

The Conversation on *Religion and the Challenge of Governance* was held on 16 March 2017, attended by 20 senior public officers from various ministries and public agencies.

2 The informal closed door discussion is a platform for public officers to seek clarification on religious matters from authoritative credible sources to aid them in designing robust and relevant policies. This is an overall summary of the discussion.

3 Role of Government and Policy-makers:

Shaykh Hamza put forth that while good governance is about the ethical protection of public affairs and interests, within a state, through informed policy design and the implementation of real checks and balances, the actual purpose of good governance is to allow for human flourishing, in accordance to man's hierarchy of needs. Participants affirmed that through their work they aimed at striking the delicate balance between optimally nurturing the higher creative agencies of people while regulating and diminishing their lower baser aspects, within the context of a complex world in flux.

4 Nurturing our Highest Self: All faith traditions affirm man's sanctity and encourage man, with a myriad set of tools, to strive towards the ideal of every religion – the wholesome development of man into a mindful human being with mature physical, mental and spiritual faculties. An individual who understands that Universal Compassion and Interdependence are the keys to harmonious living.

5 Principle-based Partnerships: The role of governance and the *raison d'être* of faith traditions thus overlap. Being aware of such fundamental commonality compels policy-makers and faith leaders to enter into a beautiful, long lasting and principle-based partnership. This is the blossoming of the soulful secularism such as the one practiced in Singapore. One that acknowledges the importance of faith traditions and strikes another delicate balance between state neutrality and engagement with faith leaders.

6 Nuanced Understanding: key to achieving their respective targets, policy-makers and faith leaders must continuously broaden their knowledge and deepen their understanding of the complexity of diverse people, language signifiers, cultural particularities and historical specificities. Participants acknowledged that in a world of constant change, there is an urgent need to make better sense of what's happening in order to develop sensitive, relevant and robust policies.

7 Radicalism and Inclusive Religions: When asked about radicalization and whether faith traditions can exclusively and independently work on their own or if they are inclusively interdependent, he points out that these are examples of issues that require a nuanced understanding of complex issues. Radical activists of any cause, who argue that there is a need to 'destroy everything in order to

rebuild anew' also threaten that there would be 'no peace without justice.' However, they fail to appreciate that the reverse also holds true. It is only in peaceful societies that people can begin to work gradually for a more just society.

8 As for faith traditions, a better understanding of their nature and their various dimensions would allow us to conclude, factually, that they are both exclusive and inclusive. Each faith is exclusive in their salvation ideals and have independent theologies; however, on the ideals of Universal Compassion and the sanctity of man, they are inclusive and interdependent.

9 Dealing with Different Degrees of Compassion:

Shaykh Hamza acknowledged that while it is observed that some Christians and Buddhists were historically violent believers, they have come to realise the embedded compassion in their respective theologies. Muslims, on the other hand, although historically just and peaceful, have derailed. Policy-makers ought to (1) re-establish the centrality of the ideals of Universal Compassion; (2) encourage the accentuation of shared common ideals; and (3) appreciate the exclusive dimension of each religion which lends each a unique character and flavour.

10 Faith, Reason and Governance: As these are three branches of government, these three signposts form three sources of social organization and they should complement and moderate one another. None ought to be subservient to the other.

11 Shaykh Hamza suggested the following tools that may allow for their harmonious and balanced co-existence: (1) Practicing responsible freedom of speech; (2) Continuously communicating with one another, rather than across each other; (3) Embracing technological advances in Artificial Intelligence; (4) Instituting a soulful secularism with transparent checks & balances; (5) Integrating rather than assimilating the different traditional/classical schools of thought of humanity's collective repository of wisdom through broad-based education systems that are focused on critical thinking and problem-solving.

12 Conclusion: The best governments are those that are conscious of their roles; willing to constantly improve themselves and their societies; and are corruption free. Singapore's model governance that learns from the best, yet retains its own values and principles, has more to teach the world than the world has to offer it in return.