

The challenge of difference: Homosexuality and same sex marriage in the context of the religious education in Vietnam

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Abstract

One ethical challenge confronting Vietnam today is the issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The existence of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) group is legalized in many countries but it is still not recognized in Vietnam. Such *non-recognition* is due to the Confucian traditions that frown upon same-sex union and homosexuality. The discussion of homosexuality is unattractive to the Vietnamese government. Such a discourse is also foreign to the present social reality in Vietnam. The discourse of this *human condition* takes on the aspect of *difference*. This paper grounds itself in the discourse of same-sex marriage and homosexuality. It considers the discourse from the Biblical perspective and the Church's teachings. The discourse on homosexuality and same-sex marriage remains almost marginal in Vietnam. This paper aims to open a debate on the issues of same-sex marriage and homosexuality. It attempts to shed light on the possible ways to change for the better the ethical values of the Vietnamese insofar as the treatment of the members of the LGBTQ is concerned. We aspire for the ethics of *openness* and *respect*. This kind of ethics provides the venue in promoting solidarity with the marginalized of society. Religious educators face the challenge of helping students who are gays and of defending their human dignity. To meet such a challenge, this paper discusses Erikson's theory on *psycho-social development* as a pathway for religious educators to assist and form the *personal identity* of their students.

Keywords: homosexuality, same-sex marriage, religious education, ethics of openness and respect, personal identity

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1. Introduction

Homosexuality as an ethical issue has always been a contentious and absorbing subject for Vietnamese people in general and for Catholic Christians in particular. The discussion about such a controversial topic is still a taboo in Vietnamese society. Although homosexuals are gradually accepted by their own families, the vast majority of the members of the LGBTQ is still locked away in invisible isolation and fear. The protection of their dignity as human persons has not gone far enough in the realm of social acceptance and civil rights. In fact, it is the other way around. Vietnamese are heavily weighed down by the conservative Confucian culture and tradition in which human relationships are expected to exhibit the core conception of “*Yin and Yang*” (the *sameness-difference* character of reality). The reality of homosexuality is therefore perceived to be in diametric opposition to the traditional understanding of sex which is rooted deeply in Confucian ethics. Within the confines of Confucian morality, the idea of a Vietnamese family is one which is basically *unsympathetic* and *uncaring* to people (family members included) who identify themselves as belonging to the LGBTQ group. As a result, homosexuals feel themselves isolated and marginalized because they are viewed as *different*. In today’s society, being *different* means being vulnerable to be rejected and exploited. On top of that, gay people always bear the familial and social family pressures which assume the various forms of psychological, emotional, and even economic intimidation.

The discussion of homosexuality is a significant aspect of Christian ethical reflection. Homosexuality as a human reality is recognized as a relevant topic in Christian ethics, beliefs, and practices. In fact, it forms an important part in the religious education of a Christian believer. The humane treatment of people who consider themselves *different* is a vital element in the body of Christian ethical precepts. Treating a homosexual with compassion and respect is a Christian value. That is why religious education is very important. For it should instruct young Christians (i.e., students) that homosexuality is a *human reality*, and that the members of the LGBTQ community should be treated as individuals deserving the respect and dignity of a human person.

The primary focus of this paper is the *ethical-educational challenge* posed to human society—that is, particularly the Vietnamese society—by the reality of *difference* or *otherness*. While moral training/formation—or general ethics based on the Confucian worldview—occupies a significant part in the formal curriculum in Vietnam, the *moral* and *religious* education is foreign, even irrelevant in the overall Vietnamese system of education (Doan, 2005). In other words, *religious education* in Vietnam is absent in the body of school curricula. Thus, it remains unrecognized, unrelated, and *different*. The Catholic Church is a minority faith-group in Communist Vietnam. Consequently, there have been significant difficulties and ongoing struggles with respect to the existence of Catholic schools. No Catholic colleges or universities are allowed by law under communist rule—except for the Catholic Kindergartens, the Minor and Major Diocesan Seminaries, and the Religious Institutes where the overwhelming majority of the students are religious people.

Since *religious-ethical* education is absent in the education system of Vietnam, and since the reality of homosexuality is of special ethical concern, the task of instructing Vietnamese citizens regarding the morality of homosexuality and same-sex marriage is a real educational challenge. For this kind of ethico-educational concern is a marginal interest in Vietnamese society. Obviously, it has very little impact on the formation and development of *moral* and *religious* values of young people. This fact, therefore, poses a great challenge for *religious* educators—that is, for Christian teachers.

In this study, the researcher does *not* attempt to explore in detail the issues and factors surrounding the morality of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Her chief concern is to focus her best effort on delving into the major challenges, problems, and difficulties that Vietnamese religious educators face on ethical matters that pertain to

homosexuality as a fact of human nature. We would like to point here that both the *non-recognition* of moral and religious education and the *want of interest* in homosexuality as a moral issue are dimensions of *difference* and *otherness* in the Vietnamese culture and society; and this *fact* is what this student wants to highlight and address.

In the following two sections, this research focuses on three discursive aspects which are inseparably interrelated: the Holy Scripture, the Catholic moral teachings, and the Catholic Pastoral Theology (i.e., pastoral care). Each of these aspects will be treated in turn. The first part presents the views of the Holy Scripture on homosexuality. The teachings of the Catholic Church on homosexuality and same-sex marriage will be discussed next. It should be noted at the outset that this paper does not intend to explore in detail what the Catholic Church teaches on the subject; rather, it will look at how the Church deals with this controversial topic. In particular, this research will expound the official teachings/views of the Church regarding the abovementioned issue, as well as its practical recommendations insofar as *pastoral care* of homosexuals is concerned. Finally, this paper presents the current politico-social climate in regard to the gay movement in Vietnam. It will discuss *this* prevailing reality within the sphere of *Religious Education*—its challenges and its hopes for the future.

2. The Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality

At the outset, it must be clarified here that there is no definitive elucidation—either directly or indirectly—about the morality of homosexuality, homosexual activities, and same-sex marriage in the Holy Scripture *as a whole*. The gender distinction between male and female is clearly defined and established both in the Old Testament and New Testament. Homosexuality in the Bible assumes the character of *otherness/difference*—and *ambivalence*. We begin by citing references in *Genesis*' account. In the first book of the Old Testament, a very clear presentation of God's original intention and purpose is given regarding the nature and identity of the human person. Firstly, the human person was created "male and female" (Gn 1:27). This twofold character of human sexuality—that is, being both male and female—denotes clear distinction as well as mutual complementariness not only in terms of biology but also of personhood.

Secondly, God stipulates in the book of Genesis the nature of human marriage in the form of a union between a man and a woman. For "*it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him*" (Gn 2:18). This personal communion between a man and a woman is achieved through sexual union and complementariness in the relationship. That is why "*a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh*" (Gn 2:24). Lastly, God blesses this union and regards it as a special feature of collaboration in God's creation and plan of salvation. Thus, in Genesis, God tells the first human persons and blesses them saying, "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it*" (1: 28).

In the similar vein, Leviticus 18:22 states clearly the moral principle which forbids same-sex relations: "*You [masculine human person] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*" The moral precept does not only characterize homosexuality as an abomination; it also lays down the death penalty specified in the same account of Leviticus (20:13): "*If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their bloodguilt is upon them.*" In the New Testament, as gleaned from the context where Christianity found itself confronted by pagan society of the time, St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians paints the homosexual behavior as an example of sin that threatens humanity. He teaches that those who engage in homosexual acts will not enter the Kingdom of God: "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, . . . nor sexual perverts*" (1Cor 6: 9). The label "sexual perverts" obviously refer to the individuals who engage in homosexual acts.

Likewise, St. Paul's first *Letter* to Timothy 1:9-10 basically echoes what the first Pauline Letter to the Corinthians says about the immoral nature of homosexual relations, "*We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels . . . for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.*" In like manner, St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans unequivocally describes the relationships of *same-sex-love* as illegitimate and lustful and specifically

condemned it as deserving divine condemnation and punishment: “*God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones*” (Rm 1:26).

From the preceding discussion, it can be deduced that homosexuality and its acts or expressions are *not* sanctioned by some “books” in the Holy Scripture. In other words, there are parts in the Holy Scripture where homosexuality is viewed *negatively*. From the biblical perspective, homosexual relationship does not fulfill God’s procreative purpose and thus is regarded as unnatural and immoral. *It must be kept in mind, however, that the Holy Scripture has its specific cultural and social contexts.* In examining the Biblical understanding of homosexuality, therefore, one must not forget the cultural, social, historical conditions of the times. Thus, one cannot use the Holy Scripture to formulate a *definitive* ethics on homosexuality. Unsurprisingly, there is perhaps no issue more controversial and contentious which confronts the Catholic Church today than the issue of homosexuality. The question we would like to address in the next section is, “How does the Church deal with the controversial issue of homosexuality and same-sex relationship?” “What are the official teachings/views of the Church regarding the abovementioned issues?”

3. The Catholic Church’s definitive Perspectives on Homosexuality

The Catholic Church has always been mindful of the biblical injunction in the book of Genesis 1:27 “*God created man male and female.*” This biblical passage is the foundation of the Catholic teachings on the personal identity of the human person as well as the idea or ideal of human relationships. As we have expounded in the foregoing, from the perspective of the Holy Scripture, homosexuality and homosexual acts—as well as illegal heterosexual behavior—are *generally* deemed immoral and sinful. The *Magisterium* of the Catholic Church, which are fundamentally grounded in the Holy Scripture and the Sacred Tradition, has always maintained and declared that homosexual orientation, in any form or manner, is “objectively disordered.” Consequently, homosexual acts or activities are also “intrinsically disordered” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2010, nos. 2357-2358.) Put in a concrete way, homosexual orientation, although *not* sinful or bad by itself, “is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (*Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* [CDF], 1986, no. 3).

For the Church, deliberate homosexual acts are activities of grave depravity and, therefore, intrinsically disordered. The reason is that they are contrary to the natural law which, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, comes from the divine authority of God. For a homosexual act does not conform to the sexual act of married couples through which the gift of life is obtained and propagated. This means that such an act does not proceed from a genuine affectivity and sexual complementarity between human persons. Thus, “under no circumstances can they be approved” (CCC, 2010, no. 2357.) For the Catholic Church, the bond of marriage is restricted to the union of a man and a woman. Husbands and wives united in the sacrament of matrimony are regarded as God’s effective collaborators to naturally *procreate, cherish, and educate* their children according to God’s intention and purpose of salvation, as clearly manifested and inculcated in the teachings of the Church (CCC, 2010, no. 2335).

Pope Francis, the present Pontiff of the Catholic Church, further emphasized in clear terms that there are “absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family” (Pope Francis, 2016, no. 251, p.190). From the ethical standpoint—that is, from the Catholic moral perspective—sexual acts are morally legitimate and acceptable *ONLY* in the marital relationship between a man and a woman. A person who engages in homosexual acts, therefore, is morally guilty and accountable for his/her conduct (CDF, 1986, no. 7). In other words, all non-reproductive sexual acts of homosexuality are immoral by nature, intent, and definition. There is no doubt about the official teaching(s) of the Catholic Church on homosexuality and same sex marriage. It is clear that the Church does *not* sanction acts of homosexual nature and same-sex union among gays or members of the LGBTQ community.

The relevant question arises as to *how* gays or homosexuals should be treated by the Church and by the Christian faithful. Do homosexuals have a place in the Church? Can they actively live their Catholic Faith? Are

there ethical and pastoral guidelines in dealing with gays and the members of the LGBTQ family? It is reassuring to know that the Catholic Church does not only have clear teachings on homosexuality and same-sex marriage; it also has practical principles in providing *pastoral care* to those who have the tendency to homosexuality (i.e., tendency to homosexual or same-sex acts) and those who maintain same-sex relationship.

Firstly, it is the explicit conviction of the Church that homosexuals and members of the LGBTQ community are children of God, created in God's image and likeness. Thus, they must be treated with "respect, compassion, and sensitivity." The Church makes it very clear that "every sign of unjust discrimination in regard [to homosexual persons] should be avoided" (CCC, 2010, no. 2358). Conversely, the Church enjoins everyone to treat homosexuals with dignity and respect.

Secondly, and more importantly—insofar as the *ethical-spiritual-pastoral* care of the Church towards the homosexuals is concerned—Mother Church maintains that "Christians who are homosexuals are called, as all of us are, to a chaste life. As they dedicate their lives to understanding the nature of God's personal call to them, they will be able to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance more faithfully and receive the Lord's grace so freely offered there in order to convert their lives more fully to his way" (CDF, 1986, no. 12). Such pronouncement suggests that homosexuals or the members of the LGBTQ community are invited to participate in the life of the Church and are called to live a holy life as children of God.

Generally speaking, as has been pointed out in roundabout way, both the Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church—i.e., its ethical concerns/views—are unambiguous in asserting that the practice of homosexuality and same-sex marriage is not morally accepted. As mentioned above, for the Church, marriage is limited to the *union* of a man and a woman in the holy bond of matrimony. As a *Vietnamese* religious sister, I am faced with some contextual questions respecting the issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage:

"How does my country or nation deal with the moral challenges/issues of homosexuality in our time and milieu?"

"How does the present Vietnamese society view the subject of homosexuality and same-sex union/relationship/marriage from the ethico-social standpoint?"

"Is homosexuality a morally unacceptable or acceptable reality in the Vietnamese context?"

These questions and issues will now become the proper topic of discussion in the following section.

4. Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage Movement in Vietnam

Like in any other country around the world, homosexuality has been a growing moral concern in Vietnam recently. However, it is important to state here that the homosexual or gay movement has *not* so far made its *real presence* felt in the current Vietnamese society. Nor is it within the radar range of the Vietnamese communist government. It is still at its infancy stage; but it is there—gradually growing in an unnoticeable manner.

It is also worth noting that the Confucian way of life, traditions, and habits—which are deeply imbedded in the Vietnamese consciousness—frown upon the reality of homosexuality as a human condition as well as the prospect of same-sex marriage. The Confucian culture views the reality of homosexuality with ambivalence, even with suspicion. In other words, homosexuality is an *other* or *different* to the Confucian way of being. As we have earlier mentioned, the Vietnamese frame of mind is heavily influenced by the conservative Confucian culture and tradition in which human relationships are expected to adhere to the core idea of "*Yin and Yang*" (the *sameness-difference* character of reality); although this Confucian clear-cut distinction of gender may not seem as strong as in the past. But it still wields much influence or impact on the Vietnamese mindset of sexual dimorphism. Consequently, such way of seeing reality creates boundaries and prejudices, as well as social stigmatization and discrimination of the homosexuals. It is pertinent to remark here that although the *notion of culture* and the *idea of human being* are two different conceptions, they are also interrelated concepts. Humans are the products of

culture and, at the same time, humans influence or create culture (Tran, 2013). This means that the *two realities* have a symbiotic relationship.

This explains why the gay movement in Vietnam is still a relatively sensitive issue—that is, it is *not* to be openly discussed. But despite the prevailing cultural tradition of Confucianism—and in spite of the fact that homosexuals are still treated less favourably than others, and that they experience exclusion and discrimination—supporters of homosexuality are now making their presence felt in the present Vietnamese society. They are well-motivated to work and campaign for the defense of the political and social rights of homosexuals *legally* through formal and informal ways (Luong, 2013). They maintain that homosexuals are part of human society and so have the full right to live out their *personal identity* peacefully and honorably. Unfortunately, until today, the gay movement almost remains marginal and *different*. The reason is that such a movement is viewed as contrary to the Vietnamese cultural values. Thus, it may not be seen as a *possible* index of *normativity*. Such a stance is, for example, expressed by Dr. Le, Thuy Tuoi (in Mai, 2016):

We are Asian people, and this sexual disorder [homosexuality] creates negative implications for our family and society. The public community cannot support or accept homosexual relationships. Those who pretend to be homosexual (fake homosexuals) should get out of their condition and go back to the heterosexual population. And if you think you are the “real” homosexuals you can still revert back if you are determined. Your family and the society are always here to help you. If not, you will always be lost, lonely and condemned by society (p. 14).

It is obvious that this view on the reality of homosexuality as a human condition is very narrow-minded. But this is the present sad state of things in Vietnam. The question that comes to mind at this point of the discussion is, “Given the current cultural mindset of the Vietnamese society—and given the fact that people have different moral principles and ideas of what is right or wrong (law)—how does the Vietnamese **law** on marriage and family life tackle the issue on homosexuality and homosexual union/relationship?” The *Vietnamese Marriage and Family law* (2000, article 10) definitively prohibits same-sex marriage.

In the present-day Vietnam, the life-conditions of the homosexuals and their social circumstances have improved a bit. Although the government denies same-sex relationship/ union its legal sanction and status, it allows or tolerates its presence in society as a “hidden aspect” of humanity or its aberration. For example, the government allows the annual festivity of LGBTQ community called “Viet Pride” which occurs during summertime in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. This event receives *no* threat from the Vietnamese government or any protest from the conservative groups (Mai, 2016). However, this does not mean that such “tolerance” is reflective of the way Vietnamese people think or their ethical view(s) of homosexuality.

As previously discussed, homosexuality is not openly supported by the Vietnamese people in general and same-sex marriage is not recognized by the Vietnamese government. Thus, the gay movement does not enjoy social visibility in Vietnam. It is quite alarming to note that—through the growth of the social media platforms and the public entertainment online—misconceptions and disinformation regarding the reality of homosexuality and the gay social movement have reached a distressing point where the virus of distortion and disinformation has infected the field of education.

Indeed, education plays an important part in the development of young citizens in an attempt to transfer values mainly through school instruction—from generation to the next (Taylor, 2006). The question is, what role does education have to play in educating the citizenry of a country insofar as homosexuality and same-sex union/relationship are concerned? How should educators—or *religious* educators, for that matter—approach and deal with the said issues?

It is a fact that Catholic schools give more attention to value-formation of students than do secular/public schools. But Catholic schools do not only give importance to value-formation; more significantly, they emphasize *religious*-value-formation. This is where the challenge for religious educators lies. What happens if a government

does not allow *religious*-value-formation of its citizens? This is actually the situation that the Vietnamese Church finds itself. At present, religious education is *not* part of the Vietnamese educational system. If this is the case then, how can the Catholic Church in Vietnam instruct its faithful about the moral issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage/union? These questions will be addressed in the following sections.

5. Background and context: Homosexuality and Religious Education in Vietnam

Gay social movement arises at different times, in divergent cultures, and in various forms. However, “its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained” (CCC, 2010, no. 2357). It is noteworthy that in a conservative culture and society, this movement is seen as a threat to sensitivity and morality of the general population. The question is, “What if homosexual issues are addressed in the system of education of a country?” Or, “Can such issues be properly given consideration in the sphere of religious education *within* the broader framework of a civil/governmental education system?” In other words, “Can *religious* education *co-exist* with the *civil* and *moral* education of the citizens under one umbrella system?”

In some Asian countries like the Philippines, *religious* education and *civil* education *co-exist* under one broad school system. In other words, religious education of the citizens is part of the overall education system of the country. Vietnam is a *different* case. Religious education—that is, Catholic Christian education—is not part of the general education of the Vietnamese citizens. In other words, *religious* education *within* the structure of human education in Vietnam is impermissible. This reality creates a particular or peculiar challenge to religious educators such as the Catholic Christian teachers. Indeed, how much more challenging is it to instruct the Vietnamese Catholic faithful on the morality of homosexuality and same-sex union?!

In the following sub-sections, the reality of homosexuality is, *firstly*, discussed in the context of religious education in Vietnam, and then, *secondly*, the significant challenges encountered by Catholic religious educators under the present social circumstances in the Vietnamese state.

Homosexuality as Viewed in the Context of Religious Education in Vietnam - As previously mentioned, religious education in Vietnam does not appear in public schools’ general curriculum—except for the Catholic Kindergartens, the Minor and Major Diocesan Seminaries, and the Religious Institutes where the overwhelming majority of the students are religious people. This reality is deeply rooted in the nation’s history, since Vietnam is ruled over the years by the Communist Party.

This entails that *teaching* about religious faith and knowledge is only possible in Catholic Seminaries and Religious Institutes. Although the subject of religion has been a part of school education since the 20th century, its treatment as an academic course has not been systematically and structurally recognized as a legitimate school topic or theme. In other words, religion is not taught as a subject in its own right; rather, it is *combined* with other subjects such as history, art, and geography classes, etc. Consequently, all curricula for religious education are created exclusively *by* and *for* the Seminaries and Religious Institutions.

All *this* points to the fact that there is no place for *religious* education in the public schools in Vietnam. There are voices clamoring for this kind of education to be acknowledged within the formal curriculum of Vietnamese schools. But these voices have so far not been heard. The Vietnamese people acknowledge that *religious* moral education holds an important role in educating the young of the present generation in their religious beliefs, so that they can live a good ethical life; but unfortunately, religious ethical education Vietnam remains at the marginal section—*exclusively* limited to religious persons (seminarians and student-sisters).

To elaborate further, in Vietnam, *general ethics* is given at all school levels and taught as a compulsory subject. However, *sexual ethics* as an academic issue or subject is deliberately **not** included in the school curriculum—meaning to say, it is *not* addressed or taught (Mai, 2016). For example, at the primary levels, the focus of teaching is on human character and personality building. In the lower secondary schools, teaching ethics means educating Vietnamese as citizens of a socialist state. In higher education, the ideas of socialism and the principles of Marxism

and Leninism are taught with a view of instructing the Vietnamese citizenry in the ways of socialist-Marxist outlook (Doan, 2005).

That is the present state of affairs in Vietnam. It is a fact that *moral religious education* still remains outside the formal curriculum in the schools. Certainly, this is a major shortcoming or disadvantage for the Vietnamese education system. This is why the subject of homosexuality in relation to *moral religious education* does not gain any attention; although it is a most important and even revolutionary reality that is gradually but greatly affecting the lives of people, especially the young. This utter lack of intelligent engagement with the reality of homosexuality as a fact of human condition bears many complex repercussions on the Vietnamese society and on the Church. The ethical issue of homosexuality remains a huge challenge for Christian ethicists and religious educators.

It is remarkable that young Vietnamese of the present generation are beginning to be more persistent and enterprising in the search for their own image and identity. They adopt models and images of human personality as presented by entertainment media and online social media platforms. They are specially drawn to imitate modes of fashion and luxurious lifestyles of high-profile athletes and movie stars. Sad to say, this type of “culture” shaped by entertainment media and social media platforms brings with it various social problems, as well as the decline of morality among young people (Nguyen, 2005).

In this midst of all this, homosexuality as a social and human phenomenon becomes more and more misunderstood by many people. It is viewed as a harmful aspect of modern society that generates social problems. Since homosexuality is *little* understood, and since it is sometimes considered as a contagious disease or an unhealthy lifestyle, homosexuals and the members of the LGBTQ community in Vietnam still suffer from severe stigma and discrimination. They face many difficulties on various fronts: in the workplace, social media, schools, and even in the family. The ethical issue of homosexuality is a matter of utmost importance to our society in our time—and also to the Catholic Church. We should all be bothered by the fact that a big sector of society suffers from abuse, discrimination, and injustice. Religious education has a big role in a modern society like Vietnam. Teaching the young about the nature of homosexuality as a human condition does *not* mean supporting or condoning homosexuality. It means instilling in the mind and heart of the young an intelligent and sympathetic understanding of homosexuality as an essential fact of human nature.

For Catholic Christians, it is an important part of religious education to *know, understand, and appreciate* the teachings of Mother Church according to Christian faith, ethos, and worldview. Religious education in a “Catholic school is above all a question of *communicating Christ*, of helping to form Christ in the lives of others” (Pope John Paul II, 1979, p. 2). Such a principle is the main feature of the religious-spiritual formation of Catholic Christians; and it should be the key element in the development of the moral values of students. In Vietnam, it is hoped that in a foreseeable future Christian *religious moral education* will be given its rightful place in the public discourse. *Religion* and *politics* remain separate and sometimes conflicting discourses. The Church wants to educate the Catholic faithful in the ways of the Gospel; but the Communist Party of Vietnam does not allow it. The Church sometimes cannot do anything, since the government controls all major political and social organizations—including the ministry of education. The basic rights of the Vietnamese such as the freedom of expression and the liberty to engage in spiritual and religious activities are strictly restricted.

This paper has argued in a roundabout manner that *education* is an important aspect of human development. In particular, it has shown that *religious moral education* is that which is needed in educating the citizenry about the nature of homosexuality as human reality. Free and effective *religious moral education* will be a reality in Vietnam if the Vietnamese government becomes more *inclusive* by opening up the Vietnamese education system and allowing its citizens to have the option to have *religious moral education*. After all, “all citizens are equal before the law” (Vietnamese *Constitution*, 1992, art. 52). Thus, it is necessary that the Vietnamese education system become inclusive, *not* exclusive, comprehensive, *not* restrictive.

Scientific studies have shown that *religious education* is always part of the overall school curriculum in strong and progressive countries. According to Mette (2007), promoting *religious education* means opening up an avenue

to interreligious dialogue which is a healthy aspect of a thriving community where the basic principles of *human relationship* are respected and followed. The state should not reject *religious education* in its system of education. It is a way of teaching students the all-important value of welcoming the *other* who is of different faith or race (*Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz* [*Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference*], 2005). The Vietnamese government should realize that *including* religious education in its system of education will be to its advantage in the long run. It should allow the Catholic Church to actively participate in educating its citizens.

Pope Paul VI (1965) touches this matter in a papal document. He asserts that Catholic schools aim to form the human individual in a holistic manner—intellectually, spiritually, morally, socially and psychologically. Regrettably, under a communist government, religious freedom is severely stifled, even curtailed. It does not support religious education; nor is it interested at all in ethical issues of utmost importance such as homosexuality. The result is that religious educators find themselves left out and ignored—faced with overwhelming challenges and difficulties. As this juncture, a question arises in the discussion: “Given the social environment in Vietnam, which is restrictive and discriminatory, are there some ways for the religious educators to positively deal with the concrete ethical issues of homosexuality at the present time?”

Major Challenges of Religious Educators regarding the Issue of Homosexuality - The issues and controversies surrounding the human reality of homosexuality pose a clear and real challenge to religious educators—especially Christian ethical-religious educators. This is because, as explained in the preceding discussions, *religion* is viewed with ideological suspicion by the communist party. Formal religious education is presently not included in the Vietnamese education system. This section highlights some challenges faced by the religious educators in Vietnam, as they deal with the moral issues of the time. In particular, this paper considers, in a general way, the reality of homosexuality as a human condition—from the perspectives of science, sociology, law, and ethics.

The gay movement has grown rapidly and dramatically around the world. Homosexual union/marriage has been recognised and legalized in some liberal countries. From the *legal* point of view, homosexuality as a social concern has gained some grounds. In the field of sociology, the state of discussion regarding homosexuality is still very fluid. Some sociologists still believe that homosexuality is not only a physiological and genetic problem, but also a social aberration and, therefore, a threat to the human family and community. Others argue that homosexuality emerges as a cultural phenomenon because of some adverse *social* and *economic* conditions. And there are some who assert that homosexuality is a psychological nature; others maintain that as a human behavior it is “contagious” (Nguyen, 2015)—meaning to say it can be learned and imbibed. Still others have advanced the notion—derived from the biological point of view—that homosexuality is caused by some hormonal changes in the body of the mother during her pregnancy—thus leading to an abnormal and incomplete development of the baby’s sex (Nguyen et al., 2012).

The difficulty is that the different views mentioned above do **not** help much in clarifying the nature of homosexuality as a legitimate subject of ethics in the *value-formation* of citizens. This is true particularly in Vietnam where *religious* education is not given attention—despite the fact that the *value-education* forms an essential element in the education of the citizenry. This fact, for example, is expressed clearly in the national *vision* and *goal* of Vietnamese education which is “[t]o educate Vietnamese in morality, health, knowledge, aesthetics, and career; [to instill in them] loyalty and the ideals of national independence and socialism; to form and nurture the Vietnamese personal character, and to develop abilities and good qualities of the citizens, in order to fulfill the mission of country in nation building and preservation” (*Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, 2005, p. 1).

In the above statement, there is *no* explicit reference to *religious*-value formation. Thus, religious education in Vietnam still remains an unexplored area in the general education system. It is vital for the Vietnamese State (government) to regard human beings as sharing universal values (Golden, 2002). And part of the universal values of humanity are religious and spiritual values. All human beings, for example, have the innate need or longing to connect with Transcendence or the Divine, which is a *spiritual reality*. *Ethics* and *faith*—as expressed in religious

values—must be essential components in every *system of value-education*. Thus, *religious education* should be included in the education curriculum in Vietnam. Making such a *dream* a reality in the future is the main challenge for the Vietnamese religious educators.

The Challenge of the Other or Difference - The title of this paper is *The Challenge of the Difference*. The notion of *difference* or *otherness* is a concept employed in ethics, politics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. Thus, homosexuality as a human reality may be labeled as *difference* or *otherness*. In other words, a gay or homosexual is a *stranger* or *other* to me. In the book *Mindfulness* (Festin, 2012) the author depicts the *different* or *other* as someone “like me.” It may be said that the phenomenon of homosexuality is an *other* to the Vietnamese State and society. As an ethical concern, it is also an *other* to the education system in Vietnam.

Festin (2012) skillfully explains that although the *other* may seem *different* to me, he or she is somehow *like* me in the sense that I am also an *other* to another person. And yet, *I* and the *other/different* will remain separate because between *me* and the *other* there is the unbridgeable gap of *difference/otherness*. In the face of the reality of *difference*—that is, as seen through the ethical lens of *otherness*—there must be a desire for the ethics of “*openness*” and “*respect*” (Coll, 2021). The Vietnamese State which is *other* to the Vietnamese Catholic Church and vice-versa should find some *common ground*. But before finding a *common ground*, each entity should recognize the essential root—which is *difference*.

“*Openness*” indicates the welcoming attitude that would enable the Vietnamese State to allow *different views* (e.g., like those of religious educators) to contribute to the *value-formation* of young Vietnamese people. In other words, both the Church and the Vietnamese State—or both the Christian religious educators and the authorities of the government—should walk on the common path towards the holistic education, formation, and development of the Vietnamese people. “*Openness*” is a positive attitude that sees the possibility of the State and Church coexisting and working harmoniously and peacefully in order to serve the interest of the nation. It is in the atmosphere of *openness* that religious educators can fulfill their mission and conviction in the given context of a *larger tradition* (Englert, 2007).

“*Respect*,” on the other hand, is a disposition which the Vietnamese State should have towards the *other*—the Church, the political opposition, and the world at large. It implies a *recognition* and *affirmation* of the Vietnamese State of the social rights of the Church and its religious educators (Coll, 2021). In other words, the State needs to see the Church as a partner rather than a competitor—a partner with equal voice in the field of education.

Overall, the task of education must be shared by both the state and the Church. There should be *no* discrimination or conflict between the two (Gal 3:28). Both the *State educators* and the *Church religious educators* can work together academically and professionally. For the task of education is *not* exclusive. It “is linked to a lived union with a ‘people’ and, for each individual it can only be attained within this ‘we’” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2007, para 14, p.10). Thus, the ethics of *openness* and *respect* for other is the key to establish an inclusive, effective, and holistic system of education. The ethics of “openness” and “respect” is powerfully illustrated by the parable of the *Good Samaritan* in the Gospel of Luke (10: 25-37). The *Good Samaritan* recognized the total stranger (injured victim) as an *other*; and, in *acknowledging* and *respecting* the *difference* of the victim, the former is able to come to his assistance. Despite the *otherness* of the victim, the *Good Samaritan* is able to understand that “*the other is like him*” because he acts *in the same way* that he would want the *other* to act towards him if the situation is reversed.

Respecting the *other* is the essence of the parable; and it captures the ethics of Christian life. In other words, the *Good Samaritan’s* ethical accountability enables him to transcend the constraints of culture and tradition and to come to help the injured man. His *respect* for the *other* moves him to *see* his own person in the *other*. One can also be a *Good Samaritan* towards a homosexual or a member of the LGBTQ group and acknowledge that “he or she is like me.” The attitude of *openness* and *respect* is exemplified by Pope Francis who said that a Christian should be compassionate towards gays. “I am a sinner, so, who am I to judge,” he said (McElwee, 2016). St. James

(4:12) also reminds us, “*Who are you to judge your neighbor?*” The nature of *openness* and *respect* has “no shape, no size, no weight, no aspect” (Festin, 2012, p. 231). Similarly, *what is good* has no shape or weight or aspect. It is a pure *Good* that inspires us to embrace the *otherness* (*difference*) of the *other*. In *Mindfulness*, the author quotes Steve Jobs who said: “This is who I am, and you can not expect me to be someone I am not” (Festin, 2012, p. 226). Indeed, the ethics of *openness* and *respect* challenges us to accept the *otherness* of the *other*. That, indeed, is the path of real ethical education!

The Other and Religious Education - Sterkens and Vermeer (2012) hold that the aim of religious education is to contribute to the development of students’ religious identity. There is a certain difficulty in this statement when one considers homosexuality from the standpoint of the Catholic faith and teachings. As previously discussed, the Catholic ethical teachings do not endorse homosexual activities and same-sex marriage. For the sacrament of matrimony in the Church is a *union* between a man and a woman. As explained, married couples are God’s effective collaborators in procreation and in the education of children (CCC, 2010, no. 2335). The question is, “How *can* Catholic religious educators/teachers help young homosexuals?” As previously stated, one of the basic tasks of religious educators is to help young people live an *ethical life* and to assist them in *forming* their moral consciousness (Ryan et al., 1993). Considering this task, this paper takes the view that a *religious educator* should teach his or her students *not* only to understand and appreciate his or faith (religion) but, at the same time, to be tolerant of *others* who belong to different religion and culture (cf. *Council of Europe*, 2008, 30).

As indicated in the preceding section, the religious educator should inculcate in the heart and mind of students the ethics of *openness* and *respect*. In the Vietnamese setting, homosexuality is a real moral challenge. Homosexuals are still viewed as the *stranger*, the *weird*, the *abnormal*. But if young Vietnamese are instructed in the ethics of *openness* and *respect*, they will realize that “*the other [the homosexual] is like them,*” and that a gay person deserves respect and kindness, even if, as explained previously, there is an unbridgeable gap between the *I*” and the “*other.*” The Church has its own distinct ethics or morality based on the Scripture, Tradition, and the *Magisterium* (the teaching office of the Church). But the Church also acknowledges the *universal values* of humanity such as justice, equality, goodness, and respect for the life and happiness of the human individual. For example, being kind and respectful towards the *other* is not only a Christian value; it is a *universal* value of all humanity. That is why Pope Francis enjoins all Catholics to be compassionate towards gays.

On the other hand, in recognizing the *universal values* of man, the Vietnamese State will realize that opening up the system of *value-formation* to religious teachings is advantageous in the long run. The Vietnamese State should not feel threatened by religion or religious institutions. As we have argued, the Church is *not* a competitor of the state; it is a partner or collaborator. Insofar as meeting the moral challenge of homosexuality as a social-cultural reality is concerned, the Church and the Vietnamese State can join hands in the area of *religious-value* education.

6. Personal Perspective on Homosexuality

As has been previously pointed out, homosexuality is generally viewed ambivalently and negatively in the Holy Scripture. The Catholic Church maintains that homosexuality is “objectively disordered” and homosexual activities “intrinsically disordered” (CCC, 2010, nos. 2357-2358). As a Catholic religious sister and as a religious *educator*, I support the teachings of the Church. For instance, I do not accept *gay-marriage* in the Church. But I respect and sympathize with gay people as the *other*. I recognize that they are oftentimes victims of injustice, discrimination, and all forms of abuse. I strongly condemn such appalling treatment of homosexuals who are our brothers and sisters. In fact, they are what Jesus calls the “least” and the “last.” They are the “little ones” with whom Jesus identifies Himself. In a way, Jesus tells his disciples to view the *least* (the *other*) in society as *like* them—and *like* Him. “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do it unto Me” (Matt. 25: 40). Overall, I consider the reality of homosexuality as part of human existence. I would say that it is *not* an aberration of human nature; it is part of human nature. And the best way to relate with homosexuals or the members of the LGBTQ community is the ethics of *respect* and *openness*.

7. Homosexuality and Erikson's Psycho-social Development Theory

In the preceding section, I have laid down my *personal perspective* on homosexuality. In this last section, I would like to examine homosexuality from the standpoint of the science of human development. In elucidating this section, I would use Erikson's theory (1950, 1968) on the psycho-social development of the human person. The guiding question of the section is: "What are the *educational implications* of the moral issue(s) of homosexuality and same-sex union/marriage as seen against the broader backdrop of *human identity development*?" Erikson's theory basically focuses on *personal identity*. It is a theory that is well-known and well-respected in the field of psychological education. Interestingly, it is also considered as a *concrete framework* for religious education. Erikson's theory of human psycho-social development has eight stages. Each stage of human life has its own CONFLICT which plays as a turning point in human development.

According to Erikson, if each stage is handled well, an individual gains a strong sense of personal mastery. On the contrary, if that stage is managed poorly, surely the person might feel a sense of inadequacy in his or her psycho-social development. Religious educators should be aware of the different stages of human development—or personal identity formation—so that they can sympathize with their students (especially the gay students) as they grow up and mature. They need to create an inclusive and welcoming environment where students feel appreciated. They have to encourage students to learn new things and build healthy relationships with their classmates, teachers, and peers (Hooser, 2010). By studying the different sexual orientations/nuances, and by applying Erikson's personal identity theory in understanding gay/lesbian identity-development, a religious educator can gain important insights which will help him/her in discharging the task of teaching—whether one is an early childhood educator, a school-age teacher, or someone working with adult learners.

Insofar as the reality of homosexual issues in ordinary life are concerned, one may ask: "Is homosexuality shaped by social factors at every stage of human development?" According to Erikson (1968), social influences and interactions play a key role in shaping a person's human identity. Thus, with Erikson's theory of human psycho-social development in mind, a religious educator should consider the following points.

Prechoolers - Erikson's theoretical framework refers to this initial psycho-social stage of development as one of "*initiative versus guilt*." What are the factors that contribute to the success of the *personal-identity* formation at this stage of life? The personal identity of children at this stage is nurtured and shaped to a great extent by caregivers and teachers. Thus, in this phase of development, children begin to understand the consequences of their actions *morally* through the *ability* of exploration (Erikson, 1950). At this stage, children need the support and encouragement of their caregivers and teachers, so that they learn to take personal initiative and responsibility. Religious educators should provide them with the opportunity to build confidence and a stimulating environment where they are encouraged to make choices, to express feelings, to understand what is acceptable behavior, as well as to blossom productively (Berk, 2003; Santrock, 2004). Therefore, the more positive support from caregivers and teachers is given, the more a child experiences positive *personal-identity* exploration. On the other hand, if children in this stage are rejected or discouraged to act upon their own choices, or experience criticisms from caregivers or teachers, they will develop a deep sense of guilt, embarrassment, and loneliness. This may cause serious struggle and fear later on in life when they face difficulties.

School Age - At this stage, the conflict is called *industry versus inferiority*. It is a stage where a child begins to socialize and form all kinds of relationships with their peers, teachers, parents, and other members of society. This is a very crucial part of human development that greatly affects the child's identity as a human person. Societal interactions and personal relationships will shape a child's sense of the *self*. If a child feels accepted by peers and teachers and friends, then he or she develops a self-confidence. On the other hand, if a child experiences discrimination, bullying, and exclusion, he or she will suffer deeply from *inferiority* and the lack of self-confidence. The negative experiences will impact a child gravely, and his or her ability to do personal tasks efficiently will suffer considerably (Erikson, 1950). It is imperative that children at this stage should feel the guidance and support of his or her *significant others*, in order to learn how to work well and effectively. Thus, religious educators should

treat them fairly, instill in them a sense of confidence and develop their feeling of competency, so that they achieve a healthy balance between industry and inferiority.

Adolescents - The central stage of the psycho-social development is characterized by the conflict called *identity versus role confusion*. This is the phase of identity exploration (Erikson, 1968). Through an intense exploration of the self (“*Who am I?*”), feelings of identity confusion arise in a person. According to some scholars like Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose (2001) and Mills et al. (2004), the lack of social connectedness and support, the problems involving personal relationships, and the lack of a sense of independence are most likely the major contributors to *identity-confusion*. As a result, adolescents at this stage may withhold negative feelings for years because they feel insecure about themselves and confused about their real personal identity. Adolescents at this particular stage need a good environment where they can best explore and realize their own identities. Religious educators can guide students, for example, to integrate academic success into their personal identities. Most importantly, *self-comparison* in adolescence is crucial, as they attach their identities to their peers (Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007). Religious educators should encourage mature, adult-style friendships, so that adolescents gain a well-balanced sense of the self. Religious educators should also find ways to help students practice *self-compassion*, so that they can learn from their mistakes and accept their own flaws and limitations—thus allowing them to successfully pass this stage with *identity-achievement*. Above all, religious educators should keep in mind that every human person, no matter what his/her gender or sexual orientation is, deserves to be treated and welcome with respect, fairness, and dignity. A saying goes, “*A good education can change anyone; a good teacher can change anything.*” This is a simple but inspiring motto that religious educators can take to heart as they guide and teach their students.

8. Conclusion

Homosexuality and same sex marriage are social-ethical issues that confront our world today. It is a national concern of every government, since a considerable segment of society is constituted by homosexuals and members of the LGBTQ community. The phenomenon of homosexuality also poses serious challenges and difficulties for the Church in the sphere of moral theology. In a broad sense, the issue of homosexuality is a great challenge dealt with in the field of *education*. Since to a silent but considerable portion of human society—in this case the Vietnamese society—the reality of *otherness*—(i.e., in the faces of the *stranger*, the *eccentric*, and the *alienated*)—bears socio-political implications on the entire spectrum of human education and poses real challenges to educators and teachers. Those who work in the field of integral human learning and education—such as teachers, pastors, counselors, spiritual directors, etc.—should have to be mindful that *the pursuit of knowledge* is always shaped to a large extent by *individual identities* (both personality-wise and gender-wise) and by the degree of a learner’s self-awareness.

For instance, a student who struggles with her/his gender identity—and who is not properly accompanied by religious educators and counselors—will find it difficult to get through the formal learning processes. This explains why teachers and educators should not only be concerned with *what* (i.e., at the intellectual/academic level) the students learn in the classroom; they should also be aware of the personal struggles and aspirations of their students—especially those who belong to the marginal sectors of human society—such as the members of the LGBTQ community. A learner/student who is a homosexual, for instance, should be *properly* accompanied and guided psychologically by a competent counselor-educator, so that he/she can develop a healthy self-esteem and self-knowledge and, consequently, confidently embark on the path of learning and knowledge. Overall, teachers, religious educators, and counselors have a special vocation as citizens of the world: to create not only a more tolerant and just society but also a more compassionate and more humane world.

In particular, this paper has shown that homosexuality as a *gender issue*—that is, as a concern that has to do with the identity of the human person—appears to be a delicate subject when viewed from the points of view of the Holy Scripture, the Church Tradition, and the Magisterium. It is also a disturbingly unfamiliar reality to the Vietnamese society—which is heavily shaped and influenced by Confucianism—and the Vietnamese Communist

State which is not sympathetic to the sad plight of homosexuals. We have asserted that homosexuality assumes the aspect of *difference* and *otherness*. We have also maintained that it is a human condition—that is to say, it is part of human nature. Homosexuality is not something to be ignored or something to be afraid of. For it is a fact of human experience. The ethical issues surrounding homosexuality—and same-sex union/marriage—should *not* be laid aside both by the Church and the State. Homosexuality should be an open subject to be freely discussed in the public sphere.

We have also contended that the study of homosexuality should be part not only of *general ethics* in the educational system of the State but also of the *religious* education of the citizens. Both the State and Church should work together in forming the values of the citizens and the faithful. Thus, the subject of homosexuality as an ethical subject should be discussed at the religious level of religion and at the national level. We have also asserted that the Vietnamese authorities need to become more inclusive and effective in promoting human rights and human dignity. This means that the Vietnamese government should protect those at the margins of society—the poor, the oppressed, and the members of LGBTQ community. It should take proactive steps in educating its citizens about the social reality of homosexuality. And we have suggested that *religious education* must be intergrated into the general education system in Vietnam.

This paper has argued that the best way of dealing with homosexuals and the members of the LGBTQ family is the ethics of understanding, respect, and compassion. Respecting the *otherness/difference* of the *other* is the way to go to make a better world for us and the next generation. I think this is the moral challenge for all of us. Above all, it is a challenge for the religious educators around the world who are called to *go out*—i.e., they have to *step forward* to answer their calling—and preach Christ's message of compassion. For, as St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, "*How can anyone [religious educator] preach unless they are sent?*" (Romans 10:15). Indeed, all Christians are called to *preach* the Gospel and educate all nations in the Christian message (ethics) of respect and compassion.

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