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May 27, 2009

SINGAPORE'S POLITICAL ARENA

No 'bright line' between religion and politics

**This is an edited excerpt from a speech by NMP Thio Li-ann in Parliament yesterday during the debate on the President's Address**

IN A recent interview, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng reiterated that religion and politics must not be mixed. This is sound, though there are difficulties of definition as no bright line demarcates 'religion' from 'politics'. We need to understand what 'secularism' entails in Singapore for more specific guidance.

A state's attitude towards religion turns upon its model of constitutional secularism. 'Secularism' is a protean, chameleon-like term: what it means depends on the context and who is using it; it can be a virtue or a vice. It is timely to eschew glibness and examine the Singapore model of secularism with precision.

There are in fact many secularisms or degrees of secularity. This complex term needs to be unpacked.

Historically, 'secularism' originates from the Latin 'saeculum', meaning 'temporal', worldly affairs, rather than 'spiritual', other-worldly matters. The word 'secular' is an emblem of intense historical conflict.

Today, in some circles, 'secularism' connotes systematic hostility towards religion, as a synonym for a politicised form of ideological atheism whose creed is that humanity is destined to wholly shed religious conviction. The atheistic word was made flesh in the atheistic state produced by the Russian Revolution of 1917, devoted to Marx's assumption that religion stupefies the masses and must be eradicated to bring forth the new Communist Man.

The principle of secularity dates back to the Roman Empire. It derived from the teaching of Jesus to 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'. This principle of limited government opposed state absolutism in suggesting Caesar did not wield absolute authority: While a citizen was to obey civil authority, he was to enjoy freedom from state interference in matters pertaining to the worship of God. Religious liberty thus limits state power. America first experimented constitutionally with dividing sacred from secular authority, rejecting the European conflation of civil and religious power.

Senior Minister of State Zainul Abidin Rasheed described Singapore secularism as 'secularism with a soul'. This deft juxtaposing of the material and the metaphysical speaks to the cooperative relation between state and religion.

The Constitution does not forbid the state to lend financial or other support to a religion; thus we have the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore as a statutory government body serving the Muslim community.

In 1989, Foreign Minister George Yeo observed the Government was 'secular but it is certainly not atheistic'. This evinces a rejection of a thick, atheistic version of secularism.

Secular humanism, which posits a morality independent of God, is a comprehensive anti-theistic world view. Some courts recognise it as a religion. It dogmatically asserts the absence of God, without any empirical evidence. We know from elementary logic that it is impossible to prove a universal negative. Whether God exists or not cannot be proved or disproved by evidence or logic.

It takes faith to believe or not to believe in God or gods. A lot of faith is needed to believe there is no divine. As Turkish journalist Mustafa Akyol wrote: 'It is the atheist's opium to regard that unsubstantiated faith as established fact.' Thick secularism is thus an anti-religion religion.

Secular democracies should be neutral not only between traditional religions but also regarding modern religions with atheistic foundations.

What is the situation in Singapore? DPM Wong emphasised the secular nature of the political arena and how keeping

'religion' and 'politics' separate was a key rule of political engagement.

What this means specifically is that laws and policies derive their legitimacy not from divine sanction but from a democratically elected government. Law generally applies to and equally protects all citizens, regardless of race, religion or social status. Clearly, the Singapore model of secularism is anti-theocratic in that religious tenets and secular law are separated, not conflated.

While anti-theocratic, the Singapore secularism is not anti-religious. This is a vital distinction.

DPM Wong welcomed the public service of individuals inspired by their religious convictions; they also 'set' society's 'moral tone'. He affirmed that religious individuals had the same right as other citizens to 'express their views on issues in the public space' guided by their beliefs.

Religion is thus separated from politics, but, religion is not separated from public life and culture. Everyone has values, whether shaped by religious or secular ideologies; all may participate in public discourse to forge an ethical social consensus. While religion is personal, it is not exclusively private and has a social dimension which is not to be trivialised.

Thus, Singapore secularism is 'agnostic' and 'thin'. The Government does not favour or disfavour any particular religion. We practise 'accommodative secularism' described by the Court of Appeal as removing restrictions to one's choice of religious belief. Religious values do have a role in public debate.

Agnostic secularism of this sort is a virtue; it is a 'framework' which facilitates the peaceful co-existence of religions.

Conversely, militant secularism is an illiberal and undemocratic vice in seeking to gag religious views in the public square and so to privilege its atheistic values, as in communist states.

Secular fundamentalists are oppressive where they seek to mute religiously informed convictions in public debate, by demonising a view as religious.

Militant exclusionist secularism is thus a recipe for social disharmony; it feeds the 'culture wars' in the US and provokes those it seeks to exclude. It will not promote unity in diversity.

When it comes to moral disagreements and public policy, the press is powerfully positioned to promote informed debate. However the press may, by biased and selective reporting, misrepresent, distort or obscure an issue. We need to broaden our understanding of responsible journalism in Singapore, which rejects the extremes of an adversarial American watchdog and a Pravda-like lapdog, or running dog.

The feedback I received from friends and strangers on the reporting of the Aware controversy was that much of the reporting, particularly in one paper, was biased. It largely lacked a diversity of views in singing the same chorus that religious groups should not get involved in secular organisations. Some spoke of their new lists of 'fair' and 'unfair' journalists.

Responsible journalism should extend to covering a diversity of views, not a journalist's preferred view. It should include the accurate representation of differing viewpoints, and not paint the fringe as mainstream or the pathological as normal. Readers may then see all sides of an issue and decide what is true.

This is important given the near monopolistic position of Singapore broadsheets. A lawyer recently returned from London wrote to me expressing horror in finding local papers apparently had nothing better to report than the Aware saga, as opposed to the more interesting British papers which offered a lot more variety.

This made me somewhat nostalgic for my student days in Cambridge, where I could, with chocolate croissant and Nescafe coffee in hand, survey a range of perspectives from The Times, Guardian, Independent or Telegraph.