‘Dialogue is best’ to surmount religious barriers

Tolerance is not enough, say panellists at forum; Singaporeans should learn more about other faiths

By T. Rajan

A CATHOLIC friar, a Hindu priest, a Christian, two Muslim academics and a Buddhist counsellor spoke with one voice as they spread the message that dialogue is the best way to overcome religious differences.

The panellists at a closed-door forum organised by the Singapore Management University (SMU) also urged Singaporeans to do more to better understand other religions, and not just exercise tolerance.

The forum, entitled In The Name Of Religion, was SMU’s inaugural discussion to mark the International Day of Peace yesterday.

Two of the panellists also addressed the controversy surrounding recent remarks about Islam made by Pope Benedict XVI.

Dr Syed Farid Alatas, an associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, told reporters later that it was time to move on.

“It’s not productive to keep harping on this issue,” he said.

Muslims here may have felt strongly about the issue, Dr Alatas said, but the more important matter is “continuing the good relations with the Catholic community in Singapore”.

From his regular discussions with Catholic leaders in Singapore, he was confident the Muslim community’s excellent ties with Catholics here were set to continue.

Mr Yang Razali Kassim, senior fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, agreed.

He felt that Singaporean Muslims had moved on following the Pope’s apology earlier this week, in which he said he was “deeply sorry” after quoting a 14th-century Byzantine emperor who claimed that Prophet Muhammad brought “things only evil and inhuman”.

But Mr Yang Razali added that the “comments were serious given the stature of the Pope”. The speech could have been more carefully crafted, avoiding the controversy altogether.

Other speakers at the forum, attended by about 100 SMU staff and students, included the Hindu president of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Mukirtirupananda, and Friar John Wong of the Catholic Franciscan Order.

With them were Professor Simon Chan, a Christian from Trinity Theological College, and Ms Yap Ching Wi, a Buddhist who works with the youth ministry of the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery.

SMU accounting student Tan Kuo Shiong, 23, a Buddhist, said he was not well acquainted with other religions and the forum was an eye-opener to the various religions in Singapore.

“No it will be easier for me to talk to people from other religions, to see what we have in common,” he said.

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