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Towards ICCS 2022

What Next for Interreligious Cooperation? New Possibilities in Strengthening Social Cohesion

By Nazirudin Mohd Nasir

SYNOPSIS

Religion is important in bringing societies together around shared values and in promoting cooperation and community engagement. Crises provide opportunities for faith communities to improve bonds of social cohesion and to strengthen resilience for the common good.

COMMENTARY

Since the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic, the world has entered a new phase of grave geopolitical and economic uncertainty. This has placed additional strain on governments and societies. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in governments and public authorities in their management of complex crises, but the escalation of military conflicts and the global food and climate crises are deepening the uncertainties further.

When social and economic fault lines are weakened by such pressures, the threat to social cohesion in diverse societies becomes aggravated, and trust and confidence across communities are at risk.

Pandemic and Challenges

We would have liked for the end of the pandemic to usher in a period of greater solidarity and calm across the world, as societies cherish the human bonds that were disrupted by social distancing and lockdowns. It is bewildering that quite the opposite seems to be happening as the world learns to live with COVID-19. There is a

heightened and palpable discomfort in many societies, whether it is ethnic, political, cultural, or ideological.

These global challenges may be recent, but the problems arising from an interconnected world and complex social fabrics had surfaced much earlier. A diverse and pluralist public sphere is no stranger to contestations and clashes of values and ideologies. Diverse identities can be fractious and polarizing; with disastrous outcomes, as is evident in xenophobic attacks, inter-communal strife, and conflicts.

For a diverse society to keep functioning effectively and cohesively amid these challenges, it needs to find a constructive way to advance the common good while each community preserves its unique culture, norms, and ways of life.

Restoring Relations

Far too often, the roots of conflict and tension are traced to religious differences. In other words, religion is usually seen as the problem. As evidenced in several major conflicts, this prognosis is not completely wrong. Yet religious communities can take it upon themselves to mend relations as a public role.

Faith communities acknowledge that certain religious doctrines, traditions, and historical legacies can breed exclusiveness, which in turn, causes hate and division, especially when it is exploited by militant and extremist groups to justify violence. Since the World Parliament of Religions convened for the first time in Chicago in 1893, faith communities have tried to restore their public image. They often get together, especially in the wake of a terrorist attack or inter-communal conflict, to reaffirm good ties and spread the peaceful message of religion.

Even amongst those who view interreligious work with suspicion or find it objectionable from their theological standpoint, the interest in and commitment to interreligious dialogue and engagement continues to grow and evolve.

Fresh historical insights are suggestive of greater commonalities across faith communities, emphasizing that they have lived in webs of social, spiritual, and cultural interlinkages as parts of a complex fabric of human diversity. Such historical legacies are an impetus to the positive choices faith communities can make in forging greater harmony and cohesion, and in countering narratives of hate and discord.

Better Solutions

Interreligious understanding has matured since the late nineteenth century. Religious communities have achieved key milestones in bolstering greater understanding and have demonstrated sufficient maturity in dealing with differences. But where to next?

In my view, faith communities can be more proactive in tackling emerging global threats by strengthening social resilience. Evidently, the world is more focused on solutions rooted in science, technology, politics, and governance as responses to such threats. But these solutions need to be infused with personal belief, or societal value change, to be sustainable.

For example, excess and wastage in the use of natural resources and the imbalanced pursuit of wealth are the sources of much of the climate crisis we experience today. This needs to be addressed, not just by mitigations such as in the recycling of waste, but by the promotion of values that emphasize more moderate lifestyles and the appreciation of environmental sustainability. Some doubt that this can come from a capitalist spirit and ethos that drove such excessive use in the first place.

Collectively, religions can continue to be the moral pill that society needs for it to be more compassionate, kind, honest, and hospitable; even as we pursue higher living standards and better conditions for all.

While technical responses are inevitably a crucial part of the response to global challenges today, our desire, passion, and commitment to sustain these efforts and support one another in the process stems from the values that define us and our societies. Whether it is for closing social gaps and inequalities, enhancing social solidarity and responsibility, or promoting the notion of the common good, religions have an important role to play and can make a difference.

But why trust religious communities to do this?

Adapting and Going Forward

The great test came during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its early stages, observers raised alarms about whether religions could cope when its main pillar of existence, i.e., social connectedness, was disrupted. Unless a divine command like “Thou shalt social distance!” is introduced, religious communities would likely fail to respond effectively.

Yet, two years on, religious communities in Singapore have shown resilience and adaptability. They accepted the need for stricter measures to prevent viral clusters from breaking out in places of worship. Many religious leaders reasoned and promoted that such moves were necessary for the greater good of society, especially to protect lives.

On this count, faith communities have proven the doubters wrong. Faith groups have also gone a step further, with religious leaders expressing solidarity and support for each other every step of the way during the pandemic. Members of each community drew strength from this togetherness at a time when mental stress was on the rise due to isolation and anxiety over an uncertain future. Faith communities have supported the scientific rationale behind Singapore’s safety measures, including vaccination.

Greater hurdles lie ahead. In many ways, COVID-19 is not a temporary blip but an enduring challenge that has ushered in fundamental changes to the way we live, connect, work and play. Scientists point out that the only lasting safeguard against the outbreak of such viruses lies in the habits of society itself, which continue to be shaped and influenced by religion, among others.

Valuing the Greater Good

Faith communities are looking ahead, with many groups improving their online

presence and connecting with their congregations and communities in new and pandemic-proof ways. The resilience that has been displayed is a good testimony of how religious groups have learned from a huge and unprecedented crisis and turned it into an opportunity to become even better.

Our vision must be to imagine new possibilities for the future even as we face dark clouds and turbulent skies ahead. These include a continued and constructive role for religion in dealing with global challenges, particularly in reinforcing the values that humanity needs to flourish. Religious communities in Singapore have learned from the failures and risks that could weaken social cohesion and are focused and committed to strengthening it further.

Nazirudin Mohd Nasir is the Mufti of Singapore. He has a BA in Islamic Law from Al-Azhar, an MA in comparative law at SOAS, and an M.St. and a PhD from Oxford University. This is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg