Why can't all Malaysians just get along? Conflict of moral values and a divided nation

We Malaysians have been delineated along racial and religious lines even before our country gained her independence nearly six decades ago. While such delineations have created a heterogeneous society that is rich in culture, tradition, personality, and charm, they have also resulted in a lack of unity among Malaysians. Unifying all Malaysians has always been one of the greatest challenges for our country.

Race and religion are two very powerful divisive agents that naturally segregate people into very committed and immutable groups. Many studies have shown that while race and religion promote cooperation between members of the same race or religion, they unfortunately also promote discrimination and prejudice against people not of the same race or faith.

Malaysians are indeed united but only at the level within their own group and at the cost of increased discrimination and prejudice against people from other groups. So, herein lies the core problem of Malaysia.

As [Joshua Greene](#) writes in his book "[The Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them](#)", we humans are wired for tribalism: we intuitively divide the world into *Us* vs. *Them* and to favor *Us* over *Them*. Even at a very young age, we naturally distinguish people base on their race, skin color, linguistic cues, and gender. We have been evolved to do this because group membership maximizes our chances of survival in nature. We cooperate with members of our own group to gain mutual benefits, and we perceive outsiders as

threats to our survival, so we discriminate against them.
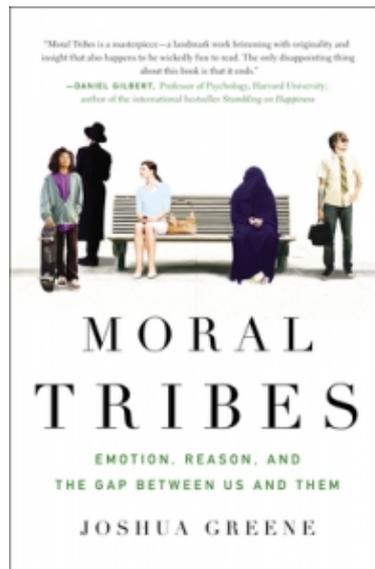
"Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them" by Joshua Greene, 2013, Penguin Press.

Joshua Greene (photo from wjh.harvard.edu/~jgreene).

Evolution thus encourages both competition and cooperation. In an environment of limited resources, the fittest individuals survive the competition of resources. But competition alone is not a successful strategy. Imagine a group made up of

only selfish people, who act only to serve their self-interests and where cooperation does not exist. Such a group would quickly disintegrate into anarchy, and it would be impossible for such a group to maintain their social cohesiveness for long periods or for the group to expand their number of members. It is difficult to imagine such a group, without any kind of cooperation among members, would continue to exist or to progress into a sophisticated society. We only have to look at any human civilization, past or present, to see that cooperation is required to give rise to a cohesive society, one having culture, socioeconomic and political structure, and technology.

And the "glue" that keeps a group together, according to Joshua Greene, is morality. Morality is the altruism, unselfishness, or a willingness to pay a personal cost to benefit others. Morality is the psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation. Morality has evolved to enable cooperation because cooperative individuals out-compete selfish individuals. So, morality has evolved to enable cooperation to keep a group of individuals together, but at the same time, morality has unfortunately also enabled competition between groups.

Conflicts between groups occur because groups differ in their ideas about how a society should be organized. In other words, different groups have different set of moral values. These groups may share some moral values but they may also differ in how these moral values should be emphasized or expressed. These groups may also have different ideas about the appropriate terms of cooperation and about what people should and should not expect from one another. Conflicts occur when one group attempts to enforce its moral values onto other groups. One typical and important factor that bonds a group together is religion. Religion establishes moral values unique only to that group. Religion is deeply polarizing, serving both a source of moral unity and moral division. This is particularly relevant today in Malaysia, where the values of one religion are increasingly being imposed onto others, causing aggrieved groups to they feel that their own moral values are being infringed.

Humans are prone to many kinds of biases, three of which are biased fairness, biased perception, and biased escalation, where our sense of fairness and how we perceive and understand an issue are tainted by our self-interests and outlook. Though we try to be fair, studies have shown we still tend to favor interests or options that benefit us and that we tend to interpret facts, events, or issues in a

way that is consistent with our current values and beliefs. We also tend to overestimate our positive impacts on others and underestimate or play down our negative impacts on others. These biases can create and exacerbate conflicts between groups because they taint each group's objectivity, its interpretation of issues, its understanding of how its actions can have or have impacted other groups, and its efforts to resolve disputes.

A united Malaysia can only occur when we all desire a common goal that transcends even our group's self-interests.

And what exactly would that common goal be? That common goal would be to increase the society's happiness. As Joshua Greene simply puts it, happiness is the common currency of conflicting groups. Happiness here however is not to be confused with the temporary experience of elation or euphoria. Instead, the happiness of a society is the overall quality of all people's experience. Happiness is not a value by itself, but it is embedded in other values such as intellectual values (*e.g.*, knowledge, truth, education, and arts), civic values (*e.g.*, freedom and justice), and character values (*e.g.*, bravery, honesty, and creativity).

We Malaysians need to seek a common goal in which every Malaysian can contribute to achieve a happy society, one that is, among others, united, just, moral, peaceful, stable, intellectual, and creative. We need to create a society in which individuals can find ample opportunities to discover and use their talents to lead positive and meaningful lives.

We need to desire this larger goal and put aside our prejudices to work out long-term and sustainable solutions that can increase the society's positive experiences. These solutions must be impartial such that no group's happiness is prioritized over others.

Malaysia needs to make science as the foundation of the country upon which the country can systematically gather and logically evaluate evidence about the effectiveness of various national policies and practices to increase the society's happiness.

Science needs to be the foundation of Malaysia (photo from eduspiral.files.wordpress.com).

Malaysia is a highly religious country where less than 5% of the population are either atheists or agnostics. But as Joshua Greene writes in his book, religion cannot become the common currency of conflicting groups. Religious fundamentalism in particular would greatly exacerbate group conflicts because a group's immutable set of moral values would be imposed on other groups.

Conflict of moral values: growing intolerance of other religions in Malaysia. On April 19, 2015, a Christian church in Taman Medan, Selangor was bullied to dismantle its cross from its building facade by a group of demonstrators from another faith (photo from straitstimes.com).

Instead, religious moderation and secularism are part of the solution because they form the common ground upon which all Malaysians, regardless of their faiths (or lack thereof), can come together without feeling that their moral values are being infringed, questioned, or threatened. It is only in such an environment that group conflicts can begin to diminish.

It is tempting to conclude here that Malaysia needs to be "color-blind" and "religion-blind" where the various races and religions are treated as if they are non-existent or unimportant. Such policies of color- and religion-blindness, though well-intentioned, may actually exacerbate group conflicts. This is because Malaysians still derive a large part of their identities from their race and religion. Ignoring or treating people's race or religion as unimportant may trigger group conflicts because this is akin to denying their identities, culture, and moral values. We should recognize and celebrate group differences but at the same time, encourage inter-group understanding and interaction that enables cooperation for mutual benefits.

I like to believe there is still hope for Malaysia, that we Malaysians have not become so polarized that we cannot see beyond our group's self-interests to seek a united, peaceful, and progressive Malaysia — or that we have become incapable of reaching out to other groups to increase everyone's quality of experience, regardless of group memberships.

And to seek that common goal, we need to put aside our self-interests, prejudices, and perceived superiority over others and cooperate, not compete, with one another.

I like to end this article with an excerpt of President Barack Obama's keynote speech at the "Call to Renewal's Building a Covenant for a New America" conference in Washington, D.C., in 2006. The following excerpt is taken from Joshua Greene's book:

> *"Democracy demands the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or [invoke] God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all."*

References

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