

New IPS Report Sheds Light on how Religion Shapes Life Orientation and Morality in Singapore

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Religion and its accompanying values remain crucial considerations in the lives of Singapore residents, even as society becomes more modern. Despite heightened religiosity, religious harmony remains a key aspect of Singapore life, and tolerance continues to be encouraged through a combination of hard and soft measures — laws (which are in fact not frequently invoked) and mechanisms to promote understanding and mediate and resolve inter-religious tensions.

On June 17, the Institute of Public Policy (IPS) released a Working Paper titled [Religiosity and the Management of Religious Harmony: Responses from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language](#). The report contains the third tranche of survey findings from a large-scale representative survey done in 2012. It documents the Singapore population's religious beliefs, and how these relate to life orientation, moral values and inter-religious relations.

IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Mathew Mathews, the lead author of the report, chaired a media briefing to discuss the report and highlighted five key points:

1. First, the system of multiculturalism continues to flourish with widespread tolerance and acceptance of diversity in public sphere relationships.
2. Second, the state is still seen as the protector of religious harmony. People still expect the state to intervene in cases of religious insensitivities, with approximately six out of 10 respondents expressing the importance of reporting such transgressions to the relevant authorities. Historically, the state has shown that it will not hesitate to intervene to maintain order, be it using soft measures such as warnings or utilising legal instruments in place such as the Sedition Act.
3. Third, data reveals that respondents from particular religions, namely, the monotheistic religions as well as Hinduism, view religion as very important to their identity. Dr Mathews suggests that such a strong indication of religious identification is shaped by the freedom and confidence to practise religion in Singapore, as long as it does not impinge on what the state constructs as the national spaces, which are to remain secular.
4. Fourthly and relating to the previous point, the importance of religion in people's lives clearly affect how they perceive relationships, especially in the private sphere. While most Singaporeans have no problem interacting with people of other religious

affiliations in the public sphere, they are less accepting of having people of different religious affiliations, for instance, as their spouse or in-laws.

5. Lastly, even within the religious groups, there is considerable diversity based on different aspects of beliefs listed. As such, the study cautions against assuming that all of those in a particular religion hold a particular view on certain issues.

The survey findings and analyses put forth in the report aim to provide a clearer picture of the religious landscape in Singapore society, covering issues as basic as ethnic-religious affiliations to more closely-guarded views such as religious morality and the perception of the state's role in multi-religious living.

The mainstream media as well as several news websites and blogs have actively cited the study in framing religious issues that have been in the spotlight recently. *The Straits Times*, for example, highlighted several points from the study such as the importance of religion in shaping morality and Singaporeans' perceptions on religious harmony. *My Paper* pointed out that Singaporeans are generally quite tolerant of people from different religious backgrounds, although it also added a cautionary note, raising the need for preparedness in dealing with new religious trends brought about by immigration.

The study also elicited a host of commentaries, a notable one coming from the Humanist Society of Singapore, which was also published by *TODAY*. The authors, Zheng Huifen and Tan Tatt Si called for a wider scope of consensus in establishing morality in Singapore, pointing out that morality can come outside of religion too, echoing the recommendations of the authors of the IPS paper. The issue of extending the guardianship of morality to those without religion was also picked up by a writer from *The Online Citizen*. The Working Paper is available on the IPS [website](#).

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