

What Religious Leaders Must Do

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The recent call by a Muslim religious teacher for Muslims to wear white as a symbol of their allegiance to “purity” and traditional family values drew support from a number of other religious leaders.

Pastor Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church, among others, expressed his solidarity with the Wear White campaign and its espoused principles, urging Christians to likewise don white for Sunday services.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) called for restraint from all sides, pointing out that the Wear White campaign could potentially polarise society amid the tension generated by holding the Pink Dot gay rights rally at the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Statements by the Roman Catholic archbishop, the National Council of Churches and other Muslim groups unequivocally stated their moral position against homosexuality and, in some cases, included advice to their members on how to deal with the Pink Dot event.

Trust In Religious Leaders

Findings from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Survey on Race, Religion and Language suggest that moral beliefs can be influenced by religious discourse.

In the survey, which polled a representative population of more than 3,000 Singapore residents, 60 per cent of Muslims and Christians said their religious ideas had considerable influence on their views on other areas of life.

It is not surprising that religious adherents expect their leaders to provide guidelines on how they should conduct themselves. Religious leaders who remain silent about moral positions would betray the confidence that believers have in them.

However, in this age of digital and social media, statements by religious leaders have a much more pervasive reach, even if they do not identify the world as their parish.

This has inevitably led to those who do not agree with them feeling that the religion-inspired pronouncements are imposed on the beliefs, and possibly lifestyles, of a broad swathe of society.

The 2012 World Values Survey showed how Singaporeans feel about religious groups. About 72 per cent of the nearly 2,000 Singaporeans polled said they had quite a lot of confidence in religious organisations. Among those who were religiously affiliated, this figure was much higher.

There were more who reported confidence in religious organisations compared with those who were confident in either the media or civil society organisations. With such trust in religious organisations and, by extension, their leadership, it would be safe to assume that statements by religious leaders weigh heavily on the minds of the faithful. This is especially so for Muslims and Christians.

The IPS survey found that about half of Muslims and Christians agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I accept what my religious teachers tell me about how I should live.”

The Singapore Government has long recognised the importance of religious organisations to the social fabric. While it is a secular government, it is not atheistic and has carefully regarded the sensitivities of religious groups.

Thus, religious organisations and their leaders have been involved in various initiatives — both in the management of social needs ranging from the rehabilitation of drug addicts to the promotion of healthy lifestyles, and in the consultation process before the implementation of potentially-controversial government policies. For about a decade now, the state has also included many religious leaders in Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles, which work to promote dialogue and harmonious living in this multiracial and religious society.

Going Beyond A Moral Guide

It is clear that religious organisations and leaders have considerable influence to mobilise their adherents towards certain causes.

However, they must realise that the semantics involved in such campaigns or even the very nature of the cause can result in religious entities polarising society.

Religious groups are viewed very positively by all when they act altruistically to mobilise the masses for charitable causes.

But, when religious groups take on issues which necessitate them taking a moral stand, it has the potential to spark off antagonism and divide society. This is especially so if the issue is not discussed in a calm and civil manner.

While religious groups should certainly stand for what they believe in and express these views freely, given their influence and responsibility as leaders in a diverse society, they will have to carefully consider the consequences of planning for a particular mass movement, lest the situation deteriorates into a confrontation, fragmenting Singapore society.

Furthermore, there are many other ways for religious groups to propagate their beliefs and state them plainly, without having to resort to confrontational campaigning.

Religious organisations and their leadership should not only play the role of moral guide for their adherents. They must also ensure that society is not fractured. Peace is a crucial dictum commonplace in world religions.

There are enough historical examples from all over the world where religious leaders have instigated radical behaviour which has irreparably damaged society.

Being aware of this, the Singapore Government established the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990 to give the Government powers to stop religious leaders who may mobilise their members in a way which undermines social cohesion. Ideally, the MRHA should remain as a deterrent.

It would be useful then for religious leaders to remain cognisant of the consequences of what they say or do, not only on those who have embraced their religion, but also on the others who have not.

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