



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
with RELIGION and FAITH
in the 21ST CENTURY

The Influence of Secular Higher Education on Religious Identity of Emerging Adults: A Case Study in Education City, Qatar

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INTRODUCTION

Since the conception of the modern period and its separation of religion's age-old involvement in state and power institutions, i.e., secularization, the subsequent generations have had to learn to cope and deal with life differently. Religion's place in society still continues to ignite heated debates yet such clamor does not seem to stunt the number of religious followers, persistently growing since the late twentieth century¹. The persistence of religious affiliation, especially in the public space, comes as an antithesis of the secularization theories in the field of sociology in the 1960s.² They were based on the premise that in addition to secularization processes pushing religion into private spaces, the secular and universal nature of the scientific method and worldview would replace

the need for religious worldviews by offering logic and rationality in place of faith and irrationality.³ These theories, however, although deemed invalid today, do contribute to enriching studies on religion and the secular world. Empirical studies instead, highlight the complex relationship between secularization processes and religious affiliation, alluding that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive as previously thought.⁴ We thus come to what looks like multiple secularisms and multiple modernities, each with their unique integration (or lack thereof) of religion in society.

The modern secular university of today, although finding its beginnings and history entwined with religion, provides a secular platform for the minds across the world to engage in. While the higher education experience has, for the most part, taken the

place of initiation rites that used to mark adulthood, it has also managed to cut across peoples of various ethnicities, religions, races and cultures.⁵ It is interesting to note that secularization theorists such as Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce believed that it was through education that the theory would be realized. Thus, education and its institutions play no minor role in influencing minds, especially those of emerging adults who would consequently form and shape future generations. This study looks into the dynamics between the secular environment found in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) such as universities and its impact on the conception of religious identity among Muslim emerging adults, specifically in the case of Education City (EC), “a hub of academic excellence...(housing) educational facilities...partner universities and...(a) home grown higher education institution, Hamad Bin Khalifa University...(to) reflect areas of relevance to Qatar.”⁶

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Secular Higher Education Institutes: Educational institutes that recognize and operate using epistemologies based on the liberal education philosophy and empiricism.⁷ These institutions do not recognize religious authority in its ontologies or epistemologies, but instead knowledge generated is independent of religious institutions.⁸ These institutions are further characterized by the privatization and compartmentalization of value-based judgements concerning religious affiliation.⁹

Religious Identity: According to the SAGE Handbook of Identities, Religious Identity can be defined as a “discourse of boundaries, relatedness and otherness, on the one hand, and encompassment and inclusiveness, on the other...For believers, religious identity marks, above all, the division of human and sacred worlds.”¹⁰ It includes an individual’s thinking, worldview, commitment, actions and non-actions.¹¹ While religious identity is multifaceted and requires multidisciplinary expertise to fully conceptualize, this

case study limits itself to the study of religious self-perception and metaphysical plausibility.

SOCIAL THEORY – BETWEEN SECULAR HIGHER EDUCATION, ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Higher education, as Valks outlines, possesses the characteristic of stimulating various worldviews as it provides a platform for the exchange of ideas, increase in knowledge and critical thinking in addition to the development of the skills.¹² Particular to the Muslim context in secular higher education, James Arthur notes that, “From a Muslim worldview, education can be seen as instrumental in bringing...the knowledge of God. Education cannot be an end in itself, but is a means to an end – submission to God. Adherence to Islam requires submission and obedience, *which would appear, for some, to suggest a limitation to speculation and critical inquiry.*”¹³ (Furthermore, he states that while in Islam “a secular and a separate religious world has traditionally or theoretically had no place within traditional understandings of Islam,” in reality and practice this is not the case in Muslim majority communities and Muslim countries.

The Problem of the Secular Worldview and Knowing the Self

Secular HEIs, as mentioned in previous sections, use epistemologies that presume anti-religious ontologies such as positivism, historicism, methodological naturalism etc., without clearly outlining their ontological bases. Given the global rise in the number of students in secular HEIs today as opposed to any other period in history, coupled with the current hegemony of western models of higher education, religious illiteracy is on the rise among graduates of these HEIs.¹⁴ Rising religious illiteracy, according to Valk, could perpetuate religious intolerance, distrust and disrespect towards individuals who express their religious identity outwardly and creates uncertainty in

matters pertaining to knowing the self and others.¹⁵ Marginalization of religion in the secular intellectual space of HEIs today is a disservice to its students since it turns a blind eye to the diversity of socio-cultural realities brought forth by globalization;¹⁶ especially given that HEIs have become sites at which students construct and solidify their sense of self.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that when sociologists of education and religion speak of worldview studies, Islam is consistently brought into discussion as an example.¹⁸ With scholars like Mayrl and Oeur calling for inclusive curricula in higher education engaging varying worldviews in order to achieve a holistic student development, the loopholes in the secular worldview begin to be realized and advocated against.¹⁹

Belief Liberalization Theory

Mayrl and Uecker outline the seven expected outcomes of a secular HE experience on college students based on the exposure to religious diversity, critical cognition and cognitive dissonance. The theory states that students may become (1) more unorthodox—or less in step with the traditional teachings of their faith tradition; (2) more naturalistic—or less likely to believe in divinely-orchestrated supernatural occurrences; (3) more uncertain about their faith—or more likely to have doubts about whether their religion is true; (4) more reserved—or less likely to believe it is alright for people to try to convert others; (5) more inclusive—or more likely to believe that religions other than their own could be true; (6) more individualistic—or more likely to grant individuals rather than institutions authority in deciding what they should believe; and (7) more independent—or less tied to institutional religion for their religious identity.²⁰

In connection to religious identity and higher education, elite college students are socialized more completely into an identity that according to Zelan, functions as an alternative to religion and hence results in the fall of religious identity among graduate students.²¹ Another major theory that falls

within belief liberalization is that of Peter Berger. He postulated that due to the high religious pluralism found in university campuses (where there is no single monopoly over the truth, prompting questioning self-held/taught religious beliefs in the encounter of the ‘other’), “students are expected to adopt anti-authoritarian cultural orientations in the classroom that are detrimental to religious belief and practice.”²²

Plausibility Theory

Once again, Peter Berger’s work has been most influential in the conception of the Plausibility of Structures theory in the sociology of religion.²³ It states that plausibility structures are “social networks that maintain the plausibility of religious beliefs even when these beliefs are challenged by competing explanations. Plausibility is provided simply by belonging to a community of similar-minded people, and by rituals that strengthen the sense of belonging to these communities.”²⁴ Berger states that “religious (and other) belief systems are socially constructed and require social confirmation to survive.”²⁵ The Plausibility Theory is supported by religiously pluralistic communities since, “The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other”, pushing religion to be “subjectivized’ in a double sense:...’reality’ becomes a ‘private’ affair of individuals, that is, loses the quality of self-evident intersubjective plausibility...being rooted within the consciousness of the individual rather than in any facticities of the external world.”²⁶

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance is a realized misalignment of an individual between what one is doing and what one ought to do. It presumes that words and actions need to be in line with one’s thoughts and rationale by default for normal human behavior.²⁷ “Such dissonance may lead them to distance themselves from organized religion, ascribe less importance to religion, or disassociate from religion altogether.”²⁸ University and college students are known to experience cognitive

dissonance leading to reduced religious expression as the HEI environment broadens the students' knowledge, thinking capacity and awareness, gives freedom of thought and expression and puts distance from previously known religious socializations such as parents, local religious community etc.²⁹

THE CASE OF EDUCATION CITY – QATAR

EC is a 12 km square campus, inaugurated in 2003 and home to six top American branch campuses for higher education; Virginia Commonwealth University, Weill Cornell Medicine College, Texas A&M, Northwestern University, Carnegie Mellon University and Georgetown University,³⁰ the French institution, HEC-Paris, the British University College London and Qatar's own Hamad Bin Khalifa University.³¹ EC's branch campuses are not watered-down versions of the main campuses but are quite the opposite; forming a stronger and more wholesome representation of the main campus values and standard while adapting the main campus culture to the Qatari context.³² Some key EC officials also emphasized the role of the liberal professional model operating within the branch campuses as being crucial for the development of Qatar's KBE, allowing creativity in solving old problems the region faces. Thus, Khoury observes that main campus philosophies trickle down into the deliverables of the branch campuses in Qatar in varying degrees. Opening doors to western models of higher education have consistently been associated with the achievement of higher developmental skills required for the economic growth targets of the GCC.

The United States' involvement in the higher education of GCC countries dates back to the Cold War and has long been part of their military involvement with the Middle East. Noori recalls the statement of Henry Steele Commager (d.1998), a notable American historian of his time, who stated, "We have a responsibility to transmit to the new

institutions which we create or develop not merely the physical facilities but the moral and intellectual characteristics of the university. That means that the American academic community...must represent to the rest of the world the habits of freedom...It must show that problems can be solved only if those who work at them are free from improper pressures of politics, religion, ideology."³³

One of the biggest challenges the region has seen in bringing in secular HEIs is the difficulty in 'glocalization'; the incorporation and preservation of their cultural and national identity through modernizing and globalizing efforts.³⁴ Despite the concerns raised by such studies, these HEIs and their influence are restricted primarily to its students and academics within the institution itself. Their reach to the public is usually restricted or heavily controlled unlike the academic freedoms offered in the Home universities.³⁵

Implications of the Secular HEI Environment at EC for the Muslim Identity in Qatar

Given that Qatar as a nation-state is still in its infancy, only celebrating its fiftieth year after independence in 2021, the feats of its overall development have nevertheless been highly laudable since the turn of the twenty-first century. Qatar has been steamrolling into economic, environmental and social innovation since. With such rapid changes however the nation's self-reflection during the process have been questioned. ElKhayat's article in the International Journal of Higher Education called for the implementation of a Capabilities Approach in designing and teaching curricula of secular HEIs due to the underlying neoliberal agenda.³⁶ He states that secular branch HEIs operate with the incentive of providing a globalized and universalized education plastering over neoliberalism. He predicts with the rise of branch HEIs in the future, students in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, would begin to internalize education as a means of employability as opposed to a means for education itself thus corroding potential creative thinkers since

educational reform in the MENA region neglected to address education as a socializing agent.³⁷ Miller-Idriss and Hanauer state that the branch campus phenomenon in the Middle East is an active move towards universalization of education, which in turn universalizes certain behaviors and modes of thought; 'a larger ideological package'.³⁸ The authors highlight three social challenges branch campuses bring to the Middle East; firstly they increase what is called 'deterritorialisation,' which is used to refer to the gap between local and foreign influence over social, economic and political functioning. Secondly, an increased focus on skill and the commodification of education. Thirdly, increased westernization masked through concepts of universalization and globalization taking the shape of a cultural imperialism of sorts. Some of the factors that contribute to this are English language preference, replacement or secondary importance to religious instruction, foreign teachers unaccustomed with local values, traditions, problems etc. Additionally, educational borrowing and transfer, they remark, are usual and bring about a puzzling situation unseen before the twenty-first century challenging regional identity, culture and religious identity.³⁹ A study of youth identities in the MENA region, states that the English language has become more popular among the youth and despite viewing Arabic as a central part of their identity, Arabic has been losing its value and functionality since English would be the route to advance their careers. Thus, examining the religious identity of Muslim emerging adults in this context becomes paramount.

METHOD

The religious identity of students from three HEI's located in EC are studied; The College of Islamic Studies under Hamad Bin Khalifa University (CIS-HBKU), branch campuses of Georgetown University (GU) and Weill-Cornell Medical College (WCMC). All three institutions are secular HEIs however, they engage with religion in different ways. The object of

study at CIS-HBKU is religion without claiming religious authority. GU, unlike CIS-HBKU and WCMC, is a secular and Jesuit institution⁴⁰ based on its mission and founding principles.⁴¹ It is also known to have the strongest program for liberal education in EC⁴² while also known to separate its Catholic heritage and values from its curricula.⁴³ WCMC, unlike GU and CIS-HBKU has very little to do with religion in much of its curriculum however studies have shown cross-cultural tension in the arena of medical ethics.⁴⁴

Sampling and Data Collection

A non-probability sample of 3 students from each HEI was made. These respondents were selected using a snowball sampling approach. 9 respondents were individually interviewed following a semi-structured guide to allow free expression when speaking on private versus public religious identity. A semi-structured interview also allows for improvisation in questioning permitting the flexibility required of the concept of identity.

The guide was divided into four themes: introduction, self-constructed Muslim identity, place of religion in curricula/environment and parental religiousness. The sample was controlled for age, residential status, enrollment in secondary and tertiary school in Qatar and religion (in this case, Islam). The sample was not controlled for gender. It was initially intended to include a 5:4 female to male ratio however due to limitations in sourcing respondents, the ratio swerved to 7:2. The interviews were held over the phone as well as in person when circumstances allowed it. The respondents were initially contacted via text message and were given questions to reflect upon prior to the interview. They were briefed on the study and were required to sign a consent form. After which they filled the information form attached in Appendix C. The anonymity of the respondents have been maintained for the study. Interviews were around sixty to ninety minutes long. They were audio recorded, transcribed and then coded for analysis.

Variables

The three independent variables for the study include curriculum, parental religiousness and number of completed semesters. Dependent variables include private and public religious identity.

Data Analysis

The data was coded and themed manually. Respondent nuances, pauses, rate of delivery and intonation were also taken into consideration.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The sample profile and the resultant themes from the data appears as follows respectively:

Table 1: Sample Profile

NO	RESPONDENT	AGE	GENDER	QATARI NATIONAL (QN)/ RESIDENT	NO. OF SEMESTERS	SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM
1	CIS – 1	24	Female	Resident	2	CBSE*/British
2	CIS – 2	24	Female	QN	4	Local/British
3	CIS – 3	22	Male	Resident	2	CBSE
4	GU – 1	18	Female	Resident	2	British/American
5	GU – 2	19	Female	QN	4	British
6	GU – 3	20	Female	Resident	4	CBSE
7	WCMC – 1	20	Female	Resident	4	British/American
8	WCMC – 2	20	Female	Resident	2	American
9	WCMC – 3	19	Male	Resident	2	Sri Lankan/British

*Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)

** Due to limitations in reach and high number of female students over males in EC45, the female to male ratio within the sample could not be maintained at 5:4 but rather was 7:2.

Table 2: Resultant Themes

NO	THEMES
1	Secondary school was most turbulent for religious identity
2	Secular HEIs enhances religious identity
3	Freedom of thought, expression and discussion enhances religious identity
4	Cognitive dissonances were resolved using religion itself
5	Parental religiousness is a key religious socializing agent
6	Inward expressions of Muslim religious identities varied to a great degree

From the interviews conducted, most respondents showed a dip in their religious identity in secondary school despite the fact that all respondents having experienced strong parental religiousness. It was a common observation that most respondents did not respond well to how Islam was taught in schools. They found it repetitive, reductionist and insufficient in its portrayal of Islam regardless of the curricula. Furthermore, Islamic Studies was not seen as an important subject in secondary school among all respondents. The following are few of the key responses that describe the experiences of the respondents in this regard.

“If I had to put a number, school benefited 10 per cent in terms of my religion. Secondary school was the worst. You don’t learn anything about religion and it takes you away from religion in my experience because they don’t consider talking about different topics.” – CIS – 3

“It would make me angry the way Islam was taught in school because it’s always like you know, this is *haram* and this is why you shouldn’t do it. And it’s always stuff that is repeated throughout the years. And I wanted to learn more, like the stories of the *anbiya* (the prophets) and how they lived. A lot of my friends would get mad too. I did not like the content being taught. We never discussed religion out of class.” – GU – 1

Unlike the presuppositions of the study, almost all respondents showed a heightened sense of their Muslim identity when in secular HEIs or secular environments. The respondents, although faced with otherwise dissonant ideas handled them uniquely, which did not phase their Islamic plausibility structures. Instead, they displayed a stronger curiosity and a drive to research how and what Islam says about these dissonant ideas instead of looking at religion as incapable of answering their questions. Another trend within this theme is the use of an individual Islamic rationalization every respondent showed through his

or her experience in the secular HEIs. They showed a tendency to incorporate even ideas and concepts, although they were taught in a secular manner, into their religious worldview.

Although religion was not something that was spoken of in the class (except the theology courses offered at GU such as “The Problem of God” and “Human Images in World Religions” and at CIS), the students did discuss religion outside class. The discussions varied from institution to institution with GU being the most controversial. CIS-2 on commenting of her experience in GU as an undergraduate, when she felt her Muslim identity developed most, states,

“I felt more connected to God at the end of my undergraduate as it gave me more motivation to learn my religion. I got more tafsir books and I realized it was my responsibility to educate myself on my religion. Islamic morals are important to me, I used to act unintentionally because of my mother but after university, I was more conscious in my decision to act morally as a Muslim.”

Similar sentiments were also expressed by CIS – 3, GU- 1 and GU – 2, where the latter showed a sense of personal responsibility in maintaining the image of Islam within the secular HEI. However, little difference was made for respondents GU – 3 and WCMC – 2 since their parental religiousness took deep hold on their worldviews and remained unphased through the social environments in university; denying dissonant ideas.

Some responded on how the secular HEIs gave them a platform to voice their opinions and speak for themselves. However, for two of the respondents (GU – 1 and GU – 2) freedom of expression was found at the end of secondary school through debate organizations, specifically Model United Nations (MUN). In their responses a sub-theme that appeared along with the freedom respondents felt secular HEIs provided in terms of voicing their opinions was

the little to no tolerance to questioning of religious matters outside of university. Among the WCMC respondents, university did not affect their voice on their religious identity as neither the class nor the professors actively address religion.

Almost all respondents confirmed the importance of their parents in shaping and maintaining their religious identity. Most respondents also expressed that home was where they felt most at ease expressing themselves as Muslims. On one hand, there were parents who educated the respondents in such a way that gave them room to act on their own (group 1) while on the other hand, there were parents who taught religion through culture (group 2). The former which did not yield strong outward religious expressions, led to a strong inner consciousness. The latter led respondents to feeling confused in the face of dissonant ideas. Initially, they criticized how religion was taught to them but then later understood that it was the problem of culture as opposed to religion. However culture, especially in the two Qatari respondents, was a strong religious socializing agent. Cognitive dissonance had initially brought about awareness between what was considered religious and cultural. The two respondents attribute this awareness to attending university

Thus from the themes discussed above, the following observations can be deduced in relation to the research questions of the study.

1. Exposure to secular HEIs does in fact influence religious identity in emerging adults. However, the relation has less to do with the curricula taught and more to do with the learning environment provided by these institutions where students are free to enquire and encouraged to explore and question ideas and ideologies.

2. Stark differences exist in the learning environments of secondary school and that of the secular HEIs, which significantly influence religious identity. It is evident that the learning environment in secondary schools does not foster a healthy growth of one's religious identity. In fact, religious identity was most distorted during this period. Secular HEIs provide space to regain and critically reflect on one's own religious identity, thereby strengthening it.
3. Parental religiousness is a key religious socializing agent for students attending secular HEIs.
4. Students after attending secular HEIs show heightened self-identification and self-awareness, which changes the ways in which they socialize in their communities outside campus and international spaces.

To conclude, while the secular HEIs in EC theoretically led to a decrease in religious identity expression, the secular or lack of ontological reference was not sufficient to cast doubt on the plausibility structures offered in their religion i.e., Islam. The respondents instead benefitted from the environment EC provides leading them to take ownership of their own Muslim identity according to what made sense to them. In this way, despite requiring a much wider sample, it can be strongly hypothesized that while 'the secular' has been made out to be as 'anti-religion' in the literature, it instead, at least in the context of EC, seems to provide a safe space for religious questioning and exploration while being nested and regulated in a culture that draws its inspiration from religion. It also allows them to actively engage with secular ideas and environments and thrive in them. Respondents developed strong religious inclinations and rationalizations for their participation in society, without seeing religion as backward or irrational.

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ENDNOTES

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