

# Diversity makes a nation great

**T**WO important celebrations fell on April 13 - the start of Ramadan listed on every calendar, and Vaisakhi Day.

Wong and Krishna kept busy in the early hours composing greetings to Ali.

Then came a video in which Anas Zubedy extolled a noble teaching of the Sikh Gurus that we must eliminate the "lima pencuri" of lust, wrath, greed, attachment, and ego.

Zubedy, a personal development and soft skills training consultant, spends money every year advertising the goodness of other religions in addition to his own. Why is his contribution so outstanding?

That's because it is rare in Malaysia for any Muslim, Christian, Taoist, Buddhist, Hindu, or Sikh to go out of his way and extol the noble teachings of all religions.

"It is awesome," Zubedy says, "to unpack and highlight shared values as that will bring us closer to each other and to God."

It certainly is true that every religion has finger-pointed the same five thieves who must be eliminated from our lives.

Were Zubedy to go on a time machine journey back to the days of Akbar the Great who ruled India from 1556 to 1605, he would fit perfectly into Akbar's unity programme.

Akbar spent many years studying various religions and found that there was truth in all of them. He was deeply troubled by the sense of exceptionalism that had permeated most religions, with each claiming that it alone held the truth and that other faiths were unworthy to be accepted.

This sense of exceptionalism at times disrupted religious harmony and affected the national progress of India to some extent. But what if

Emperor Akbar were to ride a time machine into 21st century Malaysia? Would he be pleased?

Unfortunately no, because Malaysians have long been afflicted by the same virus of deep exceptionalism - a global virus that has lasted millennia and shows no signs of abating.

Despite Malaysia being Truly Asia, there are signs of a persisting silo mentality with religious believers keeping isolated within their own faiths and showing no acceptance of the scientifically demonstrable fact that all religions are fundamentally alike while being expressly different.

Akbar's universalism made him one of India's greatest rulers, and India went through a glorious period during his reign. It was not coincidental.

Universalism propels a nation to greatness, while exceptionalism pulls it downwards. Exceptionalism is the oldest fiction of all time.

Universalism, or the appreciation of shared universal values, recognises the importance of diversity as a way of adapting to different contexts.

A nation that accepts diverse sources of truth and has diverse teams working together produces the most innovative solutions.

Religious diversity enhances critical thinking, prompts unravelling of biases, stimulates the questioning of long-held assumptions and promotes scrutiny of facts.

When you have a discussion where everyone belongs to the same religion, groupthink dominates with strong conformance to established notions.

The group complacently accepts standard answers, and without sharp brains at work everyone mindlessly gives the nod.

This homogeneous approach can



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be disastrous in the handling of national problems.

As two sociology and management professors - Sheen Levine and David Stark - stated in a 2015 research paper: "When surrounded by people 'like ourselves,' we are easily influenced, more likely to fall for wrong ideas."

One classic example was a packed religious talk held in Malaysia three years ago where a lady asked the celebrity preacher whether it was better to vote for a corrupt politician of the same faith or vote for an honest politician aligned with an unbeliever.

The preacher replied that if she voted for a leader who was aligned with an unbeliever, God would not help her.

There is no choice but to vote for the corrupt leader who is a fellow believer, with the assurance that his sin will earn him punishment in the afterlife.

But if the setting had been a religiously diverse group, everyone could be more alert as there wouldn't be a push to conform.

The lady's question would have resulted in a healthy exchange of ideas, wider inputs, more comprehensive problem-analysis, and a better solution.

In a multi-faith setting, you have a greater chance of learning that corruption is a severe form of religious unbelief with disastrous consequences for society. You unmask the real unbeliever.

A homogeneous group and a diverse group may thus produce opposite results.

In the example of the religious talk, the group unanimously accepted the label unbeliever as being applicable to those outside the faith.

But in a multi-faith setting, the same group would hesitate to endorse

such labelling out of respect for the others, and this is the beginning of wisdom.

How can we turn our nation's diversity into a source of great strength? It is by creating a broader sense of "we" that dissolves the "us versus them" division.

We mistrust anyone whom we perceive as "other" and that is why our practice of dividing Malaysians into bipolar categories (example, Muslims and non-Muslims, Christians and non-Christians, Malays and non-Malays, believers and unbelievers) creates fatal stab wounds that will bleed the nation to death.

When people are classified into "us and them" the perception is that "they" have inferior values that may threaten "us" and hence we feel safer keeping within our silos.

It gets worse if religious preachers accentuate these fears by deepening the sense of exceptionalism that undermines cooperation between all faith communities.

We do need Akbar the Great to make a time machine visit to Malaysia and show us how to become a great nation - a nation where all the people identify first as Malaysians and only secondarily as Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus or Malays, Indigenous, Chinese, Indians.

When your identity is a segment, then your thinking is also segmented. Your life is a fragment.

Malaysia is Truly Asia. Identify first as a Malaysian and you become whole nationally. Begin your journey to embrace all that Asia represents as the birthplace of every world religion.

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