
Politics of Spirituality: Reflections of Public Theology on Interethnic Communion in Malaysia

CHONG Chuin Min and CHONG Siaw Fung
Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract

Interethnic communion is very much desired in the multiethnic and multireligious society of Malaysia. However, minority ethnic and religious groups experience the political climate dominated by the majority race and religion of the country as threatening. Interethnic relationships are often disturbed by tension due to the sense of insecurity among different ethnic and religious groups, which gives rise to fear and distrust. The frequent use of the politics of emotion to provoke the majority group is definitely not helpful in promoting interethnic communion. In this article, we analyze the Malaysian situation and propose a model of public theology for Malaysian Christians to engage the multiethnic society they are living in with a politics of spirituality in the everyday life of the Malaysian setting.

Keywords

public theology, interethnic communion, interethnic relation, politics of emotion, politics of spirituality

As a multiethnic nation, Malaysia should endeavor to promote intercultural harmony. However, for almost six decades after independence, the ruling government of the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front), dominated by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), had upheld concepts of Malay ethnonationalism, affirming the social and political supremacy of the Malay race as a majority ethnic group. This ethnonationalist ideology became the major power base of UMNO in its political endeavors. Although the UMNO-dominant political pact no longer rules the nation, the past effects of ethnic polarization are still observed in

Corresponding author

CHONG Chuin Min: jimmychong@stm2.edu.my

CHONG Siaw Fung: drcsfung@stm2.edu.my

Malaysian society. How should Christians, as a minority religious group in Malaysia, respond to this predicament? Can Christianity offer any theological resources to promote interethnic communion in Malaysia? This article proposes a framework of public theology to offer a spiritual response to the ethnic-based emotive politics in Malaysia.

EMOTION AND POLITICS

The deadlock in Malaysian politics seemed to be the ethnonationalist ideal of building a “Malaysia for the Malays” rather than “Malaysia for the Malaysians.” The ethnonationalists extol slogans such as “*Ketuanan Melayu*” (Malay Supremacy) and “*Hidup Melayu*” (Long Live the Malays). In 2005, in the UMNO general assembly a prominent Malay politician went too far when he waved the *keris* (a Malay dagger) in his speech to emphasize the supreme position of the Malays in Malaysia.¹ Such an emotion-arousing and confrontation-instigating political action focusing on ethnic issues is essentially a tactic of the politics of emotion.

The politics of emotion capitalizes on public affection and emotion to influence political decisions and situations. The emotional aspect of humanness, closely and intrinsically connected to the person, is more easily influenced than the rational faculty. In *Cultural Politics of Emotion*,² Sara Ahmed expounded the sociocultural and political nature of emotion, giving it a capacity to manipulate and orientate individuals’ life directions.³ Thus, the emotional state of an individual may affect the way he or she interprets objects and matters and may be used by interested parties to control the minds and actions of certain groups of individuals. In the politics of emotion, it is possible for a proponent to instigate antagonistic reactions among his or her group against other groups that are perceived

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- 1 Liew Chin Tong. “A Decade After Hisham Waved the Keris,” *Malaysiakini*, July 20, 2015; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/305590>, accessed May 5, 2023. The act of the Malay politician became a controversial matter in the multiethnic society of Malaysia and was later said to be the major factor that led to political defeats of UMNO in the subsequent elections in 2008 and 2013, before the UMNO-led BN was finally toppled by the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH, Hope Pact) in 2018.
 - 2 Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004/2014).
 - 3 Maria Serena Sapegno, “Book Review: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*,” *Feminist Theory* 7 (October 30, 2006): 370-372.

as a threat. In one article, Sara Ahmed highlighted how some groups promoted actions to oppose and attack their perceived “other,” citing love and protection for their own community as the reason for such passive and active aggression.⁴ In Malaysia, traces of the ethnonationalist politics of emotion are commonly observed. Portraying themselves as the defender of the interest of their own people (the Malay people), Malay ethnonationalist politicians often present a narrative that stresses how the Malay people are allegedly losing their privileges and rights to wealth, that certain other non-Malay ethnic groups are becoming more dominant than the Malay people, and so on. Consequently, interethnic misunderstanding and disinformation are intensified, which leads to distrust and biases that cause unfortunate damage to intercultural harmony, particularly between the majority Malay people and the non-Malay ethnic groups.

It seemed reasonable to propose that a rational mind should be the solution for emotion. Perhaps the politics of reason could effectively mitigate the politics of emotion. However, one must realize that, most of the time, emotion is built upon reasoning, emotion and reason may not be a counter construct to each another, and reason may not necessarily be superior to emotion under all circumstances.⁵ In our consideration, we note that emotion and reason are intricately entwined in the sociocultural and political life of a society, especially in the ethnonationalist political climate of Malaysia. We also acknowledge that reason may not be the singularly most effective solution, and emotion may be practically helpful in some complicated sociocultural and political issues. Therefore, we suggest a third option—the politics of spirituality—as a remedy for the dilemma of the politics of emotion.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICS

Christian spirituality is more than merely a form of mysticism like the concept of deification of the person or attainment of a transcendental spiritual fulfillment state present in most oriental religion. Instead of attempting to free oneself from the lowly state of the world, as is the goal of most oriental spirituality, Christian spirituality recognizes the triune

4 Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 122-143

5 龚立人: “灵性、情绪与政治,” 2016; <https://weproclaimhim.com/?p=4026>, accessed May 25, 2023.

God as a relational God who seeks to establish a personal relationship with the human creature. This is clearly demonstrated by the incarnational love of Jesus Christ. The Son of God came and lived among us, showing God's true and personal care to the entire human race. Following are three observations about the nature of Christian spirituality:

1. Christian spirituality encompasses a desire to constantly surpass oneself. This is driven by a strong sense of altruism, that is, "a conscious action intending to bring benefit to others, even if it means to sacrifice the personal interests of the acting individual."⁶ This sense of altruism should go beyond sociocultural, religious, and political boundaries; it means to be selflessly active, to diligently seek meaning in life, and to contribute to life-building experiences.⁷
2. Christian spirituality is a participative knowledge, not analytical knowledge. Believers would have to implement an "incarnational" spirituality to experience for ourselves how Christ engaged with people to whom he ministered through interpersonal embodiment.⁸
3. Christian spirituality is not a counter- and super-rational mysticism. It should not object to reason but, rather, should be open to considering the reasoning of others. In the same way, neither should reason be controlled by self-serving motives but should be prepared to accept various possibilities so that it can continually surpass itself and be transformed to spirituality.

Christian spirituality, a discipline involving both the reasoning and emotional faculties of the human person, can be a viable option to replace the politics of emotion, particularly in Malaysia where this is tainted by the biases and prejudices of ethnonationalism. At this juncture, spirituality should be distinguished from religion. Religion is an organized institution subscribing to a set of beliefs and taking on an official system of religious practice. Teachings and doctrines of a religion are transmitted to promote a desired religious life through the discipline of practicing the religious rituals. Spirituality is the self-surpassing personal religious experiences of

6 Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6-7.

7 龚立人: 《纠缠的灵性》, (香港: 香港基督徒学会, 2006), 16-18.

8 龚立人: 《纠缠的灵性》, 16-18.

a believer that transcends the superficial facets of religion and develops intrinsic virtues such as love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and so on within the believer. A religious person may not be a spiritual person.⁹ A true religion should emphasize the development of spiritual qualities among its believers. Situating religion totally within politics may produce religious fanatics who take extreme stands in politics, resulting in irrational and emotional radical movements. Removing spirituality from politics would shape political ideals focused on the religious self-interest of the political proponent with no real altruistic quality.¹⁰ We agree to the notion of the separation of church and state, but not to the extent of isolating the church completely from politics. Where justice is needed for the marginalized in society, the church must raise its voice against any unjust structure that contributes to such injustice. In defending the weak and upholding justice according to biblical principles, the church would already be making a political stand. This in itself is a form of spirituality that demonstrates genuine altruism with the clear intention and commitment to build lives.

THE POLITICS OF SPIRITUALITY

By the politics of spirituality we mean a state in which political actions are built upon the spiritual formation and development of individuals personally and the community collectively and not merely on the struggle to gain political benefits and advance personal interest. Based on that understanding, the politics of spirituality should exhibit the following characteristics:

1. Moral values as the guiding principles: instead of focusing on power acquisition, refer to noble moral values to direct actions.
2. Growth of individuals and the community: stress on the growth

9 Adam Brady, "Religion vs. Spirituality: What Is the Difference?"; https://chopra.com/blogs/meditation/religion-vs-spirituality-the-difference-between-them?_pos=1&_sid=22a3af32c&_ss=r, accessed August 2, 2020. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revising Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 38.

10 D. B. Forrester, *Theology and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 164. To Forrester, the inclination for theologians to use theology only as a tool to protect the interests of the church and to oppose any statements against the position of the church delimits the functions of theology. Such narrow-minded theological approaches lack the prophetic attitude necessary to provide constructive criticism to social and political authorities.

- in spirituality for individuals and the community, encouraging individuals and their communities to pursue development from within rather than seeking external support for political expansion.
3. The inner needs of humans: instead of focusing on material satisfaction, emphasize also human inner needs—serenity, emotional satisfaction, moral attainment, and so on.
 4. Solidarity and interest of the “other”: promote peace and solidarity for the community as a whole by communication, mutual understanding, and respect; pay attention especially to the interest of individuals and groups that are overlooked.
 5. Transcend the boundaries of ethnicity, religions, and nationalities: embrace common values among people of different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities; conduct dialogues to achieve greater understanding toward one another and work together to fulfill nobler goals.

Referring to the above observations, the politics of spirituality is different from the politics of emotion in at least four aspects—source of energy, goal, method, and influence. Table 1 sums up these differences. In general, the politics of emotion exerts a short-term influence that produces negative effects in individuals and communities. On the other hand, the politics of spirituality generates long-term influence with positive impacts on individuals and communities.

The ultimate strength of the politics of spirituality is the genuine desire to seek the best interest of the “other” rather than the “self.” Those who embrace the politics of spirituality will be able to venture beyond cultural boundaries to love and care for the cultural “other.” Those who are influenced more by the politics of emotion are more likely to focus on the interest of their own group and unlikely to be altruistic or even sacrificial in their interaction with the cultural “other.” In the multiethnic and multireligious society of Malaysia, the politics of spirituality would effectively support a positive environment for interethnic and interfaith engagement.

TABLE 1. Politics of Emotion Versus Politics of Spirituality

	Politics of Emotion		Politics of Spirituality	
	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Effect</i>
Source of energy	Emotion, feelings	Individualism, pessimism	Inner spirit, values	Common good, development
Goal	Interests of an individual or a certain group	Confrontation, division	Inner peace, tranquility, synergy	Harmony, cooperation
Method	Emotional outburst, provocation	Rage, resistance, opposition	Self-examination, exercise of virtues	Positive human relations, social responsibility
Influence	Short-term	Destructive, instability	Long-term	Constructive, friendly social communion

EVERYDAY LIFE AND THE POLITICS OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is a participative form of knowledge with a strong sense of altruism. The altruistic nature of spirituality brings it close to the practical aspects of public discourse. As people go through their daily lives in their respective societies, they are inevitably involved in or affected by the political dimension. Thus, spirituality could be an essential element of individuals' public and political everyday lives.

In general, political science intellectuals focus their study on the nature and structure of politics and society, neglecting the everyday life of individuals which is regarded as a mere personal domain outside the scope of public life. Although repetitive and mundane, everyday life is hardly private and unrelated to public life and politics. French social thinker Henri Lefebvre called for discussion on the idea of "the return of everyday life" as a poetic resistance to the scholarly focus on public discourse.¹¹ Lefebvre observes that the society of his day has been "alienated" because of

11 刘怀玉、范海武：“让日常生活成为艺术：一种后马克思主义的都市化乌托邦构想，”《求是学刊》第1期(2004年)，27-33。

capitalism, technological advancement, and bureaucratic governance. The traditional form of everyday life has been tarnished by industrialization in a modernized society dominated by rationalism. Under such circumstances, the personal touch in human relations is fast diminishing and being replaced with cold and impersonal intellectualism.¹²

Signs of alienation are observed in everyday life in Malaysia (particularly in West Malaysia on the Malay Peninsula, less apparently in East Malaysia). The “everyday” in Malaysia is a state of consciousness supported and promoted by the ruling ethnonational elites. Once upon a time, Malay-Muslims and the non-Malay non-Muslims dining together in a non-Malay coffee shop was a common sight of everyday life in Malaysia. After the era of Islamic revival of the 1980s, everyday life in Malaysia displayed pathetic signs of segregation, with visible identity markers in terms of food (halal versus non-halal), attire (for example, songkok and hijab for the Muslims), and so on to distinguish ethnic and religious groups. Such initiatives of alienation and segregation begin from everyday life with special consideration for the Malay people and the Muslims as the majority ethnic and religious group, gradually establishing itself as a norm in the public life in Malaysian society. This alienizing concept of identity consciousness presents a practical challenge to interethnic communion in Malaysia.

The public sphere should be a shared platform for all members of society and not exclusively for political elites and intellectuals. The everyday life of all the members of society should contribute to the public discourse to resolve common problems, overcome common challenges, and achieve common objectives for the benefit of everyone in society. In this article, we argue that private everyday life is actually the basic unit of public life and should be given due attention. Thus, a model of “everyday public participation” is worthy of consideration.

The twofold purpose of the everyday public participation model should be to (1) seek genuine dialogue between the self and the other and to (2) deconstruct the hatred-inciting rhetoric of the politics of emotion. Everyday life can be made a public sphere of struggle against bureaucratic or even colonialist political agenda aiming to alienate the public by regulating everyday life. Lefebvre proposed an everyday life critique as an approach to shaping a culture and lifestyle of public discourse through deep

12 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, *Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 243.

reflection on everyday life.¹³ Everyday life, as a platform for the struggle in public discourse, can be understood as a form of “third space” described by Edward Soja—an imaginative immaterial space created by the public to critique observed reality in life without submitting to the typical or stereotyped paradigm of the community concerned.¹⁴ Public discourse in Soja’s third space reflects the resistance of the people against perceived political enculturation.¹⁵ In this alternative space, everyday life can act as a counter-rhetoric against destructive political narrative.

Christian spirituality is often manifested in serenity, harmony, and submissiveness. Under oppression, Christians are called to imitate Christ and “empty” themselves (Phil 2:7) and to leave room for God’s wrath rather than take revenge (Rom 12:19). Nevertheless, like Jesus, this spirituality would stand up against injustice to defend the weak. Jesus was silent when he himself was oppressed, but he responded aggressively when the interests of the non-Jewish people were ignored at the outer court of the temple (Mt 21:12-13). Two observations can be made about spiritual resistance: (1) Out of altruism, struggle for the interest of the weaker other is a legitimate spiritual resistance; and (2) the struggle against selfishness and fear within the self is also an essential battle. Without the facet of resistance, spirituality will lose its transcendent dimension. It will not be able to surpass itself but is reduced to a state of psychological self-escapism. As Jesus had demonstrated, the subject of spiritual resistance is not oneself but the weaker or marginalized others. The politics of emotion in the name of religion focuses on and struggles for self-interest or the interest of a certain group. The politics of spirituality strives for the common good

13 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1984), 203-204.

14 Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 67, 78-79. According to Soja, the first space is nature and the physical space, the second space is the chamber of information created and controlled by politicians. The narrative in the third space among the public often presents itself in hidden texts such as informal conversations, graffiti and street art, cynical comics, folk songs, and so forth.

15 Edward Soja, “Thirdspace: Toward a New Consciousness of Space and Spatiality,” in Karin Ika and Gerhard Wagner, eds., *Communicating in the Third Space* (London: Routledge, 2009), 56. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 35-36.

of everyone in the community, especially the underprivileged, and never for the self.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND CHRISTIAN WITNESS (1 PETER 2:12-16)

The concept of Christian everyday life spirituality can be found in the Bible, particularly in connection with the relationship between the believers and the state. The teachings of Peter in the second chapter of his first epistle contain some principles relevant to Christians who are a minority group living in a society that does not understand or may even be hostile to Christians.

Around 60 AD in Rome, the apostle Peter wrote a letter to the believers in the diaspora (probably Jewish Christians) living in the Anatolia peninsula (1 Pt 1:1; 5:13).¹⁶ In the first century, Christianity had yet to be recognized as a religion, and Christians formed a minority group in the multiethnic and multireligious societies of Anatolia. The lifestyle of the Christians (particularly Jewish Christians) was so distinct from the people around them that people must have found them odd and hard to understand. To the Hellenistic and pluralistic societies of first-century Anatolia, the Christians might have appeared to be aloof (they preferred not to join the local festivals) and impious (they did not show respect to the gods). Consequently, the Christians suffered alienation and perhaps even rejection by the people around them.

Under such challenging conditions, Peter exhorted them to persevere and keep their faith (1 Pt 1:6-7). He reminded them of their special identity in Christ (1 Pt 2:4-10). In 2:12-16, he instructed them specifically to live an exemplary life, even if society did not appreciate them and gave them a hard time, so that the nonbelievers could appreciate the goodness of God through the witness of their everyday life.

In verse 12, Peter stressed that their behavior was to be proper so that their “good deeds” would be their best defense in case they were being slandered as wrongdoers.¹⁷ The term “the day he visits us” (NIV) or “the

¹⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), lxvi. The “Babylon” mentioned by Peter in 5:13 is generally taken to be a reference to Rome.

¹⁷ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 117-118. Michaels regards the use of the temporal conjunction

day of visitation” (KJV) in verse 12 may mean the day of the Lord’s return or the moment of God’s grace of salvation. With this understanding, verse 12 could be interpreted either as that the nonbelievers would continue to observe the good deeds of the Christians until the Lord’s return or that perhaps they would repent due to the good witness of the Christians and experience God’s salvation.¹⁸

In verses 13 and 14, Peter continued to urge his readers to submit to every human institution. The objects of submission were specified, the emperor or king (v. 13) as the supreme ruler, and the governors (v.14) as the administrators of justice, and depicted as a collectively functional system rather than as individuals.¹⁹ By their submission to the ruling authorities, Christians should put up a public display of virtuous good deeds that would silence the “ignorant talk of foolish people” (v.15), since the slanders against Christians (v.12) might arise from the gossip of ignorant people who “have not bothered to find out the facts”²⁰ and from the “lack of Christian religious experience” among the nonbelievers.²¹ In verse 16, Peter stressed that his readers were “free”; thus submission in verse 12 is a matter of choice and not of compulsion.²²

It is God’s desire that Christians conduct their everyday life in a respectable manner in the societies in which they live. Facing the challenging condition of Malaysian society, the Malaysian Christians are called to displayed excellent Christian witness as worthy citizens of the nation and members of their communities through the exercise of everyday life spirituality.

εν ὧ in 2:12 to be a reference to a hypothetical rather than actual situation where Christians may be accused as wrongdoers, and holds that these accusations were not likely to be formal legal prosecutions but simply “malicious gossip and slander.”

18 Edwin A. Blum. “1 Peter,” in *Hebrews; James; 1, 2 Peter; 1, 2, 3 John; Jude; Revelation*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 209-256, 232. Richard Vinson, “1 Peter,” in *1 & 2 Peter, Jude*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, ed. R. Alan Culpepper (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 111-112.

19 Michaels, *1 Peter*, 124. Vinson, “1 Peter,” 114-115. The Greek work κτισει came from κτισις which means a “creature” or “creation” of God. Associating this word with “human” (ανθρωπινη) renders it an order or institution put in place by humans.

20 I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 84.

21 Michaels, *1 Peter*, 127.

22 Michaels, *1 Peter*, 123-124.

EXERCISING THE POLITICS OF SPIRITUALITY IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, under the Malay-Muslim ethnonationalist and religious stance, the political participation of the church (consisting of non-Malay people) may be perceived as an open challenge against the majority ethnic and religious group. Thus, rather than taking a position based on religion, Christian participation in public discourse may be more effective if the approach of spirituality is employed. Responding to the ethnonationalist politics of emotion, the politics of spirituality minimizes the damage from extreme ethnonationalist ideals and enhances the formulation of a Malaysian national identity that will unite Malaysians of all ethnicities. The politics of spirituality in the context of everyday life may be exercised at the individual and church level.

At the Church Level

The politics of spirituality at the church level definitely does not merely strive for the interest of the church. The altruistic purpose should be to promote character development and interethnic communion among all Malaysians.

1. Building Character among Christian Citizens

Interethnic interaction in everyday life could potentially produce conflict, although unity is desired. Without altruism and empathy, there may be more aggression, mediocrity, and egocentrism among Malaysians in their everyday political participation. Spiritually mature citizens of virtuous character are needed to ensure that friendship and cordiality are formed in the everyday life of multiethnic Malaysia. To induce social reformation, Chong Chuin Min stipulated three important elements: (1) concepts of the ideal society, (2) a good social system, and (3) the noble character of the citizens.²³ In the Malaysian context, where Malay ethnonationalist and Islamic ideals dominate the political system, the church is unlikely to participate in the process of formulating a good social system (the second element). The church may, however, be able to contribute positively to the

²³ 张俊明：《共融：日常公共神学的社会想象》（吉隆坡：永恒智慧书局，2021），128-140。

conceptualization of an ideal society and the building up of the character of the citizens.

In the matter of character building, the church, through its Christian education efforts, could help develop spiritually mature Christians with noble characters who will participate constructively in the process of social reformation. Virtues such as the following should be included in the character-building process of Christian citizens:

- (a) Mutual respect: the ability to recognize the value system of the perceived other and acknowledge their rights (such as freedom of religion, cultural traits, and lifestyle), hence demonstrating positive patience and tolerance for the other to seek consensus for the sake of coexistence and friendship.
- (b) Self-reflection: the ability to conduct critical self-analysis in order to be able to regulate oneself toward a greater purpose.
- (c) Hospitality: the ability to care for people, treating the other as guest of honor.

First, Malaysian churches should educate Christians to respect the religious and cultural traits of other fellow Malaysians, for instance, the daily *solat* of the Muslims and the morning and evening prayers of the Hindus at their family shrines. Second, Malaysian Christians should be taught how to conduct honest personal reflection to examine their inner motives in any interethnic or interreligious encounter, such that they will refrain from a self-righteous, negatively ethnocentric attitude toward other religions and cultures. Third, Malaysian churches should be quick to encourage and mobilize Christians to show respect and care for people, especially those who are in need and underprivileged. If Christian citizens practiced these virtues in their everyday lives when and where they conduct dynamic interaction with their cultural “others” (including the Malay-Muslims), positive interethnic communion in Malaysian society can become a reality.

2. *Incorporating Interethnic Communion into Religious Life*

The practice of public theology would definitely be more effective as an ecumenical endeavor. Ethnic relation should become a matter of interest for the local churches and the national Christian bodies of Malaysia, as the

visible presence of Christianity. The local churches of any community in Malaysia should work with one other to promote interethnic communion. National Christian bodies such as the Christian Federation of Malaysia, Council of Churches of Malaysia, and National Evangelical Christian Fellowship should spearhead ecumenical efforts to strengthen interethnic and interreligious relations. Just as local churches in Malaysia may celebrate some form of Parents' Day to convey Christian teachings on the subject of filial piety, which is an everyday action for all, ecumenical national Christian bodies should call for their member churches to incorporate social issues such as interethnic communion in the church ministry agenda at the local level. The following may be some initiatives for consideration so that Christians can be reminded to conduct their everyday life as a spiritual contribution to the multiethnic public and politics:

- (a) Initiate special Sunday services in which themes of social justice, interethnic harmony, public concerns, multiethnicity, interethnic relations, and so on are promoted.
- (b) Members of local churches of various denominations in a community organize or participate in community projects involving various ethnic and religious groups.
- (c) Member churches of national Christian bodies jointly compile an order of worship that includes in various parts of the worship the call to love the cultural "others" and interethnic communion, such as corporate prayers, sermon, benediction, and so on.

As a form of Christian witness, the action of the local churches and the national Christian bodies demonstrate God's concern for contextual needs, contributing to shape the unique characteristics of the church in its local community.

At the Individual Level

The politics of spirituality emphasizes individual participation in public life. In Malaysia, interethnic cordiality is a special interest in individuals' everyday lives. Interethnic friendship may be realized in three domains: public, work, and family. In the public domain, this may include basic social etiquette and simple social skills such as expressions of greetings, gratitude, and apologies. In the interethnic relationships of everyday life, Malaysian

Christians should demonstrate sincere friendliness to people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds—quick to offer greetings, say *terima kasih* (thank you), and extend apologies when one is at fault.

In the work domain, interaction and cooperation at work provide opportunities for people to develop positive working relationships that may be enhanced to become genuine friendship. Malaysian Christians should be open to working with colleagues of all ethnicities and religions and be genuinely interested in knowing their colleagues and in willingly providing assistance to all colleagues regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Interethnic connections in the public and work domains can be brought into the family domain. Family members of marketplace acquaintances and colleagues at work may get to know one another to build a stronger and deeper network of relationships. Such connections become a platform for deepening relationships between people from different ethnic backgrounds, enabling mutual respect and appreciation. For example, families of different ethnicities may strengthen relationships with one another when they visit one another during festive seasons, developing respect and acceptance of the ethnic other. In Malaysia, the Malay people celebrate the *Aidilfitri* festival after the month of Ramadan; the Chinese people celebrate Chinese New Year; the Indian people celebrate *Deepavali*; the Kadazandusun people in Sabah celebrate the *Kamaatan* festival; and the *Iban* people in Sarawak celebrate the *Gawai* festival. Where appropriate, Malaysian Christians should take initiatives to visit friends of other cultures and religions at least during the festive seasons to extend a sincere hand of friendship. In addition, visiting friends of other ethnicities when they are sick and sincerely assisting those who have needs regardless of their ethnicities are desirable gestures for a Christian and are helpful for building friendship in a state of positive interethnic communion.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

For the multiethnic and multireligious society of Malaysia, the greatest hindrance to interethnic communion is the politics of emotion. In this article, we propose a politics of spirituality in the form of an everyday life participation model of public theology as an alternative to the politics of emotion. In contrast to the segregation springing from the politics of emotion, the politics of spirituality would and should

encourage development of interethnic cordiality through the interactions of the Malaysian people in everyday life. Malaysian Christians have the responsibility as citizens to promote and maintain interethnic communion and unity. This ideal can be incorporated into their religious life as an altruistic and incarnational spirituality that will contribute toward an ongoing commitment to build harmonious relationships with fellow Malaysians of different ethnicities. Malaysian Christians should firmly establish themselves in the altruistic and sacrificial nature of the politics of spirituality, which will stimulate interethnic communion. They should make a point of avoiding an extremely negative ethnocentric sense of religious superiority that would lure them into the pit of the politics of emotion, which is self-centered and destructive to interethnic harmony.

About authors

CHONG Chuin Min (DTheo, ATESEA Theological Union) is a lecturer in theology at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, Malaysia.

CHONG Siaw Fung (PhD, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak; MTh, Princeton Theological Seminary) is a lecturer in Old Testament, theology, church management and leadership, and the Principal of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, Malaysia.