

SHARE THIS STORY

Like Tweet comment icons and social media sharing options.

CARTOONKINI



Bethlehem revisited: The sacred in the unfamiliar



Joseph N Goh 6:55PM Dec 22, 2012

O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining, It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth; Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.

As I reflect on the events of 2012, particularly on the God-rhetoric which has been reported in the Malaysian news media, I am aware that the day is fast approaching when many will once again proclaim the presence of God in the Prophet-Teacher who was born in Bethlehem.

The popular Christmas hymn 'O Holy Night' says it succinctly - the world was held ransom to sin and error, and all human existence was rendered worthless until the divine appearance restored its worth. As Christmas draws nigh, it brings renewed joy, hope, peace on earth and goodwill to all people.

Yet I find that these utopic imageries of Christmas cheer are somewhat marred by discourses that suggest an unequal distribution of joy, hope, peace and goodwill in this nation. The vision of a loving, respectful inclusiveness that Christ brought with him continues to be unfulfilled in the lives of many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Malaysians who discover themselves as they are, and decide to live as such. LGBT persons are still subjected to a diminishment of worth as deviants who pine in sin and error.

Moreover, it appears as though the only connection that can ever be forged between God and LGBT persons is either one where God peers on with punitiveness, or where God beckons recalcitrant LGBT persons towards 'repentance'.

It also dawned on me that I have sunk comfortably into expectations of seeing the transcendent between the baubles and the crèche, the carols and the midnight mass during this season. I have almost forgotten how odd it must have been for those who first encountered the holy in a dilapidated den for animals and surrounded by commoners with claims of angelic visions.

I ask myself if 21st century Malaysians might also have forgotten the unfamiliar and the uncommon in their pursuit of the sacred. Perhaps Christmas is a timely occasion to reflect on the unexpected and unusual workings of God in human lives ... and perhaps even to consider the presence of the holy in the lives of LGBT persons.

World Vision advertisement featuring a child with a white horse and the text 'Give a meaningful gift this season. Gifts of Hope. Give A Gift. Impact A Life.'

Language Professors Hate Him advertisement with a video player and text: 'Doctor's discovery revealed the secret to speaking any language in just 10 days. Watch this shocking video and discover how you can rapidly learn any language in just 10 days using this sneaky linguistic secret... Free from the computer... Free from memorization... and absolutely guaranteed! Pimsleur Approach'.

Advertise here

Advertisement for 'Eksklusif Pakej Iklan SME' showing a laptop with a Facebook ad and the text 'How to buy Facebook Ads effectively?'.

LGBT and the sacred

In our nation, LGBT persons and the sacred have long been consigned to an inimical circuit. As early as March, the Prime Minister's Department had announced its plans to curb the virulent LGBT 'problem' in the Malaysian society, which included the drafting of an 'LGBT-Mak Nyah module' and 'anti-homosexual campaigns' that were particularly directed at LGBT Muslims. It was also during this time that the Malaysian Christian-based Real Love Ministry which works for the 'sexually broken' declared that divine omniscience and predilection insisted on a disavowal of homosexual inclinations.

In April, more than a thousand people took to the sports complex in Universiti Putra Malaysia for an anti-LGBT demonstration against what was perceived as collusion between LGBT persons, free sex and political propaganda. Speakers denounced LGBT persons as those whose souls were gripped by the devil. In that same month, a workshop entitled 'LGBT Mengundang Bala Allah' (LGBT invites the Wrath of God) was held at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

The speakers made every possible effort to condemn LGBT persons as traitors to Islam and human civilisation, and made a plea for Malaysians to refrain from courting divine retribution by supporting those 'who followed in the footsteps of Satan'. In June, the Prime Minister's Department disavowed any protection in the Malaysian Federal Constitution for those whose gender identities and sexual inclinations did not conform to heteronormative dictates.

The premier of Malaysia spoke of LGBT persons as threats to Islam and the nation in July, and proceeded to exclude LGBT rights in the signing of the Asean Human Rights Declaration during the 21st Asean Summit in November. During Umno's final assembly gathering in December, delegates spoke against 'the LGBT lifestyle' which they conflated with negative ideas of pluralism and liberalism. LGBT persons were rebuked for following the 'teaching of the devil'. Enveloped by such condemnations, is it any wonder that many LGBT Malaysians remain cynically unconvinced that 'stars are brightly shining'?

A new and glorious morn

*A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

Despite its pietistic lyricism, I understand this stanza of 'O Holy Night' as offering not only optimism but an invitation to step across familiar boundaries in seeking the face of God. In pondering on what would constitute 'a thrill of hope' not just for LGBT Christians, but for all LGBT Malaysians who had grown weary with unrelenting antagonisms and diabolical accusations, I recall that Christian theologians have always abided by the notion that all of creation is unequivocally good.

"Creation proclaims outright the Creator," says Gregory of Nyssa, and Thomas Aquinas affirms that "every being in any way existing is from God." Bonaventure of Bagnoregio conceptualises all creation as likenesses and 'vestiges' of God, and Dame Julian of Norwich declares that God loved creation even before it came into being. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences echoes their thoughts within an Asian context by stating that 'peoples, their history, struggles, movements, their sufferings and hopes' (FABC Papers No. 96, 2000) are imperative in understanding how God is lovingly active in creation.

Their inspired wisdom takes on particular importance at Christmas, when the good and holy was irrevocably united with and manifested in the created order. Their insistence on the inherent godliness of every created being without exception can serve as a platform of shared reflection for all LGBT Malaysians and their opponents, regardless of religious affiliations.

It is possible to see that the 'new and glorious morn' reflected in the face of the Babe of Bethlehem did not shine with eternal disdain, but with beaming countenance on the diversity of creation and human lives. The hope of Christmas nestles in the queer occurrence of Bethlehem that first Christmas night, in which a sacred presence blossomed in the realms of the seemingly unconventional and peculiar.

This point of contemplation suggests that sin and error may not simplistically lie in Malaysian LGBT persons who attempt to be true to themselves, but in the frenetic efforts of those who condemn them without a thought that God can perhaps be encountered in previously unimagined places, including the lives of LGBT Malaysians.

[Comments](#)



MEN'S SHOP
NORDSTROM

GREAT GIFTS FOR HIM FROM CALVIN KLEIN

SHOP NOW >

FREE SHIPPING FREE RETURNS
ALL THE TIME.

Our Health Mart

Super Health Products @ www.ourhealthmart.com

Free Shipping Throughout Malaysia

[50% Off Holiday Events](#)

www.goldstar.com

Holiday Shows, Plays & More! 50% Off Tickets. Sign Up Today



Malaysiakini Account

[Subscribe to Malaysiakini](#)
[Payment Methods](#)
[Terms of Services](#)
[Search](#)

About

[About Malaysiakini](#)
[The Team](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Join Us](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[FAQ](#)
[Partners](#)







Partner Sites

[Property](#)
[Map](#)

Our Digital Network

[Malaysiakini.tv](#)
[Citizen Journalism](#)
[FeedGeorge](#)
[New Media School](#)
[Digital Library](#)
[SEACeM](#)
[Manage4me](#)
[Mobilekini](#)
[Kinibooks](#)
[Undi.info](#)

Follow Us

 [Facebook](#) EN BM CN
 [Twitter](#) EN BM CN
 [YouTube](#)
 [Email newsletter](#)
 [SMS news alert](#)
 [Mobile web](#)