

# Enduring expressions of faiths

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*ALLAH-HU-AKBAR! Allah-hu-Akbar! Ash-hadu-an la ilaha illa Allah. Wa ash-hadu-anna Muhammad-ar-rasulullah. Haiya alas-salaah. Haiya alal-falaah. Allah-hu-akbar. Allah-hu-akbar. La ilaha illa Allah.*

(God is great! There is no God besides Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger! Come to prayer. Come to salvation).

At the break of dawn, the *azan*, or the muezzin's lilting call to Muslims to prayer and meditation, from a mosque in the vicinity is the first comforting sounds I hear for the day.

It is good to know that there is a God, and through God's Messenger, the good tidings of heaven to humankind are delivered.

As I snugly lie on my bed, I raise my own salutation to that One-God and reflect on a poignant panorama

that I had once witnessed in Palestine during the Syawal.

The familiar call of the muezzin reaches the desert where amidst blinding clouds of dust blown by the desiccating El-ghibli wind, caravans of camels march on wearily.

Then they stop, and the men leave their animals and after a symbolic ablution with hot sand, kneel down and devotedly raise their prayers to Allah.

At the same time, millions of their brothers and sisters all over the world including in multi-religious Malaysia adore Allah under the shadow of the Syawal half-moon while facing the sacrosanct Kiblat.

Back in my room, the *azan* rises in slow measured cadence to a crescendo, solemnly cantored from the top of a minaret, and then fades off with a sullen end.

The abrupt silence ceases as the birds of Gasing Hill chirpily sing their morning lauds.

I rise to a new day where I will

encounter the balming sounds of the *azan* four more times in the day. And each time, I am stilled into silence and sense my favourite psalm, Psalm 23, stirring in my spirit: "The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want; Fresh and green are the pastures where He gives me repose."

Malaysia - a patchwork of living faiths is home to scores of liturgical chorals that are as charismatic as the Muslim call to prayer.

The peal of church bells whether from the opulent Cathedral of St John's in Kuala Lumpur or the inconspicuous mission-chapel of St Christopher's in the railway town of Gemas evokes in the hearts of Christians a warm sense of nostalgia and a wave of sweet memories of the quaint and fervent *Ave Maria*.

And as I live close to the Chetawan Buddhist Temple on Jalan Gasing, I often hear the drone of saffron-robed monks chanting, and the ringing of their bells.

So captivating, so healing, is their evening vespers that one stands in awe, mesmerised by the mysticisms of the East where people seek solace in many ways. These mysticisms, in our nation, are reflected by our teeming kaleidoscopic of cultures, races and religions.

It is often a sight to behold - fragrant incense, joss-sticks, candles and the sweet redolence of Indian camphor rising heavenwards together with spiralling plumes - while indigenous clarinets, drums, gongs and conch shells raise a rendition to God.

Together with the Taoists and Confucianists, the Punjabis of the Sikh



Catholic Clergy, Archbishops Emeritus Anthony Soter Fernandez and the late Dominic Vendargon and Kuala Lumpur Archbishop Datuk Murphy Pakiam (right) share a light moment with a Muslim gentleman during a Hari Raya open house.

faith, and the Bahais and Jains - every community through rituals and offerings have for the last 50 years of independence contributed to a "national conscience" that advocates one-ness amid the diversity of multi-theism.

Registering 50 years of independence, the nation comes of age where a polite citizenry accommodates - rather than just tolerates - differences in religious pluralism.

Living with a Hindu family, each time I arrive home the first to greet me is the placid statue of Lord Krishna and every time I leave the house, it is the serene face of Krishna who bids me goodbye.

So at my every arrival, I greet "Hello, Lord Krishna" and at every departure, I bid, "Bye, Lord Krishna".

Yet in this very home, on the day I first moved in, the good lady of the house, sensing that I am Catholic, apologetically said: "I have many statues of Hindu deities, I hope you don't mind."

I was more amused than

disturbed. Pointing at the statue of the Elephant God I replied: "That is Lord Vinayagar and I know that He is the remover of obstacles. I could do with some help from Him," and she giggled delightedly.

I told her that I have the statue of St Jude and if she ever finds herself in a "hopeless state", "hope" would be instantly restored as St Jude was the patron saint of "hopeless cases". She laughed all the more.

Till today, we laugh at this exchange over her Hindu altar and the Gospel sanctuary in my room.

However, religious bigotry admonishes that a Christian should not live in a house where there are two altars.

For the record, on Merdeka Day, I will clock in eight years of living in a home which hosts two altars. Our altars are still standing and we have yet to hear the rumbling, thunderous anger of God!

Born on Jan 18, 1957, the writer is very much a Merdeka baby.

The late Buddhist Chief Monk of Malaysia and Singapore Rev Dr K. Sri Dhammanada holds a cordial chat with a group of Muslims.



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