

## Carrying the Cross: Being Gay, Catholic, and Filipino

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### Introduction

Everyday we are confronted with topics that show the interplay of religion and society, topics that range from the mundane to the transformative. In fact, religion plays a huge part in an individual's holistic being that it can affect the way he or she articulates with and to the society he or she lives in. Furthermore, throughout the course of history, religion is considered a huge part in better understanding a particular society and that society's citizens' way of life (Durkheim, 1915; Orsi, 2003). However, certain religion is more prevalent over the others and this difference in scope is evident in some parts of the globe. In the Philippines, for instance, the number of Filipino Catholics reached 76.18 million out of the country's estimated population of 96.8 million (Uy, 2013). This is a considerable statistic for it shows how the majority of the population shares collective views and beliefs as a result of being part of the same religion. Nonetheless, it is important to note that although the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, it is noticeable that there is more widespread acceptance of homosexuality than might be expected.

Moreover, reports like this make us reflect and wonder about the impacts and effects of certain religions in the lives of individuals in a particular society (i.e. The Philippines) that they dominate; also, it makes us question how the prevalence of this religion impacts the lives of people, more specifically, the way it affects the lives of the members of a historically marginalized group such as the LGBTQ community. Thus, in this essay, I will try to explore the lives of the LGBTQ community in the Philippines, most specifically, Catholic Filipino gay men. And I will argue that although these men embrace their homosexuality, they still do this in and around the norms, values, and teachings of the

Roman Catholic Church. In doing so, I hope to make the reader better understand both Filipino homosexuality and Catholicism in the Philippines. As Robert Orsi puts in his argument, in order to better understand a particular religion, it is best to look at the collective memories and shared experiences of adherents rather than just at official doctrine (Orsi, 2003).

To better contextualize this topic, this essay is divided into different sections. In the first section, I present some of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines and its views and stance in regards to the issue of homosexuality. Then, I contextualize this by presenting the Catholic Filipino gay men and their ways of operating both as catholic and homosexual in the contemporary time. In the same section, I provide some examples and narratives on how the image of the Catholic Filipino gay man is presented in the media. The essay ends with reflections on the effect of the Roman Catholic church in the lives of Catholic Filipino gay men and an analysis of how male homosexuality is articulated within the context of a predominantly Catholic society such as the Philippines.

### Catholicism in the Philippines: The Paradox of Faith

*"All passions are dishonorable, for the soul is even more prejudiced and degraded by sin than is the body by disease; but the worst of all passions is lust between men... not only are their passions [of the homosexuals] satanic, but their lives are diabolic... There is nothing, absolutely nothing more mad or damaging than this perversity."*

*-Saint John Chrysostom, 347-407*

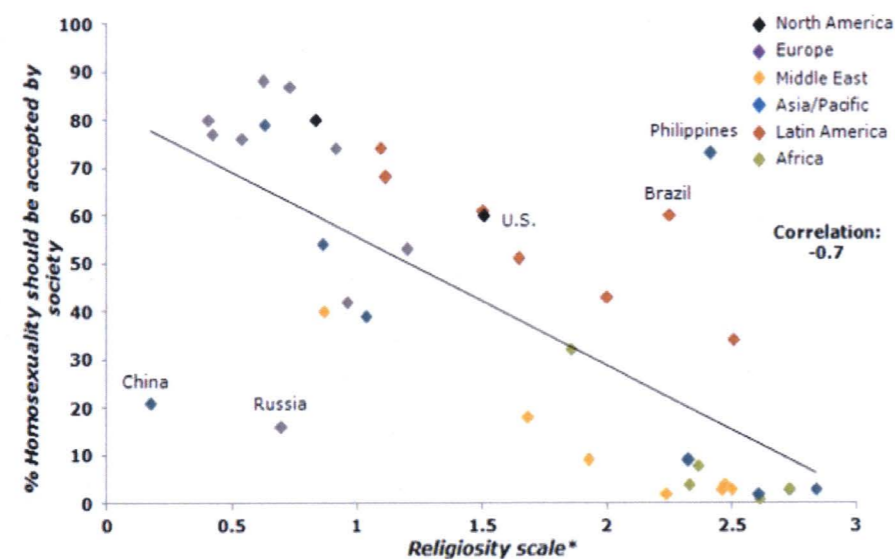
As a predominantly Catholic Christian nation, albeit with a substantial Muslim minority, the

Philippines is a unique case in Asia for it sports a wide variety of modes of how homosexuality is expressed rather than the usual dominance of one stereotypical model (Dynes & Donaldson, 1992). This can be traced from the country's history of being a Spanish colony in the mid-Sixteenth century. During this time, the islands were put through the inquisition- an inquisition that put a number of gay men to death. However, Christian homophobia never took root, giving the Philippines the reputation of being one of the most tolerant nations on Earth (Dynes & Donaldson, 1992, pp. xii).

In fact, in a recent survey, the Philippines run against the existing global trend, which states that the centrality of religion in people's lives is a negative correlate of homosexual acceptance. In other words, the more important religion is for a particular country, the less tolerance is exhibited (Bernal, 2013, para. 11). Furthermore, the result shows how the country acts as the strongest outlier in the pool of sampled regions (see figure 1), registering an above 50% tolerance rate despite a high level of religiosity (Bernal, 2013, para. 12).

However, regardless of how the aforementioned views are uplifting, the results bring into question how acceptance is understood in a country that is predominantly Catholic. In fact, in a recent study, Filipino Catholics reached 76.18 million out of the country's estimated population of 96.8 million (Uy, 2013). This statistics then bring into the question how and what kind of tolerance is demonstrated in the graph above. Hence, in this section, I will briefly provide an overview of the nature of the Roman Catholic faith in the Philippines and I will argue that it provides a paradoxical way of reading the intersections of religion and sexuality; this is due to the fact that although the Catholic church promotes discourses of love and acceptance, it also provides a long list of narratives that portray homosexuality as 'sinful' and 'immoral'. Also, I will discuss how the Catholic Church tends to medicalize homosexuality; hence, perpetuating the idea that the Catholic Filipino gay man is deviant. Then, I will close this section by arguing that the Roman Catholic Church's portrayal of homosexuality as an ailment and immoral further problematizes the relationship of the church and Filipino gay men in the Philippines.

Less Tolerance for Homosexuality in More Religious Countries



\* Religiosity is measured using a three-item index ranging from 0-3, with "3" representing the most religious position. Respondents were coded as "1" if they believe faith in God is necessary for morality; "1" if they say religion is very important in their lives; and "1" if they pray at least once a day. The mean score for each country is used in this analysis. Religiosity scores for the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Japan are from the Spring 2011 Global Attitudes Survey.

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Figure 1. Correlation of Religiosity and society's views on homosexual acceptance (Buena Bernal, May 11, 2014)

In general, individual's and society's understanding of the intersection between homosexuality and spirituality is not generally explicit and is expressed using a complex paradigm. In fact, most often than not, the basic issue is framed in terms of the relationship between institutionalized religion and homosexuality, that is, the position or policy of a given denomination or religious group on same-sex relation, its theological stance of the topic (often viewed as an ethical concern), and its formal sanctions against those who may choose to engage in same-sex behavior, in defiance of established religious norms (Boisvert, 2007, p. 32). For instance, the Roman Catholic tradition, like Christians everywhere, has a variety of ways of evaluating homosexuality (Jung, 2007, p. 191; Brom, 2004). In fact, according to Patricia Jung (2007), "though Rome has spoken extensively about homosexuality in recent decades, many moral theologians, pastors, and ordinary lay Catholics are engaged in a public and vigorous debate about the Vatican's teachings on this matter (p. 191).

In theory, all Catholics believe that loyalty and fidelity to the church's living tradition require adherence to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church (Jung, 2007). In this sense, Catholics understand the church's teachings to be authoritative; however, this authority's weight is malleable and relative. Moreover, all faithful Catholics agree that these teachings warrant their respect and are, in some sense, morally formative (Jung, 2007). However, interpretations of these teachings vary. For some faithful Catholics, following the teachings means humble submission and silent obedience; others may in good conscience disagree and engage in public conversation about a particularly controversial matter (Jung, 2007, pp. 191-192).

For instance, the Roman Catholic Church's view on homosexuality has sparked various views throughout the years (Martin, 2013; Boisvert, 2007), and has recently gained more popularity, especially alongside the rise of equal rights movements. In its articulation of homosexuality, the Catholic Church uses discourses that are consistent with the teachings of the church about love and

acceptance; however, the church also employs discourses of sinfulness and homosexuality as immoral, such as the one demonstrated in the beginning of this section. As a further example, Robert H. Brom, the Bishop of San Diego, points out:

Every human being is called to receive a gift of divine sonship, to become a child of God by grace. However, to receive this gift, we must reject sin, including homosexual behavior—that is, acts intended to arouse or stimulate a sexual response regarding a person of the same sex. The Catholic Church teaches that such acts are always violations of divine and natural law.

Homosexual desires, however, are not in themselves sinful. People are subject to a wide variety of sinful desires over which they have little direct control, but these do not become sinful until a person acts upon them, either by acting out the desire or by encouraging the desire and deliberately engaging in fantasies about acting it out. People tempted by homosexual desires, like people tempted by improper heterosexual desires, are not sinning until they act upon those desires in some manner. (Brom 2004, para. 1-2).

This definition encapsulates how the Roman Catholic Church views and polices homosexuality and homosexual desires. However, it is important to note that homosexual members are not necessarily excommunicated from the Church; nonetheless, their homosexuality is contained by the enforcement of rules and teachings that perpetuate narratives and discourses that promote 'living a sin-free lifestyle' (Jung, 2007). In line with this, the Catholic Church promotes the idea of life-long chastity and sexual denial to homosexual believers. They believe that by doing so, gay believers recognize the will of God by associating this suffering in the way Christ bear his cross (Jung, 2007. p. 192).

On this background, we can contextualize the current milieu of the Philippine gay scene. One can infer that although the country is relatively more tolerant when it comes to homosexuals and homosexuality, the influence of the teachings of the

Roman Catholic Church (and or organized religion) can still be felt (Martin, 2013). In fact, this influence has certain implications for the way Catholic Filipino gay men position themselves in the social order. For instance, in an effort to encourage Catholic Filipino gay men to come out of the closet and to be 'honest' with God and themselves, Archbishops Paciano Aniceto and Oscar Cruz of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) promote the narrative that identifies homosexuality as a medical condition (Dizon, 2011).

According to Cruz, "homosexuality is [a] kind of sexual *misidentity* caused by some hormonal imbalance... It is a sexual inclination. [A product of biology]...we are born as boys and girls, there is no third sex, end of story. But because of hormonal imbalance, some girls have the tendency to become boys and some boys have the tendency to become girls" (Dizon, 2011). Statements like this are not unusual, for medicalization is how the Roman Catholic Church in Philippines has dealt with issues of homosexuality (Martin, 2013; Dizon, 2011). In her book *Straight to Jesus*, Tanya Erzen (2006, p. 38) mentions that through the help of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, Frank Worthen began a weekly meeting to help men that are dealing with homosexuality overcome their homosexual desires. However, Erzen stresses that unlike men attending the US counterpart, Love in Action, Filipino men who came to *Bagong Pag-asa* (translated as *New Hope*) were married but engaging in homosexual behavior. Frank, in these sessions, has concluded that homosexuality in the Philippines is linked to deep cultural feelings of fear. Moreover, he asserts that "shame is greater, they don't even have words to talk about homosexuality. They only have dirty words, street words, because they don't talk about this" (Erzen, 2006, p. 38).

Hence, marking homosexuality as deviant and medicalizing it have been the tactic of the Catholic church to discipline and contain the homosexual desires of Catholic Filipino gay men. Moreover, their usage of discourses that equate homosexuality as a form of sin and an immoral act is countered and covered by the veil that promotes discourses of

acceptance, forgiveness, and love. For instance, statements like 'god loves *baklas* (gays)' are perpetuated in daily dialogues. In fact, the Church becomes a key instrument in propagating these kinds of discourses and does this so subtly that these statements are normalized in everyday life. This implicit power of the church to reinforce normative values can be traced back to Michel Foucault's concept of the identification of deviance through disciplinary power.

The identification of deviance, according to Michel Foucault, can be explained using the concept of disciplinary power. Foucault (1984, p. 188) states that the primary function of disciplinary power is to train rather than to select and to impose or, to train in order to impose a certain belief and select more. This means that disciplinary power tends to condition individuals to act a certain way and hence, if one digresses from this 'normal' way of doing things, he is then deemed as deviant and or abnormal. Moreover, Foucault asserts that this technology of power produces 'reality' through hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments, and examination. These instruments, according to Foucault are relevant in the establishment of norms and the imposition of these norms to a particular group and the individuals within that group. As a result, individuals will internalize these dynamics of power and norm formation, and will continually follow these norms in order to be perceived as normal by the group that they belong to. However, it is important to note that as in Orsi's argument presented in the beginning of this paper, individuals have various reactions toward these internalized and established norms. Nonetheless, one can argue that conforming to norms is then considered good and non-conforming to them, is considered bad.

Thus, applying this to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, we can say that the Church has identified the deviant group, homosexual men, by juxtaposing them to the heteronormative nature of biblical stories and through the existing gender order that permeates in their everyday experiences. Moreover, the Church then goes on to further problematize homosexuality by transforming it into a medical issue. Discourses

that equate homosexuality to sin and immorality are used but softened with a promise that through the help of the Church and following the Church's teachings, homosexual men can still live as dignified Catholics. However, through the revolution of knowledge, exposure to new ideas and education, and also through the promotion of liberal views and values, Catholic Filipino gay men tend to question the Church's teachings and have found new ways in practicing their sexuality within the context of the faith that they are accustomed to (Martin, 2013; Rodgers, 2013).

### **Madasing Bakla: Contextualizing the Catholic Filipino Gay Man**

In the contemporary day and age, people tend to search for paradigms that define what and who they are; frameworks that guide and evaluate the life they lead and the quality of their personhood. Thus, it is not surprising that some individuals turn to religious institutions and traditions in order to better understand their lives, the choices they make, and the implications of these choices to the society they live in. However, it becomes problematic when individuals find certain contradictions that contest their way of life when pitted against the teachings of the religion they belong to. In fact, what happens when an essential part of your individuality is constantly branded as 'sinful' and 'unnatural'? What happens when the religious discourse of love and acceptance is tainted with words of biting hate and exclusion? (Boisvert, 2007, p. 43). Needless to say, Catholic Filipino gay men personify this dilemma, that although one might expect them to renounce Catholicism, many Catholic Filipino gay men practice their sexuality still, most often than not, within the constraints of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church that allows them to practice their sexuality with caution and prohibition. Also, I will provide some examples of how Catholic gay men are portrayed in Philippine media.

*Madasing Bakla*- a phrase that roughly means 'gay man who loves to pray'. Filipinos use this statement colloquially in describing Catholic Filipino gay men. This phrase has become the definition of the plethora of Filipino gay men that

goes to church to either *pray the gay away* or for finding the love of their lives. This image of the praying Catholic homosexual is also prevalent in Filipino mainstream media (see figure 2). The image below is a screenshot from the 2013 television show, *My Husband's Lover*.

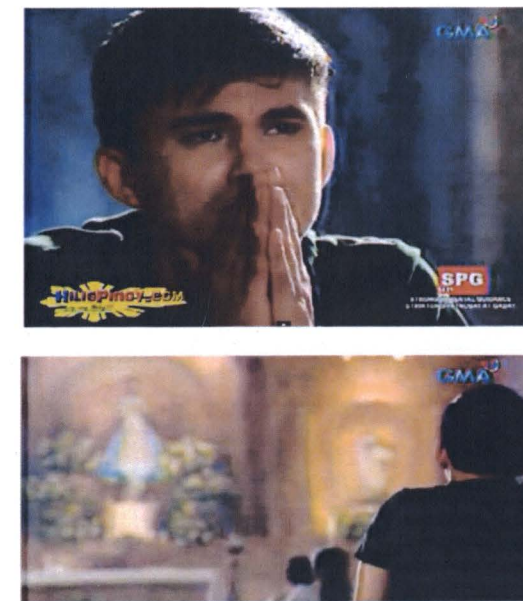


Figure 2. Screenshot from the Filipino TV show *My Husband's Lover*

In the image, Vincent (the man in the picture) is seen inside the Church, trying his best to *pray the gay away*. Throughout the series, Vincent's character (a closeted married Catholic homosexual man) is demonstrated to pray a lot- first to push his homosexuality away, then for his family's acceptance of his sexuality, and finally, for him and his lover to reunite. Hence, his character gives audiences an image of the struggles of the Filipino gay man; moreover, his characterization also shows the complexities of how a Catholic gay man articulate himself in a social setting that deems his sexuality as deviant, sinful, and immoral. In fact, during the time of airing, the lead actors are restricted from kissing each other for scenes that require 'affection' and 'intimate' closeness. Also, some Catholic priests condemn the production of the show for its explicit showcasing and apparent 'romanticizing' of same-sex relationships (Palumbarit, 2013). This is not surprising for we live in the age wherein Filipinos

currently find themselves in the midst of two forces pulling them in opposite directions - one of challenging the norms and aged beliefs, of being more open to same-sex relationships. And another, of the Catholic Church that is now, concurrent with the passage of the controversial Reproductive Health Bill that empowers women through access to reproductive health care, and the recognition of *Ang Ladlad* (which means "those who have come out of the closet", a political party for LGBT Filipinos, as a legitimate political party), more than ever, desperately asserting its influence on a nation that is beginning to think for itself (Martin, 2013, para. 12).

However, although the revolution and transformation of Filipinos' mindset in regards to certain political issues, specifically those that surround homosexuality, is uplifting, we cannot totally discard the influence of religion on one's sexuality. According to Donald Boisvert (2007) Sex and spirit, or sex and faith are related, or the idea that puts sexuality and one's belief system in a symbiotic and related position. This statement can be best understood if we look at the different discourses made by established religions and queer people themselves. Most often, the two sides are not compatible in terms of perspectives, level of mutual understanding, and or even respect.

In fact, a number of Catholic Filipino gay men have left the Catholic Church for they believe that the Catholic Church's stand on homosexuality is wrong (Rodgers, 2013). However, these men still adhere to the teachings of god and the Church. Nonetheless, they tend to phrase it differently. For instance, Raymond Alikpala, author of *God and Men: A Life in the Closet*, states,

"I still consider myself a Christian, and my faith in God is stronger and more real than ever. However, I do not identify as a Catholic anymore, although on the surface, for convenience, because I am in the Philippines, I cannot help but be engaged in Catholic practices. Yet my faith is in a God that is much bigger than the Catholic Church, a God who embraces with love and compassion the whole beauty and gamut of her creation, a

God who created us all gay, straight, transgender, queer, intersex, and everyone and everything else in between, and looks upon all of us and sees the good in all of creation (Rodgers, 2013, para. 18-19).

In his statement, Alikpala acknowledges that although he does not identify as Catholic anymore, it is hard to totally exclude himself from the ubiquity of the influence of Roman Catholic teachings and practices. In fact, in his personal blog, he provides a narrative that shows he exchanges banter with his old friend that has tried to talk him out of his homosexuality and his 'sinful' lifestyle using a couple of bible verses (Alikpala, 2012).

Hence, as presented in this section, the Catholic Filipino gay man confronts and lives his sexuality in a way that is affected and shaped by the norms set by the Roman Catholic Church. Although some gay men, like Raymond Alikpala, have left the Catholic church and have arguably reformulate the understanding of its teachings, they are still bounded by them for they have been socialized all their lives and are surrounded by these ideologies through the years. Furthermore, it is also important to note the significance of understanding human relations and behaviors in understanding religious belief and sexuality. Thus, in doing this, we can understand the ways in which a person decides to be 'religious' and 'sexual' and or both, at the same time (Boisvert, 2007, p. 32).

### Looking Beyond: Analysis, Implications, and Reflection

In contemporary times, homosexuals experience relatively freer lives. This is evident in the proliferation of equal rights movements, anti-hate crime laws, and the emergent and strengthening support of same-sex marriage in the US and other parts of the globe. However, institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church tend to act as antithesis to all of these. This is due to the fact that, as presented in this paper, the Church tends to practice and enforce views that use guilt, discrimination, and reductionism in their teachings. For, regardless of the how they put it, the Catholic Church reinforces the narrative that no other sexual orientation is

*acceptable* but heterosexuality and that not identifying as one is an *ailment* and a disgrace that needs to be corrected by the means of prayers and renouncing of sins. Furthermore, the belief of the Church in prayers and the sacraments as ways to *cure* homosexuality is arguably a reductionist way of evaluating things, for it undermines the complexities of our humanity and the effects of the webs of social relationships that make up an individual. However, denying the existence and implications of the values and norms perpetuated and promoted by the Roman Catholic Church is futile, for they exist and they affect the lives of Filipino gay men. These values are perpetuated through the rampant approving depiction of homosexual bashing and bullying in the media, the mindless usage of gay slurs in social settings, the physical harm afflicted to homosexuals in communities, the restriction of gay themed television shows and homoerotic scenes, and the teachings of other powerful organizations that continue to stigmatize homosexuality by calling it a sin- an abomination that needs to be *corrected* and or *cured*.

The aforementioned phenomena reinforce the dominant ideologies that consider heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as deviant. This is problematic for it perpetuates the stigmas and stereotypes based on and motivated by one's sexual orientation. Moreover, it is important to note that due to its pervasive presence in the Philippines, the Catholic Church mobilizes these ideologies and also acts as an agent of power that operates both implicitly and explicitly in the realms of the visible and the invisible. For instance, the Church's power is personified through the use of explicit teachings and doctrines that visibly demonstrate its views on homosexuality as *sin* and as a *deviant* behavior that needs to be corrected. Conversely, it is implicit and invisible because it relies on years of socialization and the Catholic Filipino gay man's existing faith in religion and God that both come from the unknown and the unseen.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that once these forms of powers sap into the system and affect the construction of norms and social facts, homosexual individuals will then feel subjugated and

marginalized; conversely, they may also feel rebellious and motivated to resist the power of the church. Hence, some of them leave the Catholic Church but do not necessarily abandon its teachings. Thus, they may find themselves living and performing, consciously and or subconsciously, their sexuality around the norms, values, and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church; which in turn creates a sexuality that is performed cautiously and carefully as if trying not to offend authority, as opposed to being performed freely in a way that the individual feels right.

### Conclusion

Religious institutions are important sectors in the production of knowledge and norms. Sectors so powerful, that we should never underestimate their capacities nor undermine their abilities to shape the society we live in. They are the sectors of society wherein ideologies are tested and practiced; otherness is emphasized, and norms are manufactured, reconstructed, and perpetuated.

In the case of understanding the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Catholic Filipino gay men, as analyzed in this paper, the Catholic Church has identified the deviant-homosexual men. This deviant can then be examined, disciplined, and regulated through the means of problematizing his condition and using the Church's teachings and discourses in order to correct his *ailment*. Moreover, I also look at how the Catholic Filipino gay men are represented in the media, which shows how they employ discourses that still adhere to the norms and values of the Church. Also, I have provided certain examples on how individuals tend to withdraw from the Church but still find themselves not completely abandoning the rituals, traditions, and practices of the Catholic faith.

Thus, especially in the case of the Philippines, one cannot completely segregate sexuality and religion. For some forms of sexualities are better understood when juxtaposed with the existing dominant religious institution, such as the Roman Catholic Church. However, in the time of Filipino

ideological change (Martin, 2013), institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church tend to resist and reject the notions of acceptance and sexual diversity. Instead, they use guilt and aloofness in order to *fix* an identified *other* through the means of celibacy, sex-deprivation, and prayers. This attitude brings a very important point: in the age of social movements and change, an age when equality is constantly sought, implementing programs and ideologies that seek to undermine, subjugate, and marginalize a specific group by means of changing their characteristics to fit the norms of a certain society seem to be a drastic step backwards. Moreover, such attitude becomes an agent that refuels, mobilizes, and perpetuates discrimination, hatred, and stigmas against these marginalized communities, specifically, Catholic Filipino gay men.

At the end of the day, Catholic Filipino gay men still tend to practice their sexuality within the teachings of the Church, teachings that subtly impose prohibitions on how to perform their gender. However, due to the changes in ideologies and beliefs, these same men tend to challenge these teachings by demanding re-appropriation and reinterpretation of the scripture that may shape and reshape the ideologies and public opinions with regards to the issue of homosexuality in the predominantly Catholic, Philippines (Rodgers, 2013). They hope that through this, the Church will become an ally to promote respect for individual rights and acknowledge the existence of rich diversity; and if this happens, maybe through the mobilization of this re-appropriated and reinterpreted knowledge and discourse, the world will become a better place.

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