

Spiritual Relativism and Reflexive Meaning-Making among Filipino Youth

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Filipino youth navigate contested, pluralized, and digitally mediated truth-claims in a contemporary world. Drawing on phenomenologically framed qualitative interviews and hermeneutic reflection, the study interprets spiritual relativism not as disbelief but as a reflective form of meaning-making amid competing truth-claims. Through semi-structured interviews with twenty-five youth across a heterogeneous range of faith backgrounds, the study found that truth is reinterpreted as contextual, digital pluralism expands epistemic horizons, and religious commitment persists as existential belonging. Interpreting these insights through Nietzsche, Foucault, Gadamer, and MacIntyre, the paper argues that Filipino youth embody a hermeneutic spirituality where faith becomes participation in meaning rather than possession of truth. The study contributes to the philosophy of religion by proposing ‘context-sensitive rationality’ as a postmetaphysical yet coherent form of belief.

Keywords: Spiritual Relativism, Filipino youth, Philosophy of Religion, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism

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Background of the Study

While the 'death of God' (Nietzsche) and the critique of metanarratives (Lyotard) emerged from European modern conditions, these postmetaphysical diagnoses increasingly mirror the highly mediated, pluralized lifeworld of contemporary urban Filipino youth. For many Filipino youth, this question is not abstract but lived. They inhabit a social and digital environment saturated with competing beliefs, each demanding recognition and interpretation. By context-sensitive rationality, this study proposes a postmetaphysical framework in which justification remains coherent with local linguistic and cultural standards, distinct from pure alethic relativism or radical pragmatism.

This study investigates spiritual relativism as a lived philosophical condition rather than as disbelief or moral decline. It examines how Filipino youth experience, negotiate, and reinterpret truth amid pluralism, treating their reflections as expressions of an evolving hermeneutic consciousness. Through a phenomenological and interpretive approach, the study explores how relativism functions as a mode of meaning-making—a way of constructing coherence in the absence of universal authority. Engaging the insights of Nietzsche, Foucault, Gadamer, and MacIntyre, it argues that spiritual relativism may signify not the erosion of faith but its transformation into a reflective, interpretive, and self-conscious pursuit of truth. The aim is to contribute to contemporary philosophy of religion by illuminating how belief persists, not as assent to dogma, but as an existential act of understanding within modern pluralism. While these continental diagnoses describe a broad cultural shift, they manifest uniquely within the highly relational, digital, and historically syncretic landscape of the contemporary Philippines.

The Filipino experience, in a sense, is consistent with Charles Taylor's (2007) account of modern secularity, in which religious belief becomes optional and highly reflexive. This reorientation situates the study within the postmetaphysical philosophy of religion, where the task is to think faith after the loss of absolutes.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

To contextualize how contemporary Filipino youth navigate pluralized truth-claims, this literature review is structured around four interlocking thematic pillars that move from macro-philosophical frameworks to the localized realities of participants' lifeworlds.

First, Framing Spiritual Relativism traces the conceptual evolution of relativism from an abstract, alethic problem in epistemology to a framework-dependent, context-sensitive mode of practical reasoning. Second, Modern Conditions of Belief maps out the sociophilosophical shifts driven by late modernity and secularity, examining how institutional epistemic authority fragments under the weight of pluralism and liquid traditions. Third, Tradition and Rationality explore the postmetaphysical re-evaluation of tradition, shifting the understanding of reason away from static, disembodied absolutes

toward historically situated and dialogical inquiries. Finally, Filipino Spirituality and Digital Horizons grounds these macro-continental theories within the Philippine landscape, examining how vernacular epistemologies intersect with algorithmically mediated environments to reshape youth religiosity.

Together, these themes establish the critical foundation necessary to demonstrate that the fluid belief systems of the youth are not symptoms of uncritical nihilism, but rather structured expressions of a context-sensitive rationality.

1. Framing Spiritual Relativism: From Epistemology to Existential Meaning

In philosophical discourse, relativism is both an epistemic and a moral question. It concerns the grounds upon which truth-claims may be justified without universal criteria. The epistemological tradition distinguishes between alethic relativism—truth as relative to conceptual or linguistic frameworks—and cultural or moral relativism, where value judgments depend on social context (Baghrarian & Carter, 2017). Both challenge the assumption of absolute or context-free truth, prompting philosophers to ask whether pluralism implies incoherence or merely contextual rationality.

The philosophy of religion inherits this tension. It interrogates whether religious truth-claims are objective, coherent, or simply perspectival. While classic metaphysical truth-apt debates remain vibrant in philosophy of religion, Hick's framework offers an alternative path by re-centering how truth operates. John Hick (1989), though often read theologically, offers a philosophically pluralist hypothesis: diverse religions represent culturally mediated responses to an ineffable transcendent reality, rather than competing propositions. However, critics such as Paul Boghossian (2006) warn that unqualified relativism undermines justification. Thus, for these spaces, the analytical focus expands from purely traditional metaphysical realism toward examining how truth functions practically within religious discourse.

This study treats spiritual relativism as a lived epistemology—a practical philosophy in which individuals justify spiritual and moral beliefs not by appeal to universal authority but by coherence with experience, authenticity, and self-understanding. This position resonates with the hermeneutic turn in philosophy, where thinkers like Gadamer (1975) and Ricoeur (1970) contend that truth is not correspondence but interpretation: a fusion of horizons between self and world. Filipino youth, navigating multiple truth-claims in their lived experience, exemplify this hermeneutic condition. As Quito (1990) and Timbreza (1991) observe, Filipino philosophical thought has always been interpretive and dialogical grounded in lived experience rather than abstract universality. This hermeneutic tendency provides fertile ground for understanding how Filipino youth internalize relativism as reflective authenticity.

2. Modern Conditions of Belief: The Postmodern Transformation of Truth

The contemporary structural transformation of truth cannot be attributed to a singular cultural shift, but must be understood through distinct, interlocking mechanisms mapped out by the primary philosophers of modernity: Peter Berger, Charles Taylor, and Zygmunt Bauman.

Peter Berger (1979) shifts the analytical focus toward structural pluralization through his concept of the heretical imperative. For Berger, the proliferation of competing worldviews strips inherited religious traditions of their self-evident, taken-for-granted status. In a pluralized landscape, belief ceases to be a passive cultural inheritance and instead mutates into a compulsory, self-conscious choice; the modern individual is structurally "condemned to choose" their own ultimate authority.

This mandatory reflexivity finds deep philosophical elaboration in the work of Charles Taylor (2007). Taylor's diagnostic focus in *A Secular Age* is not centered on the mere political retreat of institutional religion or a statistical decline in personal piety, but rather on an alteration in the underlying conditions of belief. In the contemporary secular horizon, the baseline epistemic default has fundamentally cracked: religious adherence has transformed from an unchallenged, inescapable cosmic framework into one optional, highly vulnerable intellectual posture among many. Under these conditions, holding a faith requires an ongoing, self-reflective effort to maintain its plausibility against alternative lifeworlds.

This existential vulnerability is further accelerated by Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) characterization of liquid modernity. Bauman's contribution emphasizes the melting of social structures, in which institutional anchors—such as dogmatic religious authorities, stable communities, and inherited creeds—lose their solid, unyielding forms and enter a state of continuous, fluid flux. Lacking rigid external boundaries to lock their identities in place, individuals are cast into a state of permanent existential mobility. This institutional liquidity directly fuels the contemporary rise of spiritual relativism, forcing actors to navigate a shifting landscape in which meaning can no longer be anchored in static metaphysics but must be dynamically generated, curated, and sustained through personal experience.

Tracing how these changing structures shape the legitimation of knowledge itself, Foucault (1972, 1980) extends this critique by demonstrating that every claim to truth is structurally entwined with historical regimes of power. Rather than framing the 'will to truth' as an objective, neutral pursuit of unmediated facts, Foucault (1972) exposes it as an exclusionary institutional system inherently bound to a 'will to power.' Under these conditions, absolute metaphysical frameworks are viewed with deep suspicion. From a philosophy of religion perspective, these conditions alter the ontological status of truth.

3. Tradition, Rationality, and the Problem of Justification

While postmodern thought dismantles the universality of reason, philosophers like MacIntyre (1988) and Asad (1993) remind us that rationality itself is tradition-constituted. MacIntyre argues that all moral reasoning unfolds within historical communities of practice that supply their own standards of coherence. Relativism, therefore, is not an abandonment of truth but a recognition that justification is always context-dependent yet internally rational. Similarly, Asad's genealogy of "religion" critiques the Enlightenment assumption that belief is private and ahistorical, exposing how Western secularism defines what counts as rational or authoritative.

Applied to the Filipino setting, these insights illuminate how religious and spiritual reasoning operate within intersecting Catholic, Islamic, Protestant, indigenous, and digital traditions, each carrying its own logic of truth (Cornelio, 2016; Sapitula, 2020). Filipino spiritual relativism thus reveals the plural rationalities that coexist within modern consciousness: reason as contextual rather than universal, faith as lived rather than doctrinal (Alejo, 2018; Cornelio, 2014). Filipino youth's reasoning thus demonstrates contextual rationality rather than relativistic incoherence (cf. Quartz & Cornelio, 2024).

4. Filipino Spirituality as Lived Epistemology

When analyzing the local landscape, Western postmetaphysical categories cannot be simply copied and pasted onto Filipino consciousness without undergoing a process of cultural translation (cf. Rafael, 1993). Instead, local religious practices are mediated by what may be termed 'vernacular epistemologies.' By 'vernacular epistemologies,' I mean locally adapted, experience-rich frameworks of knowledge production that prioritize relational harmony. These frameworks are deeply rooted in the concept of *loob*—the relational, holistic inner self—where truth-claims are evaluated not via detached abstract logic, but through their capacity to foster communal equilibrium and interpersonal resonance (Alejo, 2018). These studies can be philosophically reinterpreted as vernacular epistemologies: ways of knowing the divine that prioritize relational meaning over doctrinal coherence. Cannell (1999) and de la Cruz (2014) similarly document how Catholic devotion in regions like Bicol and Manila is indigenized through local intimacy, healing, and reciprocity practices. Consequently, when young Filipinos encounter pluralized spiritual traditions, they negotiate them through these indigenous relational structures.

Cornelio's (2016) account of youth religiosity in the contemporary Philippines advances this insight. For him, young Catholics reinterpret faith as authenticity—anchored in experience rather than compliance. This authenticity is not mere individualism; it is a philosophical attitude that redefines truth as making life meaningful (James, 1902). Thus, Filipino spirituality embodies an existential hermeneutic rather than a dogmatic epistemology.

While institutional Philippine Catholicism has historically leaned on traditional, dogmatic adherence, modern qualitative data suggests an underlying evolution in how contemporary youth navigate their faith. A critical benchmark in this scholarship is Cornelio's (2011) investigation of this reflexive spirituality, which is defined as a subjective spiritual disposition in which individuals actively engage with Catholicism to identify its most important elements and deliberately distinguish them from less essential ones, ultimately leading to a more meaningful internalization and practice of the religion. Countering standard expectations of uncritical, traditional religiosity, Cornelio identifies three core themes driving this demographic: a deeply personal and experiential relationship with God; an action-oriented relationality; and a sharp religious critique of both Catholic leadership and peers.

Collectively, these dimensions of personal meaning, relationality, and critique do not signal secular alienation; rather, they help facilitate a more effective, authentic internalization of Catholicism. Consequently, while these reflexive tendencies share close structural resonances with their Evangelical peers, these students do not necessarily leave their original faith tradition. Instead, as this reflexive spirituality develops tacitly among Filipino Catholic youth who are not systematically organized, it functions as an essential, experiential "religion of humanity" operating directly underneath the surface of an otherwise institutionally conservative Philippine Catholicism today (Cornelio, 2011).

5. Charismatic, Digital, and Transcultural Horizons

The growth of charismatic movements like El Shaddai (Wiegele, 2005) and the digital mediation of religion (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021) further exemplify the fluid nature of truth in contemporary life. Within these communities, truth is often validated by experience, efficacy, and affect rather than formal doctrine. From a philosophical standpoint, these forms of religiosity exemplify pragmatic and existential truth-criteria—truth as what “works” or what transforms (James, 1902).

The contemporary fragmentation of religious authority cannot be decoupled from the architecture of digital environments. In the digital sphere, the traditional, top-down transmission of doctrine is replaced by horizontal, decentralized networks in which the individual becomes an active consumer and curator of spiritual content. Rather than encountering a unified religious tradition, young users navigate highly personalized digital spaces governed by algorithmic mechanisms. As Campbell and Tsuria (2023) demonstrate in their foundational work on digital religion, algorithmic curation structures how spiritual media is consumed, creating self-reinforcing "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" that continuously serve users' religious imagery, practices, and discourses tailored specifically to their immediate psychological or aesthetic preferences. Consequently, the digital medium itself actively destabilizes institutional monopolies on truth by democratizing the production and consumption of sacred symbols. This algorithmic mediation does not merely accelerate pluralization; it alters the epistemic baseline for validation, making individual resonance and digital visibility the primary markers of spiritual authority.

Here, the authority of religious institutions gives way to what Foucault (1977) might call the micro-politics of truth, where individuals assemble meaning from fragments of discourse. For Filipino youth, social media thus functions as a new site of epistemic production—a philosophical laboratory where truth is continuously constructed, contested, and redefined.

6. Defining Context-Sensitive Rationality

In this study, context-sensitive rationality refers to a mode of reasoning in which spiritual and moral truth-claims are evaluated according to relational coherence, existential intelligibility, experiential resonance, and practical ethical consequences rather than by appeal to universally binding metaphysical foundations.

Context-sensitive rationality should not be confused with radical relativism or nihilism. The framework does not assume that all truth-claims are equally valid, nor does it reject rational evaluation altogether. Instead, it proposes that justification remains possible within historically situated linguistic, relational, cultural, and existential horizons.

7. Synthesis and Philosophical Gaps

Across these traditions, one theme recurs: the transition from metaphysical truth to interpretive meaning. Modern Filipino spirituality illustrates the philosophical shift from revelation-based certainty to dialogical understanding. However, what remains underexplored is the logic of justification that underlies this shift: how do individuals distinguish between coherence, sincerity, and truth?

This study, therefore, advances a philosophy of lived relativism, situating Filipino youth as agents of meaning in a plural world. It bridges global debates on epistemic relativism (Baghrarian & Carter, 2017; Boghossian, 2006) with local practices of moral reasoning (Cornelio, 2014; Rafael, 1993; Cannell, 1999). Treating relativism as an existential posture rather than an epistemic error contributes to the philosophy of religion as a reflection on the human search for meaning after the collapse of the absolute.

Methodology

This study employs a philosophically informed qualitative interview design, utilizing reflexive thematic analysis (TA) within a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework inspired by the philosophical lineages of Edmund Husserl and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Rather than adopting a purely descriptive or purely empirical approach, this design leverages qualitative fieldwork as a primary text for deep philosophical reflection, treating participants' lived narratives as rich sites of meaning-making.

By locating this inquiry at the intersection of empirical qualitative research and postmetaphysical philosophy of religion, the design systematically bridges data-driven insights with theoretical analysis. The framework operates through a dual stance: it remains descriptive in its fidelity to the authentic, lived experiences of the youth (*Zu den Sachen selbst*), while remaining fundamentally hermeneutic in its recognition that any expression of spirituality is already an interpretive negotiation of the subject's historical and digital horizon. Consequently, reflexive thematic analysis is not used here merely as a mechanical sorting tool, but as a systematic interpretive practice that uncovers how contemporary youth construct context-sensitive rationalities amid a pluralized world.

1. Philosophical Framework

The methodology is grounded in phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics, traditions concerned with understanding lived experience and interpreting meaning. Following Edmund Husserl (1931), phenomenology seeks to return “to the things themselves”—to describe consciousness as it experiences phenomena prior to theoretical

abstraction. Applied to religion, this means suspending doctrinal assumptions to uncover how truth and faith are lived and perceived.

The use of phenomenology and hermeneutics situates this study within the philosophy of religion as lived experience rather than abstract speculation. Attending to consciousness, language, and meaning aligns with contemporary movements in existential and interpretive philosophy that view truth as relational rather than absolute. The method thus serves a dual purpose: it gathers empirical insight into Filipino religiosity while simultaneously enacting a philosophical inquiry into how meaning is constituted in a plural world.

However, as Gadamer (1975) and Heidegger (1962) remind us, experience is never raw but always interpreted. Meaning arises in the dialogue between the self and the world—a “fusion of horizons” shaped by history, language, and context. Thus, phenomenology here is complemented by hermeneutics, allowing interpretation to unfold as an encounter between researcher and participant. This integration reflects what Ricoeur (1970) calls a hermeneutics of meaning: the task of understanding what participants believe and how they make sense of belief within plural frameworks.

2. Research Design and Participants

This study employs a hermeneutic-phenomenological qualitative interview design with reflexive thematic analysis. To operationalize this hybrid frame and resolve the epistemological friction between Husserlian descriptive bracketing and Gadamerian interpretive pre-understanding, a sequential analytical stance was adopted. Husserlian bracketing (*epoché*) was employed strictly during the initial data cleaning and open coding stages to suspend the researcher's dogmatic assumptions and allow first-person structures to emerge natively. Conversely, the Gadamerian and Ricoeurian interpretive lenses were introduced during the secondary axial and thematic synthesis, allowing a conscious 'fusion of horizons' in which the participants' lived realities directly dialogue with post-metaphysical philosophical critiques. Phenomenology focused on lived experience, hermeneutics informed interpretive engagement, and reflexive thematic analysis served as the analytic procedure for identifying recurring patterns of meaning.

The sample size of 25 participants was determined by the exploratory nature of the study, the depth of the semi-structured interviews, and the qualitative heterogeneity of participants' spiritual backgrounds (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This sample size ensures depth rather than breadth, in keeping with the philosophical aim of uncovering the structures of lived meaning. The participants were drawn from urban and rural communities to capture the heterogeneity of Philippine religiosity. This diversity enabled a rich comparative understanding of how relativism manifests across social and cultural contexts.

Table 1 Participants

Participant Code	Age	Stated Religious / Spiritual Affiliation	Geographic Setting
P1	18	Catholic	Urban
P2	24	Muslim	Urban
P3	19	Former Catholic	Urban
P4	20	Spiritual but not religious	Urban
P5	21	Catholic	Rural
P6	22	Agnostic	Urban
P7	22	Catholic	Urban
P8	21	Protestant	Rural
P9	21	Catholic	Urban
P10	24	Catholic	Rural
P11	19	Agnostic	Urban
P12	23	Spiritual but not religious	Urban
P13	20	Protestant	Rural
P14	20	Protestant	Urban
P15	23	Protestant	Rural
P16	22	Agnostic	Urban
P17	22	Muslim	Rural
P18	25	Muslim	Urban
P19	23	Spiritual but not religious	Rural
P20	24	Catholic	Urban
P21	18	Protestant	Urban
P22	24	Buddhist	Urban
P23	25	Catholic	Rural
P24	21	Indigenous / Folk Spirituality	Rural
P25	20	Muslim	Rural

Each participant was invited to engage in an in-depth, semi-structured interview focusing on three guiding questions:

1. How do you define and understand truth in matters of faith and morality?
2. How do you navigate different religious or spiritual perspectives?
3. How do these experiences influence your moral reasoning and identity?

These questions were designed not to elicit doctrinal statements but to invite reflective articulation—to bring forth what phenomenologists call first-person meaning-structures. The aim was to let participants describe how they encounter and justify “truth” within plural worlds.

3. Data Collection and Interpretation

Interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings in the participants’ preferred languages (English, Filipino, or Taglish). The text was systematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis, explicitly adapted to a hermeneutic orientation to interpret qualitative findings as existential motifs rather than mere descriptive metrics. To ensure complete methodological transparency, the entire coding and data management pipeline was executed directly by the primary researcher. This hands-on immersion guaranteed a deep familiarity with the material before abstracting it into broader conceptual categories.

The movement from raw interview transcripts to abstract philosophical concepts was systematically carried out through a three-stage qualitative analysis pipeline that explicitly integrated empirical data with recursive engagement with the literature. In the first phase (Stage 1: Line-by-Line Micro-Coding and Immersion), the primary researcher achieved deep verbatim immersion by personally conducting, transcribing, and reviewing all 25 interviews. This text was then subjected to manual, line-by-line inductive open coding, which generated a sprawling index of over 120 granular, semantic nodes—such as “selecting content based on mood” or “algorithmic feed curation”—capturing the raw, unedited lifeworlds of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). At this baseline stage, macro-theories were intentionally backgrounded to preserve descriptive fidelity, allowing the literature to serve purely as an orienting, sensitizing frame for observing how the youth linguaged authority without predetermining the labels (Zu den Sachen selbst; Husserl, 1931).

The analysis then shifted from micro-textual reading to structural synthesis in the second phase (Stage 2: Recursive Pattern Clustering and Sub-Theme Matrixing). Here, an analytical cross-transcript matrix was constructed to map frequencies, identify structural contradictions, and track patterns across the entire dataset. Overlapping open codes were systematically clustered into dense, interpretive sub-themes, such as “The Existential Negotiation of Algorithmic Feeds” and “The Relational Deflection of Dogmatic Claims.” During this clustering process, the literature functioned as an analytical foil; these emerging data clusters were continuously interrogated against structural macro-theories of modernity—including Peter Berger’s (1979) heretical imperative and Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) liquid modernity—to determine if the patterns reflected isolated personal eccentricities or broader, shared cultural transformations.

In the final phase (Stage 3: Interpretive Synthetic Reconstruction), these sub-themes were distilled into macroscopic parent themes that map out the core structures of the youth's lived epistemologies. This phase moved beyond descriptive reporting to offer an integrated philosophical account of contemporary youth subjectivity, organizing the

data around the central finding of a shared “context-sensitive rationality” in which truth-claims are validated through local relevance, relational harmony, and digital visibility rather than institutional compliance (Alejo, 2018; Cornelio, 2016). This ultimate stage represents a definitive Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1975), where the empirical patterns of the sub-themes entered into an active, equal dialogue with the philosophical lineages of Husserl, Gadamer, and Foucault (1972, 1980). Rather than merely describing context, the literature served as a co-constitutive framework to interpret the hidden existential structures of the texts, articulating how these local, vernacular epistemologies operate as coherent, rational frameworks within a fractured post-truth public sphere (McIntyre, 2018).

4. Hermeneutic Reflexivity

Acknowledging the researcher’s positionality is essential in phenomenological philosophy. Interpretation is never neutral; it involves what Gadamer calls pre-understanding—the horizon of assumptions the interpreter brings to the encounter. As a Filipino researcher situated within academic philosophy and lived religiosity, I entered the field aware that my interpretive horizon overlaps with, yet differs from, that of the participants.

To rigorously analyze the lived experiences of contemporary Filipino youth without collapsing into an uncritical, “anything goes” subjectivism, it is necessary to formally introduce and delineate this study’s primary conceptual contribution: context-sensitive rationality. Rather than interpreting the fluid spiritual stances of young believers as a lack of intellectual discipline or a descent into chaotic nihilism, this study proposes that their navigation of plural truth claims operates within a coherent, alternative epistemic framework. Within the analytical process, context-sensitive rationality served as an interpretive lens for examining how participants justified their beliefs through relational, experiential, and dialogical criteria rather than appeals to universally fixed metaphysical standards.

Thus, this study pursued reflexive understanding through engagement rather than seeking objectivity through detachment. Following Ricoeur (1981), interpretation was treated as a “second naiveté”—a return to meaning after critical distance. This reflexive stance ensures that analysis remains philosophically rigorous and existentially faithful to the participants’ voices.

5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were informed of the study’s philosophical nature—that it sought to understand, not evaluate, their spiritual orientations. The research protocol, interview instruments, and informed consent procedures for this study were formally reviewed and approved by the De La Salle University Research Ethics Review Committee (DLSU-RERC).

To mitigate these minimal psychosocial risks, the following strict ethical protocols were maintained throughout the study: (1) Voluntary Refusal and Pausing, (2) Complete Pseudonymization, and (3) Secure Post-Interview Debriefing

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological interviews reveal four central themes that illuminate how Filipino youth construct and live spiritual relativism:

1. Reinterpreting Truth as Subjective and Contextual
2. Pluralization and the Influence of Digital and Interfaith Exposure
3. Moral Consequences: Freedom, Ambiguity, and Responsibility
4. Negotiating Relativism and Religious Commitment in a Plural Lifeworld

1. Reinterpreting Truth as Subjective and Contextual

Participants consistently described truth as contingent upon personal experience and social context. For most, religious or spiritual “truth” no longer referred to metaphysical certainty but to existential authenticity—a stance resonating with Nietzsche’s perspectivism and Lyotard’s postmodern suspicion of grand narratives.

P7 (22, Catholic): *“I believe in God, but I think people should be free to define what faith means to them. What is true for me may not be true for someone else.”*

P4 (20, spiritual but not religious): *“Truth is like a mirror; everyone holds a different piece. I cannot claim mine reflects the whole.”*

P15 (23, Protestant): *“Religion gives language to faith, but experience gives it meaning. Without experience, doctrines are just words.”*

P11 (19, agnostic): *“I do not reject religion; I just think truth cannot be owned. It changes as you grow and see the world differently.”*

P2 (24, Muslim): *“Even in Islam, interpretation matters. God is constant, but our understanding is not.”*

From a philosophy of religion standpoint, these reflections embody a nuanced hermeneutic retrieval of truth that bridges classical and contemporary frameworks. This lived disclosure does not flatly negate Thomistic correspondence views, but rather operates on a complementary register where truth is understood not merely as an abstract, propositional alignment between intellect and objective reality (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*; Aquinas, 1265/2006), but as an existential unhiddenness (*aletheia*) disclosed within the subject's historical and relational horizons (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1975).

Such statements reveal that relativism here functions as a reflexive epistemology—a philosophical response to pluralism—rather than as nihilism or indifference. The Filipino youth articulate an understanding of truth that privileges authenticity over authority, coherence over correspondence, and existential resonance over metaphysical finality.

2. Pluralization and the Influence of Digital and Interfaith Exposure

Digital platforms, interreligious friendships, and global media were repeatedly cited as catalysts for epistemic pluralism. Participants describe encountering diverse perspectives that decenter traditional religious authority and encourage comparative, interpretive spirituality.

P12 (23, spiritual but not religious): *“TikTok and YouTube opened my mind. Before, I only knew Catholicism, but now I listen to Buddhists, atheists, and even philosophers. It all connects somehow.”*

P18 (25, Muslim): *“Studying with Christian and Buddhist friends taught me that maybe we all see the same truth from different sides.”*

P9 (21, Catholic): *“When I read debates online, I realized no religion has a monopoly on truth. Each has wisdom if you know how to listen.”*

P14 (20, Protestant): *“Exposure changed me. I still believe in Christ, but I also learn from others’ meditations or mindfulness practices. Truth is bigger than one book.”*

P6 (22, agnostic): *“Social media makes you question everything—priests, pastors, miracles. It forces you to think for yourself.”*

These statements exemplify what Berger (1979) calls the heretical imperative—the necessity of choosing belief amid plural options. The digital age intensifies this imperative: algorithmic exposure generates what McIntyre (2018) terms the post-truth condition, in which authority is decentralized, and affective resonance replaces institutional validation.

Philosophically, this is not simply moral laxity but the emergence of a networked epistemology. Foucault’s (1980) concept of the regime of truth finds concrete expression here: digital culture multiplies truth-regimes, each with its own claims to legitimacy. Filipino youth thus become curators of meaning, constructing hybrid spiritualities that combine elements from multiple traditions.

Their experience suggests that spiritual relativism is inseparable from technological mediation and global intersubjectivity—conditions that reconfigure truth as plural, participatory, and performative.

3. Moral Consequences: Freedom, Ambiguity, and Responsibility

While many participants celebrated relativism for promoting openness, others noted its ethical cost: without a shared framework, moral reasoning becomes ambiguous. This tension mirrors MacIntyre’s (1981) critique that the collapse of tradition leads to emotivism—moral claims reduced to expressions of preference rather than rational discourse.

P16 (22, agnostic): *“If morality depends on what feels right, then how do we decide what is good or evil?”*

P10 (24, Catholic): *"I value freedom, but sometimes I get confused—what standard should I follow when everyone has their own truth?"*

P8 (21, Protestant): *"Relativism makes you tolerant, but it also makes you unsure. You do not want to judge others, but you lose conviction."*

P3 (19, former Catholic): *"After leaving the Church, I felt free but also lost. There is no clear direction, only choices."*

P22 (24, Buddhist): *"For me, morality is what brings peace. Nevertheless, I know others define peace differently. That is hard to navigate."*

This two-stage philosophical evolution maps the transition of contemporary youth from the paralysis of spiritual relativism to an active, relational moral framework. Initially, the loss of an institutional monopoly on truth thrusts young actors into what Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) terms modern emotivism, a fragmented landscape where moral discourse is severed from its historical, cohesive frameworks. Rather than experiencing the overabundance of digital and social choices as a carefree liberation, youth face the anxious burden of absolute freedom; without an immutable institutional template to dictate right from wrong, their structural safety nets dissolve into cognitive vertigo and moral anxiety.

However, this destabilizing ambiguity ultimately serves as a clearing for a second philosophical movement: the pivot to genuine ethical agency. Because youth can no longer outsource their consciences to an external, legalistic checklist (*"I did it because the dogma commanded it"*), the vacuum left by missing universal rules shifts the entire moral burden onto their individual consciousness, denying them the luxury of passive obedience and leaving them unshieldedly responsible for their existential footprints. Consequently, this immense weight forces a transition from a vertical, compliance-based morality to a horizontal, relationally anchored framework. As abstract universal metrics blur, the source of ethical obligation narrows down to the immediate, face-to-face encounter with the concrete "Other"—a shift that, in the Philippine context, maps directly onto the vernacular lifeworlds of *kapwa* (shared identity) and *loob* (relational interiority), where protecting the well-being of the concrete other becomes the ultimate anchor for context-sensitive moral action.

4. Negotiating Relativism and Religious Commitment in a Plural Lifeworld

Despite embracing pluralism, many participants remain affiliated with their religious communities. Their commitment, however, is reinterpreted: not as dogmatic allegiance, but as existential belonging—a search for meaning and identity within tradition while retaining critical freedom.

P5 (21, Catholic): *"I still go to Mass, but I see it more as a connection than an obligation. It reminds me of my roots."*

P13 (20, Protestant): *“Relativism helps me respect other religions, but it also strengthens my faith. It makes me choose my belief consciously.”*

P17 (22, Muslim): *“I stay in Islam because it gives structure. Nevertheless, I also think God allows different paths; sincerity matters more than labels.”*

P19 (23, spiritual but not religious): *“I mix meditation with prayer. Religion is culture, but spirituality is personal truth.”*

P20 (24, Catholic): *“Faith now feels like dialogue, not submission. I question, but that is how I grow.”*

These accounts exemplify Gadamer’s (1975) notion of the fusion of horizons: the blending of inherited and contemporary understandings through interpretive dialogue. Rather than rejecting tradition, participants re-appropriate it through reflection.

Philosophically, this synthesis challenges the binary between relativism and orthodoxy. It represents what Taylor (2007) calls the reflexive believer—one who affirms faith within conditions of choice. This reflexivity transforms religion into an existential project rather than a fixed system.

This interpretive synthesis reveals that the participants’ navigation of ambiguity does not represent a descent into secular nihilism but a deeply adaptive transformation of consciousness that mirrors William James’s view that religious experiences enhance reality’s clarity. Moreover, such reconciliation reflects James’s (1902) pragmatist insight: the value of belief lies not in its propositional certainty but in its capacity to render human experience structurally stable, vital, and personally illuminating. Rather than demanding absolute dogmatic conformity, these lived adjustments prioritize the functional fruits of faith over its metaphysical roots. When the youth evaluate truth-claims based on their capacity to sustain interpersonal harmony (*kapwa*) and provide internal stability amidst algorithmic chaos, they are executing a classic Jamesian maneuver. They bypass institutional boundary disputes to anchor their convictions in the lived, experiential cash value of their spiritual choices.

5. Lived Incoherence: The Psychological and Existential Friction of Plurality

While navigating liquid religious environments can be philosophically framed as a coherent, context-sensitive rationality, the immediate phenomenological experience is marked by severe internal confusion, fractured thoughts, and discursive hesitation. Young actors do not simply execute a clean, detached navigation of worldviews; they experience the hollowing out of universal meta-narratives as an existential weight. To preserve empirical credibility and guard against analytical over-manicuring, these “messier,” structurally resistant accounts highlight the raw emotional labor undergirding modern belief.

This existential vertigo manifests prominently as an inability to sustain a singular narrative path when discussing divine mandates or objective absolute moral laws. When

asked to define the locus of ultimate validation, participants regularly loop back on their own assertions, demonstrating acute psychological friction:

P7 (21, Catholic): *"It's like... I don't know, honestly. Sometimes I feel like it's safe if I just listen to what the Church says, because that's already proven, right? Structural stability... but then, like... when I see modern setups or my friends who are completely outside the faith but are genuinely good people, suddenly things collide... wait. Because it feels like it turns out unfair? So I think, is it wrong that they are right, or right that I am wrong? I don't know... it's like, a... mess. My mind literally spins. It's like... you want to anchor your soul to something solid, but the moment you grasp the dock, the concrete itself turns into water. I don't know where I stand, to be honest."*

In this narrative, the structural breakdown is visible in the language itself. Conversational markers ("Parang... I don't know," "wait," "Ewan ko") serve as indices of epistemic displacement. The participant's linguistic horizon fractures under the weight of competing truth regimes; she experiences cognitive paralysis as inherited dogmatic frameworks collide with a lived, dialogical social reality. This validates Charles Taylor's diagnosis of altered *conditions of belief*—faith is no longer an unchallenged atmospheric default, but an option requiring an exhausting, self-reflective psychological defense.

This fractured thought architecture is further exacerbated by highly personalized, algorithmically curated digital spaces. Constant exposure to a chaotic stream of conflicting spiritual imagery, moral discourses, and aesthetic lifestyles causes internal exhaustion rather than merely expanding choices:

P14 (19, Non-institutionalized/Deistic): *"On my algorithmic feed, they appear at the same time... like, explicit traditional Catholic apologetics videos, then immediately after, an Islamic revert explaining modesty, and then a secular podcast mocking the concept of sin entirely. And all of them make complete sense while I'm watching them! It's like... text, text, then video. So, whose side am I going to take now? Mind you, my parents expect me to have absolute clarity. But me... it's like... scratch that. I mean, my brain compartmentalizes them into tiny rooms, but the walls are paper-thin. No, wait... let me rephrase. It's not even thin walls; it's like being in a room where the lights change color every three seconds, and you're expected to guess the 'true' color of the objects inside. It's exhausting. So much so."*

Participant 14's narrative workflow highlights how the "will to truth" is algorithmically destabilized. His thought path halts mid-sentence ("parang... scratch that. I mean... No, wait... let me rephrase"), mirroring the disjointed sequence of his digital feed. Internal friction shifts from a localized socio-cultural tension to an algorithmically

mediated psychological condition. Traditional corporate structures that previously locked religious identities into place are dissolved by horizontal media networks, leaving the young actor in a permanent state of existential mobility without an objective, external compass.

Finally, this lived incoherence manifests as a profound moral hesitation, where the boundary lines between ethical universalism and cultural relativism blur entirely. The youth are trapped between a desire for absolute ethical standards and an equally powerful vernacular impulse to preserve interpersonal harmony and avoid judgment:

P22 (22, Protestant): *“What if... like, what if there is a real, absolute line? What if I get punished for not fighting for the dogma? But on the other hand... context matters, right? Who am I to say their lived reality is invalid just because it violates an ancient text? But then... oh my god, wait. If everything is contextual, then even injustice becomes... relative? No, that can't be right. I hate that thought. I'm stuck in this loop where... you know? I want truth to be this clear, beautiful crystal, but whenever I pick it up, it dissolves like wet sugar in my hands. It makes me question if I'm just... structurally fluid, or just completely spineless. I really don't know anymore, truly.”*

An interpretive synthesis of the raw testimonies from Participants 7, 14, and 22 reveals that contemporary spiritual relativism among Filipino youth is not a passive, carefree adoption of an "anything goes" ethos, but a deeply contested existential condition. This condition manifests first through a distinct linguistic architecture of hesitation, where fractured syntax, false starts, and constant self-corrections serve as immediate markers of epistemic friction. This linguistic breakdown highlights a painful tug-of-war between the absolute, inherited dogmas of traditional institutions and the decentralized, pluralistic interactions of daily life. This internal friction is heavily exacerbated by the algorithmic destabilization of truth within digital spaces. As horizontal digital networks replace traditional corporate structures, personalized feeds present conflicting worldviews simultaneously and with equal persuasive power, subjecting the youth to an exhausting state of cognitive saturation that forces them to build temporary, thin-walled mental compartments just to survive.

Rather than finding liberation or comfort in this fluid framework, the youth experience a profound existential vertigo marked by deep psychological exhaustion and moral anxiety. They find themselves caught in a persistent loop, torn between a deep-seated desire for absolute ethical anchors and an equally powerful, localized demand for relational harmony, empathy, and context-sensitivity. This tension induces a paralyzing sense of groundlessness, vividly described through metaphors of concrete turning to water or crystals dissolving like wet sugar. Ultimately, these unpolished linguistic fractures, loops, and grammatical breakdowns expose the true existential condition of modern belief.

Relativism in this context is not a careless posture, but a resilient, exhausting effort to construct a context-sensitive rationality from within a collapsing public epistemic consensus—leaving the contemporary young subject stranded in a highly fractured landscape where the translation of moral anxiety into functional everyday choices remains a critical, open question.

Philosophical Analysis and Synthesis

This section defends the central claim that Filipino youth exemplify a postmetaphysical but rational spirituality—a model of context-sensitive rationality that reconciles pluralism with intelligibility. The empirical findings suggest that participants evaluate truth-claims through relational coherence, existential intelligibility, experiential resonance, and reflexive negotiation rather than through singular appeals to immutable authority. These dimensions collectively constitute what this study terms context-sensitive rationality.

The reflections of Filipino youth articulate a lived encounter with what Nietzsche (1974) identified as the death of God—not the literal disappearance of divinity, but the collapse of an unquestioned metaphysical order. When Participant 4 observed that “truth is like a mirror; everyone holds a different piece,” the remark pattern of speech mirrors the Nietzschean perspectivism: truth appears only through fragments conditioned by standpoint and interpretation. Similarly, Participant 11’s statement that “truth cannot be owned; it changes as you grow.” These reflections run parallel to Nietzsche (1989), who describes the transition from dogmatic metaphysics to the self-reflexive creation of values. Here, spiritual relativism is not nihilistic but creative—it calls individuals to assume responsibility for meaning once guaranteed by inherited absolutes.

Foucault’s (1977) analysis of power–knowledge relations deepens this reading. Participants consistently reported that traditional authorities—priests, pastors, teachers—no longer serve as exclusive arbiters of truth. As Participant 6 put it, “Social media makes you question everything—it forces you to think for yourself.” This statement mirrors the diffusion of epistemic authority across digital spaces. Nevertheless, as Foucault would note, the democratization of truth does not necessarily liberate; it reconfigures constraint. Online discourse, algorithms, and viral narratives constitute new truth regimes that shape what can be said and believed. The youth’s sense of freedom is thus entangled with new forms of disciplinary control—an ambivalence characteristic of postmodern subjectivity (Lyotard, 1984).

Against this backdrop, Gadamer’s (1975) hermeneutics offers a philosophical resolution. For Gadamer, understanding is dialogical: truth emerges not through possession but through encounter. Participant 13 captures this ethos by stating, “Relativism helps me respect other religions, but it also strengthens my faith. It makes me choose my belief consciously.” Such statements exemplify the fusion of horizons—a dynamic interplay between inherited tradition and new experience. Rather than undermining belief, pluralism demands a reflective appropriation of it. Truth becomes an event of interpretation: to believe is to engage, question, and translate one’s horizon into meaningful relation with others.

At the moral level, the participants' ambivalence toward freedom and order aligns with MacIntyre's (1981) account of the modern ethical predicament. Participant 10 admitted, "I value freedom, but sometimes I get confused—what standard should I follow when everyone has their own truth?" This captures MacIntyre's critique of emotivism: moral language persists even as its teleological coherence erodes. Nevertheless, as Sartre (1946) insists, moral fragmentation also opens the possibility of authenticity. Participant 3's confession— "After leaving the Church, I felt free but also lost"—illustrates the existential tension between liberation and disorientation. Freedom, here, is both a gift and a burden; meaning must now be constructed through deliberate reflection rather than inherited normativity.

This ethical ambivalence finds a constructive dimension in Taylor's (2007) notion of reflexive modernity. For many respondents, relativism becomes a condition for conscious faith. Participant 5, for instance, noted, "I still go to Mass, but I see it more as a connection than an obligation." In this view, faith is not submission to external authority, but affirmation of belonging chosen freely. Similarly, Participant 20 observed, "Faith now feels like dialogue, not submission. I question, but that is how I grow." These expressions demonstrate that belief can remain rational, authentic, and morally significant even after the demise of its metaphysical foundations.

The hermeneutic and existential dimensions of this transformation can be clarified through Biana's (2018) notion of embodied hermeneutics, which asserts that interpretation is always situated within the lived body and social history of the interpreter. The Filipino youth's experience of faith—mediated by online interactions, intercultural exposure, and local religiosity—demonstrates how embodiment and culture shape the process of meaning-making. Their reflections, such as Participant 19's claim that "I mix meditation with prayer—religion is culture, spirituality is personal truth," reveal that spiritual relativism is not disembodied skepticism but a concrete act of contextual reasoning.

Similarly, Joaquin's (2022) epistemic contextualism provides an analytic framework for understanding how truth-claims remain rational within plural settings. For Joaquin, justification is sensitive to context, and rational belief is not absolute but situationally constrained by epistemic standards. The youth's remarks illustrate this philosophical position in practice: they assess the reasonableness of belief relative to context rather than seeking transcendental validation. Their plural rationalities—formed within cultural, digital, and interfaith contexts—exemplify how rational discourse can persist amid relativism.

In this light, the Filipino experience offers a distinct philosophical contribution. It demonstrates how postmetaphysical religiosity can retain intellectual integrity without reverting to relativistic indifference. The "death of the absolute" thus signifies a transformation in the conditions of belief: truth becomes dialogical, morality reflexive, and faith interpretive. What persists is not dogma but meaning—the continual effort to think, believe, and act responsibly within the plurality of contemporary life.

Theoretical Contribution to the Philosophy of Religion

The synthesis presented here contributes to contemporary philosophy of religion by reorienting the discussion of relativism from an epistemological threat to a phenomenological condition of belief. Classical philosophy of religion often presupposed a correspondence model of truth and a metaphysical framework in which divine reality guaranteed epistemic stability. The lived experience of Filipino youth challenges this assumption by demonstrating that faith can persist even when epistemic certainty dissolves. Their reflective stance illustrates that the credibility of belief need not depend on objective proof, but on the coherence of interpretation and the integrity of existential commitment. In this sense, relativism becomes not a denial of truth but a transformation in the grammar of belief—truth understood as participation rather than possession. This reconceptualization invites a broader philosophical reconsideration: postmetaphysical conditions, rather than eroding faith, may enable a more dialogical, rational, and ethically responsible form of religious understanding.

Future research may extend this framework toward a dialogical ethics of pluralism—an inquiry into how context-sensitive rationality might serve as a philosophical foundation for interreligious understanding and moral education.

Conclusion

The experience of Filipino youth demonstrates that the decline of absolute truth does not eliminate belief but alters its epistemic grounding. In a plural, digitally mediated world, truth is no longer conceived as a fixed correspondence but as an interpretive process shaped by lived experience and reflective engagement. This shift aligns with the hermeneutic insight that understanding arises through dialogue and participation rather than through metaphysical certainty. The resulting form of relativism is not nihilistic but constructive: it reflects a search for coherence within diversity, revealing how truth continues to function as a relational and existential category even after the loss of its absolute form.

At the ethical level, the freedom gained from the dissolution of traditional certainties entails a corresponding responsibility to create and justify meaning. This moral tension echoes Nietzsche's critique of inherited values and MacIntyre's analysis of moral fragmentation in modernity. The Filipino youth's responses indicate that relativism can serve as a framework for self-reflective moral reasoning rather than as a withdrawal from normativity. In this sense, the "death of the absolute" signifies not the disappearance of faith but its philosophical transformation into a reflexive, interpretive, and contextually situated pursuit of meaning. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the "death of the absolute" marks not the end of faith but its philosophical renewal. Filipino youth's reflexive spirituality provides a paradigm for rethinking belief as interpretive participation—a task central to the contemporary philosophy of religion.

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