

# The Theological Squabble of Duterte Against the Catholic Church: Discourse Analysis of Duterte's God-Talk Based on the Verses Found in Online News

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This paper is an attempt to provide a discourse analysis of President Rodrigo Duterte's controversial statements and public pronouncements about God, the Catholic Church and its clergy, and Christian teachings based on online news and similar websites. Using critical discourse analysis grounded in Michel Foucault's (1980) theory of knowledge/power nexus, the present paper is a modest attempt to come up with a systematic account of Duterte's "theological" musings based on his random extemporized diatribes against God and Christian religion. Reconstructing Duterte's "theology" does not mean assessing it from the mainstream religious point of view but rather bringing into light the theological tenets of Duterte's concept of God and foregrounding them in the context of our predominantly Christian culture. This study wants primarily to understand what are the objectives that these performative pronouncements seek to achieve politically, and what interests they serve based on Foucault's (1980) analysis of "regime of truth."

*Keywords: Duterte, theology, discourse, religion, church, scandal*

## Introduction

The verbal skirmishes between President Rodrigo R. Duterte and the Catholic Church are an interesting topic to explore, not only because the President provides trenchant but vulgar overtones to the polemics but because they provide us a glimpse of how people perceive religion in relation to politics. More importantly, President Duterte, being the most popular and highest elected official of the country (Heydarian, 2018), acts as a porthole for us to study how people make sense of their religious beliefs when challenged by a popular political figure. This paper, however, is not an exploration of cult of Duterte; instead, it is a modest attempt to come up with a systematic account of Duterte's "theological" musings based on his random extemporized criticisms against God and the Catholic Church and its clergies.

Duterte's remarks are at best scattered, incoherent, and amateurish. Yet a serious perusal of his public statements may, given proper theoretical understanding, provide us with a coherent set of theological perspective

on his views about church-state relation, celibacy, and sexuality of clerics among other things.

This study wants to understand what are the objectives that those performative pronouncements seek to achieve politically?

## Method

Appropriating the theoretical analysis of Foucault (1980) regarding power and knowledge nexus, and combining it with the current trends in discourse analysis, this study will explore the power-effects of Duterte's theological criticisms on the regime of religious truth of the Catholic Church. Today, discourse, while popularized by Foucault (2007; 1972), has already a life of its own. Discourse generally refers to spoken language or forms of speech (van Dijk, 1997, p. 1). However, discourse does not only cover spoken language but also written texts and even signs that are intended to communicate to the wider public (Berger, 2016). From a more theoretical point of view, discourse consists of three essential elements: (1) language use, (2) the communication of beliefs, and (3) interactions in a social situation (van Dijk, 1997, p. 2). The analysis of discourse thus is not only limited to the analysis of spoken words but also the way these spoken words or language shape the way people interact and the way they shape the meanings that people believe based on the cultural worldview they share (Fairclough, 1992). The following definition of Berger (2016), which betrays the Foucauldian slant, is adopted for this study: Discourse analysis “deals with our use of language and the way our language shapes our identities, our social relationships, and our social and political world” (p. 4).

Put simply, utterances and texts are not isolated but are part of a wider social community of language users with the same cultural background (Johnstone, 2008, p. 20). These utterances must be understood within the system of hierarchy of meanings that actors employ to articulate their own worldview and interpretations (van Dijk, 1997). Discourse is made up of language, so it is more than the study of language. It focuses on how the use of language can affect certain actions upon others or create events (Johnstone, 2008). Hence Fairclough (1992) prefers to define discourse, as “a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables” (p. 26).

Following van Dijk (1997), this study will focus on the following basic principles of discourse:

**Naturally occurring talk or conversation.** This study will look at the way news present and represent the comments and speeches of Duterte regarding God, religion, and the Church. The focus here is on the edited and abridged speeches.

**Context.** Of course, the meaning of a sign or cultural symbol cannot reside completely in the text. It has to also take the wider context of the polysemic nature of a text and the cultural system of the readers or what Foucault (1972) calls as “discursive formation” (p. 34), Context refers to the properties of the communicative situation that shape and influence the way people construct their speech act (van Dijk, 2007, p. 5).

**Discourse as social practice of members.** Discourse is not just frozen language or ongoing conversation but a way of using the linguistic codes of a given community (van Dijk, 2007). It does not only mean using and skillfully drawing from the resources of the community but also challenging and modifying these received and existing linguistic rules and cultural resources. Studying Duterte’s speeches entails understanding the language and insider’s language of the President and those that surround him and his audience.

**Members’ categories.** The study of “texts” and utterances should respect the members’ use of certain concepts and categories rather than imposing the analyst’s critical idioms. Utterances are indexical, meaning they originate within the community of competent linguistic practitioners.

**Sequentiality.** Text and utterances follow certain chronological sequence. Hence to understand a given statement one has to locate it within the ongoing process of conversation and speech. The meanings of Duterte’s discourses on religion and God have to be situated in the series of events that produced them.

**Constructivity.** Meanings can only be understood in relation to the whole or larger system of discourse. Meanings should be properly placed in the hierarchy of texts.

**Rules.** Analyzing Duterte’s theological musing involves looking at how his utterances follow rules of public speech befitting a President or how he disregards and challenges these rules to deliver his message.

**Strategies.** This involves looking at the techniques of Duterte in putting his message across in effective manner. It involves analyzing his rhetorical skills to mollify antagonism generated by his cursing in public and clarifying them later.

**Social cognition.** Finally, one must understand what is going on in Duterte’s mind in order to fully comprehend the meaning of his message.

Taking these basic principles into account, this study will comb through the speeches of Duterte about the Catholic Church and Christian religion as reported in online news and similar websites. The speeches reported and highlighted in the online news feed will serve as the basic text for the discourse analysis. By using these texts, this study will show how Duterte

creates a new constellation of meanings by challenging the received doctrines about the nature of God and religion

In this study, the generalization of Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2017) that qualitative research has become relativistic will be followed. They state,

there seems to be an emerging consensus that all inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer, all observation is theory laden, and there is no possibility of theory-free knowledge. We can no longer think of ourselves as neutral spectators of the social world. (p. 1308)

While it is difficult to pin down exactly whether Duterte meant what he said or he is just joking, why is it important to pay attention to the discourses themselves and their rhetorical effects? What do they accomplish or purport to achieve within the context of political conflicts? Of course, any analysis will have to bear in mind the personal style of Duterte in delivering his speeches as well as being sensitive to its veridical and cognitive content.

### **The Pope: Infallible or Obstacle?**

The pivotal point to begin in assembling Duterte's own brand of theology is his controversial remarks about Pope Francis' visit in 2015. During his Presidential proclamation by PDP-Laban at Century Park Hotel, on November 30, 2015, it was reported that Duterte made the following joke:

*Gusto kong tawagan, 'Pope putang ina ka, umuwi ka na. 'Wag ka nang magbisita dito.* [Pope, you son of a bitch, go home. Don't visit here anymore]. (Ranada, 2015, para. 5)

Hours later, Duterte called *Rappler* and said that it was not directed against the Pope but at how the government was handling the papal visit (Ranada, 2015). But he said he would not apologize.

The following day, Duterte clarified in the report of ABS-CBN:

"I never said p\*\*\*\* mo Pope. I said "t\*\*\*\*, huwag ka na pumunta dito." he clarified, "You travel for five hours for five kilometers, you don't use your heads! You allow people to endure hardships!" ("Duterte under fire for cursing the Pope," 2015, para. 2)

Duterte's stance was clear. He was complaining about the five-hour traffic jam that he experienced during the papal visit. The news reported:

“From the hotel to the airport, alam mo inabot kami ng ... limang oras. Sabi ko bakit? Sabi pinasarado daw,” he said in a speech at the Century Park hotel where he was formally declared PDP-Laban standard-bearer. (“Duterte under fire for cursing the Pope,” 2015, para. 4).

From Duterte’s laical perspective, the papal visit was an interruption of regular business and flow of traffic. Duterte said, “Sorry na lang Pope, nadali ka sa pitik ko, baka makarating ito sa Vatican, galit ako sa mga nasarahan, sinara ang mga daan, madami kaming naghirap Pope” (Heydarian, 2018, p. 8). Duterte is the first mainstream politician to curse the Pope. “If he asks me, ‘are you inviting me again?’ ‘If people will suffer, can I say no this time’” (p. 8), Duterte added.

When Duterte narrated this even publicly he made it clear that he was not seeking popularity. This maverick way of handling the situation, for good or bad, contributed to making Duterte a powerful icon. As if he had nothing to lose, he said with bravado:

“I don’t crave for ratings, I do not need praises, I will not die if I don’t become the president” Duterte said, “if you don’t like my character, the solution is do not vote for me.” (“Duterte under fire for cursing the Pope,” 2015, para. 20)

Duterte laid the groundwork for his later “theologizing”: if people do not like his caustic rants, cursing, and vulgar language about religion and the Church, then they should just reject him as President (“Duterte under fire for cursing the Pope,” 2015). What Duterte’s cussing against the papal visit showed implicitly is the way the President challenged another head of state—the Pope being the highest official of the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican. In this innuendo, the theological blends with the political. Duterte seemingly does not show any respect for the papal title of the “Vicar of Christ.” The Pope is just an ordinary foreign diplomat who must abide by local rules and laws.

Thus Duterte started to challenge the “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1989, p. 131) of the predominantly Catholic Church (8 of ten Filipinos are Catholics in 2017, according to Agence France Presse (“Factbox: Catholicism in the Philippines,” 2017)). He has shaken the foundations of Petrine supremacy right in the heart of a profoundly religious nation. By his maverick campaign sortie, Duterte gambled: the Presidency or wooing the Catholics for votes. Surprisingly, he won the election by an overwhelming majority (Heydarian, 2018). It appeared that the Catholic voters preferred to forgive and ignore a

strong, authoritarian leader rather than defending one of the major beliefs of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

### **The Signs of Religious Conflicts to Come**

It was not only the visit of the Pope that was at issue during the presidential campaign but several teachings of the Church like birth control. The Catholic Church has been very vocal in opposing the past administrations' campaign to push for population programs involving contraceptives (Esmaquel, 2012). At this historical juncture the Church has just engaged the state in tussle with the reproductive health law approved with much controversy and heated legal arguments in 2012 (Shahani, 2012).

Yet in the report of *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on November 30, 2015, Duterte is said to have claimed that he was not afraid to air his thoughts against the Catholic Church because he was not deterred from losing votes.

“Yung ibang presidente takot kasi kapag nagkampanya ang mga pari, talo na sila,”

On the Church's stance against population control, the tough-talking mayor said that the Philippines must control its population.

“I would like to challenge them. The Philippines needs to reduce its population because our resource have decreased,” Duterte said. (Hegina, 2015, para. 3)

Duterte breaks away from the taken-for-granted imperative among political candidates not to antagonize powerful religious organizations (like The Catholic Church, Iglesia ni Cristo, and El Shaddai) to gain votes. Duterte knows to well that the “Church vote” is a myth (Azada & Hermida, 2015; Cornelio, 2013; Hunt, 1992; Youngblood, 1998).

### **The Great Schism Started**

Duterte's remarks of course did not go unnoticed. It created a furor amidst the election fever. The defenders of conservative religious regime of truth were quick to reply. The most outspoken defense of the Pope came from Buhay Rep. Lito Atienza who said Duterte's expletives over the traffic jam caused by the Pontiff's visit is a “direct assault on the Catholic faith” (“Duterte slammed for ‘womanizing, cursing Pope,’” 2015, para. 4). Atienza took the line of religious tolerance:

“Nirerespeto natin ang karapatan ni Mayor Duterte na magsalita at maipahayag ang kanyang saloobin. Subalit

dapat ay igalang din niya ang karapatan ng bawat Pilipino na magpahayag ng ayon sa kanilang pananampalataya. Ang pagmumura sa Santo Papa ay hindi natin matatanggap,” Atienza added. (para. 12)

Meanwhile the CBCP, represented by Bishop Soc Villegas, who is close to the Aquinos, took the line of moralizing:

When a revered and loved and admired man like Pope Francis is cursed by a political candidate and the audience laugh, I can only bow my head and grieve in great shame. My countrymen has gone to the dregs. (“CBCP hits Duterte’s cursing of Pope,” 2015, para. 5)

In the heat of election season, the political stance of Bishop Soc Villegas is clear: “Is this the leadership by example that Mayor Duterte excites in us? Is this the leadership by example that makes a public official deserving of the title ‘Honorable’?” (“CBCP hits Duterte’s cursing of Pope,” 2015, para. 21). This equally bellicose reply of the then President of CBCP would open the Pandora’s box for Duterte’s histrionics against the Catholic Church and its bishops.

The ruling Liberal Party, at that time led by Edwin Lacierda, also fired back and elevated the Pope into an icon against Duterte (Hegina, 2015). The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported:

On his Twitter account, Palace presidential spokesperson Edwin Lacierda said: “Mayor Duterte, you can say all you want about politicians but you don’t curse my Pope Francis! #defendthepope.” (para. 6)

In short, Duterte drew the strident line between his future political direction against those who uphold the dominant ideology of the Catholic Church. The battle for God, religious truth, and adherents is on.

### **The Church of Duterte Fired Back**

Then came the scattered members of the Duterte Church.<sup>1</sup> The supporters of the mayor were quick to defend Duterte. In a Facebook post on December 1, 2015, Duterte’s staunch supporter, former North Cotabato Mayor Manny Piñol, who would later be appointed as Secretary of Agriculture, posted a short message from the mayor addressing those who felt offended by his speech:

I can never curse my Pope. I was cursing at incompetence. If it was taken by some in that light, I sincerely apologize. I will continue to curse so our suffering nation takes action.’ (“Duterte slammed for ‘womanizing, cursing Pope,” 2015, para. 7)

If Piñol is to be believed, then, Duterte dodged the issue by reframing his criticism against the papal visit by redirecting it against the government rather than the Pope. Using this rhetoric, Duterte maintained he would not apologize: “I can never curse my Pope” (“Duterte slammed for ‘womanizing, cursing Pope,” 2015, para. 10). But yes, he did apologize that he contradicted his earlier statement. But this apology was just a quote from Piñol, not a public apology coming from Duterte himself.

In an ambush interview after his infamous statement on the Papal visit, Duterte said he thinks Pope Francis will not take issue with the comments:

“Compassionate si Pope. Maiintindihan niya ako. Kayo man maihi sa loob ng sasakyan, matutuwa ba kayo?” he said (“Duterte slammed for ‘womanizing, cursing Pope,” 2015, para. 8).

This quip appealed to the teaching of Pope Francis on compassion. And probably many people thought that Duterte was just joking and did not mean his cussing.

In an interview on TV 5, Duterte owned up his cursing and boldly promised he would not run if Vatican would not forgive him (Gabinete, 2015). Its rhetorical effect however shows Duterte is not owning up to his misdeeds but simply excusing himself for being impetuous:

“If you think that I have offended, which are never really, in the first place, not meant to do it, kung hindi ninyo ako mapatawad, the hierarchy o yung Vatican, sabihin ninyo, ‘We are offended and we demand that you withdraw from the presidential contest,’ I will tomorrow withdraw.

“Walang problema.

“Yung sinasabi na bastos ako at hindi dapat ako presidente, I will withdraw.

“Ako kasi kung magsalita, puro mura.

“Talagang pinahirapan, and then we want the Pope to be safe, but the way its being handled, you are really imposing endurance on the people.”

“I am willing to withdraw. Ask the Catholic Church.

“Pag sinabi ni Pope, nasaktan siya, go ahead, I’m willing to



withdraw tomorrow.

“I will sign the withdrawal.

“I answer for my deeds if it’s indeed a misdeed, but it was just part of my tongue.” (Gabinete, 2015, para. 8)

During his campaign, Duterte cancelled his planned visit to the Pope and instead wrote a letter to the Pope (Torres, 2018). Jesus Dureza handed the letter to the pope during an audience at the Vatican on January 18 (Torres, 2018). A letter from the Vatican’s Secretariat of State, signed by Angelo Becciu and dated February 24, stated, “His Holiness Pope Francis has received (Duterte’s) letter dated January 21, 2016” and that the Holy See “appreciates the sentiments” which the mayor expressed (Gabinete, 2015).

### **The Parable That Was a Joke**

Pressured by criticisms coming from the Church and the possibility of losing Catholic votes, the Davao City mayor threatened to reveal his alleged sexual abuse he experienced with the Jesuits amid the furor caused by his expletive-laden speech. The ABS-CBN News online reported this on December 1, 2015:

“Maliliit na mistake ... huwag na iyan ... sabi ko hindi ako mamamatay pag hindi ako Presidente,” he said. “Kung gusto mo mag-withdraw ako then I will challenge you to a debate tomorrow if you want tapos sabihin ko lahat.”

“The sad story of the Catholic way dito,” he alleged. “Kami sa Ateneo noon, and I will tell you the abuses committed against the minors during that time including me and I will tell you my story.” (“Duterte claims abuse in Catholic school,” 2015, para. 3)

He invoked divine predestination to justify his brusqueness: “If you have something against me or my mouth or my character, go to God and complain. Siya ang may gawa. He is the one to be blamed,” Duterte said in an exclusive interview with ANC on December 29, 2016 ( “Duterte to critics: Take your complaints to God,” 2016).

He would also exploit the same apology later after cursing God:

“Why should I change? God made me the way I am. God gave me this identity and God gave me this mouth,” he added. (“Duterte asks: Who Is This Stupid God?,” 2018, para. 5)

So, did Duterte curse the Pope or not? Clearly he did not care! He was honest enough to argue that he was not afraid of losing votes (“Duterte to critics: Take your complaints to God,” 2016). And even if many Catholics were alienated by his cussing of the Pope, he still went on to win the Presidential election (Heydarian, 2018). Either Catholics were not united or Duterte commanded such great charisma that he could make people love him despite his attacks on the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. But Duterte’s rhetorical style of appealing to the emotions of the ordinary people and making them feel what he felt, and claiming everything was a joke did not diminish his popularity. Ordinary Catholic voters, and even non-Catholics, could have empathized with Duterte’s personal predicament in experiencing heavy traffic due to the papal visit. And for them, the Pope would understand as Duterte believed.

### **The Cussing Continues against the Modern-day Pharisees**

After his trip in Japan in 2016, the President made the pledge upon arrival in his southern hometown of Davao that he would never curse again against anyone. It was reported in Al Jazeera online news that he claimed on the flight while he was looking at the sky and everyone was sound asleep, he heard a voice that said,

“If you don’t stop epithets, I will bring this plane down now.”

“And I said, ‘Who is this?’ So, of course, ‘It’s God,” said Duterte.

“So, I promise God to ... not express slang, cuss words and everything. So you guys hear me right always because [a] promise to God is a promise to the Filipino people.” (“Rodrigo Duterte Vows to Abstain from Cursing Others,” 2016, para. 5)

But this was yet another joke. Duterte had also previously apologized to Bacolod Bishop Vicente Navarra for cursing the Pope (Gelera, 2016). He also vowed to donate Php 1,000 to Caritas Davao for every curse word he would blurt out (Tisiorna, 2016). Despite his resolution to stop cussing when he won the election, Duterte became even more vituperative against the Church as the death tolls in Operation Tokhang reached its peak (Lema & Mogato, 2016).

Reuters reported that Duterte made the following statement:

“You sons of whores, aren’t you ashamed? You ask so many favours, even from me,” he said, addressing Catholic bishops.

“You know the most hypocritical institution? The Catholic church.” (Morales, 2017, para. 6)

Duterte became more emboldened in his public criticisms of the Church. For Duterte, the 80 percent of the Catholic population consider him more popular than the bishops because he was elected as President even if these bishops had campaigned against him (Morales, 2017).

This public dressing down happened after he was criticized by the bishops for joking about an Australian missionary woman who was raped and killed in a prison riot in 1989 (Ranada, 2018b). Duterte was also irritated by the vocal opposition of the Catholic Church against death penalty and misgivings of the Church against his war on drugs. Police figures showed that 7,042 people had been killed during the campaign, 2,250 in anti-drugs operations, and most of the other deaths still being investigated during this time (Morales, 2017).

Duterte subjected the church to a tongue-lashing even after receiving a blessing from Pope Francis. He accused the priests and bishops, who were critical of his drugs war, of engaging in homosexual acts, corruption, and child abuse. In a speech to policemen in January 2017, the firebrand leader of one of only two majority Catholic Asian countries challenged the church to a “showdown” and threatened to expose priests and bishops for a litany of abuses. Duterte is clear about the role of priests in his campaign (Morales, 2017). Reuters reported:

“Most people here are Catholics. If you are a good priest, make them understand that they will die,” he said, referring to drug users. The he lashed it out against priests, “You criticise the police, you criticise me. For what? You have the money. You are all crazy ... when we were making confessions to you, we were being molested. They are touching us. What is your moral ascendancy, religion? What is the meaning of it?” (Morales, 2017, para. 7)

Duterte claimed members of the clergy had wives and engaged in homosexual practices that are prohibited by the Catholic Church. Priests were also misusing state funds and appropriating large sums of donations from the people without accountability (Morales, 2017).

“You expose me, fine. I expose you. Why? Your mistake is just all right, but ours is not? Bullshit. That is a big joke,” he said.

“If you cannot mend your ways, if you cannot even give justice to the small boys that you have molested in the past,

you do not have that moral ascendancy to lecture on the sanctity of life.” (para. 10)

Here, Duterte employs abusive type of *ad hominem* to demolish the credibility of the priests and bishops and hold them accountable for moral righteousness. Duterte also utilizes the *tu quoque ad hominem*, or “you too” argument, to silence the bishops. He can say, “If I am corrupt, so you, too. We are both corrupt. If I am a womanizer, you too, have elicited affairs with women. So shut up” (Morales, 2017, para. 7). In his January 24, 2017 meeting in Malacañang with families of 44 Philippine National Police Special Action Force commandos who were killed in a clash with Moro rebels in Mamasapano, Duterte again used the *tu quoque ad hominem* against the Church. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* online reported:

He said he had been aware of the atrocities of the church leaders even when he was a young boy, and railed against priests who have failed to give service to the poor.

He said he might just write his own book against the church officials, titled “Hypocrisy.”

Church officials call politicians corrupt, and yet, he asked, “how about you?” (Salaveria, 2017a, para. 7).

The following day, the same news online reported:

According to Mr. Duterte, he and Catholic Church officials have the same sin—womanizing.

He singled out Bishop Teodoro Bacani, who he said had two wives like him. (Enano & Salaveria, 2017b, para. 5)

This is the typical rhetorical style of Duterte’s political theology. He publicly confesses his own sins, which he thinks people would not care for; then, he attacks the Church for not being honest and morally fair like him. Exploiting his popularity, he challenges the Catholic Church especially the bishops to come out in the open and admit their sins (Enano & Salaveria, 2017). Duterte also has a style for fending off *ad hominem* against him and his disciples. The *PDI* reported this on April 4, 2017, after then House speaker Pantaleon Alvarez was criticized for his alleged womanizing:

Duterte claimed only Christians are bound to monogamy, which shouldn’t apply to atheists.

“Sabihin mo man, when you are charged Herbert, you need not really... madamanda ka talaga balang araw. Huwag mong sabihin that you are a Catholic or you are a Protestant,” he said.

“All you have to say is that... I my... An atheist. Kung Atheist ka, kasi the Christian, Judeo-Christian is one wife. But if you are an atheist, so?” he added. (“Duterte defends womanizing: Chauvinist, yes, but there’s so many women, so little time,” 2017, para. 3)

In dismissing the moral dimension of the Christian sacrament of marriage, Duterte raised the issue of atheism (“Duterte defendswomanizing: Chauvinist, yes, but there’s so many women,so little time,” 2017). He naïvely thinks that being an atheist or atheism per se propounds anti-monogamy or even permits vulgar sexual immorality. Atheism also has a rigorous moral value system (Baggini, 2003). But it is doubtful whether there are strict adherents of atheism among his cabinet members and political allies. By bringing in atheism to his argument, even if Duterte is not himself an atheist, he thinks he can provide an intellectual challenge to the moral values of the Catholic Church.

At the height of his war on drugs and the notorious Oplan Tokhang, Duterte was under fire from the Church. *Tokhang* is a Visayan word which means *Tok-tok Hangyo*. Under Oplan Tokhang police personnel knocks the doors of an alleged drug user or pusher, asking him/her that he/she will surrender to the police in order that they will be monitored for further assessment” (Municipal Government of Calamba, PNP Double Barrel Oplan Tokhang). Duterte responded with equally vigorous, if not, stronger criticism of his archenemies. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported this on January 24, 2017:

According to Mr. Duterte, he and the Catholic church officials have the same sin—that of womanizing. He noted that one bishop—Bishop Teodoro Bacani—had two wives like him.

But unlike the church leaders, he is not corrupt, he said.

He chided them for asking for a Pajero during the time of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

“Shouldn’t you be ashamed of yourselves? That’s so expensive and so many people have nothing to eat,” he said.

The bishops knew they were not supposed to receive anything from the government, and yet they asked for the high-end vehicle, he said.

“Putangina, tumanggap ang mga ulol (Son of a bitch, the jerks accepted it),” he said.

“It was pure graft and corruption,” he added.

He said he had been aware of the atrocities of the church

leaders even when he was a young boy, and railed against priests who have failed to give service to the poor.

He said he might just write his own book against the church officials, titled “Hypocrisy.”

Church officials call politicians corrupt, and yet, he asked, “how about you?”

Most politicians have been afraid of offending the Catholic church officials, but not him, Mr. Duterte said. (Salaverria, 2017b, para. 10)

Months later, in his speech at the 11th Ambassadors’ Tour Philippine reception in Davao City, Duterte continued his attacks on priests and bishops by once again accusing them of womanizing and other excesses (Valente, 2017). He even encouraged his audience composed of Filipino-American delegates to read the book *Altar of Secrets*, written by the late journalist Aries Rufo and published in 2013, to find out about the sins of church officials. This is the only book, written by a journalist, that Duterte used as a reference to criticize the Catholic clergies.

Duterte confesses to his womanizing but he claims to be more righteous than the Church when it comes to corruption. *The Manila Times* reported this online:

According to Duterte, he and the Catholic Church officials have the same sin— that of womanizing.

“P\*\*\*\*\* i\*\* kayong mga obispo kayo, mga y\*\*\* ka, kala mo sino kayo. Pareho lang trabaho natin. Karami ninyong babae,” he said.

( . . . you bishops . . . who do you think you are? We have the same vice. You have lots of women.

But unlike the church leaders, the President said he was not corrupt.

“This I can promise you. Maski ganito lang ako, medyo bastos ganon tapos sometimes outright vulgarity...I can guarantee you. There will be no corruption. There will be no abuses in government,” Duterte said.

( . . .Even if I’m like this, a bit rude, sometimes outright vulgar . . .)

He even challenged priests to take shabu to understand the drug menace. (Valente, 2017, para. 8)

Duterte publicly admits his “sins,” but then, he denounces the Catholic clergies as acting like Pharisees or as moral phonies. Following the ideas

of Judith Butler (1997), an ingenious student of Foucault, Duterte's public denunciation of the Catholic bishops does not only state putative facts about them but performs an act that insults the consecrated power of bishops and their office. Duterte forcefully resignifies the pejorative moral connotation of "womanizer" and applies it to himself while using the same speech act to exact moral decency from the bishops. Duterte knows that the bishops and priests cannot resignify the label "womanizer" to defend their moral turpitude. The Philippine Catholic Church has a double standard on morality when it comes to corruption and sexual abuses (Cartagenas, 2015; Ofreneo, 1987).

Moreover Duterte's theological diatribes against the hypocrisy of the clergies splits public morality from private sins. Duterte excuses his private depravities by arguing that they pale in comparison to the private depravities of the clergies and their financial and economic corruption (Valente, 2017). The moral system that ensues from Duterte's theological musings justifies public officials from engaging in moral depravities in their private lives while maintaining honesty and decorum in holding public office.

### **The "Stupid God": Whose God?**

What may be considered as the height of Duterte's theological criticism of the Catholic Church while assaulting the integrity of the Catholic Church is when he infamously declared that "God is stupid" on June 19, 2018 (Phillips, 2018). The following transcription of Duterte's controversial speech from *Washington Post* online news:

What he did was, Eve eats the apple, then she wakes up Adam.... So Adam eats the apple. Then, malice was born. Who is this stupid God? That [expletive] is really stupid if that's the case. You created something perfect, and then you think of an event that would tempt and destroy the quality of your work. How can you rationalize.... Do you believe it? ... So all of us now, all of us are born with an original sin. The original sin, what is that? Was it the first kiss? What was the sin? Why original? You're still in the womb and you already have a sin? It's your mother and father's doing and you're not even included, and now you have an original sin? [Expletive]. What kind of religion is that? That's what I can't accept. (para. 3)

Duterte criticizes the popular version of the Creation story of Christianity.

First, Duterte casts doubt on the transmission of original sin (Phillips, 2018). Second, he probes the role of evil in creation (Phillips, 2018). Duterte is perplexed as to why God introduced evil in the world. After criticizing these flawed theological myths, Duterte claims he still believes in God, but not the God of the Catholic Church. He maintains that he is deeply “spiritual” person without any religious affiliation (Phillips, 2018). Duterte’s theology rejects the institutional or organized religions together with their panoplies of doctrines and dogmas in favor of personalized and subjectivist definition of faith.

In his June 20, 2018 speech in Cabatuan, Iloilo City, he was forced to keep silent during the tolling of the church bells (Placido, 2018). The President was bringing up the issue of priests being killed when bells from a nearby church suddenly began tolling. He then paused for less than a minute to wait for the bells to stop tolling. Then he is reported to have said:

“I don’t want to create a scene but I have my duty. I’m a Christian, and I believe in God. I respect the tolling of the bells,” he said.

“Wala kaming policy na galit kami sa pari, nothing of the sort. As a matter of fact, nirerespeto ko ang Simbahan,” he said in a speech in Mandurriao district, Iloilo City. (para. 5).

Here, Duterte claimed publicly he is a Christian. But weeks before this speech, Duterte made the most notorious attack against the Catholic Church by calling its God “stupid” (Phillips, 2018). From this public pronouncement, one can categorize Duterte as a “lapsed Catholic” or someone who still belongs to the Church but has stopped believing some of its fundamental doctrines (Burton & Francis, 1996).

Under fire from Catholic bishops and clergy and pressured by public uproar, Duterte explained in an ABS-CBN online news report whose God he was exactly referring to:

The President questioned why the Catholic God should created “something perfect” only to “destroy” it later with the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. “Totoo naman (that’s true),” Duterte said of his controversial comment in his speech during the oath-taking of newly elected Northern Mindanao barangay captains in Cagayan de Oro. The President, who was born and raised as a Catholic, claimed that he was not referring to his own god when he labelled God as stupid. “Wala akong sinabing torpe ang ginoo ko (I did not say my god was stupid),” he said. “Your god is not my



god because your god is stupid. Mine has a lot of common sense.” (Placido, 2018, para. 5)

Then, Duterte in the same online news invoked his right to make his own personal religious beliefs while challenging the inerrancy of the Bible<sup>2</sup>:

Duterte added, nobody has the right to “bind” him to a certain belief, and that it is up to him whether to believe in God or not. “If I choose not to believe in any god, what’s the f\*\*\*\*\*g thing about it? It’s about freedom to choose one,” he said. He said he instead believes in a “universal being” who is “more supreme than the rest of the gods of men.” In his speech, Duterte again mocked the creation story in the Christian Bible. He also questioned the story behind the last supper, wherein Jesus Christ had his last meal with his apostles before his crucifixion. “Sabi ko, not everything in the bible is true. Sino nag-publish niyang Bible na iyan? Even itong last supper. Who are the idiots there? Basta nalang gi—ginawang santo kay tua man ngadto sa painting. (The people in the painting were suddenly made saints just because they were there),” he claimed. (Placido, 2018, para. 5)

In another occasion, reminiscent of Lutheran critique of Catholic theology, he challenged the sacramental efficacy of Confession (may be as a result of being molested during Confession). Duterte’s view puts a wedge between “faith” as personal decision and “religion” as an organized rituals and actions. He believes one’s faith is not found exclusively in a single religion. The Catholic religion has no monopoly imposing its definition of faith (Torres, 2016).

“I have this deep, abiding faith in God but that does not mean that you have to have a religion, you have to follow somebody, that you have to get a message from this and that,” he said over the weekend in Davao City on Mindanao island, where he has been mayor for 20 years.

“Why would I have to go to a human being to whisper my sins and ask for forgiveness from him? Who are you to listen to my sins and give me absolution? You are not God,” he said in the press conference covered live by the country’s major television networks. Duterte, who is a Catholic, lashed out at his own Church, calling it the “most

hypocritical institution” in the country for claiming moral ascendancy while allegedly engaging in corrupt practices and other wrongdoings. He said if the Catholic Church excommunicates him for his statements, he might join the Seventh Day Adventists. (para. 3)

## **The “True” God that Emerged Out of Duterte’s Traumatic Experience**

If Duterte is to be believed, he developed animosity against the Catholic Church after he was allegedly molested by a Jesuit, Fr. Mark Falvey, SJ of Ateneo de Davao, when he was a freshman (“Jesuit priest who allegedly molested Duterte had other victims,” 2015). During the inauguration of Malayan Colleges Mindanao in Davao City on July 8, 2018, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer* online news reported:

Amid his controversial statements on God, President Rodrigo Duterte said he stopped being a Catholic because of a “terrible” incident—when he allegedly suffered sexual abuse at the hands of a priest.

This prompted him to create his own concept of a supreme being, who stood for his values of fairness and justice, Mr. Duterte related on Saturday night (Aurelio, 2018, para. 2).

One may argue that this new public discourse about God made by Duterte is just another ingenious attempt of the President to get away from the public thrashing he received for cursing God publicly.<sup>3</sup> The *Manila Bulletin* online has a more vivid description of Duterte’s speech:

“Something terrible happened when we were young. It’s not really that serious. But fondling while confessing, we were being fondled so when I graduated, hindi na ako Katoliko. Hindi na ako Katoliko [I was no longer a Catholic. I was no longer a Catholic] at that age. I was not even in politics then,” Duterte said during the inauguration of Malayan Colleges Mindanao in Davao City.

“But pag-graduate ko, I created my own God. ‘Yung nakikita kong values na justice [After graduation, I created my own God based on the values I have seen like justice] — what is justice, fairness — I have always said in Davao, ‘My God is my service to the people.’ Period,” he added. (Kabling, 2018, para. 5)

This incident allegedly happened while Duterte and his classmates were confessing their sins to the disclosed Jesuit priest (Kabling, 2018).<sup>4</sup> Duterte's narrative of his spiritual awakening parallels, or, to be more exact, parodies, the spiritual experiences of other great religious leaders (e.g., Moses, Muhammad, Buddha). Duterte's spiritual enlightenment was a product of a traumatic experience inside the Catholic Church (Kabling, 2018). Out of this traumatic experience, Duterte sought a God beyond the God taught to him by the Jesuits. This "universal mind" is more supreme than all the gods of existing religion. This God champions justice and fairness and service to the people. This God, Duterte claims, is not the God of the Jesuits and the Catholic Church. For if the God of the Catholics exists, then, there will be no more suffering and injustices. The God he cursed as stupid, therefore, is not the "true" God that he personally believed. And at 71, Duterte had forgiven the deceased priest (Kabling, 2018).

In his speech in S. Korea, Duterte jokingly proposed founding a new Church:

"So 'yung God that I believe in, 'yang God [minus?] diyan, ka-putahan na istorya ng Katoliko. Kalokohan. May bago tayong relihiyon na pag labas natin. Iglesia ni Rodrigo tayo lahat. Walang limit. May obligasyon ka sarili. Make yourself happy," he added. (Buddyw, 2018, para. 2)

It is useless to argue at this point that the "God" repudiated by Duterte is a false idol that is so different from the "true" God of the Catholic Church as Duterte vehemently refuses to believe the doctrines associated with the Catholic Church's creed. In his speech at Maasin, Leyte on July 3, 2018, he suggests pitting his god with the god of the Catholics (Reyes, 2018). After saying, "Why do you get mad if I hit your god? God is what you conceive him to be. We all have different gods" (para. 3), he declared:

"The god I know I learned from my parents, not from the school. That's the god I know. Not the gods of those who use god as a platform, to warn of karma... My god is braver. I will let my god hit your god." (Reyes, 2018, para. 4)

In short, Duterte creates his own Iglesia ni Duterte/Digong Church and a "smarter," forgiving yet strong God as contrapuntal to the hypocrisy that underscores the discourse of the Catholic Church (Torres, 2018). He instigates the public that there can be salvation outside the Catholic Church.

And he enjoins them to join him in this exodus to the New Church, a joke of course meant to deride the Church.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Theodicy of Duterte or the Problem of Human Suffering**

In the ABS-CBN online news, Duterte, echoing the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky's (1952) critical interrogation on God and innocent suffering asked poignantly:

“So where is now God when a one-year old baby, 18-months-old baby is taken from the mother’s arms brought under a jeep and raped and killed. So where is God?” he added.

“So where is God? My God, where are you? I believe in God but that is my perpetual question to Him. Where were you when we needed you? It’s not enough to say that at the end of the world, He will judge the living and the dead,” Duterte continued.

“What would be the purpose of all of that if the heartaches, sorrows and agony have already been inflicted in this world.” (“Duterte asks: What if there is no God?” 2016, para. 3-6)

These remarks were made during the oath-taking ceremony of Malacañang Press Corps officials on September 26, 2016 (“Duterte asks: What if there is no God?” 2016). The President was talking about death penalty and how it can be effectively used as a deterrent to crime. He linked innocent suffering with his promise to the Filipinos that he will end crime especially those related to drugs. If God cannot prevent crimes and innocent suffering, then, it is the task of the state to prevent it. In Duterte’s discourse about religion and suffering, he offers his own account of Hell. When narcopolitics takes hold of our nation, and threatens the future generation, Duterte is willing to kill all those involved in illegal drugs just to end hell on earth.

Reuters news online reported one of the controversial speeches of Duterte on comparing himself with Hitler:

Noting that Hitler had murdered millions of Jews, Duterte said, “There are 3 million drug addicts (in the Philippines). I’d be happy to slaughter them.

“If Germany had Hitler, the Philippines would have ...,” he said, pausing and pointing to himself.

“You know my victims. I would like (them) to be all criminals to finish the problem of my country and save the next generation from perdition.” (Lema & Mogato, 2016, para. 2)

Duterte brazenly rejects the Christian notion of Hell by arguing that if God is compassionate, then, Hell is unnecessary. He sarcastically concedes there might be Hell, but he wants to be in the worst part of Hell to make the Bishops happy. He challenges the notion of original sin, but he does not explain how evil, moral or otherwise, came into the world. The *Washington Post* reported that Duterte even belies the existence of Heaven (Lema and Mogato, 2016). Duterte seems to deny even the existence of after-life:

“You know my God never created hell because if he created hell, he must be stupid God... I do not believe in heaven because if I do, only a fraction of you in this crowd will ever enter heaven,” he said in a July 10 speech, according to GMA News. (Phillips, 2018, para. 11)

In another occasion, he quipped,

“God is all forgiving. God does not know how to put people in hell ... Even purgatory is not true. There is heaven, but do not believe that St. Peter guards the gates,” he said.

Referring to the biblical reference that Peter denied Jesus Christ three times before the cock crowed, Duterte added: “If I chance upon him and the gates are filled with chicken shit, I will punch him. What kind of guard are you? Look at the shit of your chickens!” (Reyes, 2018, para. 6)

Yet even granting there is Hell, Duterte takes this argument to appeal to the emotion of the audience by saying God should reserve the hottest place in Hell for him for letting thousands die in his war on drugs. And if there is Heaven, Duterte mockingly assures the audience that all the victims of his war on drugs will go to heaven as a consolation (Reyes, 2018). Pure sarcasm of course.

By de-mythologizing Christian discourse about sin and God, Duterte wants to persuade his audience of the defects of the Church. He wants to demonstrate that the Church’s teachings are at best infantile stories on par with fairy tales. At the same time, he deflects the criticisms of the Church by offering his own counter-discourse using ridiculous stories delivered in the sincerest style only Duterte can execute. In short, by ridiculing the doctrines of the Church and God Himself Duterte provides counter-

myths to Christian discourse about God and offering his own Soteriology (discourse about salvation), thereby, neutralizing the force of religious criticisms directed against him and his administration.

Duterte challenges and changes the predicates of God in Catholic discourse. To put it in a Feuerbachian frame, Duterte's "sensible God" is a projection of his own desire to be sensible and rational to the highest degree. Subtly, Duterte is at pains to expose the amateurish theological discourse of the Catholic Church about God. His is much better and logical.

Of course, Duterte is no atheist. His utilitarian God is forgiving for those who are willing to sacrifice few innocent criminals so that the universe will be safe for the rest. God in his view will be able to forgive him because he tried to save the lives of innocents against drug peddlers even at the cost of killing thousands. Without original sin, Duterte cannot explain how people turn evil. But he is certain that some people deserve to die because they are not human. As he warned early in his presidency:

"These sons of whores [drug dealers] are destroying our children. I warn you, don't go into that, even if you're a policeman, because I will really kill you." ("Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte urges people to kill drug addicts," 2016 )

Defending himself against public uproar, Duterte said, "*Wala akong sinabi na torpe ang Ginoo ko* [I said nothing about my God being stupid]. *Sabi ko* [I said], 'Your God is not my God because your God is stupid. Mine has a lot of common sense'" (Ranada, 2018, para. 2). But who is the sensible God of Duterte? Duterte thinks that his God is not stupid because his God did not create a world so that criminals can roam around unpunished. His God is a tough God that protects the "elect" while damning the few "reprobates." And for those who are tough against the evil ones, who unleash violence to save the future of the innocents, God is forgiving. The so-called Christian God is stupid because He created an imperfect world where innocents suffer, yet He forgives the rapists and heinous criminals. If Duterte could not believe in a God that allows criminals to roam around freely, he equally would not tolerate religious missionaries and priests who use their evangelical mandates and pulpits as pretext to criticize his government.

After discussing his sincere wish to lessen the suffering of Filipinos from drug-related crimes, he cited the case of Syrian "women and children who are burned if they refuse to have sex with ISIS militant fighters" ("Duterte asks: What if there is no God?," 2016, para. 2). And he wonders why God

allows this kind of evils.

Duterte clarified, however, that he believes in God and said: “I believe in God but that is my perpetual question to him: ‘Where were you when we needed you?’” (“Duterte asks: What if there is no God?”, 2016). One is reminded of the biblical Job.

Duterte believes in a God that sanctions the killing of the criminals in the name of justice for the innocent victims. His theodicy echoes the dualistic Manichean doctrine that sees evil as in locked combat with the Light (“Manicheism,” n.d.). In narcopolitics, Duterte found his own version of the Armageddon. In his war against the menace of drug, there is no middle road between good and evil. You both agree and side with Duterte (even if his statistics and figures on drug problems are spurious), or you are a supporter of drug lords (Coronel, 2016). In his tenacity to fight drug menace Duterte came up with series “drug lists” that included local government officials, military and police personnel, celebrities, and drug lords (Santos, 2016). But unlike the Hebrew Biblical “Book of Life,” Duterte’s narcolist is not a roster of individuals who are righteous before God. They rather contain the “damned” who have to amend for their sins and gain absolution from Duterte or face *Tokhang* (Rafael, 2017). In this Armageddon, Duterte won many allies especially among Christian sects and denominations that support capital punishment. The head minister of Ang Dating Daan Eli Soriano (2016), for instance, already gave his blessings to Duterte’s war on drugs. Other major dominant religions remain silent on his war on drugs.

### **The Apologists and Exegetes of the Church of Digong**

In the face of public uproar on Duterte’s remarks about God, the former Presidential Spokesperson, Harry Roque, defended Duterte by shifting the blame on the Church:

“I think the declaration of the president stemmed from his bad experience when still young. He was allegedly abused by a priest,” presidential spokesman Harry Roque told GMA News. “This is an issue that the Church should face and perhaps it just happened that the president is one of the victims.”

He added: “The Church cannot forget this. It should admit and ask forgiveness so that all the victims, including President Duterte, can also move on with their lives.” (Smith, 2018, para. 4)

On a more erudite level, Duterte had his own grand protector, in the person of Rigoberto Tiglao. In his column in dated June 27, 2018, Tiglao wrote:

With those kinds of words, and his relentless criticism of the Church, Duterte is at least lighting a candle in the vast dark landscape of Filipinos' worldview, by which they would risk life and limb to touch a wooden statue so they'd get a boon from the Deity, such as a visa to the US or a brand new SUV. para. 2)

Tiglao wanted the candle to be lighted in order to "enlighten" people so they could see to the glory of Duterte's new found religion! Tiglao made a mountain out of Duterte's passing remarks by turning him to a Kant for Philippine version of European Enlightenment (Tiglao, 2018).

Another official exegete of Duterte is the Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo, now the Presidential Spokesperson, who, as a true friend and apologist, claimed Duterte did not insult God but was just questioning Christianity's theory of creation ("Palace shifts narrative on Duterte's 'stupid God' remark, says Catholic Church should apologize," 2018). He also insisted that Duterte has the right to express his views on religion.

The president is being criticized for calling God stupid. He didn't call God stupid. What he said was the theory of creation as expounded by the writers of the Bible is a stupid proposition. In other words, he is questioning the logic behind the theory of creation as advanced by the theologians. There are many theories in creation as there are religions. ("Palace shifts narrative on Duterte's 'stupid God' remark, says Catholic Church should apologize," 2018, para. 1)

This is based on the freedom of the President to express his own religious beliefs.

The president cannot be divested of his right to express his opinion on matters of religion, politics and matters he deems fit to express upon, a constitutional right given to every citizen, just because he is the president. He has as much right to the freedom of speech and of expression constitutionally guaranteed the ordinary person ("Palace shifts narrative on Duterte's 'stupid God' remark, says



Catholic Church should apologize,” 2018, para. 3).

Then Panelo, like a modernist theologian, reconciles reason and Duterte’s faith:

“Indeed, the cornerstone of humanity is the possession of a critical mind which is ceaseless in its pursuit for truth. What the president does not subscribe to is blind adherence to prescribed dogma being preached by oftentimes hypocritical clergymen,” Duterte’s chief legal counsel said (“Palace shifts narrative on Duterte’s ‘stupid God’ remark, says Catholic Church should apologize,” 2018, para. 3)

Panelo argues that Duterte was also criticizing the failure of some people to practice the teachings of their religion. Like his Pontiff, Panelo also used the abusive type of ad hominem against the Church:

“You believe in a loving God and yet you are doing the opposite. Is this the God you are believing in? Why are you not following Him? That means you are believing in a false God, not the real God, because if you believe in and pray before a true God, you will follow His teachings. That’s the point of the president,” he said (“Palace shifts narrative on Duterte’s ‘stupid God’ remark, says Catholic Church should apologize,” 2018, para. 4)

Panelo claimed that Duterte is practicing the highest form of spirituality because of his readiness to sacrifice for the country (“Palace shifts narrative on Duterte’s ‘stupid God’ remark, says Catholic Church should apologize,” 2018). Panelo baptizes Duterte as the modern-day version of Christ.

“As stated in the Bible, greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. True to those words, our president has time and time again laid his life in sacrifice for the safety and protection of our country and our fellow citizens. That is the height of spirituality,” Panelo said. (para. 4)

What is noticeable here is that the exegetes of Duterte, like their spiritual guru, selectively appropriated the symbolism of Catholic religion to defend Duterte while deriding those beliefs that run contrary to the policies of the state (“Palace shifts narrative on Duterte’s ‘stupid God’ remark, says Catholic Church should apologize,” 2018, para. 6).<sup>6</sup>

## The Battle for God and Adherents

The website of *Christianity Today* explains the conflict between Duterte and the Church. First, Duterte inveighs against the Catholic leadership for campaigning against him before the May 9 election, which he won by popular vote. This is made worse by the fact that Duterte said the bishops did this even though in his 20 years as mayor of Davao City, priests had been seeking various favors from him.

“They campaigned against me; everybody was saying ‘Do not vote for Duterte.’ Fine. I said, let this election be a referendum between me and the Catholic Church ... Look, were you able to stop me?” he said (Torres, 2016, para. 5)

Catholic leaders have also criticized Duterte for openly admitting that he is a womanizer and for his alleged links with a “death squad” known to have summarily executed hundreds of suspected criminals (Quintos, 2018). According to the report of ABS-CBN reporter Patrick Quintos, “Fr. Jerome Secillano, Executive Secretary of the CBCP’s Public Affairs Committee, suspects Duterte’s harsh words against the church was triggered by some of the clergy members’ criticisms against the President over various issues” (2018).

Like an executive minister of a sect, Duterte challenged the Catholic bishops:

“You have been castigating me or criticizing me. You want a debate before I become president? Okay! ... I will tell you the sins of the Catholic Church beginning from the time the institution of the papacy was established,” Duterte said. (Torres, 2016, para. 2)

This rift was further aggravated by the opposition of the Church against the burial of President Marcos, the railroading of the bills in the House of representatives that support divorce and same-sex marriage, the proposed Constitutional change to support federalism, and the killing of three priests in his first two years as President (“Bishops against Duterte’s constitutional changes,” 2018). More importantly, the Church was very forthright in opposing Constitutional amendment as it would pave the way towards the consolidation of authoritarian rule (Espina-Varona, 2018a).

In this public controversy, God became the collateral damage. A few days before his dialogue with CBCP after the stupid God speech, Duterte even threatened to involve God in his word war if the Church fails to observe church state separation (“Duterte: ‘You cannot use God to criticize me,’ 2018). ABS-CBN News online reported the following:

In a speech in Davao City, Duterte said Filipinos can criticize him “with all [their] heart’s content” but said those in religious sects must not involve God.

“Pero when you are a religious, you have to be something of a neutral dito sa faith mo and the government. Because it is really the concept of a Republican system that there is a separation of Church and State. So, when you criticize me, do not use the platform of God,” he said.

“Do not do it, do not take God’s name in vain because pag-resbak ko, makasali ko na ‘yung Panginoong Diyos. It’s fundamental, it’s almost basic. There is really a clear cut between religion and governance. You cannot use God to criticize me.” (para. 1-3)

The CBCP responded with a razor-sharp Pastoral Letter “Rejoice and Be Glad,” amidst the latest intimidation from Duterte (“Full text: Filipino Catholic bishops release pastoral letter responding to gov’t issues,” 2018). The Pastoral Letter recognizes the imperfection of the Church:

We are a Church of sinners called to conversion and holiness at the same time. We bow in shame when we hear of abuses being committed by some of our fellow Church leaders—especially those ordained to “act in the person of Christ”. We hold ourselves accountable for their actions, and accept our duty to correct them—as duly mandated by our own higher authorities in the universal Church (para. 14).

It raises troubling questions against the approach of the government to specific policies directed against the poor especially the war on drugs and arrest of street loiterers:

Do we not feel the sufferings of drug addicts who are labelled as “non-humans”, and are stigmatized as criminals when their names end up in the dreaded “drug watch lists”? Yes, we are aware of the sufferings of those who have been victimized by substance abusers, but can we not see them also as sick people who are struggling with a disease? Should we not rather look at them also as victims who are crying out for help? Are we to remain as bystanders when we hear of people being killed in cold blood by ruthless murderers who dispose of human lives like trash? Do we not realize that for every drug suspect killed, there is a widowed wife and there

are orphaned children left behind—who could hardly even afford a decent burial for their loved ones? Do we not care when poor people’s homes are searched without warrants, or when drug suspects are arrested without warrants, or detained without charges? (“FULL TEXT: Filipino Catholic bishops release pastoral letter responding to gov’t issues,” 2018, para. 2)

Despite meeting with the President of the CBCP, Bishop Romulo Geolina Valles and agreeing to have a moratorium on making public swearing, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported during Northern Mindanao Wellness and Reintegration Center in Malaybalay City, Bukidnon on August 3, 2018:

“Enjoy your human rights in heaven,” Duterte said, addressing critics of his drug war that had killed thousands after he assumed office.

“God promised me all extrajudicial killing victims will go to heaven, iyan ang hiningi ko sa Dios. Sabi naman ng Dios, ‘pwede, pwede [That’s what I asked from God and God said, it can be done, it can be done],” Duterte said (Maitim, 2018, para. 1-2)

Mocking his critics, he said:

“They’re doing drugs and they go to hell? Now, we have a consolation, they’re going to heaven. I said, God, just allow them, I am not asking for anything,” he said.

Then he challenges the existence of Hell: “Reserve the hottest place in hell for me and may I burn until eternity,” he said, but added, “If there’s hell.”

“Why would God create an oven for his creation? I said I have a God but it is not your stupid God,” he added. (Maitim, 2018, para. 5-7)

So there is no stopping Duterte. A month before this statement, in his speech during the opening ceremony of the National Science and Technology Week in Davao City on July 8, 2018, Duterte challenged those who think they are smarter than him on theology to prove the existence of God:

If there is anyone of you out there, the noisy ones, who would say that you have been to heaven, talked to God,

saw him personally, and that He exists, that God is yours, and if He does is true, I will step down from the presidency tonight. (Maitim, 2018, para. 3)

The report continued:

Magdala kayo dito ng one, only one, kailangan ko isa lang. Sabihin niya, “Mayor, utos kasi ng mga ugok diyan sa simbahan na pumunta ako ng langit kausapin ko ang Diyos. Meron talaga po. Ito may picture kami, nagdala ako ng selfie [If you bring one, only one. I need only one, and he’ll say ‘Mayor I was ordered by the fools in the Church to go to heaven and talk to God. He really exists. Here we have a picture, I brought a selfie’],” Duterte said.

“You do that today, one single witness that there is a guy, a human being who’s able to talk and to see God. Of the so many billions na dumaaan dito, I just need one. And if there is one, ladies and gentlemen, I will announce my resignation immediately para magklaro na tayo,” he added. (Maitim, 2018, para. 2-3)

Now Duterte has come full circle in his theologizing. He now asks for proofs. Unfortunately, he, too, could not come up with his own proof for his “sensible God.” He claimed to have founded a Church, the Church of Digong/Duterte; but so far, he has not yet developed a systematic doctrine or creed.<sup>7</sup> Because the point of his “theologizing” is not to offer a counter-God-talk language but simply to undermine the power of the Church as a social critic.

## **Conclusion**

So after scouring into Duterte’s fiery discourses on God and religion, we do not find any systematic or grand theology. Nevertheless, it may be safe to say that Duterte’s incursion into religion is less theological than political. Just like other fascist or authoritarian forms of state (Benito Mussolini and Salvatore Gato of Italy, Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines), Duterte claims he has his own God and morality that are different from the existing religions (Gentile, 1990).<sup>8</sup> And this theological quibble has to do with pursuing the welfare of the nation even at the cost of massive arrests and deaths and vehement opposition from the Church.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the discourse analysis offered in the present study, it is clear that Duterte’s pronouncements about God and religion can be considered as form of myth-making (Coupe, 1997). Duterte de-mythologizes the Catholic

doctrines and teachings while offering his own counter-myth that affords his hearers the grand social and cosmic narrative by which they can situate their life stories (Cupitt, 1982). Whether these counter-myths are half-meant or should be taken seriously, following the structuralist analysis of modern mythologies by Roland Barthes (1972), one can say they create new and powerful system of meanings that challenges the dominant religious mythologies of the Catholic Church.

Whatever one makes of Duterte's God discourse, Duterte can be considered as having "subjective religious hypocrisy" or it is the case when "individuals may act as if they are religious even though they do not actually believe" (Wollschleger & Beach, 2013). Duterte is not a religious "none" who does not belong to any religious organization (Baker & Smith, 2009). He is neither an agnostic nor an atheist as he publicly confessed.

The government controlled Philippine News Agency reported:

"I never said I do not believe in God. I'm not an agnostic and I'm not an atheist. I just happen to be a human being believing in that there's a universal mind somewhere which controls the universe," Duterte said in a speech at the National Science and Technology Week celebration in Davao City. (Parrocha, 2018, para. 4)

The closest description that Duterte made about God is in this report from Philippine News Agency:

Duterte stressed that the God he believed in is a "universal mind" and that he believed in "one supreme God."

"Yes of course, there's God. There are billions and millions and billions and trillions of stars. If there is nobody that has really the technology in his mind, we will just be colliding with each other most of the time and nothing would be left for humans even to exist," he said. (Parrocha, 2018, para. 5)

Now, as to the nature of that "universal mind" that Duterte believes, we do not know anything. His preferred proof for God's existence, surprisingly, is the design argument (the universe is divinely ordered). But he does not accept the design argument of the Catholic Church that smuggled in the concept of original sin into the narrative of Creation.

Because Duterte openly criticizes what is taught to him by the Catholic Church, his subjective religious hypocrisy is a form of revolt or heresy (Wollschleger & Beach, 2013). Duterte was baptized and raised as a

Catholic, even if he claims he stopped being a Catholic after being molested by an American Jesuit priest during confession at Ateneo de Davao. He let his daughter with his common law wife, and his children be christened in the Catholic Church.

A priest that is close to Duterte remarked, “Those who criticize him do not understand the real person. Duterte is a religious person who follows the traditional rituals and practices of the Catholic Church (Miller, 2018, p. 247). But as shown in this paper, Duterte reserves his most caustic ridicule against the clergy who dare to criticize his policies based on religious values. Recently he issued grave threats against the Catholic bishops (Regencia, 2018). He does not respect the men in cassocks whom he accused of living a double standard morality. In his theological tussle with the Catholic Church Duterte did not spare God from his vituperative slurs if only to silence them. As he emphatically asserted, “You cannot use God to criticize me” (“Duterte: ‘You cannot use God to criticize me,’” July 7, 2018, para 2).

Duterte’s theological discourses therefore emerged as a two-pronged counter-discourse and defense against the moral criticisms raised by the Church. First, Duterte ridicules their mythical images of God and corollary doctrines; and second, he lampoons with much gusto the moral hypocrisy of the clergies. In his caustic attack against the publicly held sacred religious doctrines, Duterte ridicules the meanings of the dominant religious discourse and Biblical narratives.

He radically re-interprets the traditional meanings of Christian symbols and doctrines to suit his own political standpoint. Bishop Pablo David (2018) is partly right to point out that what Duterte is ridiculing is the Christian fundamentalist discourse and not the sophisticated and modern official Catholic Church’s interpretation of the book of Genesis. But Bishop David misses the political nuance of Duterte’s theological musings. Duterte is not after orthodoxy or right doctrines. He ridicules the normative religious discourse of the Church for political ends. He intends to weaken, if not, neutralize, the power of the Church by subverting its theological niceties. Thus, the theological discourse fashioned by Duterte is deployed in the most precise sense and ways, by his exegetes and apologists, to establish an alternative theocratic authority vis-à-vis the Church. As Foucault (2007) argued, “for knowledge to function as knowledge it must exercise power” (p. 71). Duterte’s theological discourse, because of its nexus with the sovereign power of a populist authoritarian President, shapes power relations between the Church and the state, which in turn, produces real effects on Christian communities. It does not only create a parallel knowledge/power nexus apropos the existing sovereignty of the Catholic Church. It undercuts it and attempts to displace its legitimacy.

Thus, he musters all his rhetorical skills and even makes effective threats against clergies to silence the Church. As an authoritarian populist leader, he knows he cannot brandish power to rally the people against the menace of drugs if he has no warranting discourse to offer. But is he successful? In effect, is Duterte able to displace the dominant theological discourse of the Catholic Church regarding human rights by undermining its institutional and doctrinal basis? Is he able to wrestle away the putative power that animates the theological discourse of the Church directed against the “culture of death” in our predominantly Catholic society?

For now, this paper has simply shown the discursive underpinning of Duterte’s theological discourse on God and religion and how it is impacting on the established power of the Catholic religious discourse in Philippine society.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This does not of course include the army of cyber trolls, the militant Church, paid by Duterte supporters (Matzusawa, 2017). This will be an interesting topic for research, but it will not be pursued here.

<sup>2</sup>To defend himself, Duterte later explained that his remarks about God was occasioned by the political activities of Sister Patricia Fox (Placido, 2018). Sr. Patricia Fox, Australian nun and Superior of the Catholic Sisters of Our Lady of Sion in the country, was finally ordered to leave the country after three decades of missionary work by the Bureau of Immigration on November 3, 2018. She was denounced by Duterte as an "undesirable alien" for criticizing his government policies and joining militant protests (Espina-Varona, 2018b).

<sup>3</sup>President Duterte's trust rating dropped by 11 points after this controversy according to the survey of Social Weather Station (Mogato, 2018). Fr. Marco Sulayao of the Philippine Independent Church (PIC), Chair of the Promotion of Church People's Response (PCPR) on Panay Island, said PIC members who supported the President were angered when he called God "stupid" in one of his tirades ("Drop in Duterte's rating pinned on discontent, Inquirer.Net," 2018).

<sup>4</sup>According to Fr. Emmanuel Alfonso SJ, spokesman of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Falvey was originally assigned to China, and was expelled by communists before he stayed in the Philippines. He was accused of other sexual abuses ("Jesuit priest who allegedly molested Duterte had other victims," 2015).

<sup>5</sup>Duterte's quip about founding his own Church is reminiscent of historical studies documenting

how fascism can be a form of secular political religion. Some historians even argue that western fascism was a political and ideological response to the moral, religious and cultural crisis of nineteenth-century Western civilization (Adamson, 1989; Eatwell, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Many of Mr. Duterte's political allies are non-Roman Catholics, including Senator Manny Pacquiao, a boxing champion, who is an evangelical Christian. Mr. Duterte also enjoys the backing of the Iglesia Ni Cristo, a Christian sect that is a political force in the country.

<sup>7</sup>I will not go as far as Greg Macabenta (2018), a veteran journalist, who proposed a standard Prayer for the Church of Digong:

*"Amo namin, sumasalungat ka. (Our boss, you contradict them)*

*Sampalin ang kalaban mo (Slap your enemies)*

*Mapasa-amin ang kaharian mo (Thy kingdom be ours)*

*Sundin ang loob mo (Thy will be done)*

*Dito sa Pilipinas, para nang sa Davao (Here in the Philippines, just as in Davao).*

*Bigyan mo kami ngayon ng aming kakanin sa araw-araw (Give us this day our daily bread)*

*At patawarin mo ang aming mga utang (And forgive us our debts)*

*Tulad ng pagpapatawad mo sa mga nagnanakaw sa bayan (As you forgive those who steal from the country)*

*Ayos lang na ipahintulot mo kami sa tukso (It's okay to lead us into temptation)*

*At hatian mo kami sa lahat ng weather-weather (But give us our share of weather-weather)*

Amen. (para. 27-38)

<sup>8</sup>It is still a contested issue whether to call Duterte and his administration as "fascist" (e.g., Bello as cited in Schaffar, 2018; Giroux, 2016), or "neo-fascist" (Kellner, 2016), fascist dictatorship (Sison, 2017), or the more academic term "authoritarian populist" (Heydarian, 2018; 2017; Ordonez & Borja, 2018), simply populist with authoritarian tendencies (Curato, 2016), "monster" (Prashad, 2018). This is an academic issue that cannot be pursued in this paper.

<sup>9</sup>Interestingly, both fascism and the Roman Catholic hierarchical organization share many similarities (Warren, 1941). Historians had also documented the alliance between the Catholic Church and Mussolini's fascism in Italy (Adamson, 1989; Nelis, 2011). According to Eatwell (2010), the term cleric-fascism was popularized in 1920s in Italy to refer to Catholic clerics who sided with fascism.

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