

Malaysians caught in a cultural gridlock

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COMMENT At least, we have the MRT, the biggest infrastructure project in Malaysian history, on the cards to ease the traffic jams that have been building up on our roads, particularly in the Klang Valley, over the past three decades.

But what solvents are there for the cultural stalemates we increasingly encounter these days, those that threaten to render public discourse in the country an exercise in which the argumentative appear to be talking to the deaf.

protest against seksualiti merdeka in shah alam 1Strident Muslim groups, aided and abetted by a ham-fisted police force, frowned on an annual rite of commiseration for gays, lesbians, transgender and transvestites because, they asserted, it would promote an alternative lifestyle considered repugnant in some religious traditions.

People of unconventional sexuality are outraged and their sympathisers appalled because the police have moved in to stop Seksualiti Merdeka's annual workshop on the grounds that the project is a threat to national amity.

The ban supposedly placates Muslim sensitivities, thought to have been rendered taut by the suspicion that proponents of unconventional sexuality are pushing to have their orientation given public respect.

Muslim sensitivities are Muslim sensitivities, but in a plural society they are not the only sensitivities extant.

Slaughter of cows in schools

Today is the feast of the sacrifice (Aidil Adha) for Muslims. In mosques and other places the ritual slaughter of cows is held, considered de rigueur in imitation of Patriarch Abraham's sacrifice of a ram on Mount Moriah, the seminal event that launched the three monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Ritual slaughter of cows within designated spheres ought to be no problem, even to those to whom the animal being slaughtered is an object of reverence.

But when it is held, in extended celebration of the feast of the sacrifice, in places not usually known to be the proper ones for such rituals, it hints at an overweening sensibility. Like grass overgrowing its verge, it ought to be pruned.

The NGO for non-Muslims religions, MCCBCHST, have implored the authorities not to allow the ritual slaughter of cows in schools because not only are educational institutions not the proper place for staging such spectacles, but the action itself is deemed insensitive to Hindus and Buddhists to whom cows are scared.

So authorities who earlier appeared to be inordinately solicitous of the sensitivities of one set of religious believers are now requested to be mildly respectful of the beliefs of other sets of believers.

It is just the situation for a bout of harrumphing by the Oxford don, Richard Dawkins, who is the world's most renowned atheist.

In his book, 'The God Delusion', in a few years back, he famously proposed the theory of "memes", which would make religious belief a kind of dangerous virus of the mind.

Respect for certain boundaries

But Dawkins' argument for the futility, obsolescence, and ludicrousness of religious belief is likely to meet the same fate as Marx's prediction that nationalism would disappear as a force in the world once the working class become the owners of the means of production: burial by history from much contradiction.

Because the religions are here to stay, their sensitivities are in for the long haul. For that reason, it is politic for everyone to join in the reining of the overweening and allow for respect for obvious boundaries.

But, in plural societies, the problem is that what may be obvious to the goose may not so for the gander.

Still, common sense, which only an overweening sensibility would be in revolt against, impels the respect of boundaries.

Pushing the envelope in matters of religious sensitivities is unwise. So long as sensitivities are regarded as a two-way street, their placation would not entail too much a sacrifice of sacred principle.

Otherwise, in a multiracial, multi-religious society, the gridlocks that would be engendered would be such

that people would much prefer being stalled in vehicular jams than in cultural dead-ends.

The latter would induce people to feel about others the way existentialist philosopher Jean Paul-Satre observed: "Hell is other people."

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