

## Religion and the Demons of Singapore Society

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The Institute of Policy Studies published a working paper entitled [Religiosity and the Management of Religious Harmony: Responses from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language](#) on 17 June. Although one could nitpick with the methodology of the survey and questions, the report on the whole is insightful and makes for a compelling read.

The various entities who will take an interest in the findings on religiosity in Singapore will, no doubt, have different ways of interpreting the data and utilizing it for their own ends. The [Today](#) broadsheet reported a Reverend Terry Kee, Bishop of the Lutheran Church, who hastens to weigh in on the findings by stating:

*“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.*

*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.”*

In his ill-advised comments, Reverend Kee, who is also vice-president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, frames the religious segment of Singapore as the bastions of morality and demonizes the non-religious group as the principle threat to morality. Having this common enemy is, of course, a convenient bogey in beckoning solidarity among the various religions groups. The reality, as the IPS study also alludes to, is an uneasy truce particularly amongst those of the monotheistic faiths as a necessary conceit for peace. Reverend Kee’s comments highlight the perceived need, amid an environment of increasing religiosity, to find common ground among the faiths to achieve its shared goals.

The IPS report, wisely, warns precisely against this:

*“While religion provides its adherents a framework to evaluate morality, this will need to be tempered with a respect for those who may not share similar religious values. What is needed is greater dialogue to achieve coherence between the various principles espoused by different religions, and a set of **universal principles** agreeable to all, including secularists.”*

The “secularists” the report refers to is likely those who declare themselves to be in the “No Religion” category which makes up 17% of Singapore’s resident population—a segment larger than Islam (15%), Protestant (11%), Taoist (11%), Catholic (7%), Hindu (5%) and Others (1%). Only Buddhists, at 33%, outnumber those who categorize themselves as having no religion. It is possibly for this reason that Reverend Kee is appealing for other faiths to work together to outnumber and outflank the non-religious community.

Some [reports](#) suggest that, in the U.S., “no religion” is the fastest growing religious status. As some respondents fear declaring themselves as non-believers due to discrimination and

persecution, it is possible actual figures in studies are on the conservative side. In Singapore, there is much scope for trends to change rapidly and unpredictably as it welcomes millions of migrants to settle in the country.

Reverend Kee would do well to recognize that regardless of one's religious affiliation, in a secular state, his rights are the same as everyone else's. He would want it that way particularly in the circumstance those of his faith dwindled and are overwhelmed by non-believers and those of other faiths. Already anecdotal evidence suggests distrust in churches in the shadow of scandals here and elsewhere as well as dissatisfaction with the church's position on certain issues.

Reverend Kee would also not want to run afoul of Singapore's most famous agnostic, the litigious Lee Kuan Yew, by inferring that Lee is lacking in morals simply because he does not adhere to a religion.

What is particularly interesting in the IPS study is that religious labels are not reflective of the personal religious beliefs of adherents. Whilst we know, in today's world, that not all Muslims share the same viewpoints with respect to their faith—that there are radical Islamists and moderate ones, for example—it is perhaps less obvious that there is a similar spectrum of diversity of personal beliefs even among Christians, Hindus or Taoists such that one cannot be certain of an individual's personal beliefs and practices even if one knew the religion of that person.

Although it may be considered heretical for an adherent to utter such thoughts, the IPS paper says about a third of Hindus and half of Buddhists stated that they do not believe in reincarnation, a basic tenet of their faith. Surprisingly, the report states that 17% of Muslims believe in reincarnation! Fewer than two-thirds of Muslims and Protestants believe in the idea of Satan. And, one fifth of those in the "No Religion" category believe in the existence of God. It is indeed fortunate that, in Singapore at least, burning or stoning heretics is not permissible.

To the person in the street, or place of worship, it has always been blatantly obvious that such great diversity of views exists within faiths that it calls into question the point of labels. Though Reverend Kee may claim to speak for Lutherans, he cannot be sure, despite his sermons to them, what his congregants really believe in private.

This diversity within faiths reinforces the real importance of secularism— which demands respect for all regardless of their beliefs—in fostering harmony and stability in Singapore. Respect for universal human rights is a far more sustainable means of achieving peace than the tenuous compact among religious groups suggested by Reverend Kee. The IPS data suggests that the good morals Reverend Kee refers to would include proselytizing to others. To the question, "To be a good person, one has to teach others your morals", 70% of Muslims and 67% of Protestants agreed. 46% of Protestants—the most by far—also felt "To be a good person, one has to convert others to your religious faith". This concept of morality, of course, presents the government with the significant challenge of setting the boundaries within which religious groups may function to manage potential tensions. Thus far, the report concludes the government has done well in this regard.

No doubt politicians will take a look at the figures in the IPS paper to formulate their positions on issues and weigh the impact of these positions on votes from their electorate. As a result,

religious groups may feel empowered to make demands on politicians in support for their positions. The anti-LGBT lobby by religious circles is evidence of this.

History, and the government's track record, would suggest the religious groups, regardless of their numbers, will have little luck with the LGBT issue unless they can present an economic basis for their appeal. The IPS paper reveals that the government's decision to build the two casinos in Singapore is a highly unpopular one. Seventy percent of all respondents believed that gambling is "almost always/always wrong". Even among the "immoral" No Religion group 61% believed this to be the case.

Another group which will scrutinize the paper are the bureaucrats at the Media Development Authority, who will no doubt repeat their mantra that this report, like others before it, is evidence that Singapore is a conservative country. Therefore, if one religious group takes offense at a film, it should mean no one should be able to watch it. This, of course, is a perfect way for religious entities to hold each other to ransom, demand respect, and extract reciprocity. By continuing to adopt this approach, the MDA will have glossed over a key outcome of the IPS report which demonstrates that, given the diversity of views within a faith, no religious group speaks for all of its adherents.

To conclude, the takeaway that will be the most comforting to all is that over 50% of all respondents in the IPS study believe that "virtuous and good people (regardless of religious beliefs)" will go to heaven. (Presumably, this figure would have been higher if not for the fact that 21% of respondents do not believe in heaven.) It is indeed wonderful that there are many in every faith that believe that righteousness can contribute to one's salvation—no need for labels or categorizations.