Multi-religious Expressions of Non-Christian Students in a Christian School: the Digital Dimension

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This study examines the digital dimensions of the religious expressions, orientations as well the cultural diversities and commonalities among non-Christian foreign students in a Christian school in the Philippines—the De La Salle Health Sciences Institute (DLSHSI). In order to give light to their query random questionnaire, focus group discussion and in-depth interview were utilized. The results indicate that there exist an “open culture” DLSHSI which allows the non-Christians foreign students to demonstrate their religious convictions and orientations without fear of being discriminated or ostracized. Social media plays an important role in the expression of religious convictions of these non-Christian students. In fact, social media is a conduit for their religious conviction and orientation through the concept of “Avatar.” The same principle applies when these students engage in some role-playing games or submit their performance task requirements to their teachers. The study also reveals that non-Christian students experienced some barrier and difficulties in the expression of their religious expressions because of academic pressures and the culture which is different from their own. Non-Christian students must therefore find some ways and means either to resolve these problems or integrate themselves to the prevailing orientations of the Institute. The process

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of orienting and integrating themselves towards this end is determined by their nature as digital natives whose ways of lives are affected by technology and digitalization. The paper thus recommends that a thorough understanding of the digital natives’ language and culture be promoted in DLSHSI in order to unlock their religious expressions and convictions.

Keywords: Avatar, digital dimensions, digital culture, digitalization, multi-religious expressions

Introduction

Religious expressions are essential part of our human communications. They reflect our specific beliefs, orientations as well as our convictions. Our religious experiences also indicate and reveal our self-expression and cultural inclinations. They are shown primarily in our ways of life and self-expression.

The process of self-expression is often compromised when one is uprooted from their cultural milieu or being surrounded with a majority of crowd whose cultural expressions is exactly opposite from one has been acquainted with. Self-expression is manifested in many aspects of our personal and social lives but it is particularly reflected in religious expressions of an individual. It is because religious expressions somehow serve as the guiding principles on how one will conduct their lives. In fact, Sharma and Guest (2013) attest that students affirmed their religious beliefs and practices as a means of coping up with the novelty and abnormality of the academic lives. They further claim that students draw on their existing religious resources (i.e. formalized beliefs, ritual practices, knowledge of sacred texts, denominationally specific language and more subtle behavioral cues), as their identities change and adapt to new contexts. These realities are particularly noticed in the lives of international students (IS) of De La Salle Health Sciences Institute (DLSHSI) in Dasmariñas City, Cavite, Philippines who are active participants in this simple intellectual endeavor.

In unraveling their self-expression, it will be inevitable to notice their multi-religious expressions having been from different continents and geographical locations. Yet despite these multi-religious and cultural diversities, they do manifest some similarities in areas pertaining to their utilization of technology and its influences to their academic lives. On this ground, we will try to account
the digital dimension of the multi-religious expressions of these non-Christian students in our Institute.

Method

The method used in this article is the combination of random questionnaire and in-depth interviews with some international students who are clustered according to their geographical origins. Group interview was also conducted to substantiate and confirm the results gathered in earlier method. Phenomenological approach has been utilized primarily in this simple inquiry.

In the last three years, the DLSHSI has been actively marketing their medical courses not only in the neighboring provinces but also in some prestigious schools within and outside the country to send their students for medical studies. In fact, the College of Medicine is known for recruiting several foreign students to finish their preparatory medicine courses and medicine proper in the same Institute. Some foreign students who are taking other allied medical courses are also being encouraged to pursue medicine in the Institute. These young students are exposed to the rigid academic life and need to cope with the various required curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Academic life cannot essentially be separated from other human realities that envelop them as foreign students. One of which is the religious expressions which form as part and parcel of their identity as individuals. Religious experiences reflect the distinctive culture and philosophy which an individual embraces and practices.

Religious expressions are integral part of human communications and constitute as inalienable right of the individual regardless if one is educated or not. It forms as the spiritual mantle which hovers an individual in dealings with others. Levin (2001) claims that religious practice is not just a joyful interruption in an otherwise secular life. It refers a spiritual worldview or belief system that permeates all aspect of our life, influencing what food we eat, who we marry, what we do, and thoughts we think about ourselves and the world. For such people, their chosen religious or spiritual path is not just a dimension of life—it is central and defining feature of their entire personality. This aspect will be the focal of point of this study which is reflected from data gathered with the foreign non-Christian students of the DLSHSI.
International Students in De La Salle Health Sciences Institute (DLSHSI)

The participants in this research are the International Students (IS) of DLSHSI. This Institute is the only medical school owned and managed by the Brothers of the Christian Schools (FSC) popularly known as the De La Salle Brothers. To date, there are 100 international students in DLSHSI from 14 different countries like China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Ghana, Japan, Kenya, South Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, the United States of America and Zimbabwe. They are currently enrolled in 9 different allied medical colleges of the DLSHSI. Males constitute around 55 percent of the entire IS population while females constitute the remaining 45 percent. The majority of these IS are non-Christians and a few have no religious affiliation.

These research participants are digital natives whose way of living is marked and dictated by the use and influence of social media and digital form of communication. In fact, social media are digital platforms used for engagement and content delivery (Gould, 2015) which enable the research participants to communicate and interact with each other in real time.

Almost every aspect of their academic lives are determined and influenced by technology. From the set up in the classrooms to their library are e-learning capable. The Institute is equipped with online resources for medical and allied medical subjects which students can easily access. This is not to mention the outcome based education (OBE) which highly characterize the Institute. OBE orientation and approach require both educators and students to be technologically literate and capable because final output is an essential requirement to every subject matter or course. Besides final output can be done efficiently with the aid of information and communication technology. These features thus reflect the digital orientation of the students in the Institute.

Religious Expressions in DLSHSI

Religious expressions may refer to the ways and means of communicating our beliefs, convictions and orientations to some spiritual or higher being. It may be in a form of worship songs, ritual celebrations or any external actions of honoring and worshipping the superior being whom we adore and believe.

It is worthwhile to know what shapes our religious expressions and on
how do we express them. In the study “Variation in Religious Expression Across Interfaith Advocacy and Social Movement Setting,” the researchers claim that the presence of religious gatekeeping institution and the belief among participants in the need to maintain certain boundaries around their faith both shape and constraint the shared practices (Yukick and Braunstein, 2014). There may be no rigid gatekeeping mechanism in the DLSHSI but every student is encouraged to express their religious conviction. The former researchers however, find that expression of religion differs according to social context, which somehow dictates the manner by which an individual will demonstrate his/her religious convictions.

Many International Students claim that there is an existing “open culture” in DLSHSI which allow them to express their religious convictions without reservation. DLSHSI promotes religious tolerance and utmost respect for student’s religious convictions. Non-Christian students who are required to take religious education subjects are advised to consider the subject as part of their academic requirements. Professors are always mindful not to proselytize their students but rather invite the students to appreciate and discern meaningfulness of their belief as reflected in their daily lives. Perhaps this is the meaning of the Lasallian religious expression, “Live Jesus in our hearts.” And if you call your God or almighty being with a different name you may substitute the name “Jesus” in that in Lasallian religious expression as what a Muslim student did when claim, “Live Allah in our hearts.”

Here are some direct accounts from the students which exemplify the “open culture” in our institute.

In our school even though it is a Catholic school we are given the freedom to practice any kind of religious activities which is not Catholic and each student is encouraged to promote their own faith apart from Christianity. Students are free to share their own beliefs with their teachers and other fellow students and it is a really great opportunity to learn others religious beliefs too. In our school students are given the freedom to share their own beliefs. --S.L., Student

By chanting the name of Allah when I am free or in between break time. And after going home, reciting verses of the Qur’an. In addition, before bedtime chanting names of Allah and prophet Muhammad. Reciting Dua (prayer from the Qur’an) every morning. This is my practice of faith being in Lasalle. --M.B., Student

Lasallian values are all about being responsible and considerate human being and our religion preaches the same. --P.T.O., Student
Being a student of DLSHSI, the Institute gives me full freedom to practice my own religion unlike many other Catholic Institutes. They do not force us to believe in what they believe but give us full freedom to believe in our own beliefs. We are allowed to attend the holy mass and feel the presence of god. We do not feel that we are being discriminated by being separated from the other crowd. I do not feel that if I am not a Christian I am being discriminated in any way. I have the full freedom to express myself in fact, the teachers are really curious to know more about my religion and respect my personal space, no one criticizes that if you are a Hindu, what are you doing in a Catholic school. All that they say is all religions tell us that we are all brothers and sisters and we must not fight over religion or cause any harm to a living being. We all are humans and tend to make mistakes but we not see the faults of others rather should work for the upliftment of ones being. The peoples’ good attitude, the school’s non-interference with my religious practice and their considerate attitude towards our religious festivals allows us to practice our religion without any hesitation. I am proud to be a part of such institution. --A. K., Student

The “open culture” observation of the participants of this research is a result of the social and value transformation which has been promoted by the president of the Institute since his appointment. It is inclusive in his 14-point agenda which culminates in the vision and to transform the Institute as a “place where the experience of God is lived and shared” (Br. Gus, fsc 14-point agenda). This observation by far confirms that multi-religious expressions are not only tolerated but are also promoted in our Institute.

**Barriers to Religious Expressions**

Communicating one’s religious expressions may not always be easy as it appears. There are some significant factors as to why religious expressions may not always be possible.

Among the significant barriers to religious expressions is the predominant culture in the Institute. As part of the International Students’ community, it won’t be possible to simply express your religious inclinations and expressions for fear of being ostracized or misunderstood. An African student, for example, recalled her experience of being completely shocked to find out that she is the only foreigner in her class and was very hesitant to express her own religious inclinations till she found out that it is not.
Some Korean students who have been almost in the country for more than two years have a relatively easier way of coping with the culture of the Institute and to demonstrate their religious expressions.

Respondents in this study indicate that academic responsibilities and requirements are barriers to their religious expressions. It is because the academic culture of excellence is very much enforced among students and educators. In fact, it is a common joke among the educators to reply to various complaints of the students in matters pertaining to their academic lives with the expression: “Welcome to DLSHSI.” Holistic education, moreover, dictates that the drive for academic excellence do integrate spiritual dimensions. Along this line, the campus ministry department do organize periodic spiritual exercises and monthly Eucharistic celebration for every college in the Institute. And to cater to non-Christian students, the campus ministry intends to promote inter-religious activities and celebrations. To date, however, nothing has been done except for some religious educators who integrate inter-religious activities in their respective classes.

Technology and the Religious Expressions

The modern means of technology, particularly the social media, play an important role in resolving the issue on religious expressions. Very often, the social media are the last resort in order to fulfill our religious convictions and expressions.

A good percentage of the respondents reveal that modern technology is an alternative way to express their religious expressions. Their orientations and nature as digital natives somehow allow them to cope with the stressful academic life and different cultural milieu. Very often, students would resort to social media to get connected with their friends and relatives to confide their issues including religious matters. Online religion is a common practice for those who cannot fully express their religious convictions because of academic requirements and difficulties. Our Methodist students, for example, cannot partake of their Saturday service because their classes in DLSHSI last till Saturday. They confided that they fulfill their Saturday obligations by watching via YouTube the sermon and other religious services they fail to attend. Hindu students resort to same technique in order to express their religious orientations and convictions. Social media and mobile apps (applications) are helpful for their religious expressions.
There are some students however, who do not rely on social media in order to express their religious convictions. Some Koreans students, for example, treat social media with suspicions and reservations in matters pertaining to their religious convictions. For some of them, social media is a venue where one does not necessarily reveal their real selves nor their religious convictions. One can pretend and hide their authentic religious convictions and orientations because of one can be anonymous in social media. These students further claim that social media do not elicit the emotion and inner sensitivity which we experience in a face-to-face communication. This perhaps is the meaning of what Fr. Eilers talk about the concept of “revenge of the analogue.”

Digital Dimension

The present generation of digital natives are marked not only by their proficiency in communication technologies but also by their way of manipulating it. The same generation has grown past from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 where the former is marked by interaction and engagement with use-generated content and the latter is known for its portable personalized content and search functions (Gould 2015, p. 4). Their ways and means of communication is characterized with digitalization.

The social lives of the millennials are driven by technology and their social interactions are dictated by their use of social networks, mobile phones, and other gadgets (Santos, 2016). Most of our Senior High School Students in DLSHSI are equipped with iPads which they use not only for academic performance tasks but also as a medium for their social interactions as well as for their spiritual or religious expressions.

Russell Belk’s (2014) study on “Digital Consumption and the Digital Self” claims that digital technologies allow us to be effectively present even when our bodies are not. Online media, for example, has the ability to represent our concept of self both as presence and co-presence. Presence which is also known as telepresence refers to the ‘illusion of being there in the virtual world or online game.’ Co-presence meanwhile refers to the ‘perception of being in the shared virtual setting’ with remote others (Shultze, 2010, p. 4380). Accordingly, presence or telepresence is progressively embodied in the avatar that we use. Thus an avatar is not only the three dimensional graphic character that we manipulate on the computer screen but also all our online representations
of ourselves like blogs, social media profiles, ‘selfie’ photos and other online traces (Belk, 2014).

Kafai and others (2007) describe an avatar as another self in the virtual world that has a personality like a human. An avatar that reflects the user’s self-concept (like facial and body similarity) influence the degree of avatar identification in terms of a self-congruity perspective. This reality is very observable among these millennials or digital natives which is in turn is being reflected in their religious expressions. Take for example some online digital Android role-playing games like: *Tiny Dice Dungeon, Maiden: Legacy of the Beast, Inotia 4, Zononia 4, Final Fantasy Brave Exvius, Dungeon Boss, Pocket Mortys, Terra Battle, Nonstop Knight, Sword Art Online: Memory Defrag, Hoplite, Star Wars: Galaxy of Heroes, Arcane Legends MMO-Action RPG, Super Awesome Quest*, and *Top Titans 2* (cf. Top 15 Best free Android RPGs/Android Role-playing games published on Mar 10, 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USvp0KaNy-0). While engaging in these role-playing games, they are unconsciously reflecting their religious conviction in the portrayal of the victory of good over evil. The concept of avatar are very much reflected in these role-playing games, which according to Fox et al. (2015) may function as interpersonal sources or as demonstrative models to inform or persuade a user.

Przegalińska’s (2015) study on the “Embodiment, engagement and the strength of virtual realities,” posits that avatars are virtual representation of users, but are not limited to what users can do with them. She further claims that avatars offer a wide range of possibilities that are very often unexplored in real life but does not necessarily mean they are completely detached from real life. This type of mindset and orientations are very observable among the participants of this research. In our focus group sessions, a participant pointed out that religious expressions can actually be reflected in their virtual presence or representation, akin to the above mentioned concept of avatar.

The result of our random questionnaire and in-depth interviews with our International Students point to one reality that we are dealing with a generation of students whose lives are marked with digitalization. From the moment they wake up in the morning using the alarm from their mobile phone, the very first thing they check are the messages they missed to answer or Facebook post they failed to comment or like. Even while taking their morning rituals in the shower room, mobile phones are being used either to listen to music or to play games.
Our phenomenological experience as educators attest to this reality. In fact, we used to call them as the iPad/iFad generation because they are known for their iPad gadget manipulations and the fad they attribute to it. The same generation of students can transform the whole range of concepts and learnings discussed in the school through this mobile gadget. You will be amazed how they can produce a video presentation using only their iPads and come up with very professional presentations. Religious concepts and ideas are well developed and presented in most of their performance tasks and often exceed the normal expectations of their educators.

The whole range of academic and social lives of research participants are indeed marked by digitalization. It is not surprising to know that even their religious expressions as students are governed by it. It is precisely on this account that then Msgr. Paul Tighe claimed that we need to recognize the significance of the “digital arena” where most of the young people are and communicating. Understanding their language will allow us to understand their religious expressions and convictions.

Perhaps looking at the language and religious expression of these non-Christian students in a Christian school like De La Salle Health Sciences Institute, one will be driven to examine the “avatars” that we are involved and preoccupied with.
References


