

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

Individual Reflections on Fieldwork

Our group did our fieldwork research in Punggol East, where we visited two Chinese temples, a Hindu temple, a mosque, and a Catholic church. Two things struck me after our experiences there – my own personal thoughts regarding religion, as well as the concepts of multi-religious harmony and religious pluralism.

I used to think that, by not ‘subscribing’ to a particular religion, I would be able to better understand the religious attitudes and beliefs that diverse groups of people hold. I have learned in other classes about the various types of biases people held throughout human history in their ways of perceiving others unlike themselves (e.g. Social Darwinism, Orientalism etc); hence, to me, being a free-thinker should have been an advantage because it meant that I would have fewer reservations about certain ideas and practices that different religions uphold. My experiences with my group in Chong Ghee Temple, however, turned this perspective of mine upside down. During one of our interviews at Chong Ghee Temple, the Chinese man we were interviewing asked about our religions. While he was very open-minded when talking about the other religions, he seemed shocked (and even horrified) when he learned that I was a free-thinker. “If you don’t have a religion, who do you answer to (if you have done something bad)? Your father?” he asked in Mandarin. I could not give a good answer. Another similar incident occurred while we were attending Mass with a Catholic Brother who was bringing us around. When the priest announced that they would be discussing what it meant to be a Catholic, the Brother turned to me, whispered, “This is not appropriate for you,” and laughed. Throughout our fieldwork, I felt this slight uneasiness and confusion when discussing my (lack of) faith with others, even if it was self-perceived on my part. It was my first time in these religious places of worship, and as I witnessed and learned about others’ devotion and love for their religions, I started wondering if being a free-thinker does not help me, but instead hinders me from understanding different faiths and beliefs, even as I try my best to do so. Although I am still attempting to reconcile that question with myself, I really appreciate having this opportunity to challenge my own

views based on our fieldwork experiences, for they have definitely been eye-opening and extremely insightful (both 'academically' and personally).

This idea of understanding different religions led me to reflect on the concept of multi-religious harmony and cooperation, based on what we saw in the Punggol East area. We noticed that some sites of religions (like the Chong Ghee Temple and the Hindu Temple) heartily cooperated with one another in various activities and even big events involving the rest of the community; while others, like the Catholic Church, were decidedly more 'exclusive' in nature, focusing mainly on members of the Catholic faith. It made me wonder about how these different religions interact with each other – perhaps some religions are more 'closed off' than others because of the nature of their religious perspectives, faiths, and the foundations that their beliefs are built upon. The Chinese man at the Chong Ghee Temple shared a unique perspective when he claimed that all religions are the same, that we all answer to one 'God', and that it was merely different cultural and historical contexts that led us to worship different deities and subscribe to different religions. To some extent, I do agree with his perspective, and I believe that this sense of mutual understanding and cooperation is integral towards interacting with people of different religions – or even those without religions.

Lee JieQi, Year 2 Sociology