Fault lines in our "Garden of Eden state"

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WE ARE a profoundly secular and, at the same time, a profoundly religious society.

In governance, we conform steadfastly to secular politics. But at the same time, 85 per cent of Singaporeans profess to belong to a religion. Clearly, religion forms a core part of many Singaporeans' identities and value systems even as the Singaporean identity has become stronger.

To be sure, religion and politics are not distinct and mutually exclusive spheres of influence and experience.

Even as concerns over the economy dominate, the dormant fears of possible ethno-religious conflict needed to be articulated. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's focus on race and religion in his National Day Rally speeches on Sunday was a timely reflection and exposition. Fifty years of nation-building can be undermined by a moment's folly, unleashing the primeval forces that can undermine Singapore's survival and success.

PM Lee describes race and religion as "the most visceral and dangerous fault line" in our society. This painstakingly-calibrated caution may strike some as being nothing new or perhaps surprising, given that religious identities here are assured and secure. Yet, the seeming absence of overt religious conflict here has given rise to false consciousness and complacency that racial and religious harmony is a natural state of affairs here. Religious freedom, guaranteed by our Constitution, has led to the casual comfort that one can say and do what one believes one's faith requires, impervious to others.

That PM Lee could discuss the sensitive and taboo topics of race and religion is a sign that our society is maturing. But tact, honesty, open minds and a commitment to unity are essential pre-conditions if we are to progress and if such discussions are not to tear our society apart. In this regard, the existential threat to Singapore is not religious piety and fervour per se but how increased religiosity is exercised.

PM Lee identified three potential risks of religious fervour: Aggressive proselytisation, intolerance and disrespect of the religious beliefs of others, exclusiveness through not interacting with people of other faiths. He pointed out that intolerance could be a source of deep division — not just in our society but also within families.
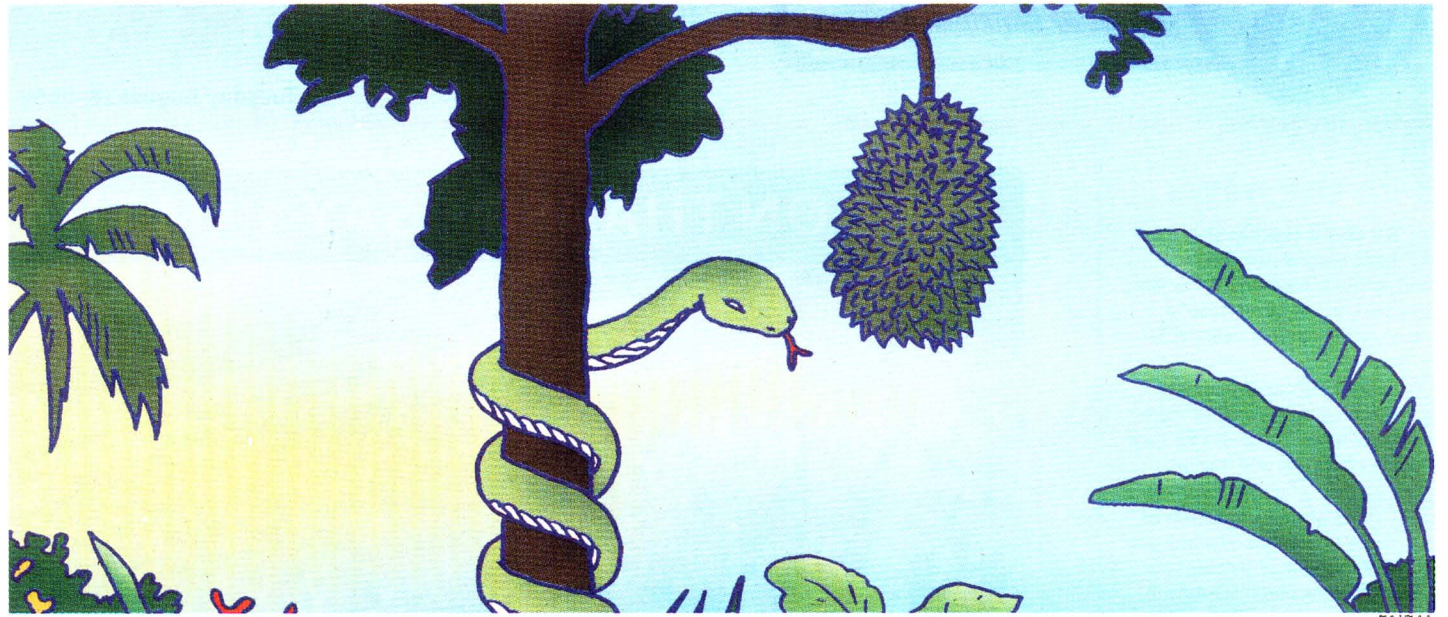
PM Lee's clarion call highlights the need for the management of race and religion to evolve from a "whole-of-government" to a "whole-of-society" approach. Governments alone cannot maintain sustainable peace and harmony. Institutional efforts to "keep God in place" are in essence a collective action challenge: How do multi-religious societies ensure religion does not become a source of friction, discord, and violence? What can societies do to foster meaningful inter-religious understanding? How can societies fortify themselves against the forces that seek to divide and destroy in the name of God?

PM Lee reiterated the four basic rules for religious harmony: All groups to exercise tolerance and restraint; keep religion and politics separate; the Government must remain secular; and preserve the common space that all Singaporeans share regardless of affiliations. The centrality of society is evident.

These ground rules are not new — they can be found, for instance, in the Declaration on Religious Harmony. But they bear repeating. These rules must embed the norms and values that entrench our shared commitment to religious harmony while also providing for common rules of engagement and conduct. Indeed, laws by themselves do not foster inter-faith understanding and engagement, and may provide a false sense of security.

We are entitled to our religious beliefs and we seek to create a societal setting that is conducive for the expression and propagation of those beliefs and values. But the key question is how do we go about achieving those goals, not whether we can express and propagate those beliefs and values.

Given that our society is becoming more diverse, it is imperative to emphasise a cooperative values-based culture and norms to meet the objectives of ethical conduct grounded in self-regulation, civic responsibility and social resilience.

Such social learning include the constitutive processes of persuasion, cooperation, socialisation, which can help us hedge against mistrust between and within communities, and between the faith communities and the Government. They attempt to regulate conduct and promote the strategic and normative goal of stable ethnic relations. Respect and recognition for others who do not share the same set of ideals are absolutely vital if we are not to allow the differences to become divisive.

As a society, we urgently need to learn how to avoid conflicts over diversity. Where we cannot resolve them, we will need to manage differences when they do occur. Norms of civility, tolerance and recognition are necessary if we are to co-exist even with people with very different values. It requires deliberate, cultivated restraint.

This is especially so when the basis of a conflict and disagreement is intractable, with starting points so irreconcilable that decisive resolution cannot be expected.

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PM Lee urged Singaporeans to maintain the 'Garden of Eden state' here. But it bears remembering that even in the Garden of Eden, as the Abrahamaic faiths believe, temptations abounded and in the garden itself were the seeds of man's fall from grace.

Then, an attitude of "live and let live" has to prevail.

Going forward, as Singapore becomes more diverse, the contestation will invariably be over values, especially those inflected by moral and religious beliefs. Contestation will increasingly shift towards more subtle forms of differences and centre on values systems, and how the support or objection to such values will be fought over.

We should adhere to the belief-action distinction. Singaporeans are entitled to their religious beliefs and, as their constitutional right, to propagate them. But actions flowing from their religious beliefs and faith practices must not offend against the imperative of maintaining and enhancing the precious mores of multi-racialism in our society.

Religion will continue to be a source of succour and ballast for many Singaporeans in a rapidly-changing world. And because religion has the power to mobilise, motivate and enforce behaviour, norms, and values, the perennial challenge is to ensure that faith communities continue to recognise and respect the virtues and imperatives of diversity, respect, and tolerance.

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