

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

Individual Reflections on Fieldwork

The requirement to spend some precious time during Chinese New Year to do fieldwork at the various religious sites in Punggol East made me question whether it was worth taking this module. It certainly puzzled my friends and family who were perplexed as to why any professor would make us do work during Chinese New Year. It also surprised many of the religious adherents whom we visited, especially those with more non-Chinese among their adherents. Mr S. Deakarajen, whom we talked to at the Hindu temple, almost did not turn up and thought we might be exchange students because he could not quite believe that we would do research on Chinese New Year Eve! However, what I found during the almost two whole intensive days of fieldwork was a rich and complex social fabric of religious activities within the community, one that I did not expect to find before I embarked on the project.

One of the most amazing experiences for me was to witness inter-religious harmony at the site where there were three temples side-by-side on a small stretch of road; a Taoist temple, a “Buddhist” temple (it was not mainstream Buddhism but a sect that supposedly originated from Taiwan) and a Hindu temple. I witnessed Indian workers helping the Taoist temple during the Chinese New Year festivities. One of them helped to arrange the fruits that were going to be offered to the gods, another helped to direct traffic into the carpark and yet another was serving food to the worshippers. It was, in my opinion, a totally bizarre sight which I would never have imagined possible. How could these, presumably, Indian Hindus help out so willingly in the festivities and rituals of another religion?

When we went to the Hindu temple, Mr S. Deakarajen confirmed that the Hindu temple has a close working relationship with their Chinese neighbours and that they often helped each other out during major festivals. Even after what I had seen and what I had heard, I still found it difficult to believe in this kind of pluralism. Furthermore, he added that during the temple’s anniversary celebration, they would “bring out the deities” for a procession on the street, stopping by the various

religious institutions along the way. He asserted that these other religions, such as the temple along the same street, would also give offerings to the Hindu deities being paraded. I found it very difficult to believe that account!

At Al-Mawaddah Mosque, the staff told us that there were rumours going around suggesting that a church would be built next door. When asked if this was going to be a problem, the staff emphatically answered that it was not going to be a big deal at all although she jokingly added that parking might be a problem; parking seemed to be a problem for every religious site that we visited. I was quite frankly amazed and quite pleasantly surprised by the cordiality that each religion had to other religions. From my limited knowledge, this would be almost implausible anywhere else in the world.

Although I have lived in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore all my life, pluralism was often just a “buzzword” which would be bandied around. I suspect that because I was educated in Christian / Catholic mission schools all my life, I have few friends who were followers of other religions (certainly I had atheist or agnostic friends but it was rare to find someone who was a devout follower of another religion). Upon reflection, I suppose that it is my monotheistic worldview that has led me to find this vibrant brand of religious pluralism difficult to swallow. I do believe in tolerance and acceptance of other religions but what I uncovered during the course of this fieldwork goes beyond that. It is one in which religions actively help each other out, sometimes even coming together to collaborate in community projects that would benefit the larger community.

I am glad to have had the opportunity to see for myself that being pluralistic means looking beyond one’s religion, not just to passively tolerate but to actively forge a common understanding between different religious faith. The agenda of inter-faith dialogue seems more pressing now than ever before if we are to remain civil with each other despite living and worshipping in such close proximity. This experience was definitely worth the number of CNY goodies I missed while out doing the field work!

- **Chiam Zhi An Augustin**