POLITICS 360; Beware Of 'Culture Wars'

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Need to manage rising religiosity and rising advocacy from secular groups

THE authors of a survey on religion released their findings this week with a rather upbeat interpretation of the results: A healthy level of religious harmony exists in Singapore society even as we have become more religious.

In the Institute of Policy Studies survey, which polled about 3,000 people in Singapore, six in 10 believe that different religious groups get along.

This has come about because of the building of cohesive relationships among the different religions, through a framework of hard and soft measures including laws such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and platforms to promote interaction such as the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles.

But recent incidents show that we need to pay attention to a potential fault-line, one that is not between religious groups, but between them and "secular" groups over beliefs, values and lifestyles.

Overseas, in countries like the United States, some have termed these clashes the "culture wars", or loosely speaking, struggles over clashing beliefs and behaviours.

As an example, a problem can take shape when a religious group espouses a certain lifestyle, while a cause-based interest group is stumping for the acceptance of an alternative one.

There has been tension in Singapore over lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender or LGBT lifestyles. In the last month alone, a Christian group and a Muslim group have made plans to take a stand against the annual Pink Dot picnic organised by the LGBT community to promote "the freedom to love" regardless of sexual orientation.

This year, one Muslim group has objected to Pink Dot taking place on Saturday, June 28, the day Muslims hold the first evening prayer to mark the start of the fasting month of Ramadan.

Earlier in the year, Christian and Muslim groups also protested against the frequently asked questions or FAQ on sexuality, including homosexuality, on the Health Promotion Board's website.

The groups asserted that the FAQ, being portrayed as factual, normalised same-sex relations.

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong responded in a parliamentary reply and said the key message of the FAQ was to prevent sexually transmitted diseases by encouraging fidelity in relationships, regardless of sexual orientation.

Last year, the Faith Community Baptist Church clashed with Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin over its sacking of a pregnant employee of the church who had committed adultery.

Mr Tan ordered the church to pay the woman's salary and maternity benefits of $7,000, after deciding that she was "dismissed without sufficient cause".

The church paid up, but later went to the High Court to seek a judicial review of the decision, and has been given the green light to proceed.

What the church wants the court to decide is whether Mr Tan had a right to interfere in what it says is a religious affair. But the issue also raised questions about whether a place of employment in a place of worship is considered a secular public space.

So given that there is both rising religiosity and rising advocacy from non-religious groups, and as their values run up against each other, there is a need to think hard about managing the relationships between them.

In Singapore, lines are drawn concerning the areas where religion can tread. For example, denigration of another religion to gain adherents is frowned upon.

Similarly, religion and politics cannot mix, such as where a religious leader calls on his flock to back a particular political candidate.

While it is not spelt out explicitly in Singapore's Constitution, the 1966 Constitutional Commission Report describes Singapore as a "democratic secular state". The 1989 White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act also states that "religion must be kept rigorously separate from politics".

Secularism in Singapore is understood to mean equal treatment of all religions by the state and of those with no religion as well.

In his 2009 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said that for the Government to remain secular, it has to be "neutral and fair".

He recognised that "people who have a religion will often have views which are informed by their religious beliefs". And "religious groups are free to propagate their teachings on social and moral issues. They have done so on the integrated resorts, organ transplants, 377A, homosexuality", he said.

In the same speech, he also reminded religious groups of others in society who have different views informed by different beliefs, and said: "You have to accept that and respect that."

Some believers worry that a strand of militant secularism, already present in Europe, could find its way to Singapore.

A British politician used the term militant secularism in a speech in 2012 to warn against the marginalisation of religion throughout Britain and Europe.

While Singapore has developed norms of engagement between religious groups, with rules and laws in place, the next step may be to develop the rules of engagement between religious and non-religious groups.

But instead of focusing on group interests, a starting point may be for all parties to learn how to get along first as individuals.

After all, in a democracy, everyone has the right to express his beliefs, as long as these do not violate existing laws. And a healthy secular society must allow for a plurality of views.

However, Singapore's unique, multi-religious context means there must be limits, preferably set by consideration for others. Resorting to specific laws in this situation could be difficult, since any number of groups and causes can emerge over the years.

Ultimately, practising tolerance will benefit the groups, who are battling for the hearts and minds of the middle ground who are still undecided.

After all, in such fights, it is usually the most reasonable who will prevail.