

**PROBLEMATIZING THE “NEW NORMAL”:
PROLEGOMENON TO (POST)
PANDEMIC THEOLOGIZING**

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As a prolegomenon to post-pandemic theologizing, this article critically examines the notion of the “normal” as is currently employed in socio-cultural and political discourses. By confronting it with the philosophical normalization process in Michel Foucault, it intends to unmask disciplinary power inherent in discursive formations used in Duterte’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. From medieval exclusionary-segregation approaches to social diseases like leprosy in pursuit of a “pure” community, Foucault observes the shift to bureaucratic surveillance through quarantine (and panopticon) as modern approaches to plagues, crime, and other social problems. The modern solution was more benign but equally disciplinary. In this article, I argue that Duterte’s present approach is a regression to the medieval program of “cleaning” society where people who do not conform to his social vision—the sick, dissenters, drug addicts, etc.—are banished from society. Consistent with his populist rhetoric, society has been divided into “us” versus “them” to the detriment of the poor and the vulnerable. A post-pandemic theology not cognizant of this disciplinary power is at best naïve and at worst harmful to theological reflection and the Christian community.

INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many books and articles have been published on the relationship between theology and the “new normal.” These are the questions that beset the pastoral and theological mind. How do we do theology in the new normal? How shall we understand the sacraments in the context of the pandemic? What is the image of the Church in the new normal? The objective of this article is to problematize the

“new normal” discourse. What does it mean to be normal? What are the strategies in society’s normalization process? As a prolegomenon, these questions first need to be settled before we can proceed to theological reflection. I will divide this essay into four sections: (1) the contemporary discourse of the “new normal”; (2) theorizing the social normalization process; (3) the plague and quarantine: Foucault’s case studies; and lastly, (4) a reflection on the Philippine response to the pandemic.

THE NEW NORMAL

I have read this in one newspaper but it seems this idea is all over: “As the world prepares to resume its normal grind, people across the globe will have to adapt to the new normal way of doing things.”¹ The following things are aspects of what is considered as the new normal: social and physical distancing, handwashing and temperature check, face masks and face shields, alcohol and sanitizers, RT-PCR tests and contact tracing, online classes and work from home, online shopping, and online liturgies, mandatory vaccinations and booster shots, zoom and google meet, cremation and online eulogies, and many more. There is no going back to the “old normal,” they say, as these new cultural realities should be accepted as the compulsory part of our present and future.

But what is hidden below the surface are equally significant and crucial experiences: fear and suspicion, depression and anxiety, inflation and hunger, closure of small businesses and loss of work, corruption and repression, incompetence and impunity. The distinct police uniform, checkpoints, high-powered firearms, curfew, lockdowns, quarantine – all these projects a metaphor of war on human consciousness—war against “corona virus.” These things have become normal, too, and we are socialized through official pronouncements and popular discourse that we accept them.

In the Philippines, the “war against the virus” slides into the war against terrorists, communists, indigenous peoples, and, earlier, against drug addicts and small-time peddlers. Here,

¹ “The New Normal,” Editorial, *Manila Standard*, May 01, 2020.

different fields coalesce into one: medical field, military field, political field, etc. With their thousand and one rules—some of them funny and ridiculous like the motorcycle dividers or marriage contracts for motorcycle riders—the so-called “new normal” tells us that we are at war. And if we want to survive this war, we have to obey. No questions asked.

A research with selected experts worldwide consulted by the Pew Research Center shows this same double-truth of the post-COVID-19 context.² On the one hand, the worldwide pandemic may: (1) “inaugurate new reforms aimed at racial justice and social equity” as global capital economy is put into question; (2) “enhance the quality of life” as family and workers adjust to a flexible-workplace arrangement; (3) “produce technology enhancements in virtual and augmented reality” making people enjoy ‘smart systems’ in health care, education, and work. “Tele-everything” is the new name of the game, wherein interconnectedness hopefully engenders empathy, awareness of others outside our boundaries which optimistically produces solidarity and concerted public action.

On the other hand, the post-pandemic situation can also: (1) “worsen economic inequality” since as the digital divide widens, technology also displaces workers from the workplace; (2) “enhance the power of big technology firms” to encroach on people’s privacy and autonomy through mass surveillance, isolate peoples and communities as well as aggravate mental health problems; and (3) multiply the spread of misinformation, hate speech and manipulation of public opinion by populist leaders and polarized populations producing xenophobia, bigotry, and discrimination.

Many are hoping for life to be normal again. For some, however, there is no going back to the “old normal.” Life will never

² Janna Anderson, Lee Rainie and Emily A. Vogels, “Experts Say the ‘New Normal’ in 2025 Will Be Far More Tech-Driven, Presenting More Big Challenges,” [Collection of responses from select experts worldwide done on June 30 – July 2020], see <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/02/18/experts-say-the-new-normal-in-2025-will-be-far-more-tech-driven-presenting-more-big-challenges/>

be the same again. But what does the “new normal” really mean? How is it to be normal in the post-pandemic society?

THE PROCESS OF NORMALIZATION

What is “normal”? How do social activities and practices become accepted by society and become “normal”? This question was a crucial issue of classical sociology from 1950s – 1960s in the discussion on “institutionalization” or “routinization” of social practices. There have been functionalist, interactionist, and phenomenological theories of normalization/institutional processes of society from Weber to Parsons, from Goffman to Berger and Luckmann. An example of the more recent theorization is the “normalization process theory” (NPT).³ Starting from demands in the health care settings, NPT talks about the social organization processes of implementation, embedding, and integration for some practices to be routinized and sustained in a certain context. It can be summarized in these three statements: (1) implementation: “material practices become routinely embedded in social contexts as the result of people working, individually and collectively, to implement them”; (2) embedding: the work of implementation is operationalized through four generative mechanisms (coherence; cognitive participation; collective action; reflexive monitoring); (3) integration: “the production and reproduction of a material practice requires continuous investment by agents in ensembles of action that carry forward in time and space.”⁴ In short, for practices to be routinized, we need the contribution of human agents organized into dynamic patterns of interaction, following some generative mechanisms and principles, and reflexively operationalized over time. What is crucial is the investment of the participants into the process of normalization,

³ See among others, C. May and T. Finch, “Implementation, embedding, and integration: an outline of Normalization Process Theory,” *Sociology* 43, no. 3 (2009): 535-554; Elizabeth Murray et al, “Normalisation process theory: a framework for developing, evaluating and implementing complex interventions Elizabeth Murray,” *BMC Medicine* 8 (2010), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2978112/pdf/1741-7015-8-63.pdf>

⁴ C. May and T. Finch, “Implementation, embedding, and integration.”

what they do, how they do it, thus, embedding the new ways of thinking, acting and organizing effectively into the already existing knowledge and practices.

But beyond these functionalist views of normalization, we also have Michel Foucault's account of normalization as "disciplinary power." Foucault defines normalization as a process that consists:

"first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm. In other words, it is not the normal and the abnormal that is fundamental and primary in disciplinary normalization, it is the norm. That is, there is an originally prescriptive character of the norm and the determination and the identification of the normal and the abnormal becomes possible in relation to this posited norm."⁵

Simply put, Foucault interrogates and invalidates the intentions of Normalization Process Theory. While NPT aims to "normalize" the intended practices into a social fabric, Foucault puts into question such a subtle process over human processes by imposing the inviolability of constructed social norms to which the whole society needs to conform. Those who can conform are considered normal; those who cannot are abnormal. In this way, the "normal" becomes an instrument of coercion and power that imposes necessary standards but also hierarchization and surveillance. Normalization is an act of social discipline classifying, locating in hierarchies, segregating people imperceptibly even as they are made to believe that they belong to one homogeneous body.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, eds. Michel Senellart et al., trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 58.

“In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties, and to render the differences useful by fining them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences.”⁶

By becoming “normal,” we have thus conformed to one and the same model. But we are actually coerced to subordination, docility, uniformity “so that [we] might all be like one another.” The norm introduces homogeneity deleting all individual differences; moreover, excluding as “abnormal” those who do not conform to the established norm.⁷

In Foucault’s account, normalization as “disciplinary power” is a conglomerate of tactics and strategies to ensure social control which he analyzed as emerging in 18th century prisons, hospitals, asylums, factories, or schools and became the hallmark of modern societies. For instance, Foucault studied the symbol of the “panopticon” and the shifting concept of penal law, the standardization of education and the establishment of “normal schools” (*écoles normales*) in the training of teachers, the shifting concepts of mental illness in an age when all should be rational, etc. In all these, Foucault wants to argue that normalization—with surveillance as its crucial element—has become a mechanism of power at the start of modernity. As people praise the “modern” to be our liberation from the abuses of the medieval ages, it also ushers in new oppressive powers.

If we had the space and time, it would have been beneficial to trace the development of the concept from the mentor of Foucault—the historian of science, Georges Canguilhem—on the

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, [1975] 1995), 186.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

concept of the “normal and the pathological.”⁸ He asks: Who is sick? Who is normal? Who is abnormal? These are not clear-cut categories. Canguilhem placed these concepts into question. Echoing his mentor, Foucault says: “If you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal; if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal, and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing.”⁹

FROM EXCLUSION TO QUARANTINE: LEPROSY AND PLAGUE

What actually proves helpful to this present article is Foucault’s research on the shifting views on responses to social illnesses—in particular, to leprosy and plagues—in the context of the Middle Ages and modern Europe. This crucial transition between the two responses illustrates the developing views of disciplinary normalization from medieval to modern times.

From the High Middle Ages, Foucault narrates, “leprosarium had multiplied their cities of the damned over the entire face of Europe,” as many as 19,000 throughout Christendom, 2000 in the whole of France and 43 in the diocese of Paris alone.¹⁰ The Western world’s solution to leprosy was “exclusion.” First, there should be no contact between the leper and the community. Second, the lepers had to be cast out “into a vague, external world beyond the town’s walls, beyond the limits of the community,” “into outer darkness,” as it were. Third, the exclusion of lepers spells their “death” to the community, a disqualification from one’s rights within the juridical and political body. This act was symbolized by a religious ritual, “a kind of funeral ceremony during which individuals who have been declared leprosy were

⁸ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁹ M. Foucault, *Entretiens*, ed. Roger-Pol Droit (Paris : O. Jacob, 2004), 95.

¹⁰ M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 3.

declared dead (which meant that their possessions can be passed on) and they departed to the foreign external world.”¹¹

This logic of exclusion done on the leper can be traced to an earlier period on what Western society did to the ‘insane’. The “Ship of Fools” (*Narrenschiff*) became part of the medieval cultural landscape both in literature, arts, and popular imagination. All people considered ‘mad’ were herded into a ship and made to sail to a point of no return. “Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is the prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads.”¹² But at the end of Middle Ages, Foucault observes, “leprosy disappeared from the Western world,” or better still the lepers have been all locked somewhere. The lazar houses of Paris became empty and even “before the time of St. Vincent there was only one leper left at Saint-Lazare.”¹³ While leprosy disappeared and the leper was banished, the same logic remained in those spaces where they left off. Upon further examination, this exclusionary process was equally applied to criminals, beggars, deviants, children, and the mentally challenged. This is what Foucault calls the “Great Confinement.” Vagabonds, criminals, and the “mad” took over the part played by the leper. Their salvation was found in their exclusion. “With an altogether different meaning and in a different culture, the forms would remain—essentially that major form of a rigorous division which is social exclusion but spiritual reintegration.”¹⁴

At the beginning of the 18th century, however, the exclusionary logic was gradually replaced by the quarantine model—in this case, the quarantine of the plague victims. Reading Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* ushers us to a new social process of disciplinary normalization. I take great pains in narrating some

¹¹ M. Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975* (New York: Picador, 1999 [2003]).

¹² M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

details because the process proves too familiar during the present COVID-19 pandemic.

First, there was spatial partitioning, closing off of inhabitants into their quarters (*quadrillage*), assigning an inspector, and a strict prohibition not to leave the place on the punishment of death. I would like to extensively quote him as his narrative is too close to home.

“On the appointed day, everyone is ordered to stay indoors: it is forbidden to leave on pain of death. The syndic himself comes to lock the door of each house from the outside; he takes the key with him and hands it over to the intendant of the quarter; the intendant keeps it until the end of the quarantine. Each family will have made its own provisions; but, for bread and wine, small wooden canals are set up between the street and the interior of the houses, thus allowing each person to receive his ration without communicating with the suppliers and other residents; meat, fish, and herbs will be hoisted up into the houses with pulleys and baskets. If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting. Only the intendants, syndics and guards will move about the streets and, between the infected houses, from one corpse to another, the ‘crows,’ who can be left to die: these are ‘people of little substance who carry the sick, bury the dead, clean and do many vile and abject offices.’”¹⁵

Second, the detailed observation, recording, and centralization of collected data were a very important part of the process. While their names are called, the people appear on their assigned windows. The observer “calls each of them by name; informs himself as to the state of each and every one of them— in which respect the inhabitants will be compelled to speak the truth under pain of death; if someone does not appear at the window,

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 195.

the syndic must ask why: ‘In this way, he will find out easily enough whether dead or sick are being concealed.’ Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked— it is the great review of the living and the dead.”¹⁶

All the meticulous observations— name, age, gender, illness, deaths, complaints—were written in one big register which was passed from the local inspector and later centralized at the magistrates’ office. Only the main magistrate can authorize the doctor or the priest-confessor to access the sick. Assigned, immobilized, and frozen in their individual spaces, people are locked up in their cages, as it were. Part of accounting for every reality is the purification of the houses—equivalent to our present fumigation—which happens several days after quarantine. Inhabitants leave each room, windows were sealed, keyholes were filled with wax, furniture was suspended above the ground, then chemicals were sprayed in every nook and corner. No one, practically, nothing, one escapes the social gaze. “The registration of the pathological must be constantly centralized. The relation of each individual to his disease and to his death passes through the representatives of power.”¹⁷

Foucault’s narrative obviously points to an observable shift from the expulsion and exclusion (of the leper) to inclusion and surveillance (of the plague victim). While in the medieval society, a certain part of the population—lepers, beggars, mad—were labeled and thrown out to the great unknown, in the modern society, we see a bureaucratized surveillance of space “within which each individual is constantly assessed in order to determine whether he conforms to the rule, to the defined norm of health.”¹⁸ In the following paragraph, Foucault sums up his main contention. It is worth quoting him in full.

“If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great

¹⁶ Ibid., 196.

¹⁷ Ibid., 196-197.

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975* [online].

ecologies into a coherent perspective. For Ken Wilber, a framework is integral when it seeks “to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic.”²⁹ This presupposes that the more perspectives are included the more integral is the framework.

Today, due to the emerging various approaches to ecological reflection, many authors propose to come up with an integral ecology, “a framework that allows all aspects of reality to connect with what has traditionally been associated with the scientific study of ecology.”³⁰ Accordingly, “integral ecology unites, coordinates, and mutually enriches knowledge generated from different major disciplines and approaches.”³¹ Although this term was probably used for the first time in 1958 by Hillary B. More,³² it became popular only in the 1990s with the publication of the respective writings of Ken Wilber, Leonardo Boff, and Thomas Berry. Among these three authors, Boff deserves a particular focus here due to his significant influence on understanding the concept of integral ecology that has become part of the present Catholic social teaching.

The Latin American liberation theologians, Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, persuasively argued that recent ecological reflection has (1) moved beyond conservationism and preservationism, (2) criticized environmentalism, (3) pointed out the limitations of human ecology, (4) issued in a

²⁹ Cited in Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael E. Zimmerman, *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2009), 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

³¹ Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael Zimmerman, *An Overview of Integral Ecology. A Comprehensive Approach to Today's Complex Planetary Issues*, Integral Institute Resource Paper 2 (2009), 2.

³² Hilary B. Moore, *Marine Ecology* (New York: John Wiley and Sons; London: Chapman and Hall, 1958).

positive. The religious model of exclusion/separation has been supplanted with the military model of disciplined surveillance.

As suggested earlier, the same process happens in the “panopticon” prisons and “normal schools,” among others. These are subtle techniques of State power to make everyone subject to the “norm.” But instead of using brute force like in the Middle Ages, subtle power of surveillance gets to be imposed on bodies, thus, naturalized, corporealized, normalized. It is this bureaucratic normalization process that was later applied to the poor in other countries like England during the Industrial Revolution. When the poor threatened the health of the rich in a cramped-up urban space like London, they needed to segregate people into their “proper” spaces. They also subjected the poor to medical controls—compulsory vaccination, low cost medicines for the poor, segregation of residences—not so much to care for the poor as to protect the rich and maintain the labor force.²⁰ Modern society thus has become a fully “disciplined” society not only in its institutions but in the bodies of its members.

SECURITIZATION AND THE BUBBLE: PHILIPPINE RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

I endeavored to recover Foucault’s research to bear on the Philippines’ present response to the pandemic. As of October 2021, one year and seven months after the first lockdown, Bloomberg’s COVID-19 Resilience Ranking placed the Philippines lowest among the 53 countries surveyed.²¹ Its score (40.2%) is lowest in the world and among Asian countries, behind Vietnam (43.7), Malaysia (44.1), Thailand (47.6) and Indonesia (52.4). Ten countries mostly located in the First World got the highest score Ireland (79.4), Spain (78.2), the Netherlands (76.4), Finland (76.1), Denmark (75.3), United Arab Emirates (74.7), France (73.9), Switzerland (73.8), Canada (73.8) and Norway (73.6).

²⁰ S Danielle Guizzo and Iara Vigo de Lima, “Foucault’s Contributions for Understanding Power Relations in British Classical Political Economy,” *Economia* 16, no. 2 (2015): 194-205.

²¹ “The Best and Worst Places to Be as COVID reopening gathers pace.” <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/>

There are several factors included in Bloomberg’s survey: coronavirus statistics, health care quality, vaccination coverage and progress in restarting travel and easing border controls. At the time Bloomberg did its research, the Philippine positivity rate was 27% – only one step higher than Mexico. It went beyond that when the Omicron variant struck the country. Since there is no mass testing (we mainly test only those who exhibit symptoms) the positivity rate could be much higher. The health care sector is beset with corruption— from PhilHealth 15B peso scam to the Pharmally corruption, not to mention the charge of incompetence of the leaders of the Department of Health.²² The vaccination rate was slow in coming as a consequence of incompetence and corruption. The Philippines gained the name “one of the world’s longest and harshest lockdown” with unimaginable social, economic, educational, religious, and mental health consequences.²³

Let me forward some tentative comparisons between Foucault’s surveillance society and Duterte’s approach to COVID-19. First is the securitization of the pandemic. “Securitization” has a long history.²⁴ The expansion of the global economy after the Cold War ushers in new dangers to Western societies: terrorism, religious terrorism, massive migration, failed states, etc. The events of 9/11 and its aftermath became the symbol of these new security threats to liberal economies which now include epidemics, hunger, and other environmental disasters. The “human security” paradigm

²² Jenny Lei Ravelo, “Corruption Allegations Rock Philippine Health Insurance Corporation amid COVID-19,” (14 September 2020), <https://www.devex.com/news/corruption-allegations-rock-philippine-health-insurance-corporation-amid-covid-19-98048>; Cristina Eloisa Baclig, “Pharmally scandal: When Middlemen Profit even during a Pandemic,” <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1506920/pharmally-scandal-when-middlemen-profit-even-during-a-pandemic#ixzz7IpGkQTWJ>

²³ Aie Balagtas See, “Rodrigo Duterte is Using One of the World’s Longest COVID-19 Lockdowns to Strengthen his Grip on the Philippines,” <https://time.com/5945616/covid-philippines-pandemic-lockdown/>; “Manila Lockdown: One of the Longest Lockdown in the World,” <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2021/10/19/manila-lockdown-one-of-the-longest-covid-lockdowns-in-the-world>

²⁴ See Thierry Balsacq, ed., *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London: Routledge, 2011).

thus emerged as a response to these threats.²⁵ Securitization entails the “production” of existential threats by discourse, the launching of emergency security action, the possibility of breaking free from social rules, and the tacit acceptance of such discourse by the population.²⁶

Duterte’s government decidedly “securitized” its approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. The military approach to a medical problem characteristic of modern society earlier analyzed by Foucault—lockdowns, surveillance, house to house searches—became the dominant feature of each and every barangay in the country. The rule of former military generals in the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF)— or to call it with another name the “militarization of science”— describes the Duterte government response from day one. At the beginning of the first lockdown on March 20, 2020, Duterte had no qualms of hiding his war metaphor: “We are in the fight for [our] lives. We are at war against a vicious and invisible enemy, one that cannot be seen by the naked eye. In this extraordinary war, we are all soldiers... Obey the police and the military. Do not quarrel with them and do not start [a] ruckus that would amount to a violation because you will be arrested and brought to prison... You can be arrested. [Just follow and we will have no problems].”²⁷

The surveillance described by Foucault has been applied to the local districts and villages. Police power has been subtly integrated into the Panopticon but also harshly into the locked-down communities. People who violated the quarantine protocols were arrested, like the twenty-one residents of the San Roque district in Quezon City who were clamoring for food ration weeks after the harsh lockdown. They were later charged with violating

²⁵ Ricardo Pereira, “Processes of Securitization of Infectious Diseases and Western Hegemonic Power: A Historical-Political Analysis,” *Global Health Governance* 2 (Spring 2008), in <http://www.ghgj.org>

²⁶ B. Buzan, O. Wæver and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

²⁷ Presidential Communications Operations Officer (PCOO). For parallel analysis, see Karl Hapal, “The Philippines’ COVID-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 2021 40, no. 2 (2021): 224–244.

the *Bayanihan Heal as One Law* and released on 17,500 pesos bail.²⁸ The police shot a mentally ill man who allegedly violated quarantine protocols.²⁹ The highest expression of this securitization program is the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 signed by Duterte on July 3, 2020.³⁰ As if disease, hunger, and unemployment are not enough punishment for the poor, this law places dissenters with the charge of “terrorism.” At least nine human rights workers were killed almost at the same time from different parts of Metro Manila one Sunday morning (March 7, 2021).³¹ It was dubbed by the Philippine press as “one-time big-time” event on a “bloody Sunday.”

We do not have the space to narrate all series of violence unleashed on the people during the pandemic. In my analysis, Duterte did not only apply Foucault’s benign use of modern power as it was done in the quarantine and panopticon. He did not mark the sick and the dissenter like the plague victims; he intended to banish them from sight. While medieval society segregated them; Duterte brutally killed them. Using the same logic of the War on Drugs, he wants to create a society of subservient individuals through brutal force and ruthless violence. The same method of brutal violence was applied to achieve a drug-free Philippines and a COVID-free society. These gruesome killing sprees have been documented by journalists and filmmakers, sometimes with the consent of the police authorities themselves.³² What we see is

²⁸ “21 Protesters Demanding Food Aid Arrested,” <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested-.html>

²⁹ “Police Shoot Lockdown Violator Dead,” <https://www.ucanews.com/news/police-shoot-lockdown-violator-dead-in-manila/87801#>

³⁰ “Philippines: Dangerous anti-terror law yet another setback for human rights,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/philippines-dangerous-antiterror-law-yet-another-setback-for-human-rights/>

³¹ “Bloody Sunday,” <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/bloody-sunday-at-least9-killed-in-raids-against-civil-rights-groups-across-the>

³² On the President’s Orders, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qugduxazBBg>; Horrors of the Philippines’ Drug War, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0v9IcZRfY>; Aswang, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLigb4iEx-U>; Police Fake Evidence in the Philippines’ Drug War, <https://www.hrw.org/tag/philippines-war-drugs>; The War on Drugs in the Philippines, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyAHmMMORCs&list=PL0JyM3hC2NZFSPNtS8sSRLaag5egemH4X&index=57&t=0s>

Duterte’s regression to the medieval model. While Foucault’s modern surveillance was instituted to eliminate brute force reminiscent of medieval tyrants, Duterte’s rule is retrogression to medieval power by hunting down addicts, “communists,” dissenters, indigenous peoples. Its purpose is archaic— “to purify the community.” To prioritize the enactment of the Anti-terror Law in the middle of the pandemic, to restore or retain in crucial positions officials who have been seriously charged with corruption; to opt for a more expensive vaccine from China using people’s money despite other cheaper offers; to favor a group of Chinese businessmen with a questionable reputation to deliver medical services— all these bring society back to medieval power where the king is king and is accountable to no one but himself. This is not even a benign medieval monarchy; it is crude barbarism, pure and simple.

The second comparative reflection is found in the notion of the “bubble.” The distribution, partitioning, segmentation in Foucault’s disciplined society finds its expression in the bubble paradigm extensively used during the pandemic. Coupled with surveillance, the bubble culture ushers in a totalitarian society Foucault summarizes in the figure of the panopticon. What is in a bubble? First, the elements inside a bubble distinguish themselves from those outside, for example, air vs. water, etc. Bubbles live in that basic distinction— us versus them. Opening itself to outside elements pricks open the bubble’s life and destroys it. Second, bubbles live a precarious existence; they can burst anytime. Their pretensions are gone in an instant and we are back to reality as it happened in the so-called “economic bubbles” in its boom and bust cycles. The bubble metaphor is the dominant frame of Duterte’s approach to the pandemic. It is called with many names— quarantine, lockdown, isolation, “stay-at-home” with their corresponding curfews, checkpoints and detentions. The concept is simple. Live inside your own bubble and be accounted for.

On the one hand, it is understandable and maybe necessary. Multiple exposures to infected individual spell contamination. “Stay at home and save lives”: this is the government refrain. On the other hand, there are problems. First, only those who have the means can live in bubbles. Only those who

have savings can live without working. The bubble-like “social distancing” is actually a class concept. Only the privileged classes can afford it.³³ Second, if the government does nothing while they lock people down, they are just killing them twice as much. The dismal COVID testing and contact tracing, the lack of support for health workers, the expired medicines stacked in storage buildings, the inadequacy of vaccine supply and system for a systematic rollout of the same, the corruption that beset the health industry: all these suffocate people whom the government lock inside the bubble.³⁴ Third— and I think this is the main problem with the bubble metaphor— is it being closed from voices other than itself, from ideas that are distinct and different. So, it is always “us” versus “them.” Our bubble versus theirs. We have heard it from the beginning of the Duterte Presidency: we the poor versus the “elite” (except the Davao oligarchs); our country versus foreign incursion (except China); the youth of our land versus the drug addict (and not the big drug lords). The intention is to keep others at bay. The pressure of the other might prick our bubble and burst our illusionary and precarious existence. Fear also haunts the residents of the bubble— fear of accountability, fear of dissent, fear of the voices of the dead coming back to life in their surviving families seeking justice, fear of the other.

I am really amused to read Foucault come alive again in the Philippine pandemic society. But if we read more closely, Duterte’s approach to the pandemic has no point of comparison with Foucault’s portrayal of the modern “surveillance society.” While the plague-infected families and quarters were locked into their homes and streets and given food supply without contact from outsiders, COVID-19 lockdown promised but do not deliver food provision. People have to line up under the scorching heat or rain for hours on end and scramble for the little that was on offer from

³³ Sheila Coronel, “Philippines: COVID-19 will Devastate the Poor,” <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/philippines-covid-19-will-devastate-poor>

³⁴ Muhammad Jawad Noon, “How to Stop Vaccine Corruption which is Plaguing the Global Fight,” (14 August 2021), <https://fortune.com/2021/08/14/covid-vaccine-corruption-distribution-rollout/>

the government and private relief agencies. While the meticulous recording of names and other personal details were collected and centralized during the plague, there was dismal contact tracing and no reliable list that can be followed in the distribution of vaccines, food ration, and other supplies. While there was accurate observation for strict surveillance during the plague, the Duterte government protocol was not really intended to be followed; it was just a show of force to instill fear and subservience. While Foucault was describing a well-disciplined society normalized by tactics and strategies into human bodies beyond and outside the person of the sovereign, Duterte’s populist intention is aimed at keeping the sovereign—himself—enthroned, and his absolute power perpetuated forever.

**CONCLUSION:
TOWARDS REFLEXIVE THEOLOGIZING**

In conclusion, my invitation is an appeal towards reflexive theologizing. Before we theologize, there is a need to step back and think again. Any theological insight on the “new normal” without any analysis of its discursive power— no matter how creative and necessary— is at best naïve or at worst an enabling of those who wield social power on people’s bodies and complicity with the victimization of the poor. In this play of power, the poor are the usual victims. As the African proverb goes: “When the elephants play, it is the grass that dies.” Foucault tries to unmask impersonal power in modern society. But whether it is the *Ship of Fools*, the expulsion of lepers, or quarantine surveillance, it is the poor who are the real victims. It is always them who are eliminated by brute force or subtle State machinery or both combined. In Duterte’s “new normal,” they are the first ones to be detained from minor law infractions or killed without hope for justice; they are the last ones to get food rations or to be vaccinated with a vaccine not their own choosing.

To be concrete, the excitement over online sacramental presence, praise for the wonders of online education, or the euphoria for the new ecclesiologies brought about by the “new normal” in fact also marginalizes and excludes seventy percent

(70%) of the population who have no internet, gadgets, electricity, not even food. And most often, it is these people who are easily killed, expelled, excluded, or manipulated—either by the State’s brute power or the coercive all-encompassing gaze of the capitalist surveillance machine. A good number of literature has come out on religion and the pandemic or on theologies after COVID-19—some of them innocently extolling the resilience offered by faith, or praising the Church’s role in fighting hunger, or assigning it to assist in people’s mental health emergency, etc. But a (post)pandemic theology not cognizant and critical of violent societal power—sometimes subtle, most often brutal—unleashed unto people’s lives by the political system risks of becoming irrelevant or, worse, of serving as an ideological prop to the same oppressive machinery.

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