

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

MANY COMMUNITIES, ONE SHARED FUTURE

Event Report

19–21 June 2019

RSiS

S. RAJARATNAM
SCHOOL OF
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore



**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**
SINGAPORE

Event Report



19–21 June 2019
Raffles City Convention Centre Singapore

Report on the Conference organised by
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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OVERVIEW¹



More than 1,000 delegates from government bodies, religious groups, civil society organisations, and academic institutions from close to 40 countries gathered in Singapore from 19 to 21 June 2019 to discuss the challenges posed by extremism and exclusivism that are stoking tensions across the globe and causing polarisation. They met at the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) convened by the S. Rajaratnam School of Studies (RSIS), with the support of Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

The conference was aimed at providing a platform for conversations on forging stronger inter-faith understanding and sharing best practices for building more cohesive societies. One outcome was a greater appreciation of social diversity. There was a recognition of the strengths and challenges involved in weaving together disparate communities in society to make a strong, cohesive whole. For instance, participants cited the need for religion to be included as part of the solution for peace, rather than be considered the problem causing divisiveness. For that to happen, mutual learning, trust building, mutual respect and inter-faith dialogue were considered necessary steps.

¹ A version of this overview appeared in *The Straits Times*, Singapore, on 27 June 2019

Forging a Common Identity

Education, acknowledging different experiences and welcoming human resilience rather than enforcing a single rigid identity were also highlighted as vital ingredients in unifying communities. If shared values and norms form the basis of inclusive identities, as many speakers noted, then collective action from every sphere of society is needed to forge a common identity.

What was clear too is that the work of achieving harmony in society is ongoing and never done. As Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat said in his closing remarks at the conference, "Building an inclusive and cohesive society in Singapore is always a work in progress, and this is true for every other country." It is particularly true at a time when divisive views and fake content designed to stoke strong emotional reactions are rife on digital media.

Putting Words into Action

One thing that stood out at the ICCS was the often repeated call to engage the young. This makes sense, considering that the problems arising from social fault lines are long term, spanning generations.

Furthermore, social media and digital platforms are the arenas where the battle of ideas is increasingly fought and where young people are most likely to be found. The challenge then is to come up with the messages and narratives best suited to win them over.

The ICCS Young Leaders Programme, which preceded the main conference, was an acknowledgement of the importance of getting youths involved in playing a bigger and more active role in community building.

Sharing Experiences and Ground-up Work

Building cohesion in society is dependent on many variable factors. What works in one society may not in another. Seen in this light, the ICCS is an invaluable platform for the sharing of ideas among different groups on how to meet their common challenges. Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious make-up as well as its ability to survive the odds with minimal disruption to social harmony makes it an ideal place to host the ICCS.

However, while Singapore can offer inspiration to other communities still trying to bridge social divides, it is essential that Singaporeans not take for granted what the country has attained; instead, they should see good communal relations as an ongoing project, working always to find ways to forge stronger common bonds.

The Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony, which was unveiled during the ICCS by 259 faith groups in Singapore, is one such example. It also underscores the importance of ground-up initiatives in ensuring peaceful coexistence.

Paving the Way for New Relationships

The ICCS may have ended but the boost it has given to the cause of forging social cohesion continues. By bringing academics, policy makers, thought leaders, and practitioners together to participate in robust discussions, it has paved the way for the building of new relationships and the strengthening of existing ones.

The conference provided avenues to learn from others and find similarities in the work they do. This was the case for two speakers — Mr Christian Picciolini, a former American white supremacist recruiter, and Dr Noor Huda Ismail, an Indonesian activist who works to rehabilitate radicalised fighters from the so-called Islamic State (IS) group. Vastly dissimilar in their backgrounds, both saw common purpose in their current missions.

The hope is that the ideas generated and the contacts made will result in further exchanges and collaborations to find ways to push back against the polarising forces that are threatening to tear apart many countries.

Alongside global initiatives that are already taking place, such as the “A Common Word” initiative and the “Christchurch Call to Action”, the ICCS seeks to bring more people together on inter-religious endeavours to expand the common ground.

Moving into Deeper Conversation

The strong interest shown in the ICCS suggests that there is a strong mood for more conversation and engagement in this critical enterprise, not only in Singapore and its ASEAN neighbours but farther afield.

And yet while governments, institutions and platforms like the ICCS can create awareness and initiate more dialogues, what matters ultimately is grassroots support. Social cohesion is an ongoing process where everyone has a part to play.

As Singapore’s President Halimah Yacob, who mooted the idea of organising the ICCS, said in her opening address to the conference, “A nation cannot prosper if its people are divided. A society cannot be proud if its people distrust each other.”

In his keynote address to the conference, Jordan’s King Abdullah II also underscored the individual’s role in combatting the threat to inter-faith harmony,

mutual respect and trust. “Solutions are not exclusively the job of governments and big companies,” said the King, urging young people to do their part on social media.

The key takeaway from the conference was that despite its challenges diversity should not be viewed as a hindrance. What matters is how we view diversity in society and make the most of our differences, bearing in mind we share one common future.

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong
Executive Deputy Chairman, RSIS



OPENING ADDRESS



**HER EXCELLENCY MADAM HALIMAH YACOB
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE**

Mr Teo Chee Hean, Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security;

Mr Goh Chok Tong, Emeritus Senior Minister;

Ministers;

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS;

Distinguished guests,

Good evening.

Thank you for participating in the International Conference on Cohesive Societies, and a very warm welcome to our friends who have joined us from all over the world. I am deeply heartened to see many participants from all parts of the world, and I hope the message will continue to reverberate way beyond this conference.

We are here because we believe in a common ideal — that diversity in all forms,

within and across societies, is a source of strength that can enrich our lives, our countries and our world.

Individuals with more diverse social networks are more likely to encounter new ideas, new opportunities, and new horizons. Understanding different perspectives promotes curiosity, openness and humility.

Societies that are diverse enjoy a rich variety of cultures, each with its own style, grace, customs, cuisine, music and manners. Each community contributes to a more interesting and vibrant national life.

The world would be all the poorer if it had no room for difference. If we were all the same, we would have nothing special to offer, nor anything to learn from others. Each of us has something precious that only we can give. The more diverse we are, the richer we become.

Nonetheless, engaging meaningfully with diversity is not easy. Globalisation and technology have closed the distance between people and places, allowing people, goods and ideas to move across borders more freely than ever before. This in turn has enabled economies to prosper and changed the lives of many for the better. But people do still instinctively bond and connect with those who are like them. The colour of one's skin, the beliefs one holds, the customs one cherishes, are markers of identity, and can sometimes also become the fault lines of mistrust and conflict. Indeed, there is growing urgency to our work in our respective countries and communities to build bridges across such divides.

The ease in the flow of ideas with modernisation has inadvertently accelerated the spread of extremist ideologies. In the past 10 years alone, there have been nearly 20,000 terror-related fatalities worldwide annually. Religions have been hijacked by terrorists and radical preachers to justify murder and destruction. Since its proclamation as the Islamic State in 2014, the terrorist group known as IS has directed or inspired terrorist attacks around the world, from Bandung to Berlin to San Bernardino, resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries. The direct human cost has no doubt been devastating. But just as extreme and deadly and fuelled by the same irrational fears and ignorance is the menace and rapid rise of Islamophobia and acts of violence promoted by a resurgent Far Right.

Global mass migration of peoples has also created its own challenges, by fuelling both segregationist and nativist instincts. Quite understandably, immigrants seek out their countrymen upon arriving in an unfamiliar land, and adherents of a faith find fellowship with their co-religionists. Those belonging to one culture find comfort and a sense of belonging among their own. But when taken to the extreme, such tendencies can invite host societies to see these immigrants as

threats to their own cultural cohesion. Worse still, such anti-immigrant rhetoric may take on racial and religious overtones.

This weakens society. A society is fragile if its members view each other in mutual incomprehension. It is vulnerable when its communities live parallel lives and inhabit separate worlds.

A nation cannot prosper if its people are divided. A society cannot be proud if its people distrust each other. Only a cohesive society built upon mutual trust can harness the strength of its diversity, so that its people can build a better future. And this trust has to begin with a discourse anchored on cohesion, not division; on unity, not discord; on respect, not distrust; and on building bridges and common spaces, not walls and watchtowers.

Strong leadership and deep social mobilisation are vital elements to achieving cultural change. Leaders play an important role in promoting peace and social cohesion at both the national and international levels. But often we see political leaders articulate division and conflict for their own personal agendas. Hence, all societal actors must play a part in managing diversity — from government leaders to individuals, from the media to educational institutions. We need to take ownership of our social harmony. We need to be role models for one another.

Over the next two days, I hope we can find new perspectives and insights among ourselves about how we manage diversity in our different countries, with our different histories and contexts. Many in this room are global leaders and thinkers in this important area, so I do not profess to be able to guide you in the discussions. But if you allow me, I would like to share what I believe are the foundations of social harmony in any society.

First, there must be accommodation, which includes creating space to celebrate our own distinctive cultures, whilst accepting differences, and not imposing our practices or requirements on others. We should enable this by emphasising shared values such as empathy, kindness and respect, which are universal to all religions and cultures.

Second, there must be dialogue and interaction to foster familiarity and friendships with one another. Contact through informal interactions can go a long way to improve relations among diverse groups. This can be done in many ways, from eating and working together on a day-to-day basis to sharing interests and passions in sports, music and the arts.

Third, social cohesion has to be cemented by a shared conception of the common

good and a felt reality of collective belonging. Without this, communal, ethnic and religious institutions can become pressure groups, representing sectional interests, and not the common good. Upholding the common good means holding our differences not in opposition to one another, but bringing our differences together to build a future that we all share. What makes us different is what we are; what unites us is what we do. However different we all are, we rely on one another for security, stability and prosperity. Ultimately, our victories — and our failures — are shared.

How these three principles manifest themselves will differ from place to place. There are many paths to social harmony. Our national journeys are unique, and we see great value for lessons and experiences to be shared and better understood in our own countries. Tomorrow, His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al-Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan will be delivering the keynote address. Located at the crossroads of the beginnings of two major faiths, Christianity and Islam, Jordan has made great efforts in the past 20 years to strengthen social harmony within the country and internationally, by advocating for and supporting inter-faith initiatives. For example, King Abdullah II advocated for and funded an inter-faith initiative called “A Common Word Between Us and You” in 2006, which promotes peace and cooperation between Muslims and Christians. Jordan has also embraced the conservation of historical and religious sites, which has contributed to a greater appreciation of our shared human heritage.

For Singapore, this conference is important because social cohesion is of existential importance to us. We are a small city-state, with no natural resources save our people. We mark Singapore’s Bicentennial this year, a key turning point of our history. Forging unity and drawing strength from diversity has always been, and will continue to be, part of the Singapore story.

Singapore has come a long way from the days our immigrant forefathers formed ethnic enclaves, which were further entrenched by the colonial administration. When Singapore became independent in 1965, we were deliberate in moving away from that approach, and instead focused on growing national unity from diversity through legislation, policies and programmes. We expanded common spaces so that all Singaporeans can live, study and work together. No one is discriminated against or disadvantaged on the basis of race, language or religion. That is also enshrined in our national pledge, recited by all the children in schools every day. Everyone progresses based on their abilities and talents.

Today in Singapore we have a sense of confidence and belief in a shared future,

one in which all Singaporeans can be a part of, as neighbours, friends and colleagues. We are not doing too badly — a recent survey showed that 94 per cent of respondents feel Singaporeans are able to stay united even when events threaten the racial and religious harmony in Singapore.

But, ultimately, social cohesion is not something that can be commanded by any government. It can only be nurtured and inspired by each of us, and what we do every day. Friendships and connections will have to be built, face to face. Social trust has to be forged, one positive encounter at a time. Strength from diversity can only grow from dialogue, give and take, speaking and listening. I am thus glad that in conjunction with this conference the religious leaders in Singapore have come together to affirm a Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony, in which they encourage day-to-day positive interactions so that people continue to talk with one another, work together, and live together as one united people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Singapore, along with all countries, faces a common challenge of overcoming the forces of division. We can do better with more ideas, inspiration and partnerships. There is much we can learn from each other's beliefs, practices and experiences in our effort to build cohesive societies from many communities, and move together towards a brighter shared future for all. So let me thank all of you once again for contributing to this meaningful and important discourse. I encourage everyone to use this conference as a global dialogue, where we can learn from one another in a safe and trusted space.

I wish you a fruitful and meaningful conference ahead.

Thank you.

WELCOME REMARKS



AMBASSADOR ONG KENG YONG EXECUTIVE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN, RSIS

Her Excellency, Madam Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore;

His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al-Hussein, King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan;

Chairman of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Dr Tony Tan;

Ministers;

High Commissioners and Ambassadors;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning. A very warm welcome to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies or ICCS in short.

A special thank you to His Majesty King Abdullah II and his royal entourage. We are deeply honoured by your presence and support.

We appreciate the participation of so many speakers and delegates from Singapore and countries around the world.

The world we know is changing rapidly. Many things have been transformed. While some of these changes are positive, some had posed considerable challenges to our pursuit of peace and cohesion.

Issues affecting inter-religious relations can no longer be dealt with in isolation. Increased connectivity, the rise of social media, fake news and demographic shifts have made conversations on sensitive subjects very difficult, especially in diverse societies.

The theme for this conference is “Many Communities, One Shared Future”. In order for many communities to share one future, openness and acceptance are of utmost necessity. We need to have more dialogue. We need to communicate more effectively among people of all levels. Above all, we need to strengthen mutual respect and trust.

As a multi-racial and multi-religious society, Singapore is deeply aware of all these and we have worked hard to maintain our cohesion and unity.

We are assembled here to exchange our knowledge and best practices, to learn from each other, and to rejuvenate individual and community efforts for the well-being and security of our societies.

As we discuss inter-religious issues in the ICCS, we must not forget our young people. Their voices are important in helping us shape the shared future we envision. Through the Young Leaders' Programme of this conference, we created opportunities for the young generation to engage in deeper conversations to forge stronger understanding and share new ideas to foster greater harmony in our diverse societies.

His Majesty King Abdullah II has travelled long distances to join us today. His Majesty is a global leader in promoting inter-faith understanding, dialogue and inclusivity. His Majesty has led many important international initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence among people.

It gives me immense pleasure, on behalf of all of us present this morning, to invite His Majesty King Abdullah II to share with us his vision for cohesive societies.

Thank you.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS



HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH II IBN AL-HUSSEIN HASHEMITE KINGDOM OF JORDAN

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Madam President;

Your Excellencies;

Distinguished Guests,

Thank you so much for having me here today. I am delighted to be in Singapore again.

Madam President, I deeply appreciate your invitation to this important conference. Because the dynamism I see here is urgently needed to tackle the world's single most important threat — the attack on inter-faith harmony, mutual respect, and trust.

Threat to Inter-Faith Harmony

And I say “single most” because every global challenge in this 21st century demands we resist hatred and exclusion. Economic growth, peace-making, protecting the environment, global security, inclusive opportunity — all these critical goals require that we cooperate, and combine our strengths to our common benefit.

After the recent, murderous attacks on houses of worship in Christchurch and Sri Lanka, after so many terrorist actions around the world, who hasn't seen the evil that extremists will do to drive us apart?

But we must also see, clearly, the tremendous power we have, as a united world, to defeat these evils and secure the future our peoples deserve.

The vast majority of people on earth are members of a spiritual community. Each has its own traditions and convictions. But our world religions also have something profound in common — the commandment to show compassion and respect for others.

Such values are at the heart of my faith, Islam. For Muslims, “The Compassionate” is among the beautiful names of God. For the Qur'an says:

“Call upon God, or call upon the Most Merciful, whichever you call upon, unto Him belong the most beautiful names.” (17:110)

In His compassion and mercy, God requires that we, in turn, show mercy and compassion, respect others, and live in peace. These core Muslim teachings and values are at the heart of my work for mutual understanding. And I am joined by 1.8 billion other Muslims who live and work in partnership with their neighbours to create a better world.

So those who preach a hate-filled message about Islam are distorting our religion's great heritage and teachings. And whether this hate speech and violence is perpetrated by the outlaws of Islam, the *khawarej*, or by extremist Islamophobes, it is a threat to all humanity.

And the fact is to “love one's neighbour” is not just an ideal. It is the golden rule that enables all of us to live side by side, to look beyond ourselves, and to achieve what we can only achieve in common.

We need to defend this global social cohesion with all our might. And, allow me to suggest three areas of special attention.

Defend Social Cohesion

First, let us gather our forces, the billions of people on earth who seek peace and harmony. And I'm pleased that two Jordanian initiatives, "The Amman Message" and "A Common Word", have inspired positive exchanges worldwide. Jordan also sponsored a UN initiative, the annual World Inter-faith Harmony Week, to encourage far reaching dialogues of mutual respect. And, I congratulate Singaporeans for your sterling participation over the years, with a wonderful focus on young people.

A second priority must be to take advantage of the tools of the modern world. Now extremists have manipulated today's global connectivity to plot, recruit, arm, and publicise their dark atrocities. We must do better.

In 2015, seeking a new paradigm for international cooperation in global security, Jordan initiated the Aqaba Process. At the heart of this ongoing effort is addressing the narrative of hate wherever it is found. Dialogue between governments, civil society, and the technology sector has been central. And we are seeing results. In fact, as we have seen time and again, we all do better when we speak to each other, and work collectively.

Last month, I attended the High-Level Meeting on the Christchurch Call to Action. This meeting focused on safeguarding the online environment from those who abuse it to do harm to others. A few days ago, a follow-up meeting was held in Jordan to further identify practical steps.

But solutions are not exclusively the job of governments and big companies. In a very real way, the Internet belongs to its users. Moderate, positive voices need to reclaim this space and redirect the dialogue away from misinformation, insults and fear, and towards understanding and respect. Young men and women have a vital role in speaking up on social media and social networking sites, and using their talent for innovation to promote mutual understanding and hope.

A third priority is to commit for the long term. We face a complex and evolving threat. Meeting it demands a holistic approach addressing security and also the issues that extremists exploit. And that means investing in inclusive, sustainable development, so that all people — especially the young people — can share in opportunity, fighting the war of ideas to combat divisive ideologies, and then responding to the world's unprecedented refugee crisis.

Concluding Remarks

We must also help resolve conflicts, especially the core crisis of my region, the long denial of Palestinian statehood. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has fuelled global discord and radicalism. We all need a lasting peace, meeting the needs of both sides: a viable, independent, sovereign Palestinian state, on the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital, but living side by side with Israel, in peace and security.

And we must safeguard Jerusalem, a holy city to billions of people around the world. As Hashemite Custodian of Jerusalem's Islamic and Christian holy sites, I am bound by a special duty. But for all of us, Jerusalem should be, and must be, a unifying city of peace.

People speak these days about the challenges facing multi-cultural societies. The truth is we are all part of the one, great, multi-cultural society that is our world. So your work here, together, can help all humanity thrive. I wish you every success.

Thank you.

PERSPECTIVES ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

Panellists

Dr Paul Hedges

Associate Professor in Inter-Religious Studies, RSIS

Presented a paper developed with

Professor Katherine Marshall

Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, and Executive Director, World Faiths Development Dialogue

Ms Karen Armstrong

Historian of World Religion

Chair

Dr Shashi Jayakumar

Senior Fellow, Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security, and Executive Coordinator, Future Issues and Technology, RSIS



Leading for Robust Diverse Societies: Challenges and Opportunities

By Professor Katherine Marshall and Dr Paul Hedges²



Prof Marshall and Dr Hedges' paper began with the observation that diversity is the natural state of human societies and is true even of those societies that have traditionally seen themselves as homogeneous. While some societies seek to minimise or hide their diversity, diversity is nevertheless evident in terms of gender, religion, ethnicity, and lifestyle choices.

Diversity

In presenting the paper, Dr Hedges noted that societies are faced with two questions when managing diversity. The first relates to the course of action they should take when faced with diversity. This could be either inclusion, where people embrace and celebrate the way of life of others, or exclusion, where people deny others their human dignity and outrightly reject differences.

The second question pertains to the challenges that leadership needs to navigate when managing diversity. This was an implicit theme throughout the paper.

² Dr Paul Hedges presented a paper developed from the speaking notes prepared for the conference by Prof Katherine Marshall, who was indisposed.

Social Cohesion

The paper highlighted three important aspects of social cohesion. First, people in cohesive societies ought to trust and respect one another. Second, in a cohesive society people must accept diversity as central to being human and embrace it. A cohesive society should also seek to include those who are not a part of the majority. Finally, a cohesive society should have people with resilient identities. The way people understand their own identities in relation to that of others is important and we must be careful in how we construct our identities. Further, while identity markers are unavoidable, identity and diversity should not be politicised and weaponised.

Tensions and Promoting Cohesion

Dr Hedges drew attention to the variety of tensions that affect society, from security issues stemming from extremism and terrorism, the contemporary refugee and migrant crisis and climate change to populism arising from a crisis of legitimacy, social media as a platform for spreading hate, a lack of humanity, and cultural and religious ignorance. It was particularly stressed that social media and populist political leaders are potential danger points in many societies. A key point highlighted in the paper was the notion of development and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Dr Hedges noted that "solving" poverty would not automatically lead to social cohesion. He added that dialogue and youth engagement are essential tools to help build understandings of diversity and promote alternative discourse. Leadership is also important. Leaders should act as agents of social change and seek to understand what they do not know. Leadership, moreover, is not just about political leaders but applies all the way through society from youth leaders, the media and grassroots activists to religious leaders and others engaged in civil society movements and interfaith work.

Hypothesis for Action

The paper ended with Prof Marshall's hypothesis for action, as framed by Dr Hedges. This stressed that religious and cultural literacy is imperative in the management of diversity. There is a need to appreciate the variety of religious, secular and cultural divides in society and address grievances such as inequality and poverty to prevent them from being exploited by extremists. Likewise, leadership must speak to the heart of people's identities and set parameters of acceptable behaviour, articulate civic norms and act as agents of change to effect societal change. Finally, the dialogue and engagement process should be expanded to include inter-religious networks, youth and women.

Perspectives on Cohesive Societies

By Ms Karen Armstrong



Ms Armstrong noted that while there were many secular reasons for having an inter-faith dialogue, she had yet to hear any religious reasons for inter-faith dialogue. She said she would, therefore, attempt to start a discussion on some of the possible religious reasons.

Having Humility in the Discussion of Faith

Ms Armstrong stressed the importance of Transcendence. She stressed that academic definitions fall short when we attempt to talk about God, the Divine, the Tao, or Nirvana. Rather, she said, we should recognise that Transcendence is something that is beyond words and situated in our experience of it. She recalled that when she was a young girl attending catechism class God was defined as the Supreme Spirit who only exists in Himself and is infinite in all perceptions. However, such a definition was meaningless to an 8-year-old. Even the theologian Thomas Aquinas, who composed five proofs of God's existence, claimed that all he had proved was the existence of a mystery, that all beings have a beginning and an end, and that we do not know what Being itself is.

Truth May Be Found in Experience

On her point that the Transcendence needs to be experienced rather than captured through an academic definition, Ms Armstrong said there was a need to transition into silence for this purpose. She recalled a story from ancient India where the

Brahmin priests would have competitions aimed at talking about the Brahma, the ultimate reality. The first priest would kick off the competition, drawing on his immense insight and learning to talk about how he perceived the Brahma. The other priests would follow suit one after the other. However, the priest who won the competition was the one who could reduce the whole community to silence. This was because it was in silence that the Brahma was present, and, Ms Armstrong added, it is in silence, that we can begin to experience the Transcendent.

Not Conflating Religion with the Divine

Paraphrasing a Chinese philosopher, Ms Armstrong noted that all of our religious traditions are like fingers pointing to the moon. The moon is up there beautiful and luminous, but we can never touch it. The trouble is that very often we focus on the finger and not the moon. Likewise, Ms Armstrong added, when we talk about religions, about the divine and the Transcendent, we often forget that religion is about transcending beyond ourselves. Instead, she lamented, we often use our religious traditions to boost ourselves. While doing so is important in helping us form a sense of identity and providing historical context to our beliefs, we should not forget that religion is not meant to just confine us but to help us transcend our egos, she said.

The Golden Rule

Ms Armstrong felt that religion should not merely be a private practice but a public one that engages others. She identified the Golden Rule, that is, “Do unto others what you want others to do unto you”, as a concept integral to all religions. This concept was also integral to the idea of the pursuit of justice in political and public life. Ms Armstrong drew examples from the teachings of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism to support this view, stating that all religions seek the creation of a decent society where the vulnerable are protected. She reminded the audience that religion could not always mitigate the injustices of the state, and thus while our mission is to recognise the transcendence of God it is not to retreat into private spirituality. Instead, we should go forth into the world to assuage the suffering of the masses.

Reflections

Ms Armstrong ended her presentation with some reflections: that every human being was a unique and unrepeatable incarnation of God; that we should recognise the holiness of every single human being and every faith; and that we should not praise our own faith and disbelieve the rest, for if we do this, we will miss out on much that is good. She concluded that God cannot be confined to any one creed, for wherever one turns one can see God’s divine face.

PLENARY 1: WHAT WE BELIEVE (FAITH)

Panellists

Bishop Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot

President, Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Vatican City

Venerable Guo Huei

Abbot-President, Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan

Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir

Deputy Mufti, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)

Dr Veena Howard

Associate Professor, Asian Religious Traditions, and Coordinator of Peace and Conflict Studies Programme, California State University, Fresno, United States

Chair

Dr Farish A. Noor

Associate Professor, RSIS

The plenary focused on the role of faith in inter-religious relations. Within the context of a global society with diverse religious beliefs, it examined how:

- (1) positive inter-religious relations are expressed in religious doctrine, traditions, and practices;*
- (2) religious doctrine and practices influence the way faith communities relate to one another in a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic society; and,*
- (3) the diversity of religious beliefs in turn enriches the interpretation and expression of faith.*

Role of Faith in Forging Social Harmony in Pluralistic Societies

By Bishop Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot



Bishop Guixot focused his presentation on the important role that faith plays in forging social harmony in pluralistic societies. He argued that faith promotes the true values of human fraternity for world peace and living together amid the challenges of fragmentation and growing intolerance in today's society.

Inter-Religious Dialogue

He then offered the Catholic perspective on inter-religious dialogue, highlighting three points. First, Catholics have been involved in inter-religious dialogue since the Second Vatican Council, with the *nostra aetate* (Declaration of the Relation of the Church with Non-Christians of the Second Vatican Council) giving the Church the doctrine and practice by which followers must approach other religions and believers. With the declaration, it has been the Church's interest over the past five decades to encourage inter-religious dialogue and to draw on the spiritual and moral heritage of religions for the values that contribute to harmony and the common good between cultures. Specifically, Bishop Guixot said that all religions must urge their followers to work towards preserving the human dignity of an individual as part of the common good.

Second, the belief in human dignity and everyone's right to religious freedom is at the core of the Catholic social teaching. Noting that religion had often been seen as part of the problem behind prejudice and bigotry, Bishop Guixot argued that religion is instead the solution. Religious leaders, he said, could work together in society to do works of charity, to participate in international debates about the dignity of the human being, and to propose essential values that constitute a just society.

Third, safeguarding refugees, migrants and victims of human trafficking is part of contributing to human dignity. As conflicts grow, there are also a growing number of refugees and migrants who have no way to go or to be safe. Thus, Bishop Guixot argued, it was important for religious communities to welcome, protect and integrate refugees and migrants so that they could find the peace they desperately needed.

Conclusion

Bishop Guixot posited that as believers of different religions we ought to promote dialogue, which is a necessary condition for peace in the world. He noted that through dialogue religious communities would become an instrument of unity helping to build a better society, founded on mutual respect and friendship.

Religious Faith and World Peace

By Venerable Guo Huei



Ven. Guo pointed out that all humanity is one earth community that is dependent on each other for survival. As such, he said, we should seek to engage in constructive inter-faith dialogue, searching for common ground while respecting differences.

Universal Values Across All Religions

Ven. Guo noted that every religion cherishes life and teaches the universal values of mutual respect, charity and forgiveness. The starting point of any inter-faith dialogue should not be the presumption that each person's belief is the only right one but a recognition of the richness of other traditions, he stressed. Respect is a universal value of all religions, and it is needed to ensure that all are treated equally and invested in solutions. Ven. Guo stressed that the willingness to play down one's own stances and perspectives would give him or her the capacity to connect and dialogue meaningfully and to discover commonality and collective wisdom. Constructive inter-faith dialogue seeks commonality while respecting differences, he said.

Ven. Guo emphasised that seeking common ground is not to deny that differences exist but instead to search for the common ground and thereby ensure peaceful coexistence and cooperation. When everyone in a dialogue is treated as an equal, and everyone's contribution is considered equally important, the collective wisdom of the group is activated.

Mitigating Conflict Through Closer Cooperation Between Religions

Ven. Guo felt that close cooperation between religions can eliminate or mitigate conflicts between peoples and nations. He urged people to find common ground and then use dialogue and cooperation to mitigate potential conflicts. When everyone feels equally vested in the dialogue, the solutions would be more holistic and can lead to meaningful levels of cooperation that seek to support each other.

Conclusion

Ven. Guo stressed that using compassion and wisdom is key in the elimination of conflicts and wars and the achievement of lasting peace and happiness on earth. He noted that we can support each other in our fraternity, that we can tap into our collective wisdom to transform hostility into deeper inter-cultural understanding. Only then can we support each other with compassion in our common endeavours.

What We Believe (Faith)

By Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir



Dr Nazirudin highlighted the centrality of the theme of differences and the great challenge it poses to the achievement of cohesion. He argued that Islamic traditions allowed him to speak of differences positively.

Religious Differences

First, Dr Nazirudin noted that the story of Abraham bears many commonalities and differences among the Islamic, Judaic and Christian traditions. Over the generations, the traditions have evolved into three distinct faith communities, each with its own understanding of salvation. At the same time, important shared legacies of intertwined traditions and coexistence have remained. As such, in reading about the story of Abraham in the Qur'an, Dr Nazirudin said he was encouraged to consider other scriptures, which in turn helped him to think of the differences positively.

Second, Dr Nazirudin highlighted that Singapore is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. In view of Singapore's small size, Singaporeans frequently encountered persons of different faiths in their daily lives. Religious leaders in Singapore were aware of this challenge of diversity, but there was a general sense that beyond religious leaderships the communities at large should play a greater role in managing diversity. He noted that over time a lot of effort had been spent on rapprochement and reconciliation.

Third, Dr Nazirudin said that whatever we believe and practise should be done within a sense of social context. He emphasised that one could not remain a person of faith and yet be oblivious of the serious existential threats that the world encounters. Whether one talks about violence or environmental crisis, these are problems that have serious implications for society and cohesion. He felt that such challenges demand that religious communities collectively plan well, adapt adequately and educate fully.

Important Areas of Consideration for Muslims

To that end, Dr Nazirudin said there were three important areas of consideration from the Muslim perspective: (a) theology; (b) ethics and character; and (c) inter-religious competence. First, some Muslims might argue that there should not be any debate on the idea of God and theological shifts. However, Dr Nazirudin argued that it was this reluctance to engage in the theological debate and inaction that has led to a theology of hate, exclusion and vengeance in dealing with religious differences. He added that extremist groups had used theology to justify crimes against other communities and even against Muslims themselves. Therefore, he argued, it is important that we put forth a theology that speaks of inclusion and compassion, which allows us to recognise the existence of others and to live in harmony with them.

Second, Dr Nazirudin said theology would need to work hand-in-hand with religious ethics on how to show love, care and compassion to neighbours and friends from different backgrounds. He remarked that the world of hospitality was highly instructive, as it demanded that we treat anyone from an unfamiliar community as our guest. In the context of living together, one should express happiness for neighbours and friends during their important celebrations and festive occasions. That is part of the ethics of living with differences, he added.

Third, Dr Nazirudin highlighted the importance of developing a deep understanding and engagement with our own history and traditions as well as inter-connected histories from the other faith communities. He stressed that inter-religious competence and sophistication are necessary in order that we do not misinterpret and misapply lessons for our times.

Conclusion

Noting that humanity faces some of its greatest challenges today, Dr Nazirudin said that faith communities should be catalysts for positive change and not obstacles or impediments. He felt that, with religious traditions being vast and historically rich, society should be able to find solutions to its challenges while living with differences.

Hindu Faith in a Plurality of Paths: A Way to Build Bridges Across Religious Traditions

By Dr Veena Howard



Dr Howard discussed Hinduism as a pluralist religion and suggested how its philosophy could offer a path towards religious peace and cohesion, especially in diverse multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies.

Cohesion and Peace Through a Pluralist Lens

Dr Howard observed that Hinduism is not a monolithic religion, but by nature pluralistic. Hinduism does not seek to convert but to transform hearts so that we can live in harmony. Despite varying ideologies, the Hindu response to other traditions has generally been charitable. In Hinduism, truth is so multi-faceted that no one tradition can capture it fully. Thus, Hinduism offers peace resources for us to consider inter-faith visions and harmonious society. Dr Howard noted that each religion is a unique system with its own theology and ethics. Some religions see heaven as a goal, some go beyond the concept of heaven and hell. In her teaching career, Dr Howard had observed that her students who were unfamiliar with religion prior to taking her class were able to discover that most religions encompass some form of the Golden Rule, where we should care for each other and treat each other as we would like to be treated.

The Inter-Connectedness of Individuals in Society

Dr Howard introduced the Hindu concepts of *Dharma* and *Karma*. *Dharma* is rooted in the idea of cohesion, and the idea of *Karma* — that what goes around comes around — recognises the impact our actions have on society. One who perceives others in the self and the self in all beings does not encounter any hatred. If human beings are connected with others by the unity of all, and all are working towards the good of society, then the good society is in the process of continuous development. Through this lens, all are actors and agents partaking in the building of a cohesive and sustainable society. Humans are, therefore, connected to each other by their shared humanity and have a responsibility to each other.

Diversity is Essential for Survival

According to Dr Howard, India has a unique definition of secularism. In this definition, secularism is not about having no religion, but instead defined as equal respect for all religions. As such, the collective wisdom of religious traditions can become a great asset for humanity. Hinduism's famous dictum, *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (The entire earth is our family) can serve as a guiding religious principle to appreciate the eco-systems of religious traditions, which is essential for the survival of humanity, she said.

Conclusion

Dr Howard concluded that the best way to deal with the challenge of bigotry is to embrace diversity and accept differences.

PLENARY 1 DISCUSSION

Youth in Inter-Faith Dialogue

Ms Armstrong recollected her frustrations of being young and not being listened to. She believed in the need to engage the youth to foster inter-faith dialogue in the community. She underscored that in the process of such engagement it was important to be open to listening to the youth and to refrain from telling them what to do and what to think. Ms Armstrong believed that there was no definitive doctrine about God and, therefore, no best answers.

Bridging the Humanitarian Concerns of the Youth with Faith and Dialogue

Dr Howard identified three factors that she believed would help bridge the connection. First, she said, we should stop talking down to the young.

Second, inter-faith dialogue requires religious literacy, and all, including the young, should understand what the other religions stand for. Dr Howard added that the young needed to be encouraged to speak up and ask difficult questions. Third, as the young are more interested in community service than in organised religion, Dr Howard suggested combining both community service and learning, whereby the young would serve with community service organisations attached to different faith groups.

Involving the Youth in Faith and Dialogue

Dr Nazirudin suggested that before we involve the young we should try to understand them. He cautioned that when we involve the young in inter-faith dialogue we must be prepared for out-of-the-box responses. He added that one of the reasons why adults are hesitant to involve the young is that it is often difficult to deal with unconventional questions and positions. Nevertheless, Dr Nazirudin believed it was important to involve the young and stressed that the engagement must be made relevant and meaningful for them. Adults cannot assume that they understand everything; it is through involving the youth that new solutions to today's problems can be found.

Principles of Accommodation

Ven. Guo noted that religion is usually related to the afterlife and not to the present. While religion is important, the focus on the present and on a common humanity is more important. Therefore, he said, our kind and compassionate attitude to our fellow human beings matters more. If one can fulfil the kindness of one's human nature, one can attain the Buddha nature, he noted.

Dr Nazirudin added that respect, compassion and hospitality are values that every human being would cherish; these are values that could bring everyone together regardless of religious orientation, and even if one did not hold on to any religious belief. Issues like environmental crises, inequality and poverty affect everyone and it is not right to exclude people from other religions — or people with no religion — who might be able to bring valuable insights in the search for solutions. Dr Nazirudin acknowledged that religious leaders might feel uncomfortable about this, but it was the same problem the inter-religious dialogue movement faced when it started in the 20th century. He added that the same trust has to be built to gather those with no religious backgrounds.

Dr Howard introduced the saying of Mahatma Gandhi, who used to call God “truth”. But after Gandhi met some dedicated and ethical atheists, he reversed it to say “truth is God” to embrace everyone. Dr Howard believed there were multiple approaches to include all, depending on the setting. Collectively, religious traditions inform us that humanity is more important. She noted that we should be charitable rather than judgemental.

Overcoming Exclusivity

Bishop Guixot noted that Pope Francis had called on the community to promote a culture of inclusivism. It is important that communities come together to provide for the common good of society, he said. Unfortunately, he lamented, there are signs of exclusivism. Observing that some of the people who performed good deeds were those who had no belief, Bishop Guixot said he was disappointed that he did not witness the same behaviour from religious communities. Bishop Guixot concluded that faith without good works is dead.

Honest but Harmonious Dialogue

Ms Armstrong felt that we should make a place for the “other” in our minds and in our hearts to reach across the divide. She added that we should find out the context of the other person’s religious traditions and beliefs, and not just look at them from the point of view of an outsider.

PLENARY 2: WHO WE ARE (IDENTITY)

Panellists

Lord John Alderdice

House of Lords, United Kingdom

Professor Chaiwat Satha-Anand

Professor of Political Science, Thammasat University and Founder, Thai Peace Information Centre, Thailand

Mr Christian Picciolini

Founder, Free Radicals Project, United States

Dr Azza Karam

Senior Advisor on Culture, United Nations Population Fund and Coordinator, United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development

Chair

Professor Lily Kong

President, Singapore Management University, Singapore

This plenary looked at how societies can promote shared identities and encourage empathy. The panel discussed how:

- (1) identities create perceptions of distinct communities and their implications for inter-cultural, inter-religious, inter-ethnic relations in a situation where identity politics may be highlighted;*
- (2) the intersectionality of identity and citizenship influences the duties and responsibilities of those within different communities; and,*
- (3) competing interests from different identities can be reconciled for the common good.*

Who We Are (Identity)

By Lord John Alderdice



Lord Alderdice explained the importance of recognising that differing identities can develop a new set of relationships through mutual respect and recognition of communal relationships.

A Shared and Single Identity

Lord Alderdice explained that the divisions in Northern Ireland were brought on by people's differences of identity and allegiance. Against this backdrop, it is essential to address how people feel about both their own and other identities, he said. It is not enough to simply address the differences between Protestant Unionists, who want to remain attached to the United Kingdom, and Catholic Nationalists, who want to be part of a United Ireland, independent of Britain. There is also a need for looking at the relationships between the people in the north and south of Ireland to address their differences. He noted that it was through this process that a shared and single identity for the people of Northern Ireland could be created.

A Sense of Community

Lord Alderdice defined community as a living organism with its own memories, feelings and capacities. Building sufficiently complex institutional and constitutional arrangements is necessary to deal with people's differences in culture, history, and religion. For instance, the peace process in Northern Ireland has resulted in agreement on three sets of related institutions: those internal to Northern Ireland, those between north and south, and those between Britain and the Republic of Ireland. However, Britain's impending exit from the European Union (Brexit) could create disruption, especially since the European Union had helped hold Britain and Ireland together and facilitated the peace process. Hence, Lord Alderdice advocated that we develop our institutions and ensure that their structures are continuously evolving to address the changing needs of the future.

Commonality of Experiences

According to Lord Alderdice, our emotions, which are a crucial element of the way we think, are more universal than our identities because we share common experiences. Elaborating, he said our beliefs give us substance as individuals and groups, but we also share common experiences, such as joy and grief. The commonality of our emotions and experiences can bring us all together regardless of our differences. Therefore, he said, the challenge for us is to find common fundamental experiences that could bring us all together in a way that helps us develop an appreciation of our differences.

Mitigating the Toxicity of Identities in Asia?

By Professor Chaiwat Satha-Anand



In Prof Satha-Anand's view, mitigating what he called "the toxicity of identity" requires societies to underscore the moral economy of faiths, acquire cultural fluency in dealing with others, and foster common decency in people's action as taught by faiths.

Moral Economy

Citing anthropologist Kwame Anthony Appiah, Prof Satha-Anand noted that identities are labels that do not accurately represent reality; they are ways of grouping people that make it possible to simplify a complex reality by attributing fake homogeneity and unchanging nature to what are essentially heterogeneous and changing populations. Human society, he added, is a repertoire of diversity, such as majorities and minorities. However, the quest for purity or moral superiority claims, that is, freeing oneself from contaminations by other experiences, intoxicate social relationships and create deadly religion–ethnic conflicts. Hence, Prof Satha-Anand said, it is important to supplant moral superiority with moral economy. He explained that moral economy is not based on a sense of superiority but rather on a sense of egalitarian economic rationality where everyone is much the same. As such, the possibility of dehumanising the other would be curtailed.

Cultural Fluency

Prof Satha-Anand highlighted the “Cultural Fluency” project in Southern Thailand, where the relationship between the Buddhists and Muslims has been a corrosive one. The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre had launched the project with a view to bridging the differences between the two communities. Prof Satha-Anand noted that the “Cultural Fluency” project seeks to identify the cultural biases that endanger cohesion in the region and to dispel common stereotypical beliefs about religion and ethnicity. He lauded the Thai National Security Council’s Administration and Development in Southern Border Provinces (2017–2019) for including a statement that government officials must be trained in both conflict engagement skills and cultural fluency.

Decency

Prof Satha-Anand felt that it is important to have decency from all sides of heterogeneous populations. He illustrated what he meant by decency by reflecting on his personal experience with how Muslims and non-Muslims in central Bangkok coexist. When Prof Satha-Anand was once having lunch with his Muslim friends at a small roadside stall, a Chinese lady carrying a large bowl of pork tried her best to steer clear of the Muslim men around her. This anecdote illustrated that everyday coexistence is possible between different religions and ethnicities. Prof Satha-Anand emphasised that although human reason helps us comprehend the connectedness of all human beings, it is the heart that can help us emerge and rise above our inability to connect with others.

Who We Are (Identity)

By Mr Christian Picciolini



Mr Picciolini argued that it is not people's ideology that drives them to extremism but their life's "potholes" and search for identity, community and purpose.

What Drives Extremism?

At the age of 14, Mr Picciolini recalled, he had met a man who introduced him to the neo-Nazi movement. This led him a life of violence. He was also repeatedly dropping out of high schools. He said he was then baffled why he had become delinquent, especially when his parents — immigrants from Italy — had raised him well. He later realised that he had felt abandoned and estranged from his parents because they were very busy working seven days a week to put food on the table. Mr Picciolini explained that his feeling of alienation pushed him towards delinquency. This led him to the conclusion that it is not ideology that pushes people towards extremism but their traumatic experiences, joblessness, poverty, and sense of hopelessness.

Repairing Human Infrastructure

According to Mr Picciolini, it is important to build human resilience by repairing one's life potholes. He said he had since been helping delinquent individuals for several years, not by telling them that they were wrong but by engaging with them. He added that adults should know how to engage with the youth by being open to them. Our purpose is to look out for future generations and help them solve the problems of polarisation and hatred. Mr Picciolini also said there is a need to treat extremists through public health so that they could unlearn to hate. He concluded that people become extremists because they are looking for belonging. Therefore, they need compassion from those around them.



Religion and Sustainable Development: The Journey from Why to Engage, to a Plea for Caution

By Dr Azza Karam



Dr Karam focused on the importance of religion for sustainable development and the consequent need for engagement with religious actors.

Value of Religion and Its Impact on Development

Noting that religion is at the centre of human life, Dr Karam stressed that it is important to understand its impact on societies, particularly its impact on human development. It was because religion matters to development that a UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development was established to engage effectively with various faith-based actors and faith-related activities, she added. Dr Karam went on to say that religion must be understood not only as an identity marker but also as a social service provider. She recalled that religious institutions were the first humanitarian actors in the areas of education, health, and sanitation. She noted that 70 per cent of hospitals in the United States are run through and by the Catholic Church. Moreover, religious institutions provide an average of 30 per cent of basic health care in the world. Hence, Dr Karam argued, it is important to reach out to religious institutions.

Although religion is not exactly a solution to all of society's problems, religious actors are instrumental in achieving sustainable development. It is therefore necessary to convene religious actors together and identify the commonality

between them in promoting sustainability, Dr Karam said. She went on to note that religious engagement is beginning to be perceived as an element in the toolbox of development. For example, faith-based organisations are being included as non-traditional partners around policy tables, and efforts are being made to tap into the financial resource bases of some of the well-endowed faith-based organisations for development purposes.

Identity, Purpose and Platforms for Dialogue

Dr Karam argued that religion must also be perceived as human experience, especially in the course of defending human rights. She lamented that extremism and discord are driven by people's lack of a sense of belonging, their search for identity and purpose. This is why it is important to have dialogues that would serve as a platform for interaction and mutual understanding, she said.



PLENARY 2 DISCUSSION

Engaging Through Diversity

The panellists emphasised the necessity of engaging with others and in a variety of ways to embrace a common identity while accommodating diversity.

Lord Alderdice explained that building a common identity is needed to dispel the issues brought about by multiple identities. Mr Picciolini noted that we need others for our survival and can build a connection with each other through care. Dr Karam noted that it is important for us all to have effective communication, especially for those people who feel their identity is being threatened. In relation to this, Prof Satha-Anand stressed that we need to confront and overcome our biases in order to accommodate diverse identities.

Lord Alderdice felt that the real problem lies not in the differences of faith but in how people think. He said it is necessary for us to accept uncertainties and differences of religious backgrounds. Mr Picciolini, for his part, noted that we all share a certain degree of brokenness that could keep us together. Using the human body as a metaphor, he said we are all like cells inside a body that get affected when one of them is infected. It is, therefore, necessary that we take care of each other, he said.

Finding Common Ground

To find common ground, Prof Satha-Anand said, we should be united by our own vulnerabilities and sufferings. Dr Karam felt that we could only find commonality by understanding our differences, which requires both conviction and humility. She added that we share common ground in our diversity. Prof Kong stressed that to understand our differences and our purpose in creating a sense of community, engagement and dialogue are necessary but must be continuous to be effective.

Dr Karam emphasised that we need to understand that our uniqueness and differences are all one and the same process — “you cannot have light without dark, and you cannot have shade without light and dark.” We also need to acknowledge our differences so that we can see our similarities with others in a multi-cultural society, she said.

PLENARY 3: HOW WE COME TOGETHER (COHESION)

Panellists

Dr Ali Al Nuaimi

Chairman, The World Council of Muslim Communities, United Arab Emirates

Professor Lai Pan Chiu

Interim Dean and Professor of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Dr Anna Halafoff

Research Associate of the UNESCO Chair in Inter-Religious and Inter-cultural Relations — Asia Pacific

Bishop Emeritus Dr Wee Boon Hup

Member, Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, Singapore

Chair

Dr Dicky Sofjan

Core Doctoral Faculty, Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Graduate School, Gadjah Mada University

This plenary explored what diverse communities can do to engage each other and work together side-by-side. The session explored how we can:

- (1) strengthen social cohesion by recognising commonalities that cross social divides;*
- (2) promote pro-social values and behaviour; and,*
- (3) counter extremist and exclusivist interpretations of religion, ethnicity, and identity.*

How We Come Together (Cohesion)

By Dr Ali Al Nuaimi



In his presentation, Dr Al Nuaimi stressed that religion should not be used to divide people; instead, he said, we need champions, especially religious leaders, to do more to bring people together.

Dangers When Religion Is Hijacked

Dr Al Nuaimi shared his personal experiences on the progress made by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from its independence in 1971 until the present day. He acknowledged that the Middle East region suffered a lot because religion had been hijacked by ideology, with extremists believing their religion made them superior to others. He said that Islam is a religion of peace and love. He stressed that while all nations seek security, stability and prosperity, a country cannot achieve these when its neighbours are suffering.

Conclusion: A Globalism That Brings People Together

Noting that globalism had served as a tool for business and finance, Dr Al Nuaimi said what is needed now is a globalism that brings people together. He called for champions, especially religious leaders, who will take the lead in bringing people together. He added that religion should not be used to divide people and we need to show that people can live together despite their different religions.

Religious Education and Cohesive Societies

By Professor Lai Pan Chiu



Noting that education plays a vital role in the building of a cohesive society, Prof Lai said that in a multi-religious society how religious education is to be conducted is especially crucial.

Three Models of Religious Education

Prof Lai noted that religious education need not take place solely in religious institutions. He then provided a critical review of three major models of religious education. He noted that the approach to religious education has evolved from mono-religious to multi-religious and finally an inter-religious model of education. He argued that the inter-religious education model is more effective than the other two models in maintaining one's religious identity, on the one hand, and fostering inter-religious dialogue, on the other hand, as well as friendship among religions. Inter-religious education trains people to learn to dialogue, listen, and understand different religions. It helps students to realise that they tend to see things from a particular viewpoint and contributes to a humble and open position towards other religions.

Religious Education in Hong Kong

Prof Lai provided some concrete examples illustrating how the model of inter-religious education is practised in the secondary and tertiary education system in Hong Kong. Students in religious schools focus on studying their own faiths from

Forms 1 to 3 (12 to 15 years old), but they can take up an inter-religious course called Ethics and Religion Studies from Forms 4 to 6 (16 to 18 years old). Among its various aims, this course helps students acquire knowledge of the religion they have chosen to study and of the other major faiths, and additionally helps them make rational and informed judgement about religious and moral issues.

Conclusion

In summary, Prof Lai reiterated that inter-religious studies help students acquire knowledge of religions other than their own, make rational judgements, enhance their spiritual and moral development, and develop a positive attitude towards others.

Multi-Faith Movements and Critical Religious Pluralism

By Dr Anna Halafoff



Clash Within Civilisations

Dr Halafoff's remarks were focused on the notion of the clash within civilisations. She noted that within civilisations one could see a clash between those who are pro-diversity and champion multi-culturalism and those who reject diversity. Cosmopolitan actors welcome diversity as long as the rights of others are not impinged upon. Anti-cosmopolitan actors feel that their entitlements are threatened by globalisation. This sense of threat, Dr Halafoff noted, could sometimes lead to an anti-cosmopolitan terror.

Response to Anti-Cosmopolitanism

Dr Halafoff noted that the response to anti-cosmopolitanism has led to new social movements, which she argued could learn from the inter-faith movement. She noted that the inter-faith movement has four aims: developing understanding of diverse faiths, challenging exclusivity and normalising pluralism, addressing global risks and injustices, and creating peacebuilding networks.

Conclusion

Dr Halafoff called for a critical religious pluralism that is focused on liberation from inequality. It should also be one that acknowledges the roles of religion in both creating and ameliorating structural violence.

Social Cohesion in Singapore

By Bishop Emeritus Dr Wee Boon Hup



Dr Wee attributed the high level of social cohesion in Singapore despite its diversity to four aspects that he summarised using the acronym “GRIP”. He elaborated on the acronym as follows.

Government

“G” is for Government as the prime mover in bringing people together. The Singapore government has been the regulator or umpire when various groups show signs of drifting apart or are antagonistic to one another. As a last resort, the government is the enforcer in prosecuting those who will not work and live together. The challenges in this area are that governments are subject to change and there is also the risk that both religion and race based politics can change the government.

Relationship

“R” refers to the Relationship between government and key religious leaders, in which both personal relations and formal structures play a role to ease tensions. Dr Wee added that personal relationships among key religious leaders themselves are crucial. He noted that there are structures in place currently that allow opportunities for religious leaders to interact informally at community gatherings. But he cautioned that passing on the current harmonious relationship between the various communities to the next generation is not a given and the building of the relationship will be an ongoing and never-ending process.

Informed

“I” is for Informed, where people are constantly informed about the beliefs and practices of other religions through national education in schools as well as public education campaigns. Dr Wee added that government agencies and other institutions are kept informed of what is happening overseas, and such information is in turn relayed to the people to educate them on the need to be alert to developments that could threaten Singapore’s social harmony. The challenges in this area include keeping up with changes brought about by social media and managing and responding to fake news.

Prayer

“P” stands for Prayer. From a religious perspective, the various scriptures urge believers to pray for the authorities, and prayer positively influences people’s actions. From a socialisation perspective, words spoken in a sacred context (i.e., prayer) in the presence of the faithful have the power to influence their subsequent thoughts and actions. However, Dr Wee noted that the right theological teachings are essential to bring about peace and harmony.

Conclusion

Dr Wee stressed that education goes beyond the information communicated in the classroom. Eventually, people of different faiths need to have face-to-face encounters to develop a deeper relationship with someone from another faith or race.

PLENARY 3 DISCUSSION

Religious Education in Schools

Diversity is a fact in all societies. There is a need to invest in education to bring people together and learn how to respect differences. It is possible to have education about different religions even in secular education systems. Religious leaders sometimes tend to divide people and, therefore, more needs to be done to bring people together.

Division of Religion and Politics

Religious leaders should stay away from politics and politicians should in turn stay away from religion.

From Religious Tolerance to Acceptance

There is a need to accept that there are differences between the various faith groups. Instead of the word religious tolerance, a better word would be religious understanding. On the other hand, there are also some extreme manifestations of religiosity that should not be tolerated.









Breakout Sessions



FAITH #1 – INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Speakers

Dr Paul Hedges

Associate Professor, Inter-Religious Studies, RSIS

Dr Veena Howard

Associate Professor, Asian Religious Traditions and Coordinator of Peace and Conflict Studies Program, California State University, Fresno, United States

Inter-religious dialogue (IRD) is key to not just building understanding between religions but also to promoting social cohesion and improving societal resilience. Currently, there are some perceived barriers to developing IRD, namely, fear and reluctance around dialogue among religious groups. The reasons for fear and reluctance stem from a lack of understanding of the aim of IRD and its processes. This breakout session looked at models of IRD as ways to develop cohesion in diverse societies.

Dialogue and Social Cohesion

By Dr Paul Hedges

Dr Hedges said that IRD should not be the exclusive domain of religious leaders but should be accessible to the common person. He highlighted three key principles that are critical to fostering social cohesion and promoting dialogue. First, the principle of religious literacy. Having basic knowledge of other faiths and religions is an important first step in fostering social cohesion. Something as simple as speaking to one's neighbour can be a good start. The second principle focuses on attitude, specifically relating to empathy. "Seeing the face of the other", in other words, seeing the other as a human being and according them the same respect as a human being will help to build a more conducive environment for dialogue and engagement. Third, the principle of service and joint action. Initiatives such as community service can help to bridge differences and establish common ground, he said.

Case Study on Gandhi

By Dr Veena Howard

Dr Howard spoke about some of Gandhi's ideals. She highlighted Gandhi's idea of being critical of one's own religion, as well as the notion that religion is not simply what we preach and believe, but rather what we do. Morality, in this sense, is the best yardstick of religion. Dr Howard noted that, growing up in a pluralistic society, Gandhi recognised that religion plays an important role in the functioning of society. However, he was also cognisant of its potential for being highly divisive. As such, he wanted to purify Hinduism and change the caste system associated with it. "How can we overcome oppression from the British if we the Hindus are oppressing ourselves", he had queried. Gandhi also held prayer meetings to facilitate the exchange of religious knowledge and improve religious literacy. Dr Howard commented that Gandhi was against proselytisation, claiming, "as long as the person is walking the right path, there's no need for proselytisation." She suggested that Gandhi's acceptance of the righteous values of each religion is something that we should all aspire to achieve.

DISCUSSION

Promoting Inter-Faith Dialogue

One of the participants observed that inter-faith conversations (including the ICCS) tend to exclude non-believers, atheists and agnostics. Dr Hedges acknowledged that this exclusion was a legitimate problem and that the conference had not dealt with it adequately.

On the question of how to engage with extremists, proselytisers and highly divisive communities, the discussants noted that inter-faith dialogue should be a pre-emptive approach instead of a reaction to conflict. However, they also acknowledged that when dealing with violent extremists law enforcement has to step in, as there is very little that dialogue can do. A question was raised pertaining to the value of recognising the similarities between religions. Dr Hedges reiterated that recognising similarities is a priority even in highly divisive communities.

Inter-Faith Marriage and Religious Conversion

The topic of inter-faith and inter-ethnic marriages was discussed, with many participants highlighting the problem of individuals being rejected and vilified by their communities for marrying outside their faith. The discussants felt that since inter-ethnic and inter-faith marriages are very common these days more work needs to be done to address the negative perceptions surrounding them. One

suggestion raised was for targeted marriage counselling to be made available for persons in an inter-ethnic or inter-faith marriage with a view to helping them cope with potential discrimination.

One participant raised the point about the inherent tension between proselytising and constructive discourse. Since proselytising is often a means of sharing about religion, to what extent should it be allowed, he wondered. One of the discussants noted that Singapore is often accused of lacking freedom of religion because of the perceived inability to proselytise. He pointed out that there is a need to recognise the other tenet of freedom of religion where one has the right to his or her own religion. Hence, it is not that one cannot proselytise, but that proselytisation should be done in an ethical manner, with respect for other religions and faiths. The discussants also highlighted the need to include proselytisers in inter-faith conversations because they tend to have an uncompromising stance on religion. The point was that we must be prepared to engage in tough questions about religion.

Building Social Cohesion

Participants demonstrated much interest in bottom-up, on the ground inter-faith initiatives to foster community building. A participant from Indonesia noted that the sharing of stories and narratives helped her community overcome social divisions. Dr Howard agreed and pointed out that stories of inter-faith engagement can help empower others. The sharing of suffering and pain, but also the sharing of a sense of community, can help build social cohesion. Ultimately, it is not about an individual's religious identity but about recognising that we are all human. She added that meal sharing and partaking in the festivities of other faiths are effective ways to foster social cohesion.

FAITH #2 – FAITH AND TECHNOLOGY

Speakers

Dr Karine Martin

Chairman, French Daoist Association, France

Mr Jasvir Singh

Co-Chair of Faith Forums, London, and Chair of City Sikhs, United Kingdom

Chair

Ms Teo Yi-Ling

Senior Fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security, RSIS

A highly relevant and topical issue today is how faith and aspects of modernity, science and technology are related. Faith and technology are sometimes seen as incompatible. This session explored how both faith and technology can coexist today. It looked at the ways of negotiating potential tensions between religious communities and new technologies in the way that contemporary society addresses the wider role of faith in the public sphere.

Faith and Technology

By Dr Karine Martin

Taoist View on Technology

Dr Martin began by discussing mental health issues and the role of religion in covering the gaps in science. She then went on to conceptualise the Taoist view on technology. Noting that it is like the Yin and Yang that are complimentary to one other, she stressed that religious people can work with mental health and technology to bring balance to their lives. She then connected this point to the larger question of science. She noted that modern science presents dangers only when it is not able to interact with religion. While science may be driven by curiosity and outward experience, religion is driven by an ethical and inward drive. Science helps improve the material aspects of life whereas religion helps improve the spiritual aspects, she stressed.

Dr Martin enumerated the three questions that Taoism poses to humans:

- (1) Is more always better?
- (2) Is looking outward always fulfilling?
- (3) Is increasing better than decreasing?

She noted that some studies had found that depression, which arises from a sense that something is missing from one's life and is the third most common illness among youth, is not linked to a lack of material comforts; in fact, countries in the West with high income levels have higher instances of depression than countries with considerably lower income levels. She added that other studies had shown that people following congregations felt much happier. Thus, Dr Martin surmised that the feeling of togetherness and collective emotions is something that helps provide more peace to human beings than just material comforts.

Overconsumption of Social Media

Dr Martin noted that the overconsumption of social media could lead to many negative side effects. But she added that these could be reversed or at least prevented. She pointed out that religion teaches us to be compassionate, frugal and humble. She then spoke about how one could be better motivated to apply the following three guiding characteristics:

First, Taoism teaches that we are all good and benevolent by nature; thus, adopting compassion, frugality and humility would help us feel good because we would be in a state that is a reflection of heaven. It would help us reach a natural state of life, which would in turn help us feel contented;

Second, desire and environment meddle with the clarity of our heart and our original nature. Dr Martin commented that consumerism, on which our society is now based, is a system that works to manipulate our desires. Consequently, our ability to be compassionate is affected by the level of competition that the system perpetuates;

Third, the role of education is important in changing this attitude. When human beings are educated on the strength of the heart and given sound moral training on how to deal with their lives, they will always be able to take better care of their surroundings and the people around them.

Faith and Technology

By Mr Jasvir Singh

Mr Singh sought to debunk the fallacy that faith divides while technology unites. He noted that the period of Enlightenment that took place in Western Europe was known for both its huge advancements in science as well as the strong religiosity among its scientists and inventors. While religion has not played a part in modern science and technology, its words and impulses have, he said.

Mr Singh noted that for centuries technology has been changing the way religion is conceived and transmitted. Today, the ubiquity of smartphones and apps has transformed the way religion is transmitted. For example, Facebook is utilised to propagate and organise religious groups through message boards and discussion groups that provide religious service as well as photos and videos of various religious services and functions. YouTube has become a form of digital congregation whereby adherents of a faith can follow the sermons or practices of their preferred teacher. Twitter has emerged as a viable tool for faith-based campaigning or as an identifier of trending religious topics, including memes, and the instantaneous sharing of news. This in turn has created a sense of a global religious community. Finally, WhatsApp has been designed as the quickest way to communicate and has become a great tool for running a faith organisation. In short, said Mr Singh, social media has quite successfully democratised the faith community by reaching out to people and groups directly rather than through the traditional means, i.e., the word of mouth.

Mr Singh acknowledged that there could be abuses when using social media as a tool. One disadvantage is that social media allows hate speech to be easily circulated. For example, the perpetrator of the March 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings had used social media to stream the horrendous incident live. Likewise, ultra-conservative religious groups have been using social media to propagate their intolerable religious practices, which could impede better engagement with various religious communities.

Another problem that Mr Singh identified was the prevalence of fake news that spreads fear and anxiety through social media. He also lamented the incidence of young Muslims being radicalised through the Internet. Here he highlighted the dilemma of British IS returnees from Syria who are struggling to reintegrate into British society.

On balance, Mr Singh observed that technology had done more good when coupled with faith. Technology, he said, has filled the literacy gap by allowing people to understand the different faiths.

Mr Singh noted that technology also brings to the fore new issues for religions to contend with. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly becoming a mainstay of contemporary society and may in the future be used to create an AI deity. This raises ethical issues not only for scientists but also religious groups. Mr Singh cited the teachings of his own Sikh faith, which place belief in reincarnation and the transmigration of the soul — a teaching that, he said, could be inconceivable in and incompatible with trends in technology.

Mr Singh concluded that faith communities have in general been making use of modern technology as a complementary tool. Technology facilitates the propagation and circulation of religious faith. On the other hand, he added, faith provides spiritual substance that is reliably constant in times of flux due to technological change.

DISCUSSION

Ms Yi-Ling began the discussion quoting Albert Einstein: “Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind.” She commented that today’s younger generation are growing up with digital technology, which makes them vulnerable to institutional distrust and falsehoods. Citing his interactions with the youth, Mr Singh observed that many people are more satisfied with having a sense of purpose than with material possessions. Dr Martin stressed that although technology helps people to understand religion better, contact with religion, through religious authorities, institutions and others of the same faith, remains important and cannot be discounted. Mr Singh responded that it is important to include the relevance of digital technology to religion so that the youth would not be alienated. People taking selfies at places and centres of worship manifests the adoption of digitalisation by faith, he said.

Technology That Will Bring People Together

Interested in developing an app for various religious adherents online, a participant asked whether an app could provide opportunities to connect religious adherents to physical locations of religious interest. Mr Singh responded that Google maps had helped him connected with Sikhs in Singapore. He suggested that it would be better if the participant’s proposed app acted as a “one-stop shop” that people could use whenever they wish. Dr Martin agreed that an app for each religious community to find their places of worship would be useful.

Technology and Faith Collide

One participant drew attention to conservative sections of religious groups that often cite religious reasons for not engaging in technology. These include those who take a strong anti-vaccine stance. Mr Singh acknowledged that the values of faith communities would constantly be challenged by technology. However, he said, the only way to overcome these differences would be to engage in dialogue and learn to respect each other’s points of view. Agreeing, Dr Martin said that boundaries and personal opinions should be respected.

IDENTITY #1 – SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNITY DISCOURSE

Speakers

Dr Dicky Sofjan

Core Doctoral Faculty, Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Graduate School, Gadjah Mada University

Dr Shashi Jayakumar

Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security, and Executive Coordinator, Future Issues and Technology, RSIS

In our globalised world, social media has enhanced connectivity between the individual and communities. It allows us to overcome geographical barriers and promote civil discourse. More importantly, social media serves as a convenient platform for interaction between people from different religions, cultures and ethnicities. In recent times, however, social media is fast proving itself to be a double-edged sword. Social media has facilitated the propagation of the fake news phenomenon and of subversive messages by individuals and groups with ill intentions. This breakout session explored the role of social media in community discourse and how it serves as an instrument for positive change.

Social Media and Community Discourse

By Dr Dicky Sofjan

Dr Sofjan highlighted how social media not only affects community relations but also influences ways of thinking about community. He noted that social media and other technology such as virtual reality could change the way people conceptualise the world as well what constitutes truth and reality.

Dr Sofjan noted that social media has resulted in higher levels of social polarisation. Owing to the echo chamber effect, social media users are often exposed to filtered messages and tailored content that reinforces existing biases and prejudices. Social polarisation occurs mostly in these echo chambers, with social media users believing that the information they receive is objective and relays all sides of an argument. Dr Sofjan added that individuals do not necessarily become trapped in echo chambers because they lack intelligence or analytical skills. Rather, social media itself systematically avoids feeding its users diverse sources of information and perspectives that are instrumental in engendering more balanced views.

Beyond the dissemination of fake news, propaganda, and alternative facts, and exacerbating the social polarisation brought about by such phenomena is the nature of news reports milling through social media feeds. Dr Sofjan pointed out that news reports are significantly, if not predominantly, opinionated rather than non-partisan. Factors such as media ownership and political partisanship often influence the objectivity and impartiality of news reporting.

Dr Sofjan also touched on religious populism, which is another impact of social media that affects community ties and leads to social polarisation. Noting that religious populism has seen an uptick in many countries including Indonesia and the United States, he said this phenomenon could be characterised by three factors. First, it involves advocating a single source of truth, which is interpreted through a narrow lens — a development facilitated by echo chambers and filter bubbles. Second, religious populism features social mobilisation such as through social media and/or physical protests. Third, there is significant support for a strongman saviour figure. Although rational voters may find such religious populist movements illogical, the growth of such movements is a testament to the power of social media to influence people's feelings and beliefs, as well as its power in bringing together like-minded groups.

Dr Sofjan noted that the sense of alienation, loneliness and depression that tends to result from social media use could affect individuals' perceptions of and relationships with the wider community. He saw community building as the best means of overcoming these strong emotions. Building meaningful community relationships and engaging in generativity, wherein individuals share guidance and advice, correlate to higher levels of happiness than the traditional metrics of success such as wealth.

However, social media itself can be used for community building and thus put to positive effect, said Dr Sofjan. Using social media for this purpose may be a trend that accelerates with time, he added, considering that as people get older they tend to be less interested in self-actualisation than in helping and mentoring others. More constructive social media use for community building can also be advanced by focusing on human dignity rather than human rights, which is perceived to be a less relatable Western concept by religious groups. Finally, Dr Sofjan suggested that there was a need to improve both digital and religious literacy.

Social Media and Community Discourse

By Dr Shashi Jayakumar

Noting that social media once a useful tool, Dr Jayakumar lamented that it has evolved into something that can be weaponised and used as a destructive force. The detrimental results from the irresponsible use of social media have outweighed its intended benefits, he asserted, citing the example of the Rohingya crisis, where the echo chambers of social media serve only to incite further conflict. The problem with social media is that once a rumour starts to spread, it accelerates so quickly that no counter narrative will be effective, he observed.

Dr Jayakumar pointed out that countering the proliferation of hate on social media would first require recognising that regardless of how extreme an individual's views are there will be someone more extreme on the Internet who would justify those views. This leads to a rise in extremism and radicalisation as the Internet provides a community where people with shared identities can congregate and reaffirm one other's radical views.

In Dr Jayakumar's view, the most crucial part of the work of countering violent extremism (CVE), contrary to popular belief, must take place far before an individual reaches the point in his life where he is at risk of radicalisation. In order to extinguish the feeders of hate, it is imperative that tolerance, respect for diversity, and pluralism be instilled at an early age, he stressed. He recommended that CVE is best done not by government specialists but rather at the grassroots level. Teachers, social workers and members of the community have both the ability and the reach to identify and influence those at risk of radicalisation, he said.

Dr Jayakumar said the tendency for society to criticise the younger generation for their fragility and vulnerability makes it ineffective in getting the critical message across. It would be far more productive to engage today's youth by harnessing their sensitivities into empathy rather than criticising them for their perceived weaknesses.

DISCUSSION

Responding to a question suggesting that social media amplifies negative rather than positive messages, Dr Jayakumar noted that those involved in peacebuilding efforts lag in social media use compared to radical actors. This dampens efforts to create more tolerant communities. Complicating matters is the difficulty of de-radicalising individuals online compared to the ease with which social media can radicalise individuals. Dr Sofjan agreed with his observation, adding that while intolerant groups work on a full-time basis, peacebuilders seem to work on a part-time basis. The question then is how individuals can become radical peacemakers instead, considering especially that people are generally more passionate about religious values than liberal values.



IDENTITY #2 – OVERCOMING HATE

Speakers

Mr Christian Picciolini

Founder, Free Radicals Project, United States

Dr Noor Huda Ismail

Visiting Fellow, RSIS

The rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalised individuals into society is an increasing global concern. There needs to be collective understanding that the successful reintegration of such individuals requires a concerted effort from society. This breakout session focused on the topic of individual reform and explored the broader narrative of reintegrating de-radicalised and reformed individuals into society.

Overcoming Hate

By Mr Christian Picciolini and Dr Noor Huda Ismail

The two speakers jointly conducted the breakout session. They shared ideas on preventing radicalisation and giving second chances.

Preventing Radicalisation

Both Mr Picciolini and Dr Ismail agreed that a soft approach and one undertaken on a more personal level is more effective in rehabilitating extremists than a hard approach. In a hard approach such as imprisonment there is no room for change in the individual's mentality. Thus, hard approaches could result in high rates of recidivism. Mr Picciolini suggested that those who address the growth of extremism should remain vocal, visible, and vigilant against extremism.

Dr Ismail argued that extremists should be given second chances. He also said young children should be engaged so that they would not be at risk of being radicalised. He stressed that it is important to win the "three Hs" of individuals: the heart, the head, and the hands. Interaction is important to win the hearts of people who have different views, he added.

Mr Picciolini enumerated what he called his “Seven Ls” soft approach to rehabilitation:

- (1) linking up with individuals by having meaningful connections with them;
- (2) listening to them;
- (3) learning about their circumstances;
- (4) leveraging on the community to help individuals;
- (5) lifting them up by empowering them as a human being;
- (6) loving these communities by introducing them to people; and
- (7) living after removing the demonisation of the other.

DISCUSSION

Alienation of Youth

Mr Picciolini asserted that there is a little difference between the backgrounds of white supremacists and Islamist radicals, drawing on as illustration the similarity between his own experience growing up in Chicago and that of a friend, a former Islamist radical from Belgium. Both he and his friend were first generation immigrants who were struggling to fit into their respective adoptive countries' cultures. In the process, they embraced extremist behaviour because of the promise of paradise, which is a common belief for white supremacists and Islamist radicals. One of the participants responded to this observation, noting that the Christchurch shooting in New Zealand had caused some immigrant children to question their identity and feel compelled to change their behaviour. Mr Picciolini felt that nobody should be made to change his or her identity just to fit into society.

One of the participants suggested that the socio-economic background of extremists does not factor much in bringing about a sense of alienation and the radicalisation it often leads to. He cited as illustration the fact that the perpetrators of the April 2019 Sri Lankan church bombings came from well-to-do families. Another participant echoed this sentiment, noting that conflict in Marawi City, Philippines, was caused by a sense of alienation. Mr Picciolini noted that, although it is often easy to demonise radicals because of what they have done, most of them hail from normal backgrounds.

The Need for Political Will

One of the participants drew attention to the importance of having a political response to address radicalism, like that made by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern after the Christchurch shooting incident. The “they are us” message by Prime Minister Ardern constituted recognition that the victims of the shooting incident, Muslims, were part of the wider community; it was also an outright rejection of the extremist ideology propagated by the gunman. Prime Minister Ardern took on the role as “mourner-in-chief”, which showed that she was representing the whole community. Her response created a sense of safety and belonging for all Muslims in New Zealand. It was laudable that there was dialogue between the government and smaller communities to build an idea of one community.

Mr Picciolini observed that programmes designed to address extremism could be repurposed by other organs of the state to become surveillance programmes. By exploiting such programmes for surveillance, the state risked losing the trust of the community. The resulting radicalisation of the community could in turn draw radical responses on the part of the government. Mr Picciolini warned that such an eventuality might have a spiralling effect, where extremism from both the government and community feeds off each other. The intentions of government-led programmes must, therefore, be clear, he said. He added that such clarity is necessary to ensure that the trust between the government and communities is not eroded.

Addressing Hate

Mr Picciolini stressed that the key to tackling hate is to listen to the views of individuals but not necessarily agreeing with them. By doing so, one can understand the motivation that drives individuals to undertake extremist activity. Drawing from his experience, he said young people are often driven by emotional reasons rather than rational ones; they are looking for permission to project their hate and blame onto another group. Mr Picciolini added that using government policy instruments to address hate typically results in limited results; instead, there is a need to leverage on civil society to deliver the desired change.

COHESION #1 – BUILDING BRIDGES: GLOBAL BUILDING BRIDGES

Speakers

Dr Kumar Ramakrishna

Associate Professor, Head, Policy Studies; and Head, National Security Studies Programme, RSIS

Dr Patrice Brodeur

Associate Professor, Institute of Religious Studies, University of Montreal, and Senior Advisor, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue (KAICIID), Austria

Parts of the world remain in conflict and there is concern about the potential increase in civil strife owing to increased divisiveness along ethnic and religious lines, among others. This has highlighted the importance of peacebuilding and community building initiatives. Such initiatives, no matter top-down or ground-up, will require the participation of various constituents in society. Global peace is everyone's responsibility, and everyone has a role to play in community building. This breakout session explored the best practices in global peacebuilding and community building initiatives and provides an understanding for the role of the individual and society in such initiatives.

Building Bridges: Global Peacebuilding Efforts

By Dr Kumar Ramakrishna

Dr Ramakrishna offered an analysis of the threat environment that today grounds global peacebuilding efforts, focusing on the violent ideologies of Extremist Islamism and Extremist Identitarianism. In the current era of religiously motivated terrorism, he said, both Extremist Islamists and Extremist Identitarians view their attacks as a form of divine punishment in addition to psychological warfare. Extremist Islamism portrays the Muslim world as being involved in a cosmic war for survival against the United States, Israel and a coalition of friendly governments. A key element of this ideology, Dr Ramakrishna noted, is the notion that the targeting of Western civilians is justified because the military campaigns undertaken by the United States and its allies result in the unintended killing of innocent Muslim civilians. This ideology also frames civilians in Western and allied countries as complicit in the violence because their political support and taxes have enabled their respective governments to support what Extremist Islamists see as the oppression of Muslims.

Extremist Identitarianism, on the other hand, portrays the Judeo-Christian European nations as being under threat from non-white immigration, particularly those groups that appear to be overwhelming white populations through their higher fertility rates, said Dr Ramakrishna. Networks founded on this ideology, he said, believe themselves to be defending white nations against non-white invaders. They also target Western political elites who promote multi-culturalism. As with Extremist Islamism, Extremist Identitarian attacks are driven by a retaliatory, “eye-for-an-eye” principle, said Dr Ramakrishna. In this sense, he noted, both strands of violent ideologies fuel each other, with the reciprocal process empowered by the Internet and social media platforms. To counter such religious extremism, global peacebuilding efforts need to incorporate interventions and dialogue at the intra-religious and inter-religious levels to preserve social cohesion, said Dr Ramakrishna. These would contribute towards a concerted, whole-of-society effort in peacebuilding, he concluded.

Building Bridges: Global Peacebuilding Efforts

By Dr Patrice Brodeur

Dr Brodeur said that intra-religious dialogue as well as national ideology and intra-national dialogue are important in addressing extremism. He added that it is also important for people with no religious views to bring their views into the conversation between various religions.

Touching on the roles of the leaders of religious communities, Dr Brodeur said they are especially important in countries where the government is not in control of the whole country. In such instances, it might be religious leaders who have some respect or authority. Dr Brodeur spoke about the notion of servant leadership, which requires “servant theologies and worldviews”. He noted that there needs to be resilient religious actors within religious communities and that religious actors, communities, organisations and institutions need to be empowered. In addition, inter-religious networks and platforms need to be created and sustained, he said.

Dr Brodeur said there can be no positive peace without healing and there can be no healing without nurturing compassion and forgiveness. He provided examples of various global religious peacebuilding efforts ranging from UN agencies, governmental organisations, international inter-governmental organisations, and regional inter-governmental organisations to international inter-religious organisations and religious endeavours by faith groups. He ended his presentation by encouraging a scaling up of investment in various areas in order to promote global religious peacebuilding.

DISCUSSION

The discussion centred on the notion of identifying “servant theological leaders” to counter extremist ideologies. It was noted that there was a need to invest in people from within the respective religious groupings themselves. Such people, who are familiar with the religious language and are known in their communities, would be able to make the greatest impact.

One of the points that emerged during the discussion was that in countries like Indonesia, radicalisation does not occur in mosques but through the Internet, where individuals become self-radicalised. In this regard, there is a need for traditional religious leaders to move beyond engaging followers at places of worship and enhance their media literacy, especially in the use of social media. It was also felt that social media literacy should be promoted in the education sector. Participants felt that strategies should be developed for social media and engagements in cyberspace in order to counter the proliferation of extremist worldviews.

COHESION #2 – COMMUNITY INITIATIVES TOWARDS SOCIAL COHESION

Speakers

Pastor Tan Seow How

Senior Pastor, Heart of God Church, Singapore

Dr Mohamed Bin Ali

Assistant Professor, Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, RSIS

Singapore is one of the world's most religiously and culturally diverse nations. This breakout session highlighted the social cohesion initiatives in Singapore. It was aimed at examining the past and ongoing community efforts and exploring possible new avenues for collaboration in the strengthening of social harmony.

Community Initiatives Towards Social Cohesion

By Dr Mohamed Bin Ali

Dr Mohamed emphasised that social harmony in a diverse society is a precious commodity as it can be very fragile. Highlighting Singapore's past and ongoing community efforts to build social cohesion, he noted that the relative peace and social harmony the country had enjoyed since its independence was only the result of deliberate efforts that had been developed over decades. Dr Mohamed urged Singaporeans to understand and reflect on the difficulties that this process entailed in order that social harmony can continue to prevail.

Dr Mohamed noted that Singapore's early leaders had integrated social cohesion into their social policies. While concerns over social cohesion had originated in the context of the ethnic tensions that were prevalent at the time, the lessons learned were equally applicable to contemporary concerns over religious tensions. He said the process of building social cohesion had to be an ongoing and constantly evolving one. He also stressed that the dynamic nature of today's community, with an ever-growing influx of immigrants and foreign workers, made the need to work towards social cohesion greater than before.

Dr Mohamed highlighted the Singapore government's crucial role in developing policies and implementing measures and initiatives to promote social harmony. The close partnership between government and the community is invaluable, he

said. Nonetheless, new social cleavages have emerged in the post-9/11 period, particularly along religio-political lines, he noted. The threat of transnational terrorism is the result of various threats that had already existed, such as extremism, exclusivism, and segregationist ideologies. The role played by the different religious leaders and communities in preventing society from splintering is, therefore, of great importance, said Dr Mohammad. In conclusion, Dr Mohamed acknowledged the helpful efforts of the Muslim community in combatting Islamist extremism.

Community Initiatives Towards Social Cohesion

By Pastor Tan Seow How

Pastor Tan shared his view on how his church, as a religious organisation, translated the aspiration of societal cohesion into action in secular Singapore. He explained that his church is comprised mainly of young adults, with an average age of 22 years, with 75 per cent being students. According to him, the youthfulness of the congregation provided his church and its members with energy and drive to participate in activities focused on the promotion of social cohesion. The church participated in 68 activities held by Singapore's Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles between 2016 and 2018 with, over 1,500 volunteers. Pastor Tan noted that the impetus for participating in these events was first and foremost the desire to be of service to fellow human beings. He highlighted that community building based on a common humanity was the key to building cohesive societies. This could only be achieved through government policies, he added.

Pastor Tan pointed out that his church's approach in building cohesive societies is preventive rather than interventionist. The Heart of God Church actively teaches its congregation to respect common spaces and to never politicise religion. Its activities and messages are framed positively. Pastor Tan noted that instead of emphasising what the church is against, the Church focuses on areas of community unity, such as serving, helping and loving people, as well as being compassionate.

DISCUSSION

Dr Mohamed and Pastor Tan made two key points on the approach to cohesion. First, integration into a cohesive society does not necessarily require shedding the distinct elements of one's identity completely. But one's individual identity should not impede building a cohesive national community. Second, cohesiveness must be the product of equal partnership among diverse groups. They ended the session by acknowledging those religious, community and political leaders who have not shied away from the difficulty of building cohesion in a diverse society. They commended these leaders for their concerted efforts to reconcile divergent theologies as they foster partnerships in promoting cohesion.

CLOSING REMARKS AND DIALOGUE



**MR HENG SWEE KEAT
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER (DPM)
AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE**

Minister Grace Fu,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

Introduction

It is very heartening to see so many religious leaders and scholars gathered here, to share ideas to strengthen social cohesion.

Over the last two days, this conference has covered a wide range of issues on cohesive societies. As the international community becomes more diverse, both within each society and across societies, it is critical to recognise our shared humanity and uphold harmony.

Both President Halimah and His Majesty King Abdullah II highlighted that everyone has a role in upholding inter-religious harmony

We saw the religious leaders of Singapore reaffirm their commitment to safeguard religious harmony in Singapore.

As King Abdullah II reminded us, we all have a role to play in reclaiming the moderate voice on the Internet, on social media, and in the public space.

The conference also confronted difficult questions, like how we should balance the different identities that we all carry — whether religious, communal or national — and, more importantly, how we can enable these identities to coexist in harmony.

These are important questions, because in order to draw strength from diversity, we must first live in harmony with people who have different beliefs, customs and practices.

Throughout human history, we have had diverse societies. Not all have been peaceful, but many of those that embraced their diversity thrived.

In this region, the Malacca Sultanate of the 15th century stands out in the annals of history.

- (a) The Sultanate became Muslim when Parameswara, later known as Iskandar Shah, converted to Islam after he met Chinese admiral and diplomat Zheng He. Admiral Zheng He, a Muslim, was on his way to Africa. Islamic culture blended with the Hindu and Buddhist teachings of the archipelago.
- (b) As a port city, Malacca was remarkably cosmopolitan. Malays, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Turks, Siamese and Burmese, who were also Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Jews, lived alongside each other. They also intermarried and exchanged cultures. The rich cultures of the Peranakan and the Chetti Melaka communities are the legacies of these unions.

Challenges to Cohesion-Building

How we draw unity from diversity is more important than ever because we live in an era marked by unprecedented levels of global trade, technological advancement and human migration. These three forces have combined in a way that has not worked for some people, and this has fuelled tension and conflict.

- (a) In some developed economies, while global trade has benefited many, it has also sharpened the divide between the haves and the have-nots.

- (b) Industries and jobs are being disrupted by new technologies, creating much uncertainty.
- (c) Against this backdrop of anxiety, fault lines have deepened between different segments of society.

This is exacerbated by the ease with which falsehoods and extremist and exclusive ideas proliferate through the Internet. This has been exploited by those who seek to spread misinformation and sow discord to further their own agenda.

Increasingly, nationalism and intolerance are displacing openness and harmony. We have seen a resurgence of ultra-nationalist and supremacist hate groups, and increasing hostility towards minority communities, breeding disenfranchisement, and generating a vicious cycle of conflict.

How We Build Cohesion

Every society will need to find its own path to cohesion, one that is shaped by its history, context, culture and demands of the time. But there is much we can learn from each other, and work with each other, in our effort to build cohesive societies.

Allow me to share Singapore's experience. Modern Singapore began as an *entrêpot*. People from all over the world came here to trade, and many stayed. These traders brought their own religions and beliefs. The Pew Research Centre has named Singapore the most religiously diverse country in the world.

Today, we are fortunate to have peace and stability in our multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society.

But Singapore was not always like this. We learned how to build cohesion the hard way.

- (a) Like many other British colonies, Singapore was managed along racial and religious lines before our Independence in 1965. Communities were kept apart geographically. So we had Chinatown, Little India and Geylang Serai, where different ethnic groups were placed.
- (b) Racial tensions were not uncommon, and the 1950s and 1960s were turbulent times for Singapore. Over those two decades, several racially-motivated riots took place, and a total of 58 people were killed while 835 were injured.

When Singapore became an independent nation in 1965, building a cohesive multi-cultural and multi-religious society was the Government's top priority. To build cohesion in Singapore, over the years, we have approached this in three ways:

- (a) First, we expand common spaces and shared experiences, while preserving racial and religious diversity.
 - (i) We established English as the working language of Singapore, so that people from different ethnic communities would have a common language to work and interact with one another, and with the world.
 - (ii) We introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy in 1989 to make sure that our HDB, or public housing estates, have a balanced mix of ethnic groups to promote interactions and foster racial harmony.
 - (iii) We regularly rejuvenate our common spaces such as hawker centres, community centres and civic spaces — sometimes all rolled into one, like in Our Tampines Hub in my constituency!
 - (iv) We emphasise the importance of shared experiences through our national school system and National Service in the uniformed services. Through these, Singaporeans from all walks of life, regardless of race, language or religion, come together.
 - (v) At the same time, we conserve our cultural and religious landmarks and protect our heritage in precincts like Kampong Glam, Chinatown and Little India. We also observe and celebrate the festivals of the various ethnic and religious communities in Singapore.
 - (vi) But, like most other countries, our demography is evolving. Life experiences and needs are also more varied. So, Singapore is more diverse today than before.
 - (vii) Our increasing diversity means that our common spaces will be harder to maintain, and must be deliberately nurtured and expanded.
- (b) The second way that we use to build social cohesion in Singapore is to stay vigilant to guard against forces that can tear society apart. We built and supported institutions to work together and foster understanding between different communities and groups.

- (i) We established the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, which scrutinises bills that pass through Parliament to ensure that they do not discriminate against any racial or religious community.
- (ii) We formed the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, which advises the Government on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore.
- (iii) We also set up the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony (NSC), whose membership comprises apex leaders from major faith and ethnic groups, to guide the Government's engagement on racial and religious harmony.
- (iv) At the constituency level, we have 89 Inter-Racial and Religious Circles (IRCCs) that act as platforms for community and religious organisations to network and collaborate. These IRCCs bring together people of different faiths — to interact, to perform charitable acts and community services together. Through this process, we deepen understanding and trust.

Besides institutional structures, we have also put in place legislation to ensure that our fault lines are less easily exploited by those who seek to do us harm.

- (i) To deal with hate speech and the spread of misinformation, we have in place laws such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which allow us to intervene where necessary to protect our society.
- (ii) This is an evolving threat, and we must continue to be vigilant.

As our racial and religious demographics shift, so, too, must our approach to building bridges and encouraging discourse.

- (i) For example, homogeneity of religion within ethnic groups is on the decline in Singapore. We have more inter-faith families in Singapore now, where each generation may hold different religious beliefs. We should use this opportunity to deepen mutual understanding.
- (ii) More people are also choosing not to affiliate themselves with traditional ethnic identities or religion. Today, 22 per cent of marriages in Singapore are between people of different ethnic groups, and nearly 20 per cent of Singaporeans do not identify with a religion. We must learn to include their perspectives in our discourses.

- (c) The third way that we promote cohesion is to work hard to provide Singaporeans with better lives, and to ensure that all Singaporeans get to share in the fruits of our progress.
- (i) In growing our economy, we put a special focus on creating good jobs for all Singaporeans, regardless of which community they belong to. Our National Trades Union Congress, our labour movement, encapsulates this well with their tagline, “Every Worker Matters”.
 - (ii) Some workers have benefited more from this growth than others; this is why we continue to work hard to address social inequality, to better distribute the fruits of growth. We have been doing more to help low-wage workers, to better provide for seniors in their retirement years, and to give children from underprivileged backgrounds a good start in life.

Building an inclusive and cohesive society in Singapore is always a work in progress, and this is true for every other country.

This is why conferences like the ICCS are important, so that we can learn from each other and exchange best practices.

This conference brings together people from government, academia, religious groups and the civic sector. Through the Young Leaders’ Programme (YLP), which is part of this conference, we reached out to the next generation of leaders. Everyone has a role to play in building cohesive societies.

To Singaporeans in this audience, the Government is committed to working in partnership with you, to build a future where everyone plays a part and feels a sense of belonging.

I hope that we can build a democracy of deeds, where everyone chips in with our various strengths and passions to build a society we can all be proud of.

To those who have come from 40 countries around the world to take part in this conference, I thank you for the perspectives you have contributed to broaden our horizons.

Countries around the world are all facing common challenges — be it global warming, global security, global economic growth, or sustainable development. These common challenges can only be tackled effectively if the global community works closely together. The foundation for this is mutual trust and respect, deeper understanding and harmony.

We must build this foundation not only in our own society, but across societies around the world. To combat extremist and intolerant views, we must work together to create an ever widening ripple of understanding, trust and respect.

I commend the initiatives of The Amman Message, A Common Word, the UN World Inter-faith Harmony Week, the Christchurch Call to Action and other similar initiatives to deepen dialogues, and understanding.

The many religious leaders gathered here have also called on all of us to distil the commonality across all religions, which teaches us to be good, and to do good for one another, so that humans can continue to progress.

Just as each society achieves more together than as disparate individuals, the global community achieves more together when all societies can pursue common goals and tackle common challenges.

Conclusion

To conclude, humans have a deep spiritual impulse, to seek the meaning of life and the profundity of existence. For thousands of years, religious beliefs in different parts of the world have guided and nourished people. But sometimes, differences have led to wars.

So it is very meaningful to bring together leaders, thinkers and activists of all major faiths, across different continents, to engage in dialogues, learn new perspectives, and unite in a fellowship of respect and trust. I applaud you for your commitment to building cohesion as well as deepening understanding and trust. Thank you for joining us in this conference. I look forward to continuing the discussion with you during the dialogue.

Dialogue with DPM Heng

Chair

Amb Ong Keng Yong

Executive Deputy Chairman, RSIS

Role of the Youth

During the dialogue, DPM Heng highlighted the importance of engaging the youth through education so that they understand important values. He felt that young people should be encouraged to appreciate diversity. Therefore, initiatives to promote inter-faith harmony must be implemented, especially those aimed at helping the youth to realise their role in shaping a better future. If the youth are going to inherit the future, they should be involved in shaping the future, DPM Heng added. DPM Heng also emphasised that young people must take a stand against forms of extremist views by speaking up against any derogatory remarks about the various races and religions.

Role of Digital Technology

Noting that the proliferation of social media tools in the digital age had had caused disruption, DPM Heng said it was important to make digital technology constructive instead. He suggested that there should be strong stances against online falsehoods to prevent misunderstanding brought about by hate speech and disinformation. He emphasised that young people should make use of digital technology to promote better understanding and mutual trust.

Building Social Cohesion

DPM Heng stressed that diversity is good for society. He pointed out that building social cohesion requires religious leaders, policymakers, academics, and media to play their respective roles. Religious leaders should come together to build social cohesion and should take action against extremism. DPM Heng highlighted the importance of dialogue in promoting inter-faith understanding. He also said that policymakers must uphold the rule of law, which is critical for building social cohesion. To promote mutual understanding, DPM Heng suggested that academics should do research on understanding different communities across the world. As for the media, they should help to promote better understanding of different faiths by using social media tools to rebut online falsehoods.

In conclusion, DPM Heng noted that by emphasising what we have in common, we could grow together as a cohesive society. He laid out four points to consider towards better facilitating the process of building a cohesive society. First, **Openness** to the world and the flow of people and ideas would enrich our society significantly. Second, **Multi-culturalism**, where regardless of race, language, and religion we come together and work towards cohesion. Third, **Self-determination** requires that we understand the global context that we operate in because our fate will be shaped by global developments. Finally, **Cohesiveness**, where sharing our commonality can help us stay cohesive as one community that believes deeply in harmony for building trust and understanding across the world.



About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

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