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# One (colourful) nation under God, even for gays, lesbians and transgenders – Joseph Goh

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September 14, 2012

SEPT 14 — Writing primarily as a Malaysian Christian theologian, and secondarily as an aspiring scholar in issues of gender and sexuality in Malaysia, I wish to register my utter disappointment with a new rhetoric that was freshly delivered through the allied efforts of the Yayasan Guru Malaysia Bhd, the Putrajaya Consultative Council of Parents and Teachers Associations, and the Education Ministry against non-heteronormative Malaysians.

My outrage stems from a myriad of reasons – the implicit claim in the “Guidelines” that gay men, lesbian women and even transgender persons are societal “problems”, that all of them bear distinguishing muscle-flexing and handbag-totting characteristics, and that these “problems” need to be weeded out from childhood.

Most of all, my acute anxiety in this matter arises from the fact that these passionate causes are often performed in the name of, and corroborated by religion and God-talk, as manifested in contemporary Malaysian history.

Academics aptly point out political agendas, societal expectations, cultural norms and rigidities of gender and sexuality intersect with religion in a collusive effort to produce a cohesive Malaysian “identity”.

Yet many of the masses do not share the detached view of sociologists and anthropologists that religion is merely a convenient, socio-political force that seeks to regulate and control by appealing to the sentiments of the populace.

For many Malaysians, religion is a theological project, the sacred channel through which they connect with their divine personal being, and the font of meaning and direction in their lives.

I offer Anglican bishop Desmond Tutu’s wisdom that the recent “Guideline’s on identifying gay and lesbian symptoms” has become a “deeply theological issue.”

Theology is the study of God, on relationships between human persons and God, and on interpersonal human relationships as informed by this divine-human symbiosis. In our nation, theology finds its greatest expression in Islam and Christianity. With their respective theological methodologies, both religions exert great influences upon their adherents in imagings of God.

I wish to scratch the veneer of superficiality which addresses non-heteronormative issues in religion simply as men, women and transpersons struggling with their religious convictions, in which they either conform, suffer the penalties of ostracisation, or depart completely from what they perceive as oppressive regimes.

We are dealing with psycho-theological issues in a particular segment of Malaysians, whose spiritual well-being is adversely affected by the dogged insistence of the image of a Creator who monochromatically creates human beings, and in which the only valid forms of creation are uncompromisingly heterosexual.

What is constantly glossed over however, are the multiple human experiences that indicate otherwise. Malaysians have family members, relatives, friends and colleagues who have risked their vulnerability to share who they are as gay men, lesbian women and transgender persons.

Malaysians can vouch for the fact that many these persons whom they love and respect are not sexual deviants or perverts, do not all wear tight V-neck T-shirts, nor demonstrate “unhealthy phenomena”. Somehow, all these also got left out of God-talk.

Both Islam and Christianity celebrate diversity in the divine act of creation, and promote acceptance and amicability among all human persons. These noble visions have found resonance in Malaysia’s numerous visions and aspirations.

Yet the actualisation of these ideals look very different when gay men, lesbian women and transgender persons are involved. Religion, theology and God suddenly take on a deep heterosexual hue, the banners that cheer diversity lie dismally under wraps, and all forms of perceived transgressions are sanctimoniously penalised.

If Malaysia was founded as a nation that both embraces diversity and upholds the notion of God, would it not align itself more closely to its founding principles if it preached on the colourful, creative prowess of God, and taught its young the many ways of accepting and celebrating this diversity?

\* Joseph Goh reads *The Malaysian Insider*

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