

# Making Religious Harmony A Way Of Life

## *Editorial*

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THE findings of an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey - which show that six out of 10 people believe there is a high level of religious harmony in Singapore - reveal the foundational achievements of secularism here.

These successes rest on the state's equidistance from all religions, its impartiality towards all and the absence of any hostility towards organised faith.

The state is not neutral towards religion: instead, it seeks to protect religious harmony both through the law and by encouraging inter-religious understanding. However, because the state has no religion and no religious preferences, it has created a secular space in which citizens can practise their faiths without impinging on those of others or on the making of public policy. The soundness of that space is shown by the degree of popular trust elicited by the survey.

Many would be aware of the different ways state-religion separation has been tested in the past - for example, the online FAQ on sexuality by the Health Promotion Board which sparked comments from religious groups.

Yet, the secular state remains a normative reality in Singapore and many want the state to play a central role in maintaining religious peace.

Most are confident that rising religiosity will not affect inter-faith harmony. When some religious figures occasionally have transgressed the boundaries of acceptability by denigrating other faiths or religious practices, not only has the Government come down on them, but credible religious leaders have also moved swiftly to reaffirm the need for mutual respect. Misguided fundamentalists and straightforward bigots there always will be, but they should not be allowed to set the religious agenda.

The majority must show how trust in and openness to one another can reveal the possibilities of religion as a socially cohesive force.

The majority's satisfaction with the rights that religious groups enjoy underlines the balance that Singapore has sought to strike between religiosity and a public sphere which, while not closed to religion, is not a part of it.

The IPS study provides welcome respite from the almost daily barrage of news about religious dissension, intolerance and violence in societies around the globe. Religious militants are trying to reverse Iraq's democratic gains through armed terror. The egregious kidnapping for sale of innocent girls by the Boko Haram has cast a pall on Nigeria. Attempts to redefine multi-religious states in confessional terms are gaining traction in South-east Asia.

Extremists do not belong to any one religion. What they have in common is a visceral distaste of respect and tolerance. Singapore must go against the grain of this major threat to world peace.

