

# Grace for the Day

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## Does Religious Harmony Affect Our Witness? (Part 1 of 2)

By Rev. Peter Eng

### Preamble

When I was in Singapore recently, after a long absence, I noticed my Yahoo Singapore search engine showing "Rony Tan" as the top search topic. "He must be some local star," I thought. It turned out he was the pastor of a large church in Singapore, and the interest lies in some remarks he made about Buddhism for which he later apologized. His name as the top search engine item tells me Singaporeans are concerned with the issue of religious harmony, or of the government's handling of religious harmony, or both.

This is a subject close to my heart, so I will weigh in on it. I guess that makes me the fool who rushes in where angels fear to tread. (Alexander Pope)

In 1992 the Singapore government passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA). This Act gave the government: the right to decide when a religionist is speaking in a way that is contrary to religious harmony; and the power to censor or censure such persons. That religionist, so censured, has no recourse to the court.

If the reports I read are correct, the MRHA has never been used, to date. The presence of the Act which confers on the government sweeping powers may be such a big stick and most cast a wary eye and exercise self-censorship. It also suggests that the Singapore government has been judicious in its application, and reinforces the classification of the government as a benign dictatorship.

The very presence of MRHA can be intimidating. When I mentioned my intention to write on this subject, I received a chorus of warnings from well-meaning friends. But I think better of the Singapore government. Surely the Singapore government does not gag people from addressing a sensitive topic.

Let me assure my friends that I am in fundamental agreement that we should exercise our faith in such a way that it does not create religious discord in the community. In addition, I believe the Bible urges Christians to propagate the Gospel with sensitivity. I shall demonstrate this in our discussion that follows.

My concern is that there is a necessary offense when we engage in soul winning, and recent events can cause us to choose between (1) evangelize and offend or (2) do not offend and so do not evangelize. There is a better and more powerful way given to us in the Bible.

### The Politics and Religion of It

The Bible supports the non-offensive propagation of the Gospel, but this does not mean it supports the MRHA. Let me use a parallel to illustrate. Christians subscribe to the need to honor our parents, and Asian customs strongly advocate filial piety. There is a law in Singapore that enforces the responsibility of children towards their parents. The law cannot promote this value, but it can call to account those who fail to take care of their parents. A person can take the view that this law is unnecessary even when s/he is a very filial child. We can disagree with the need for, or presence of, the MRHA, but agree with its objectives. My

discussion here today is limited to the objective(s) of the MRHA, which I find to be quite similar to the biblical value to be inoffensive in our witness for Christ.

The Bible teaches an effective and non-offensive witness. This stands apart from the MRHA which is viewed as coercive and has a social purpose quite different from the teachings of the Bible. The Bible teaches non-offensive witness because it is effective. The MRHA requires the non-offensive practice of religion to ensure harmony in a pluralistic society.

### **Necessary Offense**

There are aspects of our faith that can be naturally offensive. But this offense is culturally conditioned. In the early days of the church, the message of a crucified savior was "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks" (1 Cor 1:23). The Jews could not accept a crucified Savior. It is even offensive to say that God will send the champion of Jewish interests to be crucified. While this may not offend the Greeks, they found it plain stupid.

In Acts 7, Stephen explained to the religious leaders that it was God's interest to extend beyond the Jewish people and the Jewish nation. This may seem like a congenial message about God's universal acceptance to us. But his listeners, who prided in their exclusive relationship to God, flew into a rage and stoned Stephen to death! The point is simply this: in different social contexts, different aspects of the Gospel can cause offense to the listeners. We cannot always avoid offense in the content of what we believe.

Muslims today can be offended by us because they accept Jesus as a prophet of God, but we do not accept Mohammed as a prophet of God. We can also take offense because Muslims falsely say that the text of the Bible is corrupted without producing any credible evidence. Universalists like Hindus, Buddhists and New Agers find it offensive when we say that Christianity is the only true faith. Muslims, however, understand why we make that assertion, and stand with us in our belief

that faith is not mere subjective experience but what is perceived as true. Christians stand with Hindus against Muslims in advocating greater tolerance for those with whom we disagree.

Each religion has a set of values and we are not under obligation to modify them to make them less offensive to others. The need for social harmony does not require such religious compromise.

### **Unnecessary Offense**

From time to time, Christians forget the need to be gracious. The triumph of the Gospel around the world is not triumphalism.

In the OT, Yahwism was the official religion of the Jewish people. We see court prophets engaging corrupt kings and their courts, criticizing and admonishing them. This can give the impression that we are to do the same today. My view is that there was a fundamental shift when Jesus came. God's community of people was no longer limited to Israel. God's people now engage all nations. God's people shift from the earlier agenda of creating a godly nation to making all nations more conformable to God's character.

The last of the OT prophets was John the Baptist. He openly denounced the immorality of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee, who stole his brother's wife. Herod Antipas first arrested and later beheaded John (Matt 14:3-11). This was completely consistent with the role of OT prophets who were called to confront the immorality of kings in the attempt to create a holy nation.

Jesus related to Herod Antipas quite differently. Jesus did not see the need to reprimand Antipas' immorality. When Jesus was warned that Antipas wanted to kill him (not sure if that report was true as it came from the Pharisees who did not like Jesus), Jesus responded with an enigmatic reference to his impending death in Jerusalem (Lk 13:31-35), and proceeded to avoid Antipas. Antipas would later meet Jesus in Jerusalem when he sat in judgment over Jesus, but Jesus refused to talk to him (Lk 23:8-11).

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ completed the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. Thanks to the account in Acts where Luke the author related many interactions of the first witnesses to the Gospel, we can reconstruct a pattern of behavior on how the early Christians related to other religions and to the temporal powers.

The ministry of the Apostle Paul, as apostle to the Gentiles, is instructive for us. He engaged other religions and the Roman imperial administration.

**Next Article:** An in-depth study of Paul's interaction with other religions and with the Roman authority. This study will enable us to formulate our own understanding of religious harmony in a pluralistic society under a non-Christian government.

### Preview of Lessons from Paul in the Next Article

One of the first places Paul evangelized was South Galatia. There he and Barnabas healed a man in the city of Lystra. The people tried to sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul thinking they were gods (Ac 14:11-13). Their action tells us Barnabas and Paul did not spend their time condemning their gods before this event. Otherwise, the misunderstanding could not have occurred.

Paul tried to stop them saying: *"Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. <sup>16</sup>In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; <sup>17</sup>yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good — giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy." <sup>18</sup>Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them."* (Acts 14:15-18, NRSV).

The tenor is clearly the exposition of the true God rather than a castigation of the pagan gods. The only term used to describe what the Lystrans were doing was "worthless

things" (Gk: mataios). This can refer to the gods, but more likely, to the sacrificial activity that Barnabas and Paul were declining. The term can mean "worthless" (also NIV); "vain" (KJV, NASB), "unreal" (Weymouth), etc. In the OT, the Hebrew equivalent of "vain," repeated so often in Ecclesiastes, also carries a strong sense of that which is transient. Paul used a term that was true but not unnecessarily offensive. He did not say what they did was nonsense, false, evil, or any other stronger term. Could the Lystrans be offended by the term mataios? Yes. There was, however, the reality that Paul was trying to share the truth with them. The term mataios (worthless, vain = empty, unreal, or transient) is a term that avoided offense without compromising truth.

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**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.