

Why religion remains a force for good, not division, in Singapore

It helps that there is no dominant religion here, and many Singaporeans feel a personal connection with other religions too.

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In a world rife with division, religion is often treated with scepticism, even disdain. Religious extremism has cast a long shadow over faith, leaving us to grapple with images of violence carried out under the banner of belief.

Dogmatism and intolerance, habitually rooted in religious doctrine, are also seen to be at odds with the winds of social change, progress and inclusivity. All this may explain why, on the face of it, many people in Singapore attribute less importance to religion in their lives today.

A recent Pew Research Centre survey found that just 36 per cent of more than 2,000 Singapore respondents indicated that religion was “very important” in their lives.

This affirms similar trends noted in the 2021 Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) World Values Survey. The proportion of Singapore residents considering religion as “rather important” or “very important” in their lives dropped from three-quarters in 2012, to under two-thirds in 2020.

The question beckons: Is religion still relevant in Singapore?

BEYOND ORGANISED RELIGION

If we go beyond rigid definitions, a slightly deeper dive shows that a significant majority of individuals still identify with a religion. The 2020 Population Census revealed that four in five Singapore residents reported having religious affiliations.

Even among those without a religion, a substantial proportion still believes in spiritual precepts



Representatives of the Inter-Religious Organisation holding prayers at a war memorial service in February. Religion has played a constructive role in coalescing Singapore's social fabric, rather than a destructive one, as in the cases of many other countries. ST FILE PHOTO

and holds faith in things unseen, such as heaven, hell, karma and fate.

Nearly two-thirds of non-religious respondents in the Pew survey believed in God or unseen beings, as well as the existence of karma. Four in 10 non-religious respondents also reported burning incense and being able to feel the presence of a deceased family member.

In other words, religious and non-religious beliefs can converge. This suggests the existence of an extensive shared space in Singapore where individuals with varying beliefs can come together – including those that eschew organised religion.

This space is defined by values such as kindness, compassion and the pursuit of the common good. It guides the pursuit of meaning, interrogates the significance of human existence, and serves as a moral compass to examine ethical dilemmas.

One example of this shared space is the extended history of inter-faith dialogues and endeavours by the Inter-Religious Organisation, which began as early as 1949, even before Singapore's independence.

Another is our celebration of religious festivals such as Vesak Day, Hari Raya, Deepavali and Christmas, where it is common to share in the festivities.

Religious organisations also play a huge role in sustaining

volunteering and providing third-sector services such as counselling, education, or uplifting the underprivileged without regard to beneficiaries' creed.

In this regard, religion serves as a bridge that connects individuals and encourages collaboration and understanding.

Faith also provides solace during significant moments in our lives, such as death and bereavement. Regardless of one's religious affiliation, funerals often draw upon religious customs and traditions.

Approximately half of those in the Pew survey who claimed to identify with no religion felt it was important to set up altars or perform religious rituals for the souls of deceased relatives.

This shows that Singaporeans continue to value religious beliefs held by loved ones, even when they don't subscribe to them.

A POSITIVE FORCE

Religion has played a constructive role in coalescing Singapore's social fabric, rather than a destructive one, as in the cases of many other countries.

For one thing, Singapore has no one religion with a significant majority. This means every religious community is a “minority” sharing a vast common space. This pluralistic state of affairs encourages – or necessitates – dialogue,

understanding and collaboration between diverse individuals.

Thus, we end up with devotees worshipping different deities, practising different rituals and adhering to spiritual traditions, all co-existing in relative harmony.

Faith in this city-state is also remarkably syncretic in nature – whereby a belief or practice may be shared by, or resonates with, individuals of different religions.

The Pew study reveals that even as most affiliate themselves with a single religion, more than a quarter of respondents feel a personal connection to at least three other religions they do not identify with, while over a third feel connected to one or two other faiths other than their own.

Take Buddhists in Singapore. The study shows that 18 per cent of them pray or offer their respects to Allah, 25 per cent to Jesus Christ, and 31 per cent to Ganesha, even though these figures are associated with Islam, Christianity and Hinduism respectively.

These connections with other religions sustain a posture of tolerance and respect.

It is also commonplace for many to live alongside others of differing faiths. The daily interactions compelled by our dense cityscape foster a culture of tolerance and mutual respect, reinforcing the idea that just because someone is of another faith, does not mean the person is of less worth.

The vast majority of Singapore residents – nine in 10 – indicate they would be willing to accept, and be comfortable with, neighbours of other religions, as evidenced by the Pew study and the 2018-2019 IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony, respectively.

These proportions are the highest in the region and should be something we are proud of beyond our typical accolades for industrial and economic prowess.

SEPARATING FAITH AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

In Singapore, robust legislation, including the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, emphasises the principle of keeping religion and politics separate.

Over the past few decades, this approach has paid off in terms of shaping attitudes towards mixing religion and politics, and ensuring that the practice of faith in Singapore can unite rather than divide.

Just three in 10 Singapore respondents in the Pew study felt religious leaders should be politicians, or talk publicly about the politicians or political parties they support. In contrast, at least half or more of respondents in Malaysia and Indonesia indicated likewise.

The rejection of faith-based politics has also ensured a cohesive national identity that

seeks to include all.

Singapore's policies have consistently eschewed the use of religion or race to mobilise specific groups in society, or buttress nativist attitudes. Instead, multiculturalism and inclusivity are defining features of our identity.

The outcomes of such an approach are plain for all to see.

For every other country surveyed in the region, the Pew study notes that seven in 10 or more respondents felt that having a certain religion, or being part of the majority ethnic group, is very important to being truly part of their nation.

Singapore is the sole exception; over eight in 10 felt otherwise. A similarly high proportion also felt that all major religions practised here are compatible with our national culture and values.

THE WAY FORWARD

Protecting against the misuse of religion for national identity politics is crucial. While religion is a unifying force in Singapore, it can be easily weaponised by insidious elements to cause divisions.

That is why we should continue to encourage the practice of being respectful of other traditions.

Our commitment to secularism and religious harmony should remain steadfast. This is best done through education – in schools, we should build on existing programmes to promote diversity and cross-cultural interactions.

At present, most of such efforts are ad hoc. We should provide more practical and sustained opportunities for interactions between those of different faiths to promote better understanding between them.

We can also widen our appreciation of diversity through cultural competency training in the workplace, educational institutions and the community. This will enable individuals to learn more about others from different backgrounds, and reduce prejudice, stereotypes and friction.

At the same time, we can't let our guard down. That is why it is important to support robust legislation that can, for example, respond effectively to the (mis)use of religion in identity politics that is evident in our part of the world.

This will ensure that instead of being a potential cause of friction, religion continues to be a source of tolerance and social cohesion in our multicultural society.

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