

Habits of the Heart to Counter Bigotry

*Growing religious expression here isn't the problem –
it's what's behind it we should be wary of*

by

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There are uncanny similarities between Mullah Mohammed Omar's order to the Taliban to destroy Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddha statues in 2001, and the recent burning of the Quran by American Pastor Terry Jones that sparked a mob in Pakistan which left 12 dead.

Both started as fringe actors who gained global attention through the media. Both share a narrow vision of religion. Both chose to attack symbols of other religions to make a point. For Terry Jones and Mohammed Omar, their narrow visions dictate that their religion is on a collision course with all others. Beneath that vision lies prejudices and stereotypes that caricature other religions in the most essentialist and prejudicial way: One depicting Buddhists as idol-worshippers, another depicting Islam as a violent religion.

At the centre of their diatribe is politics, not religion.

As a small cosmopolitan city-state, Singapore cannot allow such events to affect interfaith relations here. In fact, with the growing conservatism in Malaysia and the increasing violence in Indonesia towards minority groups, religious conflict and tension seem to be headed closer to our shores. What will be our response?

On Saturday, the National University of Singapore (NUS) University Scholars' Programme, together with the Department of Malay Studies and the NUS Interfaith Society, organised an interfaith dialogue on "Religions in Conversations: Reflections on Singapore". Such dialogue fronted by young people is increasingly shaping a new Singapore landscape.

It marks the growing realisation that dialogue is key to addressing the religious divide in today's world. No longer is dialogue shunned for fear of "saying the wrong things" and upsetting a religious community. This was once the perception, driven by the polemical approach to faith by religious fundamentalists in all camps - this is the reason various regulations came

into place, including the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act enacted in 1990.

Thus, the message, at least till a decade ago, was to keep religions apart. But times are changing. Since September 11, perceptions have changed.

Instead of keeping religions apart, Singapore's leaders realised the need to foster greater interactions. There have been visible changes in policy to promote dialogue and interaction, such as with the formation of the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle in 2002 and the rolling out of the Community Engagement Programme in 2006.

Intrafaith Differences

Today, a lot more people realise that increasing religious expression is not the problem. The problem lies with the kind of orientation within that expression.

For example, if a person consumes *halal* food and refuses to eat beside someone who takes non-*halal* food, the problem lies with the act of self-exclusion - not the consumption of *halal* food.

If the orientation behind a religious expression is of the exclusivist, supremacist and intolerant type, then we ought to be wary. Measures need to be taken to ensure it does not become dominant in our society.

But if the orientation is of the inclusive, egalitarian and progressive sort, then we ought to celebrate these expressions as part of our diverse religious landscape. The latter may even help strengthen our identity as a cosmopolitan society where diversity is celebrated and cultural exchanges lead to the greater common good.

The challenge before us, therefore, is to ensure that social policies are able to distinguish the diversity within each religious tradition. Interfaith awareness must go hand-in-hand with intrafaith.

No religion is monolithic and all religions can be susceptible to extremist elements driven by politics and narrow interests. The direction each religious community takes - whether the path to greater openness and embracing of the other, or down the road of insularity and conservatism - will depend to a large extent on the elites at the helm.

Thus far, Singapore has done well to keep religious bigotry from occupying

centrestage in our religious life. Legislation such as the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act has been effective, while institutions like the Inter-Religious Organisation, Onepeople.Sg and the Harmony Centre have helped build bridges between communities.

Activists for Faith

But the legal and institutional approach may not be sufficient. What is needed is greater spontaneity at the grassroots level, particularly among the youth to form “interfaith circles” and promote dialogue with the aim of forging greater understanding and deepening friendships.

Such groups have mushroomed in recent years, to an extent - examples are the Developing Conversation Circles Programme and Explorations into Faiths led by seasoned interfaith activists Ms Guat Kwee See and Mr Farid Hamid respectively.

Such small group engagements done informally, but with a serious aim of conversing with each other, spell hope for social cohesion. They involve young professionals from various backgrounds. Meeting in homes and casual venues, they require few resources. Going beyond the usual niceties and theological debates, such groups delve into some of the more difficult, and crucial, faith-based responses to issues of our time: Religion and violence, gender relations, poverty, sexual orientation, environmental degradation.

Done consistently across a period of time, such engagements may eventually erase stereotypes, promote appreciation of our common humanity, instill a democratic personality and deepen trust and friendship. It is these "habits of the heart" that are needed urgently today, and these we can foster with greater interfaith engagement done respectfully, and with a clear aim of embracing diversity.

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