

2014/4: Run, Alvin, Run!

by B S Poh

[Alvin Tan is only 26 years old, the same age as the youngest son of the present writer. Together with his then partner, Vivian Lee, they created quite a stir by raunchy postings on their blog. They ran foul of the Malaysian government when a Chinese pork dish was posted in connection with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan last year. Both of them were sent to jail briefly, and then released on bail. The charges against them under the Sedition Act and Film Censorship Act are still pending. Alvin has since jumped bail and escaped to USA. Read more about them at: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/sex-blogger-alvin-tan-says-not-a-coward-but-smart-to-seek-asylum>.]

Alvin Tan is no coward. He is intelligent, and courageous. He is young and full of fighting spirit. He is able to make distinctions and has understood underlying principles.

He distinguishes between immorality and illegality, between religion as personal faith and as political agenda. He values freedom of speech and rule of law. He has understood the importance of separation of religion and state. He has been let down by “heartless mercenaries” who (uncharacteristically, we hope) called for his imprisonment. He identifies the malaise of the nation as consisting in political tyranny and ignorance of the general populace. In short, Alvin is coming close to understanding the doctrine of “the liberty of conscience”.

No fellow human has the right to lord it over another’s conscience. The Creator alone is Lord over it. The conscience is sacred. It is the soul of the soul. Touch it, and you desecrate the sanctum of the person. Those who value the conscience would resent it being violated. Totalitarian governments violate it. Religious extremism violates it as well. You cannot legislate personal beliefs. You cannot threaten or force someone to act contrary to his belief. You might disagree with him, but you must uphold his right to his belief. Disagreements may be resolved by moral suasion, education, or isolation (sanctions, boycotts, or expulsion), not by abuse - whether verbal, physical, or psychological - of those you disagree with.

Liberty of conscience expresses itself as freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech and expression. It is also expressed in the demand for basic human rights - the right to live, to be treated with dignity, and to associate voluntarily. There are limits to such freedom and rights. First, such freedom and rights must not encroach upon or limit the freedom and rights of others. Second, such freedom and rights are proscribed by the Creator of the human race. Breach of the first set of limitations may be redressed by the law of a country. Breach of the second set of limitations will be addressed by the Almighty on judgement day. When the government of the day is unjust, redress is not only impossible, but it is self-defeating. That is what Alvin has experienced first hand.

The pain in Alvin's life lies deeper than leaving behind parents who are ill-equipped to understand or advise him, and also the once-girlfriend and collaborator who has to make her own decisions. His pain lies in the hopeless situation of a nation wallowing in mediocrity, settled in self-denial mode, and bent on self-destruction. Alvin has to run for his life. He might not be literally killed, but he will be harmed in such a way as to make death preferable to a life that is less than life. This writer would defend his right to hold to opinions different from other people. This writer approves of him fleeing the country. Run, Alvin, run!

Malaysia is unworthy of Alvin. He will do well in USA. Malaysia's loss is America's gain. I have no doubt that asylum will be granted to him in that great nation of America. America was founded on sound principles, chief of which was the liberty of conscience. The biblical values of the nation have been eroded and distorted in recent days, but it remains "the greatest country in the world".

In this poignant saga, I wish Alvin well. I would only add the caveat that he must guard against the enemy within, having escaped the enemies without. Beware of cynicism. Pursue the American Dream for all it is worth. May you be led to discover the faith of the founding fathers of America, who founded a great nation only because their faith was founded on Jesus Christ.

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