

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Navigating Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Inter-Religious Relations

By Paul Hedges and Siti Raudhah Ramlan

SYNOPSIS

By exploring the nuanced dynamics of inclusivity and exclusivity based on recent research, it is suggested that we need to delve into the interplay of these concepts within religious traditions in Singapore and reflect on the need for a balanced approach within diverse religious communities.

COMMENTARY

Singapore has long recognised the value of inclusivity in maintaining social harmony and prosperity. [Legislation](#) aimed at preserving religious peace has been enacted, while communal [initiatives](#) such as interfaith dialogues, cultural exchanges, and collaborative projects arise from the community and in governmental-public platforms.

Exclusivity, however, is commonly viewed as a challenge to religious harmony, fostering enmity between communities. Despite interventions by the home front security agencies with religious influencers who [disparaged other beliefs](#) and [propagated segregationist ideologies](#), solely associating exclusivity with negative connotations is biased. Recognising exclusive religious truth claims existing in many traditions is crucial, as they can coexist compatibly within harmonious interreligious dynamics.

While inclusivity is strongly favoured in Singapore, exclusivity is part of the identity and preservation of traditions within religions. This duality prompts important questions: How should the nuanced interplay between inclusivity and exclusivity be defined and navigated? Can religious harmony be sustained by acknowledging the expression of both inclusivity and exclusivity? What are their boundaries for inter-religious cooperation? Addressing these questions is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping interreligious relations in Singapore.

Inclusivity and Exclusivity

[Abdullah Saeed](#) sees inclusivity and exclusivity as a key division within religious perspectives. However, there is a distinction between the theological and social dimensions of this binary. The interaction of theological and social exclusivism and inclusivism affects attitudes and behaviours towards individuals of different faiths.

Theologically, inclusivist positions acknowledge the spiritual worth of diverse religious paths and the potential truth and validity of multiple faiths. In contrast, theological exclusivity asserts the sole validity of one's own faith and salvation path. It also often negates the legitimacy of other religions and scriptures.

On a social front, inclusivity promotes the belief in the equality and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. It encourages respectful social interactions with people from various faiths and the acknowledgment of their right to choose their religion. Conversely, social exclusivism asserts that one's own religious community holds a superior position, potentially leading to the exclusion or denigration of individuals from different faiths. It sees diversity, especially religious, as a potential danger and harm.

Studying Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Practice

Since 2020, a research project covering Australia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Singapore funded by the [Australian Research Council](#) has explored Muslim attitudes to religious diversity. Beginning with a literature review, it has included interviews with leaders, asatizah, students, and community figures across Singapore.

While the survey focused on how broadly inclusive views are propagated, the project has considered both exclusive and inclusive stances. While it may be supposed that inclusivity paves the way for open and respectful dialogue among diverse faith communities, while exclusivity poses challenges by potentially deriding other belief systems, the situation seems more complex.

Inclusive and Exclusive Views in Singapore

When questioned about the nuanced dynamics of inclusivity and exclusivity within traditional religious positions, the prevailing sentiment was that these concepts do not exist in a binary framework but develop within different contexts and eras. The coexistence of inclusivity and exclusivity within religious traditions was acknowledged as a complex interplay of perspectives.

Many interviewees emphasised that intersecting values between religions form a foundation of commonality. Shared beliefs, principles, and ideals were identified as points of agreement where different religions converge, particularly in areas such as ethics, social justice, and compassion. This highlights the inclusivity of religious teachings.

Yet, often, interviewees highlighted the exclusivist nature of certain theological beliefs as a defining feature that distinguishes one faith from another. Having boundaries that

differentiate faith communities brings significance to their commitment towards their beliefs. It concerns questions of identity which help ground people within a tradition.

The above aligns with [perspectives](#) on exclusivity that emphasise its role in fostering moral value, strengthening dedication to principles, and providing a meaningful framework for religious devotion. It contributes to a deep understanding and commitment to core beliefs and practices. It also offers a profound sense of purpose in following ethical and theological teachings.

Dialogue, Inclusivity, and Exclusivity

Some advocates have suggested that only a very open, even pluralist stance, can ground interreligious dialogue. However, holding exclusive views about the truth of one's own tradition is no barrier to dialogue about living together within an inclusive social attitude.

Indeed, arguably, the boundaries can instil a deep sense of appreciation in a meaningful and enriching discussion amongst differing beliefs. If everyone believes the same, then why dialogue? Discovering difference is a purpose of dialogue. [Many studies](#) have also found that [engaging in interreligious dialogue](#) actually [takes people deeper](#) into the distinctiveness of their own tradition, as they find they need to know more to explain it to others. Paradoxically, exclusive difference can be a ground for openness and sharing.

Of course, a hardline exclusivism that sees not just truth about salvation, but links truth to goodness which is held to only belong to one's own group can be detrimental. But holding that religious truth is one's own, does not prevent one from seeing others as either seeking truth and goodness, nor seeing common social and moral values as being shared.

This may potentially extend to minority religious sects within various religions. While exclusivist ideologies are said to be potentially divisive and segregationist, they can also be seen as a door that opens further understanding and appreciation towards others.

Navigating the Lines

Uncovering the dynamics of inclusivity and exclusivity leads us to the last question: What are the boundaries that need to be discussed when both are being expressed in religiously diverse platforms? As seen above, a balance is needed. Neither should be completely dismissed.

Religious representatives play an important role in inter-religious settings. It is essential to explore voices that extends beyond the "neutral" or "common" stance, especially when they are of the minority. Such exposure could enable a wider and deeper coverage on religious differences. It is important to be aware also that every religion is diverse: there are different, even conflicting, interpretations on such topics as salvation and afterlife, or the idea of religious supremacy.

Conflicting stances may be a detriment to a harmonious society as it may lead to

tensions or divisions within religious groups. In Singapore, religious leaders can help clarify a distinction between personal beliefs and a communal position. This was mentioned in another interview: the community needs to acknowledge the breadth of internal diversity, but without compromising one's own commitments.

Lessons for Social Harmony

Moving forward, exposure to both expressions of inclusivity and exclusivity is necessary for a more authentic and open intra-religious and inter-religious conversation. It is crucial to recognise that theological exclusivism does not prevent social harmony. Equally, if too inclusive, it may break down community identity and so actually make relations between groups less secure as people are unsure of where they stand. Worries that interreligious dialogue may lead this way are negated by the way it makes one go deeper into one's own exclusivity as a resource for meeting the other. Openness and a commitment to fostering mutual understanding towards differences between, and within, religious groups and beliefs are core for Singapore's ongoing harmony, and this means accepting both exclusivity and inclusivity in praxis. The key for a nation like Singapore is unity not uniformity.

Paul Hedges, PhD, is Associate Professor of Interreligious Studies in the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His most recent books are Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies (California, 2021), and Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context (Bloomsbury, 2021). Siti Raudhah Ramlan is an asatizah and independent scholar with interests in interreligious dialogue and social cohesion.

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