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The virtues of secularism

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ONE of the best decisions I made in my life was to study philosophy at the then University of Singapore. Though I had to repeat a year in order to switch courses, it turned out to be a hugely beneficial decision because it armed me with one of the most powerful weapons developed by mankind: logic.

I discovered the power of logic when I served at the United Nations. Logic travels well across cultures and languages. A logical argument in one culture is equally logical in another culture, just as mathematical truths are equally valid in all cultures.

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Cuba supported it; Singapore opposed it. Hence, we had fierce arguments with Cuba in numerous multilateral fora. In the end, what helped us was a simple rule of logic: All specific propositions can be universalised. Hence, if you argue a specific case, you have to accept the universal rule that goes with it.

(Interestingly, the principle of universalisability of moral statements was propagated by British philosopher R.M. Hare in his book, *The Language Of Morals*. Most of this book was written on toilet paper while Hare was imprisoned by the Japanese in Changi Prison during World War II. Singapore, one might say, has a proprietary interest in the principle of universality.)

I put across this simple logical argument to the Cubans: You argue that it is legitimate for the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan. The universal consequence of this argument is that it is legitimate for major powers to invade small states. If you accept this universal rule, it means that it will also be legitimate for the United States to invade Cuba.

The Cubans were mad as hell when we made this argument because they could not argue against the logic. Even the Iranians - who were as anti-American as the Cubans - told us that we were logically correct.

The same power of logic can be applied to all other disputes. For example, some members of the Anglican Church of Our Saviour have argued that it is legitimate for their members to take over the secular organisation, Aware, because Aware was supporting activities they considered to be against their religious principles. Their pastor Derek Hong was quoted saying: 'It's not a crusade against the people but there's a line that God has drawn for us, and we don't want our nation crossing that line.' He later expressed his regret for saying this.

The universal application of this argument is that it is legitimate for religious organisations to take over secular organisations if these secular organisations violate their religious principles. Let us now try a logical extension of this argument by imagining the following scenario.

Imagine that there is a religious organisation in Singapore which believes that it is immoral for teenage girls to be forced to expose their arms, legs and faces when they go to school. They say: 'There's a line that God has drawn for us, and we don't want our nation crossing that line.' Hence, since the teachers of Singapore are enforcing the rule, this religious organisation marshals its members, takes over the Singapore Teachers' Union and uses it to advocate the argument that female teenagers should be 'free' to choose whatever dress they want to wear to school. They argue that it is wrong to impose the corrupt Western school uniforms on young women of their religion.

Please note that the above is not a hypothetical example. This argument over school uniforms has been played out in France. Should we allow this to happen in Singapore too?

The people who led the takeover of Aware did not realise that they were pushing a rule that could undermine the delicate social and political fabric of Singapore. There is one simple political reality that many

Singaporeans have not fully absorbed. It is not normal for multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious societies to live in relative harmony. Indeed, virtually all the multi-ethnic former British colonies have failed to preserve ethnic harmony after gaining independence. Look at the cases of Guyana, Cyprus, Sri Lanka and Fiji.

Singapore is the exception to the rule. What principles explain its success? One key principle has been the principle of secularism. There is a place for religion in society and there is a place for politics in society. Both should stay in their respective spheres. Many societies have come to grief because religion has been used as a force in politics. And Singapore will definitely come to grief if religion enters the political sphere here. As Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng put it emphatically last week: 'Keeping religion and politics separate is a key rule of political engagement.'

This is why we should be aware (pardon the pun) that the Aware saga is not just about one organisation; it is also about the larger principles that allow Singapore to survive and not fall into the same fate as other failed multi-ethnic communities.

One reason why Singapore has done well so far is that we had exceptionally wise founding fathers. One of them was the late S. Rajaratnam. He was a fierce defender of secularism. Shortly after independence in 1965, he drafted the National Pledge, which speaks of Singaporeans as 'one united people, regardless of race, language or religion'.

One simple solution for Singapore's long-term survival is to create a firewall - a thoroughly impregnable firewall - between the religious space and the secular space in Singapore society. However, when I proposed this simple solution in the draft version of this article to my friends, I received a blizzard of comments stressing that it would be very difficult, in practical terms, to create such a firewall. I agree. It will be very difficult. But if we fail to build and maintain such a firewall, dealing with the consequences of allowing religion to enter the secular space here will be more difficult.

In some areas of life, there are no easy solutions. There may only be solutions that require vision, courage and wisdom to implement. Hence, we should not underestimate the challenges of preserving secularism in Singapore.

The writer is the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.

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