

Public intellectuals can lead debate on concepts of honour and virtue

FROM **JEROME YAN ZHELUN**

I read Dr Nazry Bahrawi's commentary on public intellectuals with interest and have some suggestions to complement his. ("Time to scale ivory towers, moral high ground"; March 5)

I agree with literary scholar Edward Said that a public intellectual's academic freedom should be exercised towards alleviating human suffering. I agree that abstract reasoning forms an integral part of critical thinking. This still leaves much to be desired, however.

Academic freedom should be exercised unto virtue, honour and proper self-evaluation.

As Dr Nazry wrote, it is easy for the public to dismiss academics as peddling "airy-fairy ideas", or even ideals. Nevertheless, this is the tension academics have chosen — to formulate and communicate theories in ways that transform practices and beliefs.

No doubt, the orientation of academia towards professional skill sets is an exercise in honour, with privileged success in our society's dominant professions, but to the neglect of intellectual discourse.

It has possibly shaped the minds of students and the workforce to dismiss abstract reasoning as impracticable or irrelevant.

It can shape the individual's idea of virtuous living as one of material

success and promotion in a particular industry.

Public intellectuals can play the role of recapturing the honour and virtue of other pursuits, such as participation in the public sphere on social issues, cultural appreciation and familial flourishing.

While it is the academic thing to look far afield for examples of progress, Singapore has its own stories of people overcoming setbacks or mistakes — those who have succeeded in their endeavours despite society's initial resistance to their novel visions.

Singapore Management University, for instance, holds regular lunch talks by speakers who share their ups and downs, and the lessons they learnt.

Dr Nazry used the term LGBT neutrally, but there are also other value-infused variants such as GLBT,



Public intellectuals are responsible for evaluating and refining traditional conceptions of honour and virtue, drawing from the best of the past and present to point the way forward.