



Religious Pluralism and Sociological Engagement:

Reflections of a Young Sociologist from the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon the trajectory of my work on the sociology of religion in the light of the ongoing diversification of modern Philippine society. My close encounters with the vagaries of religious diversity in the course of fieldwork experiences has enabled an appreciation and assessment of competing forces toward monolithic and pluralist frames of reference. The interaction between these tendencies deserves closer treatment because of its profound implications on the character of social structures and everyday relationships. It is in this regard that one appreciates the deliberative and intentional character of religious pluralism. Far from being mere outcomes of the diversification of modern society, I point out that 'sustainable convivialities' are actively and continually crafted and managed. This entails confronting deep-seated differences, fears of perceived 'others' and the effects of negative stereotypes.

Keywords: hierarchised conviviality; Marian piety; pluralism; religious literacy; religious monoliths

The reputation for religious pluralism in Southeast Asian societies does not often match the general characterisation of the region as culturally heterogeneous. While there is much room to appreciate diverse cultural formations like customs and traditions, food, kinship patterns and language, discussions on religious identities has significantly relied on religious majorities prevalent in each of the countries in the region, perhaps with Singapore as the only exception.

It is thus typical to find a considerable amount of academic work devoted to Buddhism in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam; Islam in Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia; and Christianity in the Philippines. This tendency somewhat corroborates anecdotal and documentary evidence demonstrating the considerable influence of 'majority religions' in the social and political fabric of these countries, indicating that religion is a powerful social force to be reckoned with by agents and institutions on the ground.

This is not to say, however, that religious pluralism does not exist in Southeast Asia. In fact, besides the commonly observed presence of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam in the region as a whole, there is also the more subtle but real intra-societal diversity in each of the countries. As already mentioned, Singapore is an exceptional case where Buddhism as the majority religion comprises 42.5 percent, followed by Islam (14.9 percent), Christianity (14.6 percent), Taoism (8.5 percent) and Hinduism (4 percent).¹ Although predominantly Islamic, Indonesia officially recognises five other religions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism) in its Pancasila-based constitution. There is a considerable Islamic presence in the Philippines and Thailand in the midst of Christian and Buddhist majority populations, respectively (Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines and the 'Deep South' in Thailand). In like manner, Vietnam has a sizeable Catholic population and its adherents have been quite visible in the

country's recent history.

In this paper I look at my own engagements as a sociologist with emerging forms of religious pluralism in the Philippines. I look back at my encounter with convivial arrangements in my own field site for my Ph.D. dissertation research, noting how it 'disrupted' my initial assumptions about the practice of religion on the ground and expanded my interest alternative trajectories of inquiry. I then reflect on the task of rethinking 'religious monoliths', which, as mentioned above, is quite common in Southeast Asia. I see value in targeting a broader approach that problematises how these monoliths are engaged on the ground, either through outright resistance or critical assessment. Finally, I forward how these realisations contribute toward fostering religious literacy, and the role that sociologists play in this process.

Encountering the vagaries of religious conviviality

I would say, on hindsight, that my encounter with religious conviviality has significantly influenced the direction of my scholarship toward a more engaged and relevant social science. This significant yet unplanned trajectory found its roots in my fieldwork research on Marian piety in the Philippines, which I commenced in 2009. I conducted fieldwork in Baclaran district in Metro Manila, where I spent my first months inside a popular urban Catholic shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help (henceforth Perpetual Help shrine). I began my fieldwork with something within my 'comfort zone': formal organisation, sacred space, devotional objects and rituals. Consistent with earlier literature about the integrative function of ritual, a legacy that sociologists have inherited from Emile Durkheim's (1912) work, I have experienced the forms of religious 'effervescence' wherein devotees feel their intimate connection with the shrine, the divine figure, and other devotees. Emile Durkheim (1912) made sense when he argued that ritual provided individuals with a means to be released from the prison of their own selves in order to encounter others: ritual objects, sacred space and words of blessing enveloped devotees

in a mantle of collective identification with the divine figure.

From these familiar structures of faith-expression, I moved to do a close reading of thanksgiving letters that devotees send to the shrine. These letters narrate devotees' everyday life struggles and the purported action of the divine figure that merited their gratitude. I immediately perceived a new world through these letters; letter-writing was a platform where devotees stood alone vis-à-vis the divine figure, expressing themselves unrestrained by the watchful eyes of priests and other devotees. In the context of this fieldwork, this is my first experience of religious diversity and pluralism, which demonstrated itself through the plurality of devotees' voices. These voices enunciated a complex array of social backgrounds, predispositions, moral universes and visions for themselves and the wider spheres of family, community and nation. It is through these voices that devotees negotiated with other agents as regards the meanings of religious belief and practice. This is the particular domain of popular religion where regulation of piety was either enthusiastically welcomed or conveniently disregarded, and while sociologists like myself can discern and explain trends, the shifting terrain of social forces acting upon individual decisions will always necessitate new analyses and explanations.

I then ventured outside the shrine compound during the succeeding months, and things became even more complex. I went out of familiar sights inside the shrine and delved into the everyday experience of urban transitions and religious conviviality along alleys and streets, in marketplaces, and among merchants and patrons. It became imperative for me to squeeze into busy streets where numerous Muslim migrants from Mindanao sell wares along the sidewalks; to visit mosques and engage with Muslim leaders; and to engage with police forces and local political institutions that regulate peace and order in the area. My encounter with Muslim migrants from Mindanao in Baclaran district made me aware of a certain Catholic-centrism in my own research. As a majority religion in the Philippines, Catholicism commands a certain degree of conspicuousness in

public life and influences scholarship and policy. I unconsciously absorbed this mindset when I conceptualised my core research questions, but later I became convinced of the need to divest myself of this preferential treatment for Catholicism if I prefer a nuanced engagement with issues on the ground. What I uncovered in due course is complex process of ‘othering’ Muslim migrants that intersects with class, ethnic and religious lines of identification. By looking at the conditions of Muslim migrants in their mosques (there were four at that time) and commercial spaces in Baclaran district, I appreciated another view of urban life from the perspective of actors who are at the periphery of a fledgling pilgrimage-based economy (see Ambrosio & Pereira 2007).

This later experience constitutes my second ‘discovery’ of religious diversity and pluralism, which carried with it the unsettling question of the social conditions that prevent mutual trust and reciprocity among Christians and Muslims in Baclaran district. This ‘hierarchized conviviality’ (Sapitula 2014) is premised on many factors: historical distrust, lack of adequate state regulation of public space, and internal migration. I will discuss this further in the next section, but for now it suffices to note how it was possible for people to erect invisible boundaries as they come into closer contact with perceived others, so that, while they ‘lived side-by-side, they were not [really] living together’ (Sapitula 2014: 144). This situation, which is replicated in other districts in Metro Manila and other traditionally Christian provinces in Luzon and Visayas, begs the question of the character of religious pluralism that is taking root in our communities.

Rethinking religious monoliths

These experiences of religious pluralism and diversity shaped my later scholarship, which tended to move away from the established position of religious monoliths. I regard religious monoliths thinking as the tendency to flatten, if not totally erase, disagreement and opposition in order to put up a united front vis-à-vis a commonly perceived enemy. In certain cases this need not be a hostile outsider, but may also be the at-

tribution of danger to the world outside the religious sphere of influence. Just like any frame of reference, religious monolith thinking conditions the researcher’s approach to lean toward doctrinally acceptable conceptualisations of religious belief and practice. This approach has proved problematic for the sociology of religion in general, especially its seeming over-reliance on the particularities of the Western Christian experience in crafting concepts that are then used in non-Christian contexts (Alatas 1977). Even from a pragmatic point of view I increasingly found this approach untenable because it significantly limits the researcher’s engagement with the complexities of religious practice on the ground. I had to move away from religious monolith thinking, hoping that the unsettling experience it provokes will also yield fruitful engagements and new ways of thinking.

Just to note, not all Catholics in the Philippines are content with the monolithic way of thinking. I am aware of several initiatives from within institutional Catholicism that conceive of ways to transcend this tendency. Member theologians of the Catholic Theological Society (DAKATEO) devoted one of their national conferences to the issue of interdisciplinarity, which yielded engaging papers in their journal *Hapag: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research*. This year they are venturing into the prospects of theology in a globalised world, in which I was invited to share my reflections as a social scientist. Catholic priests and religious are also quite involved in interreligious dialogue on many levels (academic, theological and community-based) across the Philippines.

For a sociologist, however, what is there to see beyond religious monoliths? In the context of my own work and engagement in the Philippines I found three realities, which are either outcomes of religious monoliths or responses to it: hierarchised conviviality, secularism and dual belonging (or syncretism, its close variant). I already mentioned in the previous section, hierarchised conviviality refers to the replication of historically-entrenched inequalities between Christians and Muslims in new situations. These inequalities, often unchallenged, flow from the lack of awareness on the part of the majority Christian

residents, and also from the absence of effective urban regulation that allow 'shared spaces' to flourish. At the heart of hierarchised conviviality is an un-problematized mode of social stratification that intersects with religious, class and ethnic lines. As this spreads across cities and towns unchecked, the outcome is potentially disruptive and disastrous.

Another response to religious monolithic thinking is *secularism*, which can either be 'benign' or altogether 'hostile' to organised religion in general and Catholicism in particular. I have not encountered this response personally, nor have I studied it systematically, but as an observer of contemporary Philippine society I am aware that this type of response is gaining ground. Secularist responses were articulated most strongly in the recent issue of the passage in 2012 of the Reproductive Health Bill in Philippine Congress, which was staunchly opposed by Catholic bishops and lay people affiliated with church organisations. The bill was eventually enacted into law but challenged in the Supreme Court by groups and individuals sympathetic to the church's position. After diligent discussion, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Reproductive Health Law, although certain provisions were struck down.

The traditional mode of articulating the secularist position was then confined to individuals identifying themselves as agnostic or atheist. One such example is Prof. Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, former director of the Center for Women's Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman. A medical doctor and psychologist, Prof. Claudio is a staunch supporter of the Reproductive Health Bill then pending in Philippine Congress and an avowed freethinker. She wrote a column piece 'No Religion' for Rappler (an online news website), in which she discussed her petition to have the term 'God-loving' removed from the Department of Education's (DepEd) vision statement. She has also written similar commentaries on the impropriety of Catholic bishops meddling with deliberations on the Reproductive Health Bill, forcefully reiterating that the Catholic position is not supposed to be the basis of public policy.

As a response to the perceived preponderance of the Catholic Church in public life, secularism in the

Philippines has adapted to new realities and has thus changed significantly. Unlike in the past, groups that openly advocate secularist viewpoints in public life have now emerged. The most accessible example is the Filipino Freethinkers. As an organised group, the Filipino Freethinkers use traditional and new media outlets to resist perceived 'interference' of democratic processes by religious leaders and zealous lay people who trumpet religious values as bases of law and policy. They have clashed with religious groups (particularly with lay organisations affiliated with the Catholic Church) during the deliberations for the proposed Reproductive Health Bill, usually with rancorous exchange of words and much fanfare. Although small in number as compared to other organisations, the Filipino Freethinkers exemplifies a shift in religion-society dynamics in contemporary Philippines.

The slow but steady trend toward visibility of secularist voices in the country certainly recasts earlier statements that the Philippines is 'the only Christian country in Asia'. This statement, usually mentioned by Christians themselves with a certain degree of pride, packages the country as an exemplar of Christian society for its Asian neighbours. Secularists refute this claim, highlighting the fact that the Philippine Constitution espouses the separation of Church and State as an inviolable principle. They also work toward the removal of conspicuously Christian symbols in public space: the petition to remove 'God-fearing' from the DepEd's vision statement earlier is only one example. In 2012, Rep. Raymond Palatino of the progressive *Kabataan* Partylist filed House Bill (HB) 6330 that sought to ban religious rites inside government offices' premises. He later withdrew the bill, derogatorily labelled the 'anti-God Bill', after Catholic bishops and several government employees (most of whom are Catholics) voiced displeasure to it.

The third response I wish to emphasise is *dual belonging*, wherein individuals do not perceive their religious membership in exclusive terms. This somewhat resonates with syncretism, which denotes the mixing of religious beliefs and practices from different traditions. After I finished my Ph.D. studies I was involved in a research project on Buddhist-inspired meditation practices in the Philippines through

a grant by the Institute of Thai Studies in Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. I undertook this project because I see value in studying ‘minority religions’ and the practices they foster among practitioners. In the course of the research I found that, despite seeming statistical insignificance, Buddhism is a dynamic religious tradition in the country, with all the major Buddhist schools of thought thriving in Metro Manila and other urban areas. I also found ‘dual belongers’ in the meditation groups I visited; they claim to profess both Buddhism and Catholicism, studying doctrines and attending religious services in both traditions.

This situation certainly does not bode well in a monolithic thinking that emphasises total religious commitment to one tradition. While such expectation is common, there are religious practitioners who do not subscribe to religious traditions in an absolute way: in fact, in my discussions with meditation practitioners some hinted that Buddhism makes them better Christians, or they find value in their Christian practice as a supplement to their journey toward enlightenment. My guess is that religious individuals of this type place a premium on ‘experiences of transcendence’ (see Luckmann 1990), which allows them more leeway in crafting alternative identities and courses of action. It is quite interesting to see how religious influences, rather than being perceived as ‘wholes’, are actually broken down into useful categories of thinking and making sense of the world.

Toward religious literacy and sustainable convivialities

The various responses to religious monolithic thinking outlined in the previous section convinced me that the only way to go is to dispose Filipinos to sustainable forms of religious diversity. In attempting to make sense of hierarchised conviviality, I realised that my training in sociology offers tools and perspectives in accounting for *actually-existing* pluralism that is hinged on social conditions rather than doctrinal propositions from religious organisations. This is one way by which social scientists informs the trajectory of pluralisation, because, as I have already demon-

strated above, not all moves toward diversification are fair to all agents or sustainable in the long run. Diversification may actually involve the perpetuation of inequalities, and may thus yield new forms of ‘othering’. This is starkly different from William Connolly’s (2005) advocacy for *deep pluralism* where people do not only tolerate but honour differences as an essential aspect of the fibre of democratic societies.

In the context of my own work, I find that working toward *deep pluralism* is distancing from monolithic thinking, or challenging it wherever it exists. The complexity of the contemporary religious landscape of the Philippines renders monolithic thinking useless in accounting for the plurality of identities, institutions and interests that impinge upon the character of public life. Scholars and academics can actually foster this atmosphere in their own universities: in the University of the Philippines where I currently teach, critical engagement with social issues is the lifeblood of curricular offerings in various disciplines. The University has yet to institutionalise an introductory course in World Religions or Religious Studies, and this issue has occasionally sparked discussions among faculty members. My position on the matter is that academic institutions are viable sites for a non-monolithic view of religion, as religious claims are analysed with the aid of scientific, social scientific and humanistic tools for evaluating evidence and ways of thinking.

This emphasis on sobriety and investigation aids the task of cultivating what is referred to as *religious literacy*. As a component of cultural literacy, religious literacy ‘refers to the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions’ (Prothero 2008: 11). This entails discussion of religious claims that promote critical appreciation and the checking of prejudicial tendencies. As a Filipino Christian, one ought to understand the fundamentals of the Islamic belief in the prophethood of Isa al-Masih (Jesus Christ) and the Muslim practice of refraining from eating pork. As a Filipino Buddhist, one needs to know a little bit about Christian meditation, which has important interfaces with *vipassana* and Zen meditation practices in Buddhism. In this way individuals are invited to understand

religious traditions on the basis of the tradition's self-understanding rather than on preconceived notions by outsiders. Students will also need this academic grounding in religion in order to understand viable forms of engagement with people who hold different religious views (or none).

Moving beyond academia, the broader implications of religious literacy relate to the pluralistic character of Philippine society itself, and how these can be engaged to yield equitable encounters among citizens. The broader question pertains to the ways by which corrosive stereotypes of religions and religious believers (or freethinkers for that matter) are rethought and renegotiated so that they do not incite hatred and distrust. This becomes especially relevant in a situation wherein people of different religious persuasions find themselves in the same work environment and share in the same public spaces. I deem sociology as an important discipline in aiding the task of crafting resilient forms of religious pluralism that assigns equal status to the 'other' without dissolving differences into some sort of forced unity (see Eck 2003).

With the trajectory the Philippines is currently taking, religious literacy and sustainable convivialities are imperative in forming citizens who can engage with the complexities of living side-by-side with people who are deemed to be different (in varying levels of intensity). I am quite certain that for some people, such encounters with perceived 'others' can be destabilising; it resonates with the discomfort I felt when I attempted to transcend conventional categories, sites and spaces in my own research. It strikes at intimately-held notions of 'home', of familiar surroundings and predictable neighbours. But that is not modern Philippines: at present the 'home' is filled with unfamiliar people, 'strange customs' and 'foreign' languages. Can the next generations of Filipinos embrace this complexity as an enriching experience?

I do not really know yet. But I am willing to work toward that goal.

Notes

¹ The percentages as provided by the 2000 Census of Population in Singapore, cited in Tong (2008).

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