

Unpacking Interfaith Relations in Multireligious Singapore

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Introduction

It is a well-known fact that Singapore is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Miner, 2023). Despite this, a surprising truth often goes unacknowledged: true peace is not just about the absence of conflict, but the active presence of genuine connection. Achieving peace between religions is like living with your neighbours in separate rooms. True harmony, however, requires breaking down the walls to build a shared home. While Singapore is generally safe and peaceful, our religious harmony is relatively a fragile concept, built not on shared bonds, but on the quiet distance of mutual tolerance. Perhaps, it can even be said that for many, religious harmony is taken for granted, and people of different religious communities merely tolerate one another instead of forming genuine friendships.

This notion of mere tolerance is not unfounded. According to the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony 2024, 9 in 10 respondents felt it was acceptable to have a neighbour of a different religion, but only about half of Singaporeans were likely to have a close friend from a different race or religion (Mathews et al., 2025). This disparity highlights the difference between passive acceptance and active friendship. It also suggests that while our harmony is stable on the surface, there is still room for growth in fostering deeper social bonds. Additionally, the study finds that while social trust remains high on a general level, the public is divided on whether a higher degree of interreligious social interaction is necessary for religious harmony to flourish. This implies that Singaporeans may be comfortable coexisting with different faiths, but they may not be actively engaging or seeking deeper friendships across religious lines. Outside of designated interfaith spaces, people may tend to stick with what is familiar, existing in their own bubbles. As long as no one incites animosity, each community lives in a separate space, which leads to a somewhat surface level harmony.

For this article, we have interviewed 11 participants from diverse religious and non-religious identities, all of whom have lived experiences in Singapore. The participants' ages range between 20 and 60 years old, allowing us to get insights from various perspectives in terms of religion, age group, and gender. This interview aims to explore the state of religious harmony in Singapore, along with the contemporary challenges in achieving its ideal form in society. Questions that were asked to the participants mainly revolved around their ideas of the ideal state of religious harmony in Singapore, whether Singapore has achieved this ideal or not, and the challenges to achieving this ideal. However, it is important to note that the participants of this interview are not representatives of the Singaporean society as a whole. With this, this article will discuss the concept of religious harmony and its challenges in attaining it in Singapore, based on our readings and interview.

Concept of Religious Harmony

Even though most people are familiar with the concept of religious harmony, its understanding varies from person to person. According to Jaclyn L. Neo (2019), there are three ways in which harmony is understood:

1. **Order:** Religious harmony understood as order entails emphasis on avoiding conflict and maintaining public order through state control. Usually, there is a legislation of maintaining religious harmony by the state. This can be seen in Singapore whereby Sections 298 and 298A of the Penal Code are enforced. Those who commit offences, such as violent crimes or insults, against another person due to discrimination of the person's religion, or against another religion, can be charged. While maintaining public order is important, this understanding of religious harmony leads to a superficial coexistence and tolerance amongst different religious communities with no meaningful interactions. This results in a lack of sense of community or segregation among the citizens (Neo, 2019).
2. **Complementariness:** Religious harmony in this approach encourages active engagement and mutual adaptation among different religious groups. This approach allows the freedom to practise one's own religion, but these practices cannot overlap the sensitivities of another religion. It is undeniable that each religion is different from another. However, managing and balancing these differences are important and it can be achieved by adjusting their interests to meet the social or state goals. Needless to say, this is difficult to achieve as it is unclear how much incongruence is allowed before it breaches religious harmony (Neo, 2019).
3. **Uniformity:** Uniformity as one of the understandings of religious harmony promotes sameness and suppresses differences. In contrast with complementariness, uniformity maintains religious harmony not by balancing interests, but by aligning them with collective norms. Critics of this understanding mentioned that this results in a subjugation of individuals' rights for the sake of social order (Neo, 2019). We do not agree with this approach to religious harmony as religions are different by nature and this individuality should be maintained instead of dissolved.

Similarly, the concept of religious harmony is no stranger to Islam. Islam encourages peaceful coexistence and respect for other religions. Muslims are not allowed to insult the God(s) of other religions as this will result in our own God being insulted. This is mentioned in the Qur'an:

وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ ۗ

“O believers! Do not insult what they invoke besides Allah or they will insult Allah spitefully out of ignorance.” (The Qur'an, 6:108, Quran.com)

Here, it is evident that an act of enmity towards another religion will cause the same enmity to be reflected onto us. Hence, respecting other religions, which is one of the most important keys to uphold religious harmony, is significant in Islam.

In fact, during the time of Prophet Muhammad, when he became the leader of Medina, he granted all parties religious freedom (Bibi, 2022). This could be found in the Charter of Medina; a compact regulating relations among Muslim and Jewish tribes. It recognised the autonomy of different communities under one political framework, without coercion in matters of belief. This is also in line with the Qur'anic verse:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ

“Let there be no compulsion in religion.” (The Qur'an, 2:256, Quran.com)

Therefore, it is evident that religious harmony is a part of Islamic values as well.

Interestingly, during the interview with the 11 participants, at least half of them acknowledged that Singapore is relatively harmonious when it comes to living in a multireligious society. People are allowed to choose their own religion without any legal repercussions. Tolerance of other religions is generally observed in society as well. In this aspect, religious harmony is achieved in Singapore with the implementation of Sections 298 and 298A of the Penal Code.

However, they also mentioned that there are still gaps in Singapore when it comes to religious harmony, especially in terms of social and individual efforts. One of the participants noted, *“Religion is a sensitive topic. My religion is mine, your religion is yours. That's for it. I feel true religious harmony is when we are comfortable enough to talk about the religion openly, not to criticise, but to learn and understand about other religions.”*

While most people have tolerance for other religions in Singapore, religious harmony is more than just tolerating other religions. Mere tolerance leads to a superficial state of religious harmony without meaningful interactions and bonds across different religious communities and individuals. As a matter of fact, more than half of the interviewees suggested that deeper and mutual understanding is required to achieve true religious harmony as ignorance still persists in Singapore. Religious harmony as “order” is not sufficient or sustainable in the long run as it does not foster genuine societal bonds

across religious communities and individuals. Instead, this approach makes it seem like the line between religious harmony and disharmony is thin, fragile, and easily threatened.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that Sections 298 and 298A of the Penal Code are not important. These sections of the Penal Code are definitely important in a diverse society as it maintains public order, but we find that more can be done to maintain religious harmony in Singapore beyond tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Hence, we opine that religious harmony is not fully actualised in Singapore.

This then begets the question: What is the ideal state of religious harmony? Or, in other words, what is “true” religious harmony?

Of course, some find that religious harmony is achieved once peaceful coexistence and tolerance as well as religious freedom are apparent in society. While this is important, it does not necessarily mean that the individuals of the society interact and integrate meaningfully with people of other religions. Living individualistically without caring for others who do not share our beliefs is not an ideal form of religious harmony.

Even then, the ideal concept of religious harmony in Singapore has various understandings. Our interview participants also have diverse understandings on what the ideal state of religious harmony should be. These are the key points of what they believe an ideal state of religious harmony looks like:

1. **Respect and tolerance without imposition:** Mutual respect is important when it comes to living in a multireligious society. Everyone should not use the differences within religions as a tool to create conflicts. Instead, these differences should be respected without necessarily having to adopt them.
2. **Deep understanding beyond superficial tolerance:** There is a huge contrast between tolerance of other religions and understanding them. Tolerance simply means allowing religions to exist without any interference. Meanwhile, understanding religions allows people to form genuine bonds with one another regardless of which religion they adhere to, if any. By fostering deep understanding, we will understand why people different from us do as they do and get to know one another without judgement. This then leads to treating others with an open mind, empathy, compassion, and kindness. As a result, a sense of community is forged among individuals of the society.
3. **Open, respectful dialogue:** Religious harmony is not complete without having difficult conversations. In this world, there have been many instances whereby conflicts happen among different religions. Additionally, different worldviews and different opinions usually cause tensions and rifts among communities. Hence, to move beyond tolerance, having an open, respectful dialogue is

important to understand one another and actualise the concept of religious harmony.

4. **Freedom to practise religion:** Everyone is entitled to practising the religion of their own choice. No one should be oppressed or discriminated against in society, workplace, and school on the basis of religion. No one should also be coerced into converting to another religion.

Therefore, religious harmony is not a concept that is based on mere tolerance. It is about having active engagement with people of different religions. It is about forming genuine bonds with them, despite not sharing the same beliefs. It is about learning about one another and living in an integrated society, rather than in a segregated one where we discuss religious issues only with those who share the same beliefs. While the ideal state of religious harmony differs from person to person, it can certainly be said that more can be done to enhance religious harmony in Singapore.

Challenges of Religious Harmony in Singapore

As mentioned earlier, religious harmony is not yet fully actualised in Singapore. This is because there are many challenges which prevent its actualisation. From the interview conducted, the majority of the participants stated that one of the biggest challenges to religious harmony is the lack of education, or awareness, and misinformation about religions. The participants highlighted that when people do not know much about other religions, it may lead to wrong assumptions and, therefore, a lack of respect. The lack of understanding may also cause fear or discomfort when interacting with people of different faiths. One of the participants mentioned, *“So I think the biggest challenge for us Singaporeans is to educate ourselves about other religions, not just to respect, but to also understand and be more open about the religion.”* In addition, misleading religious contents online can contribute to misunderstandings and negative perceptions. Such contents often go viral, spreading confusion and distrust both within and between communities (Soh & Teo, 2022). As a result, people find it difficult to connect and get along with people from different religious backgrounds.

Furthermore, the lack of education may lead to the next challenge, which is the presence of persistent social and cultural barriers. Some examples of these barriers are prejudice, discrimination, hate speech, ethnic segregation, and negative media portrayals of certain communities. These issues often arise from ignorance, leading to stereotyping and unequal treatment of ethnic or religious groups. For instance, a study by Dr. Peter Chew found that Chinese undergraduates in Singapore, when asked to role-play as employers selecting candidates from a set of resumes, discriminated against Malay job

applicants due to biased assumptions (Subchi et al., 2021). Besides that, hate speech, both online and offline, fuels fear, inflames tensions, and increases social distancing (Soral et al., 2018). Similarly, negative media portrayals reinforce harmful stereotypes and deepen divisions. As a result, some avoid cross-cultural interactions, leading to social enclaves that, if left unaddressed, may threaten national unity (Musa, 2023).

Another common challenge, as highlighted by the interview participants, is the avoidance of sensitive or difficult religious topics in discussions. Two of the participants highlighted that religion remains a sensitive subject in public discourse. This sensitivity often results in an overcautious approach where difficult conversations are avoided altogether. While this may be done in the name of peacekeeping, it can unintentionally hinder genuine interfaith understanding. For instance, another participant shared that interfaith events and dialogues tend to focus on common values while avoiding uncomfortable or divisive topics. The participant noted that this lack of open discussion can lead to superficial harmony and allow radical ideas to take root in isolated “echo chambers”. Additionally, controversial issues such as the Israel-Palestine issue, abortion, or LGBTQ+ rights are often seen as too sensitive to address publicly. However, one of the participants believes that Singaporeans have matured enough to engage in these complex conversations within safe and structured environments. Encouraging more honest and respectful dialogues on such topics may be essential for fostering deeper mutual understanding and long-term religious harmony.

Finally, generational differences present a unique challenge to religious harmony in Singapore, as highlighted by several participants. For instance, two of the participants observed that the older generation is sometimes perceived as close-minded, partly because they had limited exposure to structured interfaith learning. At the same time, older generations tend to place more importance on religion in their daily lives, whereas younger generations are increasingly inclined to distance themselves from religion altogether. This is because they find religion to be restrictive and unwelcoming to certain groups. Meanwhile, another participant noted that there is a certain reluctance among senior religious and interfaith leaders to pass on leadership roles to the younger generation. The same participant also emphasised the need for a dedicated effort to introduce and guide the younger generation, as they may feel insecure or awkward when first starting out in interfaith work. Addressing these generational differences is crucial in building stronger mutual understanding across faiths, with both younger and older generations working hand in hand to promote lasting religious harmony.

To move past mere tolerance and truly strengthen the bonds in our society, one has to move beyond simply coexisting with the other. Here, we recommend several key actions to respond to these challenges. Firstly, we have to create more natural and informal safe spaces for interfaith dialogue. Hulsman (2023) reveals that interreligious

dialogue through friendship is important to help people develop a correct understanding of different religions and move beyond their limited social bubbles. By proactively engaging in interfaith dialogue in informal settings, people can build authentic friendships and not just tolerate one another.

Secondly, to truly understand one another, it is important for people to learn and educate themselves on different religions. The only way to fight the misinformation of religions by the media or stereotype is through religious literacy. Learning from young would help the future society become more appreciative of one another. According to Lim (2019), religious and worldview studies in school can strengthen social cohesion and help correct misinformations by encouraging religious literacy. Learning about different religions in a respectful and accurate way allows people to correct false narratives and break down stereotypes.

Last but not least, the responsibility of building a religiously harmonious society lies in the individual. In the 2019 parliamentary speech, Ms Grace Fu, the then Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, highlighted this. She stated that while legislation is important, it is not sufficient to achieve true social harmony. True harmony is built by the interactions of our everyday life and our efforts to interact with one another (Fu, 2019). We must take ownership of our role in this process. No matter how many policies or initiatives are organised by the government, true religious harmony cannot be fostered without the people. Religious harmony is not a concept that is imposed from top-down, but instead it is built from the ground-up, starting with one person at a time.

Conclusion

All in all, Singapore is known for its unique multicultural and multireligious socio-political landscape, despite being a small-island nation. However, this article has shown that true religious harmony has yet to be actualised. Instead, it is a concept that goes beyond mere tolerance.

Although there is no one-size fits all definition for religious harmony, in essence, it is about actively engaging and forming genuine bonds with people of different faiths. Only then can a truly integrated society be created. While the ideal state of religious harmony differs for everyone, Singapore can do more to achieve a deeper, more meaningful state of harmony. This requires tackling a variety of challenges to achieve this ideal. Among the challenges identified were the lack of education and awareness about different religions, discrimination of the religions of others, a tendency to avoid sensitive topics, and a generational gap when dealing with religions. Therefore, to build true religious harmony, several recommendations have been made, such as building authentic interfaith friendships through informal spaces for dialogue, fostering religious

literacy through education, and individual responsibility. Ultimately, lasting religious harmony and social cohesion can only be achieved through everyday interactions rather than being imposed by top-down policies.

In conclusion, the power of change lies in each individual to make a difference and foster true religious harmony. Ultimately, the future of Singapore's religious harmony depends on each of us. Starting with a small step, by simply seeing each other as equal human beings, it can foster greater appreciation for one another. This will move beyond passive tolerance and make us more united as a society.

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About The Article

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About Harmony Centre Singapore

The Harmony Centre was officially opened by Singapore's then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 7 October 2006. The Centre is an initiative by The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to promote better understanding of Muslim life and culture as a response to the post-September 11 era. It addresses queries and misconceptions about Islam and the Singaporean Muslim community.

In partnership with Singapore's Ministry of Education, the Centre has become a learning hub under the national education scheme, welcoming over 76,000 visitors to date. It serves as a meeting point for various faith communities, fostering dialogue and understanding through diverse educational programmes. Notable initiatives include Faith in the Heartlands (F.A.I.T.H), the Building Bridges Series, as well as the Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Memorial Lectures. The Centre also facilitates discussions between youth and faith leaders on religious and contemporary issues, nurturing cross-community friendships and cultivating appreciation for diverse beliefs and practices.

The Centre's efforts are particularly significant in Singapore's multi-religious context, where it plays a crucial role in maintaining social harmony. By providing a platform for open dialogue and education, this approach aligns with Singapore's commitment to religious harmony, making the Harmony Centre a vital institution in the nation's ongoing efforts to maintain social cohesion in an increasingly complex global environment. It has also been consulted globally on its interfaith model and shares its experiences regularly to international visitors. The Centre's philosophy is rooted in the belief that there is a positive role of religion in societies, and that faith can contribute to human flourishing.