

Handling Religion.

Religion is a dominant presence in Malaysian Society. A large number of Malaysians are devout adherents of their various religions. The huge numbers turning up at places of worship on special days is an indicator of that reality. At the same time, religions have been dragged into politics, used by several parties on both sides of the political divide to score political points leading to friction and tension between different ethnicities, and undermining efforts to build a Peoples' Movement in Malaysia.

So there is no way for Malaysian socialists to avoid religious issues, or avoid taking stands. We can't pretend that religion is not an important factor in Malaysian society. We need to engage religious groups, and also promote the engagement of different faith communities if we want to contain the efforts of those who use religion to create controversies and gain political mileage. The challenge for us is – how do we remain principled while at the same time not offend the religiously inclined? Is it possible to be principled and yet pragmatic, in our engagement with the religious majorities?

I believe it is possible to strike that balance. I would like to first share some observations about religions and then go on to enunciate a set of principles in dealing with the religious.

A: Observations about religion

1. The radical core of religions

Human solidarity, compassion for the disadvantaged and love of mankind are among the central components of all religions. Many religions began as uncompromising protests, as social critiques of existing socio-economic system which had led to marginalization and injustices in society. (I am borrowing heavily from Farish Noor's presentation to us several years back.) The founders of religions invoked the Almighty to justify their criticism of the existing unjust status quo and to urge reforms premised on love for the marginalized and the poor – on a platform of social solidarity. The elite of their times mobilized against these challenges to their privileges - Jesus was crucified and Mohammad had to flee from Mecca and then fight several battles launched by the political elite of his time.

2. Universal values expressed in historically specific contexts

Religions bear the marks of their time. They were situated in particular societies, at certain levels of technological development, particular forms of economic activity and specific levels of patriarchy. The solidarity and compassion central to all religions are expressed in the metaphor of their times, and are entwined with the socio-cultural practices of the historical period they originated in.

3. The "Domestication" of Religion

With the conversion of the ruling elite of these societies, these religions which began as uncompromising protest movements, became "domesticated" by the class societies they were situated in. The ruling elite generally sponsored those expressions of religion that did not directly challenge the injustices associated with the class nature of their society and their privileged position. Over time, the uncompromising anti-elite tendencies in religion were "distilled" out leaving a much blander product. Personal "sin" and personal "salvation" became the mainstay of

religious activity. The religious institutions accumulated property, their leaders became part of the ruling hierarchy and many of the prejudices of the existing elite were adopted and endorsed by these religious institutions. Over time religions tended to degenerate into another one of the tools of elite rule.

4. The radical potential of religion

The great religions have certainly not proven to be bulwarks against social injustice or the exploitation of man by man. They acquiesced to, and in many cases supported slavery, patriarchal oppression of women, colonialism, war and pogroms against other religious groups. However, despite all of this, religion still retains the potential to radically challenge socio-economic injustices – Liberation Theology within the Catholic Church in Latin America is just one example, and I think it had a significant impact on the evolution of the strong anti-imperialist political current in Latin America today. Ali Shariati in Iran? Closer home, the YCW (Young Christian Workers) movement in the late 1970s, was the training ground for a generation of Malaysian social activists.

5. The role of religion in the “post-colonial project”

The post colonial societies of Africa, Asia and Latin America, attempting to re-assert their autonomy from Western value systems associated with commercialization, commodification, individualism, expropriation of the poor in the name of development, etc, sometimes turn inwards to their own religions to resuscitate their own cultures, build national pride, and to generate consensus for the politico-economic projects of their countries. This can have a progressive face as in Nicaragua, Venezuela and other countries in Latin America. More often it has a more jingoist, chauvinist (even fascist) puritanical character – right wing Hindu nationalism, the current Buddhist mobilization against Muslims in Burma and a plethora of Muslim movements all over the world.

6. The role of the CIA in the evolution of Militant Conservative Islam

The Imperial powers were threatened by the radical nationalism of leaders in several countries in West Asia – Nasser, Mossadeq (Iran), Bhutto (Pakistan) are just a few examples. Many of these leaders attempted to create “space” for their countries by accepting aid from the USSR.

One of the methods used by the Western powers to contain this challenge to their hegemonic control was to promote radically conservative Islamic movements that held literal interpretations of the Koran. The more “Sufi” types might have found common cause with the radical nationalistic leaders!

The Taliban and Al Qaeda themselves are direct products of CIA intervention to destabilize the Communist government that overthrew the Afghan royalty and attempted to modernize that country.

7. “Soul Brothers”? - The origin of the religious impulse.

Some time ago, a Catholic Priest said to me, “You (referring to PSM members) are all “Anonymous Christians”.” When pressed to clarify he explained that anonymous Christians are those individuals who have been touched by God such that they are moved to serve their fellowmen, but who do not (yet) realize the fact that God has touched their hearts.

This does make sense in the Christian theological framework. For if all men are sullied by “original sin” (the “apple incident” and the rejection of God by Adam and Eve) they then need

the sacrifice of Jesus to free them from sin and put love in his/her heart. It needs the intervention of God to save man from the original sin.

I have a question for socialists - If you reject my Priest friend's hypothesis that God put compassion in your heart, how would you explain the altruism of socialists? Why do we disdain material pursuits, choose to live simply, expend effort, go on exhausting road-shows, exasperate and worry our next of kin, take the risks of arrest and detention, etc? Because we are radically opposed to injustice and the exploitation of men and women. Che is supposed to have said that "the true revolutionary is motivated by love". What is the source of that "love"?

The alternate hypothesis is a "materialist" one - that the human capacity for empathy and for feeling compassion is hard-wired into our psyche as a consequence of our way of being - social beings who need to be part of a community to survive and actualize themselves. 150,000 years or more of living in community has built into us the capacity for empathy and the need for fair-play. Persons advocating this "materialist" hypothesis would go on to argue that the "Almighty" of the religions is a projection of this aspect of the human psyche - God is the virtual embodiment of the powerful feelings and passions that emanate from human beings themselves, expressed in the specific cultural metaphors of their times. (The religious would find this blasphemous - to claim that Humans "create" God!)

But, and this is an important point - whichever hypothesis is correct, my Priest friend's or the materialist position - the impulse to charity on the part of the religious and to altruism on the part of socialists, are from the same source. So, are we not "soul brothers"?

8. Atheists as bad as the Believers?

Because both of them make assertions about "God" which they cannot back-up with incontrovertible evidence. Perhaps the agnostic position - that one does not know and probably cannot know, and actually doesn't really need to know to get on with living in this world - might be the most intellectually honest one.

9. 'Opium of the masses'

This is often quoted to show that Marx and Marxists are anti-God. However the passage that precedes "it is the opium of the people" reveals a more sensitive and nuanced view of religion. *Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.* (From Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.)

10. Time to move beyond the “consociational state” model?

“Political scientists define a consociational state as a state which has major internal divisions along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines, yet nonetheless manages to remain stable, due to consultation among the elites of each of its major social groups.” Wikipedia

Malaysia has been managed along consociational lines – the elites in the BN make the deals, and the rest of us are prohibited from touching “sensitive” issues because we are not mature enough to handle these – these issues are made out of bounds for ordinary citizens by the sedition laws.

The problem with this is 2-fold

a/ Our political elite need inter-ethnic tension/suspicion to justify their existence as ethnic and/or religious parties. So they need to whip up anxiety and enmity among the people to remain relevant to the people, and to consolidate their grip on power. So while giving lip-service to building harmonious relations among the people, from time to time they spark off controversies that divide the people along ethnic and/or religious lines – the Allah issue, Apostacy, Hudud, etc.

b/ Because ordinary people are discouraged from discussing these so called contentious issues with people from different ethnic or religious backgrounds, civil society is ill-prepared to withstand and counteract the periodic attempts of some sections of the elite to stir religious and ethnic tensions.

B: Positions that the PSM should take

1. Reject the Consociational Approach

The People should take over the work of building inter-religious harmony because the politicians and religious authorities are making a proper mess of it! There is already a lot of goodwill among the people of Malaysia – all the mass rallies over the past few years attest to that. On the whole, it is not too difficult to ensure that “A”’s right to practice his/her religion does not impact negatively on “B”. The contentious issues in religion can be resolved by the people if they agree to

- affirm the positions detailed in the Federal Constitution;
- affirm the principles of respecting the right to worship, respecting the rights of others to be not affected by one’s form of worship;
- respect each other’s positions, and seek to understand where other groups are coming from;
- remind themselves that their own religion teaches them to be compassionate and

just:

- agree to disagree;
- agree to keep to the status quo while trying to resolve outstanding issues.

The “seditious” issues are too important for us to sub-contract to politicians – especially to our present set who thrive on sensationalizing ethnic and religious issues!

2. Respect for the radical core of religions

- as all have compassion and solidarity as one of the core values;
- because they have the potential of contributing towards a counter-culture to neo-liberal capitalism.

While retaining the right to criticize aspects of religion that are feudal, patriarchal and elitist.

3. Affirm pluralism in religion

- Exclusivism (the assertion that only a particular religion is correct and the rest are abominations) is not internally consistent with the values and beliefs of religions themselves – of a compassionate and just Almighty. It would be grossly unjust if God, who has allowed the development of different religions, rejects and punishes individuals born into certain religions for not converting to the “right” religion.

4. Respect the right to worship

- all individuals have the right to worship as they wish to, to the extent that it does not impinge on the lives or violates the human rights of others;

(This would mean that Muslims have the right to canvass for Hudud if they believe that it is an integral part of their faith, but are obliged to ensure that Hudud would not at all affect non-Muslims, or infringe the human rights of Muslims themselves.

This would also mean that Islamic Authorities have no business decreeing what terms other religions can use in their worship.)

- Individuals also should have the right to not worship if they so wish. There should be no compulsion in religion.

This does not mean one cannot comment on religions other than the one you are in. As religious beliefs have the potential to affect others not of that religion, it is only fair that people have the right to make comments on the practices and beliefs of any religion, but that should be done with sensitivity.

5. Reject Theocratic States of any form

- because such a state would be grossly undemocratic. Not only those from other religions will be excluded from the process of formulating and administering laws, but also the less “educated” of that same religion will be barred.

- the State should be secular. But this term is often understood differently by Islamists who term Kemal Attaturk’s position as “secular” when in fact it goes beyond that.

6. Read up on Islam and other Religions

- displaying some knowledge of religions would be of help in discussions with the religious. For it indicates a certain level of respect.

- But at the same time Non-Muslims should be careful not to overdo things eg basing their arguments exclusively on quotes from the Koran. Because that reinforces the belief among some Muslims that the Koran contains all that needs to be said about anything – it is the complete blueprint of how human life should be lived. When non-Muslims go around basing their

argument on Koranic quotes, it feeds this belief, and reinforces the argument for an Islamic State.

The PSM has been steering clear of religion up till now. We believed it is better to work on socio-economic issues that have much greater potential for developing multi-ethnic support and joint action. But the recent developments in Malaysia – the Allah issue, conversion of minors and now Hudud - demonstrates how irresponsible elements from among the political elite in both the BN and the PR as well as some religious authorities can sabotage the process of developing a multi-ethnic peoples' movement.

The Peoples' Movement has to re-appropriate inter-religious dialogue. That's the only antidote to the toxin of religious based politicking that some elements of the Malaysian elite excel in. And it looks like the PSM has a role to play in empowering the rakyat to take back ownership of inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue.

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