

## Philosophical, psychological and religio-cultural roots: Contemporary challenges to religious education

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### *Abstract*

This paper aims to identify the role of philosophical, psychological, and religio-cultural roots especially in religious education in facing various challenges that students face in the contemporary time. A content analysis of literature was conducted to highlight significant findings and insights as to how religious education contributes to the on-going discussions in addressing the various needs of students. Results revealed that depression is a contemporary challenge to religious education. Various schools of thought in philosophy, psychology and religion can help augment the educative process, especially in religious education. Though these schools of thought may not be perfect, they are yet beneficial in providing answers to the many intricate issues and concerns that confront education. Nevertheless, the formation of students is what really matters. At any rate, that is where education is essentially aimed.

**Keywords:** philosophy; psychology; religion; religious education; contemporary challenges

## **Philosophical, psychological and religio-cultural roots: Contemporary challenges to religious education**

### **1. Introduction**

Depression among the youth has become a serious concern among educators, not to mention teachers of religious education. According to World Health Organization (WHO), depression is a common mental disorder that 300 million people worldwide suffer, and usually more women are affected than men. Depression is a leading cause of diseases and, if not given proper medical and psychological attention, it can even lead to suicide. In a study conducted, people who have gone through some unfavorable life events like unemployment, bereavement, or psychological trauma are more likely susceptible to depression (WHO, 2018). Depressive disorder has an enormous impact on a person's ability to function at work, in relationships, and in other areas of life (Bonelli et al., 2012). Low-income earners in poor countries is a major cause of depression (Patel, 2007). Depression is associated with isolation brought about by social and cultural adjustments and homesickness among international students (Sümer et al., 2008; Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009). Depression is also connected to culture and gender (Kelly et al., 1999). In a research, it is hypothesized that low social contact, low self-esteem, and sensitivity to stressful life events may account for depression among college students (Hokanson et al., 1989). Excessive exposure to the internet which often leads to social isolation may account for an increasing propensity to depressive behavior among teenagers (Twenge, 2017).

Recent studies in the Philippine context also attest that depression is an emerging concern in mental health and low utilization of mental health services is found out because of resilience and self-reliance as coping strategies of most Filipinos (Lally et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2020). Studies have also been conducted to investigate depression and anxiety among teenagers. In Peña-alampay et al. (2003), Filipino adolescent lives in a precarious milieu of precipitously shifting socio-cultural circumstances like urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements. Filipino youth studies have had a hefty dependence on structural functionalism and the utilization of modernization theory to elucidate youth and social change (Lanuza, 2004). Indigenous approaches are to be the starting points in Filipino youth studies in order to have a more culturally relevant slant in such undertakings (Lanuza, 2004). In a study, it is revealed that while both males and females experienced anger, females were more inclined to accept and tolerate verbal abuse, suppress feelings, and attempt to please the abusive parent (Esteban, 2005). According to Esteban, "female victims were disadvantaged due to: differentiated child-rearing expectations and practices; birth order; and the female victim's attitudes, affective reactions, and failure at meaningful communication with the abusive parent" (Esteban, 2005). Physical absence of biological parents, dissatisfaction with one's financial condition, level of closeness with parents, and level of closeness with peers were some factors associated with more intense levels of depressive symptoms among Filipino college students surveyed (Lee et al., 2013).

Among Filipino teenagers, females are often the ones vulnerable to anxiety and depression. There is a significant increase among female students who are getting depressed due to verbal and physical abuse in the family and the school (Tuliao, 2014; Virola, 2010). The number of suicide cases and students with mental illnesses have mounted significantly in the last two years with at least one suicide referral made each day (Tomacruz, 2018). Separation of parents and sexual abuses are the leading causes of depression among Filipino teenagers. This has become a worrying distress among parents and school personnel. Efforts to address such issue are now sincerely being undertaken. Additional guidance counselors and home-school collaboration are being suggested in order to deal with such alarming concern.

By looking into the philosophical, psychological and religio-cultural roots of young people's concerns, it is hoped that recommendations for religious education program may be given so that young people may further develop their values towards life and faith (Sarmiento & Manaloto, 2018; Vitug & Sarmiento, 2018).

### 1.1 Objective of the study

This paper aims to identify the role of philosophical, psychological, and religio-cultural roots especially in religious education in facing various challenges that students face in the contemporary time.

## 2. Methodology

The study employed the basic qualitative research method. Researchers gathered pertinent literature that was facilitated by accessing electronic databases such as Ebscohost, ProQuest Online and Google Scholar as well as other internet sources. Content analysis of literature was done to further clarify the role of the philosophical, psychological, and religio-cultural roots to identify contemporary challenges to religious education.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Depression, religion, and spirituality

Some researchers (Estrada et al., 2019; Bonelli et al., 2012; Dein, 2010; Jansen et al., 2010; Amrai et al., 2011; Koenig, 2004; Habenicht, 2001) have identified the connection between depression, religion, and spirituality. In Bonelli et.al. (2012), it examined the relationship between depressive symptoms or disorders and religious / spiritual involvement. They posited that during the last 50 years (1962-2011) 60% of the 444 studies studied report less depression and faster remission from depression in those more religious / spiritual or a reduction in depression severity in response to a religious / spiritual intervention. Religious beliefs and practices may help people to cope better with stressful life circumstances, give meaning and hope, and surround depressed persons with a supportive community (Bonelli et al., 2012; del Castillo & Alino, 2020).

In a recent study, it is posited that, since a quarter of the world's population are children and adolescents, a significant number of whom experience mental disorders as early as the age of 14 (Estrada et al., 2019). The researchers argued that, since interventions are necessary to address this alarming concern, a special attention is needed to be given to religious education because it promotes mental health among youngsters. It is important to reflect on the crucial role of religious education on adolescent mental health (Estrada et al., 2019). School-based mental health education and promotion strategies can maximize the benefits of religious education by putting emphasis on effective implementation of religious education to positively influence adolescent mental health.

In Jansen et al. (2010), it sustains the recommendations made in Koenig (2004) which encourage healthcare providers to inquire about religious beliefs and practices to support care of the patient. Some religious factors may seem to serve as protective factors for Christian individuals and thus future investigations should examine whether capitalizing on these factors within treatment can increase efficacy. Nevertheless, there is a close association between religious beliefs and mental health (Jansen et al., 2010; Koenig, 2004). In a study, conducted by it is reported that with the increase of the student's religious orientation, their depression and anxiety decreased (Amrai et al., 2011). The research revealed that reinforcement and assimilation of religious values in students can lead them toward increased mental health.

Albert Ellis, the founder of rational emotive therapy, remarks that there is an indisputable pivotal correlation between religion and emotional and mental illness (Dein, 2010). Studies included those mentioned above have relatively confirmed the positive correlation between religion and mental health. It is argued that social support, comfort, and meaning derived from religious belief are also important and may even thwart suicide as a possible consequence of depression (Rasic et al., 2009).

However, it is also argued that the rigidity of religion may promote a negative effect on the mental health of an individual. Negative psychological effects of religious involvement include excessive devotion to religious practice can bring about family breakup (Dein, 2010). Differences in the level of religiosity between spouses can

result in marital disagreement. Rigid thinking can be stimulated by religion which may lead to over reliance on laws and rules, a highlighting of guilt and sin, and contempt for personal individuality and autonomy. Unwarranted dependence on ritual and prayer may delay seeking psychiatric help and consequently worsen prognosis. At its most extreme, strict adherence to the ideology of a movement may trigger suicide. It is therefore recommended that religious issues that may worsen depression should also be given attention in the assessment and treatment of patients. Despite these considerable implications of religious concerns among patients, religion or spirituality may have therapeutic implications for mental health (Dein, 2010). Desultory trials indicate that religious interventions among religious patients enhance recovery from anxiety and depression. Psychoeducational groups that focus on spirituality can lead to greater understanding of problems, feelings, and spiritual aspects of life (Kehoe, 2007 as cited in Dein, 2010).

### *3.2 Freud and Jung on psychology and religion*

There is an understandable proximity between the ideas of Freud and Jung (Jacobsen, 2014). It is remarked that “to a 31 year-old Jung, Freud embodied a not only an esteemed colleague, but also a father figure with whom he could open his heart and mind. Likewise, to Freud, Jung was energetic and an exciting new prospect to the psychoanalytical movement” (Jacobsen, 2014). Major similarities between Jung and Freud include: focusing on the conscious and unconscious mind; dream analysis as a form of research methodology; and repressed human emotions (complexes) influencing behavior. However, though there seemed to be an understandable influence by Freud to Jung, a clear and distinct contrast manifested in their understanding of science and religion (Luale, 2018).

For Freud, psychology is an empirical science that should be detached from religion, while for Jung, psychology is a science that can be used to support religious, spiritual, and cultural ideas. Freud regarded religion as an escape from the harsh realities of the world (Luale, 2018). Moreover, Freud also rejected the idea of paranormality, regardless of its presence in a variety of cultural beliefs. Jung on the other hand, argued for an affirmative posture as regards religion. Jung recognized religion as a vital part in the development of an individual. Religion promotes communication and consents people to manage their psychological injuries. Jung connected his archetypal theories to a variety of religious symbols. Archetypes are the intrinsic universal understandings of the world that are held by all humans according to Jung (Luale, 2018). Freud’s thought’s on transference with non-traditionalist ideas were challenged considerably by Jung. He (Jung) regarded transference as an opportunity for two people to understand one another by transferring their ideas in a collaborative way. With regards to the conscious mind, Freud argues that it actively suppresses desires, while for Jung, the conscious mind constructively negotiates with emotions.

Concerning the unconscious mind for Freud, the unconscious psyche was the epicenter of repressed thoughts, traumatic memories, and fundamental drives of sex and aggression (Jacobsen, 2014). He saw it as a storage facility for all hidden sexual desires, resulting in neuroses, or what one would nowadays call mental illness. On the other hand, Jung divided the human mind into three parts: the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. To Jung, the ego is the conscious, the personal unconscious includes memories (both recalled and suppressed) and the collective unconscious holds experiences as a species or knowledge that are born with. Jung’s view of the human mind was motivated by his studies on Eastern philosophy and religion such as Buddhism and Hinduism (Jacobsen, 2014).

### *3.3 Carl Jung on religion and spirituality*

Carl Jung profoundly noted that “religions are the great healing-systems for the ills of the soul” (Fordham & Fordham, 2019). Jung believes that spiritual needs of humanity are as real as hunger and the fear of death and they are as basic as essential as these other deep guides, or archetypal patterns, which govern how an individual try to live (Jung, 1921, para. 403). Such spiritual longings are satisfied in innumerable ways. Jung considers deeply that the satisfaction of these spiritual yearnings are embedded in humanity’s quest for purpose and

meaning. However, not all fulfillments are helpful for one's well-being if they are not properly fathomed (Clark, 2018). Jung argued that individuation is the healthiest spiritual aim and the one of most benefit to the individual (Clark, 2018).

For Jung, individuation is attempting to become more and more fully and truly who human beings essentially are. This gradual becoming conscious of unconscious motivations, fears and longings, is an enduring process and can be followed along many different paths, two of which according to Jung are analysis and religion. In the words of Jung, "individuation means becoming an "in-dividual," and, in so far as "individuality" embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as "coming to selfhood" or "self-realization" (Jung, 1921, para. 266). This individuation ordinarily understood today as "un-divided" may even irritate human beings but nonetheless may lead one to an understanding of himself according to Jung. The "un-divided" of Jung means, to a greater extent, becoming of our own full self, having less of it projected or repressed or split off and denied (Clark, 2018).

Just as the satisfaction of spiritual longings is no guarantee of purpose and meaning, so too is religion. For Jung, spirituality and religion, though related, are not exactly synonymous. Meanwhile, religion is a particular spiritual path (Clark, 2018; Nelson, 2009). Not all spiritual routes involved religion because others (who embrace a particular spirituality) may not belong to a certain religion. Nevertheless, religious longings may be perverted without "individuation" as Jung argues. Religions are supposed to teach an individual how to understand him/herself. The longing for a purposeful and meaningful life, according to Jung, may be fulfilled by religion. Debauched practice of religion may lead to fundamentalism, which for Jung is the opposite of individuation.

Accordingly, fundamentalism requires a belief in a static, once-and-for-all truth which is given by others, by authorities external to the individual, rather than being an evolving truth dependent on the psyche of the individual searcher (Clark, 2018). Unlike individuation, which is espousal of the innermost realm of an individual-leading to a profound understanding of himself, fundamentalism depends strictly on the doctrines and dictates of authorities which are external to the person. Jung suggests individuation in the practice of one's religion. It is in this sense that religion will play a significant role in one's well-being. Without individuation, religion becomes a perverted spiritual path that is detrimental to one's mental health. When individuals who belonged to a certain religion are conscious in their "becoming" they become more and more aware of their spiritual growth and are profoundly being able to gradually fulfill their religious longing. This, for Jung, is a true spiritual achievement.

#### *3.4 Depression as a contemporary challenge to religious education*

In Baring (2011), dialogue must be an exigent Christian agenda in Philippine religious education if religious education should be an instrument in the formation of the right Christian attitudes among the young. The presence of religious education formally in some Catholic and Christian schools, and, through catechism in some public schools is considerable advantage for Philippine education. Religious education may be an instrument in the formation of right Christian attitudes (Baring, 2011). Hope, charity, fortitude, faith, and love are just some of the values that can be inculcated among the students, which are not being touched significantly in other subjects. Religious educators are an important support for guidance counselors in some schools. Together, parents, teachers and non-academic school personnel can work in helping learners in their integral development.

However, aside from the increasing plurality in religious cultures among the youth and the non-involvement of many parents in the education of their children, depression is becoming an alarming concern that need to be addressed. The numerous incidences of anxiety attacks among students that result more often to suicidal tendencies tormenting teachers in general and religious educators in particular. This growing frequency of anxiety have been associated to high levels of depression among youngsters. If not treated, this could lead to serious psychological problems, more so suicide.

Depression is a universal phenomenon. It exceeds the boundaries of race, gender, and religious affiliation. Everyone therefore is susceptible to it regardless of status in life. However, there is less depression and faster remission from depression in those more religious / spiritual or a reduction in depression severity in response to a religious / spiritual intervention (Estrada et al., 2019). School-based mental health education and promotion strategies can maximize the benefits of religious education by putting emphasis on effective implementation of religious education to positively influence adolescent mental health. Support from parents, teachers, peers, and other school personnel is what is needed to help students who are undergoing deep emotional distress. The gospel values of faith, hope, and kindness may be discussed in the classroom or may even be integrated and promoted in the institutional agenda of schools. Bible sharing can be of help also in encouraging peer bonding and solidarity. A Catholic university in Pampanga, Philippines has two relevant programs in helping students cope with demands of academic life: 1) Share a Meal Project, Share a Wing; 2) No Student Left Behind Programs (Holy Angel University, 2018). These two endeavors are aimed at aiding students, especially those financially challenged and emotionally distressed in handling and surviving the many challenges that confront them. Included, of course and with utmost importance is depression. Alone, religious educators are in a disadvantage in these educational concerns. Collaboration with other stakeholders (teachers, parents, community) may hopefully address such challenges.

In addressing the reality of depression, the tenets of Jung, Marcel, Elkind, and Van Kaam are of significant help to religious educators. Elkind (1967) for instance may be beneficial in addressing egocentrism and paranoia among teenagers. Egocentrism that distresses adolescent thought, behavior, and emotion was observed by Elkind. He illustrated how adolescents are preoccupied by themselves since they are undergoing major physiological transformations. The egocentrism of adolescents rests in their belief that others are as anxious of their appearance and behavior as they are. Consequently, the adolescent expects that the responses of other people are about herself, and is, in a way, constantly produces and reacts to an imaginary audience. For Elkind, egocentrism may play a significant role in the self-consciousness relatively frequent in early adolescence, along with other experiences in this period of life. Elkind also initiated the personal story or fable. The adolescent creates a narrative about herself, an account of her life emphasizing the distinctiveness of her feelings and experiences. Without a doubt, these ideas of personal uniqueness are also seen in a common conviction that there is hope amidst problems. Elkind underscored the usefulness of these concepts in recognizing and handling disturbed youngsters. Elkind believes the egocentrism of early adolescence usually lessens by the age of 15 or 16 as cognitive development proceeds (Elkind, 1967). Elkind also turned his attention to educational methods and how current vicissitudes in society and the family influence children, adolescents, and the family. According to Elkind, these changes in society must have to be considered in pedagogical systems because they affect greatly the learning process of students. A healthy learning environment contribute significantly in the molding children and adolescents. He believes that children need to have numerous and diverse experiences to progress in a healthy way, and that this is also essential for children to rightly ascertain and comprehend things. For Elkind, children that are forced to learn in an early age are not permitted to attain "rich" experiences indispensable in absorbing and learning in a deep and meaningful way.

The philosophy of Marcel is also beneficial for religious educators and learners. For Marcel, philosophy and religion were both involved with the ways by which individuals may well surmount alienation and the absurdity of life in order to live an authentic meaningful existence (Treanor & Sweetman, 2016). As an advocate of existentialism and phenomenology, Marcel argued against philosophical systems that demanded abstract truths to be of primary importance. For Marcel, philosophy ought to accentuate a lived experience, i.e., a phenomenological approach (Wyatt, 2019). Learners can be taught as regards the correct understanding of autonomy, which for Marcel is not a power that an individual exerts albeit gains, but something that recuperates from the intricacies of possession. Marcel's autonomy, is entrenched in a commitment to participation with others, and is distinctive in the sense that the participative subject is unswerving by being encountered, or approached by, another individual's need (Treanor & Sweetman, 2016). Autonomy happens when a person recovers himself from being receptive to others. Adolescents nowadays are so eager in wanting to exercise

absolute freedom without truly understanding that freedom and accountability are dialectical terms that relate to each other. The practice of autonomy does not license anyone unconditional freedom. Marcel's notion on freedom is demonstrated by a respect for and love of other individuals (Hernandez, 2019). It is not a selfish freedom but one that looks for the welfare of the other. The experience of freedom cannot be attained without the subject disentangling herself from egocentrism, since freedom is not simply doing what desire dictates. The person who sees herself as independent within herself has a freedom based on ill-fated egocentrism. She errs in believing freedom to be rooted on independence (Hernandez, 2019).

Another psychologist whose ideas are useful also in religious education is Adrian Van Kaam. For Van Kaam, recollection, which is reflecting one's life facilitate the discovery and incarnation of one's spiritual identity. He suggested recollection and not introspection for it (introspection) looks at the self anxiously, unlike recollection which reflects (looks) at the self gently and in an integral way (Burston, 2008). Reflection also enables one to see the self in a meditative way- "tenderly held in splendor by Divine presence" (Van Kaam, 1975, p. 172). In the words of Van Kaam "Transcendent self-presence pushes us beyond the limited here and now meanings of our own particular problems, childhood traumas, sensitivities, faults, and projects. In and beyond all of these, it integrates our lives contextually, that is, it helps us live in the context of the whole of reality, of which we are part, and with its divine all-pervading source. We begin to see ourselves in the loving and redeeming perspective of Divine Presence" (Van Kaam, 1975, p. 172).

Teenagers who may be undergoing serious turning points in life may be subjected to such approach or process in order to help them see, "in a gentle, integral, and meditative" way their worth- held and loved by a loving Creator. Students who suffer from depression and deep emotional distress may be given help by enabling them to see the redeeming perspective of divine presence- who is at all times ready to embrace us with his gracious love. More often than not, teenagers who suffer depression are deprived of the needed attention from their parents. They cling to their peers for recognition. When peers are unavailable, they isolate themselves and seriously depressed. The school, though limited, can be a venue for helping students cope with their anxieties and depression. The educational / psychological approach of Van Kaam can be an indispensable tool for teachers in addressing such concern.

#### **4. Conclusion and recommendation**

To anyone who is engaged in education, complexity will at all times be a despairingly recognizable phenomenon. Religious education, just as any other form of education will always be faced with challenges and concerns. After all, helping learners remove the veils of ignorance is definitely not an easy task. No single approach and methodology are considered the most effective in any situation. The learning process, with all its intricacies is not a simple reality. Since time immemorial and even today, educators are challenged by the variety of approaches and methodologies available in order to address its intricate reality. In Baring and Cacho (2015), "we have to address culture, in all its variedness, as a factor in the learning process" (p. 149). The plurality of cultures, exposure to media, the emerging culture of nonconformity and moral relativism are but some of the challenges to religious education (Baring & Cacho, 2015).

Included among these concerns and with utmost worry is depression. Teachers, especially religious educators are supposed to be equipped with the necessary methods and approaches in order to deal with these challenges. They have to be acquainted with the needed philosophy and psychology of education to better understand the learner and its learning environment. Marcel's phenomenological philosophy on freedom, creative fidelity, autonomy and existence are helpful in developing among learners the attitude of being free yet responsible; to be a person who is really alive- detached from tangible achievements; to be a person whose existence does not depend on possessions; and to be a truly human being who exists is present and in communion with others. We can help students learn the skill of reflection in order to facilitate their quest in discovering their true and authentic selves. The ideas of Jung are also beneficial for religious educators. Since spiritual needs for Jung are as basic as physical needs, the satisfaction of these spiritual yearnings is nonetheless

embedded in humanity's quest for purpose and meaning. Students may be exposed to individuation, which for Jung is the healthiest spiritual aim and the one of most benefit to the individual. In a world where one can become anything, students may be encouraged to learn individuation in order to help them become more and more fully and truly who they essentially are.

As religious educators, we may assist students in helping them become conscious of their "becoming" since today's digital culture is alarmingly influencing them to become whatever they wanted to be. Students have longings and if we can facilitate in re-directing their aspirations to that which truly defines authentic human existence, we may lessen the negative outcomes of restlessness and nonconformity. The ideas of Elkind may be utilized in assessing the learning environments of students. It is a sad reality that many among today's learners do not have a healthy learning environment, especially those in many public schools. But this concern, though saddening should not be a hindrance, especially among religious educators because the learning conditions during the time of Jesus are even more depressing. Though it is easier said than done, dedication and perseverance are milestone qualities that many educators have achieved. Young teachers today may emulate their senior colleagues who have manifested dedication and perseverance in facilitating learning in the classrooms despite the disheartening conditions. Elkind's ideas may be of help to teachers in bringing this into completion.

Lastly, Van Kaam's notion on recollection can also be a valuable approach for religious educators in assisting teenagers who may be undergoing serious turning points in life. They may be subjected to such process in order to help them see, "in a gentle, integral, and meditative" way their worth- held and loved by a loving Creator. Students who suffer from depression and deep emotional distress may be given help by enabling them to see the redeeming perspective of divine presence- who is at all times ready to embrace them with his gracious love. Religious educators may aid students who are at the brink of hopelessness through this method.

Limited as these philosophies may be, they are nonetheless supportive of the augmentation of the educative process, especially in religious education. Despite their imperfections, they are yet beneficial in providing answers to the many intricate issues and concerns that confront education. Nevertheless, the formation of students is what really matters. At any rate, that is where education is essentially aimed.

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