

Restoring moral values

By Dr Abdul Wahed Jalal Nori

In thinking about the features of a good society, different people will emphasise different traits that they consider to be important, such as egalitarianism, personal freedom, moral values and spirituality.

Yet, what makes a good society? How do we know if a country, region or city is a good society? How can a society be the agent for promoting moral behaviour? Is it possible for a society to have a shared formulation of the good?

We have to acknowledge that the evaluation of a proper moral stance will vary according to circumstances of time and place. But, in general, the success of our political, economic and social systems depend on building shared values, habits and practices, which assure the respect for one another's rights and fulfilment of one's personal and collective responsibilities.

Successful policies are accepted because they are recognised to be legitimate, rather than imposed. Although some of the rights and responsibilities are identified through legal terms, when we reach the point at which these responsibilities are largely enforced by the power of the state, we are in deep moral crisis indeed.

The diversity of culture and religion in Malaysia is not a threat to the integrity of our society as long as a core of shared values and institutions — constitutions, the democratic way of life and mutual tolerance — are respected. The shared memory and mutual aid are rich resources of moral voices. To build our moral foundations is to bring our regard for individuals and their rights into a better relationship with our sense of personal and collective responsibilities. We must, therefore, begin with the institutions of our society.

People can become increasingly virtuous if proper processes of value-internalisation and reinforcement of undergirding social institution — the “moral infrastructure” — are in place. Whether various elements of the moral infrastructure reinforce, neglect or undermine the moral infrastructure, three elements help determine the state of the moral infrastructure in a given society — families, schools and society.

The best place for each new generation to acquire its moral anchoring is the family. In today's world of turmoil and uncertainty, it is more important than ever to make our families the centre of our lives and at the top of our priorities. The family is the nucleus of civilisation and the basic social unit of society. Aristotle wrote that the family is nature's established association for the supply of mankind's everyday wants. How is it possible to have a good society when the family system is broken or even disappearing?

We must insist, once again, that bringing children into the world requires a moral responsibility to provide, not only material necessities, but also moral education and character formation. Moral education is not a task that can be delegated to babysitters, or even professional child-care centres. It requires close bonding of the kind that typically is formed only with parents, if it is formed at all. Parents, who are preoccupied with personal achievement — often going home late from work and too tired to attend to the needs of their children — cannot discharge their most elementary duty to their children and fellow citizens.

It follows then that work places should provide maximum flexible opportunities to parents to preserve an important part of their time and energy to attend to their educational-moral duties, for the sake of the next generation, to build their civic and moral character, and their capacity to contribute economically and socially to the society. Above all, what we need is a change in orientation by both parents and work places. Child-raising is an important and valuable work — work that must be honoured rather than vilified by both parents and the community.

Unfortunately, Malaysia is experiencing an increase in single-parent families as divorce becomes more common. The number of divorces in Malaysia has more than doubled in just 10 years from 2006. The number one reason for divorce and relationship issues is money. According to Sonya Britt, a Kansas State University researcher, "arguments about money are by far the top predictor of divorce... It's not children, sex, in-laws or anything else. It's money — for both men and women."

Families with children under the age of 5 spend a large percentage of their household budget on child care. The burden on low-income families, who make less than RM2,000 a month, is especially heavy. Therefore, it is very important to rethink our welfare system and put in place a proper policy to insure that citizens are able to satisfy their basic needs such as (shelter, education and healthcare). The government must ensure wellbeing of citizens by providing, regardless of income, child care, schooling and healthcare.

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