

# Gap in multiracial message

Racist postings show more needs to be done to sensitise the young



BY SALIM OSMAN  
SENIOR WRITER

IT WAS by coincidence that three incidents of racial slurs in cyberspace came one after another in less than a week.

First, police reports were filed against Young People's Action Party (PAP) member Jason Neo who had uploaded a picture of Malay kindergarten children in a school bus with the caption "Bus filled with young terrorist trainees" on his Facebook page on Nov 17.

Two days later, full-time national serviceman Christian Eliab Ratnam was found to have posted on his Facebook page a photograph of an Israeli flag and a text which said "Islam is not a religion or a race! Islam is an authoritarian, political doctrine which imposes itself by force".

On Tuesday, blogger Donaldson Tan posted on his Facebook page a picture of a pig superimposed on the Kaaba, a building in Mecca that is sacred in Islam. Pigs are offensive to Muslims.

All three postings are insulting and disparaging to Malay-Muslims. Mr Neo and Mr Ratnam have apologised for their "folly" after their postings were discovered, claiming that they had no intention to offend the community. But Mr Tan reportedly said that he had done nothing wrong.

The Young PAP and the Ministry of Defence (Mindef) promptly issued statements to criticise two of the men for the postings.

This is not the first time that Malays and Muslims have been targeted by racist postings on the Internet. In 2005, the police prosecuted three people for sedition in separate cases because of their remarks.

Like in the past, police are taking stern action by investigating the three cases to underline the severity of the matter and the threat they pose to racial and reli-

gious harmony. Such an action is necessary to drive home the point that one cannot get away with posting racist remarks on the Net and subsequently issue an apology and recant after being found out.

But should it be the end of the matter even after an apology is offered? As far as their personal behaviour goes, an apology suggests contrition and a willingness to make amends. Mr Neo's offer to visit the kindergarten to apologise personally demonstrates his willingness to see for himself the place and people he had maligned and to correct his perspective.

But from a society's point of view, it is certainly not desirable if the takeaway from these episodes is that one can impugn another race or religion, provided one offers an apology if found out.

If that is the takeaway, then every episode of insult merely creates additional opportunity - and ammunition - for animosity between the various races.

Only legal prosecution under a tough Sedition Act and mandatory counselling for the offenders would serve as a deterrent against racist postings.

In scanning cyberspace, perhaps a clear distinction should be made here between the idiots who spew racist views out of ignorance and the bigots who express their own feelings of ill will, hos-

tility and even hatred towards an ethnic group in an organised way through the Internet. The second group is obviously more dangerous for the country than the first. People like Mr Neo belong to the first category. They know not what they do, but when it is pointed out to them, they are quick with apology and remorse.

But in fact, both types of behaviour should be frowned upon.

So far, there have been no public emotional outbursts from the Malay-Muslim community on the issue. But in fact, segments of the community were outraged by the slurs as the postings went viral among Malay netizens within minutes of their discovery. There has been a raging debate over the issue on the Net and how Malays should respond to the latest insult.

The community has chosen restraint, with its reticence on the issue instead of being belligerent and vengeful. It views the matter with equanimity, preferring to leave it to the police to handle. This should not be mistaken as indifference.

In my view, the offensive postings betray racism and prejudice against Malays and Islam. It happens at a time when Muslims the world over have become the target of insinuation and slurs since the terrorist attacks in New York by Al-Qaeda

on Sept 11, 2001.

This is despite Muslims repeatedly denouncing terrorism and condemning such acts of violence as being unIslamic. Harboring racial prejudice and showing intolerance and hatred is morally abhorrent. It is also "a sin in the eyes of God", Christian evangelist Billy Graham said on his website. "God made the whole human race, and every person on earth is equally precious to Him," he added, paraphrasing a quotation from the Bible (Acts 17:26-27).

For Muslims, racial prejudice is repugnant too. Prophet Muhammad came with the Divine Message and proclaimed that no Arab is superior to a non-Arab, and no white is superior to black and that superiority is by righteousness and God-fearing alone. A verse against racism is found in the Quran in Sura al-Hujurat (49.13) which says: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another."

It is saddening that cases of racial slurs keep cropping up despite efforts to promote integration and strengthen racial harmony since independence in 1965. Singapore's public housing estates enforce ethnic quotas based on the population ratio to prevent the growth of ethnic enclaves. This ensures that the majority Chinese live side by side with minority Malays and Indians and vice versa. Hence, children will grow up with some semblance of ethnic mixing both in schools and their housing estates. For many years, community leaders have been exchanging visits to celebrate one another's festivals to promote mutual respect and understanding.

But regrettably, all these have not stopped racist comments by young people who think they have the licence to free expression to say whatever they like on the social media.

It reflects shortcomings in education and socialisation about living in a multiracial and multireligious Singapore. The fact that the offenders are all young indicates that the message of religious harmony has not passed down sufficiently, and that they are not enamoured of the need for racial sensitivity. There must be a better way to communicate with the young to teach them that freedom of expression must be bounded by respect for others' faiths and beliefs.

✉ salim@sph.com.sg  
See Prime Page A18

## PUNCHLINES

