

Keeping The Faith With The Faithless

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Ken Lee Wen Foong describes his family as “pretty atheistic/agnostic”.

It is a family model not heard of all that often in public discourse.

“My father challenged the idea of God when I was really little,” says the 19-year-old. “Every time I said ‘Oh my God’, my father will reply ‘Which God?’”

From the age of 15, Foong identified himself as an agnostic, someone who believes it is not possible to know anything about God and refrains from committing to any religion. His two siblings, according to him, are atheists, people who deny or disbelieve the existence of God.

If the findings of the Department of Statistics General Household Survey (GHS) 2015 is anything to go by, more families like the Foongs could feature in the Singapore demographic in years to come. Those with no religious affiliation constituted 18.5% of the resident population. Five years ago, the proportion was 17%.

More young people featured in this category in 2015. Of the non-religious group, 23% were between 15 and 24, whereas 14.6% were aged 55 and above. When it comes to the precise nature of belief, though, breaking the numbers down further may not reveal a straightforward picture.

Non-religious and heterogeneous

As Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Mathew Mathews says in an article for *The Straits Times*, “What people mean when they declare that they do not belong to any religion is contested. For one thing, we know that those who say they have no religious affiliation are not precluded from subscribing to supernatural beliefs.”

“In an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Working Paper on Religiosity and Religious Harmony published in 2014, my co-authors and I noted that based on survey data of over 3,000 Singapore residents, out of those who had indicated that they were not religiously affiliated, 42% held on to some form of supernatural belief.”

The choice between identifying as an atheist and an agnostic can be a fraught one. Pearl Lin says that for a long time she was on the fence, but counts herself as an agnostic. She considers herself first and foremost, though, as a humanist.

“It’s basically believing in the basic goodness of people,” she explains. The 22-year-old student is an executive committee member of the Humanist Society (Singapore). The organisation has been around since 2010 and currently has around 150 members who are atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and humanists.

The ‘humanist’ tag is more palatable than the ‘atheist’ one, it would seem. “It sounds a little less aggressive. If you say you are an atheist, people have this preconceived notion of what an atheist is. People just think you are completely against religion and so I think they are more comfortable with our identifying as humanists because a lot of people are not sure what it is.”

“And from there you can kind of educate them on the meaning and tell them that basically we’re just a bunch of people who believe in reason and science, and also that we do not need organised religion to tell us what is right or wrong.”

Rules of engagement

Richard Dawkins, a famous evolutionary biologist, atheist and humanist is seen both as an icon and a bane for the non-religious. His book *The God Delusion* (2006), along with other books like Christopher Hitchens’ *God Is Not Great* (2007) and Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith* (2004), ushered in what is known as the New Atheism movement.

Dawkins courted controversy in 2014 when he said a mother should have aborted her foetus if she knew it had Down’s syndrome. Fellow atheist and humanist Daniel Dennett said such public spats could seriously damage Dawkins’ long-term legacy.

When asked about the combative brand of atheism, Lin says she is not taken by it. “I always think, if there is a more peaceful way of resolving conflict and tension, then I would choose that over adopting hardline views and trying to be very fierce and aggressive.”

She thinks Singapore is not ready for a more strident form of criticism of religion. “It’s definitely going to take time. I don’t see it happening. Definitely, as a whole, I think we’re rather conservative as a society, despite the increasing non-religious views.”

One of the more peaceful means of bridging the gap between the non-religious and the religious is dialogue. On 18 March, Leftwrite Center, together with the Humanist Society (Singapore), held *Religion & Atheism — A Conversation*.

Founding member of Leftwrite Center Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib says the challenge in holding a dialogue between the religious and the non-religious is not unique from the challenge in holding a dialogue between different religious groups.

“It is the same whenever we want to hold discussions over a matter that is considered ‘sensitive’ or laden with preconceived opinions about how the discussion will turn out. I think this is symptomatic of our society’s inexperience in engaging difficult issues publicly and our over-reliance on state authorities to settle whatever differences we may have among ourselves.”

Singapore, he adds, is becoming more diverse and fragmented. “This is not something to be feared but to be properly understood as part of the process of change in any open society.

“The challenge is to equip citizens with the necessary tools to be able to accept the deep diversity, to communicate in a way that can aid mutual understanding, and to accept the imperative of living together as a cohesive society that respects the freedom of individuals and the right to differ in the spirit of tolerance and goodwill.”

The inter-faith activist says during such dialogues, the first step is to reduce “the various simplistic views” both sides may have of each other. The negative perceptions the non-religious have of the religious and the religious have of the non-religious are usually “represented by two extremes of both sides”, according to him.

“Atheists, for example, should see that religion is not just superstition but an essential element in the development of civilisation as seen throughout history from the earliest times. People of religion too should not see atheists as having no moral compass or hedonistic, simply because of the absence of a belief in any type of religion.

“Atheists can be as moral and spiritual in the broadest sense of the term, as much as not all religious people are moral or spiritual. To be able to ‘humanise’ both sides and to show the nuances within both, the religious and non-religious communities, is the aim of the *Religion and Atheism* dialogue.”

Common community

Imran believes Leftwrite Center’s forum is the first of its kind and “it will require a few more to normalise such discussions without thinking that people of religion and people with no religion are competitors and nemesis in public discourse over various issues such as role of religion in public sphere, homosexuality, and such”.

His point echoes Dr Mathews’. The IPS researcher said engaging the non-religious should “commence now while a substantial portion among the religiously non-affiliated are still ‘believing’ and sympathetic towards matters of faith”.

Perhaps indicative of this, Lin, in explaining the appeal of the Humanist Society (Singapore) for her, draws parallels between it and religious congregations.

“When you look at people who are religious, they go to church and they have cell groups, and then they feel a sense of belonging and (are) part of this one big family.

“For me, in a sense, it’s similar, being part of the Humanist Society. You get to talk to a diverse range of people... I love talking to people who are intellectual, in my opinion. It provides a space for us to just be able to talk and share our views with people who have similar standpoints.”