

# Perspectivism and Religious Education: Perceptions of the Selected Non-Catholic Filipino Youth

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**Abstract** – *The growing number of non-Catholic students in many Catholic schools raises questions about the Catholic school's changing nature and purpose as a context for religious education. Gen Zers 'have returned to religion,' which makes teaching theology an apt course to teach among their groups. This paper explores and analyzes perspectives of selected non-Catholic Filipino youth studying theology in a Catholic setting. It employs Salzman and Lawler's concept of perspectivism concerning religious education. The study further uses qualitative research. This study aims to provide practical recommendations toward an inclusive theological framework which the educators can use.*

**Keywords** – *religious education, inter-religious dialogue, young people,*

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing plurality of positions among the young pe, which yields concerns in the education system. Pluralism is defined as based upon the "assumption that all positions are equally valid [1]. This can be observed in the religious education classes where diverse learners from various faith beliefs are learning together. The call to dialogue is indeed needed in this educational landscape.

The First Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) Plenary Assembly sets guidelines for interreligious dialogue in Asia, which is synthesized into three strands: (1) dialogue with the poor; (2) the cultures; and (3) religions in Asia [2]. These would help attain focus and concentration in terms of providing religious encounters inside the classroom. De Mesa and Cacho suggested highlighting prophetic dialogue, which needs to be emphasized in Catholic schools, especially on the essence of Christian faith in a diversified society exacerbated by modernization. In this context, it would be good to ask then the role of religious education in the religious development of the young people [3].

The society is increasingly becoming diverse, brought about by globalization. Peoples of different backgrounds and religious orientation live side by side [4]. Researchers agree with this setting and suggest the need to review how religious education affects young people, especially those outside the Catholic faith beliefs [5,6,7]. With the presence of students who are non-Catholics, how can religious instruction be in Catholic institutions be inclusive and open?

In his address during the 28th World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis sets the ground by bringing and announcing the Gospel to everyone. He reiterated that there are no borders, no limits in the discussion of faith. His vision lies in a keen interest in young people and a passion for understanding others' life experiences. Pope Francis has made throughout his life developing a culture of encounter that he now proposes as the basis for the rebirth of the whole Church. This will be a good opportunity for young people from various religions to have a 'prophetic dialogue' [3].

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper explores and analyzes various non-denominational perspectives of Filipino youth studying theology in a Catholic setting. This study aims to provide practical recommendations toward an inclusive theological framework.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Relativism claims that "there are no universal ethical truths and that the ethical terms *good* and *right* are defined either culturally or individually" [8]. Salzman and Lawler explain that commonly, students do not understand relativism but recognize some ethical universals, such as respect for innocent human life and human dignity. In other words, students realize what is commonly called 'meta-ethical objectivism.' On the other hand, contrary to relativism and pluralism, perspectivism means that the "truth we know is always partial and fashioned by how we look at reality, and how one looks at reality is shaped

historically, culturally, biologically, relationally, contextually, religiously, and spiritually" [8]. Salzman and Lawler identify three sources of ethical, helpful knowledge for interreligious exchanges: experience, science, and human culture. He explicitly underscores the Christian tradition's important role in the Churches' documents, particularly the *Gaudium et Spes* and prominent documents of the Second Vatican Council. All these are "sources of virtuous knowledge we judge essential for doing Christian ethics". We are not to be taken for granted, which can prominently give space for interreligious dialogue [9].

These sources are essential to any *Christian* discernment of what is right or wrong, good or bad, though particular perspectives, as we see, select, interpret, prioritize, and integrate the sources differently. Moreover, Salzman knows the need for all the bases to dialogue and "divergent normative perspectives" to fully appreciate what remains to be 'selected, interpreted, prioritized, and integrated.' A 'divergent perspective' could create a space for dialogue and allow a growing appreciation on both sides.

The use of these sources combined informs Christian ethics and aids in forming a well-formed conscience. The sources are ethical, methodological components to facilitate a perspectivist, ongoing, evolving understanding of human dignity and the norms that enable its attainment. *Gaudium et Spes* provide revolutionary methodological insights that serve as a "manifesto" for Christian ethics to aid all people of goodwill in the search for truth [9].

Salzman and Lawler highlighted two crucial sets of data relevant for the use of the perspectivist framework: First, the growth of the "nones," and second, the values, ideas, and beliefs of Generation Z. The latter are the demographic group following the Millennials. Salzman and Lawler assert that a distinguishing demographic factor that has changed radically since the 1970s is the development and expansion of so-called nones. The term "*nones*" designates religiously unaffiliated Americans, and the number of nones has grown exponentially over the years. Of those unaffiliated, the highest percentage is made up of Millennials: 34 percent of older Millennials (born 1981–89) classify themselves as nones; 36 percent of younger Millennials (born 1990–96) classify themselves as nones [10]. Some frequently cited reasons for Millennials choosing to be unaffiliated is that they find institutional religion intolerant, rigid, especially concerning sexual and LGBT issues, and too politically outspoken and motivated.

Salzman and Lawler explain that we are currently in a transitional generational stage from Millennials to Generation Z (or Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2005. With this transition comes shared and evolving ethical perspectives, beliefs, and concerns as compared to Millennials. Gen Z's sociological data provides insight into these perspectives, ideas, concerns and how this textbook can build on those perspectives and beliefs and address those concerns. First, like Millennials, Gen Zers are committed to social justice, equity, and equality. Second, and fundamentally, they are "strongly motivated by relationships" [11]. Third, they are solution-oriented, meaning they can recognize complex ethical issues like homelessness and the motivation to seek solutions to them. Fourth, unlike Millennials, participation in religion is increasing rather than decreasing. Questioned about their spirituality, 31 percent of Gen Zers indicated they are spiritual but not religious, and 47 percent indicate they are religious. As young adults, 41 percent attend weekly religious services than 18 percent of Millennials in the same age group. This is a significant shift in religious beliefs and may have long-term implications, curbing the increase of "nones" in the United States.

According to Salzman and Lawler, there is a need to draw from this sociological data the following points that help us discern how to develop this text to reach and affect our audience effectively.

First, commitment to social justice and the common good and exposing individual acts and social structures that threaten the common good are central to his study. We attempt to expose and confront actions and systems that require systemic responses to effect change and create a more just society, especially for society's most marginalized. Part of this systemic response will require transforming structures that prevent, for example, more women and minorities being in leadership roles, an ethical concern of Gen Zers.

Second, Gen Zers focus on the importance of persons and relationships rather than on the acts they do as foundational for virtue ethics, emphasizing personal relationships and virtues that motivate persons and are expressed in actions that affect relationships. His ethical method, which he develops, explains an ethical perspective and how that perspective enables him to perceive and respond virtuously to relationships with God, self, neighbor, and the environment [8].

Third, his text attempts to provide Christian ethical tools for "solution-oriented" students. Often, he tells his students that the facts, data, and information they study in class will pass away. However, the most critical aspect of a Christian ethics class in particular, and a liberal arts education in general, is to teach students to become critical-analytical thinkers so that they have the tools to seek solutions to complex ethical issues. Salzman pointed out that in teaching Christian ethics classes, it is best to keep in mind that the tools provided are grounded in the Christian tradition and help shape a perspective in living an ethical life and create a just society [8]. There will be differences in perspective in what constitutes an ethical life and a just society and the tools to allow for charitable dialogue about those differences that may facilitate a search for common ground in complex ethical issues.

Fourth, Millennials have moved away from religion to search for solutions to complex ethical issues, and that Gen Zers are returning to religion. This return is where the sociological data and Christian sources of ethical knowledge that shape perspectives intersect. A guiding principle then is the epistemological principle of perspectivism. This perspective means that the truth we know is always partial and fashioned by how we look at reality. We look at reality as shaped historically, culturally, biologically, relationally, contextually, religiously, and spiritually. Gen Zers' more positive outlook on, and participation in, religious institutions reflect an openness to Christian perspectives that many Millennials view with suspicion [8].

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this qualitative research, an online survey questionnaire been employed on twenty-two university students ranging from 18 to 23 years. This age range is considered in the category of Gen Zers. Kenneth Young provides 1996-2009 as the bracket for generation Z's [12].

The respondents belong to different religious and non-religious denominations namely: Born Again (n = 7); Nones (n = 2); Agnostic (n = 2); Christian (n = 3); Non-practicing Catholic (n = 2); Protestant (n = 2); Atheist (n = 2); Latter Day Saints (n = 1); Crusades Divine Church of Christ (n = 1); and Buddhist (n = 1).

The study employed convenience sampling in getting data. After identifying the participants, the researchers gave out an online survey questionnaire to draw out the participants' understanding of the role of religious education in a Catholic institution in their life. Respondents were chosen based on their respective

faith denominations, the majority of which are non-Christians studying in a Catholic university between August and October 2020. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. They were given ample time to answer the online questionnaire.

All the responses proved a viable point for thematic analysis. The information provided by the respondents (first-order constructs) was analyzed and categorized by the researchers into themes (second-order constructs). The researchers then synthesized the information and made conclusions. This study examined two areas of inquiry. First is the role of religious education in the life of non-Catholic students in honing their beliefs. Second is the purpose of religious education in strengthening or weakening faith beliefs.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Understanding Catholic Beliefs**

How does perspectivism can be useful in understanding Catholic beliefs? If other non-catholic students studying in a Catholic school can "understand the complexities of religion and know himself/herself concerning other religion," in what way does perspectivism play a major role in order to have a good grasp of Catholic beliefs and be able to appreciate his/her own belief or vice-versa? Pope John Paul II writes in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth) a way to appreciate and understand other beliefs. The former pope writes, "To be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is, therefore, necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person (no.78) [13].

To better explain this kind of idea, Salzman and Lawler presented a man's visual analogy in a multistory building. He looks out a first-story window and sees what that window allows him to see; he looks out a tenth-story window and twentieth-story windows and sees what those windows will enable him to see. What he sees outside the three windows, though different and partial to the extent that our viewer can see only what each window will enable him to see, put into adequate, reliable but partial focus what truly lies outside each window. When he looks out a first-story window, he sees what truly lies outside each window. When he looks out a twentieth-story window, he sees what truly lies outside the window. Perspective accounts for new beliefs and acquiring a comprehensive truth, and one needs to see from different perspectives.

Table 1. Role of Religious Education to Non-Catholic Students

Area of Inquiry	First-order Constructs	Second-order constructs
Religious Education's role in honing non-Catholic students' belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See and understand the viewpoints of the Catholic community, also its practices and teachings;</li> <li>• Learn the religious upbringing and practices;</li> <li>• Learn to uphold their morals and strengthens one's beliefs;</li> <li>• Catholic school helps me understand the complexities of religion and know oneself concerning other faith;</li> <li>• Learn about the bible and its histories. There are universal truths that are explained and similar in both religions.</li> <li>• Studying in a Catholic school helps one understand the different aspects of Christ seen by another religion. As a Born Again Christian, one is exposed to the apostles of Christ and Jesus. Nevertheless, in the Catholic school, one is exposed to the different saints and laypeople.</li> </ul>	Understanding the Catholic beliefs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In most schools, religion is mostly not being talked about, and the school goal is to be objective on the information to be taught, and the school is mostly letting the students decide on their own;</li> <li>• A Catholic school is not that effective in honing one's religious upbringing simply because they are born by their teachings and application of the dogmas and principles of faith are not observed;</li> <li>• Religion divides the universal Church, but lessons about faith and spirituality do help.</li> <li>• During group discussion, for example, most students who are Catholics will not match in creating an output. Being judged can also happen whenever one voices his/her beliefs, for one will not understand the teachings of one's respective religion.</li> </ul>	Cause of Division and Misunderstanding
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It helps to know oneself more. Also, the environment is pleasant because it respects one's beliefs as well;</li> <li>• We are respecting and receiving judgments towards other religions.</li> <li>• Raised in a Catholic family, one learned to respect people of other religion;</li> <li>• Help understand Catholic values and beliefs;</li> </ul>	The Practice of Mutual Respect
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In terms of love as one studying in a Catholic school helps in honing one's religious upbringing and helps one to improve;</li> <li>• As one surrounded by practicing Catholic people helps remind his/her spirituality and keeps faith grounded. With similar practices, one can maintain his/her character as a Christian rather than comprising it;</li> <li>• Reminds one to keep his/her faith in check (esp. TRED classes) and provides different perspectives;</li> <li>• It helps to see Roman Catholics' perspectives and their thoughts about God, but studying in a non-secular school can be difficult. Experiencing all these regularly, having faith in God is one that matters. It does not matter the religion; what is important is one's belief in God. Learning about Catholic teachings did not shake one's faith in God;</li> <li>• Studying in a Catholic school helps to strengthen faith. Encountering people who have completely different religious beliefs helps understand one's religion and culture and learn more about one's beliefs. This also aligns one's belief and help to realize one's current religious affiliation/Why I believe in this affiliations beliefs and doctrines;</li> <li>• Religious education does not change one's beliefs because it shares the same belief of a God and teachings;</li> <li>• Studying in a Catholic school does not affect or change one's individual beliefs. As agnostic, practicing discipline by following strict rules is very helpful;</li> </ul>	Solidify Personal Beliefs

Perspectives from various windows lead a person to different, partial, but adequately and reliable views of what truly lies outside it [8].

Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan states a lesson to this concept succinctly, "where relativism has lost hope about the attainment of truth, perspectivism stresses the complexity of what the historian is writing about and, as well, the specific difference of historical from mathematical, scientific and philosophic knowledge" [14]. To put it simply, when one allows taking a look through different lenses about the truth of religion, beliefs, cultural views, etc. will lead us to different conclusions, interpretations, nuances of beliefs, etc. Relativism concludes with the falsity of judgment; perspectivism concludes with its partial but excellent and reliable truth to further understand one's view.

### **Cause of Division and Misunderstanding**

What are the significant causes of division, conflict, prejudices, religious intolerance among different religious denominations? If studying in a "Catholic school is not that effective in honing one's religious upbringing simply because they are born by their teachings and application of the dogmas and principles of faith are not observed." There might be a significant disconnect between appreciating the role of religious studies promoted in a Catholic school.

Perspectivism could very well provide a significant answer to these kinds of substantial divisions and misunderstandings. Salzman and Lawler presented a story about these widely circulated photographs of a dress that flooded social media in 2015. The dress appears as either black or blue or white and gold, depending on the viewer. This particular phenomenon demonstrates differences in individual perceptions of color. The dress phenomenon demonstrates a crucial epistemological point about how human beings know. When the brain is confronted with 'profound uncertainty,' such as the uncertainty of color, it fills the knowledge gap by making assumptions based on past experiences of sensory perception, lighting, and color. On these bases, individuals judge that the dress is either black and blue or white and gold. Salzman and Lawler pointed out that it is incorrect to say that one judgment is proper. The other conclusion is wrong since, for a person, sensory perception, lighting, color, and historical experience inform that judgment and ground the partial truth of that judgment for that individual. What all can agree on is that it is a picture of a colored dress. Perspectivism, based on this example, therefore,

accounts for both universal agreement and individual differences [8].

Bernard Lonergan presented three factors that account for differences in perspectival human knowledge, which can help solve division and understanding. First, as human beings, the information available to us at any given time is incomplete, and no one can master all the data even despite the unlimited data available on the internet. At one point in the history of Christianity was the claim that salvation is only for us Christians or that 'Jesus is the only way, the truth and the life' to salvation. These claims support the idea that only Christians have the monopoly of information, and therefore, other religions do not have the capacity for that search for truth [14].

Second, Lonergan acknowledges that all of us 'knowers are selective,' given our different historical and cultural socialization, personal experiences, and ranges of data offered to us. Considering our cultural, religious, and social conditionings are crucial and could result in a wide array of conflicts if not taken care of [14].

Third, knowers are individually different, and we can expect them to have different interpretations of the data available to us. The theologian-knower trained in Plato and Augustine's philosophy will attend to additional data, achieve further understanding, and make other judgments from the theologian-knower trained in Aristotle and Aquinas's philosophy. Augustine, Aquinas, and their various followers produce different theologies, which are partial but adequate and reliable explanations of a very complex theological reality. They are like our viewer at first-story and twentieth-story windows, who gets a partial but fair and reliable view of what truly lies outside the windows. We would easily predict that, out of the ordinary experience, if both our viewers at the windows and the theological ethicist ascended to higher levels, they would each get a different, but still partial but adequate and reliable, view again [8].

### **The Practice of Mutual Respect**

Every religion is in a way mutually seeking after truth and therefore has to respect each other mutually. Pope John Paul II asserted this kind of idea in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* by stating that every Christian quest or discovery of truth could help discover another religion [15]. In his *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis advises every Christian to 'keep an open mind' and not 'bogged down' by our limited ideas and opinions but be prepared to change or expand them.

He sees no problem in two different partial truths, for, he judges, "the combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both" [16]. The recent study on the centrality of religiosity among Filipino youth shows that Filipino youth who are non-Catholics are highly religious [17, 18]. This means that mutual respect must be practiced as the youth navigate the unique religious space.

### Solidify Personal Beliefs

One of the respondents in our interview narrated his difficulty in studying in a non-secular school, but in a way, he said that it helps him "to see Roman Catholics' perspectives and their thoughts about God." Eventually, he claimed that "having faith in God is one that matters. It does not matter the religion; what is important is one's belief in God. Learning about Catholic teachings did not shake one's faith in God."

Is it possible to believe in God without having any religion? The simple answer is 'yes!' However, is it correct to say that religion does not matter, but faith in God is what matters? There is a danger to categorize perspectivism in an individualistic paradigm. Perspectivism offers the human person the capacity to sift through and prioritize what is most vital for him/her, especially in faith. Likewise, there are various ways where every person achieved and actualized their faith in God through religion. Religion contributes to every attainment to further their faith in God though in different, partial, adequate, and reliable ways. To negate such contribution is a blind search for faith, for no one can achieve it all by himself/herself without the help of every people contributing to furthering such attainment. Religion and Christianity are all helping to reveal and understand a still ultimately hidden God partially. No one of us can fathom the total mystery of God, but every religion can somehow reveal this partial mystery. St. Augustine states it clearly, "Si comprehendis non est Deus" (if you understand, what you understand is not God) [19]. In the same vein, Aquinas expresses the same truth in his mature doctrine: "Now we cannot know what God is but only what God is not; we must, therefore, consider how God does not exist rather than how God does exist" [20]. There can be and are, however, partial, adequate, and reliable objective truths, and perspectivism accounts for their plurality.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study noted the greater ambivalence over the place of non-catholic students studying in Catholic schools. However, the study results show that receiving

Catholic education positively affects the development of non-Catholic students. It allows them to understand the Catholic beliefs, which leads to the practice of mutual respect. The theological courses also move them to solidify their personal beliefs. However, being in a Catholic setting, some students find themselves in conflict with the teachings, which leads to misunderstanding. These misunderstandings are brought about by both differences of beliefs and the perspectivism concepts. Here, the researchers recommend reexamining the Catholic institution's religious education curriculum and seeing how interfaith and interreligious education can mutually transpire.

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