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Finding faith among friends

WHEN our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited Pope John Paul II at the Vatican earlier this month, it was to discuss the escalating Palestinian-Israel conflict.

The invitation was extended by the Pope in recognition of Dr Mahathir as a leading Muslim leader whose moderate voice has managed to influence the Muslim world.

We guessed that for an effective dialogue to take place, both leaders must have a reasonable level of knowledge about each other's religion.

This encouraged us at YouthQuake to find out more about what we, at home, know of each other's faiths.

We ran a survey involving 100 secondary school students and university undergraduates to find out just this. What we discovered was shocking!

It was a good thing the questionnaire was multiple-choice. Even then, there were many blank expressions!

We came up with five questions each pertaining to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Christianity. The deal was that everyone would answer a questionnaire about a religion that wasn't theirs.

Blank faces aside, there were many furrowed brows, frantic discussions and the all-time favourite Malaysian student's act of desperation - "tembak-ing" .

C'mon guys. Have you never heard of Sikhism? That word elicited giggles from some respondents. More blank stares. Mention "turban" and only then a look of recognition dawned.

Of the 20 per cent of respondents who answered the questionnaire on Sikhism, not ONE got all the answers right! Most scored 60 per cent, though we suspect it had to do with target practice (read: guess work).

A Sikh is supposed to have five things on his body - the kesh (hair), kara (steel bangle), kirpan (sword), kanga (wooden comb) and kaccha (cotton underwear).

When asked to single out which one of the items was not part of the 5Ks of Sikhism, mostly guessed the kirpan which is in fact the symbol of courage and self defence for Sikhs.

The answer however should have been kurta (shirt), which we threw in to confuse you.

You guys get a holiday on Awal Muharram, don't you? Sadly, you have no idea why. Seventy per cent of you think it's to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. That's Maulidul Rasul!

Awal Muharram is the first day of the Muslim calendar.

There was a bright spark among the respondents, 16-year-old Azfar Hanif Azizi from Taman Tun Dr Ismail. What was wonderfully ironic was that this boy knew more about Christianity than his own religion, as he embarrassingly admitted. Azfar attributed his familiarity about the topic to television programmes and movies.

To support his familiarity with Christianity, a heartwarming 41 per cent scored full marks here. So we're not totally lost in this jungle.

Buddhism came in a close second with 40 per cent scoring all-correct answers.

Perhaps then more should watch Hindi/Tamil/Chinese/Arab movies to educate ourselves about each other's faith and culture. Hritik Roshan as Lord Shiva, Amir Khan as Lord Ganesh and Rahul Roy as Lord Vishnu should attract enough attention!

Multiple-choice questions aside, the real test probably came in the form of impromptu questions that revealed so much more. When asked simple questions like when Wesak is celebrated, some fumbled. (For goodness' sake, it's a public holiday!)

While many were able to throw key words around (like "mooncake", "lanterns", "kavadi"), there was little or no knowledge about the festivals celebrated by each religion. (Incidentally, Thaipusam is strictly a Malaysian thing!)

How could we have allowed this to happen?

Yet we know it's pretty cool living in multi-religious Malaysia. We visit our friends' and neighbours' homes during religious festivals and gorge ourselves silly on rendang and nasi himpit, crispy love letters, mutton curry with puttumayam and sodhi. We also get ang pow, duit raya, presents... So blessed are we!

If we learnt more about each other's faith, it would make us more sensitive, more tolerant and respectful of one another.

Here's something that need not have happened had some people been more knowledgeable and sensitive to another's faith.

There was a letter in one newspaper recently complaining that a cow had been slaughtered in a school compound during Hari Raya Haji.

For the Muslims this commemorates the time when Prophet Abraham, on God's orders, got ready to sacrifice his son Prophet Ismail. It was a test of faith and devotion, which in the end saw the father sacrificing a cow instead, as replacement.

To mark this day, on every Hari Raya Haji cows are slaughtered and the meat distributed to the poor.

But when a cow was slaughtered in a school compound on this day, some Indian students, Hindus who revere the cow, were shocked to see blood-stained grass. They didn't want to go anywhere near the place and found it offensive and insensitive. Rightfully so.

So you see, this is why we need to learn about other religious beliefs, customs and traditional norms.

* Have you felt uncomfortable in school or college when someone knowingly or unknowingly offended your religious beliefs? Be it food, the burning of incense, or ignorance of religious practices, we'd like to hear your stories. Please e-mail us at yquake@nstp.com.my by June 25.

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