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RECOGNISING THE TEACHERS OF RELIGION: SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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ONE of the suggestions in the White Paper on the arrest of Jemaah Islamiyah members published by the Singapore Government was for the Muslim community to develop a comprehensive self-regulatory system to monitor religious education and detect the dissemination of extremist teachings.

In December 2005, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), in collaboration with the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), launched the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS). The scheme's key objective is to oversee the professional conduct of all asatizah in performing their roles as religious teachers, scholars, propagators and advisors on Islam. The assumption is that such a system would curtail the spread of deviant teachings which mislead the community, create social disharmony and present security threats to the country. (Details of the ARS are available at MUIS' website http://www.muis.gov.sg/english/Asatizah_Recognition/Asatizah_Recognition_Scheme)

Before the ARS was launched, the title ustaz (religious teacher) was given loosely by members of the community on the basis of no clear criteria. This has resulted in parents sending their children to religious classes conducted by unqualified persons merely because they are known as "ustaz".

It is likely that the White Paper influenced the decision to launch-the ARS. But to be fair to the parties responsible for developing the system, the idea is neither new nor purely a response to the White Paper. It was first mooted in 1994, when the community was stunned by the news of an ustaz who married 10 women but was later charged with having illegal wives by the Syariah court in neighbouring Johor and sentenced to 25 months in prison.

Such a regulatory scheme is not unique to Singapore. Malaysia has implemented a similar one that conferred official authorisation on religious teachers to teach or conduct talks on Islam in mosques, madrasahs and in public places. The difference however is that the newly launched scheme in Singapore is not enforceable by law. Individuals who breached the system or failed to abide by it cannot be charged -- whether in the Singapore Syariah or civil courts. Nevertheless, MUIS has not discounted the possibility of making the system enforceable by law in the future.

Whether such a system is relevant in today's open and globalised world is still open to debate. But the reality is that the scheme has already been implemented. Hence, it is necessary for all parties, especially the asatizah community, to support and contribute

towards the success of the scheme. Failure could mean a degradation of the *asatizah*'s stature and a humiliating blow to the Muslim community in Singapore.

Points to Ponder

There are four points about the ARS that merit some consideration.

Firstly, it is important for all parties to have a realistic expectation of the system. Like any other systems, the ARS is not infallible. No one should have the impression that its implementation would prevent the emergence of deviant or extremist teachings, and that there would be no more "black sheep" among the *asatizah* community. In reality, the *asatizah* whom the ARS targets are not immune to errors of judgement. There have been cases where *asatizah* were charged and sentenced in court for criminal acts. There will always be room for improvement and the emergence of any black sheep in the future should not be blamed on the failure of the system or of the community to overcome extremism from within.

Secondly, the ARS should not distract all parties from the importance of personal integrity and values such as honesty as the means of self-control in the *asatizah*'s professional conduct. Indeed, there is nothing more effective in controlling an individual than his own sense of integrity and good values. A highly educated scholar in Islamic knowledge who is not sincere to himself, God and His teachings could easily be swayed when faced with temptations. In contrast, an individual who is honest, though less educated, would be more careful in offering religious fatwa or opinions. When unsure, the latter would consult a more knowledgeable person for guidance. Therefore, the emphasis on personal piety, integrity and good values as part of the professional conduct of the *asatizah* should be given more weight than legal enforcement of the ARS.

Thirdly, history has shown that the development of Islamic religious sciences and the tradition of early Muslim scholars were very much a civil movement based on openness and cherished diversity. Indeed, they served as catalysts for the development of intellectual activity in the Muslim world. Such movements-led to the emergence of various sects in Islam such as the Muktazilites, the Kharijites and the Shiites, which challenged the mainstream Sunni school.

During the classical era, Muslim scholars in pursuit of intellectual endeavour rarely used legal enforcement or political influence against what they perceived to be competing or deviant ideologies. Often they were subjected to various types of pressures, jail and torture for the ideas that they stood for. But when faced with opposing or destructive ideologies, classical Muslim scholars observed what the Quran has enjoined: "Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and argue them in ways that are best and most gracious." (The Quran, 16:125).

The result was an invaluable intellectual heritage produced in voluminous books and manuscripts. Discourses were offered to counter arguments while books were written in response to other published books. One such example is Al-Ghazali (also known in the West as Algazel) who wrote *Tahafut Al-Falasifah* (Incoherence of the Philosophers) to counter the influence of Greek philosophy in Islamic theology. He was then rebutted by Ibn Rusyd (or Averoes), a scholar from Andalus (Spain) who wrote *Tahafut At-Tahafut* (Incoherence of the Incoherence) specifically to respond to Al-Ghazali's work.

In trying to overcome the problem of deviant teachings and misinterpretation of Islam in Singapore, the religious authority should not quickly or conveniently resort to the ARS. Its existence should not blunt the intellectual capacities of the *asatizah* and Muslim scholars in defending the correct teachings of Islam. Also, the ARS must not be seen as a tool to limit the space and freedom of expression of non-mainstream views.

Resorting to the use of discipline or revoking the title of “ustaz” from a person would not stop the influence of ideas from various “scholars” outside Singapore on local Muslims. In today’s context, there is no better alternative in dealing with competing ideologies than by upholding the tradition of the classical Muslim scholars.

Fourthly, the ARS was designed to ensure that only a qualified person can adopt the title of “ustaz”, conduct religious classes and become a reference point for religious queries. It was not directed at producing a homogenous community of *asatizah* in Singapore. The ARS can never stop differences and divergence of opinions among them.

However, there is a need to ensure that differences, such as those between the Sufi and the Wahhabi or Salafi orientations, would not result in disharmony of religious practices within the community. Otherwise, the public may become confused and divided, thus negatively affecting the image of Islam, the *asatizah* and the community.

Ensuring harmony in religious practices, which the ARS attempts to achieve, is not simply a matter of reigning over the “black sheep”. Instead its success depends on how the *asatizah* manage and live with the differences and diversity among them. To ensure this, it is important to observe the ethics of disagreement as propagated by the early Muslim scholars. These ethics should not be forgotten; indeed they must be continuously cultivated and respected.

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