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Culture Shock and Interfaith: Finding Common Ground in the Earth

I spent the summer of 2015 in the Philippines, interning with St. Scholastica's College in Manila through the IWU Freeman Asia Internship Program. The Philippines is an extremely Catholic country, as is the campus of St. Scho, so every day was an Interfaith encounter for me. In my time there, I heard the noon prayers ring throughout the city, in malls as well as in the school. I rode in taxis containing dashboard shrines to the Virgin Mary and rosaries hanging from the rear view mirror, and saw jeepneys and pedicabs decorated with images of Jesus. At times, this immersion was the source of tension and discomfort for me, as when I learned that the strict views on the sacrament of marriage prohibited divorce even in cases of spousal rape and domestic violence, or when the Benedictine values of silence and obedience were espoused. I found, however, that the majority of my experiences were those of common ground—places where I found myself enriched not despite the religion of others but because of it.

St. Scholastica's places a great deal of importance on social activism as academic excellence, and is deeply committed to Women's Justice and Environmental Justice as areas in which they can live out their Catholic values. In engaging these issues, the faculty and Benedictine Sisters that work at St. Scho use a great deal of Goddess imagery and language about the inherent sacredness of the Earth and nature. These are commitments that matter to them because of their Catholic faith, but these are values that are absolutely central to my theology as a Wiccan as well. In fact, there were several occasions when my faith and St. Scho's Catholicism bled into each other. For example, in my first week in the Philippines, I sat in on a graduation of nuns from various Asian countries who had attended a Women's Empowerment program at the Institute where I would be

living while in Manila. As a part of the ceremony, they performed a dance to "We All Come From The Goddess," a song written by Wiccan author and activist Zsuzsanna Budapest. A few weeks later, I had the opportunity to travel to the city of Baguio with student leaders from St. Scholastica's, where we stayed in a convent. Although the rooms were austere, the convent grounds included many beautiful gardens. In the entrance to one of the gardens, I was surprised to see a sign which read "Walk the Earth reverently, be one with Her." This deep reverence for nature was continued when we were woken one morning for a 6am Shibashi session led by one of the nuns. Shibashi is a Japanese form of meditation that allows one to become closer to the Earth through healing



Carly performs Shibashi.
Photo by Khamylle Castillo.

movements modeled on those found in nature. The awareness of the sacredness of the Earth and the commitment to honor and care for Her as our Mother, key elements of my Wiccan faith, were themes that came up over and over. On one occasion I went on a tree-planting trip in Tanauan, where I was asked by the Sister organizing the trip to lead one of the prayers. She handed me

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a piece of paper, and I accepted nervously, not wanting to be disrespectful but knowing I would be inauthentic in praying in the Catholic fashion. Much to my surprise, it was an invocation to the Four Directions, a practice familiar to me as a Wiccan and also from my upbringing with elements of the Lakota tradition. When I asked the Sister why she had selected a Native American prayer, she told me she chose it for the emphasis it placed on the Earth as a sacred and holy place, a belief that was integral, and not separate from, her Catholic faith.

Because of my background in a Native American context, however, I was at times troubled by the Catholicism of the Philippines. There continues to be a national resentment of Spain for the hundreds of years of exploitation and suffering the Philippines endured while a Spanish colony. Part of that history included compulsory conversion to the Christian faith and banning the practice of their traditional customs. The same thing happened to the indigenous peoples of my home country, and I know that there have been movements in the modern day among the Native peoples of America to return the faith of their ancestors and to regain some of the culture that was taken from them. So I wondered—how could the Filipinos I met be so devout, when they knew the violent history of Christianity in their country? How did they not see Christianity as oppressive? I confronted this question most directly while visiting St. James the Apostle Church in Paete, where I saw two paintings of St. Christopher. While both images showed a man wading through water and clutching a palm tree with an angel on his shoulder, one of the Christophers was white, and the other was brown. I was told that during a recent renovation, they removed the former for preservation and found the latter beneath it. They discovered that the original commission had been rejected because it portrayed the Saint as too Filipino for the Spanish priests' tastes, so they had the piece redone to make him more acceptably European and covered the original. While today being Catholic is as much a part of the national identity

as rice and adobo, in its inception, Catholicism in the Philippines was very anti-Filipino.

My journey to acceptance came from connecting this situation to that of my own religion. In Wicca, as well as in other contemporary Pagan traditions, there have been many criticisms of the validity of a historical narrative for ancient matrilineal Goddess traditions and covens in medieval times. Starhawk, founder of the contemporary Pagan Reclaiming Tradition and author of *The Spiral Dance*, writes:

"The idea seems to be that if they can disprove our origin story, they can invalidate our spirituality. . . . In reality, . . . the truth of our experiences is valid whether it has roots thousands of years old or thirty minutes old. . . . What gives [our tradition] validity is how it works for us now, in the moment, not whether or not someone has worshipped this particular image in the past" (1999, p.4).

Perhaps in the same way, modern Catholicism for Filipinos is an expression of their current culture as the culmination of their history and national experience. And that doesn't discount the validity or genuine nature of their faith. As a Wiccan, I should understand that well.

While I had gone to the Philippines expecting that the Catholic nature of the country would limit my ability to live out my own faith, I instead found that their beliefs made it easier, not harder, for me to engage with my own. Although on the surface it seems that Catholicism and Wicca could not be more different, I was able to grow in my faith by connecting to the shared values we both held. Through Interfaith, I was able to make lasting friendships not only across differences in religious traditions, but across differences of culture, nationality, and native language as well.



A statue of St. Scholastica in the convent gardens.
Photo by author.