

Muslim vs Non-Muslim: A Malaysian ritual, not a debate
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While I share Scott South's impatience with this utterly banal and parochial annual ritual-debate about who has rights to the 'Assalamualaikum' greeting, I think he misses the point when making comparisons to Oman. As far as I can see this is neither a genuine debate nor a debate about Islam (and what is proper to Muslims-Non-Muslim forms of interaction).

This is a Malaysian ritual: a venting of anxieties by an ideological and cultural fragmented society. This dynamic of fragmentation produces a host neurosis and anxieties that need to be expressed with varying levels of intensity and unevenly throughout our society. This debate is just one of many instances of our cultural neuroses.

And since malaysiakini is the online portal of the anxious middle-class Malaysian liberal, par excellence, it is not surprising that this issue finds a sustained presence here. I do not mean this in an evaluative (negative) sense; it is merely descriptive of the cultural and ideological location of the site.

My own intervention in this debate begins with how we might understand the meaning of the process of 'dialogue': Dialogues, at best, assume that those involved are, collectively, trying to resolve a problem by promoting an understanding of competing positions that have been staked, perhaps attempting a consensus or, minimally, agreeing to disagree. My definition emphasises the intention of the interlocutors not their success or lack of it.

Over the years, this debate has remained static. It has not been successfully diverted it from its real core despite some valiant attempts to have a reasoned dialogue. And why have these reasoned interventions – some using history, or text-based exegeses, or contemporary comparisons – not altered the course of this debate?

I believe that this is primarily due to the fact that the debate is sustained by a discourse of territoriality – what is mine, what is yours, where we can afford to be inclusive, where we demand exclusivity and finally that residual category, which sometimes emerges in the aftermath of sporting victories, the acknowledged and fully embraced, 'We'.

How might those interested in dialogue intervene more effectively? I think it might begin when we each openly acknowledged the concerns of the others that underscore their stated positions. As well as reflect critically our own interventions. And this is where I disagree with Scott South again: this is not merely a question of how Islam/Muslims chooses to relate to others, it is equal a question of how 'non-Muslims' choose to understand Islam and the Muslim community in relation to themselves.

In Malaysia, far too many 'non-Muslims' begin from with the problematic position of the aggrieved victim-minority. It's a position, more inadequate than untrue. First because the category 'non-Muslim' is actual fact a non-existent social entity and is

best substituted by real communities or individuals such 'Christians', 'atheists', 'fellow citizens', 'artists', etc.

Secondly, in the discourse of territoriality, the 'Muslim position' is seen by Muslims themselves as 'defensive' rather than offensive in character. So much so that the accusations by others that their rights are being infringed upon seem almost counter-intuitive. This tricky defensive/offensive dynamic requires us to use a language that can broach the divide. We need a language that will aid us in recognising those points where the rights of communities seem to be in conflict.

Thirdly, there is a tendency to collapse religious categories into ethnic ones as well as ignore equally important frameworks of gender and class even when they are more productive for understanding the particular dynamics of a case. For instance, if an ethnic Indian Hindu man converts himself and his child to Islam in a battle with his estranged Indian Hindu wife. Surely questions of gender and gender relations specific to Hindu culture are equally salient frameworks to understand what is going on.

Finally, if public debate and democratic culture have any hope of deepening, we must pause, lessen the rhetoric and platitudes (albeit progressive ones) and genuinely attempt to begin a dialogue.

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