

A Tapestry of Faiths: **Keeping Religion Vibrant in** **a Multi-Religious Singapore**

By Harmony Centre



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Walk through Singapore's heartlands and you'll witness something remarkable: a mosque's call to prayer alongside church bells, whilst Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines stand peacefully alongside modern schools and bustling markets. This is Singapore's living testament to religious harmony—not by accident, but by design.

Singapore's diverse religious landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for building lasting social cohesion. In our increasingly complex modern world¹, fostering interfaith understanding has become essential for maintaining the peaceful coexistence that defines our island nation.

The Singapore way: harmony by design and by habit

Over the past decade alone, Singapore has seen a substantive evolution in its interfaith landscape, marked by a concerted effort by diverse societal actors to promote understanding, respect, and collaboration among different religious communities. This includes the implementation of clear policies and legal frameworks to safeguard and foster inter-religious harmony in this country. Singapore's approach to religious diversity is deliberate, layered, and lived. Three mutually reinforcing elements stand out:

Clear safeguards and Education

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act², first enacted in 1990 and strengthened in 2019 (with key provisions commencing in 2022), provides tools to prevent the abuse of religion, uphold moderation, and keep religion and partisan politics separate. These legal guardrails are rarely used—but their very presence underwrites trust across communities.

¹ This underscores the rapid and unpredictable changes in societal, political, and economic landscapes, which can affect interfaith relations in various ways. Sudden shifts in power dynamics, social norms, and geopolitical landscapes, impacting the status and influence of different faith communities. Complexity and ambiguity can create challenges in understanding and navigating diverse religious beliefs and practices, leading to potential misunderstandings and conflicts. Nonlinearity and incomprehensibility can further complicate the dynamics of interfaith interactions, making it difficult to predict and manage the outcomes of such engagements.

² <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/maintenance-of-religious-harmony-faq.pdf?sfvrsn>

The Ministry of Education in Singapore has implemented comprehensive initiatives to educate students on social cohesion and intercultural understanding. Through the Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum, students are taught values of respect and empathy, while the National Education curriculum emphasises Singapore's multicultural heritage and the importance of social cohesion. Schools also organise cultural and religious awareness programmes, including interfaith dialogues and cultural festivals, to celebrate diversity. Additionally, students participate in Values-in-Action (VIA) programmes and leadership development activities that promote empathy, inclusivity, and community service.

Shared Spaces and Cultures

Beyond policy frameworks lies the heart of Singapore's approach: shared celebration and genuine connection. The nation's calendar reflects its diversity, with Eid festivities flowing into Diwali celebrations, Christmas and Vesak Day observances. These festivals have transcended their religious origins to become occasions for cross-cultural understanding and community bonding.

From Buddhist temples offering quiet contemplation to mosques echoing with calls to prayer, from churches ringing their bells to Hindu shrines alive with ceremony, Singapore's spiritual landscape reveals profound commonalities beneath surface differences. Values of compassion, service, and the pursuit of meaning emerge as universal threads that connect rather than divide communities.

This shared foundation enables open, respectful conversations about faith and belief—conversations that bridge differences and strengthen social bonds. Such dialogue transforms interfaith harmony from an abstract ideal into a practical necessity for peace, conflict resolution, and mutual respect. In Singapore, understanding diverse religious beliefs isn't merely encouraged; it's recognised as a shared responsibility that enriches the entire community.

Dialogue and Preparedness

Community-level platforms such as Harmony Circles (formerly Inter-Racial Confidence Circles, or IRCC) convene leaders of different faiths in every constituency to build relationships in peacetime and respond swiftly in moments of strain. The platform was then refreshed to broaden outreach and strengthen capabilities, reflecting how inter-religious friendship must be continually renewed.

Additionally, the Singapore government has supported initiatives such as the Harmony in Diversity Gallery and the Religious Rehabilitation Group, which aim to educate the public about different faith traditions and address issues related to religious extremism. Interfaith youth programmes, including dialogues, workshops, and volunteer projects, have also flourished, empowering the younger generation to play an active role in promoting interfaith harmony.

The Harmony Centre, established by The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), has been instrumental in promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding since 2006. It has served as a platform to front a public education exercise on providing the true teachings of Islam for local communities³. As of date, the Centre has recorded more than 76,000 local and global visitors promoting interfaith understanding and delivering programmes on interfaith literacy⁴.

These initiatives collectively reflect Singapore's commitment to (i) play a contributing and active role in advancing local interfaith understanding and cooperation, (ii) contribute to the broader goal of building a more inclusive and harmonious world, and (iii) nurture a harmonious and inclusive society, serving as a model for interfaith engagement and

³ This is especially with the post-September 11 era, where there were increasing tides of Islamophobia and questions on Islam are recorded. Supported by volunteers as docents, The Centre has also adapted and propagated The Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) framework set by MUIS. The SMI emphasises the importance of living harmoniously in a plural society, being well-adjusted citizens, and contributing positively to Singapore's social fabric.

⁴ This would include visits from government ministries, schools and madrasahs, as well as individuals who are keen to learn more about Islam and interfaith initiatives. Some initiatives to foster interfaith understanding include the National Education Learning Journeys, Building Bridges Programmes, Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Memorial Lecture as well as baseline interfaith literacy programmes for practitioners such as Faith in The Heartlands Programme.

collaboration, demonstrating that fostering interfaith harmony is not only possible but can also lead to a thriving and vibrant interconnected society.

Keeping Faith Vibrant in Diversity: Bangladesh and Singapore

Both Bangladesh and Singapore, despite their geographical distance and distinct historical trajectories, share remarkable religious diversity that reflects the broader tapestry of South and Southeast Asian spirituality. The shared presence of diverse faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity in both nations creates a unique laboratory for interfaith dialogue and facilitation, where ancient wisdom traditions must navigate the complexities of modern plural societies.

The teachings within these common religious traditions offer profound insights into maintaining vibrant faith amidst diversity:

- Islamic principles of *ummah* (community) and *rahmah* (compassion) emphasise unity whilst respecting differences, as reflected in the Quranic verse - (Chapter 49, Verse 13): "*We have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.*"
- Hindu concepts of *dharma* (righteous duty) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) promote ethical living that transcends sectarian boundaries.
- Buddhist teachings on *karuna* (compassion) and the interconnectedness of all beings provide a framework for understanding diversity as an expression of universal suffering and the path to liberation.
- Christian principles of love, service, and the inherent dignity of all persons, particularly as expressed in liberation theology movements within both regions, offer additional resources for building inclusive communities.

This cultural synthesis demonstrates how faith remains vibrant through creative adaptation rather than rigid preservation. In both societies, religious festivals have evolved into occasions for cross-cultural celebration, whilst traditions of communal cooperation—such as Singapore's *gotong-royong*⁵ practice—reflect how religious values translate into practical interfaith collaboration. This approach maintains the distinctiveness of individual traditions whilst fostering genuine dialogue across faith lines, suggesting that diversity strengthens rather than dilutes authentic religious practice.

Conclusion: Onwards for the Common Good

The experiences of Singapore and Bangladesh illuminate a profound truth: religious diversity need not divide but can become a wellspring of collective wisdom and strength. The path forward requires moving beyond mere tolerance towards what might be called 'collaborative transcendence for the common good'—recognising that our deepest spiritual aspirations are often best realised through authentic engagement with those who walk different paths.

This demands both courage and humility from religious communities: courage to step beyond comfortable boundaries and engage genuinely with different beliefs, and humility to recognise that each faith tradition contributes valuable insights to our shared human journey.

As plural societies continue to evolve, success in keeping faith vibrant amidst diversity will depend not on the strength of individual religious traditions alone, but on their collective commitment to weaving these traditions into a tapestry that serves all humanity. In Singapore, every act of interfaith cooperation becomes both prayer and practice—a glimpse of the more just and compassionate world that our shared faiths envision and call us to create.

⁵ a Malay concept meaning community cooperation and mutual assistance, where people work together to achieve common goals and support one another.

About The Article

This article was written by the Harmony Centre Singapore for Rongdhonu - the official publication of the Singapore Bangladesh Society (SBS) in 2025 - with deep appreciation for the friendships and shared endeavours between these two institutions.

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.