

COMMENT: Bridging inter-religious rift
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Jan 15: LET us be clear about this. Religion should never be allowed to tear asunder this multi-religious society of ours.

Because of the emotional power it commands, religion, more than perhaps any other form of identification, can be used and abused to generate unending tension and conflict.

Are there trends and tendencies in Malaysian society that threaten inter-religious harmony?

Every religion has an exclusive dimension to it expressed in its history and tradition, its rituals and practices, its symbols and meanings, which creates a certain distance between the followers of different faiths.

This in itself is not a problem. Malaysia like many other societies has lived with religious tolerance for ages.

The real challenges confronting religion in Malaysia are of a different order.

One, since ethnic identity is synonymous with religious identity — all Malays are Muslims — and since identity dominates politics and public life, religion has become an overwhelmingly powerful identity marker for the Malay community.

Non-Malays in turn who are largely non-Muslim do not distinguish Malay identity from Muslim identity or Islam.

Thus, negative non-Malay perceptions of certain public policies that favour Malays are often transferred to Islam even though the principles of the religion may be at variance with those policies.

Two, these negative perceptions which became most pronounced at the height of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 80s affected the world view of a whole generation of young non-Malays, many of whom are today part of the influential stratum of society.

The 80s was also the decade when Islamic resurgence — propelled by young urban Muslims with its emphasis upon an exclusive Muslim identity expressed through forms and symbols — reached its peak.

That generation is also playing critical roles in today's Malaysia.

It explains to some extent why current Muslim/non-Muslim perceptions of one another are conditioned more by antipathy rather than empathy.

Three, since Islamic resurgence has compelled the Government to create new institutions and enact new laws in the name of Islam, non-Muslims are beginning to feel that the religion is encroaching upon their space.

"Creeping Islamisation", it is alleged, is undermining non-Malay and non-Muslim interests.

There is growing anger and unhappiness over this. Even some Muslims are uneasy about this trend since certain interpretations of syariah by religious bureaucrats do not accord with the principles of Islamic jurisprudence.

Four, the massive stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims within the Christian and Zionist Right mainly in the United States in the wake of the Sept 11, 2001 tragedy has also begun to cause an impact upon the

non-Muslim populace in the country.

Since most non-Muslims do not realise that at the root of this stigmatisation is the politics of "Israoil" (Israel and oil), they have fallen prey to the often jaundiced coverage of the religion and its adherents in the mainstream media, now augmented by internet websites, which also serve a larger hegemonic agenda.

Five, if the aim of the global hegemony is to project Islam as a religion prone to violence and Muslims as congenital terrorists in order to camouflage the underlying motives of imperial power, a militant fringe within the Muslim community itself has given generous help to the hegemony.

The senseless violence of this fringe has convinced a lot of non-Muslims in Malaysia, already unhappy about various aspects of state policies, that Islam is a dangerous religion.

There is no denying that, as a result of all these forces at work — both internal and external — inter-religious ties have deteriorated in recent times.

The question is: can we reverse the trend?

Within our own borders we can perhaps give some consideration to the following measures.

One, those who care about Islam should not allow communal perceptions within a segment of the non-Malay populace to tarnish the religion's image and integrity.

The most effective way of eliminating such perceptions is for each State to ensure that justice is done to each and every community, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation.

Faithful adherence to the principle of universal justice which is at the heart of Islam in matters relating to educational and economic opportunities, social and administrative mobility, and cultural and religious rights would do a great deal to reduce inter-religious animosity.

Two, there should also be a much more concerted endeavour on the part of both State and society to eradicate prejudices and stereotypes of each other's religion.

Both the education system and the mass media have a big role to play in this.

Even today, the level of ignorance of the religion 'of the other' is appalling.

It was to foster better understanding of each other's religion that I had proposed in 1979 an Inter-Religious Council whose primary purpose would be to make Malaysians of different religious persuasions aware and appreciate the moral values that they share in common.

Perhaps the time has come for us to take a second look at this proposal.

Three, in consultation with the proposed Inter-religious Council, the national leadership should, as a matter of utmost urgency, examine in depth the various critical issues pertaining to freedom of religion, religious conversion, religious propagation, and the areas of jurisdiction of Syariah courts on the one hand and civil courts on the other.

It is no longer possible to sweep these concerns under the carpet.

Their just and equitable resolution has become imperative for ensuring inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony.

However, responding to domestic challenges to inter-religious harmony alone will not suffice.

As Malaysians, we have an obligation to try to lessen the adverse consequences of the current global environment upon inter-religious ties by making our people understand why Islam and Muslims are being demonised and how this is linked to the perpetuation of global hegemony.

The non-Muslim intelligentsia in particular should come forward and discuss and debate this important issue with their people.

It is a pity that there are hardly any non-Muslim academics or activists — let alone politicians — who are prepared to play this role.

Contrast our situation with the vocal positions adopted by Christian church leaders and intellectuals in Europe and the US against both global hegemony and the demonisation of Islam.

Similarly, there are very few Muslim intellectuals in Malaysia who have spoken out against pejorative generalisations of Christians and Jews within sections of the local media.

Neither have our ulama — with a couple of exceptions — openly condemned the deliberate targeting of civilians and non-combatants by Muslim militants which is a blatant transgression of Islamic ethics. Their silence is deafening.

It is only when Muslim and non-Muslim groups with influence and authority who are actively engaged in addressing the underlying causes of the decline in inter-religious harmony that we will begin to see a glimmer of hope on the horizon.

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