

Organized Humanism in the Philippines

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

On May 31, 2015, my brother Dave Allen and I attended the second international conference of the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS.) The organization was founded on February 14, 2011 by former leader Marissa Torres. (Torres has founded and leads another group known as the Humanist Association of the Philippines International, or HAPI, some of whose members attended the second PATAS conference.)

I spoke at the first international PATAS conference held in Manila on April 21, 2012 at the Bayview Hotel. I knew then that PATAS would do extremely well in its courageous efforts to defend reason, science and humanism in the Philippines, and in their attempts to secularize their country.

The second PATAS conference was held at the Unilab Bayanihan Center in Pasig City, near Manila. The building was clean, beautiful, comfortable, and air-conditioned. (This last point was especially important, as temperatures in the Philippines at that time got as high as 110 degrees Fahrenheit!)

The main room in which the conference was held was packed with people. Most of those in attendance were young people in their 20s. Most of the attendees were men, but there were quite a few women in attendance.

Members of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) also traveled to the Philippines to meet in conjunction with the conference. Former IHEU President Sonja Eggerickx delivered opening remarks.

There was a very impressive international presence. People came from the U.S., Sweden, Finland, Canada, Britain, Norway, Australia, Malaysia, and many other nations.

The quality of speeches was high and the topics were important. Willie Poh Kaw Lik, a humanist educator and lecturer at Multimedia University, discussed

“Learning vs. Education.” The TEDx speaker said that education systems must be updated to spark student interest in learning.

Many Filipino humanist activists have great interest in LGBT rights. To that end, attorney Lily Milla discussed the role of the Philippine government in supporting LGBT rights, and how state universities handle sexuality among LGBT people.

Bob Churchill is the IHEU’s Director of Communications. He discussed anti-blasphemy laws and the persecution of non-theists throughout the world charged with blasphemy. He said that every week there are reports of threats against alleged blasphemers, and he talked about the need to get rid of such laws and to promote genuine freedom of thought, conscience and expression.

Jason Sylvester is a Canadian atheist and the author of *Manifest Insanity: Or...How I Leaned to Stop Worrying and Think for Myself*. He discussed the challenge of Catholic policies and social issues in the Philippines. (The Philippines is the only predominantly Catholic nation in Asia, and the church has tremendous power and influence throughout the country.) Sylvester gave much attention to the Church’s opposition to divorce.

Eric Julian Manalastas is a junior faculty member in the Psychology Department at the University of the Philippines. He has done research in LGBT psychology, including dealing with stereotypes, anti-LGBT prejudice and coming out. He discussed the various psychological challenges of young LGBT people.

Rodion Herrera is the Manager and Head Astronomy Lecturer at Voyager Philippines. He discussed the importance of scientific literacy in attempts to promote secularism. His power point presentation was especially impressive.

David McAfee studies Christianity the way people study Greek mythology, i.e. with interest but not with blind faith or the notion that its theistic claims are rooted in objective reality. He is an American and the author of *Disproving Christianity and Other Secular Writings* and *Mom, Dad, I’m an Atheist: The Guide to Coming Out as a Non-Believer*. He said that one institution of higher learning refused to admit him to their Christian studies program simply because he is an atheist! The school responded to him, and admitted as much.

Red Tani is the founder of the Filipino Freethinkers. He believes that non-theists should have respectful dialogue with progressive theists, and that the two sides could work together. He said that some Filipino atheists even seem willing to get violent in their run-ins with religionists. Tani advocated a kinder and gentler approach for non-theists, but made it clear that non-theists cannot abandon the push for secularism in the Philippines.

Organized Filipino activists are making important contributions to society. They are feeding the hungry, rowing in boats to help victims of floods, and so on. However, when they work with religionists, it is not always a smooth ride. For example, sometimes even progressive religionists object to them displaying their banners at various events.

The major newspapers in the Philippines are filled with articles by Christian writers. However, I was delighted to learn that in at least one publication, *The Manila Bulletin*, there were objective stories about extraordinary Catholic claims.

In the May 30, 2015 issue on page 16, there was a story about a statue of the Virgin Mary in the province of Camiguin, weeping “tears of blood.” Some saw it as a miracle. Yet others said that it was not real blood, and that “it was just liquid that seeped out of a crack on the face of the statue.”

In the June 8, 2015 issue of the paper, page 8, there was a story about the Pope ruling on the supposed Medjugorje apparitions of the Madonna in Bosnia. In 1981, six children first reported having visions of the Virgin Mary. Many other people were to follow. However, the paper reported that many believe the apparitions are a hoax.

As long as this kind of skepticism exists in the Filipino press, organized Filipino humanists will have a much easier time getting their points across.