

# **“The time is... not yet?”**

## **The Problems and Peculiarities of Proselytization**

Humanity has made great strides in the world even as most forms of totalitarian rule lie in their death throes. Within the last three decades, the Berlin Wall has collapsed, the Cold War ceased, and apartheid crushed. Yet, in the midst of such unprecedented liberation, my heart aches to see the last bastion against true freedom still standing ominous – the denial of an individual’s right to choose his God.

Far from being a Malaysian anomaly, the resistance to religious freedom is actually a world-wide phenomenon especially in most Islamic nations. Try espousing this basic principle say in Dubai, Islamabad or Abu Dhabi, we can expect to encounter vehement responses there similar to what we have witnessed in our own country.

The truth is the world’s human rights record is skewed and politically motivated. Short of a direct divine intervention, not every citizen of this world will enjoy the “right to choose his God” just because a few enthusiastic zealots rant and rave, or even make public prayers for it. This is obvious in the way world powers and the UN has not displayed any will power to even meekly suggest a change in this direction.

Nearer home, the infamous JAIS raid at a church has brought to the fore the issue of proselytization. Sadly, this issue cannot be rationally resolved when we have an “I-can-do-it, but-you-can’t” mentality. A restrictive enactment which allows for selective proselytization only highlights the uneven playing field – hardly helpful to solve a multifarious problem.

Our Constitution guarantees all faiths the “right to manage their own affairs.” If we want the right to manage our religion, we must accord others the right to manage theirs. Islam is surely no exception. This simply means we must respect what each faith does and teach their members, even be it through ‘corrective’ teachings at ‘religious camps’. As such, Islam has every right to tell their adherents “you cannot convert”, especially so when millions of Malaysian Muslims still choose to remain Muslim.

As a pastor, I too adamantly tell my members “don’t convert out.” I suspect every priest and religious leader worth his salt would do likewise.

But a reality check is needed. With the advance of modern technology and global travel, almost anyone can “log in and read what they want to read” and “be influenced” – be it in the interior of Mongolia or suburbs of Mecca. The unthinkable is taking place today. For example, the Middle Eastern people are now deciding their own governments to determine their own destinies. In this day and age, no matter how repressive the regime or restrictive the legislations or teachings, people can tweet and blog their way out.

While people all over the world now have the liberty to learn and be exposed to all forms of teachings, it is unfortunate that in Malaysia, the Church has become the favorite punching bag each time a Muslim chooses to reconsider his faith.

One can no longer simply “police” what goes on in the heart anymore. Regrettably, this fact still seems like rocket science to many governments.

Early this year, high definition TV (HD) was introduced on Astro. I watched the National Geographic HD Channel – and as every visual played across the screen, I saw the *real* balloons, the *real* glitter, the *real* fire, the *real* ballerina, the *real* flower... accompanied by the tagline “the *real* world redefined.” Indeed, technology has presented us with the gift of ‘new sight’ of the *real* world.

Since Merdeka in 1957, thousands in our country have converted to Islam.<sup>1</sup> But when a few chose to “re-convert” or one or two decided to “convert out” of this faith, their action triggered a national crisis. Why? Is it not because we have yet to learn and see what the “*real* world” is?

For years, our church has been strengthening our own members, and counseling every soul we lost. I vividly remember when one of our own became a Muslim. We took it in our stride, and accepted the reality out there. Looking back, I suppose we could have ridden motorbikes into the compound of the mosque<sup>2</sup>. But good sense prevailed and we took time to re-examine where we went wrong.

Barely noticed and perhaps intentionally disregarded are the pain and the social trauma wrought on the thousands of non-Muslim homes who have lost their family members to Islam. It is with utter amazement and disbelief to see the hue and cry over the one or two and “the twelve”<sup>3</sup> who have merely shown some inclination towards other faiths.

I long for mature days to come in all camps.

I was heartened when some Muslim groups suggested that they evaluate why Muslims would go to Christian NGOs for help and aid, and when another even proposed a seminar be jointly organized with CFM to study the various approaches to “social work” (by this I assume they would like to learn what Christians do). If only we had this mature attitude before the JAIS raid and childish posting of its video on YouTube.

In Malaysia, we also have the added problem of entrapment.<sup>4</sup>

When one knowingly enters the place of worship of another faith or enrolls in an explicitly Christian kindergarten, only to turn around to accuse the Church of inappropriate undue influence, it is indeed ludicrous. In church, we do “churchy stuff” – how simple is that?

During the Alkitab fiasco, we had a few calls from purported Muslims at our church office asking for help on how they could become Christian. One caller even identified himself as an imam and requested for an Alkitab! If only we spent as much time governing our country a bit more seriously instead of devising such “games of entrapment.”

I can just imagine some well-meaning Christians assisting “poor Muslims” who in addition to asking for social aid, may then ask for ‘help’ in faith matters. No doubt, such incidents of ‘proselytization’ will be exposed at the appropriate time, perhaps coincidentally just before a general election.

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<sup>1</sup> According to official records, the numbers are in excess of 100,000.

<sup>2</sup> Following the JAIS modus operandi

<sup>3</sup> If the JAIS report is to be believed.

<sup>4</sup> In criminal law, entrapment is conduct by a law enforcement agent inducing a person to commit an offense that the person would otherwise have been unlikely to commit – Wikipedia.

Today, while the US has lost its “Triple A” rating, we the Church in Malaysia have been unceremoniously bestowed a “Triple A” quandary – we have had the Allah issue, then the Alkitab issue, and now the Apostasy issue.

The present crisis in Europe and the US mostly centres on economics and politics. I believe Malaysia is facing a similar crisis except that religious strife has been a good cover-up for harder issues.

In December 1998, during the CFM’s annual Christmas function held at the Catholic Cardign House, I recall asking our then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammed, if he felt there would ever come a time when Muslims could decide for themselves what to believe in. He quipped, “The time is ... not yet.”

I was inclined to agree with him... then.

Interestingly, in his live telecast Malaysia Day speech this year, PM Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced the long-awaited repeal of the ISA, stressing that the changes were to “accommodate and realize a mature, modern and functioning democracy.”<sup>5</sup> The unimaginable has indeed arrived!

My prayer is that this aspiration towards a “mature, modern, functioning democracy” would spur both the state and federal governments to take bold steps towards reviewing all enactments that affect matters of the heart.

To balance the religious ambitions of the State and the rights of the individual is no easy task. For too long we have boasted of being a tolerant nation when we are, in actual fact, nothing more than a pseudo-model of religious freedom, in denial of the realities on the ground.

We respect the wishes of our Rulers and the people. We respect the laws, albeit the wisdom behind some legislation is suspect. But surely, no non-Muslim is going to be one ounce less happy if all Muslims remain Muslim. And we should also note that restrictive enactments on faith did not exist back in 1957. So, is it so unpatriotic or treasonous to yearn for the good old days of the Merdeka era once again?

Our PM was spot-on when he told the nation it was “not too early or too late for initiatives to be introduced.”<sup>6</sup> After all, it’s not about a piece of legislation - it’s about matters of the heart.

Eu Hong Seng

#### Footnote

Rev Dr Eu Hong Seng is chairman of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF). The author does not believe that if the “doors were open” there would be an exodus of Muslims from their faith. On the contrary, the Bible teaches that in the last days, there would be a “great falling away” (2 Thess2:3) i.e. there will be an “outflow” not an “inflow.”

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<sup>5</sup> STAR newspaper dated 16<sup>th</sup> Sept 2011, pg 1.

<sup>6</sup> STAR newspaper dated 16<sup>th</sup> Sept 2011, pg 4, referring to the review of the various “outdated” laws of the land.