

Miracle on Waterloo Street

A Jewish synagogue, a Hindu temple and a Buddhist temple are clustered on this street. Singapore's religious harmony has come about as a result of conscious policy, laws and institutions.

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RELIGION can promote peace between people and between nations. It can also be a cause for conflict and war. Religion has often been hijacked by unscrupulous men to gain or retain power and used by such men as a weapon against their adversaries. There are many situations in the contemporary world where religion is a threat to peace.

Let me cite a few examples.

The Buddhists and Muslims have clashed in Myanmar, especially in Rakhine state.

In Pakistan and the Middle East, Sunni terrorists have been blowing up mosques and other places sacred to the Shi'ites.

In Iraq and Syria, a group of Sunni extremists, who call themselves the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is seeking to create a new caliphate by violent means.

In one of our neighbouring countries, the Shi'ites are not allowed to practise their religion.

In Europe, there is growing animosity between Christians and Muslims. The recent shootings at a Copenhagen cafe during a seminar on free speech, and the killing of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris, are manifestations of this chasm. So too are the anti-Islam demonstrations in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

A precious achievement

VIEWED against this backdrop, the religious and racial harmony we enjoy in Singapore is remarkable.

This weekend, it will not only be the Chinese who celebrate Chinese New Year; I am sure Singaporeans of all races will also be visiting their Chinese friends.

I consider Singapore's religious harmony one of the most precious achievements of the past 50 years. We must do everything we can to preserve it.

Singapore may be a small country but it is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism and Hinduism are the main religions of Singapore. Sikhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Baha'ism have small followings. All 10 religions are represented in the non-governmental organisation called the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO).

The fact that Singapore is physically very small means that the places of worship of different religions may be located on the same street, and sometimes even next door to each other.

In other countries, such proximity could lead to misunderstanding and even conflict. Luckily for us, this is not the case in Singapore.

I often take visitors from abroad to join me in a walking tour of Waterloo Street.

On this street, we have a Jewish synagogue, a Hindu temple and a Buddhist temple dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin. My foreign friends are amazed at the sight of Buddhists worshipping at the Hindu temple and vice versa. I tell them that this is one of the miracles of Singapore.

Riots in the 1950s and 1960s

HOWEVER, relations between the followers of the different religions in Singapore have not always been amicable.

In 1950, riots occurred for several days when an insensitive British judge ordered that a Dutch girl, Maria Hertogh, who had been adopted and raised by a Malay-Muslim foster mother, be remanded in a Catholic convent, pending his ruling on whether custody should be awarded to Maria's biological mother or her foster mother.

In 1964, a procession to celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birthday was attacked by Chinese gangsters. This led to several days of rioting, arson and mayhem.

The memories of those riots as well as the one which occurred on May 13, 1969 will never be forgotten. They have motivated Singaporeans to work hard to prevent the recurrence of such unhappy events.

Singapore's state of religious harmony did not happen by chance. We got here from crafting important policies, laws and institutions which helped to promote religious harmony in Singapore.

Secularism, Singapore style

FIRST, Singapore is a secular state. We do not have a state religion, unlike Malaysia or the United Kingdom. The state does not promote religion. It is, however, not hostile to religion, unlike the communist countries.

Freedom of religion

SECOND, Article 15 of the Singapore Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and the right to propagate one's religion.

The Court of Appeal has held that it is not illegal for a Singapore citizen to be a Jehovah's Witness, a proscribed group. He is, however, not exempted from being called up to serve his national service.

In another case, the same court held that a citizen working in an educational institution is not exempted from singing the National Anthem or reciting the National Pledge on account of his religious beliefs. In other words, in Singapore, a citizen's right to religious freedom is subordinated to the public good.

Free speech and religious harmony

THIRD, in Singapore, the right to free speech is not an absolute right.

The Penal Code makes it an offence to utter words which deliberately wound the religious feelings of others. The Sedition Act makes it an offence to promote feelings of ill will or hostility between different races or classes of the population. In 2005, three bloggers were convicted under the Sedition Act for posting Web-blog comments that were anti-Muslim. In Singapore, unlike Denmark and France, cartoons which depict Prophet Muhammad would be deemed to be offensive, punishable under both the Penal Code and Sedition Act and not protected by the freedom of speech.

Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act

FOURTH, in 1990, the Singapore Parliament enacted the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. The law established the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, a body consisting of both religious and lay leaders, to advise the President on matters affecting religious harmony.

The law also empowers the Government to issue restraining orders against preachers who threaten our religious harmony.

A few years ago, a good friend who is a pastor in an independent Protestant church sought my advice. He told me that he had received a letter from the Government warning him that he would be stopped from preaching unless he refrained from attacking the Catholic Church in his sermons.

I asked him to show me the text of his recent sermons. After reading them, I told my friend that I agreed with the Government's warning and that he should stop his unwarranted attacks on the Catholic Church.

I remember that a few years ago, a Christian pastor was caught on film badmouthing the Buddhists and Taoists. The video went viral and the public response was unanimous. He had crossed the red line and should apologise. The pastor did apologise and the Buddhists and Taoists decided to forgive him.

Inter-Religious Organisation

FIFTH, I believe that the IRO has played a very positive role in the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore.

The members of IRO belong to 10 different faiths. They serve in their individual capacities and not as the official representatives of their respective religions.

The fact that they get along well, respect one another's faith, visit one another's places of worship and appear together at public performances of joint religious prayers is an inspiration to the community. They set a good example for others to follow.

In conclusion, I would reiterate my point that religious harmony is one of the most important achievements of the past 50 years. Our success is due partly to our policies, laws and institutions.

It is also due to the good sense of the people of Singapore.

Singaporeans have developed the cultural DNA to respect one another's faiths. It is unSingaporean to insult, disparage or make fun of the deities or religious beliefs of others.

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