Multi-cultural harmony is not just about tolerance

by Shashank Nigam

IHAD is an inner struggle of good against evil in the mind.

We hear in the media about jihad as being the physical struggle, but it is just one of the five kinds of jihad, a struggle in the cause of God.

I did not learn this from the Quran, but at an iftar (breaking of fast) dinner I attended on the Carnegie Mellon University campus last week.

This bi-annual event was organised by the Muslim Students’ Association.

And all non-Muslims, faculty members and students alike, were invited to join the evening prayers and the breaking of fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

There were insightful presentations about Islam throughout the dinner, and I felt enlightened after the event.

I wish I had such an understanding of the religion earlier.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently announced the formation of a new National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony that will involve leaders of the main religious groups here and key community leaders.

This announcement was made when he opened a Harmony Centre in Bishan, which aims to promote inter-religious dialogue and explain the true teachings of Islam through activities and seminars.

Coming from a government that has fostered racial harmony through many policies — including integrating the population in HDB estates — this is a welcome move.

However, I feel that Singapore has now matured as a society and to grow further, it is time to immerse ourselves in one another’s cultures, and not merely be tolerant.

Inter-cultural immersion efforts have to begin at the grassroots level, beginning with students. This will ensure that the efforts reach the masses, at a young and formative age.


This is even more of a reason for the newly set-up Harmony Centre to design a cultural programme for students that is truly experiential.

A Chinese New Year celebration should not just end with concerts and exchanging of oranges, but should allow non-Chinese students to, say, accompany their friends to a reunion dinner.

On Deepavali, non-Hindu students should have the chance to join their Hindu friends’ families to light up lamps, for example.

Did you know that the largest Thaipusam celebrations take place in Singapore and Malaysia, and not in India?

Immersing students deeply into one another’s cultures will not only provide them with a greater understanding of fellow Singaporeans’ lifestyles, but also allow them to think through and analyse racially-sensitive issues with maturity.

In an increasingly globalised world, they will grow into culturally-responsible adults who are sensitive to the views of the people they meet, and embrace diversity.

Earlier this week, The Malay Language and Cultural Club (MLCC) at the Singapore Management University organised an iftar dinner that was open to all students.

Imagine the impact if such events were organised in all schools in Singapore, open to all students, and this process is institutionalised by the Government.

Recently, I was surprised to find out that one of my Hindu friends has been fasting for Ramadan. When I asked her why, she replied that she wanted to know how her Muslim friends feel during this month.

Now that is true cultural understanding, not just tolerance.

So let’s take advantage of living in a multi-cultural society like Singapore, and gain a deeper understanding our fellow Singaporeans.

The writer is a final-year student at the School of Information Systems at SMU, currently on an exchange programme with Carnegie Mellon University in the US.