

or researchers who haven't got a clue what's going on (myself included). However, because priests have so much authority, it matters what they have to say, and who they are – everyone has a worldview, and everyone has an agenda. My concern is more that the church impedes development in the Philippines, while those doing truly good work are in the minority.

At the moment, there is a bill going through Parliament called the Reproductive Health (RH) Bill. As could probably be predicted it refers to universal access to information about things like abortion, family planning and contraception. As could also be predicted, the Catholic Church is vehemently against it, and implementation of the law has been delayed as a result of opposition. On the side of one church we saw a sign that proclaimed the government should be opposing the RH bill because it would a) create terrorism, b) (I paraphrase) turn children into sexualised monsters and c) create poverty. The ridiculousness of this sign is most scary because people are taken in by it. In what world does being able to choose whether or not to have a child create more poverty? Surely, it does the exact opposite. The imposition of the Church's fearful remonstrations and opinions is what I find disgusting – taking away from people who often lack access to basic sex education the right to think for themselves and take control of their own bodies, families and lives.

Of course, I found the expectation to sing hymns and say grace a strain too, but those are the kinds of things I can deal with out of respect for the people I am with. Besides, I find the expectation to sing karaoke a strain too, even at the best of times (i.e. two bottles of Red Horse down). It is only when I see the flagrant abuse and institutionalised, systemic undermining of progress by the Catholic church that I have a problem with it. It is under these circumstances that one can really see where Marx was coming from when he spoke about religion being the "opiate of the masses". The Catholic Church is bad enough, but the cultish Iglesia ni Christo is far worse. The stories I heard about the links to big money and organised crime are enough to turn your stomach, even before you consider the positions it takes and the way it tries to place its ministers into promising government positions.

My experience with the particular Filipino brand of religion was thus pretty mixed. On the one hand it felt incredibly overbearing, and a hindrance on the personal development of people, and on the development of the nation as whole. Meanwhile, on the other, I felt that on an individual level it gave people hope and purpose – which can't be derided. I feel that the problem is when religion is used imperialistically, much as it is elsewhere in the developing world. Spirituality supersedes borders, whereas organised religion is often needlessly used to realise ulterior ambitions – and therein lies the problem.

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