

Need for interfaith dialogue in classrooms

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AFTER 25 years of ground-breaking research on moral psychology in the West as well as the East, Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who wrote the book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, challenged the conventional thinking of individuals and groups about morality, politics and religion. He has shown how moral judgments arise not from reason but from gut feelings. Through his longitudinal and global research evidence, he wrote how different groups and individuals had such different intuitions about right and wrong, and why each side might be right about many of its central concerns.

However, my concern is the miracle of human cooperation, and the consequences of our divisions and conflicts. Often, I come across individuals who work well together for the greater good of society and the development of the nation, but, as soon as these individuals, who may be good friends or belong to the same organisation, represent a political body, they break away from each other due to political differences. The same goes for religious groups. Those who used to help the unfortunate without looking at colour or creed, are now focused on specific religious groups.

What used to be a broader sense of helping and sustaining mankind is now aimed only at those in a certain group. For a multicultural nation like Malaysia, this move is not healthy at all. We need to halt, ponder and reflect on where we went wrong. We have come a long way, from a developing nation, moving towards a developed one where economical terms are concerned.

As a moral and social researcher, I find our nation regressing where understanding of different ethnic groups and working towards the betterment of mankind is concerned. I find it disgusting when community leaders talk about helping only one ethnic or religious group. I find it more intolerable when leaders speak about helping one group more than the other.

This is where Haidt talks about the curse of our eternal divisions and conflicts. Why such individuals can change because of politics and religion is still a big question mark. What happened to their righteous mind? All religions teach ways of life, reaching salvation, completing birth and death cycles, and other aspects which prepare individuals for their final destiny. But no religion focuses only on its own believers. It is stated in almost all sacred and holy books how religious leaders showed empathy and kindness to believers of other faiths.

Yet, today, people are quick to pass comments or criticise the other side's opinion and point of view without fully considering their opinions. It is even sadder when some religious leaders do not allow their believers to even communicate or socialise with those of other faiths. They live in their own cocoon, from cradle to grave. They are happy when individuals talk grandly of their religion, but never give a thought to those of other faiths. Worst of all, they make judgments and degrade those of other faiths or non-believers.

Who gives them the authority to do so? Are they in a position to do so? With technology, we are now a globalised society and the younger generation are becoming more and more curious and rational. They do not accept faith at face value; they want to talk, argue and discuss matters of daily living.

They are looking for opportunities to relate their lives as individuals and as believers of a certain faith to the rest of the world.

Thus, there is the need to prepare platforms for interfaith dialogues, even at school and university level. Political leaders play the important role of ensuring that ethnic relations is strengthened through daily activities.

Being culturally sensitive to all ethnic and religious groups is the most essential characteristic for political heads in a multicultural nation like ours. They will be respected and accepted for being understanding towards all, rather than only towards their own ethnic or religious groups.

As clearly mentioned by one religious authority, "Let's learn to be good human beings first before we learn to be individuals who belong to different groups". It is always welcome to be different, but we have to find ways to cooperate and live as complete human beings who are special because of our rational mind and our judgment ability.

Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan,

Petaling Jaya, Selangor

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