Fading faith? Fathoming the future of Singapore’s religious landscape

With more people having no religious affiliation, it is time for a review of interfaith platforms to include additional voices and to promote greater understanding.

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For The Straits Times

The Census of Population 2020 released by the Department of Statistics last week provides food for thought on what lies ahead for our social fabric. For instance, figures from the census corroborate religious trends which have taken root over a few decades.

While the religious make-up of Malay and Indian communities remains relatively unchanged, higher proportions of Chinese now identify themselves as Christian or have no religious affiliation as compared with 2010.

Overall, one-fifth of Singapore residents profess to have no religion, up from 17 per cent in 2010. While a 3 percentage point increase may seem trivial, it reflects a slow, though sustained drift away from organised religion.

This change is observed across all age cohorts, especially among the better educated, and comes primarily at the expense of a dwindling share of Buddhists and Taoists.

Understanding what drives these trends will enable us to appreciate their manifold implications—some with the potential to reshape our socio-political landscape.

UNDERSTANDING FAITH

An off-the-cuff conclusion that may be appealing to many young and well-educated Singaporeans is becoming secular rationalists, with religion ostensibly on its way to oblivion in our fast-paced, modern city-state where people want to “follow the science”.

But there is a case against presupposing the above based on the census data.

First, declarations of null religious affiliations do not necessarily reflect a repudiation of the spiritual. A March 2021 Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) report on the World Values Survey, which polled 22,000 Singapore residents, found that 40 per cent of respondents who professed to have no religion still believed in the notion or some form of God. Thirty-eight per cent of this group also indicated that they believed in life after death, and the existence of heaven and hell.

For some, the non-identification with particular religions stems from negative encounters with, or perceptions of, religions or religious organisations or institutions.

Many also prefer to practice their faith in private, without the need to interact in a community which may require them to abide by social and institutional mores.

All these suggest that while proportions identifying themselves with particular religions may have declined, there is a significant number of “religion- and non-religion” who hold similar values and beliefs with adherents of organised faith.

Second, the sustained emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines in Singapore’s education system and economy seem to have challenged the relevance of religion.

This is an extent to an end in the larger context of logic and scientific inquiry being a powerful instrument in helping society deal with a plethora of challenges.

However, many still try to reconcile faith with sciences, and continue to think of faith as “the hope in things not seen.” For this group, faith functions as a salient anchor in their lives when dealing with situations and experiences that science is not fully equipped to deal with.

Findings from a 2019 Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) paper discussing the International Social Survey Programme on Religion found that 26 per cent of the non-religious Singapore respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “true knowledge in science and religion, and not in enough faith.”

Clearly, even among those with no religion, there is some openness to religions concepts or spirituality, although scientific rationality is commonplace in society.

Third, the prevailing shifts in religious landscape are also shaped by the continued significance of traditional religions, associated with our Chinese community. While 57 per cent of Chinese who profess to have no religion today, the corresponding figure for non-Chinese is approximately 20 per cent.

These figures illustrate how religion remains salient for minority communities in Singapore, and clarify why we should not refrain from assuming that the diminished relevance of religion is universally true.

Second, faith is often a social force multiplier. The commitment of the religious is exemplified by the onerous institutions they erect, such as faith-driven acts of charity or altruism.

The Commission of Charities’ 2019 Annual Report notes that religious organisations make up a substantial proportion (47 per cent) of the 2,281 registered charities in Singapore. Moreover, the contributions from faith-based donors outstrip those of their non-religious peers, accounting for the greatest proportion of annual charitable donations.

A Statistics Report in the same year also found that four of the top 10 charities by donations in Singapore were religious organisations.

The impact of religion extends beyond the confines of their respective faith communities. Many Singaporeans would have been the beneficiaries of medical, educational or elderscare services furnished by religiously affiliated institutions at some point in time.

MITIGATING POTENTIAL RISKS

Against the backdrop of shifting religious landscape, it is inevitable that the beliefs and actions of the religious will be at odds with others of different faiths or those with no religion on occasion. This is especially so, as certain groups are perceived to be imposing their beliefs on others. The divergent views on hot-button issues like LGBTQ, social egg freezing and “amiable” divorce options are cases in point.

Often, discussions of such issues are mired in toxic blend of generalisations, trolling and vitriol, especially on the online space.

Left unchecked, religious fault lines have the potential to result in more treacherous outcomes. In another 2019 IPS report, religious violence was identified as the most likely fail line to result in permanent tensions.

To bridge the divides between religions, and between the religious and non-religious, we should consider the following.

First, inter-religious spaces which already promote inter-religious understanding should be augmented, with greater focus applied on the views of non-religious individuals.

Second, Singapore should continue to promote a positive approach to foster social cohesion, starting with our schools. After all, mindsets are easier to mould at a young age.

The responsibilities of our schools and educators in nurturing religious discrimination should not be underestimated. Examples like the Ngee Ann Polytechnic lecturer who shared derogatory views on Islam in class is a case in point.

Finally, overcoming the “hardware” and official impediments to open discussions on religion may not be enough; it would require all of us as individuals to be open, empathetic, understanding and respectful to our social partners.

Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam remarked in a recent speech that people may have racial preferences, that people are more likely to choose to be of the same race; bringing these preferences out into the public sphere and imposing them on others across the divide.

While he was speaking vis-a-vis racism, the same principles should apply to religion, both to religious and non-religious, to appreciate and respect their views.

Against the varied social fault lines that may emerge in any diverse society, our embrace of what binds us rather than divides us as Singaporeans is especially important.

To ultimately strengthen our pluralistic social fabric, and to avoid a repeat of the potential impact on future generations.

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