

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

Individual Reflections on Fieldwork

I came from a city where religion does not have a very strong presence. I rarely saw any temples or churches still in use in the city area. I did meet people who present offerings to some Buddhist or Taoist deities, but they were never devoted followers. Instead, two thousand years of presence of Buddhism and Taoism in China has made it a kind of tradition for people to turn to those deities for good luck, though they may not adhere to the religious doctrines or practice any other rituals. Before coming to Singapore, my personal encounters with religion were limited to a few visits to some Buddhism temples at tourist sites on mountains or in rural areas. The sites were largely degenerated to tourist destinations, where ritual ceremonies were performed as a show and there were vendors selling joss sticks, religious paraphernalia and souvenirs to tourists. I even remember reading from somewhere that the 'monks' and 'nuns' in some of these temples were actually actors and actresses who were recruited to perform there. Certainly, we were all taught to respect others' religious beliefs, but I did not fully understand what that implied because apparently religion has no connection with my daily life. Sometimes I heard from the news about 911, Dalai Lama, or Falun Gong Cult (if it is counted as a religion), etc. As a child I began to think that in a world far away from me, followers of different religions tended to create troubles for each other, and were always trying to convince the non-believers. I hope this paragraph does not offend anyone. It is merely the thoughts in a child's ignorant mind.

One of the first surprises I got when I just arrived at Singapore seven years ago was to realise so many people we meet in our daily life have a religious belief! And people from distinct religious backgrounds seem to have no problem living and working together. As part of religious education, the school brought us to some religious sites and we visited Christian churches, Islam mosques, and Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu and Sikh temples, all within one day. After the initial surprise, in the following years I gradually learned about religious issues and the countries' efforts to preserve religious harmony. I started to see how it is possible for a society to

incorporate such religious diversity, of course with dedicated efforts of the government and delicate sensitivity from everyone.

The fieldtrip this time has brought me new surprises when we met a shopkeeper of a holographic sculpture shop named Tushiv. Walking along Serangoon Road, we first noticed some sculptures of Buddha heads displayed at the door of a shophouse opposite the road. It immediately attracted our attention as this 'Buddhist' shop is only no more than fifty metres away from the Sri Veerama Kaliyamman temple. While waiting for green light to cross the road, one of our group members suddenly noticed several paintings of Hindu deities hung behind the glass windows besides the door. We were excited to run into the shop and were stunned one more time by more sculptures of Jesus and Mother Mary placed side by side with those of Buddha, Guanyin as well as several Hindu deities. Then we met the shopkeeper Mr Karim Sattar who is an Indian, and had a friendly chat. Towards the end, we politely asked if he is a Hindu, but only to find out he is an Indian Muslim! He began to smile seeing us been amazed and told us 'Well, I live my holy life, and I'm selling arts.' I am impressed. It refreshes my understanding of religious tolerance and respect to see a person of one religion comfortably spending everyday with 'deities' of other religions. Very likely he is also introducing these religions and telling stories to his customers who may not be familiar with these religious figures. He views them as pieces of arts, no different from other admirable works of human intelligence.

- **Li Mo**