

How should Singapore go about having religious discourse on social issues, especially contentious ones?

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TODAY, 20 November 2019

A recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) paper on fault lines revealed significant differences in opinion regarding religious leaders strongly articulating their views on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues in public.

More than 60 per cent of the 4,000 respondents to a nationwide survey indicated discomfort to varying extents with this scenario; the rest indicated otherwise. Over two-thirds of those who expressed such discomfort also had concerns that increasing religiosity is a threat to harmony.

For this group, discomfort may arise from their fears of highly charged-up religious leaders and their equally activist communities making public pronouncements and imposing their beliefs on others. This could subsequently lead to the undesirable narrowing of the public space and social discord.

Such discomfort may be borne out of instances where some religious voices and endeavours were perceived as radical and confrontational in nature.

One example is the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) saga a decade ago involving a takeover of its management council by a group of conservative Christians who opposed what they claimed was the advocacy group's push for more LGBT rights.

Another example is the Wear White campaign — an anti-LGBT movement organised as a same-day rejoinder to the Pink Dot rallies annually.

Of course, radical pro-LGBT discourse is evident too, such as in the online space where vitriolic narratives of repugnance for religion, coupled with assertions of bigotry and closed-mindedness, are advanced without restraint.

“Militant” engagement by both sides is unlikely to be productive in assuaging the concerns or informing the views of the general public. Often, it only encourages more visceral and emotive responses.

In such a fight to the bottom where discourse is shaped by the most radical and loudest voices on both sides, there are no winners.

Based on the IPS survey, many Singaporeans understand that anger and polarisation will likely take root in such a scenario. Only 17 per cent of respondents surveyed believed that a failure to properly manage LGBT issues would be inconsequential.

Already, we see the extent of anger and polarisation occurring in a number of other countries.

Cultural conflict between various social groups and the struggle for dominance of their values, beliefs, and practices in the United States have resulted in deep fragmentation of its social fabric.

The tone and nature of socio-political debate has also deteriorated into often acerbic, bigoted engagements.

Religion's role in community and policy

Singapore has a secular Government. But Singapore society is by no means secular — we are multi-racial and multi-religious. Religion must be practised with an appreciation of this social context, and engage people with love and empathy.

The way forward is for religion to constructively inform public discussions alongside other segments of society, and for all to acknowledge the right and value of each other's inputs through civil engagement.

We should not desire the divorce of religion from social discourse too, even as it stands separate from politics. Religion continues to play a valuable and relevant role in informing policy — it has done so for millennia as the arbiter of ethics and morality.

For instance, against the backdrop of rapid progress in Singapore's biomedical sciences, the Bioethics Advisory Committee canvasses views from local religious groups on their beliefs and understanding of the sanctity of life in the context of issues arising from neuroscience, stem cell research, and more.

Policies to mitigate the discontent arising from development and scientific progress would be deficient without the inputs of religion.

Religion is not merely an armchair critic of societal mores. It plays a laudable role in mitigating a variety of social issues through charity and social service provision.

Such involvement extends beyond the confines of respective religious communities. Many Singaporeans at one time or another would have been the beneficiaries of medical, educational, or eldercare services furnished by religiously-affiliated institutions.

Presently, a significant portion of Singapore's social services sector comprises such institutions, spanning a plethora of issue spheres such as underprivileged youth, disabilities, financial hardship and a wide range of addictions.

These organisations also influence the broader community to live out the virtues of charity and kindness. For many religious adherents, faith entails altruistic pursuits — and society at large is better off as a result.

Beyond its public good, we should not forget the role religion plays in the lives of its adherents, given how it is an important conduit for morally virtuous pro-social behaviour.

Based on the most recent population census, over 80 per cent of Singaporeans profess to have religious beliefs. For the religiously affiliated, the views of their religious leadership can shape their perspectives on social issues.

In this regard, the input of religion does not stand in isolation from society at large. It represents significant segments of society and hence has its rightful place in public discourse.

With more people not affiliated with religion, both worldwide and in Singapore, alongside ever-evolving dilemmas on morality, the relevance of traditional religious viewpoints may come increasingly into question.

The public reception of religious voices will become increasingly discerning, even critical.

However, the emphasis on cordial discussion and persuasion — as opposed to more “activist” forms of engagement — must persist in order to ensure the preservation of our harmonious social fabric.

At the same time, the state as the secular, final arbiter on social policy must continue to provide all groups with fair opportunities to air their opinions to the masses.

While religion may not see eye-to-eye with some, on questions such as LGBT issues, this in itself should not be a reason to desire the exclusion of religious communities from public discourse.

Disagreements are par for the course in discussions of nearly every social issue in a democratic space. Open, tempered, and respectful engagement should be our response, as opposed to exclusion and hostility.

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