

# Religion still matters

**But we must resist the tendency to view every contentious issue from a religious perspective**

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Religion is in the spotlight again globally and locally. Perhaps, it is a sign of the times. At one level, religion inspires as a creed and is an instrument by which believers seek the transformation of self, family, and society.

We live in a "post-secular" age, which German philosopher Jurgen Habermas describes as a society where the secular domain includes essential contents of religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm, enabling society "to rescue the substance of the human".

In short, religion still matters.

That is certainly the case in Singapore. Earlier this week, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng noted Singaporeans' growing religiosity and growing religious assertiveness, especially in the public sphere.

He observed that amid the increase in proselytisation activities, security concerns are thrown up when "overzealous and self-righteous" followers engage in aggressive and insensitive propagation of their faiths.

This is not new. Such an observation was made in the 1989 White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony, which led to enactment of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

More worryingly, Mr Wong added that Singaporeans now "appear to be less tolerant over perceived slights to their religion, and are more ready to retaliate".

The Internet has also exacerbated the situation. Not only is it used for missionary activity, it is a convenient tool for venting hatred and abuse, the spread of extremist materials and ideas, and facilitating self-radicalisation.

In the same week, Senior Minister Professor S Jayakumar spoke of hardening Singaporeans in the fight against terrorism.

This can be done through the whole-of-nation enterprise of "mainstreaming counter-terrorism".

This requires our developing collective norms of vigilance, and rejecting



Issues of religious harmony still have the potential to whip up emotional fervour here, as seen during the Aware saga last year. TODAY FILE PHOTO

extremism and violence.

In launching the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore's (Muis) third three-year work-plan last Saturday, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim highlighted the need to develop Islamic religious content and thinking that is relevant to Singapore's context.

For example, the Muslim community's religious life has to be denominated by a progressive religious outlook embracing inclusiveness and diversity.

Among other things, these three speeches point to the salient theme of the role of religion in public life. Secular governance is a necessity in our multi-religious society.

But, as the speeches acknowledge, to pretend that religion has no role to play in public life is to be blind to the reality that politics and religion are not hermetically-sealed compartments.

The religious beliefs of believers form the foundational premise of their identities and drive their value systems. Faith also involves making moral claims, traversing

meaning and reality, and a conscious suspension of disbelief.

For example, mainstreaming counter-terrorism requires faith communities, particularly, to play their part in countering extremist and violent ideas at the grassroots.

Dr Yaacob noted that mosques here have evolved from being places of worship to become multi-faceted centres intimately involved in social development assistance, youth outreach, family life and even inter-faith activities.

This close nexus of politics, religion and society is evident. Even when made on the basis of secular grounds, public policy choices still have to pass the litmus test of being reasonable and acceptable to most citizens regardless of their religious convictions.

It is impossible to remove moral questions from everyday affairs and politics. Yet, we must resist the tendency to conceive and to evaluate and confront every contentious issue from a religious perspective.

Moral panics are inherently divisive and self-indulgent. Also, 15 per cent of

Singaporeans do not subscribe to any faith.

Our Constitution states that "every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it".

While we are not required to privatise our faith, it is certainly not an unfettered right to evangelise with callous disregard to others.

Will religion be a fertile source of conflict in Singapore? That depends on you and me. If faith communities do not self-regulate, we will see more frequent "values" clashes where prejudice and stereotypes dominate.

Ultimately, our enjoyment of religious liberty will depend on our respecting and protecting the religious liberties of others.

Without that fundamental ethos, our own liberty, security and prosperity will be threatened. Not to do so would also be anti-religious and undemocratic. ■

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