Religious Identity Strongest In Muslims, Protestants
IPS Study Finds They Are Most Concerned About Moral Issues And Friends Giving Up Beliefs

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SINGAPORE — Religion is important to their identity, and Muslims and Protestant Christians are the two religious groups that are most affected by and most disapproving when friends or family members of the same faith give up their religious beliefs.

They also feel more strongly than their Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic and other counterparts about moral issues such as homosexual sex, sex before marriage, adoption of children by gay couples and gambling.

These were among the findings in a study on religiosity and management of religious harmony released yesterday by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The study's authors said: "Considering that for many Muslims, Protestants and Catholics, a mark of the good person includes the teaching of one's morals, it is important that they temper this with a respect for those who do not share such values."

About two-thirds of Muslims and 44 per cent of Protestants said religion was very important to their sense of identity — significantly higher numbers than those of other faiths. About 69 per cent of Muslims and half the Protestants said they disapproved of family members of their faith giving up their religious beliefs, compared with 20 per cent of Buddhists and 31 per cent of Hindus, for example.

The study's authors noted that giving up religious beliefs is more disconcerting among religious groups where there are higher levels of religious participation and identity.

Lead author, IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, said greater religiosity among Muslims here was observed a few decades ago and coincided with increased global Muslim piety. Many Muslims in Malaysia and the region also take their religion very seriously and this is increasingly so, he noted. As for Protestants, the dominant form of Protestant Christianity here is of a "conservative variety where there is an emphasis on doing the right thing".

Many Singaporean Protestants are first-generation Christians and "you expect converts to be a lot more fervent about their faith, especially since they made a choice to embrace the religion", Dr Mathew said.

Mr Noor Mohamed Marican, president of Inter-Religious Organisation, said it is important that Muslim and Protestant leaders have strong ties and communication with different religious leaders, as inter-faith dialogues based on goodwill will prevent misunderstandings. "We must learn to respectfully agree to disagree and see above and beyond our disagreements," he said.

Speaking in his capacity as Bishop of the Lutheran Church, Reverend Terry Kee said: "If you look at the survey, it's not just Muslim and Christians ... almost all the faiths had similar

conviction in terms of the importance of good strong morals. With the increase of non-religious influence ... (and) in the face of eroding moral fabric of our society, this actually brings the religious community closer together ... on how we can work together to preserve and protect the moral value of our nation."

Rev Kee, who is also a vice-president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, added: "So this would not be a problem between different religions but, rather, it may become a problem between a more united religious community versus the non-religious."

Literary and cultural critic Nazry Bahrawi of the Singapore University of Technology and Design also felt Singapore's biggest challenge with regard to harmony is not inter-religious. "Rather, our developing 'culture war' really has to do with how Protestants and Muslims react to changing views of sexuality," he said, urging both religious groups to consider theology from multiple traditions and perspectives.

Singapore could consider ethics instead of moral education modules in schools to promote more empathy and less judgment of others, he suggested.

The study's authors also warned that vibrant religious centres elsewhere are likely to have some influence on believers in Singapore through constant exchanges and the Internet. With immigrant flows, there is the possibility of intra-religious conflicts over theology, religious practice and other issues.

Established religious structures here should also be open to incorporating "splinter groups" with their own interpretation of religion and "steer them clear from tendencies that may destabilise religious harmony", they wrote. Additional reporting by Laura Philomin