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Interreligious Dialogue Among Youths: A “Debt” or a “Gift” in Singapore?

By Liyana Rosli Asmara

SYNOPSIS

Young people face the challenge of navigating sensitivities tactfully when discussing religion in public spaces. In the wake of Pope Francis' visit to Singapore, it is pertinent to ask whether the harmonious community enabled by interreligious dialogue is simply an approach to be enjoyed or a “gift” or a “debt” to be invested further in the interest of social cohesion. Do young Singaporeans regard the current peace and harmony as an inherited privilege they are entitled to or an achieved outcome they must continuously uphold?

COMMENTARY

At a youth event held at the Catholic Junior College during his visit to Singapore, the last stop in his Asian tour, Pope Francis remarked, “Youth is really the time of courage in our lives”. He encouraged young people to pursue interreligious dialogue, urging them to be brave, to ask questions, and to engage with people of different beliefs. His message underscores the importance of fostering space for dialoguing with curiosity and confidence. Interreligious dialogue is considered a crucial element in maintaining social harmony and deepening trust across different faiths.

Pope Francis' approach toward other religious communities builds on a longstanding tradition within the Catholic Church of engaging in dialogue with diverse faiths. This approach, which evolved significantly in the 20th century, reflects the Church's progressive stance on interfaith relations.

A Turning Point in Catholic Attitudes

In 1964, Pope Paul VI established the Secretariat for Non-Christians, now called the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, to foster understanding, respect, and

collaboration between Catholics and those of other faiths. A year later, the Second Vatican Council produced [*Nostra Aetate*](#), a document which marked a pivotal moment in the Church's relations with non-Christian religions.

This document acknowledged the shared Abrahamic heritage between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, urging mutual respect and understanding. It also recognised elements of truth and holiness in other religions, calling for engagement rather than exclusion. This marked a shift from the Church's previous emphasis on the exclusivity of salvation within Catholicism.

In the years following, successive popes continued to champion dialogue and cooperation with different faith communities, further embedding interreligious dialogue into the Church's ethos.

Pope Francis and Interreligious Fraternity

Pope Francis has built on this foundation, expanding the Catholic Church's vision for interfaith relations. One of his earliest calls to interreligious dialogue can be found in the document [*Evangelii Gaudium*](#), which emphasises the importance of establishing common ground with other religious communities.

In 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, co-signed the [*Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*](#), a significant milestone in Christian-Muslim relations. This document promotes dialogue as a means to build bridges, resolve conflicts, advocate for peace, reject violence, protect the vulnerable, and safeguard the environment.

Pope Francis' emphasis on interreligious fraternity goes beyond mere diplomacy. His 2020 encyclical, [*Fratelli Tutti*](#), focused on the mission of promoting genuine connections bound by shared moral and spiritual values for the sake of a harmonious and just society.

Youth and Interreligious Dialogue: Deconstructing Safe Spaces and Problem-Saving

Pope Francis' interactions with young people often show his pastoral and spontaneous style, which resonates with the youth's curiosity. In his 2018 *Synod on Young People*, he encouraged young people to face life's challenges with courage and creativity. This message extends to interreligious relations, where he calls for youth to be peacemakers, building bridges instead of walls.

The Pope's approach to youth empowerment through interreligious dialogue relies heavily on two key elements. First, it emphasises critical, courageous conversations. This resonates with [*Robert Boostrom's*](#) article "Safe Spaces": Reflections on Educational Metaphor", which critiques the concept of "safe spaces". True learning, according to Boostrom, requires risk and bravery, as well as being open to challenging established ideas and embracing new perspectives. Youth engagement in interreligious dialogue thrives in brave spaces that encourage risk-taking and deep, meaningful discussions on living realities.

Second, Pope Francis views dialogue as more than a tool for engagement; it's a problem-solving mechanism that raises awareness of issues and attempts to move the needle forward. The *Document on Human Fraternity* is a prime example, illustrating how interfaith cooperation can propose concrete actions toward solving global problems.

Interreligious Dialogue in Singapore: A Delicate Balance

Singapore's peace and harmony result from collective efforts by the government, educational institutions, and grassroots and community initiatives. They may seem a providential bequest to the young. But how we arrived at this haven of peace and harmony should not be lost sight of; it behoves us to consider using it to beget further and higher returns. Just as individuals invest money expecting financial returns, investing knowledge, compassion, and time for dialogue in communal bonding can yield a harmonious community.

Youths in Singapore have a variety of platforms to explore issues related to religious and social diversity, including sports, interfaith hackathons, and interfaith youth interest groups. The Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth introduced the SG Youth Action Plan (SG YAP) in 2019 to engage youths in sharing their aspirations and vision for Singapore in 2025. A cornerstone of SG YAP is the Youth Action Challenge, an ongoing programme designed to enhance youth engagement in ideation and policymaking processes. The interreligious and interracial nature of these platforms plays a vital role in bringing together youths of diverse faiths to address complex national issues.

Priorities of Youths Across the Region

The questions raised by young people during Pope Francis's visit to Asia reflect their varied concerns. As expected, the risks posed by social media were a common theme across the region. In Singapore, young people asked the Pope how to balance community work with the pressures of societal expectations. In contrast, youths in Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea raised concerns about broken family communication, consumerism, youth violence, and navigating faith amidst competing world values.

Shaping Policies for Youth Engagement

Looking ahead, more can be done to foster youth involvement in interreligious dialogue. Education, resources, and government-private sector collaboration are key to this effort. Three central questions arise: 1) How can the education system be improved to foster a deeper understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion and to encourage the youth to value social cohesion as part of their identity and responsibility? 2) What resources or sustainable support structures can help youth to develop leadership skills in interreligious dialogue and allow them to solve problems along apex leaders improving social cohesion? 3) How can the government and private sector collaborate to recognise and incentivise youth participation in social cohesion initiatives, making community engagement as valuable as academic or career achievements?

Conclusion

Interreligious dialogue is essential for fostering peace, harmony, and social cohesion. For the youth, it is an institution to uphold and a shared responsibility for all to safeguard and nurture with courage, curiosity, and openness. With the right policies and platforms, young people can continue to play a pivotal role in maintaining and strengthening Singapore's social fabric.

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