

Religious organisations should be more pro-active in curbing foreign influences: Forum

Faris Mokhtar

TODAY, 4 July 2018

SINGAPORE — Giving an example on the issue of foreign radical preachers, several religious leaders said that their respective communities should take the lead in handling their own affairs, instead of relying on the Government to step in.

This would send a “stronger message” that they also take such issues seriously, the leaders said on Tuesday (July 3) at a forum on religious harmony.

Responding to a question from the audience on whether it is necessary for the Government to intervene to keep foreign religious influences at bay, Bishop Emeritus Robert Solomon of The Methodist Church in Singapore acknowledged that some religious organisations, including his, do not have “full control over who’s coming in”. This would require cooperation between both religious organisations and the authorities.

He added that both parties working together will send “a much stronger message that these people are kept out, not only by the authorities, but also by the faith communities”.

It is “not helpful” if the Government is perceived as acting solely on its own, Dr Solomon said.

Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, senior director of religious policy and development at the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), also said that there is a need for each religious community “to own our religious discourse”.

And it is the duty of religious leaders to deter foreign radical preachers from influencing their communities, he added.

Reverend Monsignor Philip Heng, the vicar-general for finance and administration as well as inter-religious relations at the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, said that religious leaders have the “primary responsibility” to screen foreign preachers invited to speak or attend events here.

He pointed out, for instance, that there are measures in place for foreign preachers invited by Catholic churches.

Such preachers and their materials, including sermons, have to be cleared by the chancery, which is an arm of the Archbishop’s office that handles clergy matters among others. This is to ensure that they do not propagate extremist views that could stir ill will among the various faiths.

In the past year alone, the Government has barred five Muslim and Christian preachers from setting foot in Singapore, as they were deemed to have been preaching divisive teachings.

At a separate panel discussion held as part of the forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, a similar question about government interference in religious affairs was also posed to Mr Wong Kan Seng, former Minister for Home Affairs.

Law professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University asked whether government intervention might weaken society's ability to handle religious tensions.

Mr Wong, who was formerly Co-ordinating Minister for National Security before retiring from politics in 2011, stressed that the "state doesn't have to come in, unless there is a problem or unless you have to nip a problem in the bud".

He added: "As a minister, I always say, 'Leave them alone until we know that there is going to be a problem. And when it's going to be a problem, you stop it before it happens.' So, that's my approach."

Such an approach continues to be adopted by the current government, Mr Wong observed. "We do not deliberately go and get involved in religious affairs. We leave it to the religious leaders. The state's job is to make sure that we have an environment that is liveable for people."

However, in the event that a "problem" is surfacing, he reiterated that it is important for the Government to act quickly.

"If you are suggesting that we should leave it to the religious leaders to sort themselves out, I'm sorry, that would not happen because it would lead to more problems. It's better that the Government steps in before it happens."

Still, government intervention does not mean that "we always come down hard", Mr Wong said. The Government would try to tackle the problem through measures that would cause the "least friction", he added.

Discussion on the separation between church and state appeared to be a key topic at the forum, with religious studies experts at yet another panel discussion pointing out that Singapore's emphasis on secularism does not mean that it is "anti-religion".

Mr Richard Magnus, an adjunct professor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences' School of Law, said that there are two schools of thought on secularism.

The first is anti-religion in nature, out of fear that religion could be used as a political tool, while the other is accommodative secularism, which allows members of the society to practise their religions freely and ensures that they co-exist peacefully. Singapore falls in the latter category, he noted.

Mr Mohammad Alami Musa, head of studies in the Inter-religious Relations in Plural Societies programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, also noted that Singapore has a unique secular system, which he calls "secularism with a soul". He even suggested enshrining secularism in the Constitution to protect it, as well as broadening the legal framework to contain intra-religious tensions, such as those between the Islamic Shia and Sunni communities.

However, he cautioned that the state has to “moderate itself” lest it ends up being extreme, such as in the case of France, where its government had banned Muslim women from wearing the veil.

“Just like how religion can go the extreme way, secularism can go the extreme way, and this will cause tensions with the religious communities,” he said.