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There's more to handling race and religion than avoiding riots.

One quality that Singapore does not have an excess of is idealism. As a country, we tend to keep not just our feet firmly on the ground but also our gaze. We're reluctant to lift our eyes to see the better society we could be. We are realists to a fault, limiting our reach to what is already within our grasp and always finding reasons not to aim for loftier goals. This mindset may be why we haven't done enough to combat the persistence of racial prejudice, or the rise in religious intolerance. We thus fail to live up to the values of justice and equality that we tell ourselves are core to our national identity.

First, there is the problem of race. Let me quickly recite the standard caveats, that race relations in Singapore are healthier than in many other societies, and that minorities can succeed regardless of the colour of their skins. But this shouldn't blind us to their lack of protection against prejudice. Employers and landlords still get away with discriminating on the basis of race. According to an Institute of Policy Studies survey, about one-quarter of non-Chinese said they had felt racially discriminated against when seeking a job or promotion. The problem is serious enough for

many to hope for some form of affirmative action. Four out of ten Malays and three out of ten Indians felt the government should give preferential treatment to minority races. Nevertheless, most expressed confidence in Singapore's freedom from racial tensions. The overall picture suggests that minorities face impediments but are prepared to live with them, because the accept the reality that the majority will always enjoy certain advantages. Which doesn't make the situation right.

Part of the problem is the government's pro-business doctrine. It does not want to burden employers with anti-discrimination laws. This is despite knowing that the main reason for American firms' world-beating competitiveness is their openness to talent, which isn't just a product of enlightened human resource policies. It's also enforced by the state through equal opportunity laws. The current chief executives of Google and PepsiCo are originally from Tamil Nadu (and the chief of Microsoft from the neighbouring South Indian state of Telangana). Their native tongue is one of our four official languages, but it's debatable whether Tamils face less discrimination in Singapore than in the US. Socially, as well, we can do a lot better. Chinese Singaporeans too easily slip into Mandarin in mixed company, as if including minorities in conversation is not worth the bother. Too many children are hemmed in by ethnic stereotypes. At a young age, they learn not to dream.

Lee Kuan Yew's views on race and genes have contributed some unsavoury aspects to our national culture. The People's Action Party must at some point correct this strand of the LKY legacy. Lee and his colleagues certainly protected minorities from the worst-case scenario of a majoritarian chauvinist takeover that would have left our Malays, Indians and others as badly treated as minority races are in Malaysia. However, he also indulged in racial stereotyping, which has helped to cultivate an environment that's hospitable to prejudice. When his belief in eugenics produced the 1980s policy prizing the progeny of graduate mothers over the offspring of non-graduates, Singaporeans were outraged and pushed back. What has lingered, though, is Lee's conviction that group differences in

school performance are genetic and therefore beyond repair. This attitude makes it too easy for society to wash its hands of the problem of lower average scores among Malays and Indians —apparently, they're just born that way. The problem with this view is not that it's impolite or politically incorrect. The problem is that it's irrational and irresponsible.

Research does show that intelligence (as measured by IQ tests) is greatly influenced by genes, and that these genetic factors shouldn't be ignored by educationists. But we also need to read the fine print. First, experts tell us that not all differences between ethnic groups are due to race; they are often about class. It's just tough for poorer families (among whom ethnic minorities are over-represented) to keep up with the boosters that the upper middle class is able to give its children. Second, experts emphasise that genetic influences are probabilistic rather than deterministic. In other words, one group may have done better than another on average, but that can't predict how any individual will perform. Third, there are different forms of intelligence, not all of which are equally influenced by genes or recognised in IQ tests (which are never culturally neutral).

Finally, even experts in the field of behavioural genetics stress that science alone must never dictate ethics or public policy. Even if there's proof that different intelligences are not evenly distributed across races, it doesn't follow that our policies should reinforce that unevenness by investing more in the genetically advantaged. That would not only be unethical but also inefficient, because it doesn't maximise the human potential available to a society. Even if nature is found to have a bigger impact than nurture, we can still choose to invest more in nurture. We take this for granted in healthcare. For example, when the Genome Institute of Singapore works out that a disease is linked to cell abnormalities that are more prevalent in Chinese, the policy recommendation wouldn't be to tell Chinese, well, too bad, it's in your genes. Rather, we would work on interventions in the form of early detection, prevention and treatment. It shouldn't be any different in education.

The genetic explanation hasn't hurt only minorities; it also

justified an insufficiently interventionist education policy, which hurt poorer Singaporeans of all races and contributed to the socioeconomic divisions we see today. Singapore was scandalously slow to make schooling compulsory, for example. Fortunately, our education ministry has made big strides in the right direction, giving students from less privileged backgrounds more time and alternative paths to develop, and offering multiple peaks of excellence to suit different aptitudes and interests. Popular attitudes to race, though, still lag behind.

Some Singaporeans believe the answer is to transcend race altogether: we should stop emphasising racial categories so much. It's true we don't stress our shared humanity enough. But closing our eyes to race isn't the answer. Most people consider race an important part of their heritage. Treating them fairly doesn't require rendering their race invisible. Furthermore, it's a mistake to think we can replace race with a common national culture that's somehow neutral or fair to all. Such projects—like French-style nationalism—end up favouring the dominant culture and marginalising weaker groups. Finally, removing the racial lens entirely would mean losing all insight into systemic problems affecting racial groups. You may suspect, for example, that a high proportion of people in your community is losing out due to discrimination, but if no data are collected by race, you'd have no way to show that a problem exists. The answer is not to bury racial categories but to make sure they are not used to confine individuals to a box or disadvantage them, which is where anti-discrimination laws come in.

A second challenge we've been too complacent about is the worrying rise in religious intolerance. Fortunately, the government's management of religious diversity has been relatively sound. We've been extremely lucky that no faith commands a majority, which means there's limited electoral incentive to mobilise voters around religious identity. We've also been fortunate that our first three prime ministers have not had any religious affiliation, sparing them from real or perceived biases, and allowing

the government to be quite clinical in its handling of religious controversies. The state has shown due respect for Singaporeans' religious identities. Religious leaders say prayers at armed forces commissioning ceremonies, for example. Singaporean secularism doesn't mean banning religions from public life, but keeping them at an equal arm's length from the state.

All religious communities know there are lines they cannot cross. One of these lines prohibits anything that would threaten Singapore's peaceful interfaith relations. Unfortunately, not even our formidably powerful government has been able to prevent the seeping in of religious doctrines that have made some Singaporeans more intolerant of different religions and sects. There are religious teachers who sell the fiction that, to get closer to God, you have to be more judgemental of others and less respectful of everyone else's equal right to believe (or not believe) as they choose. A handful of preachers expressing contempt for other faiths have been exposed via social media, attracting the opprobrium they deserve. Some from overseas have been denied entry. But it would be naïve to believe that the threat has been contained.

Some committed atheists think the problem is religion as such. But that's an ahistorical fallacy. Religious groups have been a major, even indispensable, force behind the advancement of social justice and equal rights. Quakers, for example, were at the forefront of the movement against slavery. Churches had leading roles in the American Civil Rights movement, South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, and the Philippines' People Power Revolution against the Marcos regime. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, helped ensure that the power lost by Suharto wasn't captured by Islamists; its members protected religious minorities against attacks by militants.

Unfortunately, in recent decades, a very different religious sensibility has been on the rise globally. In particular, segments of the American Evangelical movement and Saudi Wahhabism have exported a zero-sum view of faith, an us-or-them mentality that's too easily upset by alternative beliefs and lifestyles. They, like the

rightwing Hindutva movement that has captured power in India, have chosen to ignore the golden rule at the core of all world religions, that we should treat others how we wish to be treated. This is a basic principle of morality and justice: before we demand that our own values be imposed on the entire society, we should put ourselves in the shoes of everyone who would be affected. We should consider whether we'd want people of other or no religion to impose their own values on us, preventing us from doing whatever they choose to take offence to. If that scenario doesn't feel acceptable, the same verdict must apply to our own visions for a society built on our own religious teachings—unless we're able, through open debate, to sell that vision in non-theological terms that others accept.

One of our most complex challenges is how to deal with the alarming threat of Islamist terrorism while keeping a level head about our 14 per cent Muslim population. Fortunately, our authorities have always known they cannot fight the former by treating the latter as an enemy. But while our macro policies may be sensible, social attitudes at the micro level are another matter. Terrorism—by definition and by design—cultivates more panic than the objective facts justify. Part of that irrational fear is translated into unwarranted suspicion of Muslims in general. This is being amped up by anti-Islam propaganda exported by American organisations, such as pro-Israel Christian lobby groups.

Lee Kuan Yew didn't help when he identified as a danger sign the growing number of Singapore Muslims declining alcohol and non-halal food. Sure, Muslims don't aid their case when they go beyond what faith requires, like refusing to sit at the same table where friends are drinking wine, or convincing themselves they're not allowed to greet non-Muslims on their respective holy days. On the other hand, those who are too quick to criticise Muslims should recognise that rising religiosity, including in exclusionary forms, is a worldwide phenomenon not confined to Islam. There are Hindus who are turning the Brahmanic injunction against eating beef into a litmus test of religious loyalty; in India it's even become

an excuse to lynch non-Hindus. In Singapore, it's become common to see Christians invoking the name of Jesus when commenting on the prime minister's Facebook page, in a way that would set off alarm bells if they were Muslims mentioning Allah. It's only Muslim's outward piety that's viewed as a security threat.

These things go in cycles, and there are welcome signs of a reaction against recent trends. In the United States, a large interfaith coalition has emerged as a bulwark against attacks on immigrants and Muslims. US Christians, including younger Evangelicals, are trying to rescue the moral agenda from an older, intolerant Right that has given their faith a bad name. At the Vatican, Pope Francis has been a breath of fresh air, reminding everyone that the earthly role of people of faith is to bring balance to our own lives, our relations with one another, and the environment—not take over God's job of judging the world, or implementing Armageddon. In Indonesia, the government and Muslim groups are investing in homegrown "Islam Nusantara" as a buffer against religious fanaticism.

As a multiracial, multireligious nation, Singapore can't afford to be agnostic toward these competing visions for the world. We can't just accept intolerance as the natural, inevitable outcome of our diversity—que sera sera. We must choose the only path that guarantees the conditions for social peace. This is the path that gives everyone the equal right to act, love and worship as they wish, as long as it doesn't restrict the rights of others to do the same. It's about creating an environment where all Singaporeans feel at home and have a fair shot at success, removing linguistic and cultural barriers to interaction, and never undermining children's potential with our prejudices. Our government needs to take a much stronger stand against unfair discrimination of any stripe—including racial, religious, gender or sexual orientation. And we the people, even if we find aspects of Singapore's diversity annoying or threatening, should at least accept the baseline rule that we shouldn't treat others how we wouldn't want to be treated.