

USP 3506 (2012-13 Sem 2): Religious Issues in the Contemporary World:

Individual Reflections on Fieldwork

Serangoon: Of Religious Coexistence, Compromise in Tight Urban Spaces

Growing up in a majority-Chinese Singapore society, my only associations of Little India and the Serangoon area were simply festive Deepavali music, crowds of Indian migrant workers and hundreds of shops decorated with garish colors. Moreover, my impressions whenever I visited the area previously were perfunctory and short-lived, partly due to the fact that I only visited the area for delicious Indian food. However, it was not until today that I realized how limited my knowledge of the Serangoon area was, even as a Singaporean living in a multi-racial society. Indeed, the fieldwork enabled me to slow down my steps, to “observe and not to merely see” the sights, sounds and smells within such a bustling and diverse space, and to appreciate the Serangoon area for the multi-farious nature of its religious and urban landscape, contrary to my earlier misconceptions of Serangoon as a homogeneous, monolithic Indian Hindu space. In addition, the religious and urban landscapes that characterize the Serangoon area are not mutually exclusive among the various religions of this study (namely the Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist religions). Rather, I learnt that the ongoing processes of coexistence, negotiation and compromise feature a significant part in the everyday dynamics of the Serangoon religious landscape as each religion attempts to articulate its own identity in a cosmopolitan and yet compact, urban space.

My firsthand learning journey already began before the actual site visits. Throughout the initial five minutes’ walk from the Farrer Park train station where our group scheduled to meet-up, I observed the presence of the Foochow Methodist Church (demarcated by a cross) amidst some Indian-Hindu food outlets and a Hindu temple within a stone’s throw away. There were some Muslim eateries located around the vicinity as well. The assortment of religions existing side by side one another (mostly manifested in places of worship) actually stunned me and broke down my earlier preconceptions of the Serangoon area being a predominantly Indian-Hindu space. Furthermore, these places of worship were interspersed, almost haphazardly, among various housing ranging from Housing Developmental Board (HDB) flats and pre-

World War 2 shophouses. More and more questions started to form in my mind, i.e. regarding how the residents living in the various housing estates managed to live alongside the various sites of worship, despite not being members of the respective religions. Also, I wondered how the religious devotees at such places of worship negotiated with the fact that Singapore's limited urban space and increasing population meant a perceived "encroachment" of their sacred spaces. Such were the questions that preoccupied my mind throughout the duration of the fieldwork, questions that prompted me to gather some apparent themes that surfaced over and over again as we interviewed people and visited sites.

Our first stop, the Hindu temple, left a significant impression on me as it broke down earlier preconceptions of what I imagined Hindu temples in Singapore to be. This was despite living in multi-cultural Singapore all my life. For example, when our group trotted down the main street towards the temple, we were surprised to find many Western and Japanese visitors to the temple despite previously assuming most visitors would be of Indian origin. When I asked an Indian shopkeeper across the road about the temple and its significance, he replied that it was one of Little India's centers of attraction for tourists, especially the Europeans who had limited exposure to Indian culture back in their countries. The temple's presence was enough to attract non-Indian visitors, especially tourists, to have exposure to Indian religion. I was immediately reminded of the beautiful and majestic Catholic basilicas and cathedrals in contemporary Europe and how they served as major tourist attractions rather than as sites of worship. Growing up, I used to visit and stare awe at those majestic bell towers and spires of "the good old days of European Christendom" without bearing in mind issues such as the increasing "touristification" and "commercialization" of religion to gain economic revenue (via the tourists). Hence, the concept that the Indian shopkeeper revealed to me was not entirely unfamiliar to me. Also, I found out that many local Indian-Hindus, including the shopkeeper in question, worship at the temple frequently, even on a daily basis. Ceremonies carried out are still attended by many devotees. This brings to mind Catholic important sites like Lourdes where despite the sheer number of tourists flocking there, there are still countless of Catholics who pray and attend Mass out of religious fervor and faith more than anything else. Hence, it dawned upon me that while

commercialization of religion may be seen as anathema to religion and religious fervor, these two concepts are not binary; there are many intersections and both processes could be taking place simultaneously.

Another important point that was thought provoking during the fieldtrip was that in the compact space of Serangoon area, the boundaries between what was considered “religious” or “sacred” and “profane” were blurred tremendously. My observations at Serangoon actually surprised me a lot partly due to my traditional Catholic home environment that I grew up in where the “sacred” was never to be mixed with the “profane” or “non-religious”. Even in church, we had the altar containing Jesus in the tabernacle clearly distinct from the pews where we Catholics worshipped yet. The sanctuary space containing the altar was distinguished from the “non-sanctuary” space by communion rails. Even the priest said the Holy Mass in Latin, a purer form of language that contains the essence of the Mass, as opposed to vernacular languages such as English, Mandarin where the meaning be lost in translation and hence affect the validity and value of the Mass. It is evident that there was a clear distinction between “the sacred” and “the banal”. Provocative magazines and the like were unheard of, let alone be allowed to mix with holy objects, due to their associations with grievous sin in Catholicism. However, from what I observed in many shops surrounding the temple, there were Hindu altars at prominent places of the shops (for example, the entrance) juxtaposed with “provocative magazines” sold. Furthermore, we visited a shop selling pictures of Hindu deities alongside Buddhist symbols and even “profane” Santa Claus figures! This observation was totally unheard of from my religious background and my exposure. Out of curiosity, I asked the shopkeeper what religion he belonged to, and he replied to my greater surprise that he was a Muslim! This was completely unexpected because my previous conceptions of Muslims were that they were conservative towards other religions. However, the shopkeeper replied that he felt that he was selling “art pieces” and not “religious items of worship”. He further qualified himself by stating that many Europeans are his customers. This contrasted with the attitude of the people at the Masjid Anguilla Mosque that I met, they were more strict in terms of attire and behavior and as a girl, I was not allowed in the male prayer spaces because I was considered “a distraction” to the men. This raised further issues in my mind. To what

extent is an object considered banal? What processes must it go through to be considered sacred? Or is it the fact that objects with religious icons are inherently sacred? While I cannot find exact answers regarding Hinduism, what I learnt was that such blurring of sacred-profane boundaries could possibly be attributed to the very materiality of the Hindu religion. Or perhaps, as the Muslim shopkeeper suggested, it depends on the attitude and mindset of the individual person with regard to what is considered sacred. However, in my Catholic faith, there is a clear definition of what is considered sacred (eg. religious objects or sacramental that have been blessed) and the individual cannot determine what can be sacred or not. Hence, the word “Catholic”, meaning, “universal”, “united”. Such difference from the Catholic religion that I am accustomed to really gets me thinking about the question: To what extent must the boundaries between the sacred and the profane be drawn? How are such boundaries problematized in the Hindu and Buddhist religions?

Furthermore, another recurring theme that constantly surfaced during the fieldwork (and also a major theme of this module) is that of religious diversity. The very compactness of the Serangoon space and its urban landscape magnified the various religious and cultural diversities and juxtapositions within the confined locale. For example, within just one or two streets, there could be a Christian church center, a Hindu temple and some Muslim restaurants! Even in Hindu-Indian restaurants, such as the Komala Villa Restaurant, there were signs saying “Happy Chinese New Year” albeit the fact that majority of its customers were Hindu Vegetarian! This was something to think about, as I previously only imagined Little India to be an Indian enclave containing Indian cultural items and nothing else. Such diversities to me were really noteworthy.

In conclusion, the two trips I made with the group were very enriching and educational. I was really surprised to see so much cultural intermixing and compromise (as some might say) within a compact space of Serangoon. Tourists coming to the area really have a huge assortment of cultural and religious artifacts and people to observe. Even a Singaporean like me, who grew up in a diverse society was surprised that the sheer diversity that Serangoon presented me! Furthermore, this trip made me problematize some of the earlier assumed boundaries that I thought applied to all other religions since it applied to my Catholic faith. Also,

coexistence and ways of compromise ongoing simultaneously clearly manifested themselves in various ways that left me pondering more.

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