

ORGANIZED NONRELIGION IN THE PHILIPPINES

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NONRELIGION IN THE PHILIPPINES?

The Philippines, besides East-Timor the only Christian-dominated country in Southeast Asia – with more than 80% of the population counted as Roman Catholic –, is usually considered as overwhelmingly religious and famous, for example, for the self-flagellations and ritual crucifixions during Holy Week, or the Black Nazarene procession at the Quiapo Church in Manila with millions of participants every year. Thus, it might seem as an unusual research site for studying organized *nonreligion*. However, the last two decades have seen the evolution and establishment of several such nonreligious groups, both online and offline. Among them, the *Filipino Freethinkers* (FF), founded in 2009, and the *Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society* (PATAS), founded in 2011, are certainly one of the largest and most active ones.

As part of the Emmy Noether-project on “The Diversity of Nonreligion” at the University of Frankfurt/Main, my Ph.D. research project, which is supervised by Prof. Dr. Johannes Quack (University of Zürich, Switzerland) and Prof. Dr. Peter J. Bräunlein (University of Göttingen), will focus mainly on these two groups, which have several things in common, but still constitute different forms of contemporary nonreligion in the Philippines.

Based on participant observation in Metro Manila from August 2013 to May 2014, interviews with (former) members of these groups, and an analysis of their online material, I want to reconstruct a history of (organized) nonreligion in the Philippines and describe the local diversity of contemporary forms. I will compare FF, PATAS and other like-minded groups and their activities, look at their members’ experiences as nonreligious people in a religious nation and analyze the political dimension of becoming and being active in a nonreligious group.



Regular meetups with lectures and discussions are the cornerstone of nonreligious groups in Manila. (Foto: Official FF Website)



Supporting the controversial RH Bill/Law... (Foto: Official FF Website)



Participating at the LGBT Pride March... (Foto: AB)

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF NONRELIGION

“Atheism” and “freethinking” is not only an abstract, philosophical worldview for the respective groups, but strongly tied to various forms of social activism. FF and PATAS support, for example, human rights, LGBT rights or the controversial Reproductive Health Bill/Law (RH Bill/Law). In such social and moral conflicts, where the complex dynamics of religion, politics, and modernity intersect locally and in concrete ways, the aforementioned political dimension of being nonreligious in the Philippines becomes apparent.

Outlook

The resulting ethnographic analysis will contribute to the understanding of different forms of nonreligion in different socio-cultural contexts under an inter- or transcultural comparative framework. It adds thereby not only in various ways to the emerging but still neglected field of nonreligion studies, but will also shed new light on the dynamic ensemble of religion, politics and modernity in Southeast Asia by decentering the focus on religion and approaching nonreligious phenomena relationally (Quack 2014).

For more information about the project **THE DIVERSITY OF NONRELIGION** see www.nonreligion.net

“[...] *atheism is not just a negation or an absence of belief, but is connected to a set of epistemological, ethical, and political positions.*”

LeDrew (2014)