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Religious Harmony: Stop the Tolerance, Start Appreciating

By Mohammad Alami Musa

Synopsis

The claims of religious superiority can lead to enmity, hatred of the religious other and desire to replace other religions with own's one. Moving from religious harmony based on tolerance, to acceptance and mutuality, offers a way forward for deeper and more resilient interreligious relations.

Commentary

TOLERANCE IS a bad word. The root of the word comes from medieval toxicology and pharmacology. It is the amount of poison that a human body can absorb before it would submit to death.

Therefore, religious harmony that is based on tolerance implies that in the interreligious relations amongst communities, the followers of one religion will have to submit themselves and suffer in silence to encounter the differences found in other religions, which they may perceive to be the "bad stuff".

Claims of Religious Superiority

Paradoxically, the attitude extolled for religious harmony based on tolerance is to have goodwill, which is defined as a disposition to kindness and compassion. In other words, a multi-religious society is enjoined to be kind and compassionate, for the sake of harmony—that is, to put up with the "bad stuff". This seems strikingly odd, but it exists in the subconscious mind that influences one's perception of religions other than one's own.

The attitude of religious "tolerance" can thus be viewed as being based on the premise that one's religion is superior and all other religions are gravely deficient. If so, such

claims of religious superiority will be dangerous because they can create hatred, enmity and desire to defeat other religions or replace them.

A person who claims religious superiority believes that his way offers the only saviour or highest enlightenment. Does this idea not sound familiar in the world today, one that has been seized by violence and conflicts in the name of religion?

According to the global scholar of religion Paul Knitter, there is a link between claims of religious superiority and calls for religion-based conflict, as well as violence. Fundamentalists and extremists who advocate conflict and violence underpin their ideology with claims that their religion is superior.

They believe that their religion provides the best guarantee to attain salvation and that no other religion can offer this assurance. They are convinced that their God wills everyone to become the followers of their religion; they claim that their religion has the monopoly of absolute truth. If people of religion similarly make claims of religious superiority, they may unconsciously or unwittingly echo the narrative of violent extremists.

Common Gems and Cross-learning

Religious harmony will be durable if people of religion avoid feeling arrogant, and instead become humble enough to cast aside claims of religious superiority. This may not be easy, but one can do this without weakening one's faith or lessening love for one's religion. One need not hate all other religions to love the religion one has chosen as the path to happiness.

All religions and beliefs contain "gems" that will nourish the life of all human beings. There can be a lot of "cross-learning" amongst people of religions and beliefs, because many gems in the form of truths and goodness can be found in all of them. Wherever they are found, they belong to all, regardless of the religion or belief that they belong to.

One will discover how beautiful and inspirational other religions and beliefs are. It is sheer arrogance for a person of religion to claim that all truth and goodness - the gems - are only found in his or her own religion and nowhere else. To be humble in belief is a clear sign of someone of deep faith.

Principle of Mutuality

Such humility will generate an atmosphere of mutuality. This principle of mutuality is the cornerstone from which durable religious harmony can be established. It motivates people to mutually learn from each other, to be inter-dependent and create synergy amongst diverse religions.

This is the way to proceed to level-up religious harmony from the lowest level of tolerance and goodwill to the highest level of understanding, appreciation and ultimately acceptance.

There is a qualifier, though.

The call to cast aside claims of religious superiority does not mean that all religions are recognised as the same. On the contrary, it is necessary to affirm real differences among religions. Differences matter because religions can never be reduced to a neat system of convergences, alignments and parallels.

But the important thing is that these differences are not to be seen as impurities, faithlessness and falsehoods – the “bad stuff” – which must be “put up with” or tolerated because of goodwill that mitigates the “silent suffering”. Rather, the differences offer an excellent opportunity for a religiously diverse society to go beyond mere tolerance in “putting up with” differences, to an affirmation that these differences are to be celebrated with joy and appreciated.

Next Big Task?

Moving from religious harmony based on tolerance to a durable religious harmony based on the principle of mutuality should be the next big task in Singapore’s national resilience-building efforts to ensure that society stays together in the event of a terror attack.

Avoiding claims of religious superiority, affirming differences as good, cross-learning of each other’s religions, accepting the “gems” wherever they are found, living religiously in inter-dependent ways and embracing the value of synergy to nourish each other’s religious life will require faith leaders to instil the appropriate values in their congregations.

There are resources within religious traditions to support the principle of mutuality in interreligious relations. The durability of religious harmony depends on how deeply people appreciate each other’s religions, how mutual they are prepared to be in interreligious interactions, and how humble they can be to avoid claims of religious superiority.

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