

Nearly 1 in 2 young S'poreans open to extremist views being posted online, survey shows

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TODAY, 28 March 2019

SINGAPORE — Nearly one in two young Singaporeans are open to religious extremists posting views online, a paper on religion by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has revealed.

The findings — released on Thursday (March 28) in a paper titled Religion in Singapore: The Private and Public Spheres — showed that nearly 46 per cent of those aged 18 to 25 would allow extremist views that deem all other religions as enemies to be published.

Across all age groups, more than a quarter (26.8 per cent) of the 1,800 Singaporean residents polled were open to religious extremists publishing their views on the Internet or social media.

However, this does not apply to people such as archbishops and imams — 97.4 per cent of the respondents said that it would be unacceptable for religious leaders to stoke hatred or violence against other faiths.

Market-research company ML Research Consultants carried out the face-to-face poll with 1,800 Singaporean residents — comprising citizens and permanent residents — late last year, as part of a multi-country survey for an international study on religion.

The survey sample mirrored the general profile of Singapore's population closely, especially in race and gender.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

Some young people interviewed by TODAY were surprised by the survey's findings.

Nanyang Technological University undergraduate Elgin Chong, 23, said that views propagated by religious extremists were "inappropriate" as they could mislead online users into committing acts such as terrorism.

"It could mislead many very pliable young people, who may base their judgements only on these extremists' posts," he said.

Mr Chong, who is in his second year of communication studies, suggested that the findings could reflect that most of the youth polled saw the importance of freedom of expression.

Mr Justin Ong, 24, a final-year student at the Yale-NUS College, said that there is no room for extremist views online.

While it is fine to express love for one's religion and religious leaders, he said that the freedom to convey one's views does not mean hate speech should be condoned, as this could harm people of other religions.

"The Internet is a space where many youths cultivate their beliefs and thoughts, and form their worldview. Many beliefs can and should exist, but beliefs that might cause harm to others should not be tolerated," he added.

'WORRYING' FINDINGS

The paper's authors, Dr Mathew Mathews, Mr Leonard Lim and Ms Shanthini Selvarajan of the IPS — a Singapore-based think tank — said that the findings were worrying, even though it was “comforting” that most Singaporeans would not allow religious extremists to make their views known online.

This comes amid rising self-radicalisation, hate speech and Islamophobia around the world.

The researchers said the findings suggest that while Singaporeans acknowledge that inciting violence is a clear “out-of-bounds marker”, some do not have an issue with extremist views being posted online, so long as they do not instigate harm.

But it is a “fine line” between espousing extremist views that deem other religions as enemies and straying into the arena of hate speech, they said. “How the Government navigates the desire by this significant segment of the population for freedom of speech pertaining to extremist views in future will be of interest.”

TODAY has contacted the Ministry of Home Affairs for its response to the findings.

Here are some of the other highlights from the survey:

HIGH LEVELS OF RELIGIOSITY

The study found high levels of religiosity among Singaporeans, with more than three in four (76.5 per cent) saying that they followed a religion.

However, only about three in 10 (30.9 per cent) attested to following a religion and being spiritual.

Which groups were likelier to follow a religion but not identify as spiritual? Taoists (68.3 per cent), Buddhists (61.7 per cent) and Hindus (52.6 per cent).

Christians came up tops in identifying themselves as following a religion and being spiritual (55 per cent), followed by Catholics (46.9 per cent), Muslims (45.7 per cent), Hindus (36.8 per cent), Buddhists (26.2 per cent) and Taoists (23.1 per cent).

VIEWES ON INFIDELITY, GAY SEX

While most respondents believed that infidelity is “always wrong” (82.4 per cent), fewer viewed homosexual sex (67.9 per cent) or abortion in a low-income family (38.3 per cent) likewise.

Those without a religion had the most liberal views towards infidelity. Seven in 10 (71.7 per cent) among this group felt that infidelity is always wrong, compared with Muslims (92 per cent) and Hindus (91.8 per cent), for example.

As for homosexual sex, Muslims (84.8 per cent), Christians (78.3 per cent) and Hindus (78 per cent) were most against it, compared with those without a religion (50.2 per cent).

RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Seven in 10 respondents (72.7 per cent) believed that people from different religious backgrounds can get on when they live close to one another. Muslims and Christians were likelier to hold this view.

This reflects strong support for inter-religious harmony, the authors said.

On attitudes towards other religions, the respondents viewed Christians (65.2 per cent) and Buddhists (64.9 per cent) most positively.

The authors acknowledged that the findings may reflect that those from these religions were largely Chinese, who form the majority of the respondents.

The survey also asked respondents if they deemed those from the different communities “threatening” or not.

Those perceived as the least threatening were Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and atheists (or non-believers). Most of the respondents also found Christians (93.5 per cent) and Muslims (84.5 per cent) not very, or not at all, threatening.

Still, there was a group (15.6 per cent) who perceived Muslims as threatening.

STATE-RELIGION SEPARATION

Nearly eight in 10 Singaporeans (76.1 per cent) felt that a country’s laws should not be based on religion.

The respondents were, however, split on whether they would follow a new law or their religious principles if both came into conflict. About half (48 per cent) will follow the law, compared with about four in 10 (35.6 per cent) who will stick to their religious teachings.

Christians (67.6 per cent), Muslims (66.3 per cent) and Catholics (61.6 per cent) were more likely to side with their religious principles over the law.

WHAT THE FINDINGS SHOW

As countries across the globe face increasing religious fervour, albeit amid rising levels of atheism, the authors said that the study painted a “favourable” picture of religion in Singapore.

“Though there is a fairly large proportion of religious Singaporean residents, they appreciate the positive inter-religious relations here and recognise behaviours which are not in keeping with inter-religious peace,” they said.

There is much consensus on issues of inter-religious harmony and the need to maintain this via a separation of state and religion, and a disciplined religious leadership that is careful about causing offence to other faiths, they added.

Still, potential areas of concern and tension should be dealt with, they said. These include the significant share of the population that would allow religious extremists to propagate their views online and that a bulk of Christians, Muslims and Catholics may follow their religious principles rather than the law if the two are in conflict.