



## Religious Harmony in Tense Times

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When Terry Jones, the pastor of a fifty member church in Gainesville, Florida decided that he would organise a 'Burn the Quran Day', he probably did not anticipate the full ramifications of his actions. The scheduled burning was to be held on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 tragedy which killed thousands in New York's World Trade Centre. According to Jones, the burning of Qurans was symbolic of his congregation's belief that Islam was evil and a force of oppression. His stunt was also probably motivated by American concerns over the building of an Islamic cultural centre close to Ground Zero. This project had been criticised for lacking sensitivity towards the feelings of Americans who associate the September 11 tragedy with Islamic terrorists.

In view of the tensions in the United States (US) revolving around Islam, particularly the proposed Islamic cultural centre, the mainstream media decided it would capitalise on Jones' intentions. Showcasing the pastor's plans however, evoked strong sentiments among many in Muslim dominated societies leading to a number of protests and demonstrations. The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) was quick to call on the United Nations (UN) to denounce Terry Jones' actions. The OIC also wanted the UN to enact new measures to counter Islamophobia on the international front.

The UN Secretary General, many international leaders and heads of religious organisations, including the President of the National Council of Christian Churches in Singapore, issued statements rejecting Jones' plans. In the US, similar statements were put forward by President Obama and top American officials culminating in the Secretary of Defense calling Jones personally to request that he abort his plans in the interests of the welfare of American troops based in the Middle East. While Terry Jones acceded to requests, his face-saving statement

emphasised that he had aborted his initial plans because the proponents of the Islamic centre had decided to back down on their plan to build the centre near Ground Zero.

For the average Singaporean, viewing these events as they unfolded in the US, probably elicited feelings of surprise over how the American constitution could handicap the US government in their dealings with Jones, and its having to tolerate his intolerance. This is due to the very different Singapore experience. In Singapore, legislation to aggressively deal with any party which attempts to destabilise the religious and racial harmony the island enjoys, has been soundly put in place. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) which will be twenty years as of this November this year provides the Minister of Home Affairs the power to impose restraining orders on any religious leader who either through his words or actions causes grief to other religions or steps into political boundaries. This legislation allows for speedy action to be implemented, unlike the Sedition Act which can also be invoked against those who stir hatred among different groups of Singaporeans. This is also because no court proceedings are necessary for the implementation of the MRHA. The Minister for Home Affairs together with the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony have full powers to enforce restraining orders. Failure to comply with the restraining order carries with it a jail penalty. As such, Terry Jones' plans, should he have been in Singapore, would have been immediately checked and he would have been detained if he refused to comply.

While the MRHA has never actually been invoked in the last twenty years, the government has stated that it was nearly used on several instances. Based on media and parliamentary speeches, several religious leaders had been warned that their actions contravened the law. This includes Christian pastors who reportedly denigrated the beliefs of Buddhism and Taoism by asserting that they were senseless, and a Muslim religious teacher who alleged that the milk which appeared to have been drunk on a Hindu deity's statue was the work of the devil. By revealing their infringements, the Act attempts to shape public sensibilities to resist actions which have the potential to instigate religious hostility in multireligious Singapore.

The MRHA has been most successful in changing norms within the Singapore society, as seen in the substantial alteration of Christian evangelistic practices within the country. In the 1980s, prior to the introduction of the MRHA, a good number of Christian groups felt that in order to pursue their evangelistic mandate, it was necessary to vigorously challenge members of the other faiths about the validity of their beliefs. Such practices are now no longer common with

many churches using non-threatening approaches to propagate their faith. This is at least partly due to the normative demands of the MRHA.

Legislation alone does not guarantee the peaceful coexistence of religious groups. As depicted in the US's Terry Jones case, the major concern among political leaders was that many Muslims around the world could not accept the action of a fringe pastor as an isolated case, but saw it as a representation of what all Christians believed and wanted to carry out. This is due to the lack of inter-religious understanding within many societies. Even within the Singaporean space, after Pastors Rony Tan and Mark Ng apologised for their lack of sensitivity when discussing Chinese religious beliefs during their church sermons, it is likely that a good segment of non-Christians still view the majority of Christians as wanting to mock other faiths. This is further complicated by the fact that religious beliefs are seldom openly discussed in the Singaporean space because of fears that it will cause religious tension. The model of tolerance that Singapore subscribes to, as Phyllis Chew demonstrates in her article in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, is based on ignorance and fear instead of a proper understanding of world religion.

If Singapore is going to maintain a state of religious tolerance, it may need more than strict enforcement of the MRHA. Better public education, one which does not gloss over the differences between religious traditions, but at the same time amplifies the common treads among the different religious groups, is needed. There is little question that some religious beliefs and practices may not make good sense to others within our multi-religious society, and may even seem bigoted at times. However, this does not rule out the possibility that these religious traditions may also have important tenets that call for peaceful living with those who may not embrace the faith. As such, only with the great majority of the Singapore population understanding the rationale for various religious beliefs and the commitment of different religions to pursue paths of peace, even when their rights are infringed upon, will there be great hope for future religious harmony.

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