

The Vocab Of Harmony

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I was wondering when someone will bring up the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act during this war of words between pink and white. So the Institute of Policy Studies researcher who headed the race and religion surveys have done so but only in the last few paragraphs of a column published in TODAY.

“Religious organisations and their leadership should not only play the role of moral guide for their adherents. They must also ensure that society is not fractured. Peace is a crucial dictum commonplace in world religions. There are enough historical examples from all over the world where religious leaders have instigated radical behaviour which has left irreparable damage to society.

“Being aware of this, the Singapore government established the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MHRA) in 1990 to give the government powers to stop religious leaders who may instigate their members in a way which undermines social cohesion. Ideally, the MHRA should remain as a deterrent.

“It would be useful then for religious leaders to remain cognisant of the consequences of what they say or do, not just on those who have embraced their religion, but also on the others who have not.”

Woah. You know, I have often thought the Act was to prevent religious groups from encroaching on each other’s territory by over-zealous evangelisation and derogatory preaching. In other words, to prevent inter-religious strife.

Here is a reminder (?) that the Act is far broader than that. Words that could “undermine social cohesion”. Hmm. Looks like there is an automatic switch off button for religious leaders.

No restraining order has been issued since the Act came into existence in 1990 but it is worth remembering that the G has the power, on the advice of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony – to restrain religious leaders from addressing their followers on topics that the G deems off limits.

I am no lawyer but I wonder if the legislation extends beyond preventing inter-religious strife to any kind of strife that has a religious root. And what of the other (non-religious) side? I suppose there is an array of weapons such as the Sedition Act and even the Internal Security Act for the G to resort to.

Things are getting a bit tough for religious leaders. As the writer said, “religious leaders who remain silent about moral positions would betray the confidence that believers have in them”. The trouble, however, is that whatever they say in private to followers would get out, like the Catholic Archbishop’s position on homosexuality. And in the age of the Internet, views would be circulated far away and beyond, such that those who do not agree with them will feel that “the religion-inspired pronouncements are imposed on the beliefs, and possibly lifestyles, of a broad swathe of society.

The writer says that religious leaders must be aware of the “semantics” involved in putting forth a moral position for their followers or initiate a mass campaign lest they provoke confrontation. He’s clearly referring to the wear white campaign by some Christian groups although he didn’t say so. He also says there are other ways for religious leaders to “propagate their beliefs and state them plainly”, without being confrontational. I wish he gave examples. Because sometimes plain speaking IS confrontational, questions of morality are USUALLY black and white, and words that are picked too carefully end up fudging the issues that are really bothering different groups. We end up with a bunch of politically correct statements that do not reflect true sentiments which will boil over sooner or later.

I agree with the writer that semantics are important, as well the tone of language. What we need is a vocabulary that we can agree with. Like what is the difference between support and promotion, tolerance and acceptance, defence and denunciation?

In any case, the weekend has passed uneventfully with both the pink and white camps in, well, pink and white. Pink Dot organisers put their number of attendees at 26,000 – a very high number compared to last year’s already 21,000. From news reports, I gather that the white camp turned up in white for their weekend services and while the Muslims say they usually wear white anyway for the opening of Ramadan. To each his own...

But what will happen NEXT year when Pink Dot comes around again? It looks like we have to come to some kind of accommodation or consensus before the LGBT’s next big do, unless of course, the community is so spooked by what it describes the “negativity” towards the event that it decides to cancel it.

If it decides to make it even bigger, with more foreign commercial support which the religious groups keep pointing a finger at, how will the religious groups react? And if the religious groups make even more noise, how will the G react? Will we see the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act being used?

I think I shall go away during the June holidays next year.