

Religious Reactions to Divorce in the Philippines

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Abstract: This study analyzes how religious emotions shape public discourse around divorce legislation in the Philippines—one of only two countries in the world where divorce remains illegal. Framed within the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, the research highlights how digital platforms, particularly Facebook, serve as venues for negotiating moral, legal, and religious values in real time. The study focuses on Facebook comments responding to news articles about the 2024 passage of the divorce bill by the House of Representatives. A qualitative content analysis was conducted using manually collected comments from highly engaged posts by leading media organizations. These were grouped according to sentiment—agree, disagree, or neutral—and coded for recurring themes of moral reasoning and emotional expression. Findings reveal that those opposed to divorce often cite Catholic doctrine, scripture, and prayer, expressing religious emotions tied to suffering, sacrifice, and divine will. In contrast, those supporting divorce emphasize justice, personal safety, and freedom, framing legal reform as compatible with faith but centered on human dignity. Emotions such as guilt, hope, righteousness, and fear further intensify these contrasting moral positions. This paper argues that online spaces like Facebook not only reflect but also reshape how religion is invoked in contemporary moral debates. Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing field of digital religion by showing how emotional discourse reflects lived religiosity and the tensions between tradition and reform. Practically, it underscores the need for inclusive, empathetic public dialogue in shaping policies that intersect with personal belief systems. As the Philippines moves closer to legalizing divorce, these online conversations offer insight into how citizens—through faith, emotion, and reason—are actively participating in shaping the country’s evolving religious discourse.

Key Words: divorce; religious emotion; social media discourse; moral judgment

1. INTRODUCTION

As the Philippines remains one of the most active countries on social media (Statista, 2023, 2024), platforms like Facebook have become key arenas for expressing views on divisive topics. Public discourse on moral and legal reforms, such as the legalization of divorce, often unfolds through posts and comments that blend personal conviction with religious belief. Research in sociology and psychology underscores the deep connections between religion, morality, and emotion that help explain these online expressions.

Durkheim (1915, as cited in Emerson et al., 2011) conceptualized religion as a system of beliefs and practices centered on sacred things—those set apart from the ordinary—which serve to maintain social unity and guide collective behavior. Building on this, Keen (2015) describes morality as the act of judging actions and people as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ a process frequently shaped by religious beliefs that uphold social cohesion. Smith (2021) further clarifies that religious ideologies—shared beliefs rooted in scripture and interpreted by religious authorities—provide a framework for these moral judgments.

These judgments are not purely rational but are often driven by emotion. Prinz (2006) argues that emotions are essential for moral judgment, as negative feelings like anger or disgust are commonly triggered by perceived moral violations. Avramova and Inbar (2013) extend this by showing that emotions do not merely follow moral evaluations; they amplify them and can even moralize behaviors that are not inherently moral. Pizarro (2000) similarly asserts that emotions play a key role in moral decision-making, though they can lead to biased or partial judgments. Perri et al. (2007) reinforce this view by describing emotions as both psychological and physiological responses that are observable and measurable—further validating their role in shaping discourse. In religious contexts, these emotional responses become particularly potent.

In the Philippines, where over 78% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic (Mapa, 2023), religious ideologies deeply influence public discourse. Despite constitutional guarantees of church-state separation, religious values continue to shape public attitudes toward moral and legal issues (Cornelio, 2013; Cornelio & Medina, 2019). The influence of Catholicism—rooted in Spanish colonial history—persists in contemporary debates, including those concerning the legalization of divorce. Mulder (1992) describes this phenomenon as the "Filipinization of Catholicism," where religious identity intersects with national culture. Hermida (2015) affirms that the Catholic Church remains active in public discourse and exerts moral influence on state affairs. Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, Catholic teachings continue to shape public attitudes on issues such as marriage and divorce (Cornelio & Medina, 2019). Cornelio (forthcoming) argues that within Filipino religious discourse, divorce is often framed as morally evil—perceived as sinful, anti-family, and even anti-Filipino. As a result, debates about divorce become not only legal or political matters but also deeply emotional and moral engagements mediated by religious belief.

This study investigates how religious emotions are expressed and interpreted in public reactions to the passage of the divorce bill in 2024. Specifically, it examines Facebook comments responding to news articles about the bill, focusing on how individuals use religious language to articulate support for or opposition to divorce. This paper argues

that Filipinos use religious beliefs to evoke emotions and express their stance on the issue, demonstrating how religious ideologies influence public discourse and moral judgments. Facebook comments about the Philippines' divorce law reveal how faith-based reasoning plays a central role in shaping opinions on controversial legal reforms. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how emotional and moral discourses emerge in digital spaces and how these intersect with broader societal goals, such as justice and institutional inclusivity.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how religious emotions are communicated in online discourse. Data were manually collected from public Facebook comment sections on news articles published by major media outlets such as ABS-CBN, Rappler, and GMA News. The selected posts were those that reported on the passage of the divorce bill in May 2024 and showed high levels of public engagement.

Comments were screened for relevance and sorted into three primary sentiment categories: agreement, disagreement, and neutrality. Within each category, comments were further examined for expressions of moral reasoning, scriptural reference, religious emotion, and civic appeal. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns that illustrated how users justified their views based on their faith and ethical beliefs.

To support this analysis, the study draws from sociolinguistic perspectives that link language, culture, and morality. Keen (2015), using a linguistic anthropological approach, argues that morality is deeply embedded in everyday language use. Through deontic modals such as "must" and "should," speakers express judgments about what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. These linguistic features are not neutral—they carry culturally specific values that help construct and communicate moral identity. Donzelli (2016) further emphasizes how grammatical voice (e.g., patient vs. actor voice) shapes how individuals present themselves morally and politically. For instance, using the patient voice may index humility or restraint, while the actor voice asserts moral authority. This dynamic enables speakers to position themselves within broader moral

frameworks tied to cultural values. Bennett (2014) adds that morally evaluative language—especially in political discourse—can shape collective notions of fairness and justice. Language, therefore, is not just descriptive but performative: it enacts, negotiates, and contests moral norms within a community.

All data were collected manually. To uphold ethical research standards, usernames and potentially identifying information were anonymized. While Facebook is a public platform, the study recognizes the complexity of digital identities and respects the right of individuals to privacy, even in open forums. The analysis prioritizes understanding how public sentiments are framed through religious emotion in a highly polarized socio-political issue.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The role of religion in shaping moral judgments and emotional responses is central to this study. Durkheim (1915, as cited in Emerson et al., 2011) defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices centered on sacred things, which are deeply valued and set apart from the everyday.

The analysis of Facebook comments revealed that religious emotions are central to how many Filipinos express their views on divorce legislation. One recurring theme was the framing of suffering within marriage as a test of faith. For instance, C2 wrote, "*Me personally almost 25 yrs ang struggle pero nanalig ako sa Diyos... buong buo ang pamilya ko*" ("*I personally struggled for almost 25 years but I trusted God... my family stayed whole*"). This narrative portrays endurance in marriage as virtuous, grounded in divine timing and spiritual reward. Such expressions often emphasized trusting God and the power of prayer, reflecting deep religious conviction as a form of resistance to legalizing divorce. This aligns with Pizarro's (2000) argument that emotions like hope and spiritual commitment are not just reactions but significant influences on moral decision-making, even when such judgments may be partial or biased. Moreover, Prinz (2006) explains that moral judgments are often driven by emotional responses, such as pride in overcoming hardship, which guide the evaluation of what is deemed right or wrong in a religious context.

Other comments grounded their opposition in scriptural authority and religious doctrine. C7 cited,

"FOR I HATE DIVORCE, says the LORD GOD of Israel" (C10), invoking Malachi 2:16 as a divine pronouncement. Another asserted, "*Wlang cno man pweding baguhin ang batas ng diyos*" ("*No one can change the law of God*"), highlighting an unchangeable view of moral order dictated by religious belief. These perspectives reflect an absolutist moral stance rooted in theological interpretations of marriage as sacramental and unbreakable. As Cornelio (forthcoming) points out, divorce is often constructed in Philippine religious discourse as morally evil—seen not only as sinful and anti-family but as fundamentally un-Filipino. Smith (2021) supports this by stating that shared religious ideologies serve as frameworks through which moral judgments are rendered, often drawing from authoritative texts and religious traditions.

Yet, not all commenters echoed strict opposition. Some argued that divorce should be available as a personal and civil option, separate from religious imperatives. C3 reasoned, "*The law anyway doesn't compel anyone to opt for divorce. It's still just a personal option. NOT A RELIGION CHOICE*". R2 similarly stated, "*Kung masaya kayo sa marriage nyo eh wag nyo ipagdamot ang divorce sa mga wasak na ang marriage. Give them the chance to be happy*" ("*If you're happy in your marriage, don't deprive those with broken marriages the chance to be happy*"). These voices support the notion that individuals should be free to pursue well-being outside doctrinal limits—suggesting that legal frameworks should respect both religious convictions and human rights. These arguments reflect what Avramova and Inbar (2013) describe as the moralizing function of emotion: the ability of emotional responses—such as empathy for those suffering in broken marriages—to transform secular choices into morally persuasive claims. Emotions do not merely follow judgments; they intensify them and contribute to redefining what is considered moral within the public sphere.

Other voices emphasized the disconnect between religious ideals and lived realities. To illustrate, C4 noted, "*Abuse or abusive marriage is not Sacramental, thus divorce*," framing divorce as a just response to harm within marriages that violate the spiritual and ethical core of the institution. Still others questioned the consistency of religious behavior, stating, as C5 expressed, "*Be a good example to non-believers... what you preach doesn't apply when it*

affects you personally”. These comments illustrate what Bennett (2014) describes as the use of morally evaluative language in public argumentation to challenge inconsistencies and reframe moral talk. By invoking fairness, hypocrisy, or ethical contradiction, users contribute to redefining the boundaries of acceptable moral discourse online.

These online expressions show how digital discourse becomes a space where religious, emotional, and legal considerations intersect. The diversity of responses—ranging from doctrinal certainty to pragmatic appeals for justice—illustrates the contested moral terrain of divorce in the Philippines. Religious emotions such as hope, guilt, pride, and fear are not just reflective but also productive—they shape how people engage with the law and with one another in public spaces. As Keen (2015) argues, morality is not just culturally embedded but also deeply reliant on language. Deontic modals like “must” and “should,” often found in Facebook comments, signal not just obligation but identity—demonstrating how speakers align themselves with religious or civic values in the performance of moral judgment. Donzelli (2016) further explains that even grammatical structures like voice choice can reflect moral positioning: using a passive or patient voice (*e.g.*, “*kailangan lang TRUST God*”) indexes humility and submission, while active forms (“*be a good example*”) assert accountability and agency.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Filipino online discourse on divorce is shaped by a dynamic interplay of religious ideology, emotional investment, and linguistic performance. Through Facebook, users articulate deeply held convictions and contest national moral narratives in ways that are simultaneously affective, cultural, and discursive.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study affirm the deep entanglement of religion, morality, and emotion in how Filipinos engage with social issues online. Religion, understood as a system of sacred beliefs and practices, offers moral direction that distinguishes the divine from the everyday. Morality, in turn, is shaped by shared values that help individuals determine what is right or wrong—often based on religious teachings that sustain social cohesion (Keen, 2015). These religious ideologies provide interpretive

frameworks through which people form judgments, drawing authority from scripture and institutional teachings (Smith, 2021).

Moral evaluation is not purely rational; it is shaped by emotional experience. Emotions such as anger, pride, or disgust frequently arise from perceived violations of moral order (Prinz, 2006). These emotional responses do more than follow judgment—they amplify moral stances and can even assign moral meaning to behaviors that were previously neutral (Avramova & Inbar, 2013). As observable psychological and physiological reactions, emotions are integral to how individuals engage in ethical discourse, especially in emotionally charged digital spaces (Perri et al., 2007). Yet, they can also result in judgments that are partial or imbalanced, driven more by affect than critical reflection (Horberg et al., 2011; Pizarro, 2000). In the Philippine context, such emotionalized moral reasoning helps explain why divorce is often portrayed as not only sinful, but also anti-family and un-Filipino (Cornelio, forthcoming).

This study also highlights how language and emotion function as resources for performing moral identity online. Beyond simply conveying belief, language acts as a tool for asserting authority, affiliating with groups, and aligning with—or resisting—dominant norms. The use of deontic modals such as “must” and “should” reflects culturally embedded moral imperatives (Keen, 2015). Choices in grammatical voice—such as passive or actor voice—allow individuals to present themselves as either modest and devout or assertive and morally directive, depending on how they wish to be perceived in public discourse (Donzelli, 2016). Moreover, morally evaluative language, especially in public and political speech, helps frame collective values and reinforces shared moral systems (Bennett, 2014).

Platforms like Facebook are, therefore, not merely venues for personal expression but sites of collective moral negotiation. The intersection of religious emotion, moral reasoning, and language in these digital spaces shows how Filipinos navigate public controversies by drawing on deeply held beliefs and emotional investments. While many users uphold Catholic teachings and interpret marital endurance as a spiritual virtue, others invoke justice, empathy, and human dignity as faith-informed reasons for supporting legal divorce. These discourses reflect the

evolving and contested nature of moral reasoning in the digital age.

By situating these findings within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 16—which calls for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies—the study underscores the importance of fostering dialogues that are both culturally grounded and emotionally attuned. In a society like the Philippines, where faith is embedded not only in personal life but also in collective values and public expression, discussions on divorce extend far beyond legal frameworks. The tension surrounding this issue stems from a cultural environment where religious teachings are not peripheral but central to how many Filipinos make sense of right and wrong. The influence of Catholic thought continues to shape perceptions of family, morality, and national identity, making conversations about divorce highly charged and often polarizing. As such, what may appear to be a matter of legal reform is, for many, a reflection of deeply held beliefs about virtue, duty, and social order. Recognizing these cultural and emotional underpinnings allows for a more nuanced understanding of the debate and opens up possibilities for inclusive policymaking that respects differing convictions while addressing urgent social concerns.

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