Forging Cohesive Societies

Living With Religious Diversity

By Adrian Tan and Abigail Leong

SYNOPSIS

There are growing instances of religions being exploited for political ends, resulting in conflict and violence worldwide. As a country where people of different religious beliefs share the same living space, what more can be done to encourage inter-faith dialogue in Singapore?

COMMENTARY

WHAT MAKES us Singaporean? The query is one that generations of Singaporeans have pondered since Singapore's independence. While there are no standard or straightforward answers, what is clear is that Singaporeans belong to a multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious society. According to research by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Singapore is the world's most religiously diverse nation. Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jews, people of other faiths as well as atheists and agnostics all live in relative peace on this tiny island.

While Singapore has enjoyed religious harmony for several decades, this amity requires constant monitoring and maintenance. This is especially so because in many countries religions are increasingly being abused and exploited for political ends. Islamist extremists are using violence and terrorism to incite conflict between different groups in their efforts to create an Islamic state. Racial supremacists and right-wing populists in the United States and Europe are painting non-whites, minorities, and immigrants as a threat to Christian 'civilisation' and dominance. Similar developments can be seen elsewhere.

Rising Tide of Religious Conflicts

Even as the world draws closer with globalisation and technological revolution, there is a rising tide of religious discrimination, persecution, and extremism worldwide. As a small and vulnerable country susceptible to the influence of global trends and events, the commitment to inter-faith harmony is now an ever more urgent charge.

Many positive actions have been taken in Singapore since independence to ensure that religious peace and understanding endures. These include enshrining the right to profess and practise one's religion in the Constitution, introducing the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, establishing Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles in every constituency, and enforcing the law against acts seen as detrimental to religious harmony.

At a community level, religious scholars and clerics have set up the Religious Rehabilitation Group to provide counselling to radicalised individuals. The 70-year-old Inter-Religious Organisation, representing 10 major religions, continues to encourage friendship and trust among religious leaders and followers.

While these efforts are commendable, building bridges between the different religious groups is a never-ending task, and there are still areas where inter-faith dialogue can be enhanced. For example, some observers argue that current inter-faith dialogue takes place only either among religious leaders or between state and religious leadership.

Two-Fold Challenge

They perceive a consequent two-fold challenge. Firstly, it confines inter-faith dialogue to a small circle of people, with the majority of religious followers uninvolved in the various exchanges and activities.

That said, it should also be noted that most people lack the necessary in-depth theological knowledge to participate seriously in such discussions. Yet, given the influx of fake news via online and social media platforms, there is a need to expand inter-faith dialogue beyond the leaders to reach a wider constituency.

Ways must be found to encourage communication and cooperation across every level of society, in order to ensure a productive and meaningful dialogue, and to facilitate the building of a peaceful and cohesive society.

Secondly, it is important to note that nearly a fifth of the population in Singapore, according to IPS, do not hold any religious beliefs. Even though they may not belong to a religious community, they are still part of the wider national community. Their voices should be heard and their views should be respected. It would be good if inter-faith dialogue could involve both those who subscribe to religion and those who do not, so that all groups are included and all perspectives considered.

Constraints of Inter-Faith Dialogue

At the same time, however, it is important to be cognisant of the constraints of inter-faith dialogue. Religions are international movements, and the religious communities

in Singapore do not exist in isolation – they are each part of a larger international community.

There are perhaps limitations to what dialogue here can attain unless more efforts are also made on a global scale. We must look to advancing dialogue not just within our borders but also worldwide.

The question thus arises as to what more can be done to build bridges between the different communities in Singapore. Since religion is seen as an inappropriate topic for the education system, other methods are needed to circulate accurate knowledge, deepen reciprocal understanding, and boost the spirit of solidarity and unity.

Given Singapore's drive to become a smart nation, one way to achieve this would be to put the extensive reach of the Internet to good use. Take, for example, local content production outfit Our Grandfather's Story, who use short videos to bring to light the often overlooked pockets of Singapore's heritage.

They have featured stories of the various religious communities here, such as the tradition of carrying a kavadi at Thaipusam; the temple where Taoists and Hindus worship together; and the celebration of Hanukkah at the Chesed-El synagogue, among others. A digital approach, in which documentaries, podcasts, social media and more are utilised positively, could perhaps be one way to enhance inter-faith dialogue.

Survival As One Nation

As stated in the Government's 1989 White Paper, racial and religious harmony are "not just desirable ideals to be achieved, but essential conditions for our survival as one nation". Conscious efforts are necessary to maintain it, which involves exercising moderation and tolerance, avoiding acts that might cause enmity or hatred, and keeping religion and politics separate.

With the growing exploitation of religion by extremists and populists today, it is imperative that greater efforts be made to foster mutual respect and empathy among Singaporeans of different beliefs, such that Singapore continues to enjoy peace and harmony.

Adrian Tan is Head of Policy Coordination and Specialist Research and Coordinator of the Malaysia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of international Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Abigail Leong is a Visiting Associate with RSIS with an interest in issues relating to inter-faith dialogue.