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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to explore the impact of religious beliefs in terms of religiosity, including (1) religious background, (2) religious practices and (3) participation in religious activities, on the development of spiritual well-being of Chinese students. Thereafter, this research further discussed how and what religiosity has contributed to the development of the university students' spiritual well-being.

27 individual in-depth interviews with university students were conducted. Findings contribute to the exploration of how the spiritual well-being of students could be influenced by their religious beliefs. Their religious doctrines, activities and practices may likewise be integrated in their daily lives. Moreover, religious doctrines, participation in religious activities and prayers or meditation positively contribute to the development of the university students' spiritual well-being in specific domains (i.e., personal, communal, environmental and transcendental). Happiness, love, harmony, and devotion are affirmed as possible reasons and effects from their religious beliefs in the specific domains.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on the spiritual well-being of patients with cancer and those who are terminally ill (Fehring, Miller, and Shaw 1997; McClain, Rosenfeld, and Breitbart 2003; Peterman et al. 2002). However, only a few of these studies have been concerned with the spiritual well-being of young adults. In recent years, the suicide rate amongst students has been increasing in Hong Kong. In academic year 2016, 22 cases of student suicide were recorded in Hong Kong. In the same year, over 900 students from a university in Hong Kong sought counselling support and services for mood disorders and emotional instability, such as depression, over-anxiety disorder and self-mutilation (South China Morning Post 2016). These tragedies have called our attention to the importance of students' spiritual well-being. Hence,

discussions and studies on methods to improve the spiritual well-being of university students are important.

2. Literature reviews and conceptual framework

Religion

Ingersoll (1995) explained that the root word of 'religion' is the Latin term *religio*, which connotes a binding of humans and superhumans. Religions are considered systematised combinations of beliefs that include laws, values, regulations, principles, trust and performances (Tisdell 2003). Religion refers to the belief of a person on the absolute definitiveness and inherent truth qualities of the teachings and scriptures of a faith (Stark and Glock 1968). In everyday life, each individual is guided by his/her values.

Religiosity is about how people's experience of God, Creator or a transcendent being is shaped by and expressed through religious affiliation and institutions (Piedmont et al. 2009). Religiosity includes three elements, namely, (1) background (e.g., affiliation or institutions), (2) practices (e.g., prayer or meditation) and (3) participation in religious activities (e.g., attendance in religious groups) (Ellison, Gay, and Glass 1989; Tirri, Tallent-Runnels, and Nokelainen 2005; Leondari and Gialamas 2009). The affiliation or institutional element is judged by individual denominational membership and the self-reported strength of affiliation. Religious practices, which are closely and positively linked with the devotional intensity, are based on the frequency of prayer of an individual and his or her closeness to the transcendence. Participatory religiosity is derived from one's frequency of attendance in religious services.

Religious engagement, which represents the behavioural counterpart of religious commitment, includes such conducts as participating in religious activities, practicing religious doctrines, praying or meditating and reading sacred texts (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011).These concepts are similar to the definition and description of religiosity.

Positive relationships between religiosity and general well-being are reported in large scale studies and in-depth research in the United States and around the world respectively (Delbridge, Headey, and Wearing 1994; Silberman 2005).

Spirituality and spiritual well-being

The term 'spirituality' is derived from the Latin *spiritus*, which means a breath of life, air or courage (Ingersoll 1995; Pong 2016). Tanyi (2002) defined spirituality as an intrinsic and essential aspect of humanity. Spirituality involves, but is not limited to, dreams, thoughts, meaning, principles, visions and beliefs (Palmer 2003). Moreover, spirituality is extremely personal (Freshman 1999) and subjective (Saucier and Skrzypinska, 2006). It was a person's internal

orientation toward a larger transcendent reality 'that binds all things into a more unitive harmony' (Piedmont 1999, p. 988). Additionally, Piedmont (1999) claimed that spirituality has a motivational influence in the psychological aspects of people.

The term 'spiritual' is constantly expressed as related to the soul, mystical, psychic, nonphysical and divine (Gomez and Fisher 2003). By contrast, 'well-being' refers to the state of satisfaction, comfort, harmony and pleasure (Ellison 1983). When the two terms are combined (i.e., spiritual well-being), the created term describes a person's harmonious state. Each individual embodies his/her own unique manifestations of spirituality that are heavily dependent on their philosophies, principles, experiences and values (Kitko 2001). By contrast, spiritual well-being manifests in their love, performance, concern, mercy, attentiveness, self-sacrifice and inspiration (Insel and Roth 2006).

Ellison (1983) confirmed that spiritual well-being represents the intrinsic state of spirituality and spiritual health. These states are constantly expressed and performed in two ways, namely (1) religious and (2) social and psychological. Ellison also developed the spiritual well-being scale (SWBS) with these two aims in 1983. The religious scope considers the relationship between God and human beings, whereas the social and psychological scope encompasses the meaning, reason and satisfaction of life. The two aims are completely different from each other but mutually and interactively influenced.

Spirituality is a phenomenon achieved by combining the interconnection, aims and significance in life; a person's innermost properties and God (Howden 1992). The Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS) developed by Howden (1992) was used to assess the spiritual well-being of university students based on philosophy, psychology, sociology, theology and nursing. SAS includes 28 items and uses a 6-point scale in four areas: (1) Purpose and Meaning in Life, (2) Innerness or Inner Resources, (3) Unifying Interconnectedness and (4) Transcendence.

Spirituality and religiosity

The following question is essential in the current discussion: Is spirituality the needed connection with religion? Although spirituality is believed to be a personal search for the goal, sense or point of life, spirituality does not necessarily have to be linked to any religious belief (Tanyi 2002). Spirituality connects principles, philosophies and values that bestow the significance and implications to everyday life, as well as leads to the recognition of individuals' ideal well-being.

Fisher (1998) validated that spirituality refers to the harmonious environments and closed connections people live in, including good relationships with oneself (personal), others (communal), nature (environment) and God (transcendent). Fisher likewise developed the Spiritual Health and Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM) in 1998. Moreover, Fisher (2013) modified SHALOM into a considerably

generic form to measure the spiritual well-being of people in the following four domains: (1) personal, (2) communal, (3) environmental and (4) transcendental. Fisher (2013) explained that the meaning, purpose and direction of life comprise the first domain; interpersonal relationships and communications belong to the communal domain; integration of nature and humans with obligation and thankfulness comprise the environmental domain and relationship and communication between humans and transcendent compose the transcendental domain (Fisher 2013). Fisher (2013) believed that transcendent could be regarded as God or a divine, deceased person, higher power and higher self, amongst others, in his modified SHALOM. The extensive coverage allowed to embrace worldviews ranging from belief in God to disbelief. The current study adopts the concepts of spirituality and spiritual well-being defined by Fisher (2013).

Effects of religious beliefs on the spiritual well-being

Studies have established a positive correlation between religiosity and spiritual well-being amongst ill patients (Fehring, Miller, and Shaw 1997). However, only a few of these studies had been conducted on university students. Additionally, limited information is provided on the underlying process that facilitates such a link, particularly on how and what may work in Chinese societies. The aim of this current study is to investigate whether the religious beliefs of students influence their spiritual well-being. If so, how and what do their religious beliefs influence their spiritual well-being?

Hypothesised conceptual model

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesised conceptual model of this study. The proposed model suggests how and what religion affects the spiritual well-being of students in the specific domains. Religiosity and religious engagement, which is a type of religious behaviour, include the three elements of (1) affiliation or institutions, (2) religious practices and (3) participation (Ellison, Gay, and Glass 1989; Tirri, Tallent-Runnels, and Nokelainen 2005; Leondari and Gialamas 2009). The spiritual well-being of students is evaluated by the framework of Spiritual Health and Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM) developed in 1998 and modified in 2013 by Fisher for their satisfaction in the four domains: (1) personal, (2) communal, (3) environmental and (4) transcendental.

Happiness

Positive and close correlations between happiness and religiosity have been reported in empirical investigations (Snoep 2008). Luttmer (2005) stated that religious beliefs and activities are positively correlated with subjective well-being even after demographic variables are controlled for. The frequency of

The possible facilitators between students' religious Beliefs and their spiritual well-being

1. Happiness
2. Love
3. Harmony
4. Devotion

Students' spiritual well-being:

1. Personal
2. Communal
3. Environmental
4. Transcendental

Happiness
Love
Harmony
Devotion

Religiosity :
1. Religious background
(such as affiliation or institutions)

2. Religious practices
(such as prayer or meditation)

3. Participations of religious activities
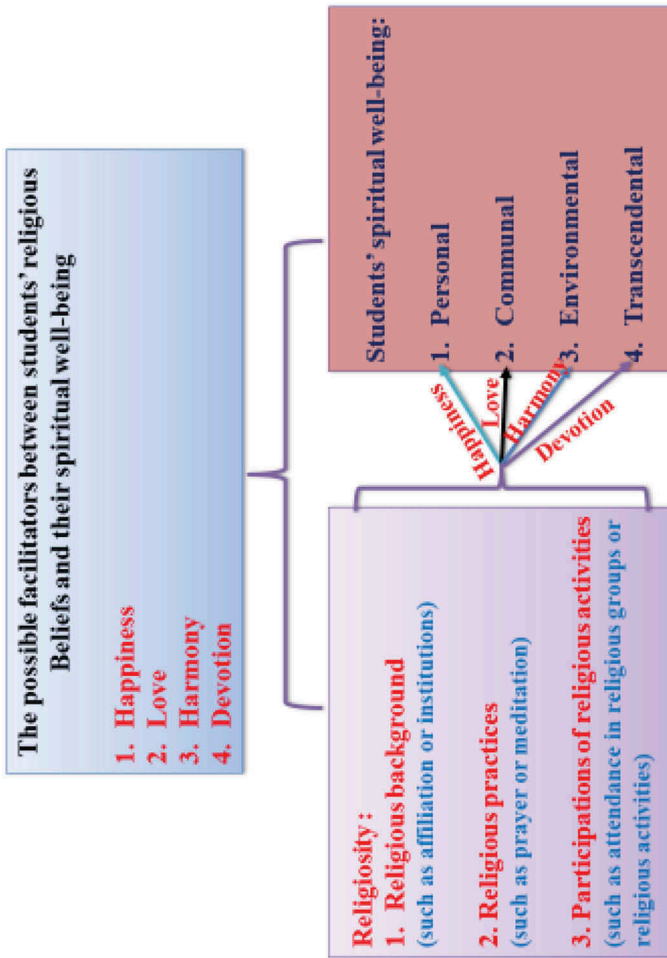(such as attendance in religious groups or religious activities)

Figure 1. The Conceptual Model of Religiosity and Spiritual Well-Being.

attending religious services, regularity of meditation or prayers and adherence to religious doctrines are linked to happiness (Ferriss 2002). Thus, religious people are highly satisfied (Swinyard, Kau, and Phua 2001). The findings of these studies can be regarded as proofs of the positive impact of religion on people.

In the past decades, several studies have been conducted on the relationships between religion and happiness amongst undergraduate students. The majority of these studies have affirmed the positive and close relationships between religion and happiness (Lewis and Cruise 2006). These studies also used the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, and Crossland 1989) to assess the happiness of people in terms of three components: (1) frequency and positive affect, (2) absence of negative affect and (3) average satisfaction over a period.

The studies conducted for relationships between religion and happiness amongst undergraduate students in the UK (Robbins and Francis 1996) and the US (Francis and Lester 1997) verified that a significant relationship exists between a positive attitude towards Christianity and happiness amongst the university students.

Love

The high levels of care and love of religious people are highly correlated to the love and compassion of God. The compassionate actions of religious people for others means performing the will of God (Ozorak 2003). Markstrom (1999) conducted a study in West Virginia and verified that extensive religious involvements (e.g., attendance in religious services, participation in a Bible study group and youth group involvement) are associated with highly positive psycho-social indicators (e.g., fidelity, love and care). Thus, high school students who intently live out religious beliefs would easily show love, care and fidelity to others.

Religious practice is highly associated with considerable charity. Brooks (2004) analysed the correlation of compassion with religion and explained that religious practice is associated with high levels of love, trust, care and empathy. Religious individuals were 15% more likely to extend sympathy and consideration to the less fortunate than non-religious individuals. Even when other factors (e.g., influence of age, income, marital status, education level, race and sex) were accounted for, this figure decreased only by 2%.

Harmony

Despite the limited research on the relationship between religion and ecological environments, several of these empirical studies have affirmed the positive correlation between religions and harmony with the natural environment (Hagevi 2014; Ontakharai, Koul, and Neanchaleay 2008). Hagevi (2014) conducted a study in 22 European and Europe-adjacent countries with 42,007

respondents and asserted that communities with high religiosity are predisposed to exhibiting care, concern and mindfulness towards the environment compared with considerably secular societies. A Swedish study conducted on a national sample during the mid-1980s confirmed that churchgoers are more environmentally aware than non-churchgoers (Bjereld and Gilljam 1991).

Ontakharai, Koul, and Neanchaleay (2008) corroborated that Thai college students with an open-minded attitude towards the Buddhist religion were likely to show care and concern for the environment. Buddhist teachings and practices are consistent with the emphasis on, care for and consideration of contemporary environmental theorists and philosophers because Buddhism is a distinctively 'green' or 'eco-friendly' religion (James and Cooper 2007). Moreover, Taoists are regarded as environmentalists because they are driven by the Daoist thought of 'favour and respect for nature and harmony with the nature'. These Daoist thoughts include 'holism', 'anti-pragmatism', 'primitivism' and 'femininity' (Cooper 1994). The correlation between religion and harmony with nature was determined in these previous studies.

Devotion

Numerous empirical studies have confirmed that religious practices (e.g., prayer/meditation) and religious activities (e.g., participation in religious groups) and the devotion of people are closely and positively correlated (Anye et al. 2013; Bryant et al., 2008; Lawler-Row and Elliott 2009; Musa 2015). These studies have asserted that the more the frequency of prayer or meditation, the nearer the people are to what they believe in as religion. Additionally, they have affirmed that the more the frequency of joining religious groups and activities, the more the experience of faith in the religion. Therefore, religious people have more devotion and are stronger in upholding their beliefs than secular people (Swinyard, Kau, and Phua 2001).

Another driver for the development of spiritual well-being

Sports

Continuously engaging in long-term physical exercises can maintain a positive mind and healthy body. Various studies (e.g., Brown et al. 2003) have determined that people who regularly perform physical exercises can easily maintain their happy mode, optimism, confidence and addiction control. Furthermore, participation in sports competitions can lead people to develop good psychological quality, thereby enhancing their ability to prevent emotional instability and over-anxiety (Sabin and Marcel 2014). Sports (e.g., football and basketball) helps children build their cooperation and teamwork spirit. Activities in nature (e.g., hiking) could train physical strength and willpower and release daily pressures (Wolf and Wohlfart 2014). Such activities provide people with a feeling of returning and

being close to nature. Connection with nature provides a good therapeutic effect on emotional depression and insomnia (Kruger et al. 2010). Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) believed that people could have optimal experience and highest spirit via the state of flow through sports. From the non-religious view, this highest state that athletes seek is called peak experience (Maslow 2013), state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2013) or moments of deep play (Ackerman, 1999).

Music

Music cultivates children's temperament and contributes substantially to the growth of their personality and spirituality (Atkins and Schubert 2014). Numerous studies have determined that children who constantly play music could have high self-esteem and sense of joy (Carr 2006), good language and communication skills and interpersonal relationship (Patel 2003), improved connectedness with nature (Miller 1987) and close relationship with the transcendent (Smith and Denton 2009). Music offers transcendence, connectedness and flow to children's spirituality (Wills 2011). Wills (2011) believed that music could 'be considered as a signal of transcendence' by bringing connectedness with others and generating 'a sense of achievement and fulfilment' in the flow.

Volunteerism

Participation in volunteer activities can assist students enhance their self-image, sense of responsibility and self-worth (Thoits and Hewitt 2001; Sax, Astin, and Avalos 1999). When teenagers are provided with an opportunity to prove their abilities, they build their confidence and use their positive powers through their contributions in these meaningful activities. These teenagers feel satisfied spiritually because they feel that they could help people in need (Thoits and Hewitt 2001). As volunteers, teenagers can also learn how to respect and communicate with other people.

Research questions

This study aims to answer the following questions.

Question 1: What are the differences in the development (experiences) of spiritual well-being of students with and without religious beliefs?

Question 2: How and what do religious beliefs contribute to the development of students' spiritual well-being?

Methods

Individual in-depth interviews

A total of 27 university students were invited for individual face-to-face in-depth interviews. These students have different backgrounds, including religious beliefs. This study employed stratified sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted from January to August 2015. Semi-structured interviews with 12 guided questions in four dimensions were conducted. For example, the students were asked (with respect to the personal domain) 'Do you think your religious beliefs have any influence on your pursuit of ideals and personal growth? Kindly share your views on religious beliefs and the development of your spiritual well-being'.

Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. We used the modified SHALOM of Fisher (2013) as foundation for the protocol for the design and development of the interview questions. The five items of the instruments in every domain are as follows.

(1) Personal domain:

Q5: sense of identity,
Q9: self-awareness,
Q14: joy in life,
Q16: inner peace, and
Q18: meaning in life.

(2) Communal domain:

Q1: love of other people,
Q3: forgiveness towards others,
Q8: trust between individuals,
Q17: respect for others, and
Q19: kindness toward other people.

(3) Environmental domain:

Q4: connection with nature,
Q7: awe at a breath-taking view,
Q10: oneness with nature,
Q12: harmony with the environment, and
Q20: sense of 'magic' in the environment.

(4) Transcendental domain:

Q2: personal relationship with the Transcendent,

Q6: worship of the Transcendent,
Q11: oneness with Transcendent,
Q13: peace with Transcendent, and
Q15: prayer in life.

To provide clear guidance and framework, we used the four identified domains in SHALOM as bases to conduct classification, processing and analysis of the scripts for the in-depth interviews. For in-depth analysis, the author transcribed the audio recordings of the 27 interviews. The author employed a research assistant to validate the resulting transcripts against the audio recordings. Repeated reviewing, checking and proofreading were performed for each transcript through listening to the recordings several times to ensure accuracy and completeness. The scripts were sorted, grouped, selected, processed and analysed based on the personal, communal, environmental and transcendental domains.

The author applied the framework analysis for the qualitative data to analyse the findings in the four domains. Table 1 presents the background information of the participants in the individual in-depth interviews.

Personal domain

Students with religious beliefs

The majority of the students (i.e., 16 of 18) noted the positive effects on their spiritual well-being in the personal domain, including a sense of personal identity, self-awareness and inner peace. In the pursuit of their religious beliefs, they likewise experienced contentment in life and enlightenment. A Christian student shared as follows:

> I was rebellious. I always smoked, drunk and fought. Then, I was dismissed from my secondary school. I really felt sorry and disappointed for what I had done in the past. Luckily, I was provided with an opportunity to believe in Christ. Thus, I really changed after I became a Christian.

The respondent learned to be virtuous after knowing Christ. Although, he was previously dismissed from his former school, he is studying in a university and has realised his life's purpose and course.

A positive relationship is determined between the frequencies of going to church or being with religious groups (and the frequencies of prayer or meditation) and spiritual well-being in the personal domain.

One of the Catholic Christian respondents provided the following insights:

> I really feel that my faith is established through my prayers and going to church to attend Mass. These activities help me reflect on my life and remind me of my tasks in life. I am able to release my pressures and worries from my studies.

Table 1. Background information of the 27 respondents.

Name [a]	Gender	Age	Major disciplines	Years of study	Religious beliefs	The number of years in their religious beliefs
1. Simon	Male	20	Art and Language	Year 2	Christianity: Christian	4
2. Peter	Male	23	Social Science	Year 2	Christianity: Christian	5
3. Mary	Female	19	Science and Technology	Year 3	Christianity: Christian	6
4. Rachel	Female	20	Business	Year 2	Christianity: Christian	3
5. May	Female	21	Social Science	Year 3	Christianity: Christian	4
6. Joseph	Male	20	Science and Technology	Year 2	Christianity: Catholic Christian	5
7. Brian	Male	21	Business	Year 3	Christianity: Catholic Christian	5
8. Joyce	Female	20	Art and Language	Year 2	Christianity: Catholic Christian	8
9. Susan	Female	21	Social Science	Year 3	Christianity: Catholic Christian	7
10. Irene	Female	21	Social Science	Year 2	Christianity: Catholic Christian	5
11. Ben	Male	22	Business	Year 3	Buddhism	3
12. Kenny	Male	22	Art and Language	Year 3	Buddhism	3
13. Benny	Male	21	Social Science	Year 2	Buddhism	2
14. Apple	Female	22	Business	Year 3	Buddhism	3
15. Anne	Female	21	Science and Technology	Year 2	Buddhism	3
16. Helen	Male	21	Business	Year 3	Taoism	3
17. Jonny	Male	20	Science and Technology	Year 2	Taoism	2
18. Zoe	Female	21	Art and Language	Year 3	Taoism	2
19. Jack	Male	21	Social Science	Year 3	No	
20. Ivan	Male	22	Art and Language	Year 3	No	
21. Ian	Male	22	Business	Year 3	No	
22. Eric	Male	21	Science and Technology	Year 3	No	
23. Kevin	Male	21	Science and Technology	Year 2	No	
24. Peggy	Female	20	Social Science	Year 2	No	
25. Cathy	Female	20	Science and Technology	Year 2	No	
26. Lisa	Female	21	Business	Year 3	No	
27. Fiona	Female	22	Art and Language	Year 3	No	

[a] The respondents' reported names are pseudonyms.

The respondent determined her life's meaning and path by becoming involved in church activities and prayers. Moreover, her religious activities provided her rest from her studies.

One of the Buddhist respondents commented as follows:

> I would try my best in my studies but I am not tenacious with my academic results. I should enjoy the process.

The respondent lives according to Buddhist principles. His goal and purpose for learning is to try his best and enjoy it. He does not highly focus on the outcomes (academic results) but considers and enjoys the learning process instead.

A Taoist student provided the following comment:

> I would follow the track. I would not be stubborn about money and reputations. I know I should work hard for the matter, not for the outcome because I understand everything happens naturally. It is the flow.

The respondent is influenced by Taoist ideals, which state that events will occur on their own. Thus, the respondent does not subject himself to excessive pressure and allows pieces to fall where they do. Nonetheless, he is still a hard worker and his religion provides him inner peace.

The others presented positive responses and answered that they benefited from their religious beliefs.

Students without religious beliefs

The majority of these students (i.e., 6 of 9) could develop their self-confidence, sense of identity, feeling of joy and meaning of life through sports, music, volunteer activities and competitions. For example, a respondent shared the following experience:

> I participated in the 10 km Challenge of the Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon with my two classmates last year. Although I occasionally run, I never attempted to complete in 10 km before. Six months before the race, I practiced every day with my two classmates. Running every day was difficult and we even thought of giving up. Fortunately, we continuously encouraged one another other. Eventually, we completed the race and I felt that I have made my breakthrough and reaffirmed myself. We decided to join the race again next year.

The respondent made a breakthrough and he reaffirmed myself through his physical activities and sports competitions. He developed his persistence, discipline and friendship in sports and sport competitions. Running appears to become his habit and hobby and he looks forward to next year's competition.

Another respondent elaborated her experience:

> I still love music and piano. Although practicing before the piano exam is extremely challenging for me, I will be honoured to get to level 8 from The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) this year. I am thankful that my parents and music

> *teachers cultivated my talent. I would work harder for the next stage, which is a diploma in ABRSM (advanced music performance level.)*

In pursuing music, the respondent felt enthusiastic, joyful and glorious. She is working hard towards her target, which is the advanced music performance level. She has expressed her respect, appreciation and trust on her music teachers and parents in the pursuit of her music.

The other respondent provided the following reply:

> *I like to participate in different volunteer activities because I can meet different people and learn different ideas. For example, before the visits to hospitals or orphanage, we are taught to understand the background in advance and avoid talking about taboo topics. These soft skills are extremely useful in my life. I am always contented and happy because I can help people in need and complete my assigned tasks.*

The respondent has strengthened his self-confidence, personal growth and sense of mission through learning of interpersonal communication skills, respect for others and completion of tasks in the different volunteer activities.

Communal domain

Students with religious beliefs

The majority of the students (i.e., 15 of 18) think that their religious beliefs will positively affect their spiritual well-being in the communal domain such as enhancing their love for others, cultivating mutual trust, allowing them to respect others, facilitating their positive treatment of others by respecting their own beliefs and fostering their capability for forgiveness. For example, one Christian student provided the following statement:

> *I am always reminded by this chapter "Love is never tired of waiting; love is kind; and love has no envy….. Love has no end". I am still learning this – love.*

This statement shows that this Christian respondent learned about love from different perspectives because they obey the commandments of Christianity (as written in the Bible).

A positive relationship is determined between the frequency of attending church or religious gatherings (and frequency of meditation or prayer) and spiritual well-being in the communal domain.

A Catholic Christian respondent shared the following statement:

> *I would pray for myself, also I would pray for my brothers and sisters in church. They are like my family members. I would be willing to listen their hearts and their difficulties.*

This response indicates that the respondent considers her religious beliefs and church life as having a positive affect because she senses love, care from others and respect. Therefore, she would treat others in a similar manner.

One of the Buddhist respondents said:

As a Buddhist, I meditate it helps me focus, calm my thought, and nurture my heart. Especially when I am very angry, meditation helps me to calm down, and I would not be so angry, so scared, and depressed.

This notion reflects that the respondent can control his negative emotions and can calm down through meditation. Thus, he will have less hate and be more tolerant of others.

A Taoist respondent gave the following statement:

I would respect others although they disagree with me or even oppose my suggestions. I believe it is important to keep harmonious relationships rather than come up with a consistent answer.

This idea reflects that the respondent understands Taoist thoughts by – accepting differences through the creation of harmonious relationships. The answer shows the respondent's respects and tolerance for others.

Students without religious beliefs

The majority of the students (6 of 9) could develop care, support, love, sympathy and trust for others through sports, competitions, music and volunteer activities. One respondent provided the following thoughts:

I am a football player in my university. I made a few mistakes in the finals of one competition, thereby resulting in the 0–1 score in the first half. My teammates did not blame me. Instead, they came to me in the field, comforted me and told me not to care too much. They said I should enjoy the game. Although we eventually lost, we were able to strengthen our friendship.

The respondent's statement indicated good spirit and attitude. That is, 'friendship comes before competition'. He understands that the processes involved in sports and competitions are more important than results.

The other respondent provided the following answer:

Before, I would always make jokes about the handicapped or retarded and I thought that my grandparents were always nagging and troublesome. However, my experiences as a volunteer in visiting the elderly homes and special schools for physically disabled students changed me a lot. I remember I had to learn sign language before visiting special schools for hearing-impaired students. They were very nice and outgoing. We quickly became friends. I really learned a lot from them. I think that an elderly at home is much like having invaluable treasure in hand now.

The respondent learned optimistic and positive attitudes towards life through participation in different volunteer activities. He appears to have learnt tolerance, respect and kindness towards different people, including the handicapped and elderly.

Another respondent shred the following statement:

Choir is a good training platform to enhance my interpersonal relationship. An excellent choral performance comprises harmony and unity of the overall tone, balance and coordination between the voices and tacit cooperation between the conductor and the choir. I learn to respect others' strengths. My pleasure in life was to meet many good friends here.

The respondent developed cooperation with and respect for others by compliance with discipline, collaborative spirit and collective honour in musical training.

Environmental domain

Students with religious beliefs

The majority of the students (i.e., 14 of 18) believe that their religious beliefs have a positive effect on their spiritual well-being by enabling them to appreciate the beauty of the environment, living harmoniously with nature and seeking a connection with nature.

One Christian respondent provided the following statement:

I would really enjoy joining retreat camps in the countryside. I pray and read the Bible there, because I could easily focus, understand, feel and experience the God's amazing works in the natural environments. It is because I could really see the peaceful picture of natural surroundings so that my heart can be in peace and connected with the Lord.

This response indicates the respondent's belief that meditating, praying and devotion to nature can help her communicate and connect effectively with, and be closer to, God.

Religious activities, such as prayers and devotion, are closely related to nature. A positive relationship was determined between spiritual well-being in the environmental domain and frequency of attending church or religious gatherings (or of meditation or prayer).

One Catholic Christian student expressed:

When I see the moon, sun and stars in the sky, I would really appreciate, praise and admire how perfect His creation is.

This view reflects that the respondent observes and lives in nature. He recognises and is grateful for God's love as manifested by the magnificence of nature and creation.

One Buddhist student shared the following ideas:

The first precept of the 'Five precepts' is not to kill living things, including all animals and plants (to leave the six paths of transmigration). We should cherish, love, care and protect them. I am a vegetarian.

This statement shows that the religious beliefs of the respondent have enabled him to communicate and live harmoniously with nature, which he considers wonderful. He does not eat meat and lives following the six paths of transmigration.

A Taoist respondent provided the following comment:

I would not mind wearing second hand clothing and using second hand books. I enjoy living a simple life and have harmony with nature. I have less desire than ever before.

This answer shows that the respondent saves resources and lives a simple life for a harmonious relationship with the natural environment because of his religious belief.

Students without religious beliefs

The majority of the students (i.e., 5 out 9) could develop a connection with nature and interests for the beauty of the environment through activities in nature, such as hiking and going to camp.

One respondent provided the following comment:

I like hiking with my friends. Although there are many bumpy and difficult trails on the mountains, I really enjoy hiking. Every time I hike and scale one hill after another, I would have new discoveries. I do not only see spectacular and beautiful natural sceneries, but also hear and smell the nature.

This reply shows that the respondent loves challenges in nature and likes to enjoy the cheerful experiences of connecting with the wonderful nature with his friends.

Another respondent presented the following statement:

Sometimes, I would go to the countryside for field photography. I use another perspective, which is that of the camera to experience nature. I record the actions of nature using my camera. Sometimes, when I see tall trees and running rivers, I would feel the mystery of nature, and I would feel how tiny we are as humans in front of the magnificent nature.

This answer shows that the respondent appreciates and enjoys the attractiveness of nature from another perspective.

Another respondent provided the following idea:

When I was young, my parents took me and my brother to camp. I still remember my parents and my brother laid down on the meadow and counted the stars and appreciated the moon in the sky. The friends – butterfly, dragonfly, grasshopper and firefly – I met in my youth still exist.

The respondent had numerous opportunities to connect with the nature because her parents brought her up to appreciate nature and nurtured her interest in it.

Transcendental domain

Students with religious beliefs

The majority of the students (i.e., 16 of 18) think that their religious beliefs will have a positive impact on their spiritual well-being by, enjoying a healthy personal relationship with and having an honest worship of the transcendent. Likewise, students can experience unity with the transcendent by consistently praying to be at peace with the transcendent.

One Christian respondent shared the following sentiment:

> Whenever I encounter difficulties and setbacks, I think it is a chance to experience God. I would come to pray and read the Bible for this lesson (his difficulty). I believe that my Lord is with me.

This statement reveals the close relationship the respondent shares with God for whenever he encounters setbacks, he immediately prays and reaches for the Bible. He treats difficulties and setbacks as tests of his faith. Also, he feels confident and peaceful because the Lord is with him.

One Catholic Christian respondent provided the following ideas:

> Sometimes I attending the mass at church would feel very touching and then I cry. I would feel my guilt. I really feel my religion more real and relevant.

This answer shows that the respondent could really have a deeper reflection and closer connection with God through her participation in the religious activities. Thus, she could really feel the existence of God.

A positive relationship is also determined between the spiritual well-being of students in the transcendental domain and the frequency of attending church or religious gatherings (and of mediation or prayer).

Another Buddhist student shared:

> To meditate in Buddhism and to recite the Buddhist scripture for my merit are to help me practice Buddhism in order to transcend the six paths of transmigration. The more I meditate, the higher my spirituality would become.

This response indicates that meditation aids in the Buddhism practice of the respondent and that reciting the Buddhist scripture is for her merit. She believes that frequent meditation and recitation of the Buddhist scripture enhance her spiritual well-being in the transcendental domain.

A Taoist student shared as follows:

> There is a natural law–the Dao. I would practice Daoist meditation – Shouyi to help me get closer to Dao.

This statement indicates the respondent's understanding of his religious belief, that is, following its practices, will bring him closer to Dao.

Other students provided positive replies. They reached out and communicated with the transcendent to enhance their religious beliefs and improved their spirituality in the transcendental domain.

Students without religious beliefs

Several of these students (i.e., 4 of 9) have shown a personal relationship with and have experienced oneness with the transcendent.

One of the respondents commented as follows:

Being able to study in a university is my mother's last wish for me when she left. I know she must be happy.

The respondent exhibited filial piety because she already completed her mother's wish and she still missed her mother. She could communicate spiritually with her deceased mother as well.

The other respondent said as follows:

I have to work a longer time for part-time jobs every day to earn my tuition fees and living because my father is unemployed. I do not mind. I still believe that one cannot achieve glory and wealth without having been through trials and tribulations. As a daughter, I should share my parents' burdens.

The respondent follows filial piety and shows her spirit. Even if she struggles in life, she treats her situation as a kind of tempering herself. She has hope in the future and she is developing her good character through the achievement towards a higher self.

Discussion

This research presents the differences between the development of spiritual well-being of students with religious beliefs and those without. For students without religious beliefs, sports, music, volunteer activities, competitions and activities in nature could be regarded as means, paths and tools for the development of their spiritual well-being by themselves. They seem to be self-oriented and self-directed. Thus, they could have different understandings, interpretations and experiences regarding their development of spiritual well-being. This view is consistent with the findings of Watson (2000), in which the experience and development of children's spirituality are essentially diverse and complex. Watson (2000) claimed this diversity is based on the different personal beliefs of each person.

For students with religious beliefs, their development of spiritual well-being appears rooted and established in their religion and their religious practices, including prayers or meditation and going to church or religious groups. These religious principles and regulations are considerably definite, precise and clear. Therefore, these students would easily tend to perform their religious attitudes and customs in their living. The findings of the current study support and

supplement the quantitative findings of Pong (2016) add to the investigation on how and what spiritual well-being of students could be influenced based on religious beliefs. Happiness, love, harmony and devotion are determined for the possible reasons and effects from their religious beliefs in specific domains.

Happiness in the spiritual well-being of students in the personal realm

Students without religious beliefs tended to rely on their abilities, talents, potential and strengths. They could develop their confidence, self-worth and sense of meaning of life through different paths, including sports, music, competitions and volunteer activities. Moreover, they tend to place their faith in themselves.

By contrast, the feelings of joy and peace, meaning of life and pursuit of goals for those with religious beliefs are most likely directed by their religious doctrines, practice and experience. For example, Christians appear to feel happy and peaceful regardless of their situation, mainly because they feel assured by God's presence. Buddhists would not be tenacious in the present situation, whilst Taoists could follow trends naturally.

The religious activities that students performed in prayer/meditation, worship, fellowship, or reading the Bible probably gave students peace and joy in their hearts, as well as provided additional chances for them to understand their responsibilities and reflect on life's meaning and value. Evidently, 'happiness' is obtained from the effects of religious beliefs on the spiritual well-being of university students.

The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) and Musa (2015), in which university students with religious beliefs indicate stronger spirituality in the personal domain. Moreover, our findings are consistent with that of Cavendish et al. (2004), in which nurses with regular participation in religious beliefs would have higher spirituality in the personal domain (particularly in self-reflection) compared with nurses without regular participation. Similarly, our findings are consistent with those of the majority of studies, which have determined significant differences in the relationship between the students' religious involvement (including frequency of praying/meditating and going to church or religious groups) and spirituality in the personal domain (Anye et al. 2013; Cotton et al. 1999; Shores 2010).

Love in the spiritual well-being of students in the communal realm

For students without religious beliefs, their mutual trust, love, respect and forgiveness could be built on their experiences, feelings and interactions with other people, such as common hobbies and joint experiences. They may easily show their generosity and sympathy to people in their networks.

For students with religious beliefs, the good performances and qualities in the communal domain are most likely developed in their religious doctrines, practices and customs. For example, the Bible is the basis of Christian teachings. Christianity gives importance to love of self and neighbours. For example, in Luke 6:35:

> But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and you shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

An atmosphere of love, trust, respect and forgiveness characterises Christian education. Therefore, the spirituality of these students will be strengthened in the communal domain. Benevolence, mercy and good deeds (by loving oneself and others) are promoted in Buddhism. For example, Buddhism advocates having mercy and forgiving others as a way of living life in Earth well and making the next life better. Therefore, Buddhists treat others with love, forgiveness, respect, and trust. Similarly, *DaoDeJing* from Taoism emphasises the harmonious relationship between the people and the environment. Taoism is also an expression of love. Religious beliefs positively affect spiritual well-being of students in the communal domain. Students of various religions are taught different practices in doctrines, meditation, and books, thereby encouraging them to be polite, treat others with trust and love and forgive as well. Evidently, 'love' is a consequence of the effects of religious beliefs on the spiritual well-being of university students.

In the communal domain, inconsistent findings are noted in the significant differences in spirituality amongst students with and students without religious beliefs. Roof (1993) determined no statistically significant differences between them. However, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) determined a positive and statistically significant relationship associated with the high spirituality of students with religious beliefs. Correspondingly, the majority of studies determined significant differences in the relationship between students' frequency of praying/meditating and spirituality in the communal domain (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011; Greenfield, Vaillant, and Marks 2009). The findings of our study are consistent with the observation of Greenfield, Vaillant, and Marks (2009) that religious participants (including the frequencies of going to church or religious groups and praying/meditating) and spirituality in the communal domain have a significant positive relationship. Moreover, these findings of the studies conducted by Brooks (2004) and Markstrom (1999) affirmed the positive and close relationships between religion and love.

Harmony in the spiritual well-being of students in the environmental domain

For students without religious beliefs, their connection, appreciation and communication with nature may be built on their interests, experiences and activities, such as hiking with the family and camping with friends.

For students with religious beliefs, their spiritual well-being in the environmental domain is most likely established in their religions. The Bible has numerous chapters that discuss nature. Genesis, for instance, tells the story of how God created the earth and things in it. Thus, they should treasure and respect nature because humans and nature are closely related. Buddhism has numerous books that mention nature as well. Buddhism teaches its followers to protect the environment and to value the life of all animals. Moreover, Buddhists believe in karma, which refers to the phenomenon of humans suffering from negative consequences when they destroy the environment. Taoism advocates following nature. *DaoDeJing* discusses how to live in harmony with changes formed by nature. Living in harmony and cooperating with nature are the most ideal way to live. Their religious beliefs performed in practicing prayer/meditation and going to church or religious groups can positively affect students' spirituality in the environmental domain. Observably, 'harmony' included in their religious beliefs immensely contribute to the development of university students' spiritual well-being.

Other empirical studies have affirmed a positive correlation between religions and harmony with the natural environment (Hagevi 2014; Ontakharai, Koul, and Neanchaleay 2008). However, other studies affirmed a negative relationship between religious affiliation and environmental concern or behaviour (Guth et al. 1993; White 1967), whilst others affirmed no relationship between religious affiliation and environmental concern or behaviour (Hayes and Marangudakis 2000; Greeley 1993; Boyd 1999).

Devotion in the spiritual well-being of students in the transcendental realm

For students without religious beliefs, the communication and construction of relationship with the transcendent are probably based on their thinking and feeling. The many different definitions, understandings, interpretations and experiences related to the transcendent may be amongst them. Many believe in a spirit or realm and others believe in a deceased or higher self and so on. The transcendent appears to be constructed from themselves.

In the transcendental domain, the spiritual well-being of students with religious beliefs is likely directed by their religious doctrines, practices and customs. They may tend to indicate evident spiritual well-being in religious contents for the transcendental domain.

For example, Christians share a positive relationship with God and often praise and pray to God. Reading the Bible, praying and worshipping are performed and conducted by religious followers and serve as their communication or contact with God. Buddhists do not believe in God and practice their religion to transcend the six paths of transmigration. Furthermore, Buddhists meditate, read the Buddhist scriptures, and follow vegetarianism.

Taoists do not believe in God and believe in the natural law – Dao – which is known as the Dao in the five elements and in yin-yang. Similarly, Taoists practice Shouyi–Daoist meditation, implement the principles of *DaoDeJing*, and follow the Dao in Yinyang and the five elements. Noticeably, 'devotion' found in their religious beliefs substantially contributed to the development of the university students' spiritual well-being.

Considerable differences in the association between spirituality and religious beliefs in the transcendental domain have been reported (Anye et al. 2013; Musa 2015). The spirituality of people with religious beliefs is stronger than that of students without religious beliefs. For example, Huang (2011) indicated that Christians, Buddhists, and Taoists have higher spirituality compared with people without religious beliefs.

Substantial differences are noted for the relationship between the students' religious participation (including the frequencies of going to church or religious group) and their spirituality in the transcendental domain (Anye et al. 2013; Musa 2015). These results indicated that people with active participation in their religious beliefs will have higher spirituality in the transcendental domain compared with people without regular participation. Bryant and Astin (2008) and Lawler-Row and Elliott (2009) determined a statistically positive and significant relationship between frequencies of praying/meditating and spirituality in the transcendental domain. All these findings are consistent with this study.

Conclusion

Religion is observed to be a complete, thorough and balanced system for the development of teenagers' spiritual well-being. Religion provides people hope after the end of life, ultimate concerns and answers for why people live here (Tillich 1965). Believers would have definitive and clear object(s) in the transcendent domain. For example, Christians worship for God.

Four major limitations characterise this work. First, small sample sizes (n = 27) could not easily make a detailed analysis and have a well-rounded discussion on different religions. Second, doubt is cast on the representativeness of the results because only year two and year three university students were invited for interviews. Third, 'spirituality' and 'spiritual' are ambiguous terms (Wong 2005) and difficult concepts and subjective ideas to Hong Kong students (Pong 2017), particularly to students without any religious belief. Fourth, the qualitative method used in this study could easily cause subjectivity and arbitrary bias because the findings are unilateral.

Nonetheless, our findings supported the differences in the development (experiences) of spiritual well-being of students with and without religious beliefs in Hong Kong. This study contributed in filling in the gap of the research area as well. In the past decades, only a few studies analysed the

effects of students' religiosity on their spiritual well-being. The majority of the related studies were conducted only by using quantitative studies and the how and what of the effects of students' religion on their spiritual well-being have yet to be comprehensively answered. This study filled in the gap by using individual in-depth interviews. Additionally, the current research provided empirical evidence that supported possible reasons and effects for the development of students' spiritual well-being. Moreover, a study on the effects of university students' religiosity on their spiritual well-being in Asian countries has yet to be conducted.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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