to the difficult struggles he was facing to obtain the permit from the Muslim neighbors. As a result, until now, the members of the demolished churches in Singkil Aceh have to set up tents under the palm oil trees every Sunday as the places for Sunday services. The church building is not there but the communion of the believers keeps going on.

This case obviously indicates how difficult it is to establish a place of worship for Christians. The difficulties in Singkil Aceh are also discerned by the researchers[37] from Minister for Religion affairs by entitling their research "The Leaning Tower of the Four Basic Agreements of National Life in Aceh Singkil." The four basic agreements are Pancasila (Five Principles as the Foundation of Indonesian State), UUD 1945 (Indonesian Constitution), Menjaga NKRI (Defending the Indonesian State), and Bhineka Tunggal Ika (Unity and Diversity) that would be firmly followed by any Indonesian citizen. According to the Indonesian Constitution, everyone has his or her right to practice his or her religion or belief. Moreover, the United Convention says that one's right to practice his or her belief cannot be prevented by anyone. In short, the researchers underline that the Christians in Aceh Singkil are not supposed to face such religious discrimination that prevents them to build their places of worship.

## 5. Coping with Religious Challenges and Going Forward

In the face of difficult circumstances, how can Churches effectively express their existence and identity? As Christians, we may feel like strangers and aliens in our own country (cf. 1 Pet 2:11), especially

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[37] Adang Nofandi and Wakhid Sugiarto, "Miringnya Menara Empat Kesepakatan Dasar Hidup Kebangsaan di Aceh Singkil" (The Leaning Tower of the Four Basic Agreements of National Life in Aceh Singkil) in *Persoalan Pendirian Gereja di Indonesia* (The Problem of Building a Church in Indonesia), Ed. Wahyu Iryana (Jakarta: Litbangdiklat Press, 2020), 41-62.

when we move to other provinces where we are in the minority. There is a striking parallel between the challenges faced by the original recipients of 1 Peter in Asia Minor and those experienced by contemporary Christians in Indonesia. The wise counsel given to the readers of 1 Peter is relevant for Christians in Indonesia as well. They are encouraged to maintain harmonious relationships with followers of other religions, avoid violence, behave honorably, and resist evil desires.

In such situations, Churches must consider how to express their existence and identity. Christians in Indonesia, especially minorities in other provinces, face similar struggles as the recipients of 1 Peter in Asia Minor did in the first century. The wise admonition in 1 Peter, such as maintaining harmonious relationships with other religious followers, conducting oneself honorably, and abstaining from evil desires, are relevant for contemporary Christians in Indonesia.

The Church can express its presence and care for its neighbors by maintaining friendly relationships with them. This can include practicing choir sessions at appropriate times to avoid disturbing neighbors, using public transport or pedicabs to minimize noise and congestion, and supporting neighbors by contributing to public festivals. By doing so, the Church can be seen as inclusive community that cares for its neighbors, with the hope of receiving their care in return.

According to reports,[38] the hostility towards Church communities is partly due to their ignorance of their neighbors, which can be resolved through dialogue. Dialogue can eliminate negative characteristics such as exclusivism and a priori assumptions, leading to a harmonious relationship between the Church and its neighbors. Martin Lukito Sinaga[39] emphasizes the importance of religious moderation, which promotes

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[38] See Batara Sihombing, "Interreligious Relations In Indonesia". Unpublished Paper Presented on Pre-Conference Workshop, Luce Hall, 5 March 2009, New Haven-USA, Yale University by Yale Indonesia Forum.; "Penginjilan Di Masyarakat Majemuk" (Evangelism in Pluralistic Society) *Journal Teologi Tabernakel* 29, no. 1 (2008): 48-49.

[39] Martin Lukito Sinaga, "Moderasi Beragama: Sikap Dan Ekspresi Publik Muktahir Agama-Agama Di Indonesia" (Religious Moderation: A Public Presence and Expression of Religions in Contemporary Indonesia". *Journal Masyarakat Dan Budaya* 24, no. 3 (2020): 332-344.

respect for human dignity and the common good. Such moderation can guide religions to address social extremism and religious exclusivism more effectively.

With respect to this, the Churches in Indonesia should take the initiative to start dialogue with the followers of other religions in their respective contexts even if they are not all facing hostile treatments from their neighbors. The Churches' involvement in dialogue is understood as extending care towards their neighbors which is part of proclaiming the Gospel or the good news of Christ in this world. Evangelism or extending the Gospel is the main task of the Churches given by the Lord (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 25:45-49; Jn 20:21-22). The Gospel is the salvation in Jesus Christ (Rm 1:16-17; 1 Pet 1:12) that should be extended in holistic form or complete salvation: spiritual and physical, now and here, which sometimes take times to realize due to pietism traditions that focused only on spiritual salvation in heaven brought by Western missionaries to Indonesia in the past. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)[40] has formulated the complete Gospel to be applied in the Indonesian context, which emphasizes not only the proclamation of salvation but also the prophetic voices such as justice, equality, repentance, well-being, peaceful relationship, and so on. This principle aligns with the concept of salvation today voiced by the World Council of Churches (WCC)[41] in Bangkok in 1972, in which salvation is understood to redeem spirit and body, personal and society, human beings and other creation. Therefore, salvation is being felt and enjoyed in the here and now. This means that dialogue as a means of establishing religious harmonious coexistence could be understood as part of the work of extending the Christian Gospel.

The concept of religious dialogue in Indonesia was introduced by Mukti Ali,[42] the former Indonesian Minister for Religious Affairs, as

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[40] PGI, *Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja* (The Five Documents of the Oneness of the Church) (Jakarta: BPK, 1994), 41.

[41] James A. Scherer, "A Lutheran Perspective on Mission and Evangelism in the 20th Century," in *LWF Report* 11/12 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1982), 91.

[42] Mukti Ali, "Menatap Hari Depan Dengan Hidup Rukun Antar Umat Beragama" (Looking Forward to the Future by Living Out Harmonious Coexistence Between Different Religious Followers) in Keadilan Bagi Yang Lemah (Justice for

a means to foster peaceful relationships among  followers of different faiths. Ali proposed four types of dialogue to achieve this goal. The first type is the dialogue of life, which involves individuals of different religions living together harmoniously while practicing their respective beliefs. The second type is the dialogue of social cooperation, where people of different faiths collaborate on projects for the benefit of all, such as environmental cleanup or poverty eradication. The third type is the inter-monastic dialogue, where the leaders of Christian and Muslim faiths are invited to visit and stay in each other's monasteries or pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools).  This exchange is aimed at promoting appreciation and understanding between different religions. Finally, the dialogue of theological colloquium is intended to promote the role of all religions in achieving the Indonesian vision, with the state upholding the freedom of religion. This type of dialogue involves a discussion between different religions and the state to deepen their understanding of their respective responsibilities.

According to Mukti Ali, dialogue for harmonious coexistence is not optional but imperative. As previously discussed, Indonesian Christians should engage in dialogue willingly, responsibly, and honestly, as it is seen as an extension of the Gospel. In a pluralistic society, any a priori characteristics that seek to Christianize other religions must be eradicated, as they are not conducive to establishing religious harmonious coexistence. It is important to note that Hans Ucho[43] underscores the fact that religious harmonious coexistence does not preclude the task of evangelism. However, the goal of evangelism should not be to monopolize or dominate the beliefs of other religious followers in order to expand Christendom. Rather, the salvation of Christ is extended by exemplifying the life of Jesus Christ in one's own actions and behavior, inspiring others through the power of one's own example.

Exclusivism is another characteristic that is similar to the a priori characteristics discussed earlier, as it attempts to separate itself from its environment. In the context of religious pluralism, exclusivists, due to

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the Weak), eds. K.P. Erari et al. (Jakarta: BPK, 1995), 234-236.
    [43] Hanks Ucho, "Rethinking Mission in a Pluralistic World," in *Membangun Tubuh Kristus* (Building the Body of Christ), eds. J.R. Hutauruk et al. (P. Siantar: STT HKBP, 1996), 407.

their strong allegiance to their religions, often isolate themselves in order to avoid any interaction with followers of other religions. However, in today's globalized world, where people rely on one another in many aspects of life, and in light of the Church's mission to engage with people of different religions, exclusivism is not a suitable choice. According to Dieter Becker, [44] being human means understanding the world, fostering fellowship, and acknowledging one's tasks and responsibilities. Human beings were created as social beings (Gen 2:18) and are meant to establish relationships with other creatures and people. This view is shared by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF),[45] which emphasizes that "dialogue is deeply rooted in the nature of Christian faith. The Christian faith is based on communication, as it participates in the movement of communication in the nature of God." Thus, dialogue is at the heart of Christian faith.

In Singkil, Aceh Province, where churches have been demolished and burnt down, Christians have taken several actions to respond to the situation. Firstly, the Lutheran Communion in Indonesia held a meeting of Lutheran leaders to discuss how to handle the problems in Aceh Singkil.[46] The meeting stressed the importance of Christians avoiding any violent responses to the angry mobs who destroy their Church buildings and instead maintaining harmonious relationships with their Muslim neighbors. Secondly, the meeting recommended that all Church leaders in North Sumatera write a letter to the Indonesian President to request assurance that Christians in Singkil, Aceh can build their places of worship as Indonesian citizens. Additionally, Church leaders were encouraged to call on Christian politicians and legislators to review the regulations pertaining to church construction in Aceh Province. Thirdly, the Lutheran Churches are exploring the possibility of sharing a Church building among 3-5 Churches for Sunday worship. This type of cooperation has been successfully implemented by Lutheran Churches in Java Island where it is challenging to construct churches.

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[44] Dieter Becker, "Finding the Truth by Living Together the Religious Dialogue with Strangers," in *Membangun Tubuh Kristus*, eds. J.R. Hutauruk et al. (P. Siantar: STT HKBP, 1996), 329.

[45] J. Paul Rajashekar (ed.), "Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology," in *LWF Report 23/24* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation,1988), 181.

[46] These leaders meeting have been done twice, October 26 and November 9, 2015. This meeting is also supported by the Communion of Indonesian Churches in North Sumatera.

In essence, the Churches in Indonesia, as the body of Christ, are called to faithfully follow Jesus Christ in their own context. It is Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, who has placed Indonesian Christians living in Indonesia with its various struggles. Martin Luther asserts that true theology is the theology of the cross (LW 31:40). Therefore, Indonesian Christians ought to faithfully follow Christ and discern the works of God through suffering and the cross. The mission of the Church, which includes living in harmony with non-believers, peacefully proclaiming the Gospel of peace, kindly administering the Sacraments, wisely contributing to nation-building, and faithfully educating Church members are practical tasks that should be carried out with integrity.

## 6. Conclusion

The receivers of 1 Peter, who resided in Asia Minor, were labeled as aliens and strangers in their community. As member of the early Church, they were subjected to persecution and hostility due to their faith. In light of their suffering, the author of the paraenetic letter sought to strengthen and console the recipients so that they could live out their faith among the Gentiles. Today, Indonesian Christians face similar challenges as a religious minority in predominantly Muslims areas when seeking to establish a place of worship. To address these difficulties, Indonesian Christians are advised to maintain a harmonious relationship with adherents of other religions and to exhibit exemplary conduct that might persuade their Muslim neighbors to appreciate the necessity of having a place of worship. In this manner, the Christian community can communicate its presence through positive interaction with non-Christians.

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# Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine: Before, During, and the Morning After

*Rey Ty*[1]

## Abstract

*Russia's special military operation has been going on since February 24, 2022, though armed hostilities have started since 2014 and Russia's mistrust of NATO commenced right after the end of the Cold War since 1991. The world is faced with the problem of having one-sided explanations regarding the origin of the conflict. This paper queried the following issues: What are the origins in current history of the armed hostilities in Ukraine? How do key players react to end Russia's special military operation? The purpose was to discuss the key events of the special military actions and the ways in which the key players seek to end it. When related literature was reviewed, most articles and news coverage revealed only one perspective and took sides on the conflict. Thus, this paper fills the gap by providing alternative responses. This qualitative case study research design uses an inductive approach, for which data collection involves combing through contending views on the Ukraine crisis. The time frame starts from the current historical background to the present. News articles were analyzed. From the data analysis, codes were organized, from which themes were constructed. A taxonomy of the divergent responses to the research questions was developed. The study in this paper was conducted by categorizing the divergent news articles based on their built-in biases. Metatheory of the data which presented divergent discourses were analyzed through content analysis. Based on the findings, there are conflicting narratives regarding the Ukraine crisis, its causes, current situation, and the aftermath of the armed conflict.*

**Keywords**: *North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Peace, Russia, Special Military Operation, Ukraine*

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[1] ***Rey Ty*** is a faculty member in the Department of Peace Studies, Payap University, Thailand.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Statement of the Problem

This paper addresses several problems. Firstly, the current Ukraine crisis has been going on since February 2022, although the impetus started when NATO reneged on its promise at the end of the Cold War not to expand eastward[2] and the armed hostilities against Ukrainian-born ethnic Russians in the Donbas region, which broke the promises of Minsk Agreement.[3] Secondly, there are conflicting explanations regarding the origins of the conflict. Thirdly, the current dominant political, economic, and cultural world system is struggling to maintain the status quo.

## 1.2. Filling the Gap

Upon reviewing the related literature, most articles reveal only one dominant or hegemonic view and take sides in the conflict. Most news coverage only portrays one side of the conflict. Emerging powers are raising their voices of discontent, as the Global South countries are starting to air out their grievances. Thus, this paper fills the gap by providing multiple concurrent divergent discourses from all sides of the conflict. We are in for a lot of disgruntlement in the world as we know it.

## 1.3 Research Questions

This paper responded to the following research questions:

1. What are the origins in current history of the armed hostilities in Ukraine?
2. How do key players react to Russia's special military operation?

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[2] George Washington University, "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard | National Security Archive," 2023, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early.

[3] Al Jazeera English, "Ukraine-Russia Crisis: What Is the Minsk Agreement?" February 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/9/what-is-the-minsk-agreement-and-why-is-it-relevant-now.

## 1.4. Purpose of the Study

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, the purpose of this study is not only to describe the origin of the special military operation and the ways in which each party to the conflict deal with the armed hostilities. Mainstream news only promotes more war to counter war. As a conflict and peace scholar and researcher, the author goes beyond being descriptive in this article, considering that this author provided research-based and empirically supported prescriptive approaches towards the resolution of the conflict.

## 1.5. Coverage of the Study

The scope of this article is the study of the Ukraine crisis itself only. It is limited to investigating the communication and discourses of the major powers in the conflict, all of whom are Christians, as well as the voices from the Global South, who hail from diverse faiths. This article deals neither with other matters nor other actors. See Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Scope, Limitation, and Delimitation of the Study

## 2.  Literature Review

After reviewing the literature, the author conducted the study by categorizing the divergent news articles based on their built-in biases and findings. A seminal work on writing qualitative literature review

indicated that among the different forms of synthesizing literature review is metatheory.[4] In this article, a qualitative metatheory integrated the data about the Ukraine crisis which presented divergent discourses that were analyzed by way of content analysis. For this article, content analysis of the narratives about the Ukraine crisis involves: 1) data identification and collation; 2) definition of the categories; 3) development of a set of conceptual codes; 4) relational or thematic coding; 5) checking accuracy and generalizability through member checking; and 6) narrative interpretation.[5]

To conduct thematic analysis of the news coverage regarding the Ukraine crisis, the follow steps were undertaken: 1) familiarity with the data from multiple sources; 2) generation of preliminary codes that describe the content of the news items; 3) combing through and searching for trends, patterns, or themes from the data that were coded; 4) collating codes with supporting information; 5) grouping the codes into themes; 6) reviewing and refining the themes as necessary; 7) identification and naming of the final themes; and 8) narrative of the thematic analysis.[6] Based on the findings of this research work, there are multiple, even conflicting, narratives regarding the Ukraine crisis, its causes, current situation, and the aftermath of the armed conflict. From the above exercise, the divergent thematic narratives about the Ukraine crisis that emerged were categorized to include mainstream news, alternative news, and onsite grassroots journalism.  See Figure 2 below.

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[4] Richard J. Torraco, "Writing Integrative Literature Reviews: Guidelines and Examples," *Human Resource Development Review* 4, no. 3 (September 2005): 356–67, https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283.
[5] Johnny Saldaña and Matt Omasta, *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C., and Melbourne: Sage, 2018).
[6] Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, Third Edition (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C., and Melbourne: Sage, 2017).

Alternative
News

Mainstream
News

On-the-Ground
Grassroots
Public Witness
Journalism
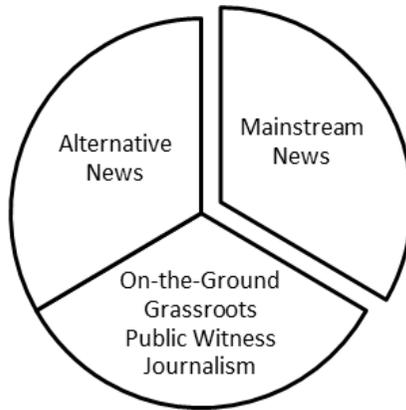
Figure 2: Qualitative Metatheory of One Reality, Three Contending Narratives

## 3. Methodology

The author utilized a qualitative research method aimed at describing the different views based on the research data and research subjects about what has been happening in the current setting in Ukraine.[7] The research dealt with a within-case analysis, focusing on one specific issue, while locating key observations from within this issue.[8] It involves an in-depth case study without the use of statistical analysis to gather data for the findings.[9] This qualitative case study[10] research design uses an inductive approach, for which data collection involves searching for and combing through divergent and contending reportage and views. Case study research deals with the investigation of

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[7] David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 5th Ed (London, U.K. and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017).

[8] Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[9] Geoffrey Marczyk, David DeMatteo, and David Festinger, *Essentials of Research Design and Methodology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005).

[10] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2007); John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (London: SAGE Publications, 2018).

a real-life present-day situation.[11] The time frame starts from the current historical background to the present. The in-depth case study method was utilized with a view to probe intensively and deepen the analysis and understanding of the phenomena[12] related to the present.

To ensure the accuracy of the qualitative research data, multiple sources were used for triangulation. In the data collection stage, information on the phenomenon of armed hostilities and the subjects involved in the conflict were identified. The author is proficient in English, French, and Spanish. To gather data, news articles about the Ukraine crisis were collected in English and French, as evidenced in the References section. However, the author was unable to find news sources from alternative and citizen journalism in the Spanish language due to limitations in the Spanish language news, which largely repeated mainstream news that supported pro-NATO war efforts in Ukraine. The data was gathered through analysis of news articles, features, and editorials, as well as through direct communication with Ukrainians during and after the author's visit to Ukraine, exchanges in social media, and news from sources with different biases. The use of multiple sources for data collection enabled triangulation, which served as a validation strategy for the research.

The researcher in this study acted as a public witness by engaging in informal dialogue with Ukrainians in Ukraine, and employed textual analysis and subjective reflexivity to collect and analyze data regarding the Ukraine crisis and its emerging themes. As quantitative data analysis was not a focus of this paper, the researcher used qualitative data analysis techniques, including memoing, reviewing personal summary notes, and creating visual representations of conflict analysis in figures and tables.[13] Through this process, codes were organized and themes were constructed from various discourses and narratives.[14] This enabled

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[11] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2003).

[12] C. R Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, Second Revised Edition (New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, 2014).

[13] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*.

[14] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

the researcher to detect patterns, identify surprises, classify subjects involved in the armed conflict, compare and contrast divergent groups, and construct a model. The analysis and interpretation were then relayed back to the research participants to obtain validation.[15] In the end, the researcher developed a taxonomy of the divergent responses to the research questions.

The author of this article visited Ukraine for approximately a month before the onset of the Ukraine crisis and witnessed firsthand the effects of recent history on the lives of Ukrainians, as well as the country's economy, politics, and culture. The author traveled to several destinations, including Kiev, Lvov, Odesa, Dnieper, and Chernigov, where he stayed with locals, allowing for meaningful dialogue about current historical events, politics, and the general state of affairs in Ukraine today.  See Figure 3 below.
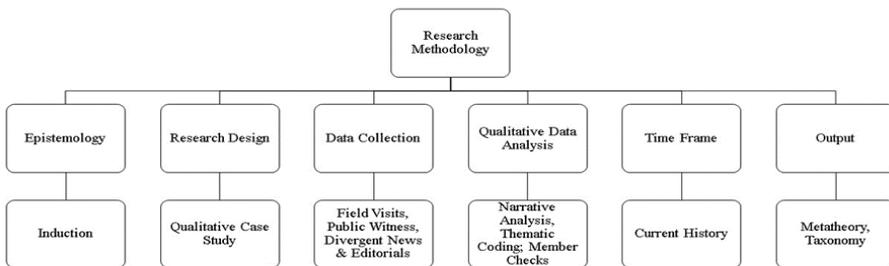


Figure 3: Research Methodology

The author has engaged in member check and peer debriefing in order to ensure the accuracy of the findings,[16] based on the accounts of the Ukrainians with whom he has conversed not only during his visit to different cities in Ukraine but also after leaving Ukraine. Essential to data collection and data analysis, member checking was an ongoing strategy

[15] John Adams et al., *Research Methods for Graduate Business and Social Science Students* (New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2007), https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132108498.

[16] Leonard A. Jason and David S. Glenwick, eds., *Handbook of Methodologicla Approaches to Community-Based Reseaerch: Qualitative, Quantitative, Amd Mixed Methods* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

of verification for descriptive and interpretive validity.[17] The purpose of member check in process through conversations was to ensure rigor in analysis and interpretation of the data collected[18] while the author of this article was still in Ukraine. In addition, terminal member checking was conducted with Ukrainians for the optimization of the validation of the findings for reliability[19] when the author was already back in his academic institution outside of Ukraine. Various forms of communication were employed for this purpose, including electronic mail and social media platforms such as Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp, among others. In both instances, both onsite in Ukraine and offsite outside of Ukraine, in consultation with the Ukrainian respondents, member checking was able to show the accuracy and authenticity of the different views[20] of the Ukrainians who engaged in dialogue with the author of this article. In this way, the qualitative data analysis was accurate and truthful to their multiple insights regarding the situation in Ukraine.[21] The Ukrainians, from whom the contextual data were investigated and gathered, have clarified, reconfirmed, and validated the data collected and analyzed.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Contending Narratives

This section responds to Research Question 1: What are the contending narratives about the origins of the Ukraine crisis? There are two major types of journalism, as far as the Ukraine crisis is concerned.

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[17] Lisa M. Given, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Two Volume Set (London: Sage Publications, Inc., 2008).

[18] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017).

[19] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, "Establishing Dependability and Confirmability in Naturalistic Inquiry through an Audit" (Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, N.Y., 1982), 31, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED216019.pdfhttps://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED216019.pdf; Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *The Constructivist Credo* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, Inc, 2013).

[20] Given, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*.

[21] Timothy C. Guetterman et al., "Contemporary Approaches to Mixed Methods--Grounded Theory Research: A Field-Based Analysis," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 13, no. 2 (2017): 1–17.

There is war journalism and there is peace journalism. Here are the criteria for classifying news as mainstream, alternative, and grassroots journalism. Mainstream news primarily promotes the war efforts in Ukraine and is dominated by large news agencies, television networks, and major newspapers. Alternative journalism covers news that is typically not featured in mainstream media and is not widely circulated in traditional television networks or newspapers. Instead, it is often disseminated through social media and other online platforms, due to the limitations imposed by shadow banning. Grassroots citizen journalism involves individuals who are on the ground and witness events as they unfold, documenting their experiences through text messages and video clips. This type of journalism is particularly relevant in areas affected by Russia's special military operation. See Figure 4 below.

| Journalism | | |
|---|---|---|
| Anti-Peace, Pro-War: | Pro-Peace, Anti-War: | |
| Mainstream: Both Parties in the U.S. | Alternative: Bridging the Left-Right Divide | On-the-Ground Citizen Public Witness Journalism |
| ABC, BBC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NATO, NBC, New York Times, U.S. Department of State, Washington Post | Aaron Maté, Ann Wright, Antiwar.com, Ben Norton, CCTV, Clare Daly, Code Pink, Douglas McGregor, George Galloway, Gravitas, Interplanetary Television, Jackson Hinkle, Jeffrey Sachs, Jill Stein, Jimmy Dore, Kim Iverson, Max Blumenthal, Medea Benjamin, Mick Wallace, Palki Sharma, Pope Francis, Rage against the War Machine, Richard Boyd Barrett, Ron Paul, Scott Ritter, T-House, TFI Global, Tucker Carlson, Tulsi Gabbard, Vatican News, Yurii Sheliazhenko, WCC, World BEYOND War, WION | Public Witness: People on the ground sharing photos, texts, and video stories |

Figure 4: Qualitative Metatheory of Journalism Calling for War and Peace

The mainstream news media outlets in NATO countries, Ukraine, and Russia are actively promoting the war narrative, with each side portraying itself as the protagonist and the other as the antagonist. On the other hand, peace scholars and peace activists are advocating for peace journalism and urging an end to the armed hostilities. Additionally, many independent journalists, politicians, organizations, retired military members, and academics are openly opposing NATO's

efforts in fueling the conflict in Ukraine, but their social media presence is often shadow-banned.

Individual politicians and retired military personalities who oppose NATO's war efforts in Ukraine include Ann Wright, Clare Daly, Douglas McGregor, George Galloway, Jill Stein, Mick Wallace, Richard Boyd Barrett, Ron Paul, Scott Ritter, and Tulsi Gabbard, many of whom are involved in the anti-war movement.[22] They criticize NATO for its double standards in dealing with Ukraine and Russia, not looking themselves in the mirror in all the NATO warmongering[23] and interventions around the world.[24] Independent journalists who are anti-war include Aaron Maté, Ben Norton, Jackson Hinkle of The Dive, Jimmy Dore, Kim Iverson,[25] Max Blumenthal, and Tucker Carlson. Some prominent organizations that are anti-NATO war efforts in Ukraine include Code Pink and World Beyond War.

The Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches,[26] representing Protestants and Orthodox Christians, have both called for a ceasefire and peace talks to immediately end the conflict in Ukraine. The Churches have emphasized the need for diplomacy to resolve the armed conflict. Pope Francis, as the head of the Roman Catholic Church, has made a plea to end the senseless, absurd, and cruel armed conflict in Ukraine. Appealing for a ceasefire,[27] Pope Francis called for concrete

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[22] Countercurrents Collective, "March Against the War Machine: Hundreds Join Anti-War Rally In Washington DC," February 20, 2023, https://countercurrents. org/2023/02/march-against-the-war-machine-hundreds-join-anti-war-rally-in-washington-dc/; Helsinki Times, "Anti-War Protests in Washington, Munich and Helsinki," February 22, 2023, https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/world-int/23014-anti-war-protests-in-washington-munich-and-helsinki.html.

[23] Clare Daly, "Clare Daly (@ClareDalyMEP)," Twitter, 2023, https://twitter.com/ClareDalyMEP.

[24] Richard Boyd Barrett, "Irish MP Richard Boyd Barrett Calls out the Double Standards on Ukraine and Palestine," YouTube, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mu2uI0gZD-c&ab_channel=MiddleEastEye.

[25] Kim Iverson, "Kim Iversen Show," YouTube, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoJTOwZxbvq8Al8Qat2zgTA.

[26] World Council of Churches, "WCC Convenes Roundtable on Ukraine, Calls for Diplomacy Instead of Threats, Dialogue Instead of Confrontation," March 30, 2022, https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-convenes-roundtable-on-ukraine-calls-for-diplomacy-instead-of-threats-dialogue-instead-of-confrontation.

[27] Philip Pullella, "Pope Urges Ceasefire in Ukraine Ahead of Invasion

measures to terminate the hostilities, and appeals "for concrete efforts to end the conflict, to reach a ceasefire and to start peace negotiations."[28]

However, the mainstream media often criticize and discredit individuals who advocate for peace. Pro-peace advocates are frequently labeled as being anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian, Kremlin agents, or Russian stooges.[29]  Peace champions argue that the only people who benefit from wars are politicians and the military-industrial complex.[30] In 2021 alone, before Russia's special military operation, weapons manufacturers amassed US$768 billion and the Congress of the United States approved $40 billion for the war efforts with a large portion going to the arms manufacturers.[31] Clearly, the military-industrial complex, which is composed of armed companies and the ministries or departments of defense  has benefitted and profited from the Ukraine crisis.  Since Russia's special military operation, the shares of Thales, BAE Systems, and Lockheed Martin, and Northrop Grumman have skyrocketed.[32]

Anniversary," Reuters, February 22, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/pope-deplores-absurd-cruel-ukraine-war-urges-ceasefire-negotiations-2023-02-22/.

[28] Vatican News, "Pope Francis Appeals for End to 'Absurd and Cruel' Ukraine War," February 22, 2023, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-02/pope-francis-prays-for-war-torn-ukraine.html.

[29] Clare Daly, "As the Invasion of Ukraine Escalates into a Wider Horror, Practically Nobody in the #EU Is Doing Anything to Prevent It.," Facebook, October 7, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1248759872555595.

[30] Sergei Klebnikov, "War Stocks Are Surging as Russia-Ukraine Conflict Rages On: Lockheed Martin, Northrop Up 20%," Forbes, March 4, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/sergeiklebnikov/2022/03/04/war-stocks-are-surging-as-russia-ukraine-conflict-rages-on-lockheed-martin-northrop-up-20/?sh=1cff735c43f0.

[31] Paula Reisdorf, "Weapons Makers Profit Handsomely off Ukraine War, Three Months After Russian Invasion," Corp Watch, May 24, 2022, https://www.corpwatch.org/article/weapons-makers-profit-handsomely-ukraine-war-three-months-after-russian-invasion.

[32] Gravitas, "Gravitas: American Defence Companies Are Profiting from Ukraine War," YouTube, nd, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDbzqdfUemQ&ab_channel=WION; Alexa Phillips, "Ukraine War: How Weapons Makers Are Profiting from the Conflict," Sky News, June 10, 2022, https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-how-weapons-makers-are-profiting-from-the-conflict-12624574.2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDbzqdfUemQ&ab_channel=WION; Alexa Phillips, \\uc0\\u8220{}Ukraine War: How Weapons Makers Are Profiting from the Conflict,\\uc0\\u8221{} Sky News, June 10, 2022, https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-how-weapons-makers-are-profiting-from-the-conflict-12624574.

Ukrainians were divided on whether to align more closely with the West or with Russia.[33] The Maidan revolution of 2014 was a significant factor in the escalation of the conflict in and outside of Ukraine. The protests started in November 2013 and continued until 2014. According to publicly available videos, photos, and leaked conversations, Nuland played a major role in supporting the protests and the subsequent change of government in Ukraine.[34] In 2014 and 2015, BBC News reported on the participation of neo-Nazis and other far-right groups in the Maidan protests, with photos, audio files, and videos.[35] The protests turned violent when supporters of Nazi Stepan Bandera, neo-Nazis, and other far-right groups resorted to physical violence. Neo-Nazis who were proud of their use of physical violence confirmed during a public talk in a video that "if it wasn't for us, Maidan would have been a gay parade."[36] The neo-Nazis committed numerous acts of terror and violence, including the burning alive of around 42 people trapped at a trade union building in Odessa by the right-wing *Pravy Sektor* (Right Sector).[37] However, since Russia's special military

[33] Per Anders Rudling, "Between Lenin and Bandera: Decommunization and Multivocality in (Post)Euromaidan Ukraine," *Nordisk Østforum* 35 (2021): 91, https://doi.org/10.23865/noros.v35.3115.

[34] Rudling, "Between Lenin and Bandera"; Pearls and Irritations, John Menadue's Public Policy Journal, "US Hypocrisy and the Role of Victoria Newland in the Maidan Coup," *Pearls and Irritations* (blog), March 4, 2022, https://johnmenadue.com/ted-galen-carpenter-americas-ukraine-hypocrisy-and-the-role-of-victoria-newland-a-key-biden-adviser/.

[35] BBC, "BBC Documentary Nazism in Ukraine," March 28, 2022, https://web.facebook.com/MiskaBlueEyed/videos/492864189138979; BBC, "Torch-lit March in Kiev by Ukraine's Right-wing Svoboda Party," 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHhGEiwCHZE; BBC Newsnight, "The Far-Right Group Threatening to Overthrow Ukraine's Government," July 23, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEKQsnRGv7s&ab_channel=BBCNewsnight; Stern, "Ukraine's Revolution and the Far Right," BBC New*s*, March 7, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26468720; BBC Newsnight, "The Far-Right Group Threatening to Overthrow Ukraine's Government," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEKQsnRGv7s&ab_channel=BBCNewsnight.

[36] World News, "Maidan Would've Been A 'Gay Parade' If Not for Nazi Influence," March 4, 2022, https://article.wn.com/view/2022/03/04/maidan_would_x27ve_been_a_gay_parade_if_not_for_nazi_influen/; *Ukraine Neo-Nazis Infiltrate EVERY LEVEL Of Military & Government*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfaAyiP8Wuc.

[37] BBC News, "How Did Odessa's Fire Happen?" May 4, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27275383.

operation, the BBC has not reported on the presence and actions of neo-Nazis in Ukraine, but some individuals have reposted BBC news about Nazism in Ukraine on social media.

Fighting erupted in Donbas between ethnic Russians and the security forces of Ukraine. In 2014 and 2015, the Minsk Agreements II were signed to bring an end to the armed hostilities, but they failed to achieve their goal.[38] According to the 2001 census, ethnic Ukrainians constituted 25.1% of the urban and 5.6% of the rural population of Ukraine,[39] while ethnic Russians comprised 17.3% of the entire population.[40] The armed conflict targeted ethnic Russians, further prompting them to leave. The 2019 census revealed that only 8.3% of the population identified as ethnic Russians.

There were three conflicting narratives about what happened during the Maidan protests. According to one view, it was a democratic color revolution. Another perspective suggests that the Azov neo-Nazis were responsible for instigating and carrying out violence during the protests.[41] A third narrative suggests that foreign intervention played a role in the coup that took place in relation to the 2014 Maidan incident, involving covert operations.[42]

With respect to the Ukraine crisis itself, there are three equally valid discourses. *Realpolitik* or power politics[43] explain the actions of

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[38] Al Jazeera English, "Ukraine-Russia Crisis: What Is the Minsk Agreement?" https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/9/what-is-the-minsk-agreement-and-why-is-it-relevant-now.

[39] Encyclopedia of Ukraine, *Russians in Ukraine*, 2023, https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CR%5CU%5CRussiansinUkraine.htm.

[40] CIA, "Ukraine: Country Summary," in *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023), https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ukraine/summaries.

[41] Valeurs Actuelles, "Crimes d'Azov En Ukraine: Le Quai d'Orsay Est Au Courant," Facebook, May 13, 2022, https://web.facebook.com/valeursactuelles.page/videos/1063213467879712.

[42] CSPAN, "Senator Rubio Questions Undersecretary Nuland Over Biolabs in Ukraine," March 8, 2022, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5005520/senator-rubio-questions-undersecretary-nuland-biolabs-ukraine.

[43] Joshua Goldstein and J. C. Pevehouse, *International Relations* (New

NATO and Russia. M*oralpolitik* or political idealism asserts that, based on the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs encoded in the Treaty of Westphalia[44] embedded in the general principles of public international law, Ukraine has the right to choose its destiny.[45] Here are the three contending narratives regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. First, NATO claims that the invasion was unprovoked and a singular event. Second, Ukraine argues that it has the right to self-determination, including the right to join military alliances like NATO. Third, Russia has repeatedly expressed its concerns to NATO member countries since the end of the Cold War that the expansion of NATO eastward is unacceptable and poses a threat to its security.[46]

During the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact, which was set up on May 14, 1955, was the mutual defense alliance of the Eastern bloc under the umbrella of the former Soviet Union.[47] NATO was the military alliance of the Western bloc on both sides of the Atlantic. In December 1989, M. Gorbachev and G.H.W. Bush declared at the Malta Summit that the Cold War has ended.[48] Thereafter, the Warsaw Pact was disbanded on

York: Pearson-Longman, 2017); James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*, 5th ed (New York: Longman, 2001).

[44] Richard Cavendish, "The Treaty of Westphalia," *History Today* 48, no. 10 (October 1998), https://www.historytoday.com/archive/months-past/treaty-westphalia.

[45] Steve Smith, John Baylis, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 9th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Daniel A. Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud, eds., *Ethics in Action: The Ethical Challenges of International Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Douglas W. Simon, Joseph Romance, and Neal Riemer, *The Challenge of Politics: An Introduction to Political Science* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2018); Claudia Fuentes-Julio and Raslan Ibrahim, "A Human Rights Approach to Conflict Resolution," *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2019): 261–73.

[46] Democracy Now, "Ex-U.S. Ambassador to USSR: Ukraine Crisis Stems Directly from Post-Cold War Push to Expand NATO," February 17, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5F0JSy-HHY.

[47] NATO, "What Was the Warsaw Pact?" 2023, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_138294.htm.

[48] Center for Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "End of the Cold War: A Visual Guide to the Cold War," 2023, https://coldwar.unc.edu/theme/end-of-the-cold-war/.

February 25, 1991[49] with the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).[50] With the signing of the original Minsk Agreement on December 8, 1991, "the USSR has ceased to exist."[51]  B. Yeltsin set up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which completed the end of the Cold War.[52] For this reason, there was no raison d'être for NATO hereinafter. On February 9, 1990, then US Secretary of State James Baker told Gorbachev that NATO would move "not one inch eastward," followed by "a cascade of assurances"; see memoranda and other documents stored in the National Security Archives of George Washington University.[53] According to declassified documents at the National Security Archive of George Washington University, "Baker, Bush, Genscher, Kohl, Gates, Mitterrand, Thatcher, Hurd, Major, and Woerner" gave "security assurances against expansion to Soviet leaders."[54]

Yet, since 1990, NATO has undergone significant expansion, growing from 12 member countries to 30 through eight rounds of expansion.[55] The largest increase in membership occurred in 2004 when Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the alliance.[56] Maps comparing NATO expansion since 1990 with Russia's growing isolation and encirclement in Europe highlight the alliance's progression toward Russia's borders.[57] The perceived threat

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[49] NATO, "What Was the Warsaw Pact?"

[50] Office of the Historian of the Department of State, "Milestones: 1953–1960," 2023, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/warsaw-treaty.

[51] Izvestiia, "Minsk Agreement," Seventeen Moments in Soviet History (blog), September 1, 2015, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1991-2/the-end-of-the-soviet-union/the-end-of-the-soviet-union-texts/minsk-agreement/.

[52] Atomic Archive, "The End of the Cold War," 2023, https://www.atomicarchive.com/history/cold-war/page-22.html.

[53] George Washington University, "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early.

[54] George Washington University.

[55] NATO, "NATO - Topic: Enlargement and Article 10," July 6, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm.

[56] AP News, "Timeline of NATO Expansion since 1949," May 10, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-world-war-ii-sweden-finland-240d97572cc783b2c7ff6e7122dd72d2.

[57] Ted Kemp, "Two Maps Show NATO's Growth and Russia's Isolation

to national security grew more acute as NATO courted Ukraine to join and as ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine were treated poorly. These factors contributed to Russia's heightened concerns and eventual boiling point, as it viewed NATO expansion as a significant national security threat.

In December 2021, Moscow released details of its proposals, requesting that the US and NATO provide assurances that Ukraine would not join the alliance.[58] However, both the US and NATO rejected the proposal.[59] After Ukraine violated the Minsk Agreements, Russia recognized the people's republics of Donetsk and Lugansk on February 21, 2022, and established a friendship and mutual security agreement with them. Russia then launched a special military operation against Ukraine.[60] Thus, NATO's possible expansion to Ukraine, which is on Russia's border, from Russia's point of view, provoked Russia's special military operation, which was to thwart NATO's containment of Russia. Russia claims to be acting in self-defense and for its security interest.[61] The stakes are highest at the Ukraine-Russia border.[62]

The eastern part of Ukraine and Crimea are both important to Russia for several reasons. Ethnic Russians in Crimea and the Donbas and other parts of eastern Ukraine are Russophone. Russia claims it is protecting ethnic Russians in the eastern Ukraine from Russo-phobic persecution[63]

since 1990," CNBC, May 19, 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/19/two-maps-show-natos-growth-and-russias-growing-isolation-since-1990.html.

[58] Patrick Reevell, "Russia Makes Sweeping Demands for Security Guarantees from US amid Ukraine Tensions," ABC News, December 18, 2021, https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-makes-sweeping-demands-security-guarantees-us-amid/story?id=81821816.

[59] DW, "U.S., NATO Respond to Russia's Security Demands," January 26, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/us-nato-send-written-response-on-russias-security-demands/a-60567276.

[60] DW, "Russia Recognizes Independence of Ukraine Separatist Regions," February 21, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/russia-recognizes-independence-of-ukraine-separatist-regions/a-60861963.

[61] Benjamin Abelow, *How the West Brought War to Ukraine: Understanding How U.S. and NATO Policies Led to Crisis, War, and the Risk of Nuclear Catastrophe* (Great Barrington, MA: Siland Press, 2022).

[62] Kathy Kelly, "The Stakes Are Enormously High Along the Russian Border," Common Dreams, June 24, 2016, https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/06/24/stakes-are-enormously-high-along-russian-border.

[63] "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia," Council on

and the right of self-determination of the people in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.[64] Thus, Russia claims that it is its "duty to protect these people."[65] In addition, for Russia, the Donbas region is a key strategic, political, and economic location,[66] while Crimea is an important strategic defense area.[67] Crimea was the crown jewel of the Russian Empire[68] and has Sevastopol, as a natural harbor, which is the sole deep-wart port on the Black Sea coast of Russia.[69] Based on the foregoing reasons, the Ukraine case is complex and has several causes.[70] See Figure 5 below.
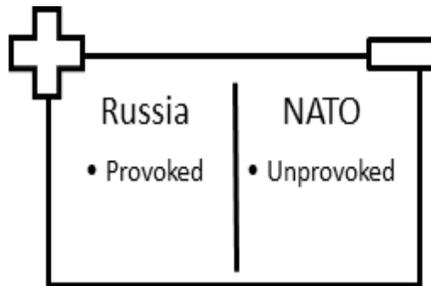


Figure 5: How NATO and Russia View Russia's Special Military Operation

Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia.

[64] Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six Years after Illegal Annexation," Brookings Institution, March 17, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/17/crimea-six-years-after-illegal-annexation/.

[65] Council on Foreign Relations, "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia," February 14, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia.

[66] Holly Ellyatt, "Battle for Donbas: 3 Reasons Why Russia Is Shifting Its War Machine to East Ukraine," CNBC, April 19, 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/04/19/why-does-russia-want-the-donbas-region-so-much.html.

[67] Institute for the Study of War, "Ukraine Conflict Updates," August 15, 2022, http://dev-isw.bivings.com/.

[68] Michael Drummond, "Ukraine War: Why Is Crimea so Important to Russia and Can Zelenskyy's Troops Recapture It," Sky News, November 23, 2022, https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-why-is-crimea-so-important-to-russia-and-can-zelenskyys-troops-recapture-it-12753182.

[69] Peter Rutland, "Why Crimea Is the Key to the Ukraine War," Responsible Statecraft, October 18, 2022, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/10/18/why-crimea-is-the-key-to-the-ukraine-war/.

[70] Executive Intelligence Review, "Interview Lt. Col. Ralph Bosshard (Ret.) An Expert Military View of Why NATO and Russia Are at War," June 10, 2022, https://larouchepub.com/other/interviews/2022/4923-an_expert_military_view_of_why.html.

The coverage of the Ukraine crisis can be viewed from three different perspectives. Narrative 1 is dominated by mainstream journalism, which is pro-war and prevalent in corporate or state news outlets in NATO countries, Ukraine, and Russia. These outlets often promote an aggressive narrative, urging conflict. Narrative 2 is represented by anti-war alternative journalism, which advocates for an immediate cessation of hostilities. Narrative 2 has supporters across the political spectrum, ranging from the right to the left. Both peace scholars and peace activists maintain that "there are no angels"[71] in the Ukraine crisis, pointing out that the leadership in NATO, Ukraine, and Russia is responsible for the conflict's failure.[72]

Narrative 3 is centered around first-hand, eyewitness accounts. Those who are physically present in Ukraine describe their experiences based on what they directly witness, hear, touch, and feel as the events unfold in real-time. This group includes a diverse range of individuals such as Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees who livestream videos on social media to document their treatment as they flee to other countries for safety, as well as independent journalists who remain in the conflict zones to document the situation.

Regarding news coverage, there are three distinct perspectives: mainstream news, alternative news, and grassroots eyewitness reports. Mainstream news in the West typically blames Russia for the conflict, while Russian media tends to blame NATO.[73] Alternative news outlets emphasize that the crisis could and should have been avoided, with all parties bearing responsibility,[74] and they often focus on peace

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[71] Yurii Sheliazhenko, "The Ukraine Crisis: U.S.A. and NATO vs. Russia," ed. R. Ty (Kyiv, Ukraine and Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University, 2022).

[72] Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Ukrainian Political Sociologist: This Is a War of Leadership Failures at Many Levels," Courthouse News Service, May 13, 2022.

[73] Countercurrents, "Geopolitical Update: The Old World Is Over, Says Putin," June 20, 2022, https://countercurrents.org/2022/06/geopolitical-update-the-old-world-is-over-says-putin/.

[74] Eric Denécé, "The Ukraine Conflict Could Have and Should Have Been Avoided," in *Proceedings of the Conference: US and European Military and Security Experts Warn: The Insanity of Politicians Threatens Nuclear War* (Schiller Institute, 2022), https://larouchepub.com/other/2022/4922-the_ukraine_conflict_could_hav.html.

journalism.[75] Eyewitness grassroots reports, on the other hand, highlight the prevalence of fake news and propaganda from all sides,[76] including Ukrainian refugees, foreign students, mercenaries, and international volunteers who fight with the Ukrainian military.[77]

Some news argue that the Russia-Ukraine war is a proxy war between western powers on the one hand and Russia on the other hand.[78] This is especially true as Ukraine uses weapons from NATO countries.[79]

One year after Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), a pro-European Union (EU) and pro-NATO elite thinktank funded by several EU member countries, conducted a survey which revealed that Western countries are becoming increasingly politically out of touch with the Global South.[80] The ECFR poll results show that as the United States and Europe consolidate and become closer politically under the leadership of the United States globally, they are divided from the rest of the world. The Western states surveyed have a combined population of approximately one billion, which accounts for only 13% of the world's population of 8 billion.[81]

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[75] Code Pink, "Don't Let Biden Go to War with Russia over Ukraine!" 2022, https://www.codepink.org/ukraine_congress.

[76] Global Times, "GT Investigates: Western Freelance Journalists Expose NATO Propaganda Fomenting Ukraine Crisis, Suffer Merciless Attacks by 'Civilized' West," June 14, 2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1268125.shtml.

[77] Armenian Soldier, "The British Mercenary Spent Nine Hours in Ukraine and Left," Facebook, March 17, 2022, https://web.facebook.com/orthodoxsword/photos/a.623658474505286/2016858641851922/.

[78] Géopolitique, "Conflit En Ukraine: « une Guerre Américaine Contre La Russie » Avoue Enfin Un Diplomate Occidental," Facebook, May 14, 2022, https://web.facebook.com/107789721922490/videos/778101326929595.

[79] Kimberly Leonard, "American-Made Javelin and Stinger Missiles Are Heading to Ukraine. At Least 19 Members of Congress Personally Invest in the Defense Contractors behind Them," Business Insider, March 22, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/congress-war-profiteers-stock-lockheed-martin-raytheon-investment-2022-3.

[80] Ben Norton, "West Is out of Touch with Rest of World Politically, EU-Funded Study Admits," Geopolitical Economy Report, February 25, 2023, https://geopoliticaleconomy.com/2023/02/25/west-rest-world-eu-study/.

[81] Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard, "United West,

The contrasting views between the West and the rest of the world extend to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the expected outcomes of the armed hostilities.[82] The majority of respondents in the United States, the United Kingdom, and nine European Union states expressed that Russia was their adversary and that they needed to support Ukraine in the conflict.[83] On the other hand, a plurality of people surveyed in China and Russia see an emerging multipolar world replacing the hegemonic power of the West under the United States, while a plurality of Western states surveyed believe that a bipolar world system will emerge under the United States and China.[84] The divide in views regarding the conflict is evident, with Western countries polled pointing the finger at Russia as the villain, while the Global South countries surveyed view the opposite as true.

### 4.2. Response to the Military Operation

This section addresses Research Question 2, which analyzes the different responses of the conflict parties to Russia's special military operation. There are essentially three options: war, war, and peace. Let's take a closer look at each option. Firstly, Ukraine, NATO, and pro-Ukrainian forces responded to the war with further military engagement. Secondly, Russia and pro-Russian forces reacted to Ukraine and NATO's armed response with further military action. This resulted in an escalation of the conflict to the point where there was a threat of nuclear war, which could have catastrophic global consequences. However, there is a third option that is often overlooked by the mainstream media – a call for a ceasefire and peace settlement between Ukraine and Russia. Peace

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Divided from the Rest: Global Public Opinion One Year into Russia's War on Ukraine," European Council on Foreign Relations, February 24, 2023, https://ecfr.eu/podcasts/episode/united-west-divided-from-the-rest-global-public-opinion-one-year-into-russias-war-on-ukraine/.

[82] Weihua Chen, "West, Rest of the World Divided in Views on Conflict," MSN, February 24, 2023, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/west-rest-of-the-world-divided-in-views-on-conflict/ar-AA17S3Tq.

[83] MSN, "West, Rest of the World Divided in Views on Conflict," February 24, 2023, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/west-rest-of-the-world-divided-in-views-on-conflict/ar-AA17S3Tq.

[84] Arvind Jayaram, "West United, Rest of World Divided on Ukraine War," The Straits Times, February 26, 2023, https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/west-united-rest-of-world-divided-on-ukraine-war.

activists are advocating for an immediate end to the war and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.[85] See Figure 6 below.
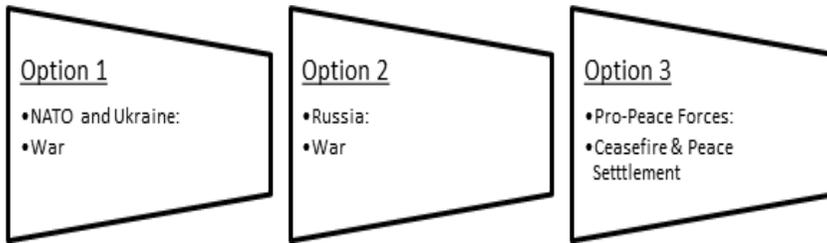


Figure 6: Responses to Russia's Special Military Operation

From the peace studies perspective, there are three courses of action possible in the case of the Ukraine crisis. These include conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and post-conflict peacebuilding.[86] What is needed are de-escalation and diplomacy,[87] not more war, as NATO, Ukraine, and Russia are hell-bent on continuing.

Step 1 involves unconditional ceasefire in good faith on all sides in the short term, after which peace making can take place through one of many conflict resolution methods, such as direct negotiations or third-party mediation.  Compromises have to be made to end the war[88] to achieve a serious peace settlement. One possible impasse is that Ukraine would want to restore its territories to the pre-war state of affairs. Russia would want to keep all the territories it has annexed from Ukraine in the post-war period. See Figure 7 below.

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[85] Ann Wright, "For God's Sake Boys, STOP THIS WAR S**T!!!" Veterans for Peace, January 28, 2022, https://www.veteransforpeace.org/who-we-are/member-highlights/2022/01/28/gods-sake-boys-stop-war-st.

[86] Patrick G. Coy, "Conflict Resolution, Conflict Transformation, and Peacebuilding," ed. Timothy McAlwee et al. (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 63–78.

[87] Kevin Martin, "Ukraine Crisis Demands Diplomacy and De-Escalation, Not More Weaponry," Countercurrents, January 29, 2022, https://countercurrents.org/2022/01/ukraine-crisis-demands-diplomacy-and-de-escalation-not-more-weaponry/; *The Need for Diplomatic Solutions in Ukraine Crisis*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsFvcFth4-U.

[88] Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Zelensky May Have to Make 'Painful Compromises' to End the War, Says Ukrainian Scholar Volodymyr Ishchenko," Democracy Now, March 23, 2022, https://www.democracynow.org/2022/3/23/volodymyr_ishchenko_how_zelensky_could_end.

Figure 7: Post-War Territorial Disputes and Bone of Contention
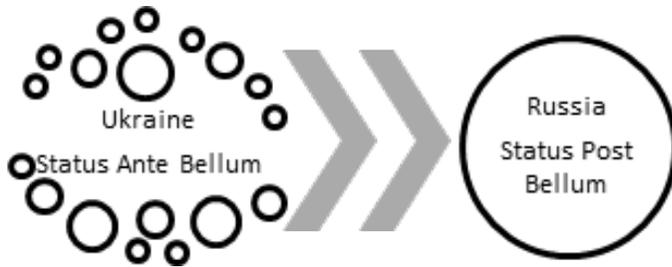


between Ukraine and Russia

Step 2 requires mutually agreed upon and acceptable peace-keeping forces to ensure armed hostilities do not break out again. Step 2 relates to conflict transformation in the medium term, which changes the dynamics from waging war to waging peace, from distrust to confidence building, from broken relationships to healing relationships, and from structural problems to structural solutions. Step 3 requires long-term post-conflict peacebuilding efforts, which delve deep into the root causes of the conflict. In addition, they involve relief and rehabilitation of survivors, structural change at all levels, as well as peace, justice, and security for all. See Figure 8 below.



Figure 8: Three Steps to End the Ukraine Crisis from the Perspective of Peace Studies

World beyond War (WBW) provided a comprehensive checklist on what needs to be done to end the armed conflict in Ukraine. They
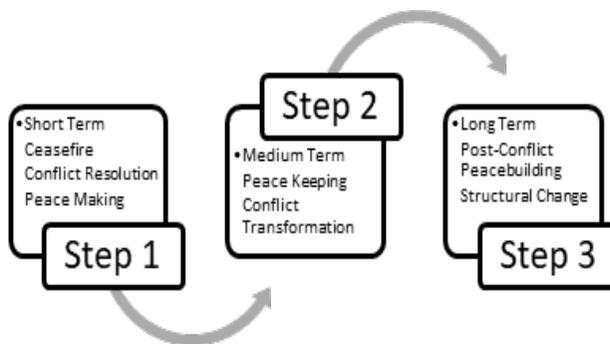
include the following: 1) an immediate ceasefire; 2) peace talks; 3) a moratorium on weapons sales; 4) the removal of missiles from Poland and Romania; 5) the removal of nuclear weapons from Belgium, Italy, Germany, Netherlands, and Turkey; 6) universal compliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation treaty; 7) the disbanding of NATO as its purpose was anti-Soviet Union which does not exist anymore; 8) all countries to take part in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons; 9) prosecution of all violations in recent years through the International Criminal Court; and 10) a shift of resources from war efforts to helping war survivors.[89]

## 5. Discussion

In the face of the ongoing war, we cannot be heartless. Rather, we must practice and have empathy for non-combatants, refugees, and all persons who have died as a result of this crisis. Additionally, all those who are not in combat, whether civilian or former combatants, who are wounded or sick must be treated humanely and be provided with appropriate medical care.[90]

The war in Ukraine has laid bare sexism, patriarchy, and racism. Foreign students, especially Sub-Saharan Africans and South Asians, who were fleeing for their life, limbs, and safety received racist treatment when they attempted to leave Ukraine in the early days of the Russian special military operation. In Ukraine, white Christian Ukrainian women and children could leave as war refugees without a snag. All adult men were required to stay and not allowed to leave the country, as they could be conscripted to take part in the war efforts. Ukrainian male adults had to stay behind, including men who are in principle opposed to all wars, as conscientious objection to military service is not recognized in Ukraine. In Russia, many male Russians fled, as the government announced the call for a partial conscription.

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[89] David Swanson, "Action for Ukraine and the World," World Beyond War, February 16, 2022, https://act.worldbeyondwar.org/ukraine_action/.

[90] Dieter Fleck, *The Handbook of Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Reminiscent of McCarthyism in the 1950s and 1960s, Russophobia got out of hand in 2022. Today, we see the emergence of Cold War 2.0 during which Russians in general received the cancel culture treatment in NATO countries. Anything Russian sounding was banned: Russian food, music, musicians, professors, restaurants, and students. Anti-Russian sentiments reached an all-time hysteria. Innocent Russians fall victim to this neo-McCarthyite folly and psychosis.

On account of the armed conflict, tensions and contradictions have emerged. On the one hand, NATO and the Global North are united and speak with one voice. On the other hand, NATO is in contradiction with several forces around the world. NATO has tensions with Russia, the Gulf States, China, India, Africa, Latin America, and the Global South in general. In broad sweep, the relationship between NATO and the Global North on the one hand and Russia and the Global South on the other hand, is very complex, with varying degrees of explicit cooperation and contestation as well as concealed concord and discord. Clearly Global South countries do not forget their negative experiences with the colonial past and the neocolonial present. In plain sight, China, India, and other Global South countries want openly to take a neutral stance between Russia and NATO for fear of reprisals from NATO. Think of Bolivia, Chile, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Peru, Syria, and Venezuela, for example, in current history. But many individuals from Africa and Asia who issue alternative reportage on social media are openly antiwar but their governments either do not take sides or do not call for an end to the armed hostilities, especially as there is a *Myrotvorets* (or "Peacekeeper") "kill list."[91] Truth be told, though, India has a long-standing amicable political relationship with Russia; thus, they have historical ties that bind. NATO now treats China as a global threat; hence, China seeks to have closer ties with Russia, what with BRICS+, in order to survive a possible direct multifaceted confrontation between China and NATO. Thus, fearing sanctions and other negative repercussions, many Global South countries are treading on a tightrope

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[91] Executive Intelligence Review, "Kiev's 'Info Terrorist' List: 'Global NATO' Orders a Hit on Advocates of Peace" 49, no. 34 (September 2, 2022): 6; Executive Intelligence Review, "Ukraine's Deathlist Database: Myrotvorets.Center" 49, no. 34 (September 2, 2022): 16; Myrotvorets Center, "Миротворец," February 22, 2023, https://myrotvorets.center/.

between taking sides openly and staying neutral.  See Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: Complex and Fluid Global Contradictions as a Result of the Ukraine Crisis
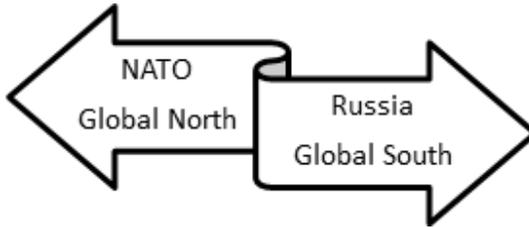


## 6.  Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion

### 6.1. Summary

The subtitle of this article is Before, During, and the Morning After. The Before section refers to the events after the end of the Cold War and NATO expansion. The During section refers to Russia's special military operation. The Morning After refers to either 1) the end of war or 2) endless war or nuclear holocaust. See Figure 10 below.



Figure 10: Before, During, and the Morning After Russia's Special Military Operation

In response to Research Question 1, there are divergent narratives regarding the Ukraine crisis. NATO claims that Russia's aggression was unprovoked. Russia argues that NATO's eastward expansion to its border provoked its special military operation. In response to Research Question 2, war propaganda and fake news abound in NATO, Ukraine,

and Russia. What we need is an urgent call for open communication, ceasefire, and peace settlement. See Figure 11 below:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Title | Russia's Military Operation in Ukraine | |
| Cognitive | NATO, Peace, Russia, Special Military Operation, Ukraine | |
| Diagnostic | Ukraine Crisis; Contending Views; Global Politics | |
| Interrogative | Origins of the conflict? | Reactions? |
| Descriptive | Contending Narratives | Contending Responses |
| Explanatory | NATO's vs Russia's Fault | Support Ukraine or Russia |
| Predictive | World Divided | Further Escalation |
| Prescriptive | Peace Talks & Peaceful Coexistence | New Security Arrangement |

Figure 10: Summary of the Findings of This Article on Russia's
Special Military Operation in Ukraine

## 6.2. Recommendations

There are only two major options in the Ukraine crisis now: 1) endless war and 2) end of war. If all sides to the conflict engage in a tit-for-tat war game, reacting to war with even more war, then the only winners will only be politicians and the military-industrial complex at best. For starter, think of all the lives lost as well as the years and dollars spent on the war in Afghanistan. At worst, the losers will potentially be the whole world as there is a realistic possibility of a nuclear war that spells nuclear mutually assured destruction (nuclear MADness) and the end of the world as we know it. The other option is to choose life; hence, putting an end to the war. For this, we need de-escalation, a stop to sending weapons, sincere dialogue, open lines of communication, ceasefire with no preconditions, diplomacy, a peace treaty, peaceful coexistence, and nuclear disarmament here and now. In addition, a new

security arrangement that ensures the security of all parties concerned—Russia, Ukraine, and the European Union—must be created.

Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, and Stephen Walt of Harvard University call for an end to the proxy war or face nuclear Armageddon, for which mainstream media label them as "top U.S. scholars" who are "smart people [who] stake out dumb, immoral positions.'[92] Yet, they stand firm on their arguments that opening the lines of dialogue and ending war is the only rational way forward to end the bloodshed and save lives. Critical of the involvement of his government and NATO in the Ukraine crisis, Sachs indicated that key concerns that a negotiated end to the hostilities must be addressed, including: 1) sovereignty and security of Ukraine, 2) NATO enlargement, 3) the destiny of Crimea, and 4) Ukraine's economic recovery.[93]

The aim of NATO was to counterbalance the Warsaw Pact and deter Warsaw Pact's geopolitical and military adventures during the Cold War. With the end of the Cold War, what is the raison d'être of NATO now? Hence, there is a simultaneous call for ending Russia's special military operation and ending NATO all at once.

### 6.3. Conclusion

There are different ways of explaining the Ukrainian dilemma from theories of international politics: *moralpolitik* and *realpolitik* as starting points. From the point of view of *moralpolitik* or political idealism, Ukraine without a doubt has the right to choose its destiny. It can decide to be engaged in full-blown NATOization based on its inherent political right as a sovereign country. However, from the point of view of *realpolitik* or political realism, Ukraine must take its political right to be a member of NATO with a grain of salt. Ukraine is sandwiched between two great

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[92] Eyal Winter, לאוננח לבנע, and יהכ ברימ ווהכ תואירב ווהלאוו!, "Top U.S. Scholars vs. Aid to Ukraine: When Smart People Stake Out Dumb, Immoral Positions," MSN, January 7, 2023 https://www.msn.com/he-il/news/other/top-u-s-scholars-vs-aid-to-ukraine-when-smart-people-stake-out-dumb-immoral-positions/ar-AA164p5H.

[93] Democracy Now!, "Jeffrey Sachs: Negotiated End to Ukraine War Is the Only Real Way Out," December 6, 2022, https://www.democracynow.org/2022/12/6/jeffrey_sachs_ukraine_war.

powers with nuclear weapons: NATO and Russia. Ukraine has fallen victim to a proxy war between its neighbors to the East and to the West. Ukraine does not have to choose between a rock and a hard place. If Ukraine takes sides, it will become a semi-colony or neo-colony of NATO or Russia. If Ukraine decides to be neutral, it could benefit from good relations with both sides and avoid the negative aspects in its relationship with either side.  For its survival, political realism of neutrality appears to be rationally a better option at this point in time than the moralpolitik of exercising its right to self-determination of joining NATO.  Therefore, is neutrality theoretically the best option for Ukraine? Situated between Scylla and Charybdis, Ukraine had better choose neutrality over NATO between these two goods. Russia, Ukraine, and NATO, all of which are capitalists and of majoritarian Christian heritage, must engage in social communication that promotes constructive dialogue to foster mutual understanding and goodwill to end the armed combat and attain peace. All international armed conflicts end with peace talks and agreements, except Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We don't want another nuclear catastrophe, which will wipe out life as we know it. The history of Ukraine is still unfolding.

This article contributes to communication, conflict and peace studies, politics, international relations, and religion in terms of public witness. Aside from the mainstream news, the author presented, among others, the voices from the media in the Global South.

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# Vaccine Hesitancy as Lived Experience among Members of a Christian Community in the Philippines

*Renalyn G. Padoginog[1] and Benjamina Paula G. Flor[2]*

**ABSTRACT**

*Vaccine hesitancy in a Christian community like the Jesus Christ the Eternal Savior International Ministries (JESIM) remained relevant in today's efforts to rise above the COVID-19 pandemic. The study uncovered how vaccine hesitant JESIM members construe COVID-19 vaccination in Sinayawan Valencia City, Bukidnon, Philippines. It also explored how their meanings define their hesitancy towards vaccination. This study employed purposeful sampling and conducted in-depth interviews using the conversational, storytelling approach. The saturation point was attained after interviewing 11 participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through initial, axial, and selective coding. Two major themes emerged in the analysis: vaccination is a threat to health and the pandemic is God's call for repentance. These COVID-19 meanings led people to seek God's will on the circumstance through prayer, a dialogic form of communication between God and the JESIM members. Their communication resulted in three response actions such as strengthened their faith, trust in God's will, and practice proper stewardship that informed their decision to refuse COVID-19 vaccination. The lived experience purports that God has responded to them with signs and wonders, including miraculous healing and divine interventions. As all of them had already contracted and survived the COVID-19 virus, they perceived that God allowed them to experience it to demonstrate that He is the greatest of all and that He is capable of healing them in hopeless situations.*

**Keywords:** *JESIM, COVID-19 pandemic, prayer warriors, belief in God*

[1] **Renalyn G. Padoginog, MS** is a faculty member of Central Mindanao University. She obtained her MS Development Communication at the University of the Philippines Los Baños.

[2] **Benjamina Gonzalez-Flor, PhD** is a Professor at University of the Philippines Los Banos and currently the Chair of the Master of Development Communication program of the UP Open University.

## 1. Introduction

In the Philippines, the Department of Health (DOH) initiated a whole-of-society approach to launch the COVID-19 vaccine deployment and vaccination program. The government spearheaded the deployment and execution of the program, forging partnerships with the private sector and organizations like the Roman Catholic Church. Communication campaigns, including the #ChecktheFAQs: A Campaign to Fight Vaccine Misinformation were launched to counter misinformation about COVID-19 vaccination using various platforms. Hence, constant surveillance of the vaccination program was implemented in the country (DOH 2021). However, in Sinayawan, Valencia City, some households remained hesitant towards COVID-19 vaccinations despite campaigns based on the report of the health center. Most households were affiliated with a Christian group called Jesus Christ the Eternal Savior International Ministries (JESIM) where one of the researchers is connected. It is a type of Pentecostal religious organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission. JESIM is committed to journey with people through a discipleship process where members are exposed and trained with various spiritual practices anchored on biblical teachings that aim to advance the kingdom of God. In the whole system of discipleship, select members who are willing were chosen to become a part of the primary leaders. These leaders represent the demographics of the organization. These include leaders from adult men and women, married young adult men and women, young men and women, and leaders for kids. These leaders meet once a week for fellowships and meetings, and they assist the senior pastors in decision-making. The leadership style applied in this organization is participatory. Hence, the study sought to find out the reasons by understanding vaccine hesitancy as lived experience through phenomenology.

The phenomenological tradition in communication theory posits that communication is the experience of oneself and others through dialogue. Within this tradition, the concept of dialogue is understood as a means of explicating the communicative process as it takes place within experience (Pilotta and Mickunas 1990). People share authentic information drawn from experience through an unmediated dialogue. The meaning people make depends on their subjective interpretation of

their experiences (Mumby 1989). As humans create meaning with their experiences, they engage in transactional communication where they use signs and symbols to interpret their field of experiences (Adler, Rodman and DuPré 2012).

## 2. Vaccine Hesitancy during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The DOH targeted to administer COVID-19 vaccination in the Philippines in March 2021 to at least 70 percent of the population. However, due to the tight supply of doses then, the target was lowered to 50-60 percent (DOH 2021). Reports revealed that during the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, people were hesitant to receive the vaccine which could be attributed to the Dengvaxia controversy (Reyes et al. 2021). The dengue vaccine, which had previously been administered to the people, purportedly caused deaths among children who received the shot. The Philippines had high vaccine confidence rates previously (Larson, Hartigan-Go, and Figueiredo 2019). Thus, this posed a greater challenge on the health workers and health organizations in the country.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP Philippines 2021) reported a higher percentage rate on the number of people who were hesitant to receive COVID-19 vaccines. Most common barriers to vaccine acceptance included people's concern on side effects, safety, vaccine's ineffectiveness, and cost. There was also the perception that other people needed it more than they did, distrust in government, and religious reasons (UNDP Philippines 2021). Other studies recommended to focus on creating more initiatives that fostered effective strategies to reduce vaccine reluctance, boost vaccination confidence, and support uptake of COVID-19 vaccination (Brackstone et al. 2022).

## 3. Religion and COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy

Despite the overwhelming breakthroughs in science, a portion of the population has remained hesitant. One of the main contributing factors is religion. Religiosity is considered an essential indicator for decision-making in healthcare and has been linked to COVID-19 vaccination intention (López-Cepero et al. 2022). Greater level of religiosity was

associated with lower levels of vaccination intents. The most common reasons for religious organizations were trust and strong religious practices (Olagoke, Olagoke, and Hughes 2021). Adherents felt that they would not get the illness if they were committed to the appropriate religious ideas and had a strong faith in God (Gopez 2021). There were also those who believed that disease resulted from sins and God wanted to demonstrate God's power to the world (Tesfaw et al. 2021).

Hence, religion plays a major role in the acceptance or rejection of the vaccine. This decision depends on the moral principles being taught or engraved in the minds and hearts of religious followers (Tan 2022). People who are pious relied more on divine help, thus, felt more unyielding to COVID-19 vaccines (DeFranza et al. 2021). Religion is even considered a significant element of human life. People decide based on their religious beliefs. Understanding religion cannot be separated from the social context where it takes place. In other words, religion relates to and influences culture and communication (Croucher et al. 2017). Spiritual leaders discourage their congregants from getting vaccinated by drawing on various factors such as traditions, myths, customs, and other related aspects.

Vaccine hesitancy driven by religious beliefs could inevitably affect vaccination coverage (Kibongani Volet et al. 2022). Religious leaders were encouraged to spread awareness of health-related concerns and moral behavior in their religious communities (Bullini, Febo, and Perdichizzi 2022). The collaboration between the government and the church can make a strong partnership in promoting vaccination uptake.

Nonetheless, there is a paucity of evidence and specific examples on effective strategies for involving local spiritual leaders in enhancing vaccination rates. Consequently, there exists a dearth of widely shared knowledge on successful approaches, as well as those that are ineffective. While conducting a literature review, the researchers identified several gaps that require attention, including the limited application of rigorous research methodologies, and insufficient investigation into the relationship between religious affiliation and immunization beyond the Muslim and Christian faiths (Melillo et al. 2021).

## 4. Theoretical Framework

Phenomenology is an approach to understand hidden meanings and the essences of an experience together (Mautner et al. 2017). It seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. The aim is to explain the significance of this event in terms of what was experienced as well as how it was experienced (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019). In phenomenology, it is important to acknowledge and respect differences, to learn from others, to seek common ground, and to avoid polarization and strategic dishonesty in human relations. It opens avenues to discover immediate understanding beyond words. Phenomenology upholds that the best way to communicate is through dialogue (Craig 1999). The communicative process as it occurs in the experience is presented in the phenomenological understanding of dialogue (Pilotta and Mickūnas 1990).

This research is more inclined to hermeneutic phenomenology by Martin Heidegger. Hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on the subjective experience of individuals and groups. It is an attempt to uncover the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories (Kafle 2011). This could unveil the participants' experiences of COVID-19 through their narratives.

## 5. Methodology

The research design utilized phenomenology to capture and comprehend the lived experience of the study participants. The research was conducted in Sinayawan, Valencia City, Bukidnon, where the JESIM organization is located. Sinayawan has a total population of 7,006, with 1,421 households, of which 90 percent have already been vaccinated against COVID-19. However, the remaining 10 percent of households, which includes some who identify as Pentecostal, have strongly decided against taking the vaccine. As of 2022, JESIM had 120 family members, almost half of whom refused to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants based on the following criteria: 1) membership in JESIM in Sinayawan; 2) receipt of various COVID-19 vaccination communication campaigns; 3) at least 18

years of age; and 4) members who had not yet received any COVID-19 vaccine (Table 1). As one of the authors being a member of JESIM, the study objectives were clearly discussed with the participants and were requested to sign an informed consent. They were also informed that they can stop anytime if they felt not comfortable doing the interview.

**Table 1. Description of participants**

| Code Name | Age | Sex | Occupation | Role in the church | COVID-19 experience | Comorbidities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P-1 | 62 | Male | Laborer | Member | Yes, 1 month recovery | Asthma |
| P-2 | 38 | Female | Laborer | Member | Yes, 1 week recovery | None |
| P-3 | 63 | Male | Farmer | Leader | Yes, 2 weeks recovery | None |
| P-4 | 31 | Female | Homemaker | Member | Yes, 1 week recovery | Pregnant |
| P-5 | 40 | Female | Homemaker | Member | Yes, 1 week recovery | None |
| P-6 | 67 | Female | Laborer | Member | Yes, 1 week recovery | None |
| P-7 | 27 | Female | Laborer | Member | Yes, 1 week recovery | None |
| P-8 | 48 | Male | Business-man | Senior Pastor | Yes, 1 week recovery | Tonsilitis |
| P-9 | 56 | Female | Business-woman | Senior Pastor | Yes, 1 week recovery | Asthma |
| P-10 | 82 | Female | Farmer | Founder | Yes, 2 weeks recovery | Heart disease and UTI |

| Code Name | Age | Sex | Occupation | Role in the church | COVID-19 experience | Comorbidities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P-11 | 59 | Female | Farmer | Member | Yes, 2 months recovery | UTI, PWD |

## 6. Data Analysis

The research employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data collected through in-depth interviews were analyzed following the IPA process (Figure 1). IPA is a flexible and dynamic method that enables the researcher to return to the interview data as needed and to focus on meanings throughout the process of analysis. It is concerned with the in-depth analysis of a person's lived experience and how that person makes sense of it (Pincombe et al. 2016). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, spent ample time reading and re-reading transcripts, and analyzed line by line for initial coding. Words or phrases were labelled based on interpretation of the participants' narratives. Codes were analyzed by looking at the connections or patterns of each code and grouped them into categories. The emerging categories were labeled to create themes.



**01 Reading and re-reading**
Immersing oneself in the original data.

**02 Initial noting**
Free association and exploring semantic content (e.g. by writing notes in the margin).

**03 Developing emergent themes**
Focus on chunks of transcript and analysis of notes made into themes.

**04 Searching for connections across emergent themes**
Abstracting and integrating themes.

**05 Moving to the next case**
Trying to bracket previous themes and keep open-minded in order to do justice to the individuality of each new case.

**06 Looking for patterns across cases**
Finding patterns of shared higher order qualities across cases, noting idiosyncratic instances.

**07 Taking interpretations to deeper levels**
Deepening the analysis by utilizing metaphors and temporal referents, and by importing other theories as a lens through which to view the analysis.
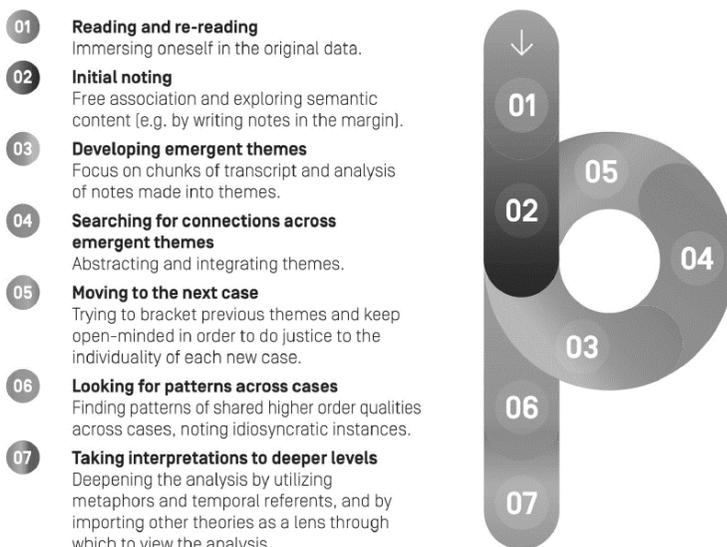
**Figure 1. The Seven Steps of IPA Data Analysis** (Charlick, McKellar, Fielder, & Pincombe 2015 adapted from Smith et al. 2009).

## 7. Results

### Meanings of COVID-19 vaccination as construed by JESIM members

The analysis of the meanings of COVID-19 vaccination as constructed by JESIM members yielded two discernible themes. These themes are: 1) vaccination as a threat to health, and 2) the pandemic as a divine call for repentance.

### Vaccination as a threat to health

The participants understood COVID-19 vaccination as a threat to their health primarily because of empirical observations. These observations include death casualties, severe side effects, and vaccination remorse. The sub-themes are as follows:

*Death casualties.* The members shared several stories about people who died or who suffered severely from side effects after vaccination. They echoed that most people who died had comorbidities such as asthma or heart disease (P-5, Female, Church Member). Some JESIM members contended that even seemingly healthy individuals had died after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Based on their observations, the vaccine had significant adverse effects that caused gradual deterioration in people's health, ultimately leading to death. Others likened the vaccine to a toxin that impaired the immune system, leading to a gradual loss of physical strength and eventual death. These members believed that the vaccine posed a threat to their health, particularly their physical strength.

*Severe side effects.* Members disclosed that every person they knew who got vaccinated suffered from severe side effects such as weakness or fatigue and disease complications. They also explained that many of the vaccinated people they knew in the community still acquired the COVID-19 virus. It implies that vaccination was unsafe, hence, a threat to their health. Some of these people were families and close relatives (P-10, Female, Church Founder; P2, Female, Church Member; P4, Male, Church Leader).

***Vaccination remorse.*** In addition to reports of adverse effects from vaccinations, there were also accounts of vaccine regret. Members shared anecdotes of regret from individuals who had already received the vaccine, including members of their households, neighbors, friends, and co-workers. These stories of regret reinforced their belief that the vaccine posed a threat to their well-being. They claimed that vaccinated individuals expressed regret because their work performance had been negatively impacted, and they were no longer able to perform tasks as effectively as before. For individuals whose jobs required them to be exposed to sunlight, their physical strength was especially important, and they reported being less productive at work after receiving the vaccine (P-2, Female, Church Member; P-3, Male, Church Leader; P-5, Female, Church Member).

## Table 2. Members construction of COVID-19 vaccination

| Major Theme | Subthemes | Illuminating Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Vaccine is a threat to health | Death casualties | "Its [vaccine] main enemy is asthma and heart disease. They are weakened particularly those with asthma because they have low immune system…For me, vaccine is like a poison. They inject it to humans to kill them slowly." (P-5, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"For example, Auntie Linda was going around the neighborhood in the morning. When her stomach ached, she went for a check-up, but she had no vaccine yet. The case was different before because if you have no vaccine, you will be asked to get one before you will be checked by the doctor. So, she got vaccinated then she died immediately. She was healthy. In fact, she went here in the house to collect debt. She had a check-up, was injected with vaccine, that's why she died." (P-4, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"They have many members who died because they forced them to get vaccinated. Many died after vaccination." (P-9, Female, Church Senior Pastor) |

| | Severe Side Effects | "My sister-in-law was vaccinated but she got symptoms of COVID. Her health condition got complicated. Now, she is undergoing dialysis. After vaccination, her condition worsened. That's why others would tell her that it's better that she did not undergo vaccination." (P-10, Female, Church Founder) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | | "She said, after vaccination, it triggered her disease. I have seen many who after vaccination has become weak." (P2, Female, Church Member) |
| | | "It does not mean that when you get vaccinated you will no longer acquire COVID-19. I knew someone who still acquired the COVID virus after months of getting vaccinated. Useless. That's why it is better not to be vaccinated because there is no assurance in the vaccine. It cannot protect you." (P-4, Female, Church Member) |

The group's perception of COVID-19 vaccination as a danger to their health led to internal disagreements, including apprehension about potential vaccine side effects and concerns about being monitored by Barangay Health Workers (BHW) and the local COVID task force. Furthermore, some members developed doubts about the efficacy of the vaccine, as well as concerns about its components and the vaccination process.

*Fear of health workers.* Other members have developed fear of the health workers, particularly the COVID-19 local task force and BHWs for their constant monitoring in the community. Consequently, when COVID-19 infected their households, they did not disclose any information to the health workers in their community. For them, it was better to die at home than to die in the hospital (P-5, Female, Church Member; P-1, Male, Church Member; P-4, Female, Church Member).

*Skepticism of vaccine's effectiveness and composition.* While some developed fear, others became skeptical of vaccines, questioning

their efficacy, components, and the government's incentive scheme for vaccination. Some even raised doubts about the origin of the vaccine components and the speed at which vaccines were developed, believing that more time was needed for proper study. They felt that humans were being used as experimental subjects without adequate testing on animals first. Some also believed that vaccines were not yet approved (P-1, Male, Church Member; P-4, Female, Church Member; P-5, Female, Church Member).

*Skepticism of government's vaccination strategies.* The participants expressed skepticism about the government's vaccination strategies, including the "incentive scheme," "no vaccination, no government support" policy, and the "no vaccine card, no groceries and travel" rules. They perceived these strategies as desperate measures by the government and an indirect way of mandating vaccination. Some viewed them as forms of deception, while others saw them as opportunities for corruption and profiteering. However, many people they knew opted to get vaccinated due to fear of losing financial support or *ayuda* from the government, particularly those belonging to the poorest of the poor, or the 4Ps (Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program) members and UCT (Unconditional Cash Transfer) beneficiaries.

*Skepticism due to misconception.* Members held misconceptions about the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines. They were told by the health department, particularly the Barangay Health Workers (BHWs), that vaccination was beneficial and would protect them from the virus, but what they observed was different from what they were told. This led to doubts about the trustworthiness of health workers and the government's support for COVID-19 vaccination. Although they claimed to respect the scientific community, they placed more trust in their observations within the community. These misconceptions heightened their skepticism of the government and contributed to their perception that the vaccine posed a threat to their health (P-4, Female, Church Member; P-11, Female, Church Member).

**Table 3. Barriers for the participants' vaccination uptake**

| Major Theme | Subthemes | Illuminating Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Intrapersonal conflicts | Fear of health workers | "There are 18 of us here who got infected with the virus from kids to adults. But we kept silent because our neighbors got infected, too. If we die, we die as long as we are in our own houses." (P-5, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"During those times, the BHWs always monitors us. That's why we kept quiet, we stayed in our house, and we never told them." (P-1, Male, Church Member)<br><br>That's why we never had check-ups because we knew 100% that it was COVID. There were many who pass by here… wheeeooo… wheeooo… wheeeeooo [sound of ambulance] in the road. But we kept silent even in our worse situation. Even Reggie [youth leader] went here to visit us during the time we were sick, he played guitar. After which he got sick and hospitalized diagnosed with COVID including his father and mother. We felt sorry for him because he had difficulty in breathing. When the local task force kept on roaming, we remained silent. We stayed inside our houses). (P-4, Female, Church Member) |

| Skepticism | Skeptical on vaccine's effectiveness and ingredients | "You know the vaccine is not yet approved but they injected it to people." (P-1, Male, Church Member)<br><br>"It seems like the vaccine cannot be trusted. There seems to be no assurance yet because they are still under studies. You can't really say that it's okay… It's strange because I think it should undergo a series of studies before it's perfect. So, in our case, we have not placed ourselves in an uncertain situation because we are not sure where the ingredients of the vaccine came from." (P-4, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"And they would not give us assurance once you get vaccinated. So, it means, we are still under experimentation? They gave it directly to humans? So, they are still experimenting to see if it's okay to people. If not, ahh, thank you with your life." (P-5, Female, Church Member) |
|---|---|---|
|  | Skeptical on government's vaccination strategies | "But why would they impose it? It makes you doubt them. Also, they said you cannot receive any form of benefits when you are not vacci-nated. But when you die, you will not also get the benefits, so it's the same." (P-4, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"They are forcing us. We cannot receive the benefits of the government when we are not vaccinated. That's why the government is so shrewd." (P11, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"Look at Doc Paul and the mayor, they distributed 10kls of rice in Batangan just bring one senior to be vaccinated. But they got COVID and was in critical condition." (P-5, Female, Church Member)<br><br>"Then what you hear being reported in the radio are death cases caused by COVID-19 virus not those who died caused by the vaccine. Not good." (P-1, Male, Church Member) |

## 8.  Pandemic as God's Call for Repentance

Aside from seeing the vaccine as a threat to their health, these members perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as a divine call for repentance. They believed that the pandemic was a consequence of people's sins, including disobedience and idolatry. They further held that people could only surmount the crisis by turning back to God and repenting. In their view, repentance was the essential means to overcoming the pandemic since God would heal the land if people humbly sought His forgiveness.

*Disobedience.* The participants drew a connection between the current pandemic and biblical events of the past. They cited how plagues were inflicted upon people in the time of the Israelites' exodus and later during the era of prophets such as Jeremiah, as a consequence of their disobedience. According to the participants, God remains consistent in His ways, and the events unfolding today can be seen in the Bible. They maintained that people's sins indicate their disregard for God's teachings, and that God sends messages of repentance through situations such as the pandemic. The members argued that the pandemic was God's way of calling people to seek Him and to know Him better. They added that during challenging times, humans tend to call upon God's name, even if they do not fully understand who He is (P-10, Female, Church Founder; P3, Male, Church Leader; P-4, Female, Church Member).

*Idolatry.* Members believed that God is a jealous God who desires to be worshipped alone. They observed that instead of trusting in God, people turned to other sources for knowledge and strength. Consequently, God sent plagues to make people realize and call out to Him. Members emphasized that if people would repent and call on God's name, He would answer and bring healing to the land. They explained that during the pandemic, many people were forced to seek and depend on God, especially during lockdown. They also noted that idolatry was not only about worshipping other gods, but also about being too focused on work and forgetting to seek God. Members believed that if people continued to harden their hearts, more similar cases would occur. Therefore, they stressed that repentance played a crucial role in overcoming the pandemic (P-10, Female, Church Founder; P-11, Female, Church Member; P-3, Male, Church Leader).

**Table 4. Members construction of COVID-19 vaccination**

| Major Theme | Subthemes | Illuminating Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Vaccine is God's call for repentance | Disobedience | "That has been written already in the bible that there will come a plague because of the sins of people. But these are ways of God so that people would call on him. All things that happened are considered as God's ways so that people would learn to seek him because He is powerful. It is His way to call people to repent, turn from their wicked ways and come to Him…They disobeyed God's word and did not believe on Jeremiah but everything Jeremiah said happened to them. That's why all these things are happening because people are unconscientiously sinning and disobeying God. But it is always the nature of man to call unto God when things go wrong in their lives. Though others would call God even without knowing who God really is. (P-10, Female, Church Founder)<br><br>"What's happening now is not new anymore. This is God's way so that man would come to their senses and to call upon His name. You know people nowadays are very sinful. Even Christians compromise to sinful acts. Look at the TV now, most shows are about adultery. That's why we do not watch TV now. Since they started airing shows related to adultery, people treat it as a normal thing. This is not good. God will not be happy with that." (P3, Male, Church Leader)<br><br>"God is pruning people because of too many sins. (P-4, Female, Church Member) |

## 9. Discussion

The participants in this study constructed meanings based on their observations of others in their community. Therefore, it can be inferred that these meanings were socially constructed. The participants' perceptions and actions towards new things, such as the COVID-19 vaccine, were greatly influenced by what they observed from those who had undergone vaccination, as well as the information they received from

them. In addition, their spiritual beliefs also played a role in how they defined situations. Members of JESIM were taught to live their lives according to biblical principles, and this included sending their children to Sunday school and engaging in discipleship programs based on biblical foundations. The organization aimed to develop individuals who would become disciples of Jesus Christ. Thus, it can be inferred that the participants' worldviews were influenced by their spiritual upbringing, and their creation and interpretation of meaning were also informed by their spiritual beliefs, shaped by their exposure to their organization's spiritual norms.

The primary spiritual norm in JESIM is prayer or communication with God. This regular communication is viewed as a dialogic interaction that fosters a personal relationship between God and JESIM members. Through their continuous communication with God, these members have developed three crucial response actions to cope with their experiences and understanding of COVID-19 vaccination. These include: 1) strengthening their faith in God; 2) having faith in God's plan; and 3) practicing proper stewardship.

*Strengthened faith in God.* Members have reported that through their prayers, God has responded to them with signs and wonders, including miraculous healing and divine interventions. As all of them had already contracted and survived the COVID-19 virus, they perceived that God allowed them to experience it to demonstrate that He is the greatest of all and that He is capable of healing them in hopeless situations. They testified that as they called upon His name, God healed them. Some members have mentioned that their experience with the virus has strengthened their faith in God and in His protection through the immune system He has given to humankind. They argued that their protection was not due to the vaccine, but to God, as they have experienced and proved it. This experience not only healed them physically but also emotionally and mentally, relieving them of their fears and boosting their confidence to refuse vaccination (P-8, Male, Senior Pastor).

This meant that they no longer needed the vaccination (P-4, Female, Church Member; P-11, Female, Church Member).  Their constant communication with God had increased their faith which helped

them overcome their COVID-19 related challenges. This meant that the members' increased faith strengthened their hesitancy towards COVID-19 vaccination. Reinforcement or affirmation of one's predicament seems to validate their action (P-4, Female, Church Member; P-5, Female, Church Member).

*Trust in God's will.* Narratives emerged regarding members' beliefs in the God-ordained fate for each person. Their consistent prayer life made them more dependent on God. They believed that when the time intended by God had come, no one could stop it. Members associated their faith with fate, asserting that while they could make requests to God through prayer, the ultimate decision remained with God, who determined their fate. Members deemed death caused by the COVID-19 virus acceptable, provided that it was God's will. Their reliance on God's will contributed to their firm refusal of vaccines. It can be inferred that the members' dependence on God led them to believe that regardless of what happened – whether they lived or died due to COVID-19 – the decision remained in God's hands. Their faith in God's will provided them with assurance and confidence that their lives were secure in God's hands (P-6, Female, Church Member; P-11, Female, Church Member; P-3, Male, Church Leader; P-8, Male, Senior Pastor).

*Adoption of proper stewardship.* The members believed that proper stewardship was a result of their constant communication with God, who communicated with them through His Word. They believed that God desired them to practice proper stewardship in all aspects of their lives, and that it resulted in a healthy lifestyle. They viewed taking care of their health as an act of obedience to God's will for their well-being. Their knowledge of the role of the immune system in fighting the virus and the importance of proper stewardship helped them to better understand how to overcome COVID-19 without vaccination. Consequently, some members claimed that they did not require vaccination because they were healthy, and their immune system was capable of fighting the virus. They further claimed that their immune system was more intelligent than the vaccine (P-8, Male, Senior Pastor). For them, being and keeping healthy was a result of proper stewardship. If they practiced a healthy lifestyle, they believed they would be protected from harm. The senior pastor emphasized, "Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food." They believed that herbal plants, such as garlic, onion, lemongrass, citrus, ginger, and other

"*dahon-dahon*" (herbal plants), were part of God's instruments to heal their diseases. They argued that these practices had existed long before scientific medication. This means that the members were not only driven by their religious beliefs but also by their indigenous knowledge of herbal or natural medicines, which were passed down to them through oral tradition. Their narratives testified that they were healed by natural medication (P-3, Male, Church Leader; P-1, Male, Church Member; P-11, Female, Church Member; P-6, Female, Church Member).

Indigenous knowledge presents authentic and diverse contexts for science education. Moreover, it affords opportunities for contemplation of nature and science in contemporary (Western) scientific learning, thereby promoting the growth of more balanced and comprehensive worldviews, intercultural understanding, and sustainability (Zidny, Sjöström, and Eilks 2020). Some members supplemented their diets with herbal remedies, including vitamin C. They believed that part of natural medication involved consuming nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables.

**Table 5. Response actions of members as a result of their constant communication with God**

| Major Theme | Subthemes | Illuminating Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Strengthened faith in God | Survival from the virus<br><br>Immunity with the virus<br><br>Healing wonders of God<br><br>Relief from all forms of fear | "The one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. We should fear the one who has the capacity to kill both the soul and the flesh than those who can kill the flesh only. I trusted God even more for the protection he has placed in us. My only protection is God. Why should we fear death? All of us will die. For me the protection is not the vaccine, but above all else, God is the only protection." (P-3, Male, Church Leader).<br><br>"Our foundation is our faith in God. Our God knows everything because He created us. He knows what's best for us. So, we settled on it." (P-10, Female, Church Founder)<br><br>"Your faith can move mountains. Now, if you feed your members with fear, they will more likely get vaccinated but if you feed them with faith, they become unshakable. Our faith is of great help to us. Your faith will stimulate your brain, it will affect your whole system because the brain is the commander of our entire body. What information you receive, your brain will process it, then it will give signal to your body." (P-8, Male, Senior Pastor)<br><br>"I was pregnant at that time, and it was difficult to breathe. I was just drinking water. I could not even drink medicine because I was pregnant, it was close to my delivery. What I did was drink water, eat vegetables, and pray. It should be coupled with prayer because that is our only great defense. I was healed by God's grace." (P-4, Female, Church Member) |

| Major Theme | Subthemes | Illuminating Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Belief in God's will | Devotion to God | "Prayer is our armor. When it's your time, it's your time." (P-6, Female, Church Member) |
| | Divine intervention | "When it's not your time, it won't happen… as long as you have strong faith in God, God will never forsake you. Whether you are vaccinated or not, when your time arrived, no one can stop it. If it's not yet your time, no one can also stop it. Let us just strengthen our faith instead because it is just a test on how strong our faith is." (P-11, Female, Church Member) |
| | God's sovereignty | "If it's not God's will for you to die, you won't die." (P-8, Male, Senior Pastor) |
| Adoption of proper stewardship | Healthy lifestyle | "That's why we should take care of our immune system because it is more intelligent than the vaccine that will be introduced in your body." (P-8, Male, Senior Pastor) |
| | Strong immune system | "It is possible not to be dependent on the medicine or on the vaccine especially if you have good immune system. Let us just go back to the basic "Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food. Why? Because in ancient times, Adan, Eve, Abraham, Jacob had no vaccines but why they lived longer? Our science today happens to combat what's going on in our time because people lost the sense of taking good care of themselves and their health. They do business just to earn money not to promote good health among people. This is the reason why our organs are damaged because they placed things that are not good in our body." (P-8, Male, Senior Pastor) |
| | Indigenous knowledge on herbal medicines | "We inherited our knowledge on herbs from our ancestors. We used these herbs every time we got sick. It's good. We're healed." (P-3, Male, Church Leader) |
| | Herbal supplements and vitamin C | "It is important to have citrus and ginger. I boil lemongrass. It's good." (P-1, Male, Church Member) |
| | | "We drank plenty of citrus and garlic during those times." (P 11, Female, Church Member) |
| | | "I ate plenty of fruits. We're able to endure it. With our experience, we could say that our body can combat the virus. Look at aunt Ipang and uncle Dodong, they got very weak, but they recovered. They took plenty of supplements." (P-4, Female, Church Member) |

The aforementioned response actions significantly contributed to the reinforcement of vaccine hesitancy among JESIM members. Vaccine hesitancy, therefore, refers to the refusal of vaccination due to the amplified faith in God, the belief in God's will, and the adoption of proper stewardship, which are established through their spiritual practices that involve dialogic and interactive communication between God and human beings. Figure 2 illustrates a schematic diagram that was derived from this definition, showcasing vaccine hesitancy within a religious context. Communication between God and the JESIM members can be argued as dialogic and interactive. This is because constant communication between God and human beings

(JESIM members) is carried out based on the principle of faith. The effectiveness of communication and dialogue in generating enduring insights that can be applied to future problem-solving hinges on how these processes function in the meaning-making process (Innes 2007). For instance, the JESIM members' communication with God allayed their fears concerning the side effects of the vaccine, thereby bolstering their hesitancy towards vaccination.

Second, the communication between God and the JESIM members is interactive as it signifies an existing partnership between humanity and God. This partnership highlights the idea of consultation and collaboration with the highest authority, God, on the decision-making process in all aspects of the members' lives. This consultation is conducted through prayer, seeking God's will (humans to God), and the application of biblical principles (God to humans) to real-life situations and decision-making processes using the language of faith. The communication cycle, from God to humans and humans to God, is an integral part of the JESIM's spiritual norm and is challenging to modify as it is deeply ingrained in the members' core life principles. The spiritual norm's impact and evidence in their lives, such as miraculous healing and transformed life, among others, further strengthened their attachment to it.

To effectively communicate about vaccination, it is crucial to carefully explain key concepts such as herd immunity and vaccine mechanisms within the religious context to avoid misconceptions and misinformation. The model of vaccine hesitancy demonstrates how the social construction of reality based on personal experiences can override scientific information, even if this results in negative consequences in the future. It appears that faith in God cannot be superseded by scientific explanations unless they are rooted in the Bible's epistemology.
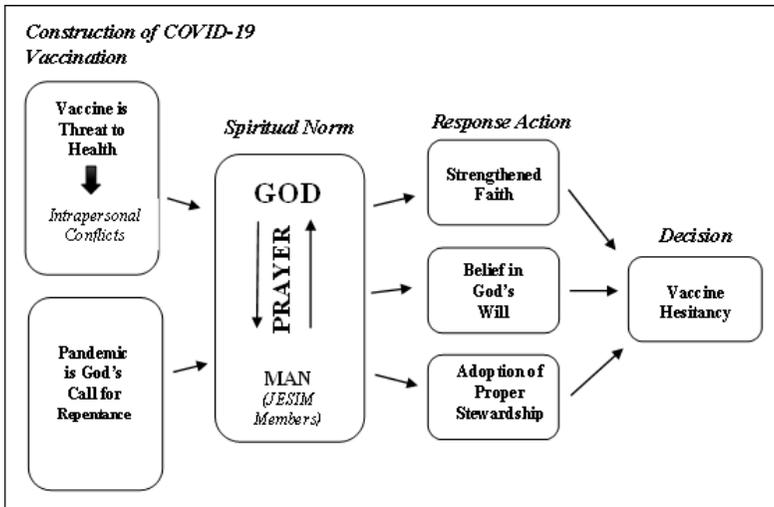
**Figure 2. Vaccine hesitancy model in a Christian community**

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

The construction of meanings is a social process shaped by lived experiences, which inform decision-making. In the case of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, individuals' lived experience of "otherness" have influenced their decision not to get vaccinated. The complex information surrounding the pandemic was difficult to process, particularly in light of the previous distrust created by the Dengvaxia controversy. As a result, individuals have turned to their central belief in God, seeking support and protection, rather than taking the perceived risk of the vaccine. This phenomenon may be termed as preconditioning, whereby individuals are predisposed to certain beliefs prior to encountering new information. Therefore, individuals affected by vaccine hesitancy will only follow instructions if they believe they are from God. The church plays a crucial role in helping individuals understand what is essential and needs to be done. Church leaders, as role models, can share their thoughts and ideas, but the ultimate decision-making lies with the congregation. The interplay between faith and fate appears to underlie decision-making regarding health matters.

Finally, the study recommends the need for a larger sample size to establish causality between religion and vaccine hesitancy.

The findings also suggest the importance of designing communication campaigns that effectively convey the scientific information related to vaccination. Customization of information campaigns may be more appropriate given the diversity of intended audiences.

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# Integration into the Local Community by Catholic Migrants through Religious Participation in Hanoi, Vietnam

*Thi Ngoc Anh Nguyen*[1]

### Abstract

*With the substantial flow of people from rural to urban areas in recent years, especially in the capital city of Hanoi, Vietnam, migration has become a topic of interest to many experts. This study aims to explore the religious practices of Catholic migrants who come to Hanoi to study and work. The study involved a survey of 402 Catholic migrants as well as 12 in-depth interviews and two focus groups held in parishes where migrants participate in religious activities. The findings indicate that Catholic migrants actively engage in religious practices such as prayer, attending solemn Sunday Masses, and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Women were found to participate in solemn Masses more frequently than men, and those with higher levels of education attend Sunday Mass more often than those with lower levels of education, as revealed by Chi-Square Test results. Other religious activities among Catholic migrants include receiving the Eucharist and joining associations of immigrants and native-born people, which make up more than 50 percent of their religious participation. Although a small percentage of migrants participate in additional activities such as fasting, retreats, and pilgrimages, the number of pilgrims has increased since 2015 due to improved family finances. The study suggests that participating in religious activities can provide valuable opportunities for migrants to integrate into society and settle into their new homes. By participating in religious activities in local parishes, migrants can connect with local people and other migrants, forming a network that can help them access better employment, career, education, and information.*

[1] ***Thi Ngoc Anh Nguyen*** is a member of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians - Female Salesian. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

**Keywords**: *religious activities, religious practices, Catholic migrants, Catholics*

## 1. Introduction

Numerous research conducted globally demonstrates that becoming a member of a religion is a requirement to be religious. According to several studies such as those carried out by Bainbridge (1989), Lipford et al. (1993), and Evans et al. (1995), engagement in religion lowers crime rates. Many qualitative studies, such as those by Dolan (1972), Min (1992), George (1998), and Zhou et al. (2002) describe the economic and social benefits of belonging to a religious group; yet, religious participation can lower income levels and vice versa (Lipford et al. 2003), which will improve security, safety, comfort, hope, and meaning (Johnson and Larson 1997; Kerley et al. 2005). According to specific research, women are more involved in religious activities than men are (Jang and Johnson 2005). Hirsman and Charles (2004) identified the three Rs: 'refuge,' 'respect,' and 'resources' as reasons migrants engage in religious activities which bring immigrants respect and dignity. Joining a religion enables individuals to carry out their religious obligations, forges close bonds with others, offers stability, instills hope, and cultivates polite behavior that makes them feel appreciated and relieves stress (Eryilmaz 2015).

The Catholic Church has become increasingly concerned about the way in which Catholic migrants practice their religion. As a response, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) established the Committee for Migrants, a formal committee of the CBCV since 2007. The committee comprises migrant priests from local dioceses who have been appointed to address the needs of the migrant community. To further support migrant pastoral care, the CBCV developed the Pastoral Guidelines for Migrants in 2010. The main tenets of Church teachings on migrant pastoral care are outlined in this booklet. These tenets cover the spiritual life of migrant believers, the priest's responsibilities to migrant believers, and marriage ministry. The publication also offers recommendations on how clergy, laypeople, and religious organizations might collaborate to meet the pastoral care requirements of migrants.

According to Canon Law on domicile and quasi-domicile, an immigrant "belongs to the parish in which he resides" (Migrant Pastoral Commission 2017). The Church also emphasizes the role of priests at both the point of departure and arrival. The priest at the destination "should be mindful of immigrants in his district and call on parishioners to cooperate in the care of the immigrant faithful so that not a single believer who has been abandoned for no apparent reason," while the priest at the place of departure "should guide and help his parishioners know and carry out the necessary procedures when moving to help them easily integrate and practice the faith life in the new place" (Migrant Pastoral Commission 2017).

Does the retention of Catholic migrants' religious participation change as they leave their familiar communities to join a new one? According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, migration impacts both the place of origin and the place of residence. For example, many rural parishes no longer have human resources for community activities. In contrast, the pastoral workload at many of the city's churches is excessive. Catholic migrants also expect priests, religious, and laypeople to provide them with care once they arrive. They will undoubtedly integrate into the parish where they live more quickly and be able to actively contribute to its development if they are given sufficient attention. On the other hand, their participation will be much less, and they may not even contribute to the building and growth of the nation if they are not given attention or are treated with apathy, indifference, or stigmatization (Migrant Pastoral Commission 2017).

Religious activities mean the expression of religious beliefs, the practice of doctrines, canon laws, and religious rituals (Clause 10, Article 2, Law on Belief and Religion in Vietnam 2016). How frequently people participate in religious services will reveal their level of religious participation. For migrants, belonging to a religious community enhances their dignity and self-worth (Connor 2009). For this study, religious activities were defined as the practice of religious rites under the doctrine and canon law, as well as participation in association activities in the destination parish. This essay aims to give insight on the religious involvement and practices of migratory Catholics. Catholic migrants can interact and build relationships with both locals and migrants by

participating in religious events, which ultimately helps them integrate into the community.

## 2. Methodology

The author is the principal investigator of a project funded by the Nafosted Foundation (code 504.01-2019.01) with the topic: "Characteristics and changes in religious activities of Catholic migrants in the urbanization process in Vietnam today." The author received approval from the leader of the research topic to utilize the quantitative and qualitative data from the Nafsted project survey. The sample included 402 Catholic migrants in Hanoi, as well as in-depth interviews with 12 Catholic migrants and information gathered from two focus group discussions in Trung Tri Parish of Hanoi Archdiocese. All data were gathered by the author between December 2019 and October 2021. The two focus group discussions had distinct characteristics. The first group comprised migrants who moved to Trung Tri Parish solely for religious activities, while the second group included various participants, such as three migrant priests, six leaders of migrant groups, the head and assistant head of the parish council of Trung Tri Church, and some migrant parishioners. The duration of the two focus group discussions was between 90 and 120 minutes. The author conducted the in-depth interviews, which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, with about two-thirds of the Catholic migrants. The sample included migrants residing in Thai Ha and Co Nhue parishes, which are two parishes with a high concentration of migrants and many associations for migrants living far from home.

## 3. Results

### a) The ritual practice of Catholic migrants

Ritual observance is crucial for Catholics in order to maintain and practice their religion. Religion also plays a crucial function as a resource for immigrants in host societies (Hoang et al. 2021). According to several surveys, migrants identified as Catholic participate in parish

activities and engage in religious activities (Nguyen 2018; Hoang and Nguyen 2019). Based on these studies, it can be concluded that religious participation generates social capital, which in turn helps facilitate the integration of migrants into their new society. Through attending religious services and engaging in parish activities, migrants have the opportunity to build connections with fellow parishioners, priests, and other religious figures, as well as with non-migrants and individuals who have previously migrated. They can interact with a variety of people through Mass, church events, and sacraments, including those from their homeland and non-immigrants, building a support network for several facets of their lives, including their careers.

Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic Church, discussed the importance of oral prayer during his catechesis on the morning of April 21, 2021. He emphasized that these were the only phrases that would bring us to God and were the only words he deserved to hear. "Prayer is interaction with God; For man, prayer becomes a word, an invocation, a song, or a poem," the Pope declared at the start of his catechesis (Pope Francis 2020).

**Table 1: Level of participation in prayer**

| Participation level | (%) |
|---|---|
| From 1 to many times/day | 54.9 |
| From 1 to several times/week | 36.5 |
| From 1 to several times/ month | 7.1 |
| Never | 1.5 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

Based on the survey results, a majority of migrants, 54.9 percent, continue to pray regularly, ranging from once a day to many times a day. Another 36.5 percent pray between once and several times per week. Only 7.1 percent of migrants pray occasionally, and a mere 1.5 percent never pray. These findings indicate that despite the necessity of earning a living and supporting their families after relocating to Hanoi, migrants still make time to pray regularly. Additionally, prayer provides migrants

with a simple way to overcome the initial difficulties of adjusting to a new environment. Once they have settled in, migrants can turn to their religion to help them cope with any challenges they may face (Warner 2000).

**Table 2: Frequency of prayer when faced with important life problems**

| Prayer level | | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Often | 85.8 | |
| Sometimes | 13.2 | |
| Never | 1.0 | |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

Catholic migrants demonstrate a profound faith in God, which is evident in their regular engagement in individual or group prayer. This practice fosters spiritual well-being and gives them the confidence to overcome challenges and anxieties in their life as migrants. In addition to their daily prayer routine, most migrants (85.8 percent) also resort to prayer when confronted with significant issues in life.

### b) Attending Sunday Mass and Solemnities

The faithful is required to attend Mass on Sundays and other holy days of obligation, according to Canon 1247 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church. In addition, the first of the "Six Commandments of the Church" mandates one to "Attend Sunday Mass and Holy Days of Obligation."

**Table 3: Participation of Migrants in Sunday Mass and Solemnities**

| Mass | Level of attendance | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Sunday Mass | At least once a week | 69.4 |
| | One to three months/ time | 27.0 |
| | Several times/ year | 3.3 |
| | Never | 0.3 |

| Solemnities | Attend all Masses | 68.4 |
| | Missing from one to two Masses | 25.6 |
| | Missing more than two Masses | 5.3 |
| | Never | 0.8 |

According to the survey data, 68.4 percent of migrants fully attend solemnities, and 69.4 percent of migrants attend Sunday Mass at least once a week, which is a high rate. However, it is important to note that according to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, Catholics are required to attend Sunday Mass and solemnities. More than 30 percent of Catholics surveyed do not fulfill this obligation. This failure to adhere to the law can be a barrier to being integrated into the religious community and may lead to a gradual disengagement from participating in the sacraments.

**Table 4: Relationship between Sunday Mass attendance and educational level**

| **Educational level**<br>(df= 2; Value = 12.164[a], p =0,002) | **Sunday Mass attendance**<br>**(At least once a week)**<br>**(%)** |
|---|---|
| No training, intermediate vocational level | 26.2 |
| Professional high school, college | 35.3 |
| University, postgraduate | 38.5 |

The study's findings indicate that the educational and professional backgrounds of migrants are related to how frequently they attend Mass on Sundays. The Chi-Square Test reveals that migrants with university and postgraduate degrees in technical fields are more likely to participate in Sunday Mass than migrants with less education. Additionally, this study demonstrates that with 38.5 percent participation, the rate of

Sunday Mass attendance increases with the increase in professional level.

**Table 5: Relationship between the level of solemnity attendance and gender**

|  | Gender | |
|---|---|---|
|  | Male (%) | Female (%) |
| Attend all solemn Masses (df= 3, Value =8.750[a], p = 0,033) | 62.2 | 73.2 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

The survey results in the above table demonstrate a correlation between gender and degree of participation in solemnity. The Chi-Square Test reveals that the proportion of women attending all solemn Masses is 73.2 percent, 10 percent higher than the rate of men. This percentage represents a statistical significance. This may be seen in the fact that, with the exception of the sports group, most associations have more women than men. By participating in these associations, female migrants are encouraged and invited to attend Mass by other immigrants or natives who joined the groups before them (Table 6). The fact that more women than males participate in parish associations is a cause for concern.

**Table 6: Relationship between participation in Catholic groups and gender**

| No | Catholic Action Groups | Male (%) | Female (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Groups relating to liturgical activities (choir, trumpet team, offerings, prayer, etc.) (N=82) | 39.0 | 61.0 |
| 2 | Charity Associations (N=55) | 47.3 | 52.7 |
| 3 | Groups relating to communication activities (N=18) | 61.1 | 38.9 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | Service Groups (flower arrangement, cleaning, altar decoration) (N=20) | 25.0 | 75.0 |
| 5 | Educational Groups (students, catechist, parents) (N=46) | 34.8 | 65.2 |
| 6 | Group related to media activities (N=16) | 37.5 | 62.5 |
| 7 | Catholic Association of fellow-countrymen (N=119) | 41.2 | 58.8 |
| 8 | Group of Catholic Migrants (N=90) | 36.7 | 63.3 |
| 9 | Other Catholic Groups (N=12) | 33.3 | 66.7 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

### c) Receiving the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation

For Catholics, the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are essential components of their spiritual lives. According to Canon 920 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church, all the faithful are obliged to receive Communion at least once a year after their first Communion unless they have a valid reason not to. If a believer has not received Communion throughout the year, they are required to do so during the Easter Season.

**Table 7: Level of receiving the Eucharist**

| Participation | (%) |
|---|---|
| More than once a week | 22.7 |
| One week/time | 38.0 |
| One to three times/per month | 13.6 |
| Several times/ year | 21.9 |
| Rarely | 3.5 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

Table 7 shows that among Catholic migrants, 38.0 percent receive the Eucharist (Communion) more than once per week on Sundays, 22.7 percent receive communion once a week, and 22.0 percent receive

communion several times a year, in accordance with the Catholic Church's canon law regarding the reception of communion. As a result, this condition is met by 96.4 percent of migrants. These results show that a significant portion of Catholic migrants partake in Holy Communion, and that they do so in a way that is consistent with their customs from back home.

**Table 8: Compulsory Communion during the Easter Season**

| Compulsory Communion during the Easter season | (%) |
|---|---|
| Ever did not receive Eucharist | 52.7 |
| Never did not receive Eucharist | 47.3 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

This table indicates that 52.7 percent of Catholic migrants have at times not received communion in compliance with the canonical requirement that it be received at least once during the Easter Season. This shows that the number of people who do not adhere to the regulations of the Catholic Church accounts for a relatively high percentage. One participant in the interview reported:

> I go to Mass a few times a year, but most of the time I miss Mass. Just twice or three times a year, max. For instance, I only attend Christmas and skip Easter. Numerous times, the Anton association leader encouraged me to attend confession; I just went to confession a few months ago. But up until now, I've only confessed and taken Holy Communion a handful of times because I kept going to confession, taking Communion, and then returning home to fight and decide I didn't want to attend any more. (Male, 42 years old, Co Nhue Parish)

As a result, decisions that Catholics make in their daily lives have a significant impact on their ability to receive Holy Communion. If a Catholic immigrant confesses their sins but still sins, they could feel unworthy of receiving Holy Communion. Consequently, some Catholic migrants opt not to receive Holy Communion or go to confession, even though it is mandatory to receive Communion during Easter, according to the law.

Catholics are required to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation under Canon 989 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which states, "After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year." This sacrament, also known as the Sacrament of Penance, enables the faithful to confess all of their sins and, through the mediation of priests, get God's pardon for all of their transgressions. They also have the right to partake of the Eucharist to nourish their souls once they have been absolved of all sins.

**Table 9: Level of receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

| Level of receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation | (%) |
|---|---|
| More than once a week | 3.0 |
| One time/week | 3.3 |
| 1 to 3 times/month | 12.4 |
| Several times/year | 75.5 |
| One time/year | 5.8 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

The survey's findings indicate that 81.3 percent of the faithful participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation from once to several times a year, while 12.4 percent receive it once to three times a month, and 6.3 percent are pious and devoted individuals who frequently partake in this Sacrament. According to Canon 989 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, Catholic migrants are expected to take part in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year. As a result, a large number of individuals participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and practically all of them keep it at least once a year in accordance with Catholic Church canon law.

### d) Observing fast and abstaining from meat

According to Canon 1251 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law of

the Catholic Church, Catholics are only required to fast and refrain from eating meat twice a year (on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) to atone for all the sins they have committed against God and other people.

**Table 10: Fasting and abstaining from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday**

| Level of abstinence from meat | (%) |
|---|---|
| Never | 53.7 |
| Sometimes | 21.3 |
| Often | 22.0 |
| No Note | 3.0 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

The study indicates that a significant percentage of Catholic migrants do not observe the two days of fasting prescribed by the Catholic Church. The results reveal that up to 53.7 percent of Catholic migrants do not comply with this sacred rule. This finding raises the possibility that some Catholic migrants may not be fully committed to their religious obligations, or that they face challenges in adhering to these practices in a new cultural context. In their hometown, it was common for grandparents, parents, or close relatives to provide reminders for religious practices. However, when migrating to a new location without this support system, it may be easier for migrants to forget these practices, particularly if they coincide with a weekday when migrants are preoccupied with work. Additionally, forgetfulness may stem from not attending Sunday Mass, which would otherwise provide an opportunity to hear announcements regarding religious obligations.

## e) Participating in activities of groups/associations

Religious social capital is developed through membership in Catholic action organizations. According to *Britannica* (2019), Catholic action is "the organized labor of the laity carried out under the guidance or sanction of the bishop in the fields of dogma, morality, liturgy, education, and charity." There are two main Catholic Action Groups

(CAGs) in Vietnam: 1) Specialized Catholic action organizations that restrict their membership to a variety of factors such as gender, age, a particular industry, certain occupations, or interest groups; and 2) Catholic action organizations, which are typically groups open to all Catholics (Hoang et al. 2021). Statistics for 2016 are still being collected, but Catholic Action Groups in Vietnam have more than 500,000 members. Many people simultaneously join two or more associations (Nguyen Huu Long 2018).

As reported by the Vatican II Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (1965), "For this reason the faithful should participate in the apostolate by way of united effort. They should be apostles both in their family communities and in their parishes and dioceses, which themselves express the community nature of the apostolate, as well as in the informal groups which they decide to form among themselves." As a result, Catholics have a responsibility and right to participate in Catholic Action Groups.

The results of the survey from the participating parishes show that there are differences in congregation size between parishes. At the time of the survey, Trung Tri Parish in Hanoi's Hai Ba Trung District, which had been operating for around two years, had nine associations. In contrast, older parishes with more history, such as Co Nhue, Ham Long, Phung Khoang, Thach Bich, Nong Vu, and Cathedral Church, had between 12 and 15 organizations. Particularly, there were over 20 organizations in Thai Ha Parish that catered specifically to members who were migrants.

**Table 11: Participation in migrant groups/associations in Hanoi**

| No | Catholic Action Groups | (%) |
|----|------------------------|-----|
| 1 | Groups relating to liturgical activities (choir, trumpet team, offerings, prayer, etc.) | 20.7 |
| 2 | Charity Associations | 13.6 |
| 3 | Groups relating to communication activities | 4.5 |
| 4 | Service Groups (flower arrangement, cleaning, altar decoration) | 5.0 |
| 5 | Educational Groups (students, catechist, parents) | 11.6 |
| 6 | Group related to media activities | 4.0 |

| 7 | Catholic Association of fellow-countrymen | 22.9 |
| 8 | Group of Catholic Migrants | 30.3 |
| 9 | Other Catholic Groups | 2.8 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01).*

The survey of parishes in Hanoi shows that the number of people participating in associations of migrants (groups of compatriots and groups far from home) accounts for 53.2 percent. This shows that associations specifically for migrants have many participants, accounting for more than 50 percent of the total number of migrants participating in other associations in parishes. It can be said that migrants participate in large numbers in associations with people from the same hometown or from different hometowns coming to Hanoi for work. Members of congregations with high migrant populations, like Anton of Co Nhue Parish, have about 50 people who go to Sunday service because they participate in the singing. Otherwise, the number of church attendees can rise to 100 on the day in which the association celebrates the feast of its patron saint.

Among the parishes, Thai Ha Parish has one of the largest migrant communities in the area with 24 different migrant associations. Each group adopts its own patron saint and organizes a special celebration on the designated day of the feast. Celebrations include Mass followed by a procession where the image or statue of the saint is carried around the Church. Second, groups involved in ceremonial activities (such as choirs, trumpet players, flower offerings, and prayer) make up 20.7 percent of the total; Education and learning (students, catechist, parents) account for 11.6 percent; and charity associations for comprise 13.6 percent. This result demonstrates that migrants join organizations that cater to them as well as to organizations in service of the Church. In other words, they are open to helping with various church activities in addition to joining associations specifically focused on them. This collaboration shows the first steps in the integration of migrants. The remaining categories, such as the physical training group (4.5 percent), service group (5.0 percent), and group involved in communication activities (4.0 percent), and other categories (2.8 percent) have very low participation. These are social

groups that are less common in the religious community because only a small number of migrants attend.

Through involvement in various organizations, immigrants from different backgrounds can come to know and connect with one another and aid one another in integrating into their new surroundings through church activities. One interviewee reports:

> If there is no community, people come here almost exclusively for work, and there is this relationship and that relationship, but with community, people are more connected; people help each other more. Sometimes in the country, we don't know each other, but when we come here, we get to know each other and play together. Whenever we go to church to participate in this and other activities, we are more aware of our obligations. The community is wonderful, helping each other a lot, and the church is quite wonderful. (Male, 26 years old, Hien Xuan Duc Community, Thai Ha parish).

## f) Participation in retreats and pilgrimages

Although attending retreats is not obligatory for Catholics, it is highly recommended for spiritual preparation in advance of significant feast days. Before significant holidays throughout the year, the Catholic community is urged to take part in retreats in order to prepare their hearts and minds for the festivities.

**Table 12: Joining a retreat with associations/groups**

| Participation in retreats | (%) |
|---|---|
| With the parish group | 44.6 |
| With the original hometown group | 21.6 |
| With a group far away from home | 20.3 |
| With other groups | 13.5 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01).*

**Table 13: Participation in pilgrimages of migrants in Hanoi**

| Participation in pilgrimages | | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Regions | North Vietnam | 57.3 |
| | Central Vietnam | 18.1 |
| | South Vietnam | 14.6 |
| | From 2 regions or more | 10.0 |
| Year of participating in a pilgrimage | From 1993 - 2009 | 13.6 |
| | From 2010 – 2014 | 23.6 |
| | From 2015-2019 | 62.8 |
| Level of pilgrimage participation | Once a year | 31.4 |
| | From 2 times or more | 22.9 |
| | Never | 45.7 |

*Source: Calculated from the survey funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (grant number 504.01-2019.01)*

Undertaking a pilgrimage is a religious practice that can offer significant spiritual advantages. In essence, it involves visiting holy sites and churches to pay homage to God and the saints. Amongst Vietnamese Catholics, the most popular destinations for such pilgrimages are the shrines dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, such as the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Hanoi, as well as the pilgrimage sites of Our Lady of La Vang in Quang Tri Province and Our Lady of Tra Kieu in Quang Nam Province. According to survey findings, around 44.6 percent of Catholic migrants attend retreats with their local parish group, 21.6 percent with their hometown group, 20.3 percent with groups they join while traveling, and 13.5 percent with other groups.

In terms of destination, the majority of migrants participating in pilgrimage in the North account for 57.3 percent. By going on pilgrimage in the North, the cost of travel will be much cheaper than going to the Central and the South because going on a pilgrimage in the North can take place in a day. However, one can also complete pilgrimages in other places. Fewer people take the trip since it is more expensive to travel

great distances, plus there are additional fees for meals and overnight accommodations. Other regions, such as the Central region, account for 18.1 percent; the South, 14.6 percent; and two to three regions or more, 10 percent.

The local populace can spend money to make pilgrimages to churches in other regions. According to the table above, Catholic migrants' pilgrimage trips began in 1993 and ended in 2019 when the poll was conducted. It is important to note that in the 16 years between 1993 and 2009, the percentage of migrants who participated in pilgrimages was only around 13.4 percent. From 2010 to 2014, that number climbed by about 10.0 percent. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of pilgrims increased more than four-fold compared to the preceding 16 years. However, financial considerations appear to play a role in determining the extent of migrant participation in pilgrimages Since 2010, those with at least VND20 million in monthly income have shown a rising propensity to go on pilgrimages. This trend is backed by Chi-Square Tests showing a statistically significant link between wealth and the frequency of going on pilgrimages (df= 456; Value= 517527a; p= 0.024).

The percentage of Catholic migrants who make pilgrimages is as follows: 22.9 percent make pilgrimages twice or more per year while 31.4 percent participate once a year. However, over 45.7 percent of migrants have never participated in a pilgrimage. Participating in pilgrimages is advantageous for Catholic migrants as it provides an opportunity for them to meet, interact, and establish connections with other Catholics, both locals and immigrants. Nonetheless, participating in a pilgrimage requires adequate planning and budgeting for expenses such as travel, food, and accommodation. Despite this, the social opportunities presented by these activities are crucial to the integration process of migrants. A male interviewee expressed:

> There should be out-of-Hanoi outings that allow people to get to know one another well without creating a barrier; if it's just going to church and getting together once a year for party, it won't work. It doesn't matter, but if you can plan a trip together and have many people go, it will be a huge success. The distance was shortened because of participation,

interaction, and an attitude of mutual exchange. (Male, 48 years old, Anton association, Co Nhue parish).

## 4. Discussion

Based on the research findings on the engagement in religious activities by Catholic migrants in Hanoi, the following remarks can be made:

This study discovered that immigrants with greater levels of education engage in religious activity at a higher rate than immigrants with lower levels of education. Also, this study is comparable to one by Jang and Johnson from 2005, which found that more women than males participate in religious activities. The study also affirms that participation in religious activities allows migrants to build a social network by connecting with local people and other migrants. As per the findings, 20 percent of migrants reported taking part in catechism classes, while retreats and pilgrimages offer additional opportunities for migrants to bond with fellow believers and non-believers alike. Building a social network through religious activities and community associations can provide valuable support in various areas, such as housing, employment, and education (Vermeulen and Penninx 2000; Wessendorf 2018). Such interactions facilitate a deeper understanding and attachment among migrants, creating a strong and supportive network that can provide assistance and better access to information.

The findings of this study reveal a significant aspect that benefits the Catholic Church, namely, the crucial role of laypeople in fostering participation in religious activities and supporting the church. Through voluntary religious engagement or with the help of like-minded acquaintances, laypeople enhance their self-confidence and establish connections in their new community.

The fact that migrants take part in retreats and pilgrimages with residents of the communities they belong to in their new parish demonstrates how migrants are gradually integrated into their new environment. Some individuals who move to Co Nhue parish and make their first family pilgrimage as a result of joining the Anton organization are encouraged

to participate in the pilgrimage even though they have never even made a pilgrimage to a church before. A migrant shared his retreat/pilgrimage experience as follows:

> Last time, I traveled to the chapel in Tam Dao with the Anton Association in order to combine a retreat and a pilgrimage. I have only made one pilgrimage due to my company's hectic schedule. To be really honest, attending retreats and pilgrimages gives me a chance to connect with my spirit, and I often consider what to teach my kids during these times. (Male, 42 years old, Anton association)

To sum up, participating in religious activities provides migrants with a unique opportunity to integrate into the society of their destination more quickly and progressively. As religion represents a form of social capital, it offers migrants advantages in engaging in religious activities and building social relationships through associations, which can help to mitigate the challenges and problems associated with migrating. The parish priest and pastoral council play significant roles in leading and organizing groups, especially for immigrants, to help support various parish activities. Moreover, association leaders must actively visit immigrant households and engage in welcoming initiatives to promote growth and support. Moreover, planning more retreats and pilgrimages that facilitate interactions between migrants and locals is essential. This can allow immigrants to build meaningful relationships with non-immigrants, which can help break down barriers and foster greater integration.

## 5. Conclusion

This study provides insights into the role of religion as a facilitator for Catholic migrants in adapting to their new surroundings. Through the formation of religious networks, Catholic migrants can maintain and express their religious beliefs and practices while also connecting with local people and other migrants more frequently in their new location. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the influence of gender on religious participation among Catholic migrants. Existing research has shown that women tend to participate in religious events to a greater

extent than men, underscoring the active role played by Catholic female migrants in religious activities following their relocation. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between religion, migration, and gender.

This study is distinctive in highlighting the role of the laity in organizing and coordinating church groups, retreats, and pilgrimages that serve to inspire and unite people. As immigrants adjust to their new parish and surroundings, they often participate in various parish groups. While the study emphasizes the benefits of Catholic migrants engaging in religious activities for easier integration into a new community, it does not fully explicate the mechanisms through which such participation leads to integration. The study's contributions offer several avenues for further research on the role of groups and individuals in promoting integration and the specific religious activities that facilitate the integration of migrants.

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# *Pakikipagkapwa–Tao* and *Bayanihan* Spirit in Community Pantries: Paul Ricoeur on Filipinos as Responsible Human Beings

*Christian U. Solis*[1]

## ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of Filipinos, especially the poor. While waiting for what the government can do for its constituents, the Filipinos acted on charity toward one's neighbors. The rise of community pantries has been helping the poor and the needy through these challenging times. The paper defined* pakikipagkapwa–tao[2] *and* bayanihan *spirit*[3] *as the motivation behind the community pantry movement. Such virtue is both personal and social. This paper employs Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of capable human being specifically on man's capacity to be responsible. It aims to bring to the fore the values of* pakikipagkapwa–tao *and* bayanihan *spirit as expressions of Filipino's strong sense of responsibility. It also employs a phenomenological-descriptive method to go back to Filipino's lived experiences of community pantries during the pandemic. This paper aims: (1) to present the Filipino's lived experiences during the pandemic and appropriate Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of capable human being; (2) to prove that the values of* pakikipagkapwa–tao *and* bayanihan *spirit are expressions of*

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[1] ***Christian U. Solis, LPT, STL-MA*** is a faculty member of University of Santo Tomas (UST), Manila, Philippines. He is also conducting his doctoral studies in the same institution. He was a former Catholic missionary working with family and the youth in the Philippines.

[2] *Pakikipagkapwa–tao* is synonymous with *pakikipagkapwa. Pakikipagkapwa–tao* is loosely translated to English as interpersonal skills. While it appears that *pakikipagkapwa–tao* is redundant in that *tao* is already present in the *kapwa,* the author uses *pakikipagkapwa–tao* in the text throughout the paper to signify Filipinos' expression of charity towards neighbors.

[3] *Bayanihan* spirit is a manifestation of Filipinos' idea of helping one another. It is often depicted in arts where men would carry a *bahay-kubo (nipa house)* to transfer to another place. It becomes a real Filipino value of helpfulness to his fellowmen. All actions and forms of helping fellow Filipinos thereby signify a true *bayanihan spirit.*

*Filipino's strong sense of responsibility; and (3) to demonstrate that Filipino's sense of responsibility finds expression in Paul Ricoeur's capable human being as responsible self.*

**Keywords:** Pakikipagkapwa–tao, bayanihan *spirit*, *community pantries, capacity to be responsible*

## 1.  Introduction: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Filipino People

The COVID-19 pandemic[4] has had a profound impact on Filipinos and people worldwide, limiting children's mobility to play, students' ability to study, and adults' capacity to work. In the Philippines, life was even more challenging because the pandemic occurred right after Taal Volcano's eruption and three strong typhoons[5] hit the National Capital Region, Ilocos Region, and Bicol Region. During the typhoon, safety protocols, and health regulations were compromised in some way as people were evacuated, rescued, and attended to. The natural calamities had worsened the situation in these areas.

The Philippine government made efforts to alleviate the suffering of its people, especially the poor, through *ayuda* (aid to the poor). However, this aid program was not enough. Fortunately, there are non-government organizations (NGOs), private companies, and even private individuals and groups that responded to the needs of the people. While the government tried to assist, it was the help coming from their neighbors, i.e., *kapwa*, that kept the needy people alive. The pandemic tested Filipinos' patience and fortitude, bringing more Filipino values and traits to the fore. Filipinos chose to live meaningfully by responding to the challenges brought about by the pandemic by living out their core human values. Instead of hate, anger, and blame games, core human

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[4] In a media briefing when World Health Organization (WHO) declares that COVID-19 is already a pandemic. "WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19," *World Health Organization*, 11 March 2020, https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020  (accessed May 24, 2021.)

[5] Typhoon Ambo in May (2020), Typhoon Rolly in November (2020), and Typhoon Ulysses in November (2020).

values enabled them to transcend personal interests and reach out to others in need.

In this paper, I will present three main points. First, I will describe the lived experiences of Filipinos during the pandemic using Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of capable human being. Second, I will argue that the values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit are expressions of Filipinos' strong sense of responsibility. Finally, I will prove that Filipinos' sense of responsibility finds expression in Paul Ricoeur's capable human being as a responsible self. To accomplish these goals, I will use a phenomenological-qualitative method to examine Filipinos' lived experiences during the pandemic and conduct a textual analysis of Paul Ricoeur's books *The Course of Recognition and Oneself as Another*, as well as other secondary sources including works by Filipino authors and academicians such as Enriquez, Aguas, Ang and Pe-Pua (et al).[6] Additionally, I will reference internet broadcasts, online broadsheets, and cyber news[7] to provide context for Filipinos' lived experiences during the pandemic.

## 2.　Paul Ricoeur's Capable Human Being: The Ability to be Responsible

This paper employs Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of capable human being as its theoretical framework. Ricoeur views the human person as a capable human being who goes beyond nationality, culture, and language, and whose context limits and constricts them. Aside from that, Ricoeur *points out the possibilities* of the capable human being. He engages in an enterprise which depicts his 'passion for the possible.'[8] He prescribes

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[6] There are notable authors on the issue in question like Brazal, Jacoba, Tuazon, and Macaraaan. However, the writer chose Enriquez, Aguas, Ang and Pe-Pua (e tal) as their concepts best encapsulate Filipino's lived experience of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit during the pandemic.

[7] The internet news may appear to be not academic, but the author deems it necessary to bring them into academic discourse as they are the most accessible and available during the time.

[8] Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema, "Introduction: How Much More Than Possible?" in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 2.

and defines ethical intention as *"aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions,* [emphasis in the original]*"*[9] as the finality of every capable subject. Ricoeur's philosophy is shaped not only by associations with his contemporaries[10] but also by being a 'philosopher who dialogues'[11] with existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, social sciences, and even psychoanalysis. His philosophical project "is nourished by the experience of a participation in a creative source of meaning."[12] Ricoeur's philosophy differs from Heidegger's notion of man who sees himself as a *being in the world*[13] and destined unto death. Ricoeur is concerned more with a being who lives with, recognizes others, and lives a meaningful life. He is a philosopher of hope who affirms man's primordial goodness. Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of the capable human being, particularly man's capacity to be responsible, highlights Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan spirit,* which express Filipinos' strong sense of responsibility.

## 2.1. Paul Ricoeur's Capable Human Being

Paul Ricoeur was a philosopher of the 20th century who proposed a humanism that remains relevant today. His life's work poses important questions about the meaning of human existence and seeks answers to

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[9] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172. Hereafter, *OA.*

[10] Paul Ricoeur must have his own philosophy, a philosophy that is peculiar to his own thinking but it cannot be denied that during his lifetime he established good relationships with his contemporaries like Gabriel Marcel to whom he dedicated the *Freedom and Nature.* His associations with these philosophers in one way or another influenced or shaped his philosophy. Olivier Abel briefly mentions some of the philosophers to whom Ricoeur was acquainted either by meeting them in person or through his readings of their works. See Olivier Abel, "Ricoeur's Hermeneutics: From Critique to Poetics," in *Reading Ricoeur,* ed. David M. Kaplan (New York: State University of New York, 2008), 183 - 196.

[11] "Ricœur is generally considered to be the philosopher of all the dialogues." See Geoffrey Dierckxsens, "Introduction," *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* 6 (2015), p. 1, no. 2 (2015): 1- 6, http://ricoeur.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/ricoeur/article/viewFile/316/159 (accessed February 23, 2016).

[12] Leovino Ma. Garcia, "Paul Ricoeur of Happy Memory" (speech delivered at the Symposium in Homage to Paul Ricoeur at the University of Copenhagen), 2. Unpublished.

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation Sein und Zeit* trans. Joan Stambaugh (USA: State University of New York Press, 1996), 49.

them. Ricoeur places the human being at the center of his philosophical anthropology, striving to understand human existence. He begins his philosophical enterprise by examining the implications of the Cartesian *cogito*, which knows itself, which makes it cease to be a subject and makes it an object; the self doubts everything that exists around him. Because he doubts, he thinks and concludes that by the fact that he thinks, so he exists.[14] This becomes Ricoeur's major consideration "to the point that in the end he came to see the models as 'broken' and in need of reformulation in the problem of selfhood, the selfhood of capable human being."[15]

Moreover, Ricoeur sees man as a capable human being with capacities. One has the capacity to say, act, narrate, and impute to oneself one's actions. One also has the capacity to promise, forgive, and remember. One of man's basic capacities is his ability to be responsible. He claims that man is a responsible self; every human act is imputed to the person who is responsible for all his actions. He expects a reward for his good actions and accepts punishment for his wrongdoings. The capable self is responsible not only for the juridical plane but also for the moral realm; the former is man's responsibility as regards his rights and duties to his subjection to laws and orders while the latter is man's responsibility towards vulnerable others.

### 2.2. Capable Self: The Ability to be Responsible

How does the responsible self holds himself accountable for his actions? In *Oneself as Another,* Paul Ricoeur writes, "[T]he term 'imputation' can be used to designate the act of holding an agent responsible for actions which themselves are considered to be permissible or not permissible."[16] The same is said by Ricoeur on imputability in *Course of Recognition,* he writes,

> The very word suggests the idea of an account, which makes the subjects accountable for their acts, to the point of being able to impute them to themselves. What does this idea add to that of ascription as the attribution of a particular genus of action to its agent? It adds the idea of being able to bear

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[14] David Pellauer, *Ricoeur: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2007), 7.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *OA*, 99.

the consequences of one's acts, in particular of those taken as faults, or wrongs, in which another is reputed to have been the victim.[17]

In other words, the capable man is a responsible man, and as such, all his acts can be imputed on him in that he is accountable for his acts and can bear any of their effects. A young man entering a relationship, a businessperson partnering with others, and a career-oriented person entering religious life are all accountable for their decisions. It is also true when a person takes offense  and is guilty of wrongdoings. A criminal will be penalized as also as a youth offender. A corrupt politician will be punished as well as a student who is caught cheating. This is a noteworthy aspect of the capable self as a responsible self in that the subject can appraise himself. On capability and responsibility in the juridical plane, Ricoeur writes,

> Now we return to the properly ethical level of self–appraisal. We have emphasized its contribution to the establishment of the capable subject, capable of ethico - juridical imputation, capable of being responsible for his actions, of taking the consequences, of making good the damages if charges for acts under civil law and submitting to punishment if they come under criminal law.[18]

Such is man's self-appraisal. He knows himself and he knows that he is a responsible human being. Ricoeur further emphasizes responsibility in the moral and juridical plane, writing that "[o]n the juridical plane, we declare the author responsible for the known or foreseeable effects of his action, among them the harm done to the agent's immediate entourage."[19] In other words, man can submit himself to laws in their manifold forms. He can obey orders, recognize policies, and observe rules and regulations. He faces the consequences of his actions, becoming both blameworthy and praiseworthy.

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[17] Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition,* trans. David Pellauer (USA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 105. Hereafter, *TCR.*

[18] Paul Ricoeur, *The Moral, the Ethical and the Political,* trans. Alison Scott – Baumann in Paul Ricoeur and *The Task of Political Philosophy,* ed. Greg S. Johnson and Dan R. Stiver (UK: Lexington Books, 2013), 17.

[19] *TCR,* 108.

Ricoeur defines responsibility in the moral realm by asking what experiences confront man with moral responsibility and what makes man morally responsible. On the moral plane, he asserts, "It is the other person and others, for whom one is held responsible. As a result of this change in emphasis, the idea of vulnerability others tends to replace damage done as the object of responsibility."[20] In other words, man can be responsible as regards vulnerable others, such as people who are victims, miserable, and suffering. Ricoeur speaks of this form of responsibility in his book, *The Hermeneutics of Action*:

> Consider the birth of a child – its mere existence obliges. We are rendered responsible by the fragile. Yet what does "rendered responsible" mean? When the fragile is not something but someone – an individual, group, community, even humanity – this someone appears to us as entrusted to our care, placed in our custody, or the burden which one takes upon oneself, should not render us inattentive to the other component emphasized by the expression "entrusted to our care" – the fragile as "someone" who relies on us, expects our assistance and care, and trusts that we shall fulfill our obligations. This bond of trust is fundamental.
>
> As intimately related to the request, the injunction, or the imperative, it is important that we encounter trust before suspicion. The result, accordingly, is that in the feeling of responsibility, we *feel* that we are *rendered* responsible for, and by, someone.[21]

Ricoeur defines man's capacity on the juridical and moral plane. In the juridical realm, the capable self knows that he is responsible for his actions, be they blameworthy or praiseworthy. In the moral realm, responsibility is shifted to the subject/victims, i.e., the vulnerable other. From here, we deepen our reflection on the discussion of responsibility as regards human vulnerability.

## 2.3. Responsibility and Human Vulnerability

Paul Ricoeur discusses responsibility in terms of vulnerability. It is in the moral plane that man becomes responsible for the vulnerable other. He

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[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 16.

describes this as a shift of responsibility: "In an age when the victim, the risk of accidents, and harm is done occupy the center of the problematic of the *law* of responsibility, it is not surprising that the vulnerable and the fragile should be equally taken on the *moral* plane for the actual object of responsibility, for the thing for which one is responsible."[22] This form of responsibility involves seeing the other as vulnerable, such as a parent towards their child, a husband to his wife, an educator to their students, and a religious superior to their subjects. David Hall, commenting on Ricoeur's responsibility and vulnerability as the foundation of the self's care for the others, writes:

> This recognition of the other who levels a moral demand, *even in suffering and vulnerability*, signals a broader sense of responsibility than Ricoeur initially assigned. My selfhood is not simply a function of holding myself responsible *for* my actions—past, present, and future. I am also constituted in selfhood in my responsibility *to* another, at once master of justice and the suffering other, who makes demands upon me. This relationship between responsibility *to* and responsibility *for* demands more attention.[23]

In other words, the recognition of moral demands from others in their suffering and vulnerability indicates a greater sense of responsibility beyond holding oneself accountable. It is not because I am compelled to be responsible at the sight of such suffering but because I can be responsible, something that requires attention. Marianne Moyaert writes, "Ricoeur's self is a clearly vulnerable creature marked by unchosen dimensions, caught up in a finite and often distorted world, yet capable of creative transformation and summoned to responsibility".[24] Moreover, going beyond the definition of responsibility concerning fragility, man is responsible because of this ability to accept being "author of one's own acts."[25] In other words, man is responsible because he is capable not only

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[22] Paul Ricoeur, *The Moral, the Ethical and the Political,* 29.

[23] Paul Ricoeur, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension between Love and Justice,* (USA: State University of New York, 2007), 92.

[24] Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters,* (United Kingdom, Lexington Books, 2014), 31.

[25] Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Action*, 16.

because he confronted with the weak human condition. As such, from human vulnerability, Ricoeur describes another shift of responsibility:

> Another displacement, which gives a new inflection, is added to this displacement of the object of responsibility, henceforth directed toward vulnerable others, and, through generalization, toward the very condition of vulnerability itself. We can speak here of an unlimited extension in the *scope* of responsibility, the future vulnerability of humanity and its environment becoming the focal point of responsible concern.[26]

As such, man's capacity to be responsible can be brought to political discourse[27] whereby a politician is held accountable to his constituents, or of man's responsibility to the polis. Man is both a social and political being. In other words, society and politics are part of man's life. Ricoeur emphasizes that man's ability to be responsible is expressed by his care and concern for vulnerable others. This capacity is significant in man's ethical life.

## 2.4. Man: The Capable and Vulnerable Self

According to Ricoeur, humans are both capable and vulnerable beings. Man is capable under his capacities and is vulnerable with his incapacities. He defines man's incapacity as suffering, which "is not defined solely by physical pain, nor even by mental pain, but by the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being – able – to act, experienced as a violation of self-integrity."[28] In other words, just as man is capable of acting, he also experiences its opposite. Man goes through inacting whereby he could have done what he should but ends up incapable of accomplishing them. Ricoeur elaborates on man's experiences of vulnerability and these are the opposite of his capacities. Man is capable but he is also vulnerable. He is vulnerable in that he suffers from inacting.

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[26] *Ibid.*, 29.

[27] It must be noted that this section aims at defining the vulnerability of the human condition which happens to have a kinship with responsibility. This topic of responsibility will also be dealt with in the next section on the capable human being. Moreover, Ricoeur discusses responsibility at length in his book *The Just.* See Paul Ricoeur *The Just,* trans. David Pellauer (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[28] *OA*, 90.

There are times when the human being cannot act, speak, and narrate. He also experiences forgetfulness, breaking promises, and unforgiveness. He, too, cannot be responsible for his actions. Despite these limitations, Ricoeur also acknowledges that humans are powerful beings who can overcome these challenges. he asserts, "[u]nder each of these headings there are incapacities, specific impotencies that correspond to the capacity to speak, to do, to tell, and to impute to oneself the responsibility for one's own acts. Of course, it is such a being of power and impotence – such a capable man…"[29]

In other words, if a man is responsible, he also experiences irresponsibility, i.e., the incapacity to be responsible. He just cannot be responsible. He is incapacitated. He finds himself in a state of passivity, i.e., of inacting. Thus, Ricoeur defines man as both capable and vulnerable, emphasizing man's inherent goodness and responsibility. Man is capable, responsible, and fundamentally good.

## 3. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Rise of Community Pantries

The COVID-19 pandemic caused suffering to Filipinos who could not go out to work and earn money for their living. Offices, factories, and other work-related places were closed. As such, there was a need for food, water, and medicine. Not only did people suffer physically but also mentally and psychologically due to worry for their safety and of loved ones, anxiety about contracting the virus, and the fear of death. Though the government did its best to keep the virus from spreading and slow down its increase by imposing lockdowns and quarantine, still, cases kept on increasing every day. Then came an unexpected event: the rise of community pantries. Suddenly, social media were filled with images of this creation where individuals could reach out to fellow citizens in need of basic goods amid the health crisis.

Since phenomenology is employed in this study, it is necessary to go back to man's lived experiences during the height of the COVID-19

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[29] Paul Ricoeur, "Religious Belief: The Difficult Path of the Religious," in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur,* eds. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 123.

pandemic where community pantries emerged as the means of many Filipinos to thrive and survive the pandemic. The community pantries are articulations of Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan spirit*, as well as other Filipino values that are manifested in it. This also includes the challenges of the authenticity of the community pantries itself.

## 3.1. The Beginnings of the Community Pantries

The community pantry became famous for its motto*: "Kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan, magbigay ayon sa kakayahan"* (Share what you can, take what you need).[30] However, the reason behind the community pantry is more interesting. According to Ana Patricia Non, "[t]his is not a charity. This is like a mutual aid. We're all helping each other."[31] This is because "[m]utual aid is organized with awareness of the oppressive systems that create need and is centered on building solidarity and strength through cultivating direct networks of community care."[32] Moreover, it (mutual aid), "… goes beyond simple charity and patronage - it mobilizes society itself for society itself. In its most advanced form, it can show us a powerful vision of an alternative society – one in which we are no longer imagined as individual brands, consumers, or entrepreneurs in endless competition, but a collective connected by compassion, cooperation, and the spirit of participatory democracy."[33]  Thus, the community pantry began with a simple act and motive of helping one's fellow Filipinos, and this also inspired more people from all walks of life to set up their community pantries. From a simple Maginhawa St. community pantry,

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[30] Robin Gomes, "Community Pantries' for Needy Mushrooming in the Philippines," Vaticannews.Va, April 23, 2021, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-04/philippines-community-pantries-bishops-caritas-kindness-stations.html.

[31] Nikka G. Valenzuela, "Community Pantry: 'Not Charity, but Mutual Aid,'" *Inquirer.Net*, April 18, 2021, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1420463/community-pantry-not-charity-but-mutual-aid (accessed May 24, 2021).

[32] Jennifer Gammage, "Solidarity, Not Charity: Mutual Aid's an-Archic History," *Apaonline.Org*, January 25, 2021, https://blog.apaonline.org/2021/01/25/solidarity-not-charity-mutual-aids-an-archic-history/ (accessed May 21, 2021).

[33] Cf. Matthew Whitley, "Why 'Mutual Aid'? – Social Solidarity, Not Charity," Opendemocracy.*Net,* July 14, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/why-mutual-aid-social-solidarity-not-charity/ (accessed May 21, 2021).

many followed, and it became widespread all over the country. With this phenomenon, the community pantries became an event that poor and needy Filipinos went to during the pandemic.

### 3.2. Community Pantries: On Filipino Values and Other Challenges

The significance of community pantries lay in their unprecedented widespread impact, which turned them into a movement. They reflected the positive Filipino values such as goodness, benevolence, and helpfulness, and were viewed by many as an act of empathy, compassion, and charity towards neighbors. Others saw them as a demonstration of Filipino hospitality, humanity, and altruism.[34] The community pantries displayed not just generosity, but also showed respect and consideration towards others. People who waited in line only took what was necessary for themselves and their families, taking into account the needs of others who were also in need.[35] These pantries became a means to help those in need and alleviate the suffering of the poor during the pandemic.

These concepts problematize the authenticity of community pantries and challenge the sincerity of the practice of values. However, it is important to note that these are mere speculations, and we cannot definitively know the intentions of those who set up community pantries. While some may have started with impure intentions, the experience of witnessing people in need waiting patiently in line may have purified their hearts. It is not the purpose of this paper to investigate the genuineness of intentions or sincerity of those behind community pantries, but rather to acknowledge the potential complexities of the phenomenon and to encourage a balanced discussion.

While it is noteworthy that community pantries were seen as a reflection of Filipino values, it is important to examine the other side of the coin to ensure a complete and impartial discussion. It is crucial to view

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[34] Cf. Juli Suazo, "What the Community Pantry Movement Means for Filipinos' *CNN Philippines,* April 19, 2021. http://www.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2021/4/19/community-pantry-filipinos-pandemic.html

[35] Cf. Andrea, Chloe Wong, Philippines community pantries give help – and send a message' *The Interpreter,* May 6, 2021. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/philippines-community-pantries-give-help-send-message

Filipinos' lived experiences from different perspectives and acknowledge that community pantries may not always be set up with pure intentions. The phenomenon of the *gaya-gaya* mentality, a concept used to describe people who follow the trend and engage in acts for the sake of gaining attention or recognition, can also be applied to community pantries. This mentality encompasses clout chasing, the bandwagon effect, and FOMO (fear of missing out).[36] These concepts problematize the authenticity of community pantries and challenge the sincerity of the practice of values.

First is clout chasing,[37] which is doing something to be famous. However, this is quite the negative way whereby an individual does things just to gain attention, acceptance, and recognition. The second is the bandwagon effect,[38] which is doing a certain thing because it became viral and trending. Filipinos engage in doing things since the act, speech, or drama became famous and became the talk of the town. The third is the FOMO mentality,[39] which occurs when a person sees his peers, group, or community doing something and does not want to be left out. When the community pantry becomes appears to be satisfying, the person joins; he never wants to miss anything of the experience.

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[36] Here, I defined these modern concepts and tweak them a little bit. For the usual definition, I will place the dictionary definition for every concept. The use of a dictionary is very Ricoeurian in that Paul Ricoeur made use of available dictionaries during his time, especially in his engagement on the definition of 'recognition.' This can be found in his book *The Course of Recognition.*

[37] In the *Urban Dictionary*, clout chasing is defined this way: /klout 'CHāsər/ noun: a person who strategically associates themselves with the success of a popular person or a currently contemporary trend to gain fame and attention. This personality disorder is often resembled, "riding the wave' without concern for damage or integrity. cf. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Clout%20Chaser.

[38] In the APA Dictionary of Psychology, the bandwagon effect is defined as "the tendency for people in social and sometimes political situations to align themselves with the majority opinion and do or believe things because many other people appear to be doing or believing the same." cf. https://dictionary.apa.org/bandwagon-effect.

[39] In the *Cambridge Dictionary*, FOMO is defined as an "abbreviation for 'fear of missing out': a worried feeling that you may miss exciting events that other people are going to, especially caused by things you see on social media." Cf. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/fomo.

These concepts are appropriated as recent manifestations of *gaya-gaya* mentality to the event of community pantries. While this reality is possible, this paper is not to investigate the genuineness of the intentions and the sincerity of those people behind the community pantries. This matter should be left to human and social sciences. Moreover, while the community pantries aim at helping the poor, needy, and vulnerable, it is not always received as expected. Challenges are posed to community pantries such as people taking advantage of them by getting more than what they are supposed to get or cutting in line. *"Naging sakim yung iba"* (Others became greedy). Unfortunately, community pantries did not sit well with the government. Not only was it red tagged,[40] but it was suggested that setting up any community pantry would require a permit[41] from the local government.

### 3.3. On *Kapwa, Pakikipagkapwa–Tao* and *Bayanihan* Spirit[42]

#### *Kapwa:* The Filipino Christian others

Before we explore the Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit*,* we must first define what *kapwa* means. *Kapwa* is translated into English as a fellow human and neighbor. Firstly, *kapwa* is a neighbor. Neighbor comes from the Latin word *proxima* which means nearby. Thus, one can find English derivatives like 'approximate,' 'approximation,' and 'proximate' to mean nearness. This section is divided into three parts: the first explores the Filipino psyche of *kapwa;* the second discusses *pakikipagkapwa–tao;* and the last focuses on *bayanihan* spirit*. Kapwa* has many meanings such as neighbors, fellow human beings,

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[40] Iya Gozum, "Red-Tagging of Community Pantry Sparks Uproar Online," *Rappler,* April 21, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/moveph/philippine-government-red-tagging-community-pantry-sparks-uproar-online/

[41] Christia Marie Ramos, "Permit Needed for Community Pantries to Ensure Safety – Security – DILG Exec." *Inquirer.Net,* April 20, 2021, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1425070/dilgs-final-answer-no-permit-for-community-pantries-but-they-must-coordinate-with-govt.  However, after nine days, the government eventually allowed the setting up of community pantries even without a permit. The organizers are asked to coordinate instead. cf.

[42] *Kapwa* is understood as one's neighbor, the other people, or one's fellow. *Pakikipagkapwa–Tao* is the person's relation with others. *Bayanihan* spirit is the collective performative action of the community. Such definitions and understanding of the aforementioned Filipino words are employed throughout the article.

or other people. Virgilio Enriquez Jr., the father of Filipino psychology, observes:

> A person starts having *kapwa* not so much because of a recognition of status given to him by others but more so because of his awareness of shared identity. The *ako* (ego) and the *iba-sa-akin* (others) are one and the same in *kapwa* psychology: *Hindi ako iba sa aking kapwa* (I am no different from others). Once *ako* starts thinking of himself as different from *kapwa*, in effect, denies the status of *kapwa* to the other. [43]

In other words, *kapwa* means people whom one considers as fellow persons. Such recognition of others as oneself stems from the very understanding of one's humanity. It means treating others not as another person *(di – ibang tao)* but as a person whom one shares the same identity with.

Moreover, "[t]he core value of Filipino personhood is *kapwa*. This idea of a 'shared self' opens up the heart-doors of the I to include the Other. It bridges the deepest individual recess of a person with anyone outside him or herself, even total strangers. Here, it is not important if you are rich or poor, or what your status in society is.[44] It is for this reason that *pakikipagkapwa–tao* is anchored in his *kapwa*. Entering into relationship is called *pakikipagkapwa–tao*. In *pakikipagkapwa*, one needs to deal and accept another person with respect, dignity, and with equality."[45] Further, one can establish a good relationship with others when he/she sees them as oneself. It is not seeing them as an *'ibang-tao'* (another person) but seeing them as *'hindi ibang-tao'* (not another person). It is also for this reason that Filipinos would often joke about others when feeling awkward in their presence. They would say, *"para kang another"* (as if you are

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[43] Virgilio G. Enriquez, "Kapwa: A Core Concept in Filipino Psychology," in *Philippine World View,* ed. Virgilio G. Enriquez (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 12.

[44] Katrin De Guia, "Indigenous Filipino Values: A Foundation for a Culture of Non-Violence," in *Towards a Culture of Non-Violence*, n.d., https://aboutphilippines.org/files/Indigenous-Filipino-Values.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021).

[45] Glenn M. Calaguas, "Investigating Social Competency in the Filipino Context." *Asia-Pacific Science and Culture Journal* 1 (2012): 9, https://www.academia.edu/27806759/Investigating_Social_Competency_in_the_Filipino_Context (accessed May 17, 2021).

another*)*, or "*di ka iba sa amin*" (you're not different). This emphasizes oneness, togetherness, and sameness with others.

Further, being a predominantly Catholic country, the Filipino values are accentuated by the Gospel of Christ. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus asks, "Who is my neighbor?"[46] It is a narrative that Jesus uses to teach the lesson of charity towards neighbor beyond the constraints of culture, belief system, and ethnicity. This becomes a similar question for people who consider who to be a beneficiary of their help. *Sino ang aking kapwa?*  Jesus answers that anyone can be one's neighbor. In other words, one's neighbor would also mean strangers, enemies, or those who may be different from oneself; anyone who is in need, victims of injustice, and those who are in pain and suffering.  *Kapwa* is closest to the definition of Jesus which means people other than oneself; it can be anyone and everyone. As such, one's charity toward neighbors must not have any considerations of economic, political, and academic background. These people include those who are forgotten, neglected, and unknown; they can also be found in the peripheries of society. Pope Benedict XVI reflecting on the parable writes,

> Aren't we surrounded by people who have been robbed and battered? The victims of drugs, of human trafficking, of sex tourism, inwardly devastated people who sit empty in the midst of material abundance. All this is of concern to us; it calls us to have the eye and the heart of a neighbor, and to have the courage to love our neighbor."[47]

Filipinos' notion of *kapwa* is enriched by the Gospel ideals. The impact, influence, and principles of the religion, church, and ecclesiastical authorities have greatly contributed to the values formation of the Filipinos. Given the predominance of Catholicism in the country, the role of the Catholic Church in shaping the Filipino perspective, values, and traits is widely recognized. The teachings of Jesus on loving our neighbors serve

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[46] Cf. Lk 10:25–37.

[47] Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (Doubleday, 2007), 198-199 cited Francisco Varo, 2019. "Commentary on the Gospel: The Good Samaritan," Opus Dei, July 8, 2019, https://opusdei.org/en/gospel/commentary-on-the-gospel-the-good-samaritan/ (accessed May 24, 2021)

as a tangible expression of one's love for God. Consequently, the Filipino notion of *kapwa* extends beyond considerations of ethnicity, belief systems, or backgrounds, transcending any limitations, constructs, or cultural boundaries. For Filipino Christians, the term *kapwa* embodies the meaning that Jesus intended. This is why the Filipino concept of *kapwa* encompasses not only those nearby but also anyone who is regarded as oneself. Additionally, *kapwa* may connote individuals who are different from oneself, referred to *as ibang tao*.

## On *Pakikipagkapwa–Tao*,[48] and *Bayanihan* Spirit

*Pakikipagkapwa–tao* is a Filipino virtue that emphasizes offering help to others and being considerate towards them, while the *bayanihan* spirit is a value that involves collective action to assist the community. Both virtues are a source of strength for Filipinos and enable them to respond to the needs of those around them. Both values share a common focus on *kapwa*, or the well-being of others, as the object of their actions.

### *Pakikipagkapwa–tao*: Seeing others as oneself

*Pakikipagkapwa–tao* is a Filipino value that is taught and learned at home, school, and in church. Parents raise their children to love one another and to be mindful of each other's needs. They also teach their children to be considerate of others and to value concern and care for others. These values help Filipinos become considerate and hospitable to others, which leads to other virtues such as friendliness, hospitality, and charity (love) for other people. Virgilio Enriquez defines *pakikipagkapwa–tao:*

> *Pakikipagkapwa* is much deeper and profound in its implications. It also means accepting and dealing with other people as equal. The company president and the clerk in an office may not have an equivalent role, status, or income but the Filipino way demands and implements the idea that they treat one another as fellow human beings *(kapwa–tao).* This means regard for the dignity and being of others.[49]

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[48] In this paper, the researcher uses *pakikipagkapwa–tao* to mean *pakikipagkapwa*. There are writers who use *pakikipagkapwa* while others utilize *pakikipagkapwa-tao*. However, they both mean the same thing.

[49] Enriquez, "Kapwa: A Core Concept in Filipino Psychology," 16.

In other words, *pakikipagkapwa–tao* is a recognition of one's *kapwa* as an equal who shares the same dignity as oneself. It allows one to go beyond the superficial differences among people and recognize them as fellow human beings.  Moreover, according to Jim Jove Aguas, a Filipino philosopher, *pakikipagkapwa–tao* as "the core value of *kapwa–tao* is expressed in the value or practice of *pakikipagkapwa–tao.* Because of *pakikipagkapwa–tao,* Filipinos are open to others and empathize with others. Because of *pakikipagkapwa–tao*, they regard others with dignity and respect and deal with them as fellow human beings."[50]

*Pakikipagkapwa–tao* is a core value of *kapwa–tao* expressed through the practice of treating others with dignity and respect as fellow human beings. It is a virtue that describes both intra-personal and interpersonal relationships among Filipinos. It enables them to empathize with others and treat them as equals regardless of their position, status, or background.

Community pantries showcase the Filipino value of *pakikipagkapwa–tao*, which recognizes neighbors as equals deserving of respect, love, and consideration. This empathy stems from the belief that although individuals have their own distinct identities, they share the same human dignity. When Filipinos witness others in need, they understand and empathize with their experiences and are moved to help, as they view their neighbors as human beings like themselves.

### *Bayanihan* spirit: The community spirit

The *bayanihan* spirit embodies the Filipino value of community helping their *kapwa* in need. According to Gertrudes Ang, the *bayanihan* spirit is an ancient Filipino custom that symbolizes the idea of group work. This core Filipino value entails both individual and communal action to

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[50] Jove Jim S. Aguas, "The Filipino Value of Pakikipagkapwa–Tao Vis-À-Vis Gabriel Marcel's Notion of Creative Fidelity and Disponibilitè," *Scientia: Research Journal of the College of Arts and Sciences, San Beda University* (2016): 26, https://www.academia.edu/33176692/THE_FILIPINO_VALUE_OF_PAKIKIPAGKAPWA_TAO_VIS_%C3%80_VIS_GABRIEL_MARCELS_NOTION_OF_CREATIVE_FIDELITY_AND_DISPONIBILIT%C3%88 (accessed May 16, 2021).

aid the community. It is known as *tulongan* or *damayan*, which is a system of mutual help that serves as the backbone of family and village life in the Philippines. It can also be expressed as *pagkakaisa,* which means to be one or united. In essence, the *bayanihan* spirit fosters togetherness and unity in the community as they help others.[51] One website states that it involves "helping one's neighbor as a community and doing a task together, thus lessening the workload and making the job easier," and is also referred to as the "community spirit."[52] The iconic image of Filipino men carrying a *bahay-kubo*[53] *(nipa house)* on their shoulders to transfer it to another location, followed by the owner of the house feeding them afterward, epitomizes the b*ayanihan* spirit. From then on, it becomes the embodiment of any form or action that the people render to the community. This spirit is deeply ingrained in the Filipino psyche, where every collective help offered and given to the community represents the *bayanihan* spirit. As one young man observes, "[t]he *bayanihan* spirit shows Filipinos' concept of supporting each other most especially in times of need." Another important aspect of this spirit is the willingness to help without expecting anything in return, reflecting the strong belief among Filipinos in supporting their *kababayans* (fellow countrymen).[54]

In the first year of the pandemic, Filipinos from different walks of life contributed in various ways, exemplifying the *bayanihan* spirit. According to local artists, designers, and entrepreneurs, they stepped out of their comfort zones to lend a hand to the nation's frontliners against the disease.[55] However, the country was hit by Typhoon Ulysses, causing

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[51] Cf. Gertrudes R. Ang, "The *Bayanihan* Spirit: Dead or Alive?" *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 7, no. 1/2 (1979): 91, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29791626.

[52] "Filipino Culture: Bayanihan: The Filipino Value That Must Be Retained," *Everything-Filipino.Com.,* May 28, 2015. https://everything-filipino.com/filipino-culture-bayanihan-the-filipino-value-that-must-be-retained/.

[53] Bahay kubo is known to be the Filipinos' traditional house which is usually being carried by men in the neighborhood to transfer to another place. The collective action is believed to be the beginning of bayanihan spirit. Cf. https://themixedculture.com/2013/09/25/filipinos-bayanihan/

[54] Samly, "*Bayanihan*: Communal Spirit in Philippines," *Asiancustoms.Eu.,* May 7, 2019. https://asiancustoms.eu/bayanihan/.

[55] Office of Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, "*Bayanihan Ni Juan*: The Filipino Spirit at Its Finest." *Gov.Ph.,* April 13, 2020, https://peace.gov.ph/2020/04/bayanihan-ni-juan-the-filipino-spirit-at-its-finest/.

damage to properties, homes, and the lives of affected Filipinos. The true *bayanihan* spirit[56] fueled the Filipinos' care, concern, and charity, resulting in swift aid to the affected areas. Not only adults but young people are also committed to offering help, setting up hotlines to facilitate rescuers' quick response, conducting online donation drives, and offering psychological counseling for debriefing and processing. Help came in the form of soup kitchens, food packs, and other forms of aid. It was the same *bayanihan* spirit that moved Filipinos to set up community pantries during the pandemic.

The *bayanihan* spirit embodies the Filipino values of charity, generosity, and helpfulness and is a core human value that they will be known for. This spirit motivates them to be united in helping the community and their *kababayans* (fellow Filipinos). Indeed, the community pantries are a concrete manifestation of the Filipinos' *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit, which inspire, move, and strengthen people to help one another during difficult times and challenges.


## 4.  The Filipino as Responsible Human Beings

Paul Ricoeur's concept of the capable human being, particularly man's capacity to be responsible, finds expression in the Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan spirit*. These values reflect Filipinos' strong sense of responsibility towards others, especially during times of difficulty and challenge such as the pandemic.

Ricoeur recognizes the fragility of the human condition and asserts that man is  responsible towards the vulnerable other. This is exemplified by the Filipino people who have shown empathy and compassion towards the poor, needy, and suffering individuals during the pandemic. The Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit are manifested through their responses and actions towards these vulnerable individuals.

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[56] "Filipino *Bayanihan* Spirit Brings Relief, Attention to Typhoon Ulysses Victims," *Rappler*, November 17, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/moveph/filipinos-bayanihan-brings-disaster-relief-attention-typhoon-ulysses-victims.

Moreover, Ricoeur emphasizes that the capable man recognizes himself as a capable human being in the same way that he sees others as himself. This recognition leads to action, as the capable man works with others to help those in need. These actions also reflect the Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit.

However, Ricoeur also acknowledges that human vulnerability is present in the human condition. Such vulnerability is manifested during the pandemic, not just in those who are suffering but also in those who may be motivated by wrong intentions in setting up community pantries such as fear of missing out (fomo), clout chasing, and bandwagon mentality. These experiences reveal man's fragility, but Ricoeur also highlights man's capability over and above his vulnerability. Thus, those who may have been motivated by wrong intentions can overcome their desires for social media fame and those who may have grown tired will eventually overcome their physical and mental exhaustion.

Ultimately, Ricoeur's philosophy underscores the importance of recognizing oneself as a capable human being, despite one's vulnerabilities. This is particularly relevant to the concept of *kapwa*, the subject, and object of the Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan spirit.* By recognizing their capabilities, Filipinos are not only able to receive help but also contribute to the continuous operation of community pantries.

In short, Ricoeur's concept of the capable human being is relevant to the Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit. These values reflect the Filipinos' strong sense of responsibility towards others, particularly during the pandemic. By recognizing their capabilities and vulnerabilities, Filipinos can demonstrate empathy, compassion, and generosity towards others, contributing to the greater good of their communities.

## 5. Conclusion

The community pantry movement emerged as a solution to address the issues of poverty, hunger, and the needs of the poor during

the coronavirus pandemic. Although the community pantry and kindness stations may not provide a permanent solution, their impact in alleviating hunger for many people was significant. While the pandemic may be winding down and community pantries no longer exist, the emergence of these initiatives has proven something significant about the Filipino people – their strong sense of social responsibility. Regardless of the circumstances, whether it be a pandemic or natural calamities, Filipinos will continue to help and support one another. In other words, the values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit will continue to thrive and manifest themselves in various forms to address any future challenges that may arise for the Filipino people.

The Filipino people have shown remarkable responsibility by recognizing the vulnerability of others and treating them as equals. This demonstrates the concept of man as a responsible human being, as articulated by philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa–tao* and *bayanihan* spirit embody the notion of a capable human being with a sense of responsibility. Each Filipino has the ability and responsibility to care for the vulnerable other, as Ricoeur argues that man is responsible not because of external pressures but because he can do so. Therefore, every Filipino can say with confidence, "I can. I am responsible."

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# Anglicized Krishna in India:
# A Study on God-Posters in ISKCON

*Ankita Patra*[1]

## Abstract

*The International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is a testimony to the emergence of new religious-cultural imagination for a virtuous landscape in Odisha. Calendar art and God-poster in ISKCON represents an alternative identity to its believers. The bourgeoning circulation of this new genre of calendar art stands in stark contrast with the existing calendar art and the God poster of religious theme in the Odia's society. The art is introducing novelty to the popular imagination and the life-world of the onlookers and the believers. The ISKCON's God poster enables the cultivation of 'habituation' among the followers of the utopian imagination. This article discusses the subtle blend of the new emerging genre of calendar art/God-poster in the religious visual piety with the existing religious-cultural imagination in Odisha. The article also presents the in-depth study of the devotees and their engagement with this new genre of calendar art and God-poster. Through the study, the article illustrates how the new calendar art is carving a niche for itself in creating the desired religious imagination. The discussion contributes to the sociology of religion and visual studies.*

**Keywords:** *visual culture, calendar art, God-poster, ISKCON, religious imagination*

## 1. Introduction

To see and to be seen by the image of the deity is an important religious activity in Hinduism. These images vary from idols to

[1] ***Ankita Patra, PhD*** is presently a faculty in Liberal Arts in ICFAI Tripura, India. She holds a MA in Sociology, a MPhil in Sociology of Religion, and a PhD in Sociology of Religion. Her research interests lie in sociology of religion and religiosity in India.

pocket-sized pictures to wallpapers on desktops of personal computers. The motifs of the pictures are creative reflections of the artists who draw inspiration from the myriad sacred literature in Hinduism. The deities depicted in the pictures bear bodily features similar to those of Indians. However, there is a visible difference in the depiction of the deities brought by the religious movement in India. This new depiction stands in contrast to the already existing depiction of the same. Some have observed such bodily differences in the depiction of the Hindu deities (Lutgendrof 1999). With the conspicuous presence of new religious movements in India, such as the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), there is a noticeable introduction of a new type of image of the central deity, Krishna, in the pictures. Therefore, this article firstly examines the difference of the bodily aspects of the two varieties of images in relation to ISKCON. Secondly, it discusses the process through which the older versions of the pictures are being replaced by the newer ones. Lastly, the article evaluates the implications of this change.

The article draws on studies of God-posters in India and borrows theoretical concepts from the Sociology of Religion to explain the process through which the newer depictions become an integral part of the onlookers. In addition, the theoretical framework justifies the implications of these changes.

## 2. The God Posters in Hinduism

### 2.1. The Role of God-Posters in the Past and Present

According to Smith (1995), God-posters are a popular genre of devotional pictures also known as calendar art. This category of art is cheap and easily available in India. People buy God-posters and use them as calendars or frame the pictures and offer worship in their personal altars. The God-posters scaffold the act of *darshan*, which is to see and be seen by the image of the deity (Eck 1991). *Darshan* is a crucial activity that emphasizes the role of God-posters in India, as it is an inter-ocular experience. *Darshan* has been the subject of academic attention, with scholars such as Eck (2007), Babb (1981), Fuller (2004), Pinney (1997), Vidal (2015), and Srinivas (2008) examining the concept and practice.

Morgan (1998) argues that in contemporary democratic societies, there is a significant value in scholarly engagement with visual culture. The scholars contend that in India, the visual culture has been transformed due to imperial interaction, followed by a boom in mechanical production of images, which serves as a common backdrop for various discussions. Ramaswamy's (2003) study focuses on the role of visual culture in modernity in India. It was during this period that India experienced the mass production and mechanical reproduction of new visuals, contributing to the construction of a new nation and a new public sphere. Popular images, which were cheaply produced and loaded with meanings and idioms, were embraced by both the rich and the poor. Although these prints lacked originality and authenticity, they appealed to the masses by visualizing a new society and a new India. These images were produced as lithographs, chromolithographs, and posters.

Jain's (2007) monograph on God-posters examines interrelated issues such as the efficiency of representation, the authority of visual evidence, the notion of fine art, art as an arbiter of social distinction, and commodity. The market was an essential component of this new visual culture in India. Jain's scholarly exegesis reveals the site called the market or bazaar, which consumes and produces mass-produced popular images. Jain (2011a) contrasts the western notion of market with the native meaning of bazaar, which is embedded in the Hindu joint family, informality, and moral economy. Political meanings, cultural idioms, and religious fervor were the three prevalent themes of these images.

One sub-genre of calendar art that is widely popular in India is God-posters. Smith's (1995) extensive study on God-posters identified three categories in India, each with distinct themes. The "Supernatural" category features popular gods and goddesses like Ganesha, Krishna, Shiva, and Durga. The second category includes posters of saints, and the third group is posters of sacred sites. This article focuses on the central role of this category of art in ISKCON, which not only captures the attention of its devotees but also introduces novelty to the popular imagination of onlookers and believers.

Compared to the existing calendar art and God posters in India, ISKCON's God-posters represent an alternative identity for its believers. The growing circulation of this new genre of calendar art stands in stark contrast to the existing art in India. Devotees, believers, and admirers

of ISKCON interface and internalize this new genre of art through the devotional act of *darshan*. In ISKCON, devotees view the deity's image during the auspicious hours of the day when they offer *puja*.[2] God-posters are useful during these times as they enable devotees to retain a pictorial image of the deity for *darshan*[3].

## 2.2. The God-Posters and the Corporeality

Scholars have extensively studied bodies and corporeality in the context of popular visuals, and there has been a noticeable shift in the topics discussed within this area. Lutgendrof's (2003) essay offers three perspectives on the subject, and this article aligns itself with one of those perspectives. Lutgendorf (2003) observes that there has been a transformation in the representation of the popular Hindu deity, Hanuman, from a hairy to a hairless, humanized muscular form. According to him, this transformation is a response to late-colonial and post-colonial anxieties over humanity in the Ramayana's good subaltern. Ramaswamy (2003) supports this observation.

Pinney (2011) notes a visible shift in aesthetics in popular visual cultures, which can be read as resistance to colonial perspectives in colonial India. The concept of "corpothetics," which engages the viewer with the image due to the liveliness of the subject, was in contrast to the colonial art masters' "absorptive" aesthetics. The latter introduced the notion of "absorptive" aesthetics, which was based on an absent viewer and no eye-contact. Calendar art and popular God-posters in the post-Independence era were a revival of "corpothetical" aesthetics. In this context, Pinney (1995) discusses popular calendar art with corpothetics as anti-colonial in nature.

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[2] *Puja* is an important act of devotional ritual among the theistic Hindus. It is conducted by burning scented smoke and incense sticks in front of the deity's image (for a detailed discussion on *Puja see Christopher Fuller, The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 56-82. http://library.lol/main/C744D1447D56C970DFE20A5ADEFB0678

[3]*Darshan* is exchange of vision (for a detailed discussion on *darshan* see Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg: Anima, 1981), 6 and Christopher Fuller*, The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 59-60.http://library.lol/main/C744D1447D56C970DFE20A5ADEFB0678

During the post-independence era, popular visual practices reflected the birth of nascent forms of nationalities that carried "dangerous corporality" (Pinney 1995, xxii).

## 3. The Socio-Religious Context: The ISKCON, the God-Posters and the Corporeality

Thus far the article has discussed the God-posters and the aspects of the God-posters in India. In this section, the article introduces the ISKCON and the ISKCON in Odisha then locates the God-posters in ISKCON; and illustrates the differences of which the ISKCON is making in order to assert its presence.

### 3.1. The ISKCON

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is a renowned devotional movement that is easily recognizable by its Vaishnavas worldwide. Founded by Srila Prabhupada in the 1960s, ISKCON is a Vaishnava *sampradaya*[4] that encourages individuals to eliminate the ills of modern life through love and devotion to Krishna. Prabhupada was a charismatic Vaishnava leader-guru who inspired Americans to adopt a lifestyle based on love and devotion to Krishna. He went to the United States to spread the message of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, where he started the Hare Krishna movement in the 1960s. The devotees of ISKCON are renowned for their vibrant and dynamic ways of conducting congregational gatherings and singing *sankirtan*.[5]

ISKCON has numerous legendary national and international followers, and it has over five hundred centers across the globe. The organization's headquarters are located in Mayapur, West Bengal, India, and feature developed and complex buildings and guest houses for devotees and visitors. The Governing Body Commission (GBC) is responsible for a variety of activities ranging from global interventions in food relief,

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[4] *Sampradaya* means sect. For a detailed discussion see Lawrence A Babb, "Sects and Indian Religion," *Handbook of Indian Sociology*, ed. Veena Das (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 223-241.

[5] *Sankritan* is congregational singing and chanting in unison.

education, environmental conservation, and various congregational social services. ISKCON has several local centers in India and different countries worldwide.

In academic literature, there is a debate regarding the taxonomic categorization of ISKCON. According to Robbins (1988), ISKCON has been studied as a sect or cult in western society, as well as in the context of new religious movements in America into adaptive movements and marginal movements. ISKCON, also known as "Hare Krishna," attracted social dropouts from American society, primarily American youth. Other themes that have shaped the trajectory of the studies on ISKCON are the issue of power within the movement, which manifested in a renegade community, economic reforms, financial independence, and the place of family and sexuality in ISKCON.

In the Indian context, Brooks (1979) studied ISKCON, explaining the interaction between non-Indian ISKCON devotees and Indian Hindu pilgrims. He relied on symbolic interactionism to explain the interaction between both groups. Leman and Roos (2007) discussed ISKCON in Belgium in the context of "the process" through which individuals become devotees. The studies have discussed the non-Indian origins of ISKCON and the organization's Indian roots at the same time.

By juxtaposing the studies by Babb (2003), Rao (2005) with Okita (2012) the debate emerges. The first two scholars include the ISKCON in the folds of Vaishnavism whereas Okita (2012) discusses the conflict between the Madhvas and the ISKCON followers. According to Okita (2012), the Madhvas of the Udupi declare that the contemporary ISKCON followers are not authentic and hence should not be identified with the Madhvas. This debate not only highlights the intra-*sampradaya* conflict but also raises questions regarding the location of ISKCON in Vaishnavism vis-à-vis Hinduism.

### 3.2. ISKCON in Odisha

Following the pan-Indian phenomenon, Odisha also underwent the effects of neo-liberalism in the 1990s and witnessed the state's shift from syncretic tradition to communalism, as noted by Kanungo (2014).

However, Odisha is not limited to the dynamics of communalism and has also experienced a 'soft revolution' with the emergence of the middle class, as Rustau (2003) has pointed out. Based on first-hand experience, the article states that Odisha is also witnessing a recent upsurge of the 'New Spirituality' breed of people-centric spiritual movements, such as the Ramdev Baba yoga groups and Art of Living groups, as noted by Gooptu (2016, 934-974). Besides ISKCON, Odisha hosts other religious movements such as the Brahmo Kumari, Gayatri Mata movement, and Osho movement.

One of the most intriguing features of ISKCON is that, on the one hand, its global presence makes it prominent, and on the other hand, its presence in Odisha makes it contentious in the land of indigenous Vaishnava deity Lord Jagannath. This relation sets it apart from other Indic origin religious movements that have made their presence in Odisha. In the popular imagination and worldview of Odias, Odisha is associated with the deity Lord Jagannath. The collective memory of the Odia rhetoric of valor is identified with Jagannath, which withstood several invasions in the past. The intertwining of Jagannath in the life-world of the Odia milieu has been studied by international scholars such as Eschmann, Kulke, and Tripathi (1978), Kulke and Schnepal (2001), Apffel-Marglin (1985, 2008a), and Kanungo (2003).

Jagannath is a male deity who belongs to the pantheon of Vaishnavism. He is considered as the *avatar* or the reincarnation of the Lord Vishnu. He is worshipped with his consorts-siblings, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra, who are also considered as the avatars of Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Durga, respectively. In the Vaishnava religious landscape, Jagannatha's Puri Temple is considered the most sacred pilgrim center, as one of the *Chardhams*.[6]

### 3.3. ISKCON in Bhubaneswar

By drawing on hagiographies and devotional accounts, the article traces the origins of ISKCON in Bhubaneswar, focusing on the founder and his Odia disciple who took the leadership role. The article also explores the complex relationship between ISKCON and the Odia community. Because Srila Prabhupada, the founder-guru of

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[6] Four important pilgrim centres in the Hindu sacred geography.

ISKCON, included foreigners as devotees, they were denied entry into the Jagannatha Temple in Puri because foreigners are considered as *mleccha*[7] (Das 2012, 59). However, the first ISKCON temple in Odisha was built in Bhubaneswar and was named the Krishna Balaram Temple.

Following the legal contestation by the self-proclaimed savior of Jagannath culture in Odisha, the Jagannatha Sena it is observed that the presence of ISKCON is problematic in Odisha, in particular and in India, in general. The convener contests the authenticity of ISKCON as a religion. According to the Jagannatha Sena, ISKCON does not follow the traditional Hindu calendar[8] which makes the ISKCON–centric celebration inauthentic.

Besides the above-discussed anecdote, the ISKCON's soteriology considers Lord Jagannatha as one form (*swaroopa*) of Lord Krishna. Instead of a debate about the descendance of Krishna from Jagannatha or otherwise, the article borrows the term 'tradition' from Srinivas (2008, 45) to include the number of "complementarity, parallelism, reinvention, and reincarnation, rather than purely a lineage of leaders and successors" (Srinivas 2008, 45). Therefore, in the 'tradition' of ISKCON, Jagannatha is worshipped along with the Krishna, Balaram, Nitai Gour and Chaitanya and the *panch* (five*)* Goswami.

The ethnographic material discussed in this article is based in Bhubaneswar, also known as the "City of Temples" and the capital of the state, Odisha. With a population of 840,834, the city has gained attention from national and international information technology companies over the past decade, resulting in an influx of migrants from all over the country. Bhubaneswar is also home to many renowned educational and healthcare institutions. The migrants who have come to Bhubaneswar are generally well-educated professionals, including those who have migrated from within the state in search of better job opportunities and educational facilities. The Odisha government is developing innovative urban plans to make Bhubaneswar a smart city with improved rapid

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[7] Barbarians and the meat-eaters.
[8] See Christopher Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 291-Appendix. http://library.lol/main/C744D1447D56C970DFE20A5ADEFB0678

transport systems. Popular news articles have portrayed Bhubaneswar as a city of rapid development and modernization.

The majority of ISKCON devotees in Bhubaneswar are Hindu, Odia-speaking, educated urbanites employed in white-collar and blue-collar jobs. They include retired bank officers, schoolteachers, college lecturers, and managers in private and small software companies in the state. These devotees live in nuclear families in Bhubaneswar, and their children often pursue education outside of Odisha and even secure jobs outside of the state or abroad. Some of the grown-up children of the devotees are settled abroad. A significant number of devotees belong to the IT sector in the state, but there are also followers from petty jobs and small-time businesses rooted in extended families consisting of elderly parents and children who have finished their college education. They maintain frequent reference and connections to their community in their village.

The Krishna Balaram Temple, which belongs to the ISKCON temple, is located in the Nayapalli area of Bhubaneswar. According to hagiography and the devotees, this location carries immense importance because Prabhupada claimed that one day it would become the "heart of the city," and the Krishna Balaram Temple would be one of the best ISKCON centers in the world (Das, 55). This article focuses on the Krishna Balaram Temple in Bhubaneswar as a case study because it contains the temple complex that has been replicated in other parts of Odisha. The temple premises consist of the main temple complex, the saint's hermitage, and the dining hall. The sacralization of the spot in Bhubaneswar where the temple is located was gradual and was led by the Odia Vaishnava leader Swami Gour Govind, who was a direct disciple of Srila Prabhupada. The temple utilizes Back to Godhead, published by the BBT, and Bhagvat Darsha, published by Gopal Jiu, which are monthly magazines of the movement.

Based on the commitment to remain celibate and renunciate, there are three groups of devotees in ISKCON Bhubaneswar. The first group is the *Sannyasis*, who lead a single, celibate, austere, and peripatetic life. They wear ochre-colored clothes and initiate novice devotees into the order. The *dikhya* gurus belong to this group of devotees. The second

group of devotees is the *Brahmacharis*, who are identified by their white clothing that depicts their celibate state for a temporary period and full-time involvement in temple activities. They work closely with the *Sannyasi* group and learn self-discipline techniques while executing temple administration and other day-to-day activities. This group consists of both men and women and members have the option to marry later in life and become *Grihastha* devotees. The last and third groups of devotees are the householders or the *Grihasthas*. This group consists of married people who have households and are involved in both worldly and temple activities. The entrants or enthusiasts work closely with all three groups mentioned above.

In ISKCON Bhubaneswar, a wide range of activities is led by two groups of trainers: the *sikhya* gurus and the *dikhya* gurus. The *sikhya* gurus are mentors who instruct ISKCON enthusiasts in the techniques and attitudes necessary for transformation into devotees. New entrants remain in regular contact with these mentors for an extended period. The *sikhya* gurus train enthusiasts in the correct attitudes and practices for transforming themselves, including the desired posture as a devotee, the necessary transformation of food habits, appropriate attitudes towards sexuality and money, and techniques for dealing with non-believers. Enthusiasts adapt to the new modalities of personhood with the guidance of *sikhya* gurus. *Dikhya* gurus occupy the highest position in the gurudom hierarchy of ISKCON and initiate trained enthusiasts into ISKCON.

### 3.4. The Change in God-Poster

In the same vein with Lutgendrof, the article highlights the changes found in the physical appearances in the visual depiction of the Krishna in the conventional images available in India and the imagery of Krishna as depicted by the ISKCON. There is an embedded narrative of change in image culture which is introduced by the ISKCON. The conventional Odia commercial markets offer images of Krishna with a white cow in his famous pose, playing the flute against a dense forest backdrop with a full moon in the sky. This Krishna has Dravidian features, a brownish complexion, a chubby boyish face, and round, fleshy limbs. He wears short kaccha and shiny ornaments and has short,

curly hair, giving the image a feel of an earthier Krishna.

In contrast, ISKCON's God-poster depicts Krishna with Caucasian features, a chiseled cheekbone, and a bluish complexion. He has a masculine face and paler limbs, and the jewelry with which he is adorned is less flashy. In some versions, even Radha with Krishna looks Caucasian. Following the studies on corporeality and God-posters, the changes are not just simple shifts but are protest to the foreign rule or at times can be expressive of imposition of foreign ideas. Therefore, the corporeality of God-posters can be read as a contested site. This article looks at the God-posters as a site which expresses novel identity. It carves a niche for itself in the host society which is far from the place of origin.

## 4.  The Theoretical Context

So far, the article has discussed the ethnographic details and the changes in the God-posters. In this section, the article will discuss the implication and the theoretical framework which explains the observation. The article uses theoretical context because there is an emphasis on the cultivation of devotion grounded in the visual aspect of devotion, which involves the practice of decorating, adoring, and worshiping the image of the deity. The article seeks to employ a context that can explain the emphasis on individual practices without ignoring their implications in the larger context. This study adopts a basic approach from the discipline of Sociology, which reveals how the visual aspect of religiosity is cultivated by the God-poster, and how the God-posters offer novelty to the worldview of the devotees and assert its presence.

In her study on the Islamist women in Cairo, Mahmood (2009) applies the concept of habituation to explain the cultivation of piety among the women participants. The present study is informed by the notion of habituation which emphasizes the process aspects of the habit formation. Followed by the above notion, the present study also finds that the shift from the old God-posters to the newer ones is a conscious effort. This concept emphasizes two implications. Firstly, devotees who

observe or receive the darshan (blessing) of the deity through images of the God-posters become accustomed to a new version. Secondly, ISKCON establishes its presence in the host society through an innovative approach.

## 4.1. Religion and Self

The question of how religion shapes the self in the contemporary age holds different meanings and engages in different ways with different individuals located in the same time and space. The resurgence of religion is no longer an intriguing question to sociologists, who examine how religion transforms in response to new social conditions, such as changes in modern, post-modern, and globalization. Since individuals in society are shaped and influenced by these factors, sociologists study religion as an important dependent variable. They study the process and ideologies that influence the shaping of individuals and their subjective modern selves. There is an upsurge in the study of selfhood in the modern context, with Warrier (2005) exploring the three processes of personal freedom, self-authorship, and internalization of faith that shape religious subjectivity in modern India. Srinivas (2009) studies the process through which the religious imagination of religious subjects in the Sai Baba movement takes place, while Gooptu (2016) discusses religious subjecthood and subjectivity in the context of modern and democratic coordinates in contemporary modern India. The new religious movement, taking place through charismatic guru-centric organizations, has also gained scholarly attention from Pandya (2012) and Warrier (2012). New religious movements have always reflected collective aspiration and consciousness. However, the role of God-posters in the formation of religious subjects and subjecthood has not been studied in the Indian context.

## 4.2. The Cultivation of the Devotion

Based on field observation and interviews, it was revealed that there are stages through which the enthusiasts gradually become a devotee. There are gastronomic aspects, the corporeal aspects, the kinesthetic and the visual aspects of the cultivation of devotion. The *dikhya* gurus train the novice or the enthusiasts to consciously transform

the above-mentioned domains under their guidance. The paper will discuss the domain briefly:

**4.2.1. The gastronomic aspect**: the first and foremost aspect of a devotee's life is to shift from non-vegetarian eating habit to vegetarian eating habits. The Krishna devotee has to follow a diet which is free from any form of violence and cruelty. The *dikhya* gurus train the novice the do's and the dont's of the ISKCON regulated food-habits. The devotees vow to consume food which is offered to the deity.

**4.2.2. The corporeal aspects**: the corporeal aspects of a devotee's life include the way he conducts his everyday actions and behavior, both physical and mental. The *dikhya* gurus instruct the men and the women devotees to dress up in traditional attire when they visit the temple or when they are engaged in temple services. They are taught to hold their body in a particular way in order to express humility. At the mental level, they are asked to make a conscious effort to shift from cheap commercial entertainment to spend time in chanting the *mahamantra*[9] or to spend time reading Vaishnava literature.

**4.2.3. The kinesthetic aspects**: in this aspect the devotees go on 'spiritual tours' to places which have Vaishnava significance. Such tours are organized by the ISKCON temple. Visiting the temples at the earliest hours of the day and at the evening hours holds importance in a devotee's everyday life. To be in the physical presence of the deity's image is also important.

**4.2.4. The visual aspects**: this is one of the most important aspects in which the enthusiast and the novice consciously make an effort to participate in the *darshan* in the earliest hour of the day. The *darshan time* in the temple is filled up with devotees. Congregational singing and dancing take place in front of the images.  Besides the above, the devotees learn to offer food and to have consecrated food. It is required to emphasize at this point many devotees use the God-posters when they are in their workplace to offer food to the deity and then consume.

It is with the shift in the above-mentioned aspects in their

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[9] *Mahamantra* is the sacred formula which the devotees chant.

everyday living, the novice and the enthusiasts reach a stage where the *dikhya* gurus select the devotees and allow them to get initiated in ISKCON.

### 4.3. The God-Posters and the Devotees

Based on interviews with the novices and the senior devotees, it was assured that most of them have replaced their own old, framed God-posters with the newer ones. The novice devotees buy the ISKCON's framed God-posters and offer worship in their home altars.

Many devotees responded that in course of time they included the pictures of various Gurus within the ISKCON order in their home altars. These pictures were sold only in the ISKCON temples. Most of the devotees and enthusiasts agreed that their sense of sacred cosmology of deities and gurus have expanded because they interfaced with new sacred personalities. Being a conventional Odia, their sacred cosmology was limited only to the references to the deities' triad of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra. With their association with the ISKCON, their knowledge about different avatars and gurus has deepened.

Many devotees have expressed their appreciation for the sacred books in ISKCON, which feature illustrations of various scenes from the Vaishnava texts. These images help to bring the stories to life and give readers a vivid and tangible depiction of the narrative. Many have even remarked that the quality of the books in ISKCON is comparable to that of books sold in conventional markets in Odisha.

Talking to devotees who work at offices, they confirmed that along with the conventional calendar posters, they hang the ISKCON brand of calendars also. These offered a site for the ISKCON to introduce to the devotees and the onlookers the newer versions of Krishna and Radha. The devotees even bought seasonal greeting cards from ISKCON which bore the images of the Krishna and Radha in their Caucasian version.

During discussions with ISKCON devotees, both in groups and individually, some have shared that they grew up in environments where images of Krishna were already present. However, they believe that the

newer versions of these images hold significance because they represent a newer self of the devotees – one that is grounded in the regular practice of integrating ISKCON's rules and regulations into their everyday life. As they shift their habits in terms of eating, conduct, and perception of their surroundings, there is a shift in their life-world as well.

### 4.4. The ISKCON God-Posters and Identity

The ISKCON in Bhubaneswar conducts various programs which aim at the individual level and collective level. The ISKCON conducts the *nagar-sankritan*, in which a group of devotees tour the city and visit various towns in the Odisha in order to spread the name of ISKCON. On such tours, the group uses their newer versions of God-posters which often attract attention of the onlookers. They even use the collage of the various versions of God-posters to locate themselves in the presence of the visual culture associated with Jagannatha. The ISKCON version looks different amidst the other prints and versions of God-posters. This has given a different identity to the ISKCON's *nagarsankritans*.

The prints and publication department in ISKCON Bhubaneswar have two sections: one which identifies with the global readers and is known as Bhaktivendanta Book Trust. This is the magazine which reaches out to devotees everywhere in the world. The other publication is known as the Gopal Jiu Publication which caters to the local and regional devotees and readers. BBT uses the Anglicized version of the Krishna motifs in the glossy magazines. The look gives an ethereal impression to the scared cosmology of Krishna.

## 5. Conclusion

The study juxtaposes the two versions of God-posters available in Odisha: one is commercially available, while the other is the ISKCON version of Krishna God-posters. The difference between them is striking and immediately apparent. The ISKCON version, which has its roots in Indic tradition but is now a global phenomenon imported from the West, portrays a religious imagination with Indic origins. However, this phenomenon is also transforming the Indic sense of aesthetics.

Qualitatively, the ISKCON version of Krishna God-posters showcases a different range of followership that is heterogeneous in nature. This category of devotees includes Hindus of both Indian and non-Indian origin, as well as foreigners who were not previously Hindu but have converted to Vaishnavism. During interviews, it was observed that ISKCON attracts devotees from various economic backgrounds. Some engineers have quit their jobs to become lifetime servitors in ISKCON, while retired salaried men and women are drawn to the organization for its blend of traditionalism and modernity. Additionally, many respondents noted that unlike traditional temples, the ISKCON temple premises maintain a high level of cleanliness.

In addition to the reasons cited above, the new category of devotees finds ISKCON's tour packages attractive, which are not commonly offered in traditional religious temples. With these factors in mind, the article argues that ISKCON is rapidly gaining popularity, as evidenced by the growing number of ISKCON temples in cities across India. This leads to the next part of the conclusion, which focuses on the integration of ISKCON into the Indian religious landscape.

Despite its non-Indic origins and growth in the West, ISKCON is gaining recognition in India and hints at a potential integration into the country's religious landscape. While Indian sectarian traditions have flourished in the West and gained prominence both in India and abroad, ISKCON originated in the West and then travelled to India. This puts its presence at odds with the traditional forms of religion in India. However, despite its complex relationship with native religious sects in India, ISKCON is being embraced by enthusiasts.

Therefore, the above observations suggest two questions: Will there be an expansion in the religious imagination of the Vaishnava sect in India, allowing non-Hindus to gradually be included in its fold? Is the replacement of the chubby Krishna with the Anglicized Krishna simply an artist's creativity or a subtler way of contesting the Indian version of God-posters? In India, God-posters previously served as a way for natives to contest colonial power. Now, in modern times, it is being used by non-natives to make their presence felt in India.

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# *TRIBUTE*

## In Memoriam
## Dr. Binod C. Agrawal
(31 December 1942 - 28 March 2023)



*Photo credit: Assocation of Development Communication*

ARC would like to express its deep gratitude and pay tribute to Dr. Binod C. Agrawal, who has been a valuable friend, collaborator, and supporter since its inception in 1999. Over the years, Dr. Agrawal has made invaluable contributions to ARC's Journal and International Roundtables through his research articles and papers. Additionally, he played a pivotal role in bringing many young scholars, particularly those from South Asia, into the ARC Network. ARC recognizes Dr. Agrawal's expertise, dedication, and friendship, and will always be deeply grateful for his immense contributions.

Dr. Binod C. Agrawal is a highly respected scholar and leader in holistic study, qualitative research, and quantitative survey in development and communication. He has made significant contributions to information technology, television, and satellite communication applications studies. Dr. Agrawal's dedication to education and research is evident in his founding of several educational and research institutions. He will be remembered for his pioneering work in development and communication, his dedication to education, research, and mentorship as

well as his unwavering commitment to social services. His scholarship and contributions will continue to inspire and guide scholars in the years to come.

*ARC Team*

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### Remembering Dr. Binod C. Agrawal

A doyen of communication research from India died in March 2023. Dr. Binod C. Agrawal, a multifaceted researcher and mentor in both Communication and Anthropology, significantly affected many of us.

His journey from Ballia in Uttar Pradesh in eastern India to Wisconsin in the United States and back to Ahmedabad in western India taught him numerous life lessons. He learned cultural nuances from his family, anthropological skills from his teachers in Anthropology at Lucknow University, India, and organizational skills from his teacher – like Dr. LP Vidyarthi, President of the Xth International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), who tasked him as Executive Secretary to organize the Xth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in India in 1978, a first-ever such Congress in any developing country.

Born on December 31, 1942, he attended Government High School in Ballia and, against his parents' wishes, went to college and university in Lucknow, where he earned his Masters in Anthropology from Lucknow University. He did well, and his Master's thesis on the 'Doctor-patient interaction' earned him a gold medal.

Dr. Agrawal had an incredible ability to impress people with his hard work. Prof. J.W. Elder of the Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, pleased by his hard work, offered him a seat in the PhD program at the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Agrawal lived in Wisconsin from 1964 to 1971, earning his M.S. in Cultural Anthropology in 1969 and his Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1970.

He briefly worked as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, before returning to India and joining the Indian Agriculture Research Institute in New Delhi as an Associate Professor until he moved out of Delhi to join the Space Applications Centre (SAC) in Ahmedabad, one of the major space agencies.

Dr. Agrawal's career transitioned from teaching to research at this point. Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE, 1975-76) was the world's largest techno-social experiment, launched by ISRO. This one-year experiment used NASA's satellite (ATS-6) to deliver development communication messages directly to 400 villages in six underdeveloped Indian states.

Using satellite-linked Direct Reception Sets (DRS), these villages got development messages in their native languages directly from Delhi and other SITE states. The goal was to give direct development messages to improve the quality of life of India's otherwise information-deprived population.

Dr. Agrawal, the Head of the Research and Evaluation Cell, was assigned to assess the social impact of SITE. He persuaded the program's management to incorporate 'Holistic Study' as a significant qualitative research tool. He hired nearly a dozen qualified anthropologists to look into the entire process of impact produced by one year of SITE. I was one of the anthropologists that resided in one of the SITE villages in Bihar for 18 months to examine the social impact at the micro level.

It was the first attempt in Indian social science research to apply ethnographic methods in an area where quantitative survey methods were prominent. Dr. Agrawal was known around the world as the Holistic Man and an authority in rural communication. He collaborated closely with UNICEF and FAO on initiatives, and the results of these efforts were published in the form of books.

After SITE, Dr. Agrawal worked on several national projects involving space technology applications. Dr. Agrawal was appointed to the PC Joshi committee in 1982, which was formed to provide future

direction to Indian television. These followed a slew of high-quality publications on SITE and other aspects of development communication.

He ultimately waved goodbye to ISRO in early 1996, following nearly two decades of excellent service in various posts.

Dr. Agrawal founded another private non-profit organization, TALEEM Research Foundation, in Ahmedabad under the auspices of Zee Group, a well-known name in the media and entertainment industry. He was the Chief of TALEEM from 1996 to mid-2015 when he retired completely. Dr. Agrawal served as Vice-Chancellor of Himgiri University from 2005 to 2012. He was also an academic adviser for Manipal Institute of Communication, L.J. Institute of Management, and Gujarat Vidyapeeth in Ahmedabad. During his nearly two-decade tenure with TALEEM, he worked closely with AMIC in Singapore as an active member of the group, as well as the Asian Research Centre for Religion and Social Communication (ARC), Bangkok, and was instrumental in motivating Indian scholars to write and present papers on religion with a focus on communication. He also edited some of the issues of their journal and compiled a book.

Dr. Agrawal appears to have a wide range of interests. He was a frequent traveler and a familiar face at most national and international conferences/seminars, where he played a variety of roles.

His abilities were recognized, and he received the Emerald/ AIMS Research Fund Award 2007 from the University of Wisconsin, the Distinguished ISRO Service Award in 1976, and the AMIC Asian Communication Award (2009) for his distinguished contribution and leadership in Asian Communication Research.

We all pay our respect to Dr. Binod C. Agrawal.

*Arbind Sinha*[1]

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[1] Dr. Arbind Sinha was a Ph.D. student of Dr Binod Agrawal, and knew him for almost 50 years; 25 years directly working with him in ISRO and in TALEEM Research Foundation.

## Dr. Binod C. Agrawal:
## A Personal Tribute to a Teacher, Mentor, and a Friend

Dr. Binod Agrawal passed on 28th of March 2023, after suffering through a far-too-long decline in health that sapped parts of his mind and his ability to express himself. That was the cruelest of all, to see someone whose career was based on dissemination and communication slowly go inside a shell that robbed him of both joys.

Of course, it helps one's legacy to spawn decades of people who communicate, research, and teach for a living. No doubt this piece will be one of a compilation of tributes from generations of communicators and researchers, teachers, and students of Dr. Binod Agrawal.

To me, Binod's death has me thinking about mentorship, how important it is and how wrong we get the concept. We write a ton about the importance of mentors. Yet, there's a commercial, artificial and transient nature to mentorship. We select a mentor based on an individual challenge or circumstance. What's more, we delude ourselves into thinking that we can "pick" a mentor, like a sweater or ripe mango.

True mentorship, though, is deeper, and it's something that chooses you. It's a relationship, deep and lifelong – even generational.  I had never realized that until Binod died.

Binod C. Agrawal started as my colleague when he invited me to be the Dean and later the Pro-Vice Chancellor to his Vice Chancellor of the newly established Himgiri Nabh Vishwavidyalaya, back when people were shorter and lived closer to the sea. He was a giant of a man – not very tall, in stature but a giant nevertheless in the world of Anthropology and Communications. He spoke softly with a kind of accent that suggested a simple view of the world, though only fools would take that as a simplicity of intelligence. He knew his work. He shared his experience. When it came to sharing his knowledge, he was generous to a fault. Binod was quiet, steady and supportive of others always. In his quiet way he leaves a strong legacy.

His legacy speaks to the values of kindness and acceptance and serves as a reminder of how to treat each other. We are so grateful for his life, his legacy and his loving presence in our lives. Our lives were touched by an angel. Binod, you have earned your wings.  This tribute is written on behalf of every person that knew and loved you.

I spent six years working alongside him, building a new University, learning the skills needed to actually work. The philosophy, dare I say the nobility, of the craft of teaching and research was there, but, to Binod, none of that mattered if you weren't doing your job right. I came out of the University being more prepared to face the world than I had ever been even though I had spent many years in North American Universities studying and learning the trades of teaching and Research.  But what I learnt from Dr. Agrawal in those six years and the years that followed were much more enriching and enlightening.  I also left the University with a friend. Since then Binod never left me.

He lived in Ahmedabad at his home with his family but never forgot to call me at least once a week merely to enquire how I was doing and what new projects I was working on.  We would chat for a while and he would say goodbye never forgetting to mention my wife, Vibha. I should have appreciated those calls more. It wasn't until much later that I realized that Binod probably was the only person alive to read every word I had ever put to page. It wasn't enough to teach me for years. He had to honor my work with his thoughts and feedback. He continued to teach, long after we had both left the University in Dehradun. We were an unlikely pairing. We disagreed on everything political.

My association with Dr. Agrawal was from much before this.  As a young boy, I had seen him come to our house in Mysore and work with my father during the SITE programme, when he used to work as a young social scientist at ISRO and my father was the Director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages.  He had great respect for my father as he for Binod.  In the 1980's the International Conference on Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences was held in India in Delhi and Mysore under the Chairmanship of my father where Binod acted as the Organizing Secretary. Many years later we held the AMIC Annual Conference in Delhi where Binod was the Chairperson and I was the Organizing Secretary.  He never

lost an opportunity to point this out. He was my greatest ally in person and in profession and I bow to him.

I am sure that many would write about his herculean achievements as a student at University of Wisconsin at Madison and his massive volume of work after his return to India in various capacities, but my note here is a more personal one.

I have travelled to many a conference and meeting with him and without him; I have published research papers following his footprints and sometimes walking away from them; but I always found him by my side. Binod introduced me to the world of "Religion and Social Communications" by making me a part of his beloved Asian Research Centre for Religion and Social Communication. He introduced me to its founder the wonderful Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD. Since then, I have been a constant in that group as I have been in many others that Binod introduced me to.

We not only disagreed on politics but often had grave disagreements about the future of Communication Research in India and Asia at large. I saw limitless possibilities in what new technology could provide, and how we needed to look into our own traditions if we had to create a national discourse. Binod was convinced that a combination of the quantitative and qualitative methods was the answer. I'm not sure I ever moved him, and I'm also not sure he was ever really wrong.  This was his style to never really dismiss anything at face value.

Which brings us back to mentorship. Binod Agrawal was, at his heart, a caring man with a love for Communication, a tendency toward meandering storytelling, an insatiable desire to teach. Until now, I never realized that so many of those words could describe me. My eyes tear writing about it, just thinking of the honor and the unworthiness of it all. Binod was also a devoted friend and a loving father, two areas where I recognize I need a lifetime of improvement to earn that comparison.

There is irony in my writing a piece about his death. In retrospect, legacy often is a discussion about the past, forgetting the impact on the present and, more importantly, what is to come. I am blessed at having the planet's finest mentor, and mentorship, no matter how we describe it,

is at bottom a dedication to a lifetime of formation. It is a gift, and, like all presents, it is best shared than held close. To appreciate a mentor, one must commit to being one, happily bearing that responsibility. To honor Binod, I need to be as good of a mentor to others as I can, unhindered by my own imperfections and shortcomings.

That means getting back to work. I hope I measure up to the job.

*Chandrabhanu Pattanayak*


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## Remembering Dr. Binod C Agrawal: A Mentor's Impact on a Young Researcher's Professional Journey

As a fresh graduate from media school, I met Dr. Binod C Agrawal, who asked me what I was doing and where I was working. It had been almost a decade since we last interacted when I was in school. Since I was looking for a job and engaged in freelance projects, Dr. Agrawal asked me to come to his office the next day, and that was how my professional journey began.

I underwent a series of interviews with experts at TALEEM Research Foundation, and post the interaction, Dr. Agrawal asked me to visit his office the following week. Little did I know that it marked the beginning of a new chapter that involved a research journey and fieldwork. His insights and training taught me the skills required for fieldwork.

On a personal level, Dr. Agrawal was a guide and a friend, known for his graciousness, warmth, and concern. It was because of him that I came into contact with the ARC, IAMCR, and AMIC, and he encouraged me to take religious communication as a research theme more seriously. My learnings from the fieldwork and management resulted in my inclination towards research and academics.

One of my most cherished experiences was during the 2014 General Elections of India, where he asked me to pack my bags and

move to Southern India for almost four months. A young boy with barely any experience was given the work to manage the fieldwork in three states. That was the kind of confidence Dr. Agrawal showed in young researchers, students, and scholars. He always shared his expertise on social communication and experiences he had during his Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) days with us and fervently believed that the media had the power to bring change to society.

I had the privilege of continuing to work with him even after he retired from TALEEM Research Foundation in 2015. We worked together and discussed political developments, advances in technology, and social media platforms. Although he was not active on social media, he was always intrigued by how it was reaching out to youth.

Dr. Agrawal's undaunted support and encouragement have helped many scholars and students like me to overcome challenges. Through his kindness, generosity, and unwavering commitment, he has helped shape the lives of countless students, leaving a legacy of research excellence, service, and compassion.

In many ways, I will always owe my present and future research work on religious communication to Dr. Agrawal. It was because of him that I became interested in understanding how religion communicates with people and how different religious groups coexist in the Indian sub-continent. In retrospect, I know that working under him for three and a half years transformed my professional journey.

*Leslin Bastian*

# *BOOK REVIEWS*

**Heidi A. Campbell and Wendi Bellar.** *Digital Religion: The Basics.* **London and New York: Routledge, 2023, 178 pp. ISBN: 9780367528102 (Paper).**

Nations used to engage in "arms races," but recently there has been a race to develop Artificial Intelligence-powered chatbots due to the emergence of systems such as ChatGPT-4. This phenomenon demonstrates the ever increasing significance of digital media in our present society. Prior to the advent of AI, the digital world already had a pervasive influence on society. Digital media has a considerable impact on how we perceive, practice, and perform religion both online and offline. As a result, it plays a role in shaping our identities and who we become, specifically regarding our religious beliefs and practices. Digital media also influences many other aspects of human life and society at large.

For those interested in the topic of digital media and religion, the Routledge book series is must-read. Specifically, *Digital Religion: The Basics* (2023) is a short but brilliant exposition on the subject. The monograph is authored by Heidi A. Campbell, Professor of Communication and a Presidential Impact Fellow at Texas A&M University, USA, and Wendi Bellar, a senior user experience researcher at JP Morgan Chase and former Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, USA.

The book explores how religious practice is continually evolving in the digital age and the impact this has on both religious culture and the digital world in modern society. It examines six key aspects of how religion is practiced online: multisite reality, convergence practice, networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, and experiential authenticity. Furthermore, it analyzes how digital religion both influences and is influenced by religion offline. In other words, the book argues that religion is changing and being experienced through digital media over time.

In addition, the book aims to address three fundamental questions. First, how are religious practices being conceived and

carried out in digital media and cultures? Second, what connections or similarities exist between religious activities carried out online and changes in offline religious practices? Finally, how do the key findings regarding religion on the internet relate to broader social, cultural, and structural behaviors observed in a networked and mobile society? At the beginning of the book, there is an explanation of what digital religion entails. According to the authors, "Digital religion is a term used to describe how religious individuals and groups engage with digital media and emerging technologies. It represents a specific way of understanding people's online and offline expressions of religiosity as being increasingly intertwined" (p. 1).

Since the 1980s, individuals and organizations have been moving religious activity online, and this has led to the development of the concept of digital religion. As time went on, people began to record their religious practices in cyberspace and engage with it. This led to an increase in active participation and impact of digital media on religion. In the 1990s, scholars in Religious Studies, Sociology of Religion, and Media Studies began expressing interest in studying religion in cyberspace. They recognized the significance of the subject as the existence of religion in the digital age prompted a rethinking of how individuals and groups practice religion online. By 2010, these developments had gradually given rise to an independent discipline of study known as Digital Religion Studies. Today, it is considered an interdisciplinary field of knowledge that intersects with subjects such as the Sociology of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy of Technology, among others, as noted by the authors.

Reading the book will provide a comprehensive understanding of how the practice of religion offline and online is interconnected through the mediation of media technology. The authors argue that in a society mediated by media technology, we all become part of a networked community in some way. The practice of religion digitally is a significant contributing factor through online media platforms, in addition to offline use. These representations have enabled people and communities to form a web of relationships, expand connections and fellowships, with diverse motives and storied identities.

The book is particularly relevant and timely, especially against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has significantly disrupted people's lives through prolonged lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and the closure of borders worldwide. In such a scenario, people were forced to stay indoors, and places of worship remained closed and inaccessible. During these times, individuals found solace and comfort in practicing online. Those with access to media and technology were able to keep up with their religious practices, while others who lacked access found alternative ways to practice religion in their individual homes or communities, adhering to health protocols.

People and communities have always sought meaningful connections, and religion and technology have been useful in this pursuit. Throughout history, religion has been an integral part of various communities and groups worldwide, despite the increasing trend towards secularism. While some argue that religion is being relegated to private space, the practice of religion both offline and online cannot be dismissed. In an ever-evolving digital culture that affects people's lives, social environment, and interaction within converging and networking communities, religion remains a crucial avenue for people to represent their being and identity. Furthermore, this trend of engaging with religion offline and online will continue to grow as media technology proliferates in contemporary society, driven by the context and need of the people.

The book is a fascinating read for individuals who have a keen interest in the intersection of religion and digital technology. It offers valuable insights into how religion continues to shape human lives and practices within the current interconnected and mediated community of believers, both offline and online. Furthermore, it prompts readers to contemplate how digital religion will continue to impact and influence people, particularly in light of the ever-growing geopolitical ramifications and ongoing global events, such as future pandemics.

**Santosh Kumar Digal**
University of the Philippines Diliman

**Rob Cover.** *Identity and Digital Communication: Concepts, Theories, Practices.* **New York: Taylor & Francis, 2023, 190 pp. ISBN: 978-1-032-28395-1 (Paper).**

This book examines the construction/reconstruction of identities, social relationships, and communities in the online world. The author, a digital communication professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, explores the various aspects and understanding of identity construction related to issues in virtual communities and social media. The monograph is designed to serve as "an essential primer for scholars and students in media studies, psychology, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, computer science, as well as health practitioners, mental health advocates and community members" (back cover).

Numerous studies have explored different facets of our digital identities since the inception of the World Wide Web. In this book, the author brings the conversation up to date by examining recent technological advancements, including Tiktok and deepfake, as well as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. With people staying at home and increasing their reliance on the internet for activities such as streaming entertainment, online shopping, and video conferencing with colleagues and loved ones, the author sheds light on the impact of these developments on online identity formation.

The first chapter of the book delves into the historical development of identity theories and how they shape our understanding of identity formation in the digital age. Cover examines a range of perspectives, including Descartes' philosophical concept of identity rooted in reason and rationality, the Marxist approach that views identity categories as sources of oppression, Freud's fragmented view of identity into conscious and unconscious selves, and constructionist and postmodern approaches to identity and subjectivity. The author also explores post-structuralist theories by Foucault and Butler. However, the author cautions readers against adopting a singular theory to analyze the impact of digital communication on identity. Instead, the author suggests that it is more effective to draw from various approaches to create a comprehensive analytical framework to investigate the dynamic interplay between our identities and digital media.

Cover explains that our understanding of the dichotomy between our offline and online identities emerged during the era of slower dial-up internet connections and bulky stationary computers. During that time, we viewed our online presence as a separate, 'virtual' identity from our 'real-life' identity when we were offline.

However, with the advent of Web 2.0 and widespread broadband connectivity, we are now online 24/7, and social media has become a platform for showcasing our lived experiences. These technological advancements have allowed us to access a wide range of websites and online platforms where we can share content, express our opinions, and communicate and interact without the constraints of time and space.

The second chapter of the book expands on this topic by drawing on Judith Butler's theories of identity performativity. The author explores how social media enables us to express our identities through various media, such as text, images, and videos, as well as through our likes, shares, and links to other websites. These platforms provide us with opportunities to showcase various aspects and narratives of ourselves, allowing us to create and curate a virtual identity.

Cover, in the succeeding chapters, raises interesting angles in viewing timely issues in making sense of our digital lives in identity terms. First, continuing the discussion of real/virtual and mind/body dichotomies, the author argues in Chapter 3 that "no digital communication is ever disembodied" (p. 75) and that our bodily practices today are in fact governed by our relationship with digital communication technologies.

This is very much true in the case of "wearables" – electronic devices that we physically wear in order to track, analyze, and transmit our personal data on real-time basis. Recent advancements in the Internet of Things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI) have led to the integration of wearable technology into a variety of settings, including health monitoring, entertainment and gaming, fashion and smart clothing, military applications, sports, and fitness.

Second, in Chapter 4, the author aims to present deep fake technology in a different light. While acknowledging the concern

and anxiety that it generates due to its role in spreading fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and misleading content, the author argues that deep fake's "creative potential is powerful and most people are not motivated to use technology to produce false or deliberately misleading content," (p. 79). Moreover, as a technology, it "fulfills a creative, cultural need" (p. 85).

Indeed, AI-generated synthetic media, or deepfakes, has the potential to improve people's lives and empower communities and institutions in various fields. For example, it can make accessibility tools smarter, deliver innovative and engaging lessons in education, help human rights activists and journalists in oppressive regimes anonymize individuals and protect their privacy, aid in crime forensics, and offer new opportunities in entertainment, film, and art.

Third, in Chapter 7, Cover addresses the various concerns over social media algorithms, specifically as they were shown in the 2020 Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*. He argues that "by positioning algorithms as technologically determining our everyday culture and lives, the Social Dilemma participates in what many technological-determinist perspectives have done about past communication technologies: created moral panic"(p. 141). Debunking six points raised by the documentary, the author explains that it "tries to show platforms as destroying aspects of the culture through which our identities are derived, suggesting that this occurs through a curtailment of our everyday agency to make informed decisions about our own lives" (p. 151).

The author argues that what the documentary failed to consider is the value of user agency – our free will, our ability to be autonomous, and even disconnected from digital technology. We have the capacity to make independent and informed choices, and as pointed out earlier, can decide for ourselves how we represent ourselves, select relevant content, and articulate and curate our identities especially in our online communication.

In Chapter 6, Cover tackles the issue of widespread hate speech, cancel culture, and other hostilities happening in the digital culture that destabilizes our sense of identity, mental health, and overall well-being. To address this, he emphasizes the importance of digital citizenship as a

means to navigate digital environments safely and responsibly. Digital citizenship, in turn, fosters active and respectful engagement in online spaces while safeguarding our freedom, privacy, and security.

The other chapters discuss the issues of globalization and re-nationalization of digital communication (Chapter 5), and the perception of authentic identities in light of the online platform TikTok (Chapter 8). The final chapter encapsulates the various issues raised by the author in the book, and attempts to predict future developments in digital communication and its implications in identity practices.

Cover aptly closes the book by stating that one's identity does not exist in a vacuum, as it is formed and constituted in relation to others. The book is an attempt to extrapolate the various intersections of our identities vis-à-vis digital communication and provide a scholarly and informed description of its different circumstances, which in turn will certainly enrich our further attempts to investigate and understand them.

*Roderick Evans Bartolome*
Far Eastern University, Philippines

**Yoel Cohen and Paul A. Soukup (Eds).** *Handbook on Religion and Communication.* **West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2023, 551 pp. ISBN: 9781119671558 (Hardback).**

In the introduction of the new publication *Handbook on Religion and Communication,* the editors Yoel Cohen and Paul A. Soukup affirm that  "Religion has not disappeared but has changed" (p.1). This comprehensive handbook comprises 33 interconnected chapters written by esteemed academics and experts who meticulously explore how religion continues to be incessantly communicated, albeit in transformed ways, due to distinct cultural contexts, technological advancements, and disruptions caused by natural or human factors.

The book is organized into eight parts or themes, each spanning around 45-50 pages and featuring two to five chapters: 1) Theoretical Context; 2) Theological Perspectives; 3) Religions as Actors; 4) Individual Religious Communication; 5) Media Institutions; 6) Functional Perspectives; 7) Cultural Perspectives; and 8) Approaches in New Technologies. The interconnected nature of these chapters serves as one of the book's greatest strengths, symbolizing a cohesive network that reflects the complexities of contemporary communication.

Theoretical Context (Part I) is intertwined in four chapters. Schofield Clark and Heidi Ippolito open it with an information-rich historical survey on the academic approaches to communication, media, and religion. They highlight decolonization, intersectionality, AI, communication as a human right, regulation, privacy, and transparency. There is a need for a more holistic account of the complementarity among humans, technologies, and the world, which raises the question: *If communication is a human right, where should such right be universally based?* (p.19). Stephen Garner responds by tracing research on the marriage between religion and communication in human societies. Commendable is how a particular religious tradition negotiates and uses new media (technologization of religion) and how technology can be more efficient through its religious shaping (spiritualizing technology).

Public theology in the public sphere is interposed, asking: *Should effectiveness be based on the instruments or on the message*

*and method itself, making the communication more meaningful?* Paul Soukup believes the message (content) is primary. He examines how major religions have addressed communication based on key theological foundations and applications for communication. One judges the suitability of the media based on the content and meaning from their respective sacred books. Robert Fortner adds ethics in communication here as indispensable in any human activity. He examines the similarities and unique perspectives of the major religious traditions in their assumed or declared purpose of communication. Ethics might vary from one religious tradition to another, but they are not so different as to be unrecognizable by others. It becomes free and independent from the chains of any religious belief.

Theological Perspectives (Part II) are explored in five chapters. Mary Catherine Kennedy discusses the "mediatization" of religion, emphasizing how being a Christian is greatly shaped by media as an information source. It dictates how information is transmitted, experienced, and lived in rituals, morals, and community formation. Despite this seeming control, faith tradition remains an indispensable and valid moral compass. Yoel Cohen and Hadi Enayat link this discussion by examining ethical guides for communication in both Judaism and Islam. Traditional forms of authority continue to play a significant role, where the memorization and recitation of sacred texts influence religious cohesion.

Anthony Le Duc and Keval J. Kumar associate this with an examination of religious tradition and communication in Asia. These traditions have never been uniform or monolithic, characterized by sects and cults and centering on "orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy" (p.99). They have been transmitted from oral traditional media to the new digital mass media. Joseph Muyangata and Mark Fackler highlight the uniqueness of African traditional religions (ATR), emphasizing strong culture, ritual, and ancestral veneration. The focus is on self-identity, relationships, and the manifestation of divine presence in the clan, tribe, and religion. The sense of God is communicated through how he relates humanly – how he speaks, how he hears. This makes religion truly become the story of humanity with its joys, dreams, and sorrows. There is a seeming dichotomy of perception regarding the ubiquitousness and

absence of atheism in the media. For Teemu Taira, both claims are true. There is the presence and absence of religion in the content (media information) and the content creators (media professionals) themselves. There is a need to clarify the media's attention-seeking logic that blurs authentic human value.

Religions as Actors (Part III) is composed of five chapters. Jim McDonnell begins with an overview of religious broadcasting, discussing online and digital broadcasting of religious programs and recommending comparative cross-cultural studies. The aim of digital technology is for individuals to be masters of the media, not the reverse. Televangelists are masters of the media. Soukup describes the history of televangelists, highlighting their success through effective storytelling in television and social media live-streams, which create parasocial relationships with audiences and symbolically manifest the "commodification of religion" in media outlets. Carlo Nardella explores public relations and advertising of media outlets, involving the "marketing of religion" with an understanding of economic resources, competition, marketing codes, techniques, symbolic capital, knowledge of public relations, and survival in a consumer culture.

In addition, Gregory P. Perreault, Mildred F. Perreault, and Monica Crawford offer religious situational crisis communication strategies where the collective response of different faith groups is paramount. These strategies include denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Media coverage plays an important role in responding to crises, requiring faith engagement, where Amanda Sturgill's work on web presence becomes crucial. Web presence complements and is complemented by the affordances and particular modes of communication of religious communities. Faith groups have a real opportunity to excel in the creation and promotion of online presence, thereby altering the landscape of faith expression offline.Top of Form

Individual Religious Communication (Part IV) continues the intertwining in three chapters. It commences with the juxtaposition between pastoral ministry (doing theology) and communication (the method of doing theology) by Daniella Zsupan-Jerome. She discusses the scope of pastoral ministry, the role of theology in pastoral

communication, and approaches to media through it. God's self-communication is the root of any theology of communication. Digital tools lead to a digital culture where such theology is lived. Building on this leitmotif, Damian Guzek and Piotr S. Bobkowski explore piety, religious identity, and the media. They note that while the role of religion in people's lives may be waning, the presence of religion in the media is increasing. There is a "progressive secularization" seemingly displacing religion and piety, which is observed in the multidimensional presence of those against religious belief and those without it.

There is a need to reinforce the orthodoxy of religious identity, particularly for Mary Hess, concerning youth, their subcultures, and their education. She highlights the challenges facing young people growing up in a pervasive digital culture, including their diminishing and displaced education and participation in religious interactions. For Hess, education in faith equates to meaning-making and authenticity in how and what young people communicate. She poses the question: *Is religious education to be seen only as part of church ministry or as a discipline in the academy?*

Media Institutions (Part V) is divided into five chapters. The first institution is the mediatization of religion discussed by Knut Lundby, which reshapes public religion evident in the automation of data collection. Religious traditions are cultural systems, and institutions rely on media for their communication. With the mediatization of religion, individuals and institutions rearrange traditional elements from "world religions" and redistribute them through modern cross-media narrations. The second institution is religious news media. Cohen traces the period when media shied away from religious news, highlighting the conflict between Church and state. He tackles questions regarding the religious background of journalists covering religious issues and the accessibility of religion news sources to reporters. The digital age has expanded religious news reporting virtually.

The third institution is entertainment, which, together with pop culture, generates tension with religion and religiosity, as discussed by Allan Novaes. He equates pop culture with media culture and discusses its challenges, intersections, and perspectives. They can serve as agents

for social change, promoting equity and diversity. The fourth institution is religion in film, explored by Joel Mayward, who examines "the presence of religious characters, practices, locations, symbols, or texts within the diegetic world of film" (p.317). Mayward explains the syntax of the narrative dialogue of religion in film, which he calls "theocinematics" – theology in motion that synthesizes theology, phenomenology, and film theory. The fifth institution is documentary film and religious faith, conceived from a historical perspective by John P. Ferré. He emphasizes that documentary film is the founding genre of cinema and argues that documentaries, laden with layers of perception and meaning, deserve broader study as symbolic artifacts of media and religion.

Functional Perspectives (Part VI) is arranged into five chapters, initiated by Myna German, who explores the function of communication media in creating global communities of religious identity and belief. It traces the evolution of media and highlights mediated religion as a means of shaping religious identity. Johannes Ehrat associates this with meaning. His work reviews the acknowledgment of religious meaning within semiotic/sign communication and the interpretation of meaning derived from it. Experience takes precedence over speculation. Gnana Patrick concretizes this experience in the interface among religious rituals, pilgrimages, and festivals. He considers rituals as realities embedded in daily relationships rather than rites institutionally performed. For Johanna Sumiala, such relationships are symbolically manifested in a ritual engagement with death, which today has become a media event containing mediated acts of public mourning, witnessing, and sacrifice – all having religious or spiritual undertones shared through digital media.

Cultural Perceptions (Part VII) is divided into five chapters. Chiung Hwang Chen opens it with a review and assessment of scholarly works, highlighting the intertwining of gender, sexuality, and race/ ethnicity issues. He underlines imbalances in several resources. Felicia Katz-Harris follows this with an overview of the cultural reality of material religion, which is recontextualized in public spaces and spheres, including churches that also serve as repositories and loci for interaction, participation, and ritualization. Rituals themselves are part of material religion, communicating dynamic social contexts and lived

experiences. Within these lived experiences, Ruth Tsuria and Jason Bartashius explore the intertwining of religion, sexuality, and gender. They argue that throughout history, religious traditions have constantly sought to control sexuality and gender norms. Media raises awareness of these mediated social representations of sexuality, eliciting distinct opinions and responses.

Another cultural and distinct social representation is discussed by Míriam Díez Bosch and Alba Sabaté Gauxachs – authority. They consider media as transforming accepted understandings of authority, with media playing a key role in religious authority. They state that "despite its central role in religious studies, the definition of authority remains elusive due to different contexts, disciplines, and approaches" (p.478). To reinforce authority, religions have embraced media as allies and have utilized media to be closer to their adherents. Finally, Robert A. White examines the role of religion in development communication among major religious traditions and how they have used media to contribute to socioeconomic development and respond to basic human needs.

Approaches in New Media (Part VIII) is discussed in two chapters. The first chapter is an exposition and analysis by Díez Bosch and Josep Lluís Micó on the impact of the internet and mobile technology on the major world religions. They emphasize the reality that while new media offer benefits for religious communities, some communities are still hesitant to use them. This hesitation is also reflected in the Catholic Church's historical perception of media as "monstrocities." However, a healthy negotiation between religion and new media continues to this day. The second chapter is focused on the landscape of online religion, presented by Rohit Chopra. He outlines a quadruple evolution of online religion: pre-web, static, interactive, and social web. Each period carries its own fears and promises that have shaped the current state of religion and digital communication – virtualized, profoundly altered, and incessantly evolving.

Overall, this new *Handbook on Religion and Communication* has excellently interwoven what it richly offers with what it promised to communicate and achieve. References are extensive, and the minimal

overlaps in topics are explicable considering the depth of its content and scope. Akin to religion and communication, the handbook is certainly a mediated treasure.

*Norman Melchor R. Peña Jr, SSP*
Saint Paul Seminary, Philippines

**Call for Submissions**
ARC Journal *Religion and Social Communication*
Vol. 21, No. 2 (2023)
Theme: *Religious Communication and the Technological Future:*
*Prospects, Concerns, and Responses*

The release of ChatGPT in November 2022 has generated significant interest in and debates about Artificial Intelligence-powered chatbots among tech companies, innovators, social scientists, and consumers. Along with this groundbreaking innovation, we can expect numerous technological advancements in the coming years that promise to revolutionize human society across multiple levels and in every area of life. The further development and propagation of technologies such as Web 3.0, Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Mixed Reality (MR), Extended Reality (XR), and Metaverse are expected to fundamentally change the way information is produced, disseminated, and acquired, and also lead to unprecedented decentralization of existing social, political, and religious structures. These developments will significantly impact the nature and perception of truth, religious or otherwise, and have other ethical, moral, and social implications in this new technological future.

Against this backdrop, the Asian Research Center invites submissions for the Journal Religion and Social Communication in the form of research papers and book reviews related to this theme. Researchers can explore topics such as:

- the impact of technological advancements on religion, religiosity, and religious practices;
- expected religious trends;
- religious ontologies and the nature of religious thought;
- ramifications for religious communication;
- the status, perception, establishment, and communication of religious truth(s);
- religious prophetic voices to affect the course of technological development;
- the role of religious leaders and communicators in anticipating these developments;

- challenges and opportunities for religion;
- and religion's preparation and religious formation in anticipation of the technological future.

Papers appropriate to this theme should explore future prospects by analyzing current trends in technological development and anticipated realities, going beyond past and present realities. Investigations can employ various approaches such as philosophical, theological, anthropological, sociological, psychological, etc. We welcome submissions from diverse religious perspectives that offer a range of ideas and thoughts related to this shared concern.

All research articles undergo a double blind (triple per request from author) peer review process. Authors whose papers are selected for publication may also be invited to participate in ARC's 14th International Roundtable in 2023 (2-3 November), which will have the same theme.

Deadline for submission is 15 July 2023 (Expected publication date is December 2023). Authors may submit an abstract (before the deadline) for a preliminary review before submitting the full paper. Extensions can be granted on a per request basis.

Please refer to our submission guidelines for details on how to prepare the manuscript: (https://asianresearchcenter.org/about/journal-policies).

For further details, please email: arcstjohns.bkk@gmail.com.

# Religion and Social Communication
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Religion and Social Communication is the semiannual scholarly journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC), founded in 1999. ARC is an independent research center housed at St. John's University, Bangkok, Thailand. The ARC aims to:

- Facilitate, support and publish research on subjects related to Religion and Social Communication in Asia;
- Promote related publications in the field;
- Develop a network of interested researchers and institutions;
- Foster interreligious dialogue and cooperation in the field.

*Religion and Social Communication* invites papers, book reviews and abstracts that provide scholarly insights into the fields of Religion and Social Communication in Asia. The journal welcomes contributions from professional researchers as well as M.A. and Ph.D. students who are interested to publish their academic work within the themes of Religion and Social Communication. All papers go through peer review and editorial process. The ARC reserves the right to accept or decline submitted contributions in order to meet the standards of the publication. We gratefully acknowledge all contributions.

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