

ISLAMIC RESOURCES TO EXPAND COMMON SPACE

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Thank you for the kind introduction. Much has been said in this symposium, and much more has happened out there in very recent times to keep all of us thinking hard on issues that concern us all. These conversations have never been more urgent. And I hope my paper can humbly contribute to these conversations in a meaningful way.

I believe we are not using the term "common space" in the physical sense. In other words, we are not talking about the place and time in which different religious and ethnic communities come together to do something collectively. This is partly because the notion "common space" transcends physical activities and has a much deeper significance. It refers to, in the first instance, aspirations and dreams or goals which are common across different communities. There is a consensus, explicit or otherwise, between them on what these aspirations are, and each agrees to strive towards achieving these aspirations. The notion "common space" also symbolises a deep-rooted desire to forge a shared identity - an identity that offers the individual meaning and that celebrates the individual and endows upon him or her a strong sense of belonging - such that the

individual is driven to contribute towards the common good that benefits all. This impetus, driven by the shared identity, is powerful enough to overcome any need for isolation that may arise out of a fear of losing a part of oneself - whether it is one's religion, language, culture, history, or even destiny.

This sense of a "common space" is explained well by our Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, in a National Day speech in 2009, when he spoke on the resilience and confidence of the Singapore Muslim community in responding to the events of September 11:

"Instead of feeling dispirited and psychologically "under siege", you resolved to become stronger. Instead of withdrawing, you reached out to engage other communities. Instead of becoming confrontational, you adopted an open and adaptive approach."

Ladies and gentlemen,

I do not think anyone here disputes that it is a basic human desire and right to want to live in peace and harmony in our families and society. I believe that all religions agree on this need and aspire to make it a reality through its teachings and doctrines. Allow me to illustrate this from the Islamic perspective. There is whole host of scriptural references that attest to the "common space" imperative. Among these are:

1. The Quran says in Chapter 49, verse 13:

O you mankind, surely We created you of a male and a female, and We have made you races and tribes that you may get mutually acquainted. Surely the most honourable among you in the Providence of Allah are the most pious; surely Allah is Ever-Knowing, Ever-Cognizant.

2. Again in Chapter 30, verse 22:

And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for men of sound knowledge.

3. Chapter 7, verse 199 of the Quran:

Be tolerant, enjoin what is good, and turn away from the ignorant.

In this verse, the word al-'urf is used to indicate what is good. Al-'urf refers to the conventions and customs upheld by a particular society. Muslims are enjoined to promote them as long as they do not stand breach of the provisions of their religion.

4. Chapter 10, verse 99, the Quran says:

And if your Lord had so decided, surely all those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them; will you then force men till they become believers?

5. Prophet Muhammad says:

All creatures are God's family, and God loves them most who treat his family well and kindly.

(Narrated by Bayhaqi)

6. Prophet Muhammad says:

The best of people are those who bring most benefit to others.

(Narrated by al-Qudha'i)

7. In another narration, Prophet Muhammad says:

Love for the people what you love for yourself and you will be a believer.

Be kind to your neighbour and you will be a Muslim

8. Imam Muslim narrated that the Prophet says:

Verily I saw a man enjoying himself in Paradise because he cut down a tree that used to harm people.

The above largely concern the imperative of physical coexistence. I would also like to bring your attention to what we could call an intellectual "common

space” that once existed ever so vibrantly in the Islamic intellectual tradition at the height of its scholarly contributions to the human civilisation. In this “common space”, scholars interacted with ideas that came from other streams of scholarly and religious traditions, but they found a common ground and powerful convergences in intellectual thought. There was something subtle, and perhaps given less attention, that had allowed this explosion of intellectual thought in a common realm to take place. I would argue that it is their thirst for solutions for the problems of society, whether medical, or technological, or philosophical, and aided by a profound sense of confidence to interact with figures and ideas foreign to their tradition.

These are just several examples in Islamic scriptural sources, which together with historical records, clearly suggest that Islam, like all other world religions, aim to develop a productive and prosperous life for its followers, in the context of the diversity of human societies. We can thus see how forging a "common space" became a religious obligation as it was critical in developing a sense of community, confidence, acceptance and mutual respect, so that humans could live together, despite their differences.

This should make religion as a powerful resource in enriching further the “common space” in any pluralistic society. In this regard, the potential for religions to do more is huge. Whilst religions have clear differences in terms of

belief systems, practices and rituals, there is a significant convergence in terms of the values that they seek to impart. And it is this commonality that can define and shape the norms that are instructive for a pluralistic society. In this instance, the “common space” is not only fostered by religious communities because it is a core part of their religious teachings, but gives the needed assurance to the non-religious that religion is positive - that it will not come in the way of expanding the "common space" for all. In the case of Islam in Singapore, the Muslim community here discussed this approach particularly in the context of the Singapore Muslim Identity initiative in 2004, as Minister Shanmugam noted in his address yesterday. Together with community and religious leaders, a list of attributes desirable for religious life that suits itself with the context was suggested. Among others, they include being religiously resilient, inclusive, contributive, adaptive and progressive. Over a decade now, these values have been upheld in all facets of our local religious life. In addition, these values are documented and discussed, so as to serve to remind and guide us always in our efforts to ensure that religion and its manifestations remain developmental and constructive.

However, some may remain skeptical about the role of religion - and continue to be doubtful, if religion actually preaches isolation, and thus, reduces the “common space”, if not rejecting it completely. This doubt is not unfounded, because today, instead of an expansion of the “common space” which should be

intuitive given that the world has become more and more borderless, the opposite is taking place: the internet has facilitated the promotion and spread of exclusivist and isolationist tendencies and teachings by certain groups and individuals.

This is a serious cause for worry. In some extreme cases, isolationist tendencies with the potential to fragment societies are not limited to the rejection of certain thought, cultural practices or beliefs, but go so far as to deny the right of others to exist. This is extremely dangerous, and totally unacceptable. Such is the case with the perpetrators of terrorist activities who cloak their crimes with twisted religious arguments.

In the case of such groups, I do not think that the clear and constructive religious resources and narratives on the "common space" are lost on them or even unknown to them. This is simply unfathomable, because the scriptural and historical references, some of which I have mentioned earlier, are abundant and easily accessible. At the very least, Google has made many things possible, and Wikipedia even more so. In fact, I am confident that these are the kind of messages and narratives that have a lot of airtime in our mosques, churches, and temples. In sum, religious communities are well attuned to a common doctrine that advocates peaceful coexistence and shared values for humanity.

This being the case, it will not help if we take the approach of increasing the number of pro-“common space” narratives in the marketplace of ideas. I do not think we should spend time to find more evidence and textual resources to justify the need for “common space”, whether scriptural or historical, as if these individuals do not already know. Because such individuals and groups may already have their own arguments to negate the need, and to reject the idea. We then end up with a meaningless debate and endlessly quibble over whose evidence is stronger, which will only lead to more confusion. The prejudicial approach of some groups will only bolster their resolve to reject the notion of a “common space”. To this end, they will only pick and choose scriptural references and appropriate these to support their position.

Yes, as students of Islamic texts, we cannot deny the existence of texts and references that may appear to contradict each other. This is a challenging fact that every student of Islamic thought encounters. But this is a hazard that is associated with the dynamism of religion, which not only lay down the foundations of a belief system that aims to serve all times, but also sets out guidelines and ethics of life for both individuals and societies. Because the world continues to change, and human life evolves and is far from being static, likewise religious narratives will necessarily be varied to accommodate the different contexts. Muslim scholars have acknowledged this fact and came up with a dictum that says “Religious texts are limited and issues are ever

evolving”. The challenge for faith communities is to identify the type and nature of scriptural references and religious texts; which ones are immutable as they form the core principles and beliefs of the religion, and which ones are context-specific and serve as exceptions to the norm. Confusion often sets in when texts which only apply in exceptional circumstances, or contingent upon specific and unique contexts, become normative for all times and places. On the other hand, those which form the principles of religion are dispensed with, because they are considered as no longer relevant. This is something that the religious scholars among you may need to reflect upon.

I have spent much of this paper on textual resources in religion. But I wish to end with another type of resource that we could collectively consider and subsequently debate. I think we ought to think of institutional resources for expanding the “common space”. It may sound paradoxical, that institutions unique to a religion and serve the religious needs of a community can contribute to the “common space” of pluralistic societies. In the case of Islam, consider the roles of mosques and madrasahs. Yes, these are primarily places for religious worship and instruction that directly serve the needs of the Muslim community. But they too have the immense potential to expand the “common space” by contributing towards a deeper interfaith understanding and relations, and by

offering various other social and communal activities in which others could be a part of.

This is actually not unprecedented in the history of Islam. According to the Muslim tradition, in the year 10 A.H. (631 CE), the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) received a delegation of Christians from Najran in Medinah in his mosque. They prayed in the mosque facing East, as they followed Byzantine rite. I am not suggesting that we turn mosques into churches or temples, or otherwise, but these institutions can offer space for communities to understand each other a lot better. Whilst such activities have been done successfully in the context of Singapore, I think the cognitive shift needs to be made to consider expanding the “common space” by leveraging religious institutions, without compromising their sacredness as centres of religious life, nor diminishing their uniqueness and primary functions to their respective communities. In our respective institutions, we ought to foster a sense of bonding with other communities, to nurture respect and love for humanity and fellow citizens, to deepen what one may refer to as the “emotional common space” between us. This ought to be a key component of our religious curricula. For example, we should not let racial or religious biasness, nor geo-political and regional conflicts, and especially crimes of terrorism and violence, to destroy the big heart that the Singaporean society has developed in the last 50 years together towards one another.

Friends,

In conclusion, I think it is fair to say that as leaders of faith communities and institutions, we do not need further convincing that the task to develop and expand the “common space” is a very critical and urgent one. However, we need to leverage the resources which already avail themselves in our traditions and harness these to protect the “common space”. In so doing, we may encounter notions, concepts, doctrines, and historical records that may pose a challenge and cast doubts on the efforts. Our task will be to explain all these very clearly so that our communities remain guided in their religious life with a constructive ethos and common vision to live as one harmonious and successful Singaporean society.