

Tolerant S'pore Alert to Change

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Singapore's religious landscape is in good shape, going by a recent survey carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Many here are widely tolerant and accepting of religious diversity in the public sphere: At least nine in 10 respondents across all religious faiths said they would be comfortable with someone of a different faith as their colleague or next-door neighbour.

About two in three among the 3,128 polled agreed that people of different religions live in harmony here.

The same number of respondents said they would report to the authorities if someone poked fun at racial or religious groups on the Internet or when a religious leader puts down another group in front of his followers.

However, the respondents were less open to inter-religious relationships in the private sphere, with only about two in 10 Protestant Christians saying they are comfortable with marrying a Muslim, and vice versa.

But in an ever-changing world, particularly one where religiosity is rising, such harmony could be challenged by several trends.

One of them concerns religious innovations and changes elsewhere in the world.

"These (changes) could come from different sources with different interpretations of a religion," explained Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the IPS who headed the study.

They could take the form of performing rites or rituals in an extravagant way, or even doing radical things to achieve the group's goals, he said.

Some of these changes, noted Dr Mathews, may be "incompatible" with Singapore's practice of peaceful co-existence between different faiths.

Immigrant flows could also lead to intra-religious conflicts here, as beliefs and practices in any region can differ across cultures and nationalities.

"There may be arguments about which way of practising the religion is more correct," noted Dr Mathews.

Added National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser: "Some immigrants may bring along with them their own religious interpretations and the tensions they encounter in their country of origin.

"This can affect the balance and understanding among the religions present in Singapore."

Another potential threat to religious harmony here could be the emergence of more splinter groups that insist on their own interpretation of particular religions, such as personality cults, thereby dispersing religious authority.

"Larger, more established religious organisations should take these groups under their wing and guide them, so that they can steer away from any tendencies that may destabilise religious harmony," said Dr Mathews.

Associate Professor Tan said: "The point here is that the balance and harmony Singapore now has weren't achieved overnight - it took time and effort, good policies and enforcement for Singapore to get to this stage."

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