

Woodrow Maquiling

I would like to talk briefly about my perspective on religion and civic engagement. In a voluntary capacity, I am the National Coordinator of RFYN – Religious Freedom Young adult network of the IARF. I am Roman Catholic, the majority religious group in the Philippines. In 2003, a working closely with other faiths was new for me. As I was student officer in my University, I was invited to take part in an “Interfaith Tour” in the Visayas involving Unitarians, Christians (Catholics & Protestants), Muslims, and Indigenous Peoples (IP) and the aim was to visit different spiritual sites and gain a deeper understanding of each other’s beliefs.

So I thought I should give it a try but my parents were very reluctant about the idea that their son would be in an interfaith fellowship with these others. Our family is orthodox Roman Catholic. Misconceptions about others fuelled the apprehensions of my parents about my participation. Nonetheless, I explained and persuaded them that I would join as a representative of Roman Catholic youth, and that my participation would somehow help dispel the false impressions held by other spiritual groups about Catholics. My willingness was in the hope that I may be able to share some ideas about our way of life. In the same manner I was keen to learn about and understand the spiritual values and practices of others. As well as my family’s hesitant consent, I also needed the blessing of our Bishop in the Diocese. So we went to meet him at the Cathedral. With raised eyebrows, he had similar reactions to my parents. He then asked me numerous questions regarding the organization IARF which was initiating the project. Eventually the good Bishop gave his cautious blessing after having reiterated the prejudices I mentioned above.

I took part in the interfaith tour, and it was the 1st time that most of us had spent time with people of another faith before in this way. We vowed to continue and we did so in Mindanao, where we had an empowerment training, building a new generation of young leaders from different faith traditions. Some of us were at first quite fearful of each other but by the end of the project, there was such great bonding between us all and great honesty. The Muslims and IPs talked of the prejudice they experienced and I needed to accept that it was often the majority Catholics who had been in the wrong.

In 2005, I spent more time with indigenous young people in Luzon, in the North of the Philippines, as they learned more about their own spirituality. They invited me as an “adopted son of Kalinga”. I saw among the young people the enormous interest to be able to partake in the opportunity to effect change in their communities. I was overwhelmed to learn that a number of participants had to trek for two-to-three hours from their homes to the training place, yet they still wanted to participate. Indigenous Filipinos (or Filipinos in general) are very resilient to combat the many challenges along the journey whatever it takes. This has been my second time to be privileged to experience their hospitality, cultural tradition of right values, modest way of life, honoring one’s word and a vibrant ethnicity.

It fascinates me how time has managed to mitigate the misconstrued impressions of my family and of our bishop. None of their worries concerning me shifting religion proved to be right. Recently, I attended the birthday party of the only living Cardinal in our country. I happened to have a brief conversation there with our bishop concerning my interfaith involvement. Surprisingly, he’s more open now to my activities. My parents too are gradually softening their approach to interfaith. In this way by being prepared to take on new challenges and work with other communities, I helped to raise awareness and break down barriers and stereotypes.

After all, life is all about sharing and actively engaging in society.

For almost three years now, from the time I started my interfaith journey, numerous changes have come into my life. One is my spiritual realization of my own faith because it was only

during these times that I really learned to appreciate this. It was in an interfaith setting where I became closer to God. More than anything else, I was able to comprehend that none of the prejudices that people held were true. My horizon became unlimited in such a way that I see life as a beautiful gift and the way to enjoy it is to nourish our own faith and nurture the understanding of the spirituality of others.

On this note, I make a plea to our friends in IARF and supporters all over the world to continue to join hands with us here in the Philippines as we continue to be involved in effecting changes in our society.

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