K.C. Meneses

Prof. K.C. Meneses, Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas, Philipines.
E-mail: kcmeneses@ust.edu.ph,
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4745-3360

Militarism and fear in a time of pandemic in the Philippines: Towards a theology of transgression

ABSTRACT

The pandemic was an opportunity for authoritarian regimes to intensify militarism and cultivate fear, resulting in the disablement of the most vulnerable in society. Fear dissipates when basic freedoms are at stake. People who once were afraid have learned to transgress, "to step across", because they just had enough of the Duterte regime's deception. In light of this context, I argue, like Michel Foucault, that transgression can be a positive notion and not opposed to transcendence. In fact, it belongs to a similar semantic cluster. An interruption can be viewed not as seeking attention, but rather as a cessation that aims for communion. Drawing from the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, I suggest a reversal of the negative perception of interruption to be incarnational, which can pave the way to a theology of transgression that is liberative.

Transgression was originally linked to the divine, or rather, from this limit marked by the sacred, it opens the space where the divine functions (Foucault 1977:37).

1. INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic, we witnessed how governments used the public health emergency as their pretext to show their power. Impunity

and human rights abuses increased during the pandemic. Opportunistic authorities found a way to revise conduct and morals for their benefit. Militarism resulted in fear and disablement of the most vulnerable in society. Nonetheless, fear will dissipate when freedom is at stake. People will be propelled to "step across", that is, to transgress, in order to mitigate a power that controls, manipulates, oppresses, and dehumanises.

Transgression has earned negative connotations. In this article, I embark on re-imagining and re-interpreting transgression as potentially incarnational. I argue that transgression can be viewed positively and as an element in theologising that can be equated to something good and divine.

I first show how militarism takes a toll in the Philippines, and creates fear in society. Excessive use of force such as the militarisation of health emergencies occur when people "step across", recognising the power that attempts to silence them. Secondly, I attempt to employ Michel Foucault's positive view of transgression. Thirdly, I propose a theology of transgression by providing an epistemological privilege to persons with disabilities' lived experiences of interruption, which has the potential to be incarnational.

2.   MILITARISM DURING THE PANDEMIC: RHETORIC INJECTING THE NORMALISATION OF CONTROL

The COVID-19 pandemic alarmed the world. Nations responded in such ways that the most vulnerable in society suffered even further. Containment of the virus has been the goal of nations that prompted a militarised response to control and discipline their citizens. Militarism in governments became pronounced during this pandemic. Militarism is not only about stockpiling weapons, but also about the use of surveillance and intelligence software for national security (González 2019:6), allocated in the national budget under the item "intelligence fund". For historian Richard Kohn (1988), militarism is an acute condition, because it engenders

> domination of war values and frameworks, public policy and institutions … the rhetoric of militarism and militarization are used to naturalize war and violence, bring about support for and acquiescence to war and military action, and dehumanize the enemy. The work of turning soldiers into heroes and objects of veneration – and valorizing their deaths – are also key tasks and goals of militarized rhetoric (González 2019:142).

This pandemic revealed militarism in our rhetoric. In one of his press conferences, the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Guterres (2020) stated, "it is absolutely critical to the world's efforts to win the *war against Covid-19*"; similar slogans such as "battle against Covid", or "fight against COVID-19" are a war mindset against the virus adapted by nations, including the Philippines. Likewise, the World Health Organization (WHO) considered the virus an invisible enemy without borders, indiscriminate race, and unpredictable.

Militarised action and rhetoric result in a normalisation of a war-like response; thus, apt designations for a war scenario such as frontliners as new heroes and the virus as the enemy. To complicate matters, in an effort to contain the enemy virus, individuals who violate stringent measures are also considered enemies. In the Philippines, at the height of the pandemic, those caught violating community quarantine rules (also known as lockdown) faced harsh consequences.

Simon (2020:104, 109) asserts that the pandemic became a gateway for the authoritarian impulses of leaders, as in the Philippines. Duterte's slogan *war-on-drugs* extends to his *war against COVID-19*. On 1 April 2020, on national television, Duterte gave a tall order to police officers:

> My orders to the police and military … if there is trouble or the situation arises where your life is on the line, shoot them dead … Understand? Dead. I'll send you to the grave. … Don't test the government. (Billing 2020:par. 2).

Violators of quarantine and curfew rules were threatened with death because they were viewed as enemies who must be exterminated – be shot dead (Amnesty International 2020). Police enforcers swiftly followed the order. On 21 April 2020, an army veteran, who allegedly refused to wear a mask, was shot dead. There was a public uproar for an investigation, which later revealed that the man was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of his military service (Robles 2021). Barangay officials forcefully arrested and dragged a deaf man for violating mask and physical distancing mandates.[1] These are some of the incidents that showed punitive enforcement of Duterte's order. Further, the pandemic afforded Duterte opportunities to tighten his grip on power. Surveillance-targeting dissidents, activists, human rights lawyers, and even a community pantry organiser, Ana Patricia Non, were red-tagged (Damicog 2021:par. 10), because the government considered them to be suspicious elements.

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1   The deaf man was arrested, carried, and thrown inside the village vehicle to be placed under custody. The crowd vehemently argued with the officials and their punitive actions and total disrespect and disregard of the deaf man.

Law enforcers or local barangay[2] staff used public humiliation, arrests, physical assault, and even death for those who violated the quarantine rules. Militarism thus legitimised the use of force, surveillance, and control of people. The Philippines is one of the many countries whose government used the pandemic to repress the critics of the Duterte regime, such as journalists, human rights activists, and lawyers. It was also an opportune time to unleash police and other security under the guise of public health emergency measures.

The police and the military enforced the tactic of the Duterte regime to use "disciplinary power", in order to subdue the population by means of consent and fear.[3] Human rights violations have escalated. According to the International Center for Transnational Justice (ICTJ), it was evident that the pandemic is not only a global health emergency, but also a human rights crisis (Speri 2021). According to Mohamed Suma, political leaders used the pandemic as an opportunity to amass power (Speri 2021:par. 9). The stringent measures impacted severely on the poorest, including the daily wage earners, those who belong in the informal economy, without considering the circumstances. The pandemic exposed the most vulnerable in the country; yet the Duterte regime used the pandemic to push through its legislative agenda such as the Anti-Terror Bill, which people would have strongly opposed if there was no pandemic.[4]

Such a threat and opportunistic manoeuvring were seemingly arbitrary authoritarianism. "Death-by-discipline", as a threat to violators, shows incompetence and lack of foresight as to how to handle the pandemic effectively. Duterte's threats to Filipinos in emergency has caused fear among the most vulnerable. His government's militarised response to the pandemic gave rise to police brutality, fostering the culture of impunity, and a means to tighten his grip on power. To control and discipline people with threats and arrests did not eliminate the virus; it isolated ordinary citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

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2   A barangay is like a township.
3   To this date, Duterte still has a significant number of followers who are tight-lipped and hide his actions.
4   Worst, the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee investigated and interrogated an anomalous transaction by the government during the pandemic. The Duterte regime enriched its cronies by purchasing medical supplies amounting to billions of pesos, with substandard quality and ten times higher than suggested retail prices.

3.   THE SHAPE OF FEAR DURING THE PANDEMIC

A militarised and draconian means to contain COVID-19 provoked fear and disablement among the vast majority of Filipinos. Besides the fear of contracting and transmitting the virus, the threat of imprisonment or death by police/military officers added to the people's insecurity. The contagion of the coronavirus is far less a concern than what is at stake for the future of the Filipinos, especially the most vulnerable in society. When will things improve?

3.1   COVID-19: Contagion, containment, and criminalisation

In his book, *The great leveler: Violence and the history of inequality from Stone Age to the twenty-first century*, Scheidel (2017) identifies four violent events that serve as equalisers; one of these is lethal pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic might currently be regarded as an equaliser. But the response of high-income countries to the call for vaccine solidarity has unmasked the ongoing astronomical inequality in society. At the time of writing, vaccine doses administered to high-income countries totalled 2.35 billion (75-80 per cent), while low-income countries only had 134.78 million (14 per cent) people who were fully vaccinated and received at least one dose (Our World in Data 2022). With the Delta and the highly transmissible Omicron variants, fear of contagion intensified vaccine nationalism.

In his address to the 76th UN General Assembly, Guterres (2021) praised our breakthrough in science by an unprecedented discovery of vaccines, but COVID-19 was a "terrible demonstration of the failure of human solidarity of the international community" (Bays 2021). A failure in ethics led to disablement and death of people in low-income countries.

During the pandemic, the Philippine government imposed extensive community quarantine that disproportionately apprehended and sanctioned those on the periphery. This resulted in daily wage earners losing their jobs and disablement of those who cannot afford medication, due to unemployment. The 2020 Human Rights Watch report found that many were arrested in violation of quarantine or pandemic protocols. Some were harassed and detained in dog cages as punishment (Hancock 2021:par. 1); others were detained under the heat of the sun; LGBTIQ people were arrested and humiliated by law enforcers. Worse yet, according to a report, children were placed in a coffin as punishment, because they violated the curfew hours (Human Rights Watch 2021). Duterte has a track record of state-sanctioned human rights abuses. Amnesty International

and the International Criminal Court (ICC) condemn Duterte's statement and actions. The ICC views his threats to attack freedom of speech and freedom of assembly as deeply alarming, especially during the pandemic. Putting people who violate the protocol, even if they simply were not wearing face shields, in prison, with total disregard for the individual's context, is counter-productive and deeply inappropriate. The government's action is, in fact, a violation of human rights. The pandemic is capitalised by those in power breeding impunity, resulting in unchecked and unjust practices by those who are supposed to protect the people from all kinds of threats. They threaten the public. In its report, the United Nations Human Rights Office concluded that the Duterte government's approach to contain and control the spread of COVID-19 is punitive. But will engendering public fear last?

3.2 Power in fear: Tail and head

As the Philippines and other governments grapple with the pandemic, those in power have found ways to use the situation to clinch power through narratives of fear. The pandemic has shown the fear of the people and the fear of those in the position of power of losing it. Indeed, fear can cause withdrawal; it can be used to control and to remain in power. But can fear dissipate and conjure a positive transgression?

3.2.1 Pretext to control

Fear propels an emotional arousal that activates our intuition of defence, signalling danger or potential threat. It can also petrify us. Hence, fear can propel us into action such as fight or flight. We can also opt for inaction such as silence as a response to fear. Foucault's notion of fear, although it propels one into action, is an exercise in control, that currently manifests in surveillance.

In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault saw how surveillance (panopticon) – disciplinary power – engendered discipline, and conformity produced another kind of power outside conventional social systems. It does not require force nor violence, because power is manipulated covertly by the ruling class, those in a position of influence and power, or with dominating intent. Power overrides the agency of individuals because they adapt and behave in consonance with expectation. In a sense, people are subjected and controlled, discreetly. They remain passive or powerless. Hence, achieving social change is an impossibility for Foucault. With this view, critics regard his position as pessimistic. In deference to Foucault, the dominant metanarrative on the negativity of power resulted in the

oversight of its positivity. Indeed, power is everywhere and in flux. We can consider the significance of power in effecting good governance and in shaping a growth-producing culture. Foucault's view on positive power, which is "disciplinary power", is subject to suspicion and critique. This positive view of power is perceived as a subtle sequestration of the agency. Similarly, power "is shrouded with a subtext, namely fear. Power is utilised to intimidate to forge fear" (Meneses 2020:155).

The dynamics of fear start with an individual, and then proliferates to the polity. There are many factors where fear spreads to the public. On an individual level, fear has a role in self-preservation. But fear rooted in concern can metastasise from individual to individual, seeded by conspiracies, misinformation, and disinformation, which can be amplified by cultural and social forces routed via social and even mainstream media. When associated with authorities, fear covertly cleaves to power; fear becomes a force that makes the powerful or those with network influence hold on tight to power. Behind power is the fear of losing control; power feeds insecurity; it fabricates synthetic validation. In other words, those in a position of influence perceive the different, dissident, unorthodox, and deviant as a threat and, therefore, they must be incapacitated, controlled, disabled, or subjugated by means of power. Whether the threat is unfounded, the response is almost certain to be disproportionate, excessive, and oppressive. What is more terrifying? Is it fear itself or the frightened (Hawley *et al.* 2018:00:3:14)?

The appropriation of war rhetoric during the pandemic spreads fear where it propels a response to a perceived threat. It employs a binary of heroes/enemies, where the former are the health workers and frontliners, while the latter are the "violators" of health protocols. The pandemic has been a favourable time for opportunists to claim that they are at the service of the public; yet stifling the movements and collecting the personal data of the population to curb the spread of the virus.[5] The question is: How are personal information and data being used? Who uses it? Where is it stored? The expiry date of such data in the system is unknown to the public. Without any clarity on the usage and management of personal data, it can be stored, used, and mined for surveillance, profiling, and intelligence portfolios.[6] Health emergencies such as the pandemic are

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5   War, in this case the pandemic, can be an opportunity for greedy leaders and politicians to find ways for the torrent of funds from loans and treasury to grease shadow deals. It is an opportune time for corruption, and it will be a field day for those doing the deal or manoeuvring ways to clinch to power.

6   Data is a new gold mined by technology giants.

temporary. Data left without clear regulation as to its usage and deletion can be infiltrated and exploited; this is dangerous to the population. Data can be a weapon. This makes the public vulnerable to cyber-attacks and surveillance, labelling and targeting of dissent.

3.2.2 Beginning of transgression[7]

In emphasising the vulnerability of the population, governments at times appeal to and exploit fear, in order to establish new rules. Higgs (2005) views such an undertaking as political economy of fear. Fear is a productive resource; like any other resource, it is subject to diminishing returns.[8] The government's overusage of fear to appeal to the people's sensibilities could result in people's gradual dissipation and disbelief until they are no longer frightened. People will then exercise their reasoning and agency. When the fear of the population seems to dissipate, the government will find ways to invent synthetic fear, in order to maintain some level of trepidation or insecurity. The dissemination of invented new fears or insecurities is galvanised through a mechanism called astroturfing, with the assistance of (social) media trolls.[9]

Framing "war on Coronavirus" shapes the public perspective and serves as a conveyor belt for a forced narrative, where fear and chauvinism are a deadly combination. At some point, restriction of movement will ultimately lead people to "step across" its limits, in order to find ways to sustain their everyday living. The Filipinos gradually realised that the government's punitive approach was intentional to confuse and complicate matters, thus resulting in a labyrinth of dead ends. After two years living in a pandemic with one of the longest lockdowns in the world, Filipinos, whose mindset was programmed with fear, began to raise critical questions about their leader's handling of the pandemic. The government, which configured languages to surveil and silence its critics for their (mis)management of the pandemic, has crushed legitimate opposition voices.

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7   The vast majority of persons with disabilities perceive the world to be structured, configured, and made for the able-bodied. Hence, "able-bodied" people view their condition as an interruption. Disabled people have challenged such perceptions. Their presence should make society re-think and re-frame able-body as temporary; their "interruption" can thus be taken as an invitation to see another dimension of what it means to be human and an opportunity to forge accessibility, inclusion, and disability justice.

8   The law of diminishing return is an economic theory whereby it predicts that, after reaching an optimal level of capacity, adding a factor of production will result in smaller increases in output.

9   In her article, Chan (2022:1) explains that "Online astroturfing is often considered to be just like any other coordinated inauthentic behaviour; with considerable discussion focusing on how it aggravates the spread of fake news and disinformation".

People need to redirect their fear; this can lead to transgression for the common good. History has proven that Filipinos value their freedom, as attested in the well-known 1986 People Power Revolution. Filipinos gathered their courage, and collectively removed a dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. and his cohorts from office. The people regained democracy. For Filipinos, courage is not only a virtue; it is also a value that defines their character. Courage, roughly translated in Tagalog as "*tapang*", is charged with nuances such as bravery, boldness, confidence, and valour. Its ethical dimension is rooted in their interiority (approximated as "*loob*"), which is "essentially an interrelational and social concept before it is a privately personal concept" (Miranda 1988:102). Thus, for Filipinos, courage or "*tapang*" manifests especially when an offence or injustice is done not only on a personal, but also on a collective level. Then, Filipinos, especially persons with disabilities, courageously express their stance against neglect and injustices during the pandemic.

In this case, fear of losing freedom and human rights, and of being silenced is greater than indifference. Nowadays, Filipinos have countered their fear by demonstrating against Duterte government's attempt to sequester their basic rights and freedoms. The pandemic was not a deterrent for the Duterte government to crack down on its critics. Rather, it was an opportune time for them to silence the dissent. However, people gradually became aware of the regime's injustices. Some of Duterte's allies and even Duterte himself were intentionally shrouded by historical revisionism and denialism. They revised the historical truth about Duterte's crusade "War-on-Drugs", claiming that no extra-judicial killings occurred. Similarly, this administration has denied its failure and incompetence in addressing the pandemic. Prior to, and more so during the pandemic, impunity and corruption have become evident; yet Duterte and his defenders revise and deny this reality. However, fearless citizens opted to stand for the truth. This paved the way to reduce fear in the Philippines' polity. When fear dissipates, when people finally dare to untangle the fake fears orchestrated by the government, those in power will surely shiver. Hence, fear is tempered, which can be liberative for all. Some Filipinos opted to "step across" to reclaim their liberties and used fear not to restrict the self, but to inspire and empower another. Concerned citizens, who value freedom, were not afraid to question the metanarrative created by the government on various platforms, through mass and social media, agencies, or concern groups that will listen and provide a space to express and present their stance. Fear is reversed not for self-preservation, but to effect community solidarity.

4. TRANSGRESSION VIS-À-VIS RESISTANCE: BOTH NEGATIVE?

In theology or beyond its realm, transgression has earned a negative notion. It has been associated with sin, to err, do wrong, a lapse, to violate, rebel, dissent, to break, and so on. This prism has conditioned us to distrust and condemn the transgressive act. One might even consider transgression as a form of resistance, given the hindsight that both easily lend to actions that side with rebellion or the unconventional. It also projects defiance against the subjugation of people's rights and freedoms. Ultimately, transgression and resistance seem to evoke aggression; this is the cisnormative language that we are conditioned to believe. As Scott (1990) suggests, resistance may take various forms of *hidden transcripts*, which he also identifies as weapons of the weak. The disguise and anonymity of resistance are coded in the form of gossip, jokes, songs, memes, language, rituals, or any practices used by the marginalised or subordinate groups against their oppressors. Its purpose is to remain unsuspecting. Etymologically, transgression shares some semblance of meaning with transcendence, where the latter is privileged with positive meaning and association. Although transgression is associated with or viewed as a form of resistance, both seem to share a degree of power. Given the unfavourable connotation of transgression, perhaps there could be an alternative way of considering it other than a contrast to transcendence as well as opposed to the divine.

The term "transgression" is rooted in the Latin word *transgredi,* meaning "across, beyond, or through" *(trans)* and "to go or to walk" *(gradi or gressus),* where the core idea is shared with transcendence.[10] The Latin word *gresso* means "to climb over, pass over, step across or go beyond". Transgression seems to imply "to walk across or go through". However, it is dragged into the notions of dissent, rebellion, and defiance, yet it closely overlaps within the semantic cluster of transcend (Boer 2012:par. 6). In this sense, both terms connote spatial movement. Transgression hints at nothing negative. This now leaves the question: What made it earn an adversarial overtone and theological abuse that often connotes breaching the commandment or projecting a kind of heretical perspective? Foust (2010:107) views transgression as an

> individual and collective processes of de-subjectification, by which humans reclaim their power of invention against those forces which would try to mediate agency into a collective agent.

It is perhaps worth exploring the aspect of transgression as a process.

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10   Transcendence is derived from the present participle of the Latin verb "transcend", which means to "climb or rise over".

5. FOUCAULT ON TRANSGRESSION: AN ALTERNATIVE?

It can be said that Foucault's concept of transgression centres around sexuality, thanks to Marquis de Sade,[11] Friedrich Nietzsche,[12] and Georges Bataille[13] who influenced Foucault on this matter. Drawing from these three individuals, Foucault explored transgression in the cultural and individual aspects that impose or effect repression and limitation. For him, transgression is a process that exposes self-imposed and cultural boundaries. Thus, transgression and limit operate side-by-side, where limit is a movement of stepping across boundaries; it is a movement between the norm (set by society and culture) and deviance. This pegged transgression alongside the extreme, excess, and the different earned a negative moral, cultural, and social definition. On the other hand, transgression can be considered significant in extending boundaries, because the movement to step across, pass over, or pass through highlights the liminal or minority lived experiences that are neglected, overlooked, or ignored.

When we consider transgression as "step across or cross-over", this could imply an enquiry, a challenge, or critique to normative notions of defining matters, be they language, values, or cultural practices, to reposition it. In this sense, Foucault (1977:34-35) addressed transgression as

> incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it. It is a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable … does not seek to oppose one thing to another … it is neither violence in a divided world … contains nothing negative but affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time.

Limiting the definition of transgression to a negative tone calls for reconsideration. Transgression, as an act of stepping across or crossing over, indicates a space that suggests in-between or liminality. It is an attempt to occupy a space of uncertainty and even ambiguity, yet with possibilities to be unravelled (Sara & Littlefiel 2014:298). In addition, transgression, as a process of stepping across, could be liberating. By

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11 Marquis de Sade's time was during the French Revolution. He discussed eroticism, where he pushed the boundaries of decency. Sade critiques the moral, social, and legal boundaries. His philosophy of transgression is linked to sexuality, which is later evident in Foucault's works.

12 Friedrich Nietzsche's reference to Apollo and Dionysius about human existence, where human beings experience limitation (viewed by Apollo) as well as flux and dynamic (viewed by Dionysius). These views have influenced Foucault's view on the relationship between limit and transgression.

13 Working along the line of Sade, Georges Bataille has shown the relationship of the sacred and profane in matters of sexuality and excess. This also influenced Foucault's view of transgression.

crossing over the norm, the political, social, cultural, or religious limit experience, people could gain new consciousness and be able to reclaim their agency, thus eliminating matters that restrain or control them. Indeed, persons with disabilities encounter attitudinal and structural barriers that result in disability injustice. Nonetheless, they continue to transgress, by challenging and raising awareness to the public of the barriers they encounter. This occurs through platforms (made) accessible to them. This is a collective and interdependent effort with networks, institutions, or agencies that advocate their cause or recognise their rights.

An assertive way of defining transgression could be to challenge, provoke, or cross over marked boundaries. Indeed, transgression has been pinned on a radical position that suggests excessive or subversive acts/behaviour. Nonetheless, it can be positioned positively. To "step across or cross-over" could also evoke creativity, leading to alternative perspectives and understandings of human relations and being. For Sara and Littlefiel (2014:297), transgression can inherently be a critical practice and a fluid force in cultural reproduction.

6.   TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF TRANSGRESSION

Transgression, often viewed as a protest geared towards conflict, occupation, and any aggressive action or movement, is fundamentally a question of power relations. Yet when we consider transgression as an interruption, an appropriation of the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, it can be regarded as an action in-between or liminal. Transgression, as an interruption, inhabits a space between body and culture that could be indeterminate (Sara & Littlefiel 2014:302). We are simultaneously an insider and an outsider (Sara & Littlefiel 2014:302). To some extent, transgression can be "politically empowering and critically creative" (Sara & Littlefiel 2014:302).

Owing to such a negative connotation, a positive perspective of transgression in theology is a rarity. At this point, I would like to present an alternative view of transgression, other than being synonymous with sin or rebellion with reference to something religious.

6.1   Transgression as interruption: Disablement as disruption

In a society that values physical ability and agility, there is no doubt that persons with disabilities[14] are living in constant interruption, be this to

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14   Persons with disabilities activists prefer to use the complete phrase rather than the acronym PWD.

accommodate or be accommodated by the non-disabled mainstream. Ignorance and inconvenience of an encounter with persons with disabilities have resulted in non-disabled or able-bodied people avoiding rapport with the disabled. However, those who experience disablement know the need to transgress, that is, to "step across" the barriers that society has constructed, especially during the pandemic, where society seems to overlook, if not totally forget their rights, particularly to accessibility.

To recall, Foucault (1977:34) views transgression in a way that it "forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes," or to recognise itself for the first time. This can be linked to the experiences of disablement. The limit of the non-disabled mainstream when faced with persons with disabilities becomes evident and they enter the realm of disablement, momentarily. In this process of transgressive movement, the non-disabled find themselves in the position of the excluded and recognise their limit, and the limits they impose restrain fluid encounter and engagement. Thus, interruption occurs with both persons with disabilities and the non-disabled. For able-bodied people, interruption is something negative that causes a pause in their daily movements or activities. It is also viewed as unwelcome because of uninvited entry of the different Other. Interruption as a trespass can elicit irritation, annoyance, and disrespect to such an extent that no one would opt to be at the receiving end.

On the contrary, interruption is part of the lived experience of persons with disabilities, more so during the pandemic. To function, work, and live in an able world is a constant "stepping across" into their world and that of the non-disabled/able-bodied. They allow the different Other (in this instance, the non-disabled) to transgress, that is to step across their world, in order to accommodate and facilitate an engagement. They live in a world where they are an afterthought, where inaccessibility and an unaccommodating environment are a constant interruption to them. Their difference is also feared, denied, and perceived as a burden, a challenge, and a loss. Society has conditioned us to value bodies and individuals according to agility, performance, capacity, intelligence, function, efficiency, and so on. Hindrances and barriers become resolved and are turned into creativity and action. Instead of succumbing to an able perspective, they resolve and reverse disablement by transgressing the norm, and overturning negative narratives on disability. They learn how to transgress the normalcy imposed by society. Their way is resistance, rebellion, or any aggressive means. They opt for collaboration. This only happens when the vast majority of them will listen, be open to engage, and seriously find ways to make society and the environment inclusive for persons with disabilities.

One way of changing the current environment that has offended and neglected persons with disabilities is to transgress from the orthodox notion of normalcy to accepting human diversity. This could begin by reversing fear of the different Other and fear of disability. It matters to have a leap of faith, step across, learn from their lived experiences, and listen to their narratives. Let them assert their agency because they have been subjected to a hegemonic discourse of negativity about disability. By privileging their lived experiences, transgression can be understood in a way that could be atypically life-giving. They can show us the importance of transgression in dealing with difficult realities.

Transgression, as an interruption, that is an act of stepping across, can be viewed as crossing boundaries of the normal, orthodox expectations, which can be politically important. It questions power relations, where power is about collaboration to achieve a goal, namely accessibility, inclusion, and justice. Transgression, as an interruption, can be a method that becomes an ethical exercise, a kind of reflexivity, whereby we ask ourselves about assumptions that eclipsed the privilege of persons with disabilities (Schubert 1995:1005, 1009-1010). Transgression as interruption could be incarnational.

6.2   Transgression in incarnation: Divine interruption

Genesis Chapter 3 and subsequent narratives of defiance in the Bible are undoubtedly interpreted as a transgression of God's precepts. Morally, transgression is an act of rebellion with an immoral undertone. Such moral notion of transgression extends to social and cultural norms, where the movement towards excess or stepping across the limit is considered delinquent and upsetting. Transgression is an action that counters the typical and the expected. By contrast, our faith links transcendence with a positive tone that is almost always divine. However, it can, to some extent, be said that God also defied the typical and the orthodox. God seemingly stepped across Divine limits, which can be considered transgressive.

At this juncture, I intend to re-imagine the mystery of incarnation, whereby God transgresses, a moment of Divine interruption. The experience of disablement can disclose the Divine and could "further inform notions of God for the purpose of providing more enlightened expositions of the role of God in human lives" (Goh 2012:150). Appropriating persons with disabilities' lived experiences of interruption could produce an alternative view of the incarnation.

The incarnation – God became human – is not merely a mystery of God's decisive action to dwell with us, but it can be taken as God

"stepping across", a form of "radical interruption in human history" (Boeve 2001:205) to commune with us in the flesh. Boeve (2001:210) further develops Johann Baptist Metz's account of apocalypticism that claims an intrinsic relationship between God and time, that is "God interrupts time". Boeve suggests that God interrupts history. This interruption can extend, by radically locating incarnation, as suggested by a feminist theologian, Laurel C. Schneider (2010), as promiscuous incarnation, wherein God transgresses human space and time. God is revealed in various ways, conditions, and contexts of people. God's option to disclose the Divine Self through Jesus discloses the incarnation; that is, it is an affair between God and human beings in flux, fluid, and free. Christ revealed that incarnation is not of the past; it is a reality that happens in the multiplicity of peoples' lives (Goh 2012:150). Hence, the incarnation is not a one-time revelatory event; rather, it is ubiquitous; it transgresses time.

Just as transgression was disapproved, interruption earned an unwelcoming remark. Interruption is a momentary pause that challenges the orthodox, the normative that could, in fact, exclude, harm, dispossess, or disqualify another. Able-bodied persons view the lives and presence of persons with disabilities as an interruption; from their perspective, interruption invites us to see and be aware of each other's place and space. It is a cessation that enables sociality and relationality. Hence, interruption seeks connection and communion by stepping across each, by transgressing the other's space. When we are aware of the other, we cause a caring relationship during the momentary pause. This shows that interruption that causes an encounter and engagement effects a radical incarnational event among us.

6.3   Theological reflection: Transgression as incarnational interruption. A proposal

Traditionally, the incarnation is regarded as the self-emptying of God, a kenosis of divine expression to be with humanity; "absolute Otherness made flesh, exiled from itself in order to reveal itself most radically" (Shakespeare 2013:43). Hingston (2018:190) views incarnation as communal, where the interdependence of the members of this body of Christ is integral to our faith. Her view is shared by Smith (2002:226), who similarly views incarnation as divine expression that seeks to commune. Thus, viewing transgression as a divine interruption in the form of incarnation is surely not without moral revelation (Smith 2002:397).

Transcendence is situated at the other extremity of the pole of transgression. In the previous section, I embarked on re-interpreting and

re-imagining transgression in a positive light, although interruption is a possibility of incarnation in light of persons with disabilities.

As a "stepping across", transgression is neither necessarily negative nor immoral *per se*. We qualified it as such. I thus propose that it is worth reframing transgression as an incarnational interruption that seeks to reveal, communicate, and express the deep desire to engage and listen to the narratives of people who are different and disabled, who are all together shunned. In her book, *The disabled God*, Eiesland (1994) proposes that God accepted and embraced deformity and disability in the resurrection. She seems to suggest that disability (a form of interruption) is a locus of divine revelation; a condition, a life where God transgresses and opts to manifest the self in the flesh. They embrace the transgressive interruption in the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, even if, at times, it is frustrating because it is the means to make others aware of their context, culture, and narratives. If their lives, narratives, and very person are subjected to erasure, are we not also deleting the possibility of God transgressing via an incarnational interruption through disability?

If transgression is a process whereby interruption happens, and communication and engagement can take effect, it can thus be a moment of word enfleshed, an awareness not only of the other but also of the self before the other and the Other (Divine). It is a reflexive encounter that can manifest the Divine. The interruption is a pause that recognises each other, our interdependence, that is integral to the Christian faith as one body of Christ. Hence, there is a space where this can be considered an incarnational interruption.

Acknowledged as an interruption, incarnation can be viewed as a risk of the unknown before us, that is, the reception or response from it. To trust in the possibilities requires living transgressively (Isherwood 2004:150). This means that we transgress and break barriers of the expected, of the orthodox, of those cultural, social, and religious systems, by letting the different and the disabled, who are often regarded as interruptions, be agents of the Divine transgression that invites us to embrace interdependence and communion for a radical incarnation to happen.

7. CONCLUSION

This article showed how militarism has scaffolded fear in times of the pandemic. Militarism was a tool to stifle freedoms and create fear that caused the disablement of the most vulnerable. As a tool to control people, militarism has come to its end when people finally reverse the fear of being

criminalised during the pandemic to the fear of losing freedoms and to the fear for the survival of the Other in need. Thus, transgression, not as rebellion, but as a "stepping across" of the limits for the Other, is inevitable, because truth and solidarity are of greater value in times of pandemics. In this light, I attempted to offer a positive view of transgression. Taken as it is, transgression does not necessarily postulate anything unorthodox or unwarranted excess. Rather, taken *per se*, transgression can only mean "stepping across", "pass over", or "pass through", which indicates neither rebellion nor resistance. In this respect, I used Foucault's notion of positive transgression. Taken as "stepping across", transgression can be a moment of reversal; it can effect and inspire change, from being controlled and restricted from the unknown to reclaiming freedom and appealing to solidarity. To appropriate the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, transgression, as an interruption, can lead to a meaningful encounter. Just as transgression is taken positively, in this instance, so it is with interruption; not seeing as seeking attention, but attention-seeking to communicate and be in communion with the Other. Concerning a theological re-interpretation of transgression as an interruption, I also suggested that interruption can be incarnational. By transgressing spaces, where the momentary pause to commune and to finally recognise the excluded could be an incarnational cessation, where solidarity and justice for the excluded Other – persons with disabilities – can transpire and inspire.

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