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DECONSTRUCTING THE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE IN THE PHILIPPINES: *Decolonizing Religious Studies and Recognizing Marginalized Communities*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of nationalist identity among border communities in the Batam Archipelago, Indonesia, focusing on the role of transnational Malay identity in shaping national allegiance. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, transnationalism, and cultural identity theory, this research investigates how border residents navigate their dual affiliations to the Indonesian state and the wider Malay world. Employing a qualitative-interpretive methodology, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and secondary sources. The findings reveal an ambivalent form of nationalism in which Indonesian identity is co-constructed alongside a broader Malay consciousness. Cultural continuity, kinship networks, and economic interdependence with Malaysia and Singapore reinforce a transnational sense of belonging that transcends formal state borders. While the Indonesian state maintains symbolic and administrative authority in the region, everyday practices reflect a fluid, negotiated nationalism shaped by regional proximity and historical ties. This study contributes to the literature on border studies and nationalism by highlighting the complexities of identity formation in Southeast Asian maritime frontiers.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of the Philippines is often referred to as the largest "Christian nation" in Asia (Jayani, 2019), with over 80 percent of its population adhering to Roman Catholicism—a direct legacy of more than three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. Catholic identity in the Philippines is not merely a religious affiliation; it is a foundational element in the construction of national identity, educational systems, and political practices. However, this singular narrative of the Philippines as a Catholic nation conceals the rich religious and spiritual diversity that has long existed and shaped the archipelago's civilization, including Muslim Moro communities, non-Christian Indigenous groups such as the Lumad, and practitioners of localized spiritual traditions (Rahman, 2023).

The dominance of Catholic discourse in religious studies in the Philippines cannot be separated from the *coloniality of knowledge*—a condition in which Western epistemologies introduced through colonialism continue to shape how religion is understood by society, academia, and the state (Nasir, 2019). Religious scholarship often centers Catholicism and studies non-Christian communities from an external lens, treating them as anthropological "objects" or as underdeveloped

minorities within narratives of progress and modernity. In contrast, local spiritualities and knowledge systems—such as localized forms of Islam in Mindanao, Lumad cosmologies rooted in the land, or other syncretic practices—are often ignored, delegitimized, or dismissed as "non-religious," "irrational," or even "primitive" (Jamilah, 2020).

The relationship between religion and colonialism in the Philippines is both profound and complex. The Christianization project under colonial rule was not merely a matter of religious conversion, but a systematic effort to dismantle Indigenous sociopolitical orders and replace traditional authority with that of the Church and the state (Quijano, 2000). Missionaries functioned as agents of empire, disseminating European languages, values, and norms while marginalizing and erasing Indigenous cosmologies. The *reducción* system, for example, forcibly relocated Indigenous populations into settlements centered around churches, facilitating colonial control and the spread of Catholic doctrine (Barry, 2018).

Catholic institutions also played a central role in colonial education and governance. Schools established by religious orders such as the Jesuits and Dominicans were not merely platforms for catechism, but vehicles for instilling Spanish culture and language—often at the expense of local knowledge and native tongues. This produced a new social hierarchy in which those educated within colonial structures became elites, while Indigenous communities and local belief systems were further marginalized (Tungkagi, 2022).

Although the Philippines has achieved political independence, colonial legacies continue to be reproduced in various aspects of national life. In the legal system, laws favoring the Catholic majority frequently overlook the rights of Muslim and Indigenous communities. In media and education, dominant narratives still portray Catholicism as synonymous with national identity, while other religions and belief systems are cast as "other" or "minority." Even religious studies within academic institutions often adopt Western paradigms that fail to account for local contexts and the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities (Al Qurtuby, 2012).

In this context, decolonizing religious studies in the Philippines becomes an urgent project. Decolonization is not merely about creating space for minority voices; it demands a fundamental re-evaluation of epistemological frameworks: Who holds authority to speak about religion? Whose religion becomes the standard? Whose voices are silenced or erased? It also calls for the courage to question the complicity of religious institutions—especially the Catholic Church—in sustaining oppressive power structures, while at the same time recognizing the role of progressive Catholic actors in struggles for social justice, such as through Liberation Theology movements.

This decolonial effort also includes the development of contextual theologies rooted in local values and lived experience. Filipino theologians such as José de Mesa have proposed approaches that integrate cultural concepts like *loob* and *bahala na* into Christian faith expressions, fostering theological models that are more authentic and resonant for Filipino communities (García, 2023). Thus, the decolonization of religious studies in the Philippines is not merely an academic endeavor, but a pathway toward social justice and recognition of the archipelago's longstanding spiritual plurality. It is a process of dismantling hegemonic narratives and reconstructing religious understanding in a way that is inclusive, equitable, and grounded in the complex realities of Philippine society.

This article contributes to the decolonization of religious studies in the Philippine context through a collective reflection grounded in the lived experiences of scholars and practitioners from diverse religious, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Employing narrative and relational approaches, it foregrounds the voices of historically silenced communities—Moro Muslims, Lumad Indigenous peoples, non-Catholic Christians, and progressive voices within the Church itself—as acts of *truth-telling* that confront the epistemic and spiritual violence embedded in dominant discourses. In doing so, this work not only challenges the myth of a homogeneously Catholic nation but also offers new

pathways for constructing a more inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of religion in the Philippines.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Deconstructing the hegemonic narrative of the Philippines as a "Catholic nation" requires a theoretical approach capable of critically examining the entanglement of religion, colonialism, and epistemic power. In this regard, the present article draws upon a multidisciplinary framework that integrates **decolonial thought**, **postcolonial epistemic critique**, and **critical sociology of religion**—particularly in analyzing how power relations are reproduced through religious and academic institutions.

First, the core foundation of this study lies in theories of decoloniality and the coloniality of knowledge, as developed by Aníbal Quijano (1980), Walter Mignolo (2021), and Catherine Walsh (2009). The concept of *coloniality of power* emphasizes that even after the end of formal colonialism, colonial patterns of thought continue to shape the way knowledge is produced and legitimized. In the Philippine context, this is evident in the dominance of Catholicism as the sole legitimate religious identity, alongside the marginalization of the spiritual experiences of Moro Muslims, Indigenous Lumad communities, and local belief systems. Mignolo (2011) argues that decolonization must begin with *epistemic disobedience*—a deliberate refusal to treat Western frameworks as the only valid ways of understanding reality. Religious studies in the Philippines, therefore, must reorient their gaze to center narratives emerging from historically oppressed communities as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Second, this article draws on critical studies of religion and power, particularly through the lens of Talal Asad (1981), whose work in the anthropology of religion provides essential tools to understand how "religion" itself is a modern category, shaped by colonial power relations. Asad critiques the Western definition of religion as a private system of beliefs detached from politics and culture—an understanding rooted in a specific European Christian history that cannot be universalized. In the Philippine context, this perspective helps to deconstruct Catholicism as a default national identity, and to reveal how other belief systems have been systematically delegitimized as "non-religious" or "primitive." Moreover, this approach allows for a nuanced view of religious institutions as both instruments of coloniality and, in some cases, sites of resistance. The rise of Liberation Theology in the Philippines, represented by figures such as Fr. Edicio de la Torre, illustrates how religion can also become a force for emancipation rather than oppression.

Third, the article employs insights from subaltern epistemologies and postcolonial theory, drawing on Gayatri Spivak (2004) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006). These perspectives underscore the idea that marginalized groups in the Philippines face not only structural injustice but also epistemic erasure. Spivak's famous question, *"Can the subaltern speak?"* remains highly relevant here, as religious studies in the Philippines often speak *about* Indigenous and minority communities without enabling them to speak for themselves. Santos (2014) advocates for *epistemologies of the South* as a counter to the Western "monoculture of knowledge." Within this framework, the lived experiences of Muslim communities in Mindanao, Lumad cosmologies, and localized spiritual expressions are treated as legitimate epistemic sources for reimagining religious knowledge.

Fourth, the analysis also engages with power/knowledge relations and representation, particularly through the work of Michel Foucault (1980) and Stuart Hall (2013). Foucault's concept of the *regime of truth* reveals how institutions such as the Church, schools, and universities construct dominant discourses of "truth" that become internalized as norms. In Philippine religious studies, Catholicism has become the default norm. Hall's work on representation further clarifies how religious identities are constructed and stabilized through hegemonic discourses in media, curricula,

and public narratives.

By integrating decolonial theory, critical sociology of religion, subaltern epistemologies, and discourse analysis, this theoretical framework enables a robust interrogation of dominant religious narratives in the Philippines. More importantly, it supports the recovery of spiritual pluralism long suppressed by colonial and postcolonial hegemonies. This framework is not only analytical but also normative: it advocates for the reconstruction of a more equitable, dialogical, and epistemically just system of religious knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, critical-narrative approach using a participatory collective reflection design (Raharjo, 2019; Suwendra, 2018). This methodological framework was selected for two primary reasons: First, the study aims to uncover embedded power relations in the construction of religious studies in the Philippines, a goal that cannot be meaningfully addressed through statistical or positivist methods alone. Second, the central sources of knowledge in this study are the lived narratives of historically marginalized communities—Moro Muslims, Indigenous Lumad peoples, local spiritual practitioners, and non-Catholic Christians—whose voices must be amplified as part of a broader decolonial project.

This methodological stance is inspired by the practice of "storying as method" (Colla & Kurtz, 2024), which frames storytelling as a form of epistemic resistance and a medium for *truth-telling* against dominant hegemonic narratives. Fieldwork was conducted in three key regions of the Philippines that reflect the country's diverse spiritual and political landscapes: Metro Manila: The political and educational center of the country, characterized by the dominance of Catholic institutional and academic authority; Mindanao (Marawi, Cotabato): A region marked by historical marginalization and ongoing conflict affecting Moro Muslim and Lumad Indigenous communities; and Northern Luzon (Kalinga, Ifugao): A region where Indigenous belief systems and local spiritualities continue to resist state-imposed religious narratives.

The study involved five key informants, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender, and sociopolitical engagement. These informants include: 1). A Moro Muslim woman activist from Lanao del Sur; 2). An Indigenous Lumad (Manobo) community leader; 3). A progressive Catholic priest active in Liberation Theology movements; 4). A Protestant academic from the Evangelical tradition; and 5). A female educator from a local belief/spiritual tradition community in Luzon.

Their selection was based on their capacity to offer critical perspectives on religious discourse beyond dominant frameworks, as well as their active roles in community engagement and epistemic resistance. Fieldwork was conducted between July and November 2024, employing multiple data collection techniques: *In-depth narrative interviews*: Each informant was interviewed for 60–90 minutes using a semi-structured format. Interviews explored key themes such as spiritual experiences, marginalization, interfaith relations, symbolic resistance, and critical reflections on the state of religious studies in the Philippines. Interviews were conducted in Filipino, Cebuano, or English—depending on the informant's preference—with local interpreters when necessary; *Limited participatory observation*: The researcher took part as an observer in various community-based religious and spiritual practices, including: A Lumad ritual to mark the beginning of the planting season; Congregational prayer (salat) in Muslim internal displacement camps (IDPs); Contextual Catholic masses incorporating Indigenous/local elements; and Community discussions among adherents of local belief systems. *Community documents and cultural artifacts:* This included local liturgical texts, internal community publications, media outputs, and reflective writings from the participants.

Data analysis was conducted using narrative thematic analysis, emphasizing a critical reading

of the lived experiences of the informants. The analytical process involved: Transcription and open coding of interview data; Thematic categorization of core issues such as: minority religious marginalization, resistance to hegemonic narratives, religion as a site of power and oppression, spirituality as resistance, and hopes for the future of religious studies; Cross-narrative analysis to identify common threads and socio-spiritual meanings across diverse experiences; and Collaborative member-checking, where informants were invited to validate interpretations and offer feedback to ensure the *emic* integrity and epistemic justice of their narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the dominant narrative of the Philippines as a "Catholic nation" has produced a new form of coloniality that silences the religious experiences of non-Christian communities. Through collective reflection with five key informants, it was revealed that Catholic dominance operates not only historically but also systemically—within academic discourses, state policies, religious practices, and everyday social relations. Three recurring themes emerged: (1) structural and epistemic marginalization, (2) spirituality as a space of resistance, and (3) aspirations for a more just and pluralistic study of religion.

Structural and Epistemic Marginalization

Most informants described how the nation-state narrative, which identifies Filipino identity with Catholicism, has produced various forms of exclusion—legal, social, and epistemic. One of the most concrete examples of this process occurs in the national education system. Maria Amina (pseudonym), a Muslim woman activist from Marawi, stated:

> "*Even in the national curriculum, we are taught the nation's history as if Islam was merely a disturbance. We've been here long before Spain arrived. Our history is sidelined. Our children study great kingdoms and the dominant religion, but there's not a single chapter about our ancestors who protected forests, rivers, and ancestral lands for centuries. We feel alien in our own land. Sometimes we ask, why are only their stories recorded, while we seem excluded from the republic? Our traditions and way of life are considered backward, when in fact they are wisdom passed down through generations. Instead of being valued, we're forced to change in the name of development and modernization*."

This testimony highlights not only a deep sense of alienation but also the systemic erasure of Islam from the national imagination. History textbooks used in public schools often depict Islam merely as a prelude to Spanish colonization—an era soon replaced by the "progress" of Christianization and Hispanization. Islam and the Moro Muslim community are thus framed as relics of the past that must be superseded by modern nationalist projects—ironically, ones rooted in colonial foundations.

This phenomenon aligns with Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of knowledge," which posits that colonial legacies endure not only territorially but also through the ways knowledge is produced, organized, and legitimized. In the Philippines, institutions such as the educational system, media, and academia normalize Catholic identity as central, while casting Muslim and Indigenous narratives to the margins.

This exclusion results in layered structural marginalization. Legally, Muslim regions in Mindanao struggle to implement Islamic-based educational autonomy due to a centralized national curriculum rooted in Christian values. Socially, stereotypes of Muslims as "rebels" or "terrorists" are reinforced by mainstream media representations that rarely provide alternative narratives. Epistemically, the religious experiences of Moro communities are often treated as anthropological objects rather than legitimate epistemic subjects.

As Mignolo (2012) argues, decolonizing knowledge requires more than representational

inclusion; it demands a radical restructuring of knowledge production itself. This includes recognizing that national history cannot be built upon the erasure of Muslim, Indigenous, and local belief narratives. Maria Amina's voice, then, is not merely personal testimony but a decolonial witness to an ongoing historical wound—that Muslim identity in the Philippines continues to be constructed as the "Other" within the state's official narrative.

Thus, the hegemonic narrative of the Philippines as a "Catholic nation" legitimizes not only symbolic exclusion but also domestic forms of coloniality—postcolonial systems of power that perpetuate colonial logics through institutions of the state, education, and scholarship. Experiences such as those shared by Maria Amina point to the urgent need to reformulate religious studies in the Philippines, toward dismantling epistemic inequality and enabling a more plural, just, and community-rooted framework.

Meanwhile, Datu Ramon (pseudonym), a Lumad Indigenous leader, shared:

> "*We never saw land as private property. For us, land is a mother, a source of life, the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. It is for all, not to be owned. But when the priests arrived, they drew boundaries, erected fences, divided lots, and put everything on paper. Slowly, our lands disappeared. They said it was law. But whose law? Not ours, not our ancestors'. Then companies came, bringing heavy machinery, turning our forests into plantations, polluting our rivers. We were once caretakers; now we are guests on our own land. We used to farm to live; now we do odd jobs just to survive. Everything changed when land was mapped not by heart, but by tape measure.*"

This account reflects a form of colonialism that is not only religious but also territorial and ontological. In Lumad cosmology, land is not merely economic resource or property; it is a sacred entity embedded in reciprocal relations between humans, ancestors, and nature. Their spirituality is grounded in communal custodianship of land, sanctified through ritual and ecological ethics.

The Catholic colonial project introduced a European logic of individual ownership and doctrines of "redemption of the wild," which systemically dismantled Indigenous relationships to land. Priests introduced not only new religious teachings but also tools of mapping, classification, and land legalization that aligned with colonial state agendas. In this context, religion functioned as a legitimizing force for dispossession—what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) calls *epistemicide*, the killing of local knowledge systems.

For Indigenous peoples, the loss of land signifies not only economic deprivation but also the disintegration of cultural meaning, spiritual identity, and ancestral presence. When ancestral territories are partitioned and certified in the name of "progress," Lumad social structures fragment. The state's legal system fails to recognize communal land management, while Indigenous rituals are criminalized as "irrational practices." Communities are then labeled as "backward," legitimizing their exclusion from development, education, and political participation.

This suggests that the marginalization of Indigenous communities is not a failure of integration, but rather a success of coloniality in promoting developmentalist narratives that erase their existence. In Fanon's terms, this reflects internal colonization, where the postcolonial state reproduces colonial logics through legal, educational, and religious systems that deny local spiritualities.

In this context, Datu Ramon's story becomes a *decolonial testimony* —not only a denunciation of historical injustice but also an invocation of alternative lifeways long displaced by colonial modernity. Lumad spirituality, which regards land as nurturing mother rather than commodity, offers a cosmological counterpoint to the spiritual capitalism inherent in religious colonialism.

Thus, religious studies in the Philippines must open itself to ontological and ecological plurality, not only theological pluralism. The Lumad experience reminds us that spirituality can be grounded not in institutional doctrine but in intimate relationships with land, history, and shared

existence. Ignoring this constitutes yet another form of coloniality—normative inclusion that structurally erases the different.

In academia, the dominance of Christian-Catholic narratives is evident not only in research content but also in institutional structures and unwritten norms that shape the scholarly community. Dr. Caleb Santos, a Protestant academic from Central Luzon, shared:

> "*In many religious conferences, I'm often the only non-Catholic. Sometimes I even have to explain that we, too, have a religion, our own system of belief, our theology—shaped by our lived experiences with nature, the spirits of our ancestors, and customary law. Many are surprised, as if we haven't quite 'arrived' at religion yet. But we never lacked faith. What we lack is recognition. We're tired of being called 'untouched' or 'unformed,' as if our religion is an empty space to be filled by others. We're not a blank page. We are a manuscript that has long been written—just never read.*"

This statement reveals a paradox at the heart of religious scholarship in the Philippines: despite formal recognition of religious pluralism, academic practices remain anchored in Catholic epistemic foundations. In conferences and institutional discourse, Protestant traditions are often treated as minor variants within a dominant Catholic frame, rather than as epistemologically and theologically distinct traditions. Their presence is sometimes regarded as an intellectual anomaly.

This reflects what Stuart Hall (2013) describes as the *politics of representation* —the process by which dominant narratives are naturalized through repetition and exclusion. In the Philippines, "religion" is often silently equated with Roman Catholicism, rendering other Christianities, non-Christian faiths, and Indigenous traditions as secondary or less worthy of scholarly attention. What counts as a legitimate research topic, who is authorized to speak, and which theologies are deemed valid are shaped less by scholarly merit than by institutional legacies of colonial power.

This is exacerbated by the lack of theological pluralism in higher education. Religious studies curricula in major universities are overwhelmingly shaped by Catholic theological frameworks in both content and method. Protestant perspectives—whether Reformed, Evangelical, or Pentecostal—are often marginalized and rarely articulated within national discourse. Non-institutional theological expressions, such as popular theology, queer theology, or Indigenous theology, are almost entirely excluded from mainstream academic legitimacy. This parallels Gayatri Spivak's (1988) critique of *epistemic silence*, where marginalized groups are not voiceless but unheard due to institutional structures that refuse their recognition. Protestant theologies, especially those emerging from ethnic minorities or lower-class communities, are thus rendered part of the "unheard," despite their rich intellectual traditions.

Dr. Santos' experience, therefore, is not merely about denominational identity but about epistemic hegemony within religious studies itself. When academic spaces only legitimize one type of religious experience—namely, institutional Roman Catholicism—religious studies becomes a form of ideological reproduction rather than a critical pursuit of knowledge. This contradicts the very spirit of scholarship, which ought to treat all systems of belief as equally worthy of critical and dialogical engagement.

In this context, decolonizing religious studies demands not only the recognition of diversity but also structural changes in curriculum, conferences, publication platforms, and pedagogy. Religious studies must move beyond tokenistic tolerance toward epistemic equilibrium, where no single tradition holds a monopoly over theological truth or academic validity.

Spirituality as a Space of Resistance

Despite systemic oppression, the informants expressed powerful forms of resistance through the revitalization of local spiritualities long excluded from formal religious domains. One of the most compelling narratives comes from Rosalinda (pseudonym), a female educator from a local belief community in Ifugao. She stated:

> "*We never call ourselves 'religious' just because we don't have churches, don't carry holy books, or don't wear commonly recognized religious symbols. But make no mistake—we live with our ancestors' spirits, we converse with nature, and we attune our lives to the rhythms of the cosmos. We know when the land needs to rest, when the sea must be honored, and when humans must listen to the wind. Our faith is not about ringing bells or calling to prayer, but about preserving the balance between the seen and the unseen. For us, faith is not doctrine—it is a way of life. So even if the outside world does not call us religious, we still feel close to the Divine. Because our faith is not spoken—it is lived.*"

This statement reveals a mode of spirituality that escapes the conventional definition of "religion" as constructed within modern Western epistemology. In classification systems dominated by Abrahamic norms, religion is deemed legitimate if it possesses institutions, scriptures, hierarchical authority, and doctrinal systems. Consequently, belief systems that are relational, undocumented in written form, and fluid in ritual expression and values are dismissed as formally "non-religious."

Rosalinda implicitly challenges this framework. She demonstrates that faith need not be institutional to be valid. In her community, belief is not a doctrinal system but a lived practice: ecological relations with land, natural cycles, reverence for ancestors, and the maintenance of spiritual equilibrium. This aligns with Talal Asad's (1981) critique that religion is not a neutral category but a historical product of European modernization and colonialism, in which non-Christian religious experiences are redefined as "custom," "culture," or "superstition" (Turner & Asad, 1994).

Communities like Rosalinda's have faced dual epistemic erasure. First, at the legal level, they were not recognized as followers of an official religion until the early 21st century. Second, at the social level, they are stigmatized as "non-religious" or as "traditional communities" that must be "guided" by state-sanctioned religions. Third, in academia, their spirituality is rarely studied seriously except as anthropological heritage examined from the outside—rather than as a living theological system developed from within (Mahestu, 2018).

Yet within this marginalization, their spirituality holds deconstructive potential against hegemonic religious systems. It teaches that religiosity can be expressed in ecological relationships, daily life, embodied and oral expressions not captured in sacred texts. This opens up a space for an alternative spiritual epistemology—one not anchored in institutions or doctrine, but in values of interconnectedness, continuity, and cyclical life.

Furthermore, Rosalinda's resistance is not merely cultural preservation; it is a form of politics of presence, in which local believers reject being erased from national and religious definitions of Filipinoness. This affirms Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2014) call for *epistemologies of the South*—an acknowledgment of knowledge systems and spiritualities grounded in the lived experiences of oppressed communities (Derpic, 2020; Escobar, 2016; Rezende et al., 2021). Thus, local spiritualities such as Rosalinda's should not merely be accommodated in religious studies but should form the foundation for reimagining how we understand religion itself. Decolonial religious scholarship must do more than create space for the marginalized—it must be willing to be transformed by them.

Resistance to Catholic coloniality in the Philippines does not always come from outside religious institutions. In many cases, voices of dissent also emerge from within the Church itself, as exemplified by Fr. Ernesto (pseudonym), a progressive Catholic priest from Quezon City. He reflected:

> "*We must ask honestly: whose religion is this really? Is it only for those who sit at the altar, wear robes, and befriend the powerful? If Jesus truly sided with the poor, the sick, and the marginalized, why is the Church so often silent in the face of injustice? Why are the voices of the small drowned out by applause in air-conditioned halls? We long for a Church that stands in the mud with farmers, not only behind podiums before officials. We long for a Gospel read in huts, not merely debated in seminars. We long for a faith that defends, not one that prays from a distance. If religion loses its solidarity with the oppressed,*

it becomes mere ornament of power—pleasing to the eye, but devoid of meaning."

This statement is not only a moral critique of the institutional Church but also a theological interrogation of the relationship between faith, power, and solidarity. The question "whose religion is this?" opens a critical discourse on how Jesus' teachings—rooted in solidarity with the marginalized—have been institutionalized into systems of authority often aligned with political and economic elites.

As an activist within the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs)—grassroots Church structures that have grown since Vatican II—Fr. Ernesto aligns with Liberation Theology, which emerged from contexts of social inequality and colonialism in Latin America and took root in the Philippines. This theology rereads the Gospel from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, positioning faith not as individual salvation but as collective liberation.

Fr. Ernesto enacts a contextual and emancipatory reinterpretation of faith, where spirituality is inseparable from social realities. In his pastoral work, he accompanies farmers, laborers, and Indigenous communities—not just as a "spiritual shepherd," but as a comrade in building a more just structure. In his view, the Church is not a site of power, but a community of spiritual-political struggle.

This position challenges the historical function of the Catholic Church as a colonial actor in the Philippines—from its role in evangelization during Spanish rule to its influence in shaping a Catholic-centric national identity post-independence. Unlike critiques from outside, internal resistance such as Fr. Ernesto's has strategic and transformative value, showing that coloniality is not inherent in Catholic faith itself, but in the power structures attached to it.

Within decolonial theory, Fr. Ernesto's approach can be understood as a form of liberation hermeneutics—an interpretive practice that reads religious texts and traditions from the standpoint of the oppressed, while remaining within a faith framework. This approach avoids the false dichotomy of religion as either "opium" or "instrument of domination," and instead reveals that religion can be a site of resistance—depending on who interprets, in what context, and for whose benefit.

Through this movement, the Church is pulled back to its prophetic roots—defending those weakened by the system, rather than legitimizing the system itself. Fr. Ernesto reminds us that Jesus was not part of the religious-political elite of his time; he was condemned precisely because he challenged oppressive structures. In this light, internal resistance is not only possible but essential in deconstructing coloniality at the heart of spiritual authority.

Therefore, Fr. Ernesto's narrative strengthens the argument that decolonizing religious studies need not be anti-institutional, but must be anti-colonial—particularly in challenging the ways in which religious institutions manipulate faith to legitimize political power and cultural dominance. He demonstrates that transformation can begin from within—through contextual reinterpretation of faith, practices of solidarity, and a spirituality that lives alongside the oppressed.

Envisioning a Pluralistic and Just Religious Studies

All informants in this study expressed a strong consensus that religious studies in the Philippines requires a radical restructuring—towards greater justice, reflexivity, and accommodation of religious and spiritual diversity. They reject the binary between domination and erasure—between maintaining Catholicism or replacing it with another single tradition. Rather than a mere shift in religious hegemony, what they advocate is a reconstruction of the discursive stage itself, where all communities speak not as supporting characters, but as authentic narrators within the landscape of religious knowledge.

As Dr. Caleb Santos (not his real name) put it:

> *"Decolonization is not about swapping one main character with another. It's not about kicking one actor off the stage and replacing them with a new, uniform cast. If the stage remains the same, the script remains the same, and the voices remain unchanged—what has really changed? True decolonization is when the stage itself is dismantled, opened, and reimagined—not simply so that we can speak, but so that all voices that have long been silenced—women's voices, Indigenous voices, local spiritualities, minority faiths—can claim equal space. It's not about becoming the center. It's about destroying the very idea of the center, so we can build together—not through dominance, but through dialogue."*

This statement reflects a deep understanding that epistemic domination is not undone merely by changing who is represented, but by dismantling the very ideological and institutional architecture that reproduces exclusion. It aligns with Walter Mignolo's (2017) concept of *epistemic disobedience*, which urges scholars to resist intellectual frameworks that mute plural voices and lived experiences. In this context, decolonization is not anti-Catholic, but anti-hegemonic—it rejects the position of any one religion as a universal norm and opens space for multiple epistemic centers.

Meanwhile, Maria Amina (not her real name) proposed a concrete direction for transformation: community-based religious education as a core methodology in higher education. She stated:

> *"My Islam is not in books. My Islam is in trauma, in refugee camps, and in the kitchen where my mother taught us to recite the Qur'an by the light of an oil lamp and the sound of crickets. My Islam was born out of unresolved fear, from loss, and from the adhan that still echoed even when the sky was full of smoke. We don't recognize labels like 'moderate Islam,' 'fundamentalist Islam,' or 'traditional Islam.' What we know is: Islam is when my father still fed a neighbor who once reported him. Islam is when my mother taught al-Fatihah not with threats, but with a hug. We know Islam from patience, from suppressed tears, and from the courage to keep doing good even when ignored. So don't measure my Islam by what I know, but by how I live it."*

This testimony challenges the academic assumption that religion can only be understood through texts, formal histories, or established theological systems. Maria's account emphasizes that religion is also embedded in daily life, in generational trauma, in women's spaces and kitchens, and in marginal practices rarely recognized as "academic." She invites us to understand Islam—and religion more broadly—as lived experience, not just doctrinal structure.

This view resonates with embodied epistemologies—knowledge born of the body, place, and lived experience, not merely of intellect or text (Derpic, 2020; Escobar, 2016). Within a decolonial framework, this approach disrupts modern academic logic that separates subject from object, text from practice, and reason from affect. By positioning community as a center of knowledge production, religious studies can be transformed from sterile abstraction into a discipline that breathes, bleeds, and takes a stand.

This restructuring requires three main shifts:

1. Methodological reorientation: From text-based analysis to community praxis; from systematic theology to narrative testimony.
2. Epistemic decentralization: Recognizing multiple ways of knowing—from Indigenous worldviews, minorities, women, and informal spiritualities.
3. Political acknowledgment of trauma and history: Religion cannot be understood apart from colonial wounds, displacement, dispossession, and marginalization.

Thus, what the informants advocate is not merely inclusivity discourse, but a call to rebuild the epistemology of religious studies itself. They invite us not only to study religion but to learn *from* those long considered "non-theologians"—mothers reciting scripture in refugee kitchens, farmers praying to ancestors in their fields, or Indigenous practitioners speaking with rivers and trees. It is

within these voices that religious studies may be reborn—as an ethical, political, and spiritual space allied with life.

This vision challenges the epistemic boundaries of a discipline long dominated by textual, systematic, and formal theological approaches. By centering lived experience, collective trauma, and community-based spiritualities, the informants show that religion cannot be separated from bodies, histories, and material landscapes in which it is rooted. Religion lives not only in altars or seminar rooms, but also in evacuation kitchens, sacred forests, and daily resistance to systemic injustice.

This approach offers an epistemological alternative—not just adding more "variety" to existing frameworks, but questioning the foundation of the discipline itself: Who is considered authoritative? What counts as valid data? How is spiritual reality articulated? In this sense, decolonization is not about expanding representation alone—it is about overhauling the epistemic structures that have constrained our understanding of religious plurality. It rejects treating marginalized communities as objects of study and instead recognizes them as epistemic subjects—holders of knowledge and interpreters of faith on their own terms.

These findings confirm that religious studies in the Philippines is not a neutral space but a site of epistemic politics—a battleground between dominant narratives and silenced voices. In this light, every definition, syllabus, academic forum, and curriculum becomes a political act—determining who is centered and who is excluded. The history of religion in the Philippines cannot be separated from the history of colonialism, and thus, its academic discourse is never untouched by colonial residue.

Dismantling the singular narrative of "the Philippines = Catholicism" is not a rejection of Catholicism itself, but a critique of how religion has been deployed as a hegemonic tool—silencing other narratives and spiritualities. It is a defense of plurality, a reclamation of histories and faiths that persist in silence: from refugee mothers chanting the Qur'an in Mindanao, to Lumad grandmothers whispering healing chants, to prayers offered to forest spirits in Ifugao.

Thus, religious studies must be reimagined as an ethical and political arena, not merely an academic field. It must make room for alternative narratives born from pain, resistance, and hope. Decolonization is not merely a discourse—it is a call to responsibility, not only toward denied pasts but toward a more just, dialogical, and plural future of knowledge.

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) asserts, building epistemologies of the South is not only about recognizing diverse knowledge outside Western paradigms (Goodwin, 2022). It demands a radical reconstruction of knowledge structures that have long silenced, normalized, and replaced local ways of knowing within subaltern communities.

Santos reminds us that epistemic dominance is not rooted in superiority, but in systemic erasure—the colonial conquest of not only land, but also religious imagination, replacing spiritual vocabularies with belief systems controlled by state and ecclesiastical power. Therefore, epistemologies of the South must be understood as both political and spiritual acts—not mere academic inclusion, but ethical projects to reclaim voice, space, and dignity from colonial silencing (Santos, 2006).

In the Philippine context, decolonizing religious studies means placing the spiritual experiences of Moro Muslims, Lumad peoples, local faith traditions, Protestant minorities, and progressive Catholics at the center of knowledge production. It means abandoning the illusion of academic neutrality and embracing committed listening—listening to pain, confusion, and the long-muted silences that demand scholarly space.

A decolonial religious studies must cultivate spiritual courage, not just academic rigor—the courage to acknowledge our own epistemic limits, to approach "the other" with humility, and to accept that truth may lie not only in arguments, but in song, ritual, and whispered stories passed

down through generations. This courage begins not with speaking, but with listening—for only by listening can we begin to heal the epistemic wounds that have long haunted so many communities.

CONCLUTION

This article has demonstrated that the dominant narrative of the Philippines as a "Catholic nation" is not merely a demographic reality, but a colonial construct—reproduced systematically through religious institutions, education, and academic discourse. Through the collective reflections of five cross-religious and cross-ethnic figures, we observe how the coloniality of religion operates not only through theological dominance, but also through the erasure of local spiritualities and the marginalization of subaltern epistemologies.

In this context, religious studies cannot be seen as a neutral domain. It is an arena of epistemic politics, where hegemonic narratives are negotiated, sustained, or resisted. As shown in this study, the decolonial project in Philippine religious studies is not merely about creating space for "the other," but about reconfiguring the epistemic, methodological, and relational foundations upon which religious knowledge is produced. It entails redefining listening—not as a data collection technique, but as a new academic ethic: one that is committed, egalitarian, and transformative.

Moreover, the findings of this collective reflection reveal that spirituality is not solely about systems of belief, but also about relationships—with land, with history, with colonial wounds, and with everyday struggle. When the Lumad describe ritual as a way of caring for the earth, when Moro Muslims recall displacement as part of faith, or when a Catholic priest questions whom the Church truly serves—these are moments when we see religion as a living field of meaning, dense with complexity and possibility.

This study contributes to a paradigmatic shift in religious studies in Southeast Asia, especially in postcolonial contexts, by offering a decolonial theoretical framework, a narrative-participatory methodology, and a reading that recognizes community experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. It reminds us that a just religious studies cannot be built on the silence of the oppressed.

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