

MY THOUGHTS

Let youth lead interfaith efforts on campus

■ BY WAI KIT OW YEONG

RECENTLY, the Web was abuzz with comments regarding the insensitive remarks made about Buddhists and Muslims by the National University of Singapore Campus Crusade for Christ (NUS CCC) on its website and on posters placed on campus benches.

In response, the university has ordered the group to cease all activities on campus.

As the university has reiterated, freedom of speech does not give any religious society the right to spread messages that denigrate other faiths because this leads to hatred and intolerance.

NUS CCC has since apologised for any distress caused.

While the issue seems to have subsided, a few friends from the interfaith community have told me their concerns about the possible repercussions of this incident.

They are concerned that there may be a backlash from the university authorities – that is, surveillance on student religious societies will be stepped up.

My friends worry that the publicity materials of campus religious groups will be increasingly censored. This would curb the freedom to publicise activities that the groups currently have.

Yet, if student religious groups can show that they can manage this incident themselves in a responsible manner, they can convince the university authorities that there is no need for further restrictions and controls.

They can demonstrate that offensive statements are not normative of faith communities, and that faith groups have the courage, determination and means to conduct their affairs sensibly.

Active inter-religious dialogue from the bottom-up is far more effective in cultivating harmony than top-down regulation. Youth advocates for interfaith cooperation must take the initiative to engage their peers, whether through campaigns or dialogues.

Already, several student religious groups at NUS are stepping up to the plate. For instance, the Buddhist and Muslim societies on campus have recently concluded successful “Buddhism Awareness Week” and “Islamic Awareness Week” publicity campaigns respectively to address misconceptions about their faiths.

These campaigns involved poster displays and public talks as well as other activities, with group members reaching out personally to students across the university.

Judging by responses on social media like Facebook, there have been no complaints about the campaigns, and the groups have in fact received positive feedback from students for their efforts.

The NUS Muslim Society and NUS Varsity Christian Fellowship are also making plans to conduct a joint dialogue for their members, so as to nurture personal friendships and forge deeper ties between the two groups.

NUS Interfaith, an interfaith group on campus, is certainly doing its part in facilitating the discussion process. The group is organising a programme called “Faith Firsts”, consisting of sharing sessions between students and local religious leaders. These sessions aim to raise awareness about religions in Singapore.

All these activities are student-initiated and counter the assumption that young people are too blasé about interfaith relations to make a difference.

Such efforts can ease fears that increased youth religiosity is detrimental to a secular society, and instead provide the assurance that young Singaporeans are equipped to discuss sensitive topics as mature individuals.

Let our interfaith activities speak for themselves. In this way, we can gain the respect of the student population at large, earn the trust of the university authorities, and show that we need no extra supervision.

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