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DAVID T. BUCKLEY

# Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma

## Varieties of Public Religion in the Philippines

As representatives of public religion in a postauthoritarian setting, Catholic elites face a democratic dilemma: they exert social influence, but cannot control directly the outcomes of democratic politics. Catholic responses in the recent debate on reproductive health reveal diversity, even at the highest levels of the Philippine Catholic hierarchy. This article catalogues three distinct varieties of public Catholicism that respond to the democratic dilemma and identifies their impacts on the internal life of the church and on alliances between the church and other social actors. These dynamics are illustrated with an analysis of the reproductive health debate and its fallout in the 2013 elections.

**KEYWORDS: CATHOLIC CHURCH · DEMOCRACY · REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ACT · PUBLIC RELIGION**

**“W**hat happened to the Catholic vote?” The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* asked the question that was on many minds shortly after the 2013 Philippine elections (Uy 2013, A1). After years of acrimonious lobbying around versions of the reproductive health (RH) law, several contentious legislative votes, and weeks of high-profile Catholic campaigning against “Team Patay” (Team Death), Philippine voters had their say. The short-term effectiveness of Catholic campaigns against RH supporters, it would seem, was mixed as several nonetheless won electoral seats. But the RH debate has served to clarify a democratic dilemma facing the Catholic Church in the contemporary Philippines and beyond. The church has substantial social influence, yet struggles to turn that influence into a unified voice in political life. Catholic elites seem divided about how to play their part as what sociologist José Casanova (1994) has called a “public religion” in postauthoritarian politics.

Catholic leaders, like other religious elites, face a dilemma in entering democratic life. How can they play a role in public life when they neither directly command votes nor run for office themselves? Catholic conceptions of human dignity and the common good have drawn clerics into debates ranging from education and development policy to reproductive health. Under the extended papacy of John Paul II, global Catholicism took on renewed interest in public life, from opposition to communism to resistance to moral relativism. Catholic elites are unlikely to exit the public sphere. However, as Casanova (2001, 1047) argues, “We can speak confidently of the end of the era of Catholic parties, of the end of Christian democracy.” Vatican application of canon law proscribes clerics from holding elected office. Rare cases like that of Eddie “Among Ed” Panlilio do exist, but the democratic dilemma must be solved by some means other than putting clerics on the ballot. Without a direct hold on the levers of power, Catholic elites must consider alternative forms of public religion.

This democratic dilemma is a substantial shift from the place of Catholicism in the Philippines in the years around the People Power Revolution. When political scientist Samuel Huntington (1991, 76) noted that the “third wave of democracy” was “overwhelmingly a Catholic wave,” the Philippines was among his exemplars. Like Catholic communities in much of Latin America and under Communist rule in Eastern Europe, the Philippine Catholic Church, both at the heights of the hierarchy and

among grassroots ecclesial communities, played a public role in resisting authoritarianism and advocating democratic elections (Moreno 2006; Philpott 2004; Shirley 2004).

This clarity of purpose has proven elusive in the postauthoritarian era. Summing up the current situation, the Jesuit Antonio Moreno (2006, 245) says, “Beyond the transition, academic and popular interests in the church and democratization appear to dwindle.” Another Jesuit, John Carroll (2004, 75), has pointed out that Catholic elites face internal political differences that “cannot easily be overridden” as well as “a restlessness on the part of civil society with its tutelage by the church.”

The democratic dilemma extends beyond the Philippines. As Casanova (1994, 133) has stated in analyzing the Brazilian case,

The successful transition to democracy and the ensuing institutionalization of political society lead per force to a relative privatization of Catholicism. Everywhere, once the phase of consolidation of democracy begins, the church tends to withdraw from political society proper. . . . The political hour of a civil society, united in opposition to an authoritarian state, tends to come to an end.

Beyond the Catholic world, scholars of comparative democracy have paid increasing attention to the contentious impact of religion on democracy across South Asia, Africa, and even secularized Europe. The place of religion in democratic life has taken on special urgency in the ongoing turmoil of the Arab Awakening. Across these cases, a fundamental question stands out: after transitions to democracy, what role do religions assume in public life?

This article develops an answer to this question by setting out distinct varieties of public religion within Philippine Catholicism and tracing the outcomes of those political strategies over time. It focuses on the contemporary democratic dilemma of the Catholic Church in the Philippines and draws on comparative cases to illustrate dynamics similar to those in the Philippines. First, I situate the study in the context of recent research into religion and democratic politics. Second, I describe the study’s methodology, which blends concept formation with qualitative process tracing. Third, I move to the main theoretical framework within which I discuss conceptually the three varieties of public Catholicism and set out the impact of these strategic

choices, both within the church and in broader public life. Fourth, I illustrate this framework in the Philippines through an analysis of the RH debate and its ongoing fallout. Finally, I close with thoughts on the future of political Catholicism in the Philippines and the research necessary to understand this dynamic community.

### **Public Religion and Democratic Politics**

Whether in relation to reproductive health in the Philippines, alcohol regulation in Turkey, or employment discrimination laws in the European Union, what Casanova has termed the “deprivatization of religion” plays an unavoidable part in contemporary democracy. This rise of public religion caught many social scientists off guard. Advocates of modernization theory expected religion to fade from public life in modern democracy (Deutsch 1961; Lerner 1958). Instead, forces like the growth of Islam in Europe, the explosion of Pentecostalism in much of Africa, and the rise of Muslim political parties have put religion back on the agenda of scholars of democracy. The prominent role of the Catholic Church in the People Power Revolution was one important contributor to this burst of analysis. In this first stage of scholarship the key question was whether religious communities supported democracy or sided with authoritarian rule. Scholars debated what drove religious resistance to dictatorship (Kunkler and Leininger 2009; Philpott 2007).

Once it became clear that religious movements would occupy public roles in newly democratic countries from Poland to Indonesia, scholars turned to a second line of inquiry: could religion threaten democratic politics? One group of scholars has examined whether the political participation of Muslim political parties leads to their moderation over time (Wickham 2004; Schwedler 2006; Driessen 2012). Their nuanced research has identified conditions that encourage participation of Islamist parties and alliances with more secular social actors. A second group has collected comparative evidence that democracy does not require the strict exclusion of religion from public life, but rather what Alfred Stepan (2000) has called the “twin tolerations” between religion and state. Among Stepan’s (*ibid.*, 39) insights, one stands out: democracy requires that state elites tolerate the right of religious citizens to exercise religion in private and “to advance their views *publicly* in civil society.” Democracies at least must be open to the rise of public religion. Taken together, this scholarship demonstrates that

public religion can coexist with democratic politics. It raises an important subsequent question: what precise form will this public religion take in democratic life?

In many ways recent scholarship on the Philippines raises similar questions regarding the future of public Catholicism. Religion’s public role in the Philippines, from independence to the present day, has never dropped from view in scholarship ranging from labor organizations (Fabros 1988), state–society relations (Abinales and Amoroso 2005; Ileto 1998), to grassroots ecclesial communities (Nadeau 2002). An array of research has documented changes in the Catholic hierarchy’s response to the Marcos regime, from tacit consent to more active opposition (Youngblood 1990; Moreno 2006). Scholars have paid attention to divisions within the Catholic Church over how to assume its public role (Carroll 2004), the impact of charismatic movements on the church’s place in democracy (Kessler and Rüland 2008), and the contentious process by which Catholic actors come to speak “in the name of civil society” (Hedman 2006). On the whole this scholarship demonstrates the undeniably public role of Catholicism in Philippine democracy and also highlights the importance of tensions within the Catholic Church and between the church and other social actors. This article takes up one source of those tensions internal and external to the church: the form of public religion put into practice by Catholic elites.

Recent scholarship also indicates that even a quarter century after the People Power Revolution, Catholic elites remain divided over what form public religion should take in Philippine democracy. Moreno (2006, 274) points out significant divisions within individual dioceses over the public role of the postauthoritarian church and closes by speculating that “a looming public retrenchment” may characterize the future of public Catholicism. Anne Raffin and Jayeel Cornelio (2009, 779) argue that a framework of “institutional panic” drives a “need to search for new identities” on the part of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso (2005, 268) point out that the Catholic hierarchy has been “increasingly unable to mobilize” wide swaths of the working classes for its public goals. Enrique Niño Leviste (2011, 12) rightly links this outcome to democratization itself, which “occasioned the surfacing of groups that can impede efforts to strengthen Church hegemony.” Survey data indicate a waning of religious attendance among Catholics, a finding that indicates “a shift in what it means to be Catholic in Philippine society today” (Cornelio

2013). If public Catholicism in the Philippines has reached an inflection point, two research tasks take on great importance: documenting the political strategies available to Catholic elites and exploring the long term consequences of those strategies both within and outside of the church.

These tasks dovetail with the major questions facing comparative scholarship. First, as Casanova (2008, 108) phrases the challenge, what “forms of deprivatization” have characterized religious politics in the decades after authoritarian rule? Second, what impact do distinct varieties of public religion have on longer-term tensions within religious communities and between the church and other social spheres? Taking up these questions is of importance both to scholarship on Catholicism in the Philippines and, as a contribution of Philippine studies, to comparative debates on religion and democracy.

## **Methodology**

To address these questions concerning public Catholicism, this study adopts a two-step methodological approach. First, concept formation distinguishes three varieties of public religion. These concepts ground a second stage of analysis: tracing effects that these distinct varieties of public religion have on political life.

Concept formation is a cornerstone of social science. This study builds on political scientist Giovanni Sartori’s (1970, 1041) advice to move “down the ladder of abstraction” in specifying a political concept “by augmenting its attributes or properties.” This kind of concept formation is valuable for its own sake, as it allows scholars to categorize the political world precisely. As Robert Adcock and David Collier (2001, 532) point out, “background concepts routinely include a variety of meanings” so that more systematized concepts are necessary to accurately assess politics. “Public religion” is one such background concept that requires specification. If Casanova is correct in saying that various “forms of deprivatization” coexist in modern democracies, moving down the ladder of abstraction to specify these forms is a central research task, both for the Philippines and beyond. The concepts set out below are new terms based in part on Casanova’s extensive writing on public religion.

From this conceptual foundation, the study then moves to identify the effects of distinct varieties of public religion on long-term political outcomes. To isolate these effects, I engage in what political scientists term “process

tracing,” that is, “the technique of looking for the observable implications of hypothesized causal processes within a single case” (Bennett 2008, 705). As Collier (2011) points out, “sequencing” is particularly important to this approach. For example, one documents when a leader adopts a political strategy and then traces the impacts that follow from that decision. In the empirical analysis of the Philippines, the main sequencing centers on Catholic responses to the RH debate. By first documenting the forms of Catholic public religion, it is then possible to trace its subsequent effects both within the Catholic Church and on related social sectors.

A final methodological note is in order regarding the study’s level of analysis. While I occasionally refer to decisions of “the Catholic Church,” the argument is largely centered on elites, including members of the Catholic hierarchy, leaders within religious orders, and lay leaders who interact with politicians on an official basis. The elite focus means that empirical evidence comes from official statements of bodies like the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), public debates in national legislatures, and newspaper reporting. The elite focus does raise important questions about the links between national Catholic leaders and individual Catholic opinion and behavior. The study begins to grapple with linkages between elite behavior and the general public in its glimpse at public opinion data in the Philippines. However, in the interest of maintaining analytical focus, the evidence presented from the Philippines and the comparative cases are largely elite driven. As discussed in the conclusion, linking these elite dynamics to mass political behavior is one future avenue of research.

## **Public Religions and their Effects**

### **Conceptualizing Public Religion**

A number of comparative studies of the Catholic Church’s relationship to democratic politics (Manuel et al. 2006; Hagopian 2009; Whyte 1981) and of political Catholicism in the Philippines (Moreno 2006; Carroll 2004) set the stage for the systematic examination of contemporary Catholic public religion. Casanova’s (1994, 1996, 2001, 2008) research provides an essential foundation for understanding the options open to Catholic elites. In the concept formation that follows I draw on this research to give a formal description of three distinct varieties of public Catholicism. For each variety, a distinct set of advocacy goals and characteristic patterns of political rhetoric

are identified. Each type of public Catholicism is then described in some depth and illustrated with a brief case study from outside of the Philippines.

A first variety of public Catholicism, *democratic preservation*, puts the church's public resources into strengthening institutions of democracy rather than policy lobbying. This strategy, in many ways, is an extension of Catholic efforts to promote transitions to democracy in the last decades of the twentieth century. Even after democratic transitions, there is still ample room for religious elites to play a part in "the definitive consolidation of democratic regimes" (Casanova 1996, 357). Advocacy centers on combatting corruption, ensuring fair voting procedures, and transparent campaign financing. At election time, this approach highlights voter registration and election monitoring. In its strictest form the democratic preservation model is agnostic about who actually wins elections; its advocates only care that the elections are free and fair. The rhetoric of democratic preservation stresses the purity of political institutions and the protection of an inclusively defined civil society from state coercion. Public religion speaks, in Casanova's (*ibid.*, 366) words, to "defend the very right of a democratic civil society to exist." The CBCP statements on elections tend to adopt this position in formal statements, as do networks such as the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) and the National Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel). As Eva-Lotta Hedman (2006) has documented in detail, this form of public Catholicism predates the Marcos regime and continues to exist in the postauthoritarian context.

To give a comparative illustration, public Catholicism in Senegal draws heavily on democratic preservation. Although Senegal is a Muslim-majority country, Catholics play an important role in public life, particularly in strengthening democratic politics (Diouf 2001). Catholic advocacy centers on electoral accountability, and rhetoric raises themes of accountability and inclusivity. Examples abound in recent elections. The Catholic Bishops of Senegal called for "transparent, peaceful and democratic elections" in 1998 (Eveques 2005, 203). In the contentious 2007 election Cardinal Adrien Sarr joined with Abdoul Aziz Sy al-Ibn, a leading Muslim cleric, to endorse a Pacte Républicain (Republican Pact) that called for responsible governance. The 2012 elections, which included a sometimes-violent campaign between incumbent Pres. Abdoulaye Wade and the challenger, Macky Sall, continued this pattern. Abbé Jacques Seck, who heads the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace, called for "free, equitable and transparent elections" and

joined with other Catholic associations like the Scouts to mobilize election observers throughout the country, deploying 850 members over nearly three thousand polling places (Kaly 2013). The combination of calling for good governance and mobilizing election monitors epitomizes the democratic preservation strategy.

A second approach to public Catholicism, *comprehensive mobilization*, is rooted in a broad Catholic social agenda and pursues a diverse policy agenda coupled with universalistic rhetoric that instructs policymakers on the protection of human dignity. Catholicism here resolves the democratic dilemma by adopting a diverse advocacy agenda through both elite and grassroots organizations. This agenda solidified itself at the Second Vatican Council and subsequently in documents from national bishops' conferences ranging from the pastoral letters of the American Catholic bishops, such as *Economic Justice for All* (US Conference of Catholic Bishops 1997), to various documents from the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano regarding poverty and economic inequality. This agenda also includes, in part, the legal promotion of traditional Catholic views of marriage and abortion, which is one among many priorities tied to protecting human dignity. Rhetoric associated with this variety of public religion stresses universalistic values and instructs (presumably sympathetic) political elites on the protection of the common good. With this approach Catholic authorities, in Casanova's (1996, 356) words, "assum[e] the vacant role of spokes[people] for humanity, for the sacred dignity of the human person, for world peace, and for a more fair division of labor and power in the world system." Comprehensive mobilization is a strong tradition within the post-Marcos church in the Philippines, as indicated by the attention paid by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines to the Church of the Poor and its diverse political implications (Bacani 2005). Jose Abueva (1997, 43) has pointed out that the CBCP statements in the years after the People Power Revolution raised issues as diverse as the death penalty, urban housing, and oil prices.

Public religion closely resembles comprehensive mobilization in contemporary Mexico. Advocacy from the Mexican bishops ranges widely; it includes respect for human rights, humane development, and human life. Frances Hagopian (2009) estimates that the Mexican hierarchy referenced themes of social justice roughly twice as regularly from 2000 to 2005 as issues like abortion and gay marriage. Various forms of grassroots religious organizing, particularly through basic ecclesial communities (*comunidades eclesiales de*

base or CEBs), have placed the diverse social needs of the Mexican poor on the Catholic political agenda. Bishop José Raúl Vera López of Saltillo has garnered international attention for his opposition to organized crime and the corruption that has allowed crime to flourish (Sherman 2012). Matters of democratic preservation are one part of the comprehensive agenda of the Mexican hierarchy. Statements from the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano have consistently decried corruption and played a central role in preserving trust in the democratic process during the contentious 2006 election (Camp 2008). The comprehensive strategy also includes lobbying in relation to topics like abortion and marriage policy. Mexico City's Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera has strongly resisted gay marriage proposals from the city's government (Grillo 2010). However, the church's public presence is much broader than issues of sexuality and gender.

Finally, Catholic elites more recently have developed public Catholicism as *defensive reaction*. This form of public religion responds to the democratic dilemma by prioritizing a policy agenda based on threats to the church and applies substantial public pressure on this limited set of issues. Changing views of gender are especially threatening “not only to [Catholic] religious traditions and their moral authoritative claims, but to the very idea of a sacred or divinely ordained natural order” (Casanova 2012, 131–32). In concrete policy these challenges frequently take the form of removing certain elements of Catholic social thought from civil law. This approach is especially true of Catholic teaching related to the family, abortion policy, and regulation of divorce. The rhetoric of defensive reaction places emphasis on threats to the church from secularism and makes appeals that are more exclusively geared for Catholic ears. As Casanova (2001, 1048) describes this approach, public religion mobilizes “in defense of the traditional life-world,” particularly against threats to Catholic teaching regarding gender and the family. As detailed below, much of the CBCP’s reaction to the RH law fell into the category of defensive reaction.

In Ireland in the 1980s public Catholicism took the form of defensive reaction in response to challenges to Catholic influence over family and reproductive law. The flashpoints in these debates were a 1983 referendum on abortion’s legal status and a 1986 referendum on divorce. These votes came as the unquestioned dominance of the Irish Catholic Church began to waver and what Irish sociologist Tom Inglis (1998) called the “moral monopoly” of Catholicism showed early signs of weakness. In preparation

for the 1983 abortion referendum, large-scale, lay-led Catholic mobilization took place through the Pro-Life Amendment Committee (Dillon 1993). Although the Catholic bishops as a whole never ordered a vote in either referendum, there was extensive campaigning in local pulpits and individual bishops were more explicit in their endorsements. The Sunday before the 1983 vote, Archbishop Dermot Ryan of Dublin issued a pastoral letter lobbying the faithful, which was read throughout his diocese (Inglis 1998, 84). In the short run the strategy seemed successful. The church won both votes, over abortion in 1983 and divorce in 1986. However, the church lost the debate over divorce in a second referendum less than a decade later and currently finds its influence over abortion policy under serious doubt.

Table 1 summarizes these distinct varieties of public religion. Although they share some features of post–Second Vatican Council Catholicism, notably lay Catholic leadership, they are conceptually distinct responses to the dilemma of democratic politics.

**Table 1. Varieties of public Catholicism in democratic politics**

STRATEGY	ADVOCACY GOALS	CHARACTERISTIC RHETORIC
Democratic Preservation	Strengthen institutions of democracy, especially elections	Purity of political institutions; Protection of inclusive civil society
Comprehensive Mobilization	Broad agenda of Catholic social thought; Relatively equal attention to spectrum of goals	Instructing sympathetic elites; Universalistic appeals
Defensive Reaction	Protect select church interests, particularly related to family and sexuality	Perceived threats from secularism; Exclusivist appeals

### Tracing the Effects of Public Catholicisms

The three varieties of public Catholicism come with implications for the future relationship between the church and democracy. As Casanova (1996, 368) has put it, the “bishops’ interventions” are likely to bring “unintended effects” both interior and exterior to the Catholic Church. In this section I set out the impacts of distinct varieties of public Catholicism in two areas: internal patterns of lay mobilization and external partnerships with civil society and political parties.

The first, internal area in which varieties of public religion shape Catholic life concerns patterns of lay Catholic mobilization. Democratic preservation encourages lay networks that are focused on the technical work of poll observation and voter registration. These associations are less focused on policy than those formed under comprehensive or defensive mobilization. In Senegal the focus on elections has built up a network of local activists, known as *Présence Chrétienne*, which promotes civic engagement and good governance throughout the country. This group regularly coordinates with other Catholic networks like the Scouts to engage lay Catholics in the work of strengthening democracy. This approach requires a high degree of discipline, as lay associations pushing policy-based issue agendas, whether on the left or right, can undercut the impartiality required to serve as an objective arbiter of democratic disputes. Centralized religious structures can provide this discipline and effectively limit religious voices undercutting efforts to stabilize democracy.

Comprehensive mobilization promotes pluralized lay associations. Because Catholic social thought puts such a wide variety of policy issues on the public agenda, lay movements proliferate, with Catholic advocacy ranging from traditional marriage to land reform and environmental protection. Some lay movements operate at the elite level, shaping policy through the direct advocacy of legislators. Existing at the grassroots are other movements that organize communities for localized priorities. Grassroots Catholic associations in Mexico bring a wide array of policy priorities to public life, from agricultural policy to minority language rights, and pressure local bishops to reflect these diverse concerns in public life (Trejo 2009). This pluralization has strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, there are ample opportunities for diverse actors to find voices in public debates. On the other hand, comprehensive mobilization may struggle to find a unified message in public debates. Self-described Catholic groups may even find themselves on opposite poles of policy questions.

Defensive Catholicism promotes narrowly focused, competitive lay associations that are responsive to the threats to core Catholic interests. Lay movements frame themselves as defenders of the faith rather than advocates of a proactive social agenda. Over time defensive Catholicism increases competition among Catholic associations. In Ireland during the defensive period, the Pro-Life Amendment Committee sharply attacked Catholics who disagreed with its mobilization. As Marcus Tanner (2001, 391) observed,

"It was not the Protestants but liberal or secular Catholics who emerged from the referendum with the biggest grudge." Advocates of the defensive strategy see Catholic movements with a comprehensive approach as naïve about the threats posed to the church and perhaps even complicit in the secular assault on church interests. Lay movements in this model may be highly dedicated—scholars of religious movements frequently argue that competition fosters religious commitment (Finke and Stark 1998)—but they will be limited in scope.

In addition to these impacts within the Catholic Church, the variety of public religion shapes alliances outside the church. Democratic preservation builds lasting partnerships with a specialized portion of civil society, while isolating the church from political parties. Strengthening democratic institutions draws Catholic elites into enduring alliances with civil society organizations that advocate against corruption and in favor of government transparency. In Senegal this alliance building showed through in preparations for the 2012 elections when Catholic groups worked with the Assises Nationales, a coalition dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions. *Présence Chrétienne* (2011) also joined with Muslim partners and secular NGOs in a series of workshops on topics such as electoral transparency. These "good-governance" organizations are only one small slice of civil society, but church activists are integral parts of these coalitions. In elections democratic preservation requires a high degree of nonpartisanship as church elites must maintain public credibility. Partisan involvement can only arise if one party is itself weakening democratic institutions.

Comprehensive mobilization embeds Catholic elites in civil-society alliances that are temporary and regularly renegotiated. Catholics will participate alongside activists from other faith communities and secular civil society organizations on a fluid basis. In Mexico, policy areas like land reform and human rights protection bring church groups into close alliances with other civil society organizations. In other areas, such as opposition to gay marriage, the church finds fewer allies in civil society. Because the political agenda of the comprehensive approach is so broad, the church is less likely to become involved in electoral politics. Parties will struggle to satisfy the whole scope of the Catholic social tradition, and even parties that disagree with the church in some areas are likely to support its initiatives in others. For example, although Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has an anticlerical history, its current leader, Pres. Enrique Peña Nieto, has

made a public show of his faith, and divisions between Catholic and secular voters are less sharp than in the past (Magaloni and Moreno 2003).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast defensive public religion isolates the Catholic Church from other actors in civil society and instead draws the church into political alliances. Defensive reaction routinely brings the church into conflict with secular actors in civil society, particularly those tied to women's health and gay rights communities. Many of these civil society groups would have been allies of Catholic elites in opposition to authoritarian rule, but differ sharply from the church in democratic policy priorities. In Ireland defensive fights over divorce and abortion policy have swelled into a religious–secular divide over policy areas like education reform and employment nondiscrimination laws. This division culminated in high-profile diplomatic spats between Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Vatican authorities (Buckley 2011). Because the church's agenda is comparatively limited, it is easy for political parties or politicians to portray themselves as “pro-church” and thus worthy of support in election season. Some politicians portray themselves as the most loyal to the limited church agenda, while others gain support through explicitly antireligious appeals.

Table 2 summarizes the long-term outcomes of the three varieties of public Catholicism. There are diverse strategies for exercising voice within consolidated democracies, each of which has distinct impacts on the future of public religion. The comparative snapshots show that the choices facing the Catholic Church in the Philippines confront Catholic elites on a much broader scale.

### **The RH Debate and the Democratic Dilemma in the Philippines**

Recent debates in the Philippines over the RH legislation embodied the democratic dilemma. Democratic politics put an issue on the legislative agenda that divided the CBCP from many in civil society. Advocates in the women's movement and development NGOs lobbied hard for the bill. Even other faith communities that sometimes share the CBCP's social conservatism, such as the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC), endorsed the proposed legislation. Public opinion polls showed support for passage even among Catholics, and groups of Catholic scholars from the Ateneo de Manila University and De La Salle University spoke out against the CBCP's opposition. After several contested votes, President

**Table 2. The effects of varieties of public Catholicism**

STRATEGY	INTERNAL OUTCOMES	EXTERNAL OUTCOMES
Democratic Preservation	Specialized, limited Catholic associations	Strong, but narrow, civil society alliances; Limited partisan ties
Comprehensive Mobilization	Pluralism of Catholic associations	Fluid civil society alliances; Limited partisan ties
Defensive Reaction	Competition among Catholic associations	Civil society tensions; Partisan alliances

Aquino signed the legislation into law in the closing days of 2012. Resistance to the law continued, both in the elections of 2013 and in the Supreme Court. In April 2014 the court issued its ruling, which upheld the law as “not unconstitutional” even as it struck down some provisions.

While the RH law's final implementation is ongoing, the course of this debate provides the opportunity to test the conceptual framework set out in the previous section. What form did public Catholicism take in this debate? And what implications did it have for the future of religion and Philippine democracy?

The most conspicuous high-profile response appeared as banners hanging from the San Sebastian Cathedral in Bacolod City. These banners famously declared certain politicians and political parties to be members of “Team Patay” (Team Death) or “Team Buhay” (Team Life). Similar tactics, whether of explicit or implicit partisan endorsement, seized media attention and caused many to debate the existence of a Catholic vote. However, the opponents of Team Patay were not the only Catholic voices in the RH debate. In fact the three strategies of public Catholicism coexisted to an extent. In the sections that follow I document how these strategies responded to the RH debate and trace the early fallout from the strategy that received the most media attention: the defensive reaction of those who spoke of Team Buhay/Patay.

### **Documenting Public Catholicism**

Catholic elites in the Philippines understandably have been internally diverse, and so all three of the democratic strategies outlined above coexisted

in the RH debate. Still, as the bill moved to its crucial votes in the legislature, public Catholicism generally took the form of defensive reaction. Advocates of the defensive approach focused not on the particulars of the legislation but on the broader threat posed to core values of life, family, and religious freedom. This pattern of critique continued once the proposed legislation was signed into law in the closing days of 2012. Opponents argued consistently that the law would serve as a step to abortion access, despite reassurances from some legislation advocates. As then CBCP vice president Archbishop Socrates Villegas (2012) wrote on behalf of the conference's leadership, "a contraceptive mentality is the mother of an abortion mentality." Likewise, rhetoric from opponents framed the RH debate as a threat to religious liberty: "By obligating the conscientious objector to make the referral, the Bill effectively forces him to become a party to what his beliefs may consider to be a sinful act, a violation of his religious rights" (CBCP-ECFL 2012). Rhetoric in that document struck defensive tones, arguing that the proposed legislation "trampled" on the religious liberties of citizens. Believing that core values like the protection of life and religious liberty were under assault, the advocates of defensive reaction rejected compromise efforts in order to preserve the purity of their opposition.

For those advocating this approach, the RH law posed a direct threat to core church interests, and so losing the legislative battle would be more than a simple policy defeat. The RH law posed such a fundamental threat that it forced the church to adopt the rhetoric of threat and resistance. In this vein, then CBCP president Archbishop José Palma argued that the RH law would be "a product of despotism" rather than true democracy (Esguerra 2012). Archbishop Villegas insisted that "the tyranny of numbers" would not deter church activism (Aquino and Namit 2012, 16). Bishop Gabriel Reyes, chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Family and Life (ECFL), went so far as to imply that President Aquino "may become a threat to the country's democracy" if similar tactics continued in the future (*ibid.*). The language of tyranny and despotism was a sure sign of the defensive posture. It recalled the church's opposition to authoritarian rule, when public engagement resulted in significant victories for the church.

Although the defensive strategy dominated coverage of the RH law, other Catholic elites pushed a strategy closer to comprehensive mobilization. These Catholic voices engaged the RH debate without the full-throated condemnation that came from many within the CBCP. Some Catholics, notably faculty

members from Ateneo de Manila and De La Salle universities, argued in favor of the bill by appealing to values of social justice, gender equality, and public health characteristic of the comprehensive approach.<sup>2</sup> Prominent Catholic clerics, particularly the Jesuits Joaquin Bernas and Eric Genilo, spent extended periods in negotiations with the bill's architects that resulted in some changes in the legislation. When the 2013 elections approached, this variety of public Catholicism avoided the rhetoric of Team Patay/Buhay. Archbishop Antonio Ledesma's (2013, 1) statement before the 2013 elections emphasized an array of policy stances and personal qualities that should be evaluated by Catholics engaged in "principled partisan politics." Father Bernas (2012) explicitly contrasted his preferred form of public Catholicism from the defensive reaction of many in the Catholic leadership: "Such a tactic is counter-productive to the formation of a kind of politics that is based on principles because it reinforces a way of practicing politics that values expediency rather than service, justice and the common good."

In addition to those advocating the comprehensive approach, democratic preservation also showed through in public Catholicism, becoming especially visible as the 2013 election approached. Archbishop Palma sounded the priorities and rhetoric of democratic preservation when he worried that the electronic voting systems were vulnerable to "wholesale cheating" and that "the integrity of a pillar of our democracy—the election—is at stake" (Aquino 2013, 6). At the grassroots level the PPCRV mobilized over 300,000 members to monitor the polls (Tubeza 2013). The CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Youth organized rallies for peaceful elections across the country, while the Jesuits' Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan (SLB) staffed a call center to dispense impartial electoral information (Mocon 2013). At the local level the Interfaith Forum for Solidarity and Peace in Pagadian City condemned election-related violence and urged citizens to remain "calm for the sake of an orderly, peaceful, credible and meaningful conduct of election" (Salomon 2013). These groups pursued the health of democracy as their top advocacy goal and understood that doing so meant avoiding direct advocacy tied to the RH law. As PPCRV chair Henrietta de Villa put it in an interview with the *Inquirer*, "We are nonpartisan. If others want to go the extra step and [endorse] candidates, they are free to do so" (Tubeza 2013).

The fallout from the RH debate shows divisions among Filipino Catholics not only on the substance of the bill but also on how to respond to the democratic dilemma. In this particular instance, the defensive posture

came to dominate media coverage of the CBCP, although other strategies in fact coexisted. It remains to be seen whether the outcome of that debate will bring consensus within the CBCP on the future shape of public Catholicism.

### Outcomes of Defensive Catholicism

Is there any indication that the defensive form of public religion that predominated during the RH debate will have lasting implications for the place of Catholicism in Philippine democracy? Time will tell; it is still early to assess lasting impacts. However, there is evidence that the defensive strategy has left its mark, along with the internal and external effects discussed in the previous conceptual section.

Externally, defensive public religion can be expected to strain relationships with secular civil society groups and in the process drive Catholic elites to partisan political alliances. In light of the RH bill debate the relationships of Catholic elites with many civil society groups, particularly those in the women's movement, have become quite strained.<sup>3</sup> Secular NGOs that are engaged in economic development and public health work also largely supported the legislation and ran counter to official Catholic lobbying. As Leviste (2011, 244) has documented at length, pro-RH groups within civil society mobilized "intense resistance" to Catholic advocacy, with effects that may outlast this particular policy debate. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that the CBCP found itself isolated from traditional allies in the interfaith community. Both the PCEC and the National Council of Churches of the Philippines came out in favor of the legislation, as did Muslim civic associations. Bishop Efraim Tendero of the PCEC explicitly framed the RH bill as "pro-life" (Silverio 2012).

With few civil society allies, defensive strategists looked for political supporters. In the wake of the RH bill's passage, Catholic clerics and lay associations took part in widespread electoral endorsements. Most famously, the Team Patay/Buhay banners were hung first in Bacolod City and then in different forms in other dioceses. The White Vote Movement united an array of Catholic associations, particularly Bro. Mike Velarde's El Shaddai movement, to give endorsements to candidates and parties who pledged opposition to the law. Some members of the hierarchy followed suit. Reports documented similar endorsements at the grassroots level (Esguerra and Romulo 2013). This pattern of partisan endorsement is a predictable

outcome of the defensive strategy. Because this strategy prioritizes a narrow Catholic agenda, it is easier for political candidates to meet with church approval and appear worthy of endorsement. For as long as the defensive strategy dominates, this kind of partisan involvement is likely to continue. Archbishop Ramon Arguelles has already expressed his determination to build a more effective "Catholic vote" in the future: "We will not give up" (Rufo 2013).

In addition to these external effects, there is evidence that, internally, defensive Catholicism resulted in mobilization of competitive lay organizations with narrow political agendas. As already documented, there was mass mobilization through the White Vote Movement and associated groups like Catholic Vote Philippines. It is important to note, however, that this kind of competitive, limited mobilization promoted rivalry and tensions among Catholic associations. There was controversy about attempts to recruit volunteers away from the PPCRV and channel them to partisan electoral efforts (Tubeza 2013). The RH bill opponents publicly denounced fellow Catholics who took supportive positions on the bill (Esmaquel II 2012). These attacks were particularly sharp when directed at Catholic faculty members at Ateneo de Manila and De La Salle who defended the bill and Catholic legislators who supported it like Risa Hontiveros (Esguerra and Salaverria 2013). Even within the White Vote coalition there was disagreement over which candidates deserved Catholic support. Rep. Lito Atienza, who secured a seat through the Buhay party list, admitted, "We fought as allies, but the reality was we [divided] the vote" (Esguerra and Tubeza 2013, A13). John Carlos "JC" de los Reyes, senatorial candidate of the pro-life Ang Kapatiran Party, was blunt in his criticism: "If you're prolific, you are prolific across the board. . . . And Mike Velarde isn't like that. You can quote me on that" (*ibid.*, A13). This is precisely the sort of internal rivalry, even among supposed Catholic allies, that defensive reaction inadvertently encourages when it enters the electoral arena.

A second, subtler effect of defensive reaction may be on popular support for the church's voice in public life. Adopting the defensive strategy seems to distance CBCP elites from popular opinion.<sup>4</sup> This difference is not simply over the RH law but over the quasi-partisan stance that accompanies defensive public Catholicism. Data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) show that Filipino Catholics are not supportive of religious officials who influence voting (ISSP Research Group 2008).

Most importantly, Filipino Catholics who are *most religious* are actually *least supportive* of religious influence on elections. Regular mass attendees are less supportive of religion in elections than nonregular attendees, and those who describe themselves as very religious are less supportive than those who do not describe themselves as such. Table 3 summarizes these data. While CBCP leaders should not necessarily let public opinion set their agenda, there is a risk that turning to electoral politics weakens their legitimacy. A developing body of research from the United States indicates that the explosion of the American “Religious Right” is partially responsible for a drop in religiosity among younger Americans (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Only time will tell if the defensive strategy may alienate some of the most devout Filipinos.

It is too early for a final assessment of the long-term impact of the RH debates. Some of these effects may be mitigated by the fact that many bishops seem uncomfortable with the defensive variety of public religion, particularly as it relates to elections. Based on the initial evidence set out above, this form of public religion could come with broad implications, both within the church and for its place in public life.

**Table 3. Catholic public opinion and religious education involvement**

GROUP	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement, “Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections”?	
	STRONGLY AGREE/AGREE	DISAGREE/STRONGLY DISAGREE
All Filipino Catholics	69 %	20 %
Weekly Mass Attender	71.2 %	19.2 %
Less than Weekly Mass Attender	67.4 %	20.2 %
Considers self “Very Religious”	72.1 %	17.6 %
Considers self less than “Very Religious”	68 %	20.8 %

Source: Data from the International Social Survey Program's *Religion III* module. Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to missing responses.

## Conclusion: The Future of Public Catholicism

Catholicism’s democratic dilemma will not disappear, either in the Philippines or on a global scale. So long as democracy empowers free citizens to elect public officials who craft state policy, the Catholic Church will continue to face a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, it exerts substantial influence, both by shaping voting behavior and by lobbying legislators. On the other hand, that influence can be fleeting and may frequently end in defeat, even on issues that matter deeply to Catholic elites. Acceptance that democracy is the only game in town implies accepting what Adam Przeworski (1991, 14) has called “institutionalizing uncertainty” in democratic politics.

This article contends that three distinct varieties of public religion may address this dilemma. While each of the three approaches is consistent with post–Second Vatican Council political theology, they come with quite different advocacy agendas and rhetorical patterns. They also bring significantly different implications both within the church and for alliances with other social actors. The defensive approach lays the groundwork for a competitive and narrow Catholic community, with fewer allies among civil society organizations. Comprehensive mobilization promotes a pluralized, somewhat unfocused public face for Catholicism, while democratic preservation focuses Catholic attention primarily on the basic functioning of democratic institutions.

At this point, Catholic elites in the Philippines seem unsure of which strategy best fulfills the church’s public mission. The RH debate saw each of the three approaches coexist to an extent, and there is certain to be further debate within the CBCP about the fallout from the Team Patay/Buhay elections. The Supreme Court’s ruling has given some finality to the law, but discussions over what the episode means for the church’s public role are sure to continue. This debate comes at a transition within the Philippine Catholic leadership, as senior clerics who played prominent roles during the People Power Revolution and the 1986 Constitutional Commission yield leadership to younger members of the hierarchy. Similarly, the post–People Power politicians have their own expectations about Catholicism’s place in a secular democracy.

For scholars of religion in Philippine politics, this period of transition provides several opportunities for research. First, it will remain vitally important to track debates *within* the Catholic community. While media

reports tend to lump “the bishops” into one political camp, the RH debate has provided yet more evidence that this simply is not the case. Even at the highest levels of the hierarchy, there were visible differences in the responses to the law’s passage; paying attention to these differences will be crucial in making sense of the church’s future choices. Moreover, as Catholic voices continue to pluralize, through grassroots ecclesial communities, charismatic Catholic movements of various sorts, and even interfaith dialogue groups, the voice of public Catholicism will be even more diverse. Because of its growth, the charismatic Catholic movement is likely to play an especially important part in influencing the future political course of Philippine Catholicism. Tracking the diverse components of Catholic leadership is a central task in determining how the church responds to the democratic dilemma in the coming years.

Second, how do elite decisions about the public form of religion impact views of religion and politics among average Filipinos? Public opinion played an important part in the RH debates, with supporters of the law routinely pointing out that surveys showed support for elements of the legislation to be high even among observant Catholics. Survey data from the ISSP discussed in this article show that the Catholic laity is quite uncomfortable with religious leaders getting involved in elections. As new data become available from the ISSP as well as local public opinion polling institutes like the Social Weather Stations, scholars will have the opportunity to see how public opinion responds to the recent injection of religion into electoral politics.

Finally, how do international trends in Catholic doctrine and practice shape the nature of public Catholicism in the Philippines? Decisions from the Vatican obviously impact the Philippines, inspiring lay movements and determining appointments to the hierarchy. Pope John Paul II played a unique role in supporting democratization, while Pope Benedict XVI’s regular references to “aggressive secularism” encouraged a more defensive approach to Catholic public religion. Pope Francis seems to be recharting the public form of Catholicism in favor of comprehensive mobilization, although only time will tell. International influence also comes through religious and secular civil society groups that make their living by advocating “culture war” issues on the international stage. International pro-life and women’s health organizations played a significant role in stoking the RH controversy, and similar international influences are likely to shape the future place of Catholicism in Philippine democracy.

The RH debate clarifies the dilemma facing Catholic elites in modern democracies, both in the Philippines and abroad. A half century after the Second Vatican Council cemented Catholic support for democracy and a quarter century after People Power forever changed the place of Catholicism in Philippine public life, Catholic leaders face choices about what variety of public religion to assume in democratic life. Their decisions will reverberate widely, both within the Philippine church and throughout the society that the church seeks to serve.

## Notes

- 1 Recent divisions between the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and the Mexican hierarchy have become quite tense and could promote among Catholic elites a turn to the defensive strategy. For now the comprehensive agenda of Catholic elites limits partisan attachments from church associations.
- 2 The efforts of Catholic scholars at the Ateneo de Manila and De La Salle universities explicitly endorsing the RH law are detailed elsewhere in this special issue.
- 3 This dynamic predates the RH debate and stretches back (at least) to debates over the Magna Carta for Women, which also divided the CBCP from women’s organizations. I thank Eleanor Dionisio for alerting me to the longer history of relations between the CBCP and women’s organizations in the Philippines.
- 4 A number of well-documented, if occasionally controversial, surveys from the Social Weather Stations (2010) found fairly strong support for the key components of the RH law, even among Catholics who attend church regularly.

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