

Holding one's peace may no longer keep the peace

Denise Chong

The Straits Times, 18 April 2016

Silence is not golden. It can lead to you becoming an unwitting co-star in someone else's narrative.

In a time of endless social media outbursts, it is easy for you to be misinterpreted if you do not speak up. In a time of growing assertiveness by some religious groups, it is easy for the non-religious to be misunderstood if they do not join the conversation.

Some time ago, someone I was eating with wondered out loud: What on earth can a humanist group in Singapore be holding a meeting for? Talk about what?

To talk about people asking what on earth humanists have to talk about, I guessed. The Humanist Society (Singapore) said in a recent Straits Times report that the group's role is to provide a voice for the non-religious who, it said, tended to be excluded and forgotten.

The person probably assumed that everyone at our meal had the same religion, and so felt free to be light-hearted in tone. Assuming that everyone at the table has a religion at all is actually a dicey thing to do these days, considering how a rising number of Singapore residents do not have one. The recently released Department of Statistics' General Household Survey 2015 report found that those who said they had no religious affiliation constituted 18.5 per cent of the resident population last year - up from 17 per cent in 2010.

There is a growing need to learn how to talk about the sacred as well as the secular in a respectful way.

In Parliament last week, Nominated MP Kuik Shiao-Yin said that conversations about religions still take place on the surface because the youth are afraid their comments "could be offensive and get them into legal trouble".

"If we don't model for our youth what respectful conversation about religion looks like, someone arbitrary and potentially dangerous will fill the gap for us. It could be a fundamentalist thought leader, a bigoted website or just prejudiced, ill-informed peers," she said, suggesting that Faith and Reason modules be developed for schools and the wider community. These could deal with issues like preserving freedom of religion, and the secular nature of the state, reported The Straits Times.

The thing is, if you are a non-religious person, and you think all this talk about faith does not involve you, well, you still are involved.

In politics, one way in which the talkers can misrepresent the non-talkers is by wielding the dichotomy tactic: Either you are with us or you are with the enemy. In this view, whether you want to be part of the conversation or not, you are the co-star of their narrative. You may be the anti-hero, even if all you did was to wake up and wonder what's for breakfast.

You can be misrepresented as being a pro-government sycophant if you are not consistently banging away in an anti-government way, or vice versa. But how about if you don't want to

share or you just don't care during, say, a general election campaign? It doesn't matter, maybe you will be talked about as being part of the "silent majority".

How can all of our wonderful complexity and contradictions as humans fit tidily into only a "for" or "against" position? Life is not a secondary school debate.

There are plenty of religious people who value what unites the religious and non-religious.

In a Straits Times report, Singapore Buddhist Federation's Venerable Seck Kwang Phing said: "As long as there is moral education, and the ability to differentiate between what is right and wrong, there will always be common ground among the religious and non-religious."

But when the ambiguous is being defined by others, do they have to get themselves organised just to avoid being misrepresented?

Singapore Management University's Asian Studies assistant professor Chang-Yau Hoon, who was the keynote speaker at a recent dialogue between the religious and the atheist in Singapore, wrote in a Sunday Times article this month: "I was not at all surprised when I was told that this was the first 'interfaith' dialogue between people with and without a religion. The sheer fact that we lack a proper term for such a dialogue - other than calling it an 'interfaith' dialogue - proves this point." The dialogue was organised by The Humanist Society and The Leftwrite Centre.

On the one hand, the non-religious may just simply want to engage with society in an organised way. On the other hand, is it also a hint that the religious and the non-religious are competing more passionately to shape social norms? There have been contests of beliefs such as the recent one over the Madonna concert here with religiously controversial elements.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Mathew Mathews wrote in The Straits Times last month: "For this group which is likely to see continued growth, the desire to live out the ideals of their faith and oppose the forces which may contravene this means that they, at least sometimes, may apply their beliefs on social norms. Such public displays of faith, including pronouncements by religious leaders of what is deemed as unacceptable or immoral, are bound to irritate those with different religious beliefs, and those with no religion."

Dr Mathews also wrote: "Perhaps it is time for people with no religious affiliation to be included in dialogues with the religious. This might foster greater sensitivity among the religious and those with no religious affiliations to understand mutual concerns and find ways to negotiate potential tensions in order to preserve a cohesive Singapore society."

Is it a case of please speak up, or someone else will dominate the conversation?

It seems holding one's peace may no longer keep the peace.