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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## Has Religion Become Evil?

By Mohd Alami Musa

### Synopsis

*Hostilities involving religion have significantly increased globally. While religion is not the problem, people of religion have made it problematic. Government intervention is needed to reduce hostilities, but the onus of redeeming the good image of religion falls on the shoulders of people of religion.*

### Commentary

PEW RESEARCH Centre recently released the findings of their study on religion. Social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012. One third of the 198 countries studied had very high or high Social Hostilities Index (SHI), up from 20% six years ago, in 2007. This is bad news for religion. Has religion turned evil? Has it become bad?

In spite of its rare achievement to be an oasis of religious harmony in a troubled world, a cohesive multi-religious society and a functioning secular nation-state for the last 50 years, Singapore's fear about the social and political divisiveness of religion has not receded. Its religious diversity is often associated with the danger of social fragmentation. A religious controversy like the tudung issue had been cited as a possible threat to good inter-religious relations due to a possible push back from other faith communities. Should religion then be feared?

### Religion & hostility – an unholy alliance

Hostilities involving religion are not new; history informs us of the various wars and conflicts that used the banner of religion. Nevertheless, there was a spike in religion--based conflicts in the last two decades. The US State Department's list of the top 50 terrorist organisations shows not a single religion-based militant organisation in the early eighties. However, the profile changed dramatically when the list was updated in the late nineties. Half of the listed organisations were religious in character. Is religion now showing its ugly head?

Many scholars have come to the defence of religion. They maintain that religion remains a central feature of human life. Religious traditions provide the social organisation, with moral codes and ethical principles that define proper behaviour. Noble acts of love, self- sacrifice and service to others are deeply rooted in religious worldviews. Religion offers analysis of human predicament and provides a kind of future hope in a new age. Notwithstanding the goodness, peace and tranquillity offered by religion, why has there been this sharp rise in hostilities involving religion?

The Pew report cited many causes of these hostilities. Primary among them are the escalation of religious

hostilities directed at minorities for acts perceived as threatening to the majority faith. Their places of worship were attacked, followed by forced occupation. Codes of moral behaviour were enforced on the young who indulged themselves in religiously unacceptable behaviour. Mob violence escalated targeting at fellow adherents who were deemed as deviants. Finally, communal violence linked to issues of nationality and identity had significantly increased.

### **Not a problem but made problematic**

The central issue of the role of religion is this: is religion the perpetrator, instigator or innocent victim of abuse?

Mark Juergensmeyer, a renowned scholar on religion, aptly said that religion is not the problem but it can be made problematic by people of religion. According to him, religious traditions contain powerful images of violence, satanisation, conflict and martyrdom. Even the imagery of the slaughter of animals as a ritual provides the notion of bloody sacrifice. All these images inspire individuals to fathom the deepest level of religious imagination to seek God's mandate to commit violence and destruction.

After all, these perpetrators framed their horrendous crimes within the religious vision of a grand struggle between good and evil and an epic cosmic war between the forces of virtue and Satan, as can be found in religious traditions.

To sum up Juergensmeyer's analysis, religion has been corrupted to give hostility remarkable power by spiritualising violence and to provide justification to militant movements as they battle against what they perceive as social oppression, hopelessness in modern life, economic injustices and political corruption. The image of religion is now at its lowest ebb. It is seen by many as a destructive and divisive force in society. What can be done to reinstate the good name of religion?

### **Re-instating religion's good name**

Government should and is expected to play a decisive role to prevent hostilities involving religion. Nevertheless, government's intervention does not necessarily result in the reduction of hostilities. Of the 20 countries with very high Social Hostilities Index, 75% of them have surprisingly high or very high Government Restriction on Religion Index. This means that in spite of significant government restriction on religion, it did not prevent hostilities from happening.

It could mean that the intervention by governments had been ineffective or worse, it could mean that governments imposed restrictions on religion selectively and chose to close one eye for hostilities to occur.

However, this does not imply that government's restriction on religion cannot yield positive results. Nine countries studied by Pew which recorded high Government Restriction on religion Index have low Social Hostilities Index. Singapore is one of them. Its restrictions which are found in legal provisions, regulatory framework and policies, on the problematic practices of religious groups, have been effective to prevent hostilities involving religion.

Nevertheless, the onus of redeeming the good name of religion falls more heavily on the shoulders of people of religion themselves. Thus far, they have closeted themselves in their own religious traditions and are pre-occupied with differences with regard to rituals, customs and practices so that the embrace of religion today has been erroneously identified with divisiveness.

### **End of 'religion' as a term?**

The great historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, shocked the academic world through his book "The Meaning and End of Religion". He suggested that the term religion should no longer be used. He argued that the language used in the pre-Enlightenment years, with terms like tradition, community of faith or the believing community, was language that produced a unifying rather than a divisive effect.

The term "religion" is a new construct of the post Enlightenment era to conveniently categorise the rituals, practices and institutions of the various religions into neat packages. People of religion are therefore trapped into thinking of differences when dealing with their own religion.

Religious people, while not losing faith in their own religion, need to transcend the differences of specific religious traditions and embrace the unifying spirit behind the big idea of religion per se that enable people to appreciate diversity without heading towards collision and stand together to protect religion from being corrupted.

The world needs to see the true spirit of religion so that the fear of its divisive and destructive potentialities can be reduced.

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