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**Being Catholic as Reflexive Spirituality:
The Case of Religiously Involved Filipino Students**

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Being Catholic as Reflexive Spirituality: The Case of Religiously Involved Filipino Students¹

INTRODUCTION

The priest's prayer to officially commence the Way of the Cross meaningfully contrasts with Manila's nightfall. Tonight's annual Taize prayer event uniquely begins with the Way around campus, underscoring the early start of the Lent season. Gathered under the ancient arch that is landmark of one of the country's oldest Catholic universities are over eighty students and religious adults from various institutions in Manila.

Vince, my main contact and president of the liturgical organisation coordinating tonight's Taize, is in front carrying his golden processional crucifix. He is surrounded by his fellow male acolytes garbed in white cassock and holding up their respective torches. Right behind them are students carrying tarpaulin banners depicting images of Christ's suffering with the words "Repent and Believe". A few select students share the portable sound system in leading the rest of us in prayer and hymns. We move reverentially from one station to another in a manner that beautifully punctuates the university's classical architecture. The procession, simple but elegant, is exhibiting the solemnity of Catholic practice in the midst of various student activities. As we proceed, cars driving by, students playing in the sports field, and others merely walking by take their respective moments of silence in obvious deference to the ritual.

About half an hour later, the Way leads us to a dim indoor basketball court converted for the purposes of Taize. As I follow the others in removing their shoes, Vincent places the wooden crucifix at the centre of the altar which it now shares with a magnificent image of the Virgin Mary. If words could fail me, it is perhaps because of the simplicity of the altar illuminated by a few candles that captivated my emotions towards it. I realise then that the Way of the Cross has been a reflective preparation of the heart to meet Christ here. I surreptitiously position myself behind where I could perform my own reflection while observing.

With over 300 students and a few nuns now gathered around the altar and drawn by the live meditative music playing in the background, the basketball court has been effectively sacralised. For over an hour, participants, prayer leaders, and the choir, echo to each other a repertoire of fantastic liturgical hymns, poetry, and supplication. Broadly, I have found the liturgy to revolve around the themes of man's guilt, the need for mercy and forgiveness, God's love, and Marian devotion. Towards the end, everyone is given a chance to come to the altar, kneel, and plant a kiss on the crucifix.

¹ Preliminary versions of this paper were presented at the 2010 Annual Conference on the Changing Face of Christianity by the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group at the University of Edinburgh, the 2010 Annual Conference on Experiencing Religion by the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore at the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, and the Department of Religious Studies Postgraduate Seminar Series, Lancaster University. I thank Prof. Linda Woodhead, colleagues, and the anonymous reviewer for comments and points of clarification.

What makes this particular Taize interesting is that it is completely run by a student organisation. From the construction of prayers to the choice and arrangement of music, Vince and his peers are behind the entire liturgy. The event, according to Lloyd, one of its main organisers and Vince's fellow acolyte, has a rather conscious aim of providing what he calls an alternative "sacred time and place" for students. By alternative, he is contrasting the event with the more Charismatic inclination of other Catholic organisations on campus. Taize is decidedly solemn and the strong attendance is admittedly surprising. It is ironic though that the traditional is now being described as the "alternative" (see Stanczak 2000).

As this paper will show, though, the solemnity of this event must not be immediately construed as a reflection of a highly sacramental or traditional religiosity among members of Catholic student organisations or those that may be considered as religiously involved Filipino students. I am convinced that by looking at their religious identity or what being Catholic means to them, religiously involved students, even if they come from various organisations and universities, do share common nuances that do not necessarily reflect a highly sacramental view, for example.

During my fieldwork, the main question I posed was "What does being Catholic mean to you?". This goes in line with contemporary understanding of religious identity as personally constructed and enacted at the everyday level (Greil and Davidman 2007). By drawing from their nuances, my argument is that contemporary Catholic identity is being recast as a reflexive spirituality whose elements include a personal and experiential relationship with God, an action-orientated relationality, and a religious critique of the Catholic leadership and their peers. These elements help in rearticulating the concept of reflexive spirituality in the literature.

Because these are elements that challenge institutional authority in terms of sacraments and doctrine, for example, I shall discuss, too, how this shared religious identity is carving space for an experiential religion of humanity within the conservative institution of Philippine Catholicism today. In context, since 80 % of its population profess the religion, the Philippines is often described in the media as the only Catholic nation in Asia (National Statistics Office 2008). Philippine Catholicism is often construed to be vibrant and conservative, especially given the significant incidence of religiosity in the population. 60% of Catholic youth (13-39 years old) are in church every Sunday.

RESEARCH METHODS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Apart from the participant observation above, the analysis here draws from interviews with undergraduate members and officers (16 to 21 years old) of Catholic organisations in universities in Metro Manila, where the main tertiary institutions of the Philippines are based. I have interacted with over sixty students from liturgical, charismatic, outreach-orientated, campus ministry-based, and catechetical organisations. They come from various academic disciplines in private Catholic, private non-sectarian, and state universities.

Investigating this sector of religiously involved youth is worthwhile for two main reasons. One, for being the minority (40% of all Filipino Catholic youth), youth in religious organisations, whether parish- or campus-based, are often perceived to be more religious than the rest (Episcopal Commission on Youth 2003, see also Smith and Denton 2005). As illustrated above, they lead successful religious events. However, while the Way of the Cross

and Taize exemplify orthodox practice, participation in them does not accurately reflect one's views about the religion and the Catholic institution, for example. Probing such views is pertinent today in light of the forthright conservatism of the Philippine Catholic leadership, seen in how it influences politics and public policy on such issues as the use of contraceptives, for example (Raffin and Cornelio 2009, see also Carroll 2006).

Two, as future professionals and informed Catholics, religiously involved undergraduates have the propensity to shape opinion within their respective spheres of influence whether in the private or public sector. In context, only around 20% of university-age youth are in fact studying for a degree (Commission on Higher Education 2006). In addition, as informed Catholics at a young age, they carry the possibility of becoming more involved as Catholics in the future, whether as religious or lay, a view verified by my interviews (see Hoge *et al.* 2002 and Wuthnow 1999). This is why towards the end of this paper, I argue that it is possible to see their reflexive spirituality as an undercurrent of experiential religion of humanity within the conservative Catholic Church in the Philippines. This is in clear contrast to dismissive claims like the Philippines is “no longer a nation of believers” just because “only a minority acknowledge the existence of heaven” (NFO-Trends 2001, p. 25).

SPIRITUAL, BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

As a follow up to my main question, I would on occasion ask my informants how they would describe themselves as Catholic. Time and again, the responses I heard express an apparent dichotomy between “being religious” and “being spiritual”. In describing herself as “spiritual, but not religious”, Nadia explains that “her relationship with God...is most important...It has to do with everything I do...As we were taught before, your whole life is a form of prayer”.

This “spiritual, but not religious” discourse underscores the general divergence between “being religious” and “being spiritual” in other contexts. Zinnbauer and his associates (Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997), for example, have sought out to unravel popular meanings people harbour about religiousness and spirituality. On one hand, being religious is about “institutional beliefs and practices such as church membership, church attendance, and commitment to the belief systems of a church or organized religion” (1997, p. 561).

Spirituality, on the other hand, has been described in “personal or experiential terms, such as belief in God or higher power” (1997, p. 561) or having a relationship with that divine being. Like Nadia, Jonalyn, a 20 year old female communications major whose father works at a hardware store, may be aptly described as spiritual. For her, “connecting with God” is the most important aspect of her religion “because even if I don't see Him, He understands my situation”.

Given these nuances, a case may be made for the emergence of spirituality in the religious identity of my informants – but in a way that must be clarified from existing works. Broadly speaking, spirituality “consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” (Wuthnow 1998, p. viii). In the literature, at least three important themes revolve around the concept of spirituality today: seeking, individual authority, and the cultivation and sacralisation of the self. It is the first two that are associated with the spirituality of my informants.

Contemporary spirituality is first and foremost concerned with a seeking attitude. Wuthnow (1998, p. 4) suggests that spirituality has been dramatically transformed in modernity from one of habitation whereby individuals ought to stay in a clearly defined spiritual boundary (or institutional religion in Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997) to one of seeking or negotiation whereby “new spiritual vistas” may be explored typically outside existing traditions. Hence, individuals are predisposed to such various sources of spiritual nourishment as self-help groups, therapy, the New Age, and even angel awakenings. For Wuthnow (1998), a spirituality of seeking is a continuous negotiation or an incessant journey in search for sacred opportunities that may work in the meantime but may not necessarily so eventually.

Closely related is the emphasis on the self or the individual as the authorising entity, seen in terms of both seeking new spiritual experiences and being fulfilled by them. Looking at baby boomers, Roof (1993, p. 67) describes their seeking as, in effect, a spiritual quest for a “religious experience they can claim as ‘their own’”, such as meditation. Because it is the self that experiences the sacred, it alone has the authority to define what is authentic. Questors are hence urged by the self-help books they read or the Twelve-Step groups they join to be in touch with the wide breadth of their emotions, motivations, and desires. In other words, the arbiter of one’s spirituality is none other than the self which lends itself to the individual urge to experience as much as possible. As Roof (1993, p. 67) notes, “direct experience is always more trustworthy, if for no other reason than because of its ‘inwardness’ and ‘within-ness’”. Such internalisation of authority is what is called detraditionalisation, in which religious institutions (or habitations in Wuthnow 1998) become weaker in determining one’s religious beliefs or practices (Woodhead and Heelas 2000). For seekers, the offerings of religious institutions (such as small groups, for instance) may be employed but only as spiritual resources coexisting with others.

Lastly, spirituality has also been conceptualised in terms of its focus on the self and its cultivation which coincides with the subjective turn in the modern culture. The turn gives premium to the subjectivities (or the inner state) of the individual as the “unique source of significance, meaning and authority” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, pp. 4-5). Subjective-life spirituality is hence primarily about the cultivation of the self and its relationships. This is in some contrast to Wuthnow (1998) for whom the inner self is just one of the dimensions of seeking and for whom spirituality is a constant negotiation with sacred activities. By conceptualising spirituality in terms of the subjective-life, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) see it as not so much about seeking within the holistic milieu of yoga, meditation, and aromatherapy, for example, as it is about, using Wuthnow’s (1998) terms, dwelling or being comfortable in the self. This coincides very well with the “mystical meaning system” among Baby Boomer seekers who want to overcome the barriers “separating people...from God and nature” (Roof 1993, p. 120), which are present in the “theistic” or the congregational domain emphasising the distance between God and humanity (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

For Heelas (2002), the emphasis on cultivating the self in contemporary spirituality lies in the very divinity of life itself. “Life” is the “spiritually-informed, personal, intimate, experiential, existential, psychological, self and relational-cum-self depths of what it is to be alive: rather than life as led in terms of what the stresses and strains, ambitions and configurations of capitalistic modernity has to offer” (Heelas 2002, pp. 358-359). It is therefore “Life” itself that “becomes God”. In contrast to the sacramentalism of religion that magnifies the frailty of humanity, the self becomes sacralised.

The distinction between “being religious” and “being spiritual” offered in the literature is not meant to say that these are concepts clearly delineated in people’s minds. Like Zinnbauer’s (1997), many of my informants would describe themselves in spiritual terms even if they are still practicing elements of traditional religiosity, as in attending Mass, for example. Others still may in fact be using “religious” to describe their deep emotional experiences. What I am pointing out here is that in terms of how they see themselves as Catholics, a personal or experiential language comes to the fore. In other words, their answers to my main question are always experientially articulated, in matters of having an emotional relationship with God, for example. Effectively, therefore, they are articulating their religious identity in terms of what the literature describes as spirituality.

I need to emphasise, however, that the spirituality of my informants is fundamentally different from the aforementioned with respect to the sacralisation of the self and their seeking dynamic. In what follows and as has been implied in their participation in such traditional practices as Taize, it is clear that their spirituality is not emanating from a belief that the inner state is sacred.

But even more importantly, although many students would profess to adhere to religious relativism, not a lot would in reality be involved in the activities of other religions. There is, therefore, a discernible Catholic boundary, a point I revisit later on. And those who do most often confine themselves to traditions recognisably Christian (i.e. non-Catholic denominations). Hence, Earl, who is president of his organisation, is quick to dismiss participating in non-Christian traditions even if he believes in the validity of all religions. Among students like Earl, some may be participating in Evangelical activities while others are reading materials written by authors from another Christian denomination.

All of them dwell in a Catholic identity and are religiously involved at that. This is in stark contrast to the individualism of Sheilaism (Bellah *et al.* 1985) or the syncretic and deinstitutionalised “spiritual, but not religious” discourse in Fuller (2001). In other words, the spirituality of my religiously involved informants may be seen as seeking but only insofar as it is maintaining a Catholic identity – what may be called indwelt seeking or reflexive spirituality, the point of the next section. Furthermore, it will also be seen that, consistent with the literature, their reflexive spirituality emphasises the self but again in novel ways. Hence the most important reason for calling my informants spiritual is because of the authority they give to the individual in relation to their own spiritual path, with the self ultimately being the ‘authorising entity’.

Finally, as a point of clarification given its conceptual broadness, spirituality may also be thought of as “obedience to the will of God” where a subjective experience in terms of emotional responses is possible but always in relation to an objective transcendent that one must submit to. Heelas and Woodhead (2005, p. 5) call this “life-as spirituality”. And in an earlier essay, Heelas (2002) speaks of “theistic spiritualities of life”, which are a combination of tradition (e.g. Scriptures) and personal experience (e.g. the indwelling and communicating Holy Spirit) in such Christian circles as new paradigm Christianity and the small group phenomenon. These two may be validly called spiritualities because of the strong subjective dimension but they are interesting because of the equally strong presence of tradition. These ideas will be revisited in light of the spirituality of my informants, and will be found to be useful in illuminating them.

INDWELT SEEKING AND REFLEXIVE SPIRITUALITY

Significant similarities exist between my religiously involved informants and the parish-based active American Catholics whom Baggett (2009, p. 67) calls “indwelt seekers” for being “quite active within and loyal to their institution but with the caveat that the faith they hold dear must resonate with their own experience and make sense to them on their own terms”. Rad, who himself is a catechist, exemplifies this “indwelt” seeking in that to him being Catholic means “going beyond rituals and even the religion itself. It’s more about having faith...and knowing why you are doing it and you really want it”.

For taking on a personal discourse and doing so without abandoning the religion, the religious identity of my informants may be aptly qualified as a reinterpreting – or in the words of Besecke (2007) – a “reflexive” spirituality. Borrowing the term from Roof (1999), Besecke (2007, p. 171) sees reflexive spirituality in terms of maintaining a “constant awareness of the ever-increasing variety of religious meanings available in the modern world and to seek spiritual wisdom by intentionally but critically assimilating those meanings into one’s own spiritual outlook”.

As in the previous discussion, because of the breadth of spirituality in contemporary culture (see Fuller 2001), it is often taken to refer to a syncretic (and most likely unchurched) attitude. Roof (1999, p. 188), however, makes the case that even within such big religious subgroups as Born-Again Christianity in the US, a reflexive spirituality privileging “individual needs and experiences” is becoming evident in seeker churches. To many of the Born-Again Christians Roof has interviewed, it is the personal meaningfulness found in emotional worship and small groups that supersedes doctrinal allegiance, for example.

In the more specific environment of a Methodist church, Besecke (2007) argues that reflexive spirituality can also be in terms of how adherents engage with their own particular tradition which she sees not just in terms of the personal meanings that they imbibe but also in terms of the cultural critiques they generate. For example, the highly educated members attending such adult Sunday school classes as “Reading the Bible Intelligently” and “Theology for the Twenty-first Century” are critically assessing the literalism or fundamentalism accorded to the Scripture and the Creeds. In doing so, members become “truer to the transcendent reality that the biblical writers were trying to convey” (2007, p. 175). By critically engaging with established beliefs in Christianity, they are, in effect, reinterpreting the religion.

What these two illustrations suggest is that reflexive spirituality is actually taking place within the confines of existing traditions in view of potentially redefining Christianity, broadly speaking. As Besecke (2001, p. 368) in an earlier work notes, reflexive spirituality makes “religious traditions meaningful for a rationalized social context”. Reflexive spirituality, therefore, is purposive. But Roof and Besecke are differing in emphasis: the former on personal meaning as the rewarding element and the latter on difference.

My view though is that by conceptualising reflexive spirituality mainly as a critique, Besecke has lost touch with the “authentic connection with the inner depths of one’s unique life-in-relation” that is the *raison d’etre* of spiritual seeking (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 4). In other words, by conceptualising one’s spirituality according to what it is not, it becomes

preoccupied with the critique and the ideological other (e.g. biblical literalism) and thus becomes impersonal².

But another limitation that I have found is that even if matters concerning belongingness and community are recurring in the narratives of seekers, the relational aspect has been neglected. When questors talk about their spirituality, for example, they are deemed to do so in personal terms, as in God or the sacred known within the self in addition to “personal growth; struggles; the body; and identity” (Roof 1999, p. 100). One is predisposed to see spirituality as perennially an individual quest or journey since, after all, it concerns the self. Indeed, this is affirming the positive view towards the self, “that [seekers] can cultivate deeper spirituality only by gaining a better understanding of themselves...The self is territory rich in potential and simply waiting to be cultivated” (Wuthnow 1998, p. 152)³.

BEING CATHOLIC AS REFLEXIVE SPIRITUALITY

In what follows, I show that my Catholic informants appear to be developing a common reflexive spirituality whose elements are not necessarily coinciding with the conservative expectations of the Catholic Church. But even so, they remain Catholic – and are religiously involved as such. Put differently, reflexive spirituality in the context of my research refers to the subjective disposition of engaging with Catholicism to ascertain its most important elements and distinguish them from the less essential ones, which leads to a more meaningful internalisation and exercise of the religion. As will be clear, however, such reflexive engagement does not necessarily have to be systematic, organised, or even intellectual, as what may be deduced from Besecke (2007), for example.

The notion of reflexive spirituality drawn from the experience of my informants brings together the two aforementioned main strands of *personal meaning* (in terms of having an experiential relationship with God) and *religious critique* (in terms of their views about the Catholic leadership and their peers). To these two, however, I add the equally prominent discourse on *action-orientatedness*. It is this particular grounded nuance that fills in the void of relationality in the current conceptualisation of reflexive spirituality.

² In an earlier article, Besecke’s (2001) project redefines reflexive spirituality as a cultural language that reconciles transcendent meaning and modern rationality. As such, greater attention is placed on how reflexive spirituality is discussed (e.g. in terms of a metaphysical and not literal interpretation of the Scriptures) (see also Besecke 2005). Hence, the self-directed nature of spirituality – such as how and why certain practices or ideas are meaningful to an individual – are inevitably overlooked. I appreciate the communicative character of the language of reflexive spirituality but I would be careful not to drop the idea that spirituality is also cultivated by the self.

³ It is possible that the absence of relationality in informing reflexive spirituality is ultimately due to the nature of seeking itself in a highly individualistic society. In an earlier research exploring the dynamics of support groups in the US, for example, Wuthnow (1996, p. 188) sees that even though “we are in a group setting, much of what happens is deeply personal, psychological, emotional, inward” about which some leaders themselves have expressed concern that it may be may have gotten out of hand. Hence, even if support groups are creating communities, they are still spaces for self-exploration, affirmation, and growth, so the argument goes.

Personal and Experiential Relationship with God

When asked what being Catholic means to them, many of my informants would readily answer that it is about “having a personal relationship with God”. Broadly speaking, this relationship sees God as an everyday companion who is familiar with one’s longings and jubilations and will communicate in various ways but most likely during moments of deep personal crisis. As a God who administers His favour and grace outside the sacraments, He is therefore primarily personal, from whom one can experience emotional assurance and to whom respond accordingly. My conversation with Sarah, a very articulate Nursing student in a private non-sectarian university, nails this down:

Jayeel: For you, Sarah, what is the essence of being Catholic?

Sarah: For me, being a daughter of God is the real essence of being Catholic...To remind you that you're loved no matter what and that you have a God who has given you everything you need and the only thing that you have to do is to receive Him.

Jayeel: What does “being a daughter of God” mean?

Sarah: Being loved, being taken care of, being guided...

I have noticed, first and foremost, that while God is referred to in relational terms, it is always personal, as in belonging-to-the-person (see Heelas and Woodhead 2005): “*my father*”, “*my brother*”, and “*my friend*”. In other words, the relationship with God is often orientated back to the self as the receiving end. This transpires in various ways. For Nina, a female Engineering major from a state university, God is like a friend “to whom I can pray every time I need help. Sometimes it’s as if I’m quarrelling with Him. But He also nags me through the Gospel and some text messages I receive from friends. It’s as if He looks after me”. For Earl, having been appointed president of his charismatic organisation is God’s way of saying that “He trusts that I can do it. What He is looking for is not capability but heart and availability”.

In such personal relationships, God does not typically speak in direct means or “impressions on the heart” as is common in Evangelical Christianity (see Miller 1997). Time and again, “signs” or “experiences” are explained by my informants as divine messages to teach them a lesson or lead them to a particular decision. Sometimes, the “signs” can come from the mundane such as inspirational text messages, websites, or music on the radio. For others, God can use people to bring across a particular message, like how Ken, an engineering student, sees his aunt as a divine help to get him into his present state university. But I have noticed that the most glaring “signs” to them come from the experience itself of a personal crisis (for a similar view among Southern Baptists, see Winston 1994). Linus, 19, recounts that the fact that he did not get any failing mark when he shifted to his current degree was God’s way of saying that “He was giving me a fresh start and that I needed to be responsible this time”. As a way of thanking Him in return, Linus joined his liturgical organisation of which he is now the treasurer.

Because divine messages and favour are often gleaned from signs and experiences, the main role of Catholic sacraments in administering grace and revelation (Troeltsch 1931) is overlooked, even if some students may still see their importance in religious life. In view of this, it is not far-fetched to characterise their spirituality or religious socialisation as not so much sacramental as it is deeply personal. In fact, a significant proportion of my interviewees are not attending Mass at all and yet they still see themselves as Catholic. Roof (1999, p. 101), therefore, rightly puts it that in reflexive spirituality, God “or the re-imaged God – is one who is best known deep within the self, that here is where life at its deepest is encountered”.

Reflecting how He answers needs, God is also often described as one’s “victory”, “provider”, and “strength”. Describing God in a very youthful way, Ken, who pioneered the charismatic organisation in his state university, recounts “God is like my trashcan because I get to throw at Him all the dirty things in me...In return, God listens to me and answers my prayers”. Indeed, the felt presence of God perfectly matches their felt needs: family conflict, money problems, and heart issues. I have seen in various occasions how my informants have shed a tear recounting personal crisis and God’s answer. Janice, a Chemistry student in a private Catholic university, considers herself “a loner. But in my loneliness, I sometimes get to say that I am not alone, after all. I would go to the chapel, sit there and reflect, then once something comes to my mind, ‘Oh, my friend is talking to me now – Jesus’”.

Statements like Ken’s and Janice’s may be easily interpreted as sheer instrumentalism (see Macasaet 2009). The general Filipino Catholic youth, after all, are deemed to show “a less mature relationship [that is] based on benefits and blessings they receive” (Episcopal Commission on Youth 2003, p. 74). My view, however, is that religiously involved Catholics are not necessarily instrumentalist with their faith in God. This is because the personal relationship with Him is more emotional than transactional, seen in terms of how God is an everyday companion. This parallels the relational or caring images of God among Golden Rule Christians in the US (Ammerman 1997).

This notion of God is, then, different from the “Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist” of American adolescents, “who is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, [but] does not become too personally involved in the process” (Smith and Denton 2005, p. 165). This everyday-companion God may be more similar to the personal and experiential God of American small groups: “God no longer represents such awe-inspiring qualities as being infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly righteous. God is now on the same level as yourself, except perhaps a little warmer and friendlier” (Wuthnow 1996, p. 239, see also Wuthnow 1994).

Accordingly, having a personal view of God does not mean shaky faith. Throughout my interviews, the vague statement “have faith in God” crops up frequently. When probed deeper, the statement appears to be about a deeply rooted belief that there is a God who knows one’s situation - and that alone is compelling and emotionally reassuring. As Earl, a 22 year old Nursing student, explains to me, “faith is about an undying perseverance even if the world tells you ‘you can’t do it’. I will prove you all wrong because the Lord is with me”.

Such emotional assurance supersedes any need to commit to a theologically correct knowledge of God. This observation resonates with Baggett (2009, p. 67) who sees the faith of reflexive Catholics in the US as “not about systematic theology or magisterial teachings or reciting the prayers correctly. It is about faith in things unseen and the worth of a sacred narrative that has yet to unfold completely”.

For many of my informants, the key to making the religion personally meaningful is having an experiential relationship with God who reveals Himself through signs and experiences in order to test, strengthen, and ultimately, deepen one's faith in Him⁴. It is in light of this experiential character that their reflexive spirituality parallels spirituality of holistic practitioners in the UK whose activities "address, nourish, cultivate and enrich the experiences of subjective-life" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 29). Towards the end I will discuss the relevance of the turn-to-the-self in this reflexive spirituality.

Action-orientated Relationality

I have pointed out that the notion of reflexive spirituality has overlooked relationality. Here, the value is with regard to relationships, which there are two possible ways to understand. For one, relationships could, quite straightforwardly, be in themselves what being Catholic means. One can be reminded of the English pre-Vatican parish wherein the religio-ethnic community provided the boundaries of "ethical and behavioural norms, social and moral values, and religious beliefs" (Hornsby-Smith 1989, p. 30).

What I am seeing among my informants, however, is not so much about relationships as the essence of being Catholic (as in being part of a parish or their organisation, for example) as it is about what one does to his relationships – an action-orientated relationality, so to speak. This, I believe, is what they mean when they say that being Catholic is about "doing good to others" or "being like Christ". A computer engineering scholar from a private Catholic university, Robert effectively sums this up: "For me, being Catholic is how we follow the life of Christ, how he lived. He led a simple life serving people, without asking anything in return. It's not just about saying you're Catholic. For me, the action matters more." Phrases like "acting it out", "serving", or "doing good to others", according to my informants, are ways of making the religion applicable or experienced in various spheres of their present relationships. The point is that the religion must, broadly speaking, be addressing a human need.

This outlook may be perceived as primarily concerned with the immediate sphere of relationships. Indeed, Ammerman (1997, p. 205) sees that that the commitment to caring relationships is parochially confined to "family, friends, neighbourhood, and church". Also, in her landmark research, Day (2009) has seen that among youth in England, views about morality and transcendence are couched in their immediate relationships with friends and family (see also Savage *et al.* 2006).

Interestingly, however, my informants do not seem to be as limited. For sure, the immediate vicinity includes friends and classmates. Explaining how he makes "Christ a living reality", Dennis, a 19 year old management student, says that "with my classmates, I really make an effort to ask them 'How are you today?' And if they have issues or something like that, just a person to be there for them". But more importantly, there tends to be an ethos for greater community involvement. Imman, an upper class student pursuing Health Sciences, talks about being with urban poor kids. For some, the ethos translates to career plans like pursuing more catechetical work. When she graduates, Katherine sees herself becoming a community

⁴ The plot of the hugely successful primetime television soap "May Bukas Pa" [There is Still Tomorrow] revolves around a young boy who directly communicates with Christ and calls Him by the moniker, "Bro" (ABS-CBN 2010). The show has, more than anything else, brought out in the open the possibly pervasive relational view of Christ in popular Catholicism.

nurse working for ethnic groups in the Philippines “because I want to be close and do good to them”.

The urge to do good emanates from two decidedly moral discourses. For Imman, being Catholic is about loving God and neighbour: “For me that’s the big thing. There are a lot of people who know everything about theology and go to church regularly but when it comes to dealing with other people, they never show that they’re part of the church”. For many students, “loving your neighbour” – and not doctrinal mastery - is a compelling principle if one is to consider himself a true Catholic. In other words, they see, to borrow from Ammerman (1997, p. 197), “right living” as being more important than “right believing”. For this reason, too, these students can be likened to American “lay liberals” who are often preoccupied with social action (Hoge *et al.* 1994). Ammerman (1997), however, rejects this terminology because it assumes those who are called by it are “shallow” or “secular”, relative to conservatives (see Wuthnow 1991, p. 134). By looking at their moral practice, Ammerman (1997, p. 197) asserts that for them, like my informants, a Christian should, more than anything else, “seek to do good, to make the world a better place, to live by the Golden Rule”, hence the term Golden Rule Christianity.

Whether or not my informants are adept at theology is not an issue to them, as it might be to Wuthnow (1996, p. 239) who says this might lead to viewing the divine as a “God of triviality”. Admittedly, many of them – except for those trained in philosophy or theology in Catholic universities – seem inarticulate in theological language. But it does not seem to bother them that they do not know many of the official doctrines of the Catholic Church precisely because the essence of Catholicism lies not in knowing it but in acting it out. After recounting her experience getting exhausted and sacrificing a lot of her comfort to lead a team of students to build shelters for a rural poor community (called *Gawad Kalinga* project⁵), Dina reasons out

In this way, something is at least happening, right? You get to help people, unlike merely attending Mass, you’re just sitting there as if you’re really listening. Sure, you realise something there but what are you gonna do with it? Nothing, right?

“Doing good to others” relates very well to the experiential character of the personal relationship with God, that His divine message is received through other people. And in the same manner, one can be a divine message himself to others. Indeed, Wuthnow (1991, p. 129), in an earlier work, suggests that “a personal God one can feel close to and a belief system that affirms one’s personal worth may be the religious beliefs most conducive to care and compassion”.

The other moral discourse religiously involved students employ to explain what “doing good to others” means is the principle “you must not step on other people”. This can be a negative version of “loving your neighbour”. When asked to clarify what “right living” means, they disclose, “you live without hurting other people”. This underpins a sense of justice and fairness usually in the form of respect and tolerance. As Ava, a catechist from an exclusive women’s university, puts it, “it’s good if it’s for the common good. It’s wrong when you’re stepping on someone already. You should always be balanced”.

⁵ See <http://www.gk1world.com>.

This element of action-orientated relationality may be important to a better understanding of reflexive spirituality within Catholicism in other contexts today. I suspect that this is one of the underlying but unexplored dimensions of Catholic communality (see Hickman 1999) in the West, as hinted at by the fact that “caring professions and teaching were *preferred careers*” among young adult core Catholics (Fulton 1999, p. 174). Day (2006, p. 159) has also interviewed some who professed that being Christian “is doing things for other people”. This nuance is on top of Catholic communality as an ethnic marker alone.

While Ammerman (1997) emphasises the practice of lived religion in Golden Rule Christianity, I maintain, however, that this relationality is just one of the dimensions of religious identity construction among my informants. As I have noted in the previous section, the personal and experiential relationship with God is an equally essential aspect to how religiously involved students see themselves as Catholic. In Flory and Miller’s (2010) view, theirs might be appropriately conceptualised as “embodied spirituality” in the sense that religion is experienced in terms of how relating with God and people must be physically experienced. The concept however does not fully comprehend the spirituality of my informants because of the following last dimension.

Religious Critique

Robert, a Computer Engineering scholar from a rural community, is pretty forthright when I ask how important being Catholic is to him: “It’s very important, although nowadays many young people take it for granted”. I found it intriguing that without even asking about it, many of my informants like Robert would interject descriptions of their religious identity with opinions or quick commentaries about the condition of their peers and the Catholic leadership. For sure, it is natural to come up with a depiction of the “other” or “difference” in demonstrating one’s identity (Jenkins 2008). I need to emphasise, however, that what has convinced me to include religious critique here as an element of my informants’ reflexive spirituality is the fact that such statements are not deliberately elicited. This is in contrast to researches that specifically look at the difference between, say, institutional religiosity and personal spirituality (see Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997, Yip 2003).

In other words, even if they are not collectively unified as one organisation or movement with a specific religious agenda, to my informants, the presence of a glaring “other” is a directly compelling force to think about their own religious identity, i.e. be reflexive. As Baggett puts it, “people learn how to be Catholic by being told the story of how they are connected to the sacred, by putting that story into practice in their daily lives, and *crucially, by interacting with and comparing themselves to other Catholics*” (2009, p. 66; italics mine). These are then instructive in revealing what I see as the most important virtue of their religious identity – sincerity.

Their views are a collective religious critique of various levels of Catholicism: their Catholic peers and the institution at large. A typical critique is made about the waning commitment or the lack of seriousness of their Catholic peers. They complain about the apparent unconcern of those who go to church, for example, but engrossed only in “texting” with friends. Others can be more scathing, like Shirley who opines that “others receive Communion without meaning it. So when they go out of church, nothing happens to their lives”. Rafael, a Business student in a private Catholic university, finds it objectionable that others are into vices like smoking.

Interestingly, however, they are also critical of those they view as “too religious”. These are peers who are deemed to be very knowledgeable in church doctrine and faithfully fulfilling their sacramental obligations. Earl reasons out that such religious practices are just “man-made” anyway, justifying that “true religion is about changing the self for the Lord”. Similarly, Lea reacts against those who “include God in their everyday conversations”, reasoning out that they are the ones “with mean attitude”, after all.

Beyond their peers, many of my interviewees have also expressed issues with the Catholic institution in terms of one’s parish and the hierarchy of Philippine bishops in general⁶. Imman disliked attending the Sunday Mass officiated by the Filipino priest at his parish for preaching on “hell”. For others, news about sexual misconduct among priests bothers them even if they have neither personally witnessed nor experienced it, thus exhibiting the power of media discourse (see BBC 2002). One student, however, has admitted that his male best friend was a victim in his own parish. The moral fault of the clergy appears to be what they mean by “The Church is perfect but not the people who run it”.

I have noticed, too, that the criticisms become more sharp-tongued once gaze is transferred to Catholic leadership, most often the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and its interference with public policy. Trixie, a humanities student and a catechist, has this to say about CBCP’s position that “good Catholics cannot support the Reproductive Health Bill”:

They assume that all Catholics can only have one mindset. But it’s not the case. There are many among us in the youth, for instance, we discuss it and we are for it. How can the Catholic Church help in solving the problem [of overpopulation] if all they do is rebut and not do anything else? Like, can they feed these people?

Contrary to the findings about youth in the West, my informants are not necessarily turned off by the devotion of their parents (Woodhead 2010). They do not, for instance, discount the piety of their parents and grandparents most likely because they know them personally and the intensity of their devotion. Time and again, students mention close relatives as religious inspiration. From the accounts above and more, there is a general disappointment over what Catholicism has come to, so to speak, and it is reflected in what they deem to be the spiritual malaise of their peers or the moral attrition and misplaced attention of the Catholic hierarchy.

In Besecke’s (2007) notion of reflexive spirituality, the cultural critique exercised by her Christian informants is primarily intellectual and poised against literalism. In contrast, my informants’ reflexivity is mainly of a moral nature. This is why, to me, these religious critiques complement very well the first two elements of personal relationship with God and action-orientatedness in that they specifically address the absence of sincerity or the sense of authenticity about one’s religion.

Implicit in the previous statements are their underlying values about what being Catholic means: It is about meaning it when going to Mass, reflecting a change in one’s lifestyle, and making a positive impact on other people, aspects which they think are missing among their Catholic peers and the leadership. It is because of sincerity or this sense of authenticity that

⁶ This is not always the case, of course. A few informants have expressed that they feel “part of the Church” by having even the most marginal participation in the parish, such as serving as offering collectors.

they prefer, *inter alia*, spontaneous prayer to memorised ones or helping others on a given Sunday to being at church but only grudgingly so. This is another reason why their spirituality cannot be simply dismissed as instrumentalist.

REARTICULATING REFLEXIVE SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality denotes a turn to the self or what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) call subjectivisation in which one's lifestyle is no longer generally bound up with social and institutional expectations. Here, the main idea is that the self, and not the religious institution, becomes the final arbiter of authentic religious experience. This is very closely related to the concept of detraditionalisation whereby a change takes place "from an authoritative realm which exists over and above the individual...to the authority of the first hand spiritually-informed experience of the self" (Woodhead and Heelas 2000, p. 342).

For being self-directed, the three elements of my informants' reflexive spirituality exhibit this process of detraditionalisation, but in ways that need to be qualified. There are two simultaneous processes to their reflexive or what may also be considered *self-directed and reinterpreting* spirituality. It is first a spirituality that is *directed towards the self*, as emphasised by personally experiencing God which lends itself to the sense of authenticity (or sincerity) they gain about being Catholic. This is why they lament the religious indifference of their peers, churched and otherwise. But it is also a spirituality *directed from the self*. Being Catholic, in other words, is practical, as seen in their principle that right living is more important than right believing. In a manner that modifies previous conceptualisation of reflexive spirituality, theirs is not just about the self; it is very relational.

I have proposed above that reflexive spirituality is the subjective spiritual disposition (or even compulsion) whereby an individual distinguishes the definitive aspects of one's religion from the less important ones to make it most meaningful. Put differently, the discussion thus far rearticulates reflexive spirituality in terms of making Catholicism more meaningfully and personally embraced in view of my religiously involved informants' most important values (e.g. immanent God and sincerity) and the relationships they cherish, which effectively inform those aspects central to the religion (e.g. action-orientatedness) and those that can be overlooked or rectified (e.g. "too much religiosity" and misguided Catholic leadership). Recalling the limitations in the literature, this definition brings together the three elements of personal meaning, critique of the "other", and relationality.

Emphasised the self might be in this reflexive spirituality, it does not presuppose its sacralisation which is the highlight of a subjective-life spirituality (Heelas 2002). Recalling the Taize moment at the onset, the prayers revolve around the themes of sin, guilt, and the need for mercy and forgiveness, Catholic ideas which presuppose that the self is not the source of all that is good and divine. The beautifully arranged *Kyrie Eleison*, for example, was meditatively repeated.

But it is not immediately pointing to a "life-as spirituality" either (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 6), in which a genuine religious experience is fundamentally contingent on surrendering to the transcendence and will of God. As the previous sections have shown, my informants treat God as an immanent being, like a friend to whom one can confide. He is not necessarily one who makes religious demands. After all, the core of being Catholic is feeling His presence, being guided by Him, and doing good things to other people. So while they can

still engage in the Mass or Taize above in which the wide gulf between the divine and the human being is thoroughly demonstrated, they foster a self-defined outlook towards the Catholic faith.

No matter the apparent similarities, this reflexive spirituality does not necessarily lead to converting out of Catholicism into Evangelical Christianity, which is becoming visibly prominent (although still statistically small) in the Philippines (Kessler and Rüländ 2008). Indeed, the Catholic boundary maintained is discernible and effectual in the sense that my informants' primary religious socialisation and connection is with their families, respective Catholic organisations (or parishes for many of them), and Catholic education (for those in Catholic universities). Given these networks, converting out of Catholicism formally entails burdensome social transitions. This explains why those who have admitted to participating in some Evangelical activities through their friends have readily indicated that it is not tantamount to leaving Catholicism⁷.

But more importantly, while their engagement with the teaching of the Church is not systematically organised, they are nevertheless tacitly thinking through them, as spurred by their peers and non-Catholic counterparts, for example. Hence, their reflexive spirituality leads to a stronger internalisation of Catholicism, although obviously in a self-directed and less sacramental manner. In fact, some would even admit to finding a calling within the Catholic Church.

The elements of their reflexive spirituality resonate with observations about young adult Catholics in the US who are evangelical-like in their emphasis on a personal relationship with God (Hoge *et al.* 2001). But they are evangelical-like only since, after all, there is no evident ethos of proselytising or engagement with Scriptures or theology, essential features of Evangelical Christianity or even "theistic spiritualities of life" (Heelas 2002, p. 366, see also Woodhead 2009). Many are not thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures and the doctrines of the Church either. But I deviate from the suggestion that this religious individualism "minimizes institutional affiliation or community commitment" (Hoge *et al.* 2001, p. 169) in light of my informants' action-orientated relationality.

UNDERCURRENT OF EXPERIENTIAL RELIGION OF HUMANITY?

If this religious identity is a reflexive or reinterpreting spirituality among religiously involved students, what space is it carving within conservative Philippine Catholicism today? Given its elements, my informants' being Catholic embodies what Woodhead and Heelas (2000, p. 72) call "experiential religion of humanity", the starting point of which is human experience and relationships. Here the divine has become largely immanent (and accordingly traditional sources of authority have diminished) and ethical duty equally important. Experience and relationality are most important, even for catechists among my informants.

⁷ This, of course, is not to discount any possibility of conversion. Using the language of rational choice theory, youth-orientated charismatic and evangelical churches may provide a better supply of religious capital in the form of emotional experiences with the divine and the community (Stark and Finke 2000). This informs the rise of Christian megachurches in southeast Asia (see Cornelio 2007; Cruz 2009).

I must reiterate here, however, that although it is widely shared among them, their religious identity is neither organised nor institutionalised. For sure, they have their respective organisations in which they may be developing it but it is noteworthy that such religious identity transcends the social structures of their organisations, gender, class, type of university, and even academic discipline. This widely shared attribute of their reflexive spirituality makes it closely similar to the condition of “moralistic therapeutic deism” as a de facto religion among teenagers in different traditions in the US (Smith 2010). Hence, Lloyd’s “reclaiming” attitude about Taize at the onset is merely on the surface.

Furthermore, because their religious identity is not institutionalised, they cannot be seen as actively redefining Catholicism. Many of them, in fact, would admit that they have never pondered the questions I posed. This is why theirs is very different from the reflexive spirituality that is developed in such marginal but highly vigilant spaces as Quest for gay Catholics (Yip 1997), Pax Christi for liberal peace advocates (Joyce 1994), Catholics for a Free Choice, and Women’s Ordination Conference (Dillon 1999).

But it does not mean that my informants do not see themselves as different from their peers. It is more tacit and introspective than vigilant, and the fact that they share similar sentiments convinces me that somehow they are collectively harbouring an undercurrent that attempts to reinterpret the essence of being Catholic in their generation. Their religious identity may be aptly described as a detraditionalising undercurrent – invisible but taking shape – in that it is a self-directed and non-institutionalised but collectively shared attempt at redefining what it means to be Catholic today. All this is taking place in the midst of a conservative Church.

This, to me, is arguably a potent variation of Luckmann’s (1967) notion of the “invisible religion” or the privatisation of beliefs and practices. The act and potency of reinterpreting Catholicism become more glaring in the fact that despite the religious critique and the embodied dimensions of personal relationship with God and action-orientatedness, these religiously involved students have not opted out of Catholicism.

CONCLUSION

In summary, what does being Catholic mean to religiously involved students today? For them, being Catholic, in a way that exhibits a reflexive spirituality, is about a *personally experienced relationship with God, relationally right living over right believing, and a critique of religious insincerity among their peers and the Catholic institution at large*. It is self-directed in two ways: directed *towards* the self (in terms of personally experiencing God and religious sincerity revealed in their religious critique) but also directed *from* the self (in terms of moral living that takes into consideration the other). Simply put, it is a reflexive and embodied reinterpretation away from the institutional expectations of adherence to doctrine and practices and the inauthenticity of some of their peers and the Catholic leadership.

The personal language employed by my religiously involved informants to describe and affirm themselves as Catholic justifies adopting reflexive spirituality to characterise how they redefine and embrace their religious identity. Hence, I align with Baggett (2009, p. 70) who sees the reflexive quality of contemporary Catholic identity as “a connection to the sacred that both dwells within a single religious tradition and, at the same time, continues in its seeking” but in, I believe, novel ways that in turn enrich our understanding of reflexive spirituality as ascertaining the core of one’s religion. The importance of an action-orientated

relationality to them has allowed me to reconfigure the notion of reflexive spirituality, not only in terms of individual meaning and critique of the other.

I have engaged with the concept's implications on detraditionalisation or the transfer of authority to the self, and whether it can be treated as exemplifying life-as spirituality or theist spirituality of life (Heelas 2002, Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Woodhead and Heelas 2000). For being shared among them even if they are not collectively organised and for taking human experience and relationality as the core, their religious identity can be considered an undercurrent of an experiential religion of humanity within conservative Philippine Catholicism, the potency and future repercussions of which are yet to be seen.

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