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.

Mathew Mathews and Melvin Tay

For The Straits Times

The Census of Population 2020 released by the Department of Statistics last week provides much food for thought on what lies ahead for our rich social tapestry.

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 now 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 shrinking share of Buddhists and Taoists.

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

UNDERSTANDING FADING FAITH

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

But there is a case against presuming the above based on 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 2,000 Singapore residents, found that 46 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, religious organisations or institutions.

Many also prefer to practise their faith in private, without the need to situate themselves 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 still a significant number of "religious non-religious" who hold similar values and beliefs with adherents of organised faith.

Second, the sustained emphases 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 true to an extent; the rigour of logic and scientific inquiry is a powerful instrument in helping society deal with a plethora of challenges.

However, many still try to reconcile faith with science, 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 28 per cent of the non-religious Singapore respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "we trust too much in science, and not enough in religious faith".

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

Third, the prevailing shifts in the religious landscape are also steered by the decline of traditional religions associated with the Chinese community. While 57 per cent of Chinese identified themselves as Buddhist or Taoist in 2010, this dropped to 52 per cent in 2020.

This decline is likely to persist, given that young, better educated and English-speaking segments of the population may feel some disconnect with the practices and rituals associated with these religions.

The spiritual, emotional and social needs of these population segments vary relative to their older, less-educated and Mandarin- or vernacular-speaking counterparts.

Consequently, a portion in the former group has embraced evangelistic branches of Christianity whose practices emphasise personal lived experiences.

From 2010 to 2020, the proportions of Christians in Singapore grew slightly from 18 to 19 per cent, though this pace has slowed from previous decades.

NAVIGATING FUTURE SHIFTS

In tandem with these observations, the continued significance of religion should not be understated. Despite the decline in overall proportions of adherents, faith will continue to retain its relevance and play a sizeable role in shaping our society.

First, some religions conflate with ethnicity. Practically all Malays, comprising 14 per cent of the population, are Muslims. Some 57 per cent of Indians, who make up 9 per cent of the population, are Hindus. Compared with 26 per cent of ethnic Chinese who profess to have no religion today, the corresponding figure for non-Chinese is approximately 2 per cent.

These figures illustrate how religion remains salient for minority communities in Singapore, and clarify why we should 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 outsized impact their institutions exert on society, such as faith-driven acts of charity or altruism.

The Commissioner 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 receipts.

A Straits Times 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 eldercare services furnished by religiously affiliated institutions at some point in time.

MITIGATING POTENTIAL RIFTS

Against the backdrop of a 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 if certain groups are perceived to be imposing their beliefs on others. The divergent views on hot-button issues such as LGBTQ, social egg freezing and "amicable" divorce options are cases in point.

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

Left unchecked, religious fault lines have the potential to result in more treacherous outcomes. In another 2019 IPS report, religion was seen by survey respondents as the most likely fault line to result in polarisation if mismanaged.

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

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

Inter-faith platforms such as the Inter-Religious Organisation, Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, and Harmony Centre feature a range of individuals from different religious denominations.

Some efforts have been made in more recent years to involve non-religious groups in discussions on these platforms. Given how one-fifth of the population does not have any religious affiliation today, it is time to review our interfaith platforms and engage this population segment in greater measure.

Doing so will promote better understanding and prevent hostile exchanges between the religious and non-religious on potentially divisive social issues

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

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

Finally, notwithstanding the "hardware" and official attempts to bridge social divides, they are not enough – it would require all of us as individuals to strive to be empathetic and mutually respectful too to sustain social peace and harmony.

Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam remarked in a recent interview that while people may have racial preferences, that in itself does not constitute racism; bringing these preferences out into the public sphere and imposing them on others crosses the line.

While he was speaking vis-a-vis racism, the same principles should apply to religion. Both the religious and non-religious need to appreciate that while their views may be diametrically opposed on some issues, no one group is entitled to dominate the public and policy space.

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

This will ultimately strengthen our pluralistic social fabric, and leave a lasting positive impact on future generations.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

● Mathew Mathews is head, social lab and principal research fellow, and Melvin Tay is research associate, society and culture, at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.

Religious leaders marking the 70th anniversary of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore in 2019. Existing channels which promote inter-religious understanding should be augmented, with greater focus applied on the views of non-religious individuals, say the writers. ST FILE PHOTO