

The Real Issue is Breaking the Catholic State

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What is missing in the on-going debate on population control and divorce?

Catholic crusaders are successful at centering these debates around the “sanctity of family and life”. Proponents, by contrast, base their arguments on the empirical ill effects of the status quo: demographic projections and the painful realities of spousal abuse. Yet this is about more than just the clash between Catholic morality on the one hand and rational development policy and feminism on the other. There is another dimension to this divisive situation.

The real issue is that the Philippines is, de facto, a Catholic state-in its laws, rhetoric and praxis. Our Muslim neighbors in the rest of Southeast Asia have every right to shake their heads at us. Aspirations for Islamic statehood ignite passionate debates the world over. In the Philippines, however, Catholic hegemony goes unexamined and unquestioned to this day.

The Preamble of the 1987 Constitution, which “implores the aid of the Almighty God”, may seem harmless in its intent. But it imparts two objectionable messages. One, it presumes that all Filipinos believe in a monotheistic higher Being, Christian or Muslim. Two, the ecumenical posturing provides a thin veil to hide Catholic pre-dominance.

The reason the Philippines is a Catholic state is not because it is populated by flocks of Catholics. Nor because the Catholic fundamentalists present a very powerful lobby in the country. It is not about numbers, although they have the numbers. It is about the degree by which the state’s basic outlook is based on a certain theology.

We have a de facto Catholic state because only in a Catholic state are civil marriages indissoluble. Marriage is a contract between two consenting parties. Contracts are governed by conditions, which unfulfilled, provide grounds for dissolution. However, on our shores, marriage contracts implicitly reflect that what God has brought together, no judge may dissolve. Thankfully, this family law does not apply to Muslims. But what about Filipinos who choose to live their lives outside the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy?

We have a de facto Catholic state because only in a Catholic state do interest groups have license to freely bully public health workers who promote modern methods of birth control.

There are other manifestations of this. As petty as this may seem, I do have a problem that President Arroyo hosts holy week retreats for her Cabinet and that House Speaker José de Venecia decorates the walls of Congress with inspirational religious message boards-presumably using taxpayers’ money.

The separation of Church and State does not hinge on the question whether religious leaders should be allowed to endorse political candidates or speak up on national issues. This is, in fact, a non-issue, in a political system that guarantees freedom of expression and assembly. The problem arises when the State’s fundamental policy is patterned after a certain Church doctrine-to the detriment of other constituencies.

To illustrate: the Ateneo high school parents’ association has the right to raise alarm over their sons

reading the Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown's best-selling novel that suggests Jesus Christ had a sex life. That is because Ateneo is a private, religious institution.

But the Philippine state is an entirely different matter. A modern state must be a secular one. In this day and age, this is a non-negotiable condition. Only a secular state can accurately reflect the pluralistic society we live in. And ironically, only a secular state can guarantee universal religious freedom for all. This begins with according Filipinos the right to shape their family life according to their own moral dispositions and material conditions.

P.S.

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