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Giving voice to the religious

Tan Seow Hon,

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THE relevance of moral values endorsed by religious persons in public decision-making has often been debated. The issue comes to the fore again in relation to the debate on Section 377A of the Penal Code dealing with acts of gross indecency between males.

With the flourishing of diverse viewpoints that is a natural consequence of a liberal democratic society, and with greater participation by an increasingly sophisticated citizenry online and in the media, particularly in a nation in which those without religious affiliations make up only 15 per cent of the population, the ground rules of public discourse must be ironed out.

What are some relevant documents from which we may discern the ground rules?

Historically, in the Report of the Constitutional Commission of 1966, it was noted that Singapore is a 'democratic secular state'. Religious liberty is protected by the Constitution. Such protection, however, does not call for the exclusion of the views of a religious person, as that may be the antithesis of liberty.

The White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony recognises that religion can be a positive factor in the nation, providing its people with spiritual strength and moral guidance. It exhorts the religious to acknowledge the multiracial and multi-religious character of society and sensitivities of different groups, emphasise moral values common to all, respect the right of individuals to hold on to their views and not be disrespectful to other groups. Similar views are reiterated in the Code on Religious Harmony.

While the Government prides itself on even-handedness in relation to different religious groups and has noted on several occasions that its decisions may not be dictated by any such particular group, it has also consulted religious groups for their views, recognising their relevance. For example, in relation to the integrated resorts, the Feedback Unit held dialogue sessions with interested parties, including religious groups.

Given that the views of the religious may not be excluded from public debate, how can they be formulated in a pluralist society where not all subscribe to the same world view?

Of theories relating to public discourse, philosopher John Rawls' idea of public reason may be one of the best-known. In a pluralist society, Rawls suggests that citizens view one another as free and equal and offer each other fair terms of cooperation according to what we consider the most reasonable conception of political justice as well as agree to act on those terms even at the cost of our own interests in particular situations, provided that other citizens also accept those terms.

Reciprocity among citizens requires that when terms are proposed as most reasonable for fair cooperation, even while we differ on what is 'most reasonable', those proposing must think it reasonable for others as free and equal citizens to accept them.

Laws made in conformity with public reason as expressed by the majority are legitimate. By extension, decisions made in conformity with public reason expressed by the majority are legitimately made. While Rawls' elaboration of his idea of public reason and other aspects of his theory are too problematic to be dealt with here, the basic idea of offering reasons in public debate that one thinks reasonable for others as free and equal citizens to accept is attractive. The religious may formulate arguments for public decision-making by reference to reasons accessible to all, rather than particular religious texts or commands of deities (unless their veracity is further supported and accessible to all).

Anecdotal evidence, online and in conversations, suggests, however, that it is sometimes the agnostic and the atheist who are not ready for the religious to offer such reasons, or even to listen to the religious. For example, as I, a rational human being, cannot, if I am authentic, deny my religious beliefs even while I engage in legal philosophy, a few persons have wondered if a religious agenda belies my philosophical arguments.

Understandably, the atheist or agnostic may be suspicious of reasons offered by the religious, and vice-versa. Interestingly, in similarly polarising parliamentary debates over legislation relating to abortion in 1969, the then-health minister Chua Sian Chin said: 'Some...attempt to put up a facade of rationality and of being scientific by quoting excerpts from some learned medical journals in the hope of concealing the fact that their arguments spring from their fundamental religious conviction...'

Member of Parliament Ng Kah Ting then replied that they were not arguing that abortion was prohibited because the Catholic Church taught that it was wrong, nor did they oppose abortions because they were Catholics, but because they thought it was wrong and bad for the nation.

Writing off opposition as 'religious objections' was just an easy way out for some, saving them 'the trouble of examining the rational arguments' and enabling them to 'evade the very pertinent questions raised, questions which have nothing to do with religion but which have a great deal to do with the welfare of our people', he said.

The words are apposite today. With the understanding that the religious, as well as the atheist or agnostic, have a place in Singapore, every argument should be tested on its own merit, even if it is made by a religious person. This is to prevent a Catch-22 situation where if the religious made a religious argument not accessible to all, they would be silenced, and if they made a non-religious argument, they would be accused of a facade of rationality.

Surely for the future of our enlightened democracy, we would not want to exclude any of the 85 per cent of Singaporeans from public discourse.