



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Secular & religious ideas

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Our previous article on "AWARE and the Principle of Participation" attracted several comments and queries. Today, moral theologian Father David Garcia looks deeper into the issue of separating state and Church.

The AWARE saga has taught us a few lessons but also left some unanswered questions. Do religions have a role to play in the public realm? Is faith an exclusively private issue?

Jesus himself said: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Does this mean that religious and social matters should be kept separate?

The history of the western world is plagued with conflicts brought about by the confusion of the religious and the secular realm. Emperors claimed religious authority and religious authorities invoked God to rule over secular matters. It took Europe a few centuries to realise that church and state are better kept separate.

After a long history of errors in mixing secular and religious matters, we have reached the point where even states that still use religious laws are likely, in time, to move on to secular states. The reason is not simply practical but one of fairness. The secular realm has its own goals and methods and this gives it an autonomy that religion should respect. By the same token, the secular law should guarantee freedom of religion and freedom in religion.

Christianity has understood the theological reasons for this mutual respect. God himself respects human autonomy. The God of Israel is the God who "left man free to make his own decisions" (Ecc 15:14) and the Church echoes this divine respect in her last ecumenical council: "God left man in the hands of his own counsel" (Gaudium et Spes, 17). If God respects human autonomy, so must the Church or any other religion for that matter.

However, in the typical pendular movement of history, we are now starting to swing in the opposite direction: from uncritical mixing to complete divorce. There is a suspicion that religions muddy the naturally peaceful waters of society, that religions bring about more conflict than solutions, and that the world would be much better without any religion at all. So, until that day arrives, the view is that we should minimise the burden of religion by confining it.

Now, then, is the time of secularism. Indeed, some have called it the new religion. The slogan seems to be "Confine religions to the sacristies of their own private spheres where they should learn to live and let live."

That attitude is a false solution. That divorce will create a kind of bipolar citizens: private believers but social practical atheists. It will end up crippling religions and depriving societies of a transcendental purpose.

Why religion

St Thomas Aquinas said that if God did not reveal himself, only few people would reach the truth, after great efforts and with a mixture of errors.

Religions offer answers that are easily accessible to most people, in an easier way and with greater guarantees. It is not for nothing that most great religions agree on the most important matters.

Of course there are also differences among them. And there has been manipulation of religion to push private agendas. But we should not blame religions for the sins of religious people. It is better to believe that there is a God than not to believe at all. The whole truth about life is impossible to achieve in this life, but the more we have of it, the better.

By understanding the transcendental destiny of the person, religions advocate a kind of human dignity practically inaccessible to a materialistic secular mentality. An awareness of a superior being necessarily fosters an understanding of equality among people that

cannot be matched by the secular version. In fact, we are witnessing today a kind of equality in which "some are more equal than others", where the absolute right to life is being compromised by the quality of life one is judged to have.

It is not by chance that this version of "unequal equality" happens in our secularised world. Where there is a lord, the rest are all servants; if the lord disappears, all will fight for Lordship. As Vatican II put it, "when the idea of God vanishes, so does the dignity of man".

On the other hand, secular ideas and criticisms help religions to be more reasonable. The Catholic Church even finds herself thanking atheist critics for helping her purify some misunderstandings in the practice of faith.

Religions have something to offer to the secular arena; but the secular arena needs to be respected in its autonomy. Both are bound to live together. Now, religions and secular institutions have similar ends: the betterment of human life. They do this with different understandings and through different means. So religions and secular organisations are bound not only to encounter each other, but to often disagree and contradict each other – and in the process improve each other.

Rules of engagement

So, if religions and secular institutions must learn to live together, what are the rules of constructive engagement?

The goal of any rules can be reduced to one word: integration.

Integration implies that the parts remain distinct but they make up a whole. Integrating religion and secular affairs entails that both respect their boundaries and autonomies through a mutual understanding of their own proper goals and at the same time they both play a role in the whole of the society making society more cohesive.

Integration is opposed to confusion where both parties interact without respecting their boundaries and autonomies.

Integration is also opposed to divorce or disintegration. It is not enough not to cross each other's boundaries. Religions do not become integrated when their believers become lukewarm.

By compromising their beliefs and practices, religious people simply send out the message that religion is subordinated to practical goals. Muslims who don't take their faith seriously send a message that their faith is something superficial. When Catholics cooperate with activities that contradict their beliefs in the name of an "inclusive" mentality, not only do they betray their own faith, they fail to exercise the role of religion in the secular world.

There is often the illusion that because this believer in a different faith does not care much about his beliefs, he becomes closer to our faith. In fact the opposite is true. A lukewarm Buddhist even if he or she converts to Christianity, would likely be a lukewarm Christian. A committed Buddhist, if converted to another religion, would likely become a committed believer. Dilution is confusion, not integration.

There are some minimal rules of engagement that should be preserved. The right to conscientious objection for reasonable matters is one of them. Not to impose particular beliefs on others would be another.

But the fruitfulness of the engagement lies not so much on respecting the rules of integration as it does on learning the skills of engagement. We will cover this in the next article.



The forum allowed representatives of Caritas Singapore member organisations to toss up ideas for meeting key social challenges.

We are Salt and Light

Caritas Singapore member groups reflect on the Church's social mission.

16,880: That is the number of people who lost their jobs last year.

Singapore faces other social problems – rising income inequality, divorce, dysfunctional families and an ageing population. We have a million migrant workers, many of whom are being sent home because of the economic crisis. The elderly, disabled, mentally ill, sick and overseas poor all need our assistance.

What is Jesus calling us to do to help our needy brothers and sisters?

Caritas Singapore held a Members' Forum on April 25, bringing together 74 representatives from 27 Catholic social organisations to network and reflect on the social situation in Singapore and the gaps in Catholic social services. The theme was 'Building a Common Social Mission'.

Social Trends

Laurence Lien, Chairman of Caritas Singapore's Community Strategy sub-committee, presented a report on the key social challenges facing Singapore today.

He highlighted the negative impact of globalisation on the poor, growing income inequality and the implications of an ageing population. The family is under serious threat due to the increasing number of broken families and the loss of moral values, he said.

Migrant workers and their spouses, the disabled, the mentally challenged, ex-prisoners and people with HIV are groups needing help. As an affluent country, Singapore also has a role to play to help the poor abroad.

Salt and Light

Father Henry Siew challenged participants to think more holistically of the Church's response to social issues. If we truly want to be the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world", he said, we should promote a social, cultural and spiritual ethos that can serve the whole human person and not just his material needs.

For example, family welfare does not only consist of economic success. Father Siew felt

that we should adjust our work ethic so that people work hard, but are not so stressed that they cannot enjoy their personal and family life.

He suggested that the Church should be a stronger voice on issues that affect the moral lives of people, such as organ trading. In this way, "the Church seeks to proclaim the Gospel and make it present in the complex network of social relations". (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, No 62)

Parts of One Body

Forum participants discussed how they could team up to better meet common goals. For example, the Catholic Business Network explored the possibility of working with Catholic AIDS Response Effort and the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry to provide employment opportunities for people with HIV and ex-prisoners. The group also discussed how to provide more holistic support for their families.

Other groups are looking at partnerships with parishes. For example, the Marine Parade Family Service Centre plans to approach the Church of the Holy Family to discuss ways to reach out to the elderly in their neighbourhood.

The forum also suggested that there should be new programmes for young parents and youth. One idea is for the Family Life Society to spearhead talks and programmes on parenting at parish level, and to serve as a resource centre for Family Life Groups in the parishes.

Participants also saw a need to work for justice in the situations they encountered, and for the Church to have better data and research resources.

As for helping the poor abroad, members felt there should be a group of experienced mission workers to offer advice and help coordinate mission programmes. To avoid "volun-tourism", there should be faith formation for mission trips, ensuring that volunteers experience personal change during the trips. Visits should also be part of a longer term project which respects the dignity of the recipients and helps them to be self-sustaining eventually.

“This was a good opportunity to understand what Caritas Singapore is doing on a strategic level and to network and share resources. Several groups formed joint working committees which will meet again to continue working together.”

– Michael Png, President, Catholic AIDS Response Effort

“Now we have a wider scope of knowledge about Catholic community services and the other Catholic organisations. We need to find common ground to work together and it is critical to have a coordinated effort.”

– Gerald Tan, President, Morning Star Community Services