

More Discussion On Religion And Humanism Needed

The Straits Times Forum Online Story (July 26, 2011)

AS AN atheist, I am heartened by the steady growth of the Humanist Society, as well as the diverse and positive community of religious non-believers in Singapore.

Last Saturday's report ("I've no God - and am proud of it") constructively raises the profile of the young, ad-hoc society, and helps individuals rationalise their beliefs and faiths (or lack thereof) in the immediate future. However, for secular humanism to take root, there needs to be more quality, rational dialogue or debate in the public realm on religion and secularism, active rejection of baseless, counter-productive "hateism", and more religion-based discussions in educational institutions.

The closeted nature of atheism and agnosticism can have significant ramifications. First, children grow up thinking that unquestioned subscription to their parents' religion is a necessity. Second, Singaporeans struggling with their religious convictions fear labels like that of an "outcast" and emotional reprisals from their loved ones. This sense of helplessness is exacerbated by a lack of productive public discourse revolving around the theme of humanism, and how this life philosophy can be equally fulfilling.

Through seminars and sharing sessions, intellectual exchanges on religion and secularism would spontaneously take place, and this wealth of information would empower participating Singaporeans to read and comprehend assertions confidently.

Nevertheless, the organisers of these programmes and activities should be cognisant of the delicate balance of religions in Singapore.

In many American and European cities, "hateism" - or fundamentalist atheism - has manifested itself, with leading religious critics such as Dr Sam Harris and Dr Richard Dawkins consistently arguing against religious tolerance, and working towards the eradication of religions in all forms. Unfortunately, these extreme views have the destructive potential to polarise groups, especially when there is negligible interactions between the humanists and religious believers.

In Singapore, the organisation of inter-faith dialogues can bridge disconnects between religions and humanism, and correspondingly heighten levels of understanding and proper social comprehension.

Having religion-based discussions in educational institutions would be great starting points. With educators and lecturers functioning as impartial facilitators, and perhaps religious representatives as guests of honour, the academic space will give students the space and flexibility to articulate their views, and simultaneously clarify misconceptions.

If a balance can be harmoniously struck, the expression of religion would no longer be conveniently labelled as taboo, and valuable religious expression can ferment.

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