

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH MADE BY THE
PRIME MINISTER AT THE HOLY QU'RAN CONFERENCE
ORGANISED BY THE TAMIL MUSLIM UNION, HELD AT THE
NATIONAL THEATRE ON SUNDAY, 17TH JULY, 1966.

Mr. President, Distinguished Guests, Friends and Fellow-citizens,

We are fortunate, in Singapore, in that throughout our recent history of over 140 years, religion has always been a cohesive, not a divisive, force in our community.

Unlike many other parts of South Asia, collisions on religious lines have been singularly absent. Whether Buddhists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Hindus or Muslims, we have avoided the excesses which, in other parts of the world have made not only governments unhappy but have also made the people miserable.

Even a pacifist, humane, religious philosophy which Buddhism represents and which advocates that not even an insect should be destroyed, such is the love for living things, if given the wrong interpretation and in wrong situations, can lead to a lot of unhappiness -- as has happened when a Ceylonese Prime Minister

was assassinated; as is happening in a very unhappy part of Southeast Asia where Buddhist monks, far from confining the interpretation of their Holy Book to the spiritual values of men, have taken to the streets to contest the temporal power of the State.

In recent memory, there have been only two relatively minor unhappy incidents. One took place some 12 to 14 years ago when there was a breakdown in the composure of parts of the population and riots took place over what was internationally renowned as the Bertha Hertogh case. The other incident took place barely two years ago.

I think nothing is to be gained if we pretend to ourselves that these things did not happen. They did happen, and a lot is to be gained by remembering how restraint, firmness and forbearance on the part of not only Government leaders but also on the part of leaders from all strata of our society, all racial groups, have been able to bring about a return to relatively easy conditions.

It is fortunate for us that what happened two years ago, under somewhat different circumstances, did not leave a scar that would hurt and fester. For quite a number of people, for them personally, there are vivid, unhappy memories. For the rest of the population, there were moments of concern, bewilderment, unease.

And, I think we have reason to congratulate ourselves that what has happened has not ruptured the easy tenor of our multi-racial society.

I am not suggesting that a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural society is the easiest to live with. But this is what we have got and, either we learn always to remember forbearance and tolerance of each other's values, habits and susceptibilities, or we must prepare ourselves for a lot of unnecessary unhappiness.

I am not a Muslim. But, that does not mean that I do understand how passionately and fervently quite a number of our citizens feel about the Muslim faith. Nor am I a Catholic but, in the same way, I hope I understand how important a very small but a very vigorous section of our community feels about Catholicism.

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I was late this morning for your Symposium because I had to attend the rehearsal of some parades which will take place on the anniversary of our independence. And, I was cheered to see how the different religious groups have made a positive contribution to our social structure -- whether it be the Muslims or the Catholics who run quite a number of our secondary schools, or the Presbyterians who run some other schools, and so on. And I hope that the

leaders who of the Muslim community in Singapore will -- as you have suggested, Mr. President -- interpret Islam in a way which will be to the benefit of its followers and to the general good of the community.

I do not know why or how it is, but I do know from watching the different forms and styles of government between the United Arab Republic and Saudi Arabia, between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, between Turkey and Jordan, between Jordan and Pakistan, that there are differences in nuances, in emphasis. And, you can take the text and given it the nuances and the emphasis and the value-judgements which can lead to a more forward-looking, a more progressive, a more up-to-date society. Up-to-date in the sense that we have inherited, in the last few decades, scientific advances and technological inventions which have changed the whole tenor of man's life all over the world.

One of these inventions is the microphone. All religions use the microphone now. You keep your forms, you have still your minarets. But, from my observation, nowadays whether or not you summon the faithful to prayer from the top of the minaret, if you do not use this modern instrument, then you are bound to place yourself at a disadvantage. And it requires an open mind, an open attitude, a willingness to adjust, adopt and utilise new forms of living which alone can give meaning to any philosophy, any ideology, any doctrine, dogma or

religion. And, I urge you always to remember: give it the interpretation that will bring peace, harmony and happiness for your adherents. And that is only possible if you at the same time give the interpretation that is conducive to multi-racial, multi-religious tolerance, forbearance and togetherness.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to accept the invitation from you, a Muslim group who originally came from South India and have made your home here. It gives me great pleasure as a non-Muslim, to associate myself with the good things which are inherent in what you seek to do.

On that note, I wish you and your symposium well.

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