



**So aunty, so what?** June H.L. Wong  
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# May I still sit next to you?

Let's hope the answer will always be yes between Muslims and non-Muslims in this country.

THE lady plonked herself next to me and as she squeezed into her seat, our thighs and upper arms touched. We tried to give each other a bit of wriggle room but we were hemmed in by others on either side of us.

So, we sat next to each other in close contact until I reached my stop and got off. That was my ride on the MRT on Saturday from the Pavilion Bukit Bintang station to Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur.

There wasn't anything particularly significant about two women – one Malay and the other Chinese – sitting next to each other on the train and I wouldn't have given it a second thought if not for recent events.

By now, the issue of Muslim-only launderettes in Johor and Perlis seems to have blown over, thanks to royal intervention which resulted in the two businesses in Muar and Kangar removing the restriction against non-Muslims.

Indeed, it was a relief that the Sultan of Johor and the Raja Muda of Perlis acted to show that such discriminatory practices, even if in the name of religious purity, must

not be tolerated.

But the fact that the launderette owners decided to refuse their services to non-Muslims on religious grounds is yet another indication that the perception that non-Muslims are unclean and anathema to Muslims is getting stronger in this country.

Although the Muslim-only launderettes hit the headlines last month, the issue of shared washing machines has been a big concern among Muslims for quite a long time.

Early this year, for example, Universiti Putra Malaysia senior lecturer Ustaz Dr Shauqi Othman addressed this concern in a lecture on Jan 2 titled "*Menjawab masalah mesin basuh yang dikongsi bersama orang bukan Islam*" or "Replying to the issue of sharing washing machines with non-Muslims".

Dr Shauqi made it clear that unless there was definite proof that the clothes of a non-Muslim had canine fecal matter, there was no problem in sharing self-service laundromats.

He added that taking such action based on assumptions was wrong

and could lead to prejudice. He also said a Muslim not wanting to shake a non-Muslim's hand on the mere possibility the latter might have touched a dog or eaten pork was also not acceptable in Islamic teachings.

His view is shared by other Muslim clerics like the imam of Masjid Toronto, Canada, Dr Wael Shehab, who holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from Al-Azhar University, and the Grand Ayatullah al-Sayyid Ali al-Hussani al-Sistani, whose official website responded to the following question thus:

I am living in India and I have a lot of doubts about things I am using and eating. What is my duty about such things?

Answer: A well-known religious law says: "Everything is ritually pure for you unless you come to know that it is ritually impure."

This law declares everything to be pure unless one becomes sure a particular item has become impure. And as long as you are not sure that it has become ritually impure (*najis*), it is to be considered pure and you can apply all the rules of purity to it without any hesitation

or doubt.

Such reassurances from Muslim scholars, however, haven't stopped the perception among a growing number of Muslims that it is best to avoid contact with non-Muslims or things that have come into contact with them. Before Muslim-only launderettes, there were Muslim and non-Muslim supermarket trolleys, separate drinking cups in a school and so on.

As a child, I remember my mum sending plates of extra food she had cooked over the fence to our neighbours and vice versa.

Sadly, those days when neighbours shared food with each other, regardless of race and religion, are long gone.

When I first moved into my present house, I invited my immediate neighbours over for Chinese New Year. My Malay neighbour was nice enough to come over but he and his family were clearly uncomfortable. They only accepted canned drinks from us and did not eat any of the catered food.

I was disappointed they didn't trust us to offer them halal food but I took no offence as I am fully aware

of the importance of the injunction on what Muslims can consume.

But I hope that the majority of Muslim Malaysians do not believe they need to be afraid of contamination in other aspects of their lives and seek to segregate us, and that they hold fast to the conviction that this nation belongs to people of other faiths as well.

That way we will be able to continue to sit together in trains and buses, pay for our groceries with money that passes from one hand to another, eat in food courts that serve us the same utensils and cutlery, and visit hospitals to see doctors who check us out with the same stethoscopes and blood pressure gauges, and operate on us with the same set of scalpels and surgical instruments.

And that we will be able to continue to donate to blood banks which do not separate that life-saving liquid for Muslim and non-Muslim use.

Aunty is a strong believer in the proverb, "Live and let live" in our increasingly crowded world. Feedback to aunty@thestar.com.my.