

No religion: Why more in Singapore are turning away from traditional faiths

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SINGAPORE: Teenager Yuxuan ticks the “Buddhist” box on official forms, but does not practise Buddhism.

Calling herself Buddhist is a “habit” she has had from her childhood days, said the 18-year-old, who did not want to share her full name.

“I’m supposed to be a Buddhist but I’m leaning more towards (being a) free thinker,” she said. “My parents practise (Buddhism), so when they practise it, I just follow along.”

Her views reflect those of a number of young people CNA spoke to, including some whose families are Christian or Muslim. A number said that religion was not a large part of their lives, although they participate in religious rituals with their parents.

The Singapore Census 2020 showed that 20 per cent of Singapore residents had no religious affiliation in 2020.

They are now the second-largest group after Buddhists, which form about a third of the population (31.1 per cent). The third-largest group comprises Christians (18.9 per cent).

Slightly more than 15 per cent identified themselves as Muslims, 8.8 per cent as Taoists and 5 per cent as Hindu.

The census, which polled Singapore residents who were 15 years and older, also found that younger people were more likely to have no religious affiliation.

In 2020, 24.2 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 years old reported having no religion, which was higher than the 15.2 per cent for residents aged 55 years and above. From 2010 to 2020, the share of residents with no religion increased across all age groups.

AN UNEXPECTED TRAJECTORY

Dr Mathew Mathews, principal research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that the increasing number of people without religion is “an expected trajectory”.

The trend has been seen in many societies where there is “a shift away from organised religion as people become more entrenched in a secular world”, he said.

“People rely less on religion to provide them an explanation for the many things that happen in life but instead look to the sciences,” said Dr Mathews.

“Religion as an institution is no longer playing a major role in one’s life and so fewer people will pass faith down to their children.”

He added that there are definitely those who officially identify with a religion but who do not practise it.

“But often they may have some nominal acceptance of some of the religion’s core beliefs or practices,” he said.

“Even if they don’t hold steadfast to many of the these, they are probably open at some point in their life to explore their faith further or may find comfort in some of the rituals of the religion.”

The increasing number of people without religion is not a new trend. The share of such people - be they atheists, agnostics or free thinkers - has been increasing since 1980, when it was 13 per cent.

HUMANIST SOCIETY

In 2010, as the proportion of free thinkers reached 17 per cent, the Humanist Society (Singapore) was formed to provide support for people who have no religion.

The group has about 100 to 120 paid members and a growing social media following with nearly 6,500 followers on Facebook.

In a Zoom interview on Jun 22, members of the society told CNA how they started questioning some of the central tenets of the religions they grew up with, and eventually turned to humanism.

“I find sometimes morality from on high taught to you may not be right after all, and sometimes you have to think for yourself, what is moral and immoral? So that was my step away from religion,” said Mr Paul Tobin, 56, the founding president of the society.

“Labels like atheist and agnostic tell you what you are not ... whereas humanist, in my opinion, tells you what else - you see that as humans we bring value to our lives, we bring meaning to our life.”

The society fulfils some of the functions traditionally carried out by organised religion - providing a community for its members, organising charitable activities and officiating at events like weddings and births.

Vice-president Tan Ding Jie pointed out that Singapore was still a largely religious society - with 80 per cent of the population officially identifying with a religion.

He has observed that an increasing number of religious individuals have developed “a good understanding of humanism and atheism”, and the society has been invited to inter-religious dialogues in recent years.

“We have developed deep friendships and no longer see each other as religious or non-religious, but fellow Singaporeans in pursuit of mutual understanding and self-improvement,” said Mr Tan.

YOUNG PEOPLE TAKE PART IN TAOIST FESTIVALS: FEDERATION

The head of the Singapore Taoist Federation, Mr Tan Thiam Lye, told CNA that the number of young people who take part in major Taoist festivals and ceremonies is still quite high.

Many take part in the Nine Emperor Gods Festival, where there are processions to mark the occasion. Young people take up the task of bearing the palanquins in the processions, he said.

The federation was set up in 1990 to stem the trend of the declining number of Taoists, and ageing of the Taoist community, he added.

The proportion of Taoists among Singapore residents went from 30 per cent in 1980 to 22.4 per cent in 1990. There was a big fall to 8.5 per cent in 2000, going up slightly to 10.9 per cent in 2010, before dipping to 8.8 per cent in the 2020 count.

“So we were already aware of this then. In fact, through the federation’s efforts in the past 30 years, the decline has slowed compared to the sharp fall in the eighties and nineties,” said Mr Tan in Mandarin.

“We have been working hard to attract young people. We set up a youth group and gathered a batch of passionate and capable young people to spread Taoist culture. We are also trying new ways of propagating the faith.”

The federation is on Facebook and has set up a website where talks on Taoism, cultural seminars and performances are streamed live.

“There could be fewer devotees going to temples now because of COVID-19 safe management measures,” said Mr Tan.

The younger generation may not have altars in their homes but they will go to the temples on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month and other special occasions, he said.

GROWING DIVIDE

With a growing number of people who say they have no religion, Dr Mathews posits that the religious landscape could, in time to come, be marked by the differences between this group and those who are committed to their faiths.

“These identities can sometimes be at odds with each other and can lead to more conflict as both groups may view their having or not having a religion as an important marker of their identity,” he said.

“Those with no religion may feel that religious people plan to impose their beliefs and traditions on them while the religious may perceive that the non-religious are working to minimise their religious goals.

“And with the better educated on both sides of the religious spectrum, you can expect that they feel more confident in their beliefs and may find it easy to put forward their arguments.”