

QUEERING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES: UNDOING VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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The paper examines the place of religious education in the violence against queer youth in the Philippines – both as a structure that perpetuates the violence and a field that imagines alternatives to the violence. In this paper, I ask not only, “How is religious education complicit in the violence against LGBTQI+ youth in the Philippines?” but also, “How can religious education imagine and create spaces where queer students are not only safe in the classroom but also thriving?” I argue that religious education carries within itself homonegative theologies that sustain queer violence. In other words, at the heart of violence against LGBTQI+ youth is epistemic violence, a violence to the theological imagination, which motivates all other forms of violence based on gender. In light of this, I propose an alternative: a queer pedagogy for religious education that creates classrooms of welcome, encounter, listening, questioning, and the undoing of epistemic violence – in short, a classroom of queer thriving.

Keywords: LGBTQI+, queer theology, homophobia, epistemic violence, queer pedagogy

Ako’y isang sirena
Kahit anong sabihin nila, ako ay ubod ng ganda¹

1. Gloc-9 ft. Ebe Dancel, “Sirena,” by Gloc-9, on MKNM: Mga Kwentong Makata, Universal Records Philippines 2012. <https://youtu.be/3nKmv5oDzBw>.

INTRODUCTION

The song “Sirena” by Gloc-9 describes the all-too-common experience of violence against queer youth in the Philippines. A father dunks his gay son’s head in a drum of water. The son gets spanked and teased because of the effeminate way that the child dresses and moves. Despite all this, the song describes the child as a mermaid, standing tall and full of beauty. The home is contradictory for a queer child. While the home is seen as a sanctuary and a safe space for children, for queer children, it might be the very place where they first experience discrimination and violence because of their gender and sexuality.

The school is often described as a second home, and like the home described above, the school can also be experienced as a place of violence. There are layers of violence seen in the school, from overt ways such as bullying and sexual harassment to more silent ways such as the violence perpetuated in the curriculum and school policies. The classroom could be a violent space if left unchecked, and educational institutions, like the Catholic School with its heteronormative teachings on gender and sexuality, can be hostile and discriminatory to its queer students, with or without them realizing it.

However, in the face of violence, many queer students still see value in their Catholic faith. Even though Queer Filipino Catholics negotiate their sexual orientation and gender identity with their Catholic faith, they still make meaning with their faith amid the violence they face. Even if the classroom could be a violent space for queer students, it could also be a space not only for safety, but for the thriving of queer students with everyone else.

This paper examines the place of religious education in the violence against queer youth in the Philippines – both as a structure that perpetuates the violence and a field that imagines alternatives to the violence. In this paper, I ask not only, “How is religious

education complicit in the violence against LGBTQI+ youth in the Philippines?” but also, “How can religious education imagine and create spaces where queer students are not only safe in the classroom but also thriving?” I argue that religious education carries within itself homonegative theologies that sustain queer violence. In other words, at the heart of violence against LGBTQI+ youth is epistemic violence, a violence to the theological imagination, which motivates all other forms of violence based on gender. In light of this, I propose an alternative: a queer pedagogy for religious education that creates classrooms of welcome, encounter, listening, questioning, and the undoing of epistemic violence – in short, a classroom of queer thriving.

This paper has two parts. The first part looks at the struggles of LGBTQI+ youth in the classrooms. Influenced and motivated by homonegative theologies, classrooms become spaces of unfreedom where queer students struggle and make sense of their faith in terms of their gender and sexuality. I argue that the homonegative theologies in the curriculum are a form of epistemic violence that continue to wound queer people and hinder authentic dialogue from happening. The second is my proposal for a queer pedagogy for religious education. Queer theology and theory can contribute much to religious education. In interrupting and transgressing heteronormative theology, I argue that religious education can create space for expanding the theological imagination towards not only queer survival but queer thriving.

QUEER STRUGGLES IN THE CLASSROOM

Violence against queer youth takes on many forms, like bullying, physical and verbal harassment, and even threats of death. Yet in the face of violence in the classroom, LGBTQI+ Catholic youth have a “spirituality of struggle” in which they make meaning of their gender and sexual identities in terms of their faith.

Underlying all of these is the epistemic violence of homonegative theologies that perpetuate and keep the classroom as a space of unfreedom and struggle. These homonegative theologies, as seen in the Philippine context, is not only founded upon by homophobic church teachings but also a theology that has been colonized by heteronormative and patriarchal ways of being and thinking in the way Filipino religious educators have educated in faith. The first movement of this paper narrates the queer struggles in the classroom and the underlying colonial theologies that have caused them.

A. Violence in the Classroom

Schools are common places where LGBTQI+ youth experience discrimination and violence. As the United Nations Commission on Human Rights reports, although “schools are supposed to be safe havens for children to learn and grow to become empowered people, many children responded that they felt unsafe or unsure of their safety in their schools” because of bullying and discriminatory policies and practices by the school administration.² This is particularly true in the Philippine setting. The sociologist Athena Presto also observes that violence in schools comes from bullies and school administration: “bullying based on SOGIE is common in the Philippines... Worse, school authorities play party to this bullying by imposing rigid gender norms and not upholding inclusive sex and gender education.”³

The most prevalent form of bullying from peers is name-calling and verbal harassment, where children “would get taunted

2. Commission on Human Rights, *The Situation of LGBTQ Children in the Philippines* (December 2019), 20.

3. Athena Charanne Presto, “Revisiting Intersectional Identities: Voices of Poor Bakla Youth in Rural Philippines,” *Review of Women’s Studies* 29/2 (2020): 120. SOGIE stands for sexual orientation and gender identity.

with words like ‘bayot,’ ‘bakla,’ ‘badap,’ ‘tomboy’ and other names.”⁴ This language becomes very exclusionary and marginalizes queer students:

Raine from NCR shared how she got bullied by her male classmates. Raine said, “They told me not to hang out with them because they too might get teased for being bakla or for having a bakla partner if they are seen with me.”⁵

Anne from Region II said, “[my schoolmates] tell me that I shouldn’t be like this, that LGBT people have no place in the Philippines.”⁶

Along with verbal harassment, LGBTQI+ students are also physically harmed:

When I was in high school, they’d push me, punch me. When I’d get out of school, they’d follow me [and] push me, call me ‘gay,’ ‘faggot,’ things like that.⁷

When we were in grade 9, of course, my classmates were playing truth or dare. And then one of them chose dare, and then they said to slap me or something. And then, they slapped me. So, I cried. That time, I felt that just because I am bakla, just because I cannot take them on and take revenge,

4. Commission on Human Rights, 20.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 20-21.

7 Human Rights Watch, “*Just Let Us Be*” *Discrimination against LGBT Students in the Philippines* (June 2017), 2.

which is how I felt. I was also afraid, which was why I just kept quiet.⁸

In some instances, there are even threats of death, driving students to quit school altogether:

Andrew, a 17-year-old gay person from CAR, talked about being bullied and felt that he was in constant threat in high school. He dropped out of school because a group of gangsters threatened to kill him.⁹

Meanwhile, school administrators and personnel also take part in the violence against LGBTQI+ students. Aside from the fact that children do not usually report violence done by their peers to teachers and administrators out of fear of retaliation, the adults in the school are also sometimes seen as agents in the violence themselves. For example, uniform policies have been seen as discriminatory for queer students that force them to express a gender that they do not identify with:

Karen from NCR talked about being subjected to ill-treatment by teachers and school personnel due to her gender identity. Once a janitor in her school forcibly cut her hair because it was ‘too long for a male student.’¹⁰

Aside from the uniform, discriminatory policies are also found in admission policies, such as one case from a Catholic School:

8 Presto, “Revisiting Intersectional Identities,” 135.

9 Commission on Human Rights, 21.

10. Ibid., 22.

Discriminatory policies may even be more prevalent in private schools, which are predominantly run by Roman Catholic congregations. An FGD participant from NCR shared that one private school in Mendiola allegedly conducts psychological tests as a requirement for students who wish to enroll in their school, and if the child has been found to have a ‘tendency’ to be gay, they are rejected.¹¹

Finally, what is taught can also be seen as violent and negative by queer students whose lives and identities are being discussed:

Juan N., a 22-year-old transgender man who had attended high school in Manila, said, ‘There would be a lecture where they’d somehow pass by the topic of homosexuality and show you, try to illustrate that in the Bible, in Christian theology, homosexuality is a sin, and if you want to be a good Christian, you shouldn’t engage in those activities.’¹²

These forms of violence – bullying from peers and discriminatory policies from school administrators, even lessons taught by teachers – can be classified as gendered harassment “that polices and reinforces the traditional gender roles of heteronormative masculinity and femininity through harmful

11. Ibid., 22-23.

12. Human Rights Watch, 3.

behaviors.”¹³ The motive of this violence is to set the norm when it comes to “traditional heterosexual, cisnormative, gender roles.”¹⁴ Because LGBTQI+ students perform different gender expressions that are deviant from the norm, they become targets and victims of this kind of violence. Students who express their queerness are often not accepted or in some cases, they are accepted partly in cases when it’s useful for the heterosexual norm. In Presto’s study on poor *bakla* youth in the rural Philippines, she argues that queer students are only conditionally accepted. Poor rural *bakla* students “are not allowed to dress and act the way they want to, but they are always called upon when the school needs participants for their events.”¹⁵ One of her participants, Mamsh, narrates:

Sometimes the baklas are too lazy to do activities.
But they call for us. They still call us because, of
course, when there is no bakla to join the
activities, the school will fall down.¹⁶

The stereotype being perpetuated here is that *bakla* students have “talents that can be tapped for certain festivities”¹⁷ reinforcing the observation by the Human Rights Watch that “many LGBT students had internalized the message that their acceptance as LGBT was conditional on being dutiful, talented members of the school community.”¹⁸

13. Elizabeth Meyer, “Ending Bullying and Harassment: The Case for a Queer Pedagogy” in *Queer Pedagogies: Theory, Praxis, Politics*, Cris Mayo and Nelson Rodriguez, eds. (Cham: Springer, 2019), 42.

14. Ibid., 42.

15. Presto, “Revisiting Intersectional Identities,” 140.

16. Ibid., 132.

17. Ibid.

18 Human Rights Watch, 40.

The violence takes its toll on LGBTQI+ students, causing several mental health concerns. In a survey conducted by the Trevor Project in the Philippines, they found that:¹⁹

- Three in four (75%) LGBTQ+ young people have ever seriously considered suicide, and nearly half (46%) have ever attempted suicide. More than one in three (34%) attempted suicide in the past year.
- A majority reported recent symptoms of depression (62%) and anxiety (62%), as well as engaging in self-harm in the past year (59%).
- Nearly one in five (19%) LGBTQ+ young people reported being threatened with or subjected to conversion therapy, which was related to higher rates of mental health concerns.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) saw their LGBTQ+ identity as a burden, and more than half (58%) did not feel comfortable interacting with others as their true selves, which were both related to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm.

The reported number of LGBTQI+ youth who are burdened with mental health concerns is worrying and raises several questions about the safety of queer children in schools. Not only are they at risk of many kinds of violence narrated above, but

19. The following data comes from Marc Eric Reyes et al., *2024 Philippines National Report on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People*, (The Trevor Project, 2024), https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-international/assets/static/2024_Philippines_National_Survey_EN.pdf.

they are also restricted from expressing their true selves without fear of harassment and rejection.

The classroom, and the Christian school, has been described by the sociologists Jayeel Cornelio and Robbin Dagle as a “space of unfreedom” where “institutional religion and the everyday life of queer Christians lock horns.”²⁰ These are spaces of “experienced restrictions, especially in the form of gender stereotypes and homonegativity.”²¹ In these spaces of unfreedom, the restrictions are culturally coded, and groups of people are conditioned into living out and policing these restrictions. The violence experienced by queer people in the classroom is not isolated incidents, but there is something cultural and structural that underlies all these forms of violence. Institutional religion and theologies also play a big part in influencing and perpetuating violence against queer youth in the classroom.

B. Epistemic Violence in Church Teaching and Religious Education

Although slow, church teachings on LGBTQI+ people (or homosexual people as the documents phrase it) have evolved since the 1980s. In the papacy of Francis, there were significant positive strides in favor of inclusivity. Francis’s comment in 2013, wherein he said, “If someone is gay, and searches for the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to judge?”²² not only displays a change of tone

20. Jayeel Cornelio and Robbin Dagle, “Who am I? whom can I love? and why me?: Queer Christians and the spirituality of struggle,” *Critical Research on Religion* 0/0 (2024): 13.

21. Jayeel Cornelio and Robbin Dagle, “Contesting Unfreedom: To be Queer and Christian in the Philippines,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 20/2 (2022): 28.

22. Pope Francis, “On Gay Priests, Pope Francis Asks, ‘Who am I to judge?’” *The New York Times* (July 29, 2013), www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/europe/pope-francis-gay-priests.html.

when it comes to gay Catholics, but a doctrinal development, as the theologian Brian Massingale argues.²³ The midterm report in the Synod of the Family in 2014 also showed significant development, acknowledging that “Homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community”²⁴ and that queer relationships can be “received as occasions of grace.”²⁵ This is a marked difference from previous church teachings that saw LGBTQI+ people as recipients of pastoral care – the acknowledgement of LGBTQI+ people’s gifts and the grace found in queer relationships is a positive development in church teaching. Although slow, church teachings on LGBTQI+ people and relationships continue to evolve. However, much of the current teaching from the 1980s up until 2019, as seen below continues to cause violence to LGBTQI+ people. There are gains, yes, but there are still teachings that continue to cause violence, which this section examines.

If gender harassment is defined above as that which “polices and reinforces the traditional gender roles of heteronormative masculinity and femininity,” there is also something restrictive, reinforcing, and harmful when it comes to church teachings on gender and sexuality on a cultural and structural level. The influence of the Catholic Church when it comes to reinforcing heteronormativity and the violence against LGBTQI+ youth is seen in Catholic schools: in the culture that it enables, the gender-normative policies that it enacts, and in the curriculum that it teaches. The violence of the heterosexual church teachings on gender and sexuality leads to the suppression and vilification of gender identities outside the norm, which I argue is

23. See Brian Massingale, “Beyond ‘Who Am I to Judge?’: The Sensus Fidelium, LGBT Experience, and Truth-telling in the Church” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan, eds. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016): 170-183.

24. Synod 14 – Eleventh General Assembly, “*Relatio post disceptationem*” of the General Rapporteur, Card. Peter Erdo, 13.10.2014. no. 50 and 52.

25. Massingale, “Beyond ‘Who Am I to Judge?’,” 176.

a form of epistemic justice. The Catholic Church in the Philippines shows a particular kind of violence against queer people in its long history of colonial patriarchy and machismo.

“Traditional Catholic teachings on sexualities and genders,” the religious education scholar Sean Henry argues, “can contribute to heteronormative school cultures where the structural causes and effects of homophobic and transphobic bullying are ignored at best, and actively reinforced at worst.”²⁶ Henry describes these teachings as a kind of institutional heteronormativity and cisnormativity wherein the Church continues to “privilege heterosexual and cisgender identities in how it understands and responds to the realities of gender and sexual diversities.”²⁷ The normative in Catholic teachings on sex is what theologians Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler call marital morality wherein “sexual expression is understood as morally good [only] when it takes place in the context of marriage, and is open to the possibility of new life through procreation.”²⁸ Anything outside the norm is considered a deviation, sinful and disordered. This paints those outside the norm in a bad light.

Often-cited church teachings on homosexuality reinforce the heteronormative and homonegative theologies seen in the Catholic Church. Most notable among them is the document “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith that refers to homosexual acts as

26. Sean Henry, “Quer Thriving in Catholic Education: The Role of Queer Theologies” in *Queer Thriving in Catholic Education: Going Beyond the Pastoral Paradigm for LGBTQ+ Inclusion*, Sean Whittle and Sean Henry, eds. (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 21.

27. Sean Henry, “Laying the Groundwork: Sexualities, Genders, and the Catholic Church” in *Queer Thriving in Catholic Education: Going Beyond the Pastoral Paradigm for LGBTQ+ Inclusion*, Sean Whittle and Sean Henry, eds. (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 9.

28. Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 7 in Henry, “Laying the Groundwork,” 10.

“intrinsically disordered” while the inclination of the homosexual person as a “strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil.”²⁹ Furthermore, the same document seems to harbor violence against homosexual persons. The queer theologian Gerard Loughlin comments on the tenth paragraph that claims that “the proper reaction to crimes committed against homosexual persons should not be to claim that the homosexual condition is not disordered.”³⁰ For Loughlin, “violence is both refused and expected” in the text and it “is indeed incited, for the letter establishes the homosexual as uniquely oriented to sin, as a person who endangers family and society and who should not be granted full human rights.”³¹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, used widely to teach the Catholic faith, takes up the wording from the CDF and also refers to homosexual acts as “intrinsically disordered” in its section on the vocation to chastity.³²

It is quite telling that the Congregation for Catholic Education has also been publishing documents about heterosexual normativity in gender and sexuality, showing direct linkages between church teaching and Catholic education. In 1983, the congregation wrote a statement on sex education entitled “Educational Guidance in Human Love: Outlines for Sex Education” where they discussed the sexual ethics of the church in line with the marital morality described above, i.e. that sex is only good within the context of marriage, which is purely heterosexual. When it comes to homosexuality, the document claims that “Homosexuality, which impedes the person’s acquisition of sexual

29. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” (October 1, 1986), no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

30. Ibid., 10.

31. Gerard Loughlin, “Catholic Homophobia,” *Theology* 121/3 (2018): 192.

32. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), no. 2357.

maturity, whether from the individual point of view, or the interpersonal, is a problem which must be faced in all objectivity by the pupil and the educator when the case presents itself.”³³ In this document, homosexuality is seen as a problem, a “contracted habit, a disorder, an obsessive impulse that families and teachers must respond to by taking account of ‘the elements of judgement proposed by the ecclesiastical Magisterium.”³⁴

In a more recent document entitled “Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education,” the Congregation for Catholic Education teaches against gender expressions beyond the binary, such as transgender identities. The document highlights the importance of the biological difference between males and females as a “constitutive of human identity” and asserts that “efforts to go beyond the constructive male-female sexual difference such as the ideas of ‘intersex’ or ‘transgender’, lead to a masculinity or femininity that is ambiguous” and that at the end of the day, these “oscillations” between male and female are only a “‘provocative’ display against so-called ‘traditional frameworks.’”³⁵

More starkly, the document goes against gender theory which it claims as “gender ideology” that goes beyond the binary of male and female, and as a result, “human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time.”³⁶ The document cites Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* saying that

33. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational guidance in human love: Outlines for sex education*. (1983), no. 101, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19831101_sexual-education_en.html.

34. Henry, “Laying the Groundwork,” 14.

35. Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘*Male and female he created them*’: *Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education* (2019) no. 25, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf.

36. Ibid., no. 2.

“ideologies of gender...assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised.”³⁷ The critique against gender theory as an ideology is something that began with Benedict XVI, that Loughlin claims is part of the homophobic discourse of the Catholic Church: “the charge of ideology against gender theory serves to obscure the magisterium’s own ideological location, which never admits to being a historically situated, contingent discourse, persuasive only through rhetoric.”³⁸ The document, though claiming to open up to dialogue, fails to do so in its charge of ideology against gender theory.

In church teaching, we see what the philosopher Miranda Fricker calls “epistemic injustice” that acknowledges that relations of power can affect reason and the actions of people.³⁹ Social power, Fricker explains, has the “capacity to control other’s actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally.”⁴⁰ Socially powerless groups, those who are marginalized (like the LGBTQI+ community who are marginalized because of their gender), suffer epistemic injustice.

In particular, when it comes to Catholic homophobia, what is happening is a case of “hermeneutical injustice,” which is one of the two kinds of epistemic injustice that Fricker proposes. “Hermeneutical injustice,” as Fricker defines it, “is the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.”⁴¹ The harm that hermeneutic injustice does to powerless groups of people is a

37. Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 56 in Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and female*, no. 6.

38. Loughlin, 194.

39. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

40. *Ibid.*, 13.

41. *Ibid.*, 155.

hermeneutical lacuna that can discriminate and misunderstand their identities. Fricker explains:

The primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, then, is to be understood not only in terms of the subject being unfairly disadvantaged by some collective hermeneutical lacuna, but also in terms of the very construction of selfhood. In certain social contexts, hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which is against their interests to be seen to be.⁴²

The structures of power that are seen as authoritative impinge upon people, “a sense of dissonance between an experience and the various constructions that are ganging up to overpower its nascent proper meaning.”⁴³ Some social constructions – ideas, concepts, frameworks, and theologies – hold sway and special power over people. This forms an injustice against powerless groups of people – what structures of power say about them becomes the privileged normative.

The heterosexual normative teachings on gender and sexuality become harmful and violent when they are the *only* teachings that are taught by the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Catholic homophobia flows from this arrangement – there is a structural foundation to violence against LGBTQI+ youth, and a huge part of it is how the Catholic Church teaches gender and sexuality, it’s about the discourse and the culture that the Church nurtures. As Loughlin argues,

42. Ibid., 168.

43. Ibid., 166.

Catholic homophobia is not, or not in the first instance, a matter of psychology. It is rather a matter of culture, of discourse, of disseminated and learned dislike. It is natural in the way that any taught antipathy is natural, natural in the context of a homophobic culture. No child is born homophobic but becomes so only as it grows into a society that establishes its identity against those it is not – that it cannot, must not be – to affirm itself. In a homophobic society, a homophobic Church, the child will learn those language games, starting with the casual insult, that can lead to more violent forms of life – the taunting, the beating, the murder – all of which establish the perpetrators as the other of the disavowed – those who are abjected, beaten, murdered.⁴⁴

Catholic homophobia is a hermeneutical injustice against a whole group of diverse people discriminated against because of their gender identities and sexual orientations. What Loughlin asserts in the vividly written paragraph above is that homophobia (and transphobia), violence against LGBTQI+ people, can be learned. It is learned in parishes and Catholic schools, where the child not only learns it from lectures and church documents, but also in how they are socialized and grow up in a culture. People learn violence from systems and structures of power, and the Catholic Church's stance on LGBTQI+ people is one example.

This is the same with the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Violence against LGBTQI+ students is seen in the Catholic School – in the culture that it enables, the gender-

44. Loughlin, 189.

normative policies that it enacts, and in the curriculum that they teach. As the theologian Kristine Meneses argues, “the heteronormative stance of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines on gender and sexuality has significantly influenced how LGBTQIA+ people are treated in family and schools.”⁴⁵ Binary and heteronormative teachings on gender and sexuality are very much ingrained in the social construct.⁴⁶

In the public sphere, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has been seen as an influential political agent on matters of gender and sexuality, constantly resisting advancements in LGBTQI+ rights. The Human Rights Watch reports:

While the CBCP rejects discrimination against LGBT people in principle, it has frequently opposed efforts to prohibit that discrimination in practice. In 2017, for example, the Church sought amendments to pending anti-discrimination legislation that would prohibit same-sex marriage and allow religious objectors to opt out of recognizing LGBT rights. It has also resisted efforts to promote sexuality education and safer sex in schools.... Beyond its influence in law and policy, the Church has shaped attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities throughout the country; citing religious doctrine, teachers, counselors, and other authority figures

45. Kristine Meneses, “The Marginalized: Recalibrating Our Normative Frame of Recognition” in *Philippine Catholicism Faces the Future: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Resources and Prospects*, Gemma Tulud Cruz and Mario Francisco, eds. (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2025), 165.

46. Ibid., 165.

often impress upon students that it is immoral or unnatural to be LGBT.⁴⁷

During Spanish times, the Church used religious education and the confessional in “disciplining native bodies and desires.”⁴⁸ This is seen not only in *pecado nefando* or *sodomia*, but in many different facets of precolonial life. Coloniality, argued by Anibal Quijano, is the “colonization of the imagination of the dominated”⁴⁹ and lives on even after colonial masters have gone. It lives on in structures and cultures of power that continue to oppress groups of people today. And what is colonized is also very gendered. Coloniality in the Catholic Church in terms of gender and sexuality is seen throughout history. From the *babaylan* fed to the crocodiles, whose faith and practices have been demonized,⁵⁰ to the different expressions of gender identity and sexual practices being erased and vilified. What is happening today in classrooms and churches is a continuation of the colonization of the imagination, of epistemic violence, of harm to the theological imagination that perpetuates varied forms of violence.

47 Human Rights Watch, 3.

48. Joaine Jan A. Marquez, “*Pecado Nefando* and the Chinese in Early Spanish Philippines: Hispano-Asian Encounters and Ethnosexual Discourse” in *More Tomboy, More Bakla than we Admit: Insights into Sexual and Gender Diversity in Philippine Culture, History, and Politics* (Quezon City: Vibal Foundation, Inc., 2021), 182.

49. Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21/2-3 (2007): 169.

50. S. Lily Mendoza, “Back from the Crocodile’s Belly: Christian Formation Meets Indigenous Resurrection Redux” in *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a: Postcolonial Perspectives*, Cristina Lledo Gomez, Agnes Brazal, Ma. Marilou Ibita, eds. (Cham: Springer, 2024), 179-198.

QUEER PEDAGOGY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In response to violence against LGBTQI+ students, I propose a queer pedagogy for religious education. Informed by queer theology and theory, queer pedagogy is a way of teaching that critically reflects on what has become “normal” at the expense of marginalized and discriminated groups. In critical examination of normativities, queer pedagogy looks to dismantle, interrupt, and disrupt oppressive structures and reimagine alternatives. In the second movement of the paper, I flesh out a queer pedagogy for religious education. First, a discussion on queer pedagogy is not solely a question of what an educator must do or how they should teach. It is important to look at how LGBTQI+ students themselves make meaning and do theology from their own context. For the first part of this movement, I look at the experience of queer students when it comes to their faith in the midst of the violence discussed above. How do they make sense of their faith and lives in the midst of the tensions between their Catholic faith and their gender and sexuality? This will inform how a queer pedagogy for religious education can look in the Philippine setting. Second, I describe queer pedagogy in terms of its nature as something that queers what is normal – in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of many other things like race, social class, etc. In doing so, a queer pedagogy invites an expansion of the theological imagination in the classroom. Finally, I argue for a queer pedagogy that advocates not only for queer survival but, more importantly, queer thriving.

A. Queer Catholic Filipinos and their Spirituality of Struggle

Queer Catholic Filipinos are not just victims of the violence against LGBTQI+ people discussed in schools and churches above. They are also agents of their own lives, and there

is far more to queer life than suffering and violence. Take, for example, the research done by Cornelio and Dagle, where their interlocutors were actively living in the tension between their faith and sexuality through their spirituality. Consider the story of Rey, from the research done by Cornelio and Dagle on queer Filipino spirituality:

For Rey, it is possible to be both gay and Catholic. He even insists that a gay man like himself can be a “good Christian.” Like many other Filipinos, however, he does not deny the dissonance. But the tension is not an incapacitating burden. Instead, Rey describes the contradiction as a “challenge” – deeply personal. Because he is a gay Catholic, he knows he must face people who question his choices. One time, he opened up to his spiritual mentor. The latter’s comments made him feel like ‘shit, I must be a really bad person.’ Rey comes from a devout Catholic family and studied in Catholic institutions, including the university where he finished his undergraduate degree. Perhaps because of such encounters, Rey draws on moral reasoning to narrate his case. “Maybe not all people will understand. Maybe I’m wrong, too. But this is how I see things. Really, at the end of the day, I don’t hurt other people, and I still honor my creator. For me, this is why the New Testament exists, where it’s clear that you are to love God as you love your neighbor.”⁵¹

51. Cornelio and Dagle, “Who am I?,” 2.

The story of Rey points out how queer Filipino Catholics navigate the tensions between their faith and sexuality. As seen in the story, Rey does not deny the tension that exists between the two, but he does not fully embrace one or the other's identity. How does he navigate the tension? His answer: "to be queer and Christian is a burden that needs to be carried. But they are willing to take it as far as it is possibly God's will for them."⁵²

Cornelio and Dagle describe the spirituality of Rey and his other queer Christian peers as a "spirituality of struggle" that they define as the "ongoing process in which queer Christians aspire to discover and fulfill what they believe is God's will for their lives, with respect to their faith and spirituality."⁵³ Their research shows that being both queer and Christian "is a negotiated act that is perhaps never completed."⁵⁴

Several scholars have already asked why these people remain in "religious institutions that have for years caused them pain."⁵⁵ In the literature, there are four modes.⁵⁶ The first "privileges faith over sexuality," in which a person abandons their queer identity and follows the injunctions of their faith. The second mode "privileges sexuality over faith," in which people abandon their institutional religion, most ending up as atheists. The third is "compartmentalization," where people do not make any attempts to reconcile faith and sexuality. Finally, the fourth is "integration or reconciliation" wherein people conclude that "God has nothing against queer people" and reread the bible to challenge patriarchal theologies.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 3.

55. Ibid., 6.

56. These four modes are neatly summarized in Cornelio and Dagle's "Who am I?," 6.

The spirituality of struggle is different from the four modes described above. While both identities are important to them, they do not reconcile or privilege one identity over the other; instead, “in this process, queer individuals draw on various resources ‘to construct meaningful lives.’”⁵⁷ Thus, a spirituality of struggle is a “search for the divine as much as it is a search for personal authenticity.”⁵⁸

The spirituality of struggle happens in spaces of unfreedom. In the case of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, this spirituality arises from spaces where homonegative theologies are prevalent – where “their gender identities and expressions are consistently questioned,” where tensions appear “from the pulpit,” from the “condemnations they receive from other people.”⁵⁹ It is in these spaces of unfreedom and struggle where queer Christians struggle in their pursuit to be “good Christians,” fertile grounds for “contestations and novel expressions of what it means to be a good Christian.”⁶⁰

As starting points along their spiritual journeys, queer Christians express their faith and sexuality in struggle. The invitation of queer pedagogy is to meet students where they are in their spiritualities, to meet them on their journeys, and to wrestle and struggle together amidst the tensions between queerness and faith.

B. Queering the Normative

Queer theory and theology inform a queer pedagogy for religious education. To queer something is “to question and resist various normativities [that are] not just about sexuality, but about

57. Ibid., 6.

58. Ibid., 7.

59. Ibid., 13.

60. Ibid.

all kinds of dimensions of life and theological concern.”⁶¹ Queer theology is a way to do theology that questions the normative – to question how normative cultures and structures take hold of people’s lives, to disrupt and undo the violence these structures cause, and to create space for different ways of knowing and being.

Queer theology gets a lot of its framework from queer critical theory. Queer, for critical theorists, is not an identity in itself, but more a critique of rigid identities and definitions: queer “is often figured as a phenomenon or methodology in a state of *opposition to regulatory normativities*.”⁶² Critical theorists are convinced, like Fricker above, that human subjectivities “are constructed by the meshes and layers of power and discourse taking place all around them.”⁶³ Thus, queer theology critiques matrices of power and at the same time, resists the normative. Queerness, then, is interrogation and resistance – not just the resistance of queerness to heteronormativity, but also a resistance to normativities that continue to hold power violently over people.

For queer theologians and religious educators, the task is to interrogate and resist normativities in ecclesial and educational spaces. As the religious educator Alfred Pang believes, “LGBTQ Catholic (religious) educators could become critical change agents in challenging the hegemonic heteronormativity in Catholic education”⁶⁴ that have been discussed above. Queer pedagogy, then, can help religious educators (not only the queer ones, but all educators in Catholic schools) to do the work of questioning heteronormativity in Catholic education and educating against Catholic homophobia.

61. Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 11.

62. *Ibid.*, 38.

63. *Ibid.*, 17.

64. Alfred Pang, “The Precarity of LGBTQ Catholic (Religious) Educators: A Theological Provocation to Teaching as a Call,” *Religious Education* (2021), 10.

Queer pedagogy is defined as “a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in schooled subjects.”⁶⁵ The critical reflection that happens in queer pedagogy leads students and teachers to question what is “normal,” to examine what that does to different contexts, and to make space for perspectives that have been cast out of that norm. Queer pedagogy disrupts and challenges traditional frameworks and “empowers educators to open up traditionally silenced discourses and create spaces for students to explore and challenge the hierarchy of identities that is created and supported by schools.”⁶⁶ A big part, then, of queer pedagogy is *questioning* – to see the classroom as a space “to question, explore, and seek alternative explanations rather than a place where knowledge means ‘certainty, authority, and stability.’”⁶⁷

There is something liberatory in queer pedagogy, in the sense that it “offers a further extension of ideas introduced by social justice education, critical and feminist pedagogies, multiculturalism, as well as anti-oppressive theories.”⁶⁸ Like the related fields in education mentioned above, queer pedagogy calls on both teachers and students to question and reformulate how they teach and learn, how heteronormativity is reinforced and perpetuates violence, and how they can challenge different normativities in the space of the classroom.⁶⁹

For the religious educators queering pedagogy in the context of violence against LGBTQI+ people, questioning also involves questioning church teaching in a creatively faithful way. The task is to interrupt heteronormativity in the curriculum and in

65. M. Bryson and S. de Castel, “Queer pedagogy: Praxis makes Im/perfect,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 18/3 (1993): 285 in Meyer, 46.

66. Meyer, 48.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

church teaching. To queer religious education is to get “under the skin of something and turning it on its head, making it strange, to expose and disrupt the tools of homophobia, biphobia, and/or transphobia that inform the very thing that one is queering.”⁷⁰

A queer religious education, then, creates space for questioning, for disrupting and interrupting normativities, and for imagining other ways of knowing and being. The hope of a queer pedagogy, then, is to create space in the classroom not only to critique and resist power structures that oppress, but also to widen the theological imagination, to reimagine religion in a different way. A transgressive theology challenges the limits of the collective theological imagination and pushes the theological imagination to see things beyond the heteronormative and binary.

C. From Queer Survival to Queer Thriving

As I mentioned, queer students are not merely victims of violence, but they are agents of their own lives. LGBTQI+ students aren’t merely “at risk,” but they are “complex and multi-faceted human beings.”⁷¹ This reshapes the narrative from damage-centered to one that sees LGBTQI+ students in a more holistic way. While not denying the realities of violence, I want to see queer students as more than victims. This is a “refusal to give homophobia the last word” and a recognition that they are “not passive victims to institutional and theological heteronormativity, but are instead active arbiters of theological praxis and renewal.”⁷² Like queer Catholic Filipinos with their spirituality of struggle narrated above, queer Catholics make meaning of their lives given the tensions of their faith and sexuality - their search for the divine, as intentional and meaningful as their search for their own selves.

70. Henry, “Queer Thriving in Catholic Education,” 23.

71. Ibid., 26.

72. Ibid., 27.

Out of spaces of unfreedom and restriction arises the spirituality of struggle, the start of their spiritual journeys. In the context of violence, the invitation is not merely survival, but meaningful lives – in other words, thriving.

Queer thriving, according to Henry is the perspective “that affords LGBTQ+ people the chance to live lives that are livable, fulfilling, and worthwhile.”⁷³ Queer thriving is not much about reconciling LGBTQI+ lives to traditional Catholic teachings on gender and sexuality, but more so refiguring “Catholic education so that its historical and contemporaneous heteronormativity can be transformed, for, with, and by LGBTQ+ people.”⁷⁴

Queer thriving can look like many different things, “queerness is not yet here,”⁷⁵ as Muñoz argues, and is something that is still yet to be unfurled. But it begins with seeing LGBTQI+ lives as life giving and an affirming way of being human. Catholic education supports queer thriving when it ensures that “all students know and understand [that] their sexual identity is not a vulnerability or a problem to be managed. Rather it is something which can or should help them to thrive as they journey through life,”⁷⁶ which is the opposite of the homonegative theologies discussed above. At the core of queer thriving in religious education is the conviction “that LGBTQ+ students enrich Catholic schools... [that they] have important insights to offer as the Catholic school as a whole continues to live out the ‘joy of the Gospel.’”⁷⁷

73. Ibid., 22.

74. Ibid.

75. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1

76. Sean Whittle, “Towards a Theory of Queer Thriving in Catholic Education – A Response to Dr. Sean Henry” in *Queer Thriving in Catholic Education: Going Beyond the Pastoral Paradigm for LGBTQ+ Inclusion*, Sean Whittle and Sean Henry, eds. (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 51.

77. Ibid., 51.

D. More than Safe Spaces

Queer pedagogy is all about questioning normativities, promoting queer thriving, with LGBTQI+ students who practice a spirituality of struggle. What does the classroom look like in this situation? Instead of a classroom filled with violence against LGBTQI+ students, the obvious answer is that it must be a safe space for all. There is much discussion recently about safe spaces where queer people can be themselves and express their diversity without fear of consequences.⁷⁸ And this must be an aspiration when it comes to responding to the violence seen in classrooms.

However, the image of safe space has its limits. For example, educational critics argue that modern US schooling (that made its way in the Philippines through public education) with its ideas of safe space and the school as home “reinscribes enunciations of civility (order)” that tames bodies (the practice of education as the work of “civilizing”) and “reinscribes the US imperialist narratives of whitening, rationalizing, and desexualizing” of bodies created in the colonial imaginary.⁷⁹ Within safe spaces created to address gender violence, there are other forms of epistemic violence that occur “such as the prevalence of white supremacy, homonormativity (through a collective focus on marriage rights and/or other assimilationist projects, or a depoliticized understanding of sex/gender/desire as a locus of social control.”⁸⁰ In the case of the Philippines, for example, visions of gender justice might be focused on more Western visions while erasing local articulations and identities.

78. Lisa Weems, “Thinking Queer About the Space of School Safety: Violence and Dis/Placement of LGBTQ Youth of Color” in *Queer Pedagogies: Theory, Praxis, Politics*, Cris Mayo and Nelson Rodriguez, eds. (Cham: Springer, 2019), 94.

79. Ibid., 99.

80. Ibid., 102.

In light of this, safe spaces must also “negotiate historical, material and symbolic linkages between education with heteronormative, racialized, and nationalist agendas, yet recognize discontinuities and slippages within totalizing narratives.”⁸¹ As argued, queer pedagogy looks at matrices of power and questions normativities. A response to violence must not create more epistemic violence, blinded by totalizing narratives, but a space where people can question, can contest and interrupt normativities, can encounter different perspectives, and expand theological imagination. More than safe spaces, the response to violence must not only be refuge, but opportunities to critique structures of power and undo violence at its foundations.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to answer two questions. First, how is religious education complicit in the violence against LGBTQI+ youth in the Philippines? The paper narrated varied forms of violence done against queer youth in Philippine classrooms – from the overtly physical, verbal, and emotional, I argued that what underlies these is epistemic violence and the harm done by traditional church teaching on gender and sexuality. Religious education is complicit in the violence as it sustains homonegative theologies that foster Catholic homophobia. The second question is more constructive. If it has been complicit, how, then, can religious education imagine and create spaces where queer students are not only safe in the classroom but also thriving? I presented a queer pedagogy that acknowledges the spirituality of struggle that queer Catholic youth have in the Philippines, which makes it possible for them to make meaning in the context of tension. I argued for a pedagogy that makes space for queering normativities

81. Weems, 97-98.

**QUEERING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES: UNDOING
VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM**

and questioning normalcy in structures of power that oppress groups of people. I argued not only for queer survival amidst violence, but also for queer thriving. This all calls for classrooms that are not only safe spaces, but also spaces of encounter and queering. My hope in writing this paper is similar to that of the *sirena* who opened this discussion: without disregarding or downplaying the reality of violence against LGBTQI+ students in the classroom, my hope is for the thriving of queer students, *na kahit anong sabihin nila, sila'y ubod ng ganda*.

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